



THE STYLE SERIES

SASSO

Jay Hogan

SASS



STYLE SERIES 3

JAY HOGAN

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*For my family who read everything I write and keep on saying
they love it all, blushes included.*

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Sass and the entire Style series are works of fiction. A great deal of research was carried out into the fashion industry whose regulation varies hugely from country to country. Copyright and Intellectual Property laws are examples of this, but also the regulation of talent agencies, modelling contracts and so on. Every person I spoke with had a different experience depending on where they worked in the world, which agency they were contracted to, which Fashion Week they were involved with, and so on.

I'd like to thank the models and designers and photographers who helped me craft the essentials of their often vastly different work experiences as accurately as I could. There is no one structure or approach to how things are done in the fashion industry, and no one way that a Fashion Week is organised in every country that runs them. As a result, my aim was to create an authentic feel to the story based on commonalities rather than detailed accuracy.

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INTRODUCTION

Note: This book contains limited discussion of off-page past trauma.

BLURB

For two years I've kept Leon Steadman at a safe distance, ever since the night he turned me down flatter than a pancake with a side order of syrupy disapproval. His loss. The world is full of sexy men. One and done is simply good math and efficient use of my time. Or it would be, if I hadn't been lusting after the irritating, judgemental, gorgeous, mountain of a man, ever since.

The less I see of Leon, the better. Bad enough that his tattoo business sits next to Flare, the fashion store I manage, and that he's friendly with my boss. But now he's apartment-sitting above the shop, as well. Every time I turn around, Leon is there. In my store. In my space. Messing with my head. Being all nice and charming and acting like maybe he's not the biggest jerk to walk the earth, after all.

Well, I don't want or need Leon's apologies, but maybe if I can have *him*, just once, it might put an end to this ridiculous hunger that sparks every time I lay eyes on him.

Yeah, I'll get back to you on that.

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CHAPTER ONE

Kip

I SPUN THE WHEEL ON MY CHERRY-RED MINI COOPER AND smiled as it spat gravel and slid into the free parking space at the back of Flare, disturbing the grey early morning calm of the city. I cut the engine and frowned at Rhys's van parked alongside. *Damn.* I should've guessed he'd be in early. A glance at the lights in the flat above Flare confirmed Hunter and Alec were also awake and moving about. *Well, shit.* There went my chance of slipping in unseen.

The three of them, along with Beck, were flying to New York that afternoon to scope out the Big Apple's spring fashion week in preparation for Rhys's formal invitation to the next one as a spotlight designer. Alec was walking for Berlini and a few other labels, and Hunter was shooting for Vanity Fair. Following the show, those two were off to London and Paris for more work, while Rhys and Beck were staying in New York for a much-needed vacation. I'd have given my left ball to join in the fun, but someone had to manage the store. And since Rhys had promised I'd be his assistant for the fall show, I wasn't pouting too hard.

I grabbed my satchel and eased the car door open just enough to squeeze out without circumcising myself. "For fuck's sake, could you spare the room?" I grumbled, firing a glare at Leon's impressive Harley pulled just far enough to the side to let Delilah scrape by.

Not that I had a damn thing to complain about. As the leaseholders, Leon and Rhys had dibs on the only two parking spaces out back, and Leon didn't have to make room for me at all. The fucker had just gone and done it, offering the space to me as soon as he'd learned I had a car that I actually gave two shits about. I should be grateful, right? Yeah, not so much. I hated the generous gesture with the heat of a thousand suns because it made me feel somehow beholden to him, something that rankled me like gorse up my arse.

Petty?

Abso-fucking-lutely. But I loved my little car, and I wasn't about to turn my nose up at anything that kept it safe and off the road. I'd lusted over Leon from the first moment I'd seen him and jerked off to images of him on his knees for me far more times than I cared to admit. But that didn't mean I liked the guy.

I sighed and pressed the fob to lock Delilah before allowing myself a final drool over what I knew lay under that bike cover—Leon's sexy metal 883 Sportster Iron. The fact I happened to know the name of the model came from a time in my life I tried to forget.

Not that I was about to give Leon the slightest indication that I knew *anything* about the sexy machines or that I could actually ride a motorbike. It was way too much fun watching his eyes spin in his head when I repeatedly called it a nice little Honda. Wouldn't want Mr Sanctimonious thinking I was remotely interested in whatever he rode, even if I fantasised about him riding *me* more times than was healthy for . . . let's be honest . . . *anyone*.

But knowing it sat there like a dangerous cat alongside my cute-as-fuck, I-dare-you-to-race-me Mini, kind of said all there was to say about the difference between me and Leon. Fast, flirty, and underestimated, versus arrogant, grunty, and all show. Not that I was averse to a little grunt. Just saying.

I slid the strap of my satchel onto my shoulder, chanced a look at the softly glowing windows above The Tattoo House, and sighed. Regardless of how annoying the man was, it was hard not to feel sorry for Leon stuck up there with not much more than a mattress, chair, television, and a lot of dust. He'd been camping above his business for two weeks, waiting on settlement so he could move into his newly purchased house, and when Rhys and I had recently taken a look at the empty, unrenovated space with the brilliant idea of making it into Rhys's studio, let's just say comfortable wasn't exactly the word that sprang to mind.

I heaved another hungover sigh, because Monday was a cruel bitch after a last-minute Sunday swipe right had taken a

sharp detour into tequila shots and an entire album of Pink until one in the morning.

And whose fault is that?

A quick check in the Mini's side mirror was a mistake. I winced. *Dammit*. The whole panda-eye thing hadn't improved, and I should've gone with a fuckton more makeup. I should at least *look* competent. Then maybe Rhys wouldn't fret too hard about leaving his precious store in my hands while he took a much-deserved break. It was the least I could do for him.

The fact *I* was actually more than a little panicked at the idea myself—note aforementioned ill-advised shots and way-too-loud Pink interlude—was beside the point. Not to mention the hook-up left a fair bit to be desired as well, but the less said about that the better.

But now Rhys had beaten me into work—something he'd rarely done ever since he'd moved in with Beck, everyone's favourite lumbersexual poetry professor—and I couldn't help but wonder if he was more worried about leaving me in charge than he'd let on. It was a thought that did little to appease my own apprehension.

I sighed and donned my Oliver People sunglasses, because *nobody* looked bad in those puppies, and hoped the dark circles under my eyes would fade under the shop fluorescents.

I patted Delilah on her chequerboard roof. "Behave yourself with the sexy Harley. No tiny trike surprises, got it?"

I checked my phone and saw it was barely eight, which gave me a little time. I skirted the back entrance to Flare and headed up the alley instead. Pastries and coffee would afford some distraction from my obvious sorry state, plus it would give me some time to stop being pissed at the fact I'd yet again let the tattooist get under my skin. I snorted at the pun, but there was far too much truth in it.

Leon didn't even have to be in the room to drive me crazy, and how the fuck did he even do that? I didn't let people . . . I didn't let *men* take up space in my head, ever. But the minute Leon walked through the front door of Flare in my first week

on the job, my balls melted right through my new pair of Reiss puppytooth slacks, and nothing had been the same ever since.

Irritating as he was, Leon Steadman was the hottest damn thing I'd ever seen. Six-foot-six inches of fantasy-inspired, tattooed deliciousness. Waves of strawberry-blond hair tied back in a messy tail; a charming and extremely lickable spray of freckles across a slightly crooked nose; and a pair of light grey eyes that drilled right through me with some serious heat that set my knees to wobbling—and I didn't wobble . . . for anyone. That should've been enough warning right there.

So yes, Leon was hot, ridiculously and annoyingly so, at least to me. But hot in no way made up for the arrogant, self-righteous, judgemental son of a bitch who'd revealed himself at a mutual friend's party about a month later and ripped the scales from my eyes.

Was I being a whiny prick simply because Leon turned me down flat when I'd asked if he fancied going somewhere quieter to get . . . better acquainted? Yes. Yes, I was. Because it wasn't the fact Leon said no. It was the fact that his rebuff came with a steaming shitty side-order of disrespect, like my slutty self wasn't good enough for him.

"Sorry, not interested." Leon smiled down at me.

"Are you sure about that?" I winked, pressing my luck, because, damn, he looked scorching hot, dressed in all black with a short-sleeved T-shirt that showed off his amazing ink, along with some impressive biceps. Half the partygoers were eyeing him up, men and women. Then again, I knew I didn't look too shabby myself, and I'd sunk one or four gins for courage, so what the hell. Go big or go home, right?

I went up on my toes and leaned in. "I think we'd be fucking hot together. Don't you want to find out?"

He stepped back, his expression unreadable. "Still not interested."

Huh. I frowned. It wasn't like no one ever turned me down, but I'd seen the way he'd been watching me all night. He wanted me. "You don't like sex?" I offered a teasing smile.

He looked at me for a long minute, like he was deciding something. "Yes, I like sex, Christopher. Although if I didn't, I'm not sure I'd appreciate the implication behind the question from someone I hardly know."

Ouch. But also . . . fair enough. Still . . . “Kip,” I corrected, feeling pissy mostly because he was right, but also because the name thing had become a bit of a dance between us since we’d met. For some reason, Leon refused to call me by my nickname. “But if you’re not averse to the idea of sex—” I side-eyed him, grateful for the loud vocals of Oasis filling the smallish lounge. “—then I guess it must be me you’re not interested in.”

He shot me a pretty solid for-fuck’s-sake glare and his gaze swept the room. “Look, Christopher—”

I rolled my eyes.

“—I’m sure you’ll have no trouble filling your bed for a night if that’s all you’re after. You’ve got a slick, well-practiced game, and there’s plenty of hot options here for you to cast your net at. It just won’t be me.” He smiled thinly, raised his beer in salute, and then dismissed me with, “Go knock yourself out.” But yet, there wasn’t an ounce of humour in his eyes. Instead, there was something that smacked too closely of . . . disapproval?

It took me a stunned moment to respond.

It wasn’t quite slut shaming, not the actual words, but the implication was close enough to shock and then piss me the fuck off. One thing for sure, I wasn’t going anywhere. And when I finally gathered some words to fire back, I used every one of them in quite a long spiel that included phrases such as, “What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Who in the hell do you think you are?” And, my personal favourite, “What crawled up your arse, you sanctimonious prick?” All quite loudly as it turned out, judging by the curious looks we received, but I’d had too much to drink to give an actual fuck.

When I was done, Leon sighed and leaned close, the crisp heady scent of his beard wax doing strange, unwelcome things to my stomach. “I’m not judging you, Christopher, I’m just not—”

“Kip,” I snapped. “What is so damn difficult about that?”

He stared at me for a long minute, and just for a second, I thought I read apology in his eyes. But it was quickly replaced by that familiar cool detachment. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I’m just not interested in being a notch on your bed. On anyone’s, for that matter.” Leon’s gaze lingered on my face and there it was again, that look I’d seen whenever his gaze landed on me. The one that screamed desire and set my heart pumping.

It was at total odds with the words coming out of his mouth, because no matter what he said, Leon wanted me. He’d watched me like a hawk as I’d flirted and danced with other guys. Every time I turned around, he’d been watching. So, what the fuck was the stick up his arse?

I lifted my chin. “Well, do you know what I think?” I ran a finger down that tight black T-shirt. “I think you do want m—”

“Have a good night, Chr . . . Kip.” He hesitated as if he was going to add something, then snapped his mouth closed and headed for the front door.

Which left me standing with my finger still in the air, reeling in his wake, the focus of a few knowing smirks, and feeling like the trash someone had thrown out the week before.

As I said, self-righteous prick.

And who the hell needed another one of those in their life? Not me. I'd dealt with enough arseholes in my short twenty-six years to last a lifetime. The fact that everyone else seemed to love the guy? Well, there was no accounting for taste. And it didn't mean I was wrong about him.

To be fair, Leon did try once or twice to raise the issue, maybe even to apologise. Who knew? But I'd shut him down. Maybe because it kept the sexy man at a distance. He took up enough space in my head as it was.

Was I being a drama queen? Possibly. But I ran into Leon pretty much every day, which made forgetting about how he'd made me feel that night damn near impossible, especially since I still lusted over him. It really shouldn't be that hard to file the man under arsehole and just get on with my life.

So what the fuck was stopping me?

I was still stewing over the question as I shivered in the damp cold of the morning and carried the tray of coffees and a bag of pastries back from the bakery. I was so distracted I almost missed Jenn's car parked out front of The Tattoo House. There was a plumber's van alongside, and I wondered what both were doing there at eight fifteen on a Monday morning?

Jenn and I had met a couple of times and instantly clicked, unlike my experience with her brother-in-law. She was a no-nonsense, whip-smart financial powerhouse with a mouth like a dock worker. What was there not to like? I peered through the door of the studio as I passed but saw nothing. Five seconds later I stumbled through the front door of Flare with the tray of coffees teetering in one hand, my keys in the other, and the bag of pastries gripped between my teeth.

"Whoa, there." Rhys rushed from his office to help. He was dressed far more casually than usual and yet somehow

still on point in top to toe black with silver accessories, his sleek black hair falling artfully around his face like he'd just fallen out of bed that way. Spoiler alert—he hadn't. "Don't spill them, whatever you do." He took the crate from my hand and cradled it like a newborn all the way to the service desk.

I took the pastry bag from between my teeth and joined him. "Good to know where your priorities lie."

He ignored my comment and peered into the bag. "Oh my god, you're a lifesaver. Beck's been fussing to get the house gold-plated and ship-shape for Mum, and it's a nightmare. She's moving in while we're away so she can get some painting done in her own place. We're doing her a damn favour, but the growl Beck gave when I pulled the toaster out this morning was enough to scuttle any idea I had of breakfast. Jack didn't even bother, just swiped ten dollars from my wallet on his way out the door to school and ignored his uncle. You'd think fucking royalty was coming."

I merely raised a brow and kept sugaring my triple shot latte.

Rhys caught it and snorted. "Yeah, okay. I know if we don't leave the place sparkling, the whole house will be rearranged when we get back and we won't be able to find a thing. I've told Jack to text me if things get out of hand. That woman's a cross between Martha Stewart and a Tasmanian devil with a definite lean toward the devil side." He paused, staring at me. "And why the hell are you wearing your sunglasses? It's barely light out there." He reached over, but I ducked out of the way.

"Oh no you don't." Rhys grinned and made a feint to the left, which I fell for, dammit, allowing him to whip the sunglasses right off my face. "Holy fucking smokes." He tipped my face from side to side. "You look like something the cat threw up." Then he smirked. "Tequila, right?"

"A shot or two may have passed my lips," I grumbled, pulling free of his grip and taking a bite of a salted caramel doughnut. "A small error of judgement. Happens to the best of us."

He laughed and bit a chunk out of a cronut, talking around the mouthful. “You really should stay away from that stuff. It fucks you up every time.”

“Says the man who starts singing ‘It’s Raining Men’ after two glasses of wine,” I mocked, just as a couple of metallic clanks rang out and we both glanced to the wall between The Tattoo House and Flare.

“What the hell was that?” Rhys shot me a puzzled look and I shrugged.

“Jenn’s car was parked out front next to a plumber’s van, so . . .”

“Huh.” Rhys cast a dubious look at the wall. “I hope it’s nothing serious. We can’t afford any problems with the sale starting this week.”

“I’m sure it’s fine.” I swallowed another bite of doughnut and tried to sound casual. “You’re in early.”

But Rhys saw straight through me. “I’m not worried, if that’s what you’re thinking.” He shot me a frustrated scowl. “I have zero concerns about leaving Flare in your hands, Kip, so get used to it. You’ve been my store manager for over eighteen months, and you do a better job than I ever could, but it’s not all you do and it’s time your job title reflected that. You manage the staff, including me—”

“This is true,” I interrupted, shoving the last of the doughnut in my mouth before grabbing another.

Rhys rolled his eyes and counted on his fingers. “You work miracles with what little help we get from my eye-wateringly expensive brand consultant, who I can’t afford to pay for more than cursory assistance. You oversee marketing plans and shit I have no idea about. You deal with orders and stocking, plan the seasonal merchandise and sales and *everything* else. You’re my right-hand person, my second in charge, my PA, my fucking business lifeline. Jesus Christ, you’re practically my damn mother.” He gave a nervous glance around as if the woman might actually appear, and I didn’t blame him. “I couldn’t keep up with my design work

without you having my back. And I don't pay you anything close to what you're worth."

"This is also true." I smiled around a mouthful of salted caramel goodness.

"You already function as Flare's executive manager, Kip, so take the damn title and the pay rise I'm offering. And you *really* need to take my office. Not to mention we could do with another sales assistant to free up your time. Drew isn't enough. Why are you fighting me on this?"

I sighed and concentrated on my doughnut. "Because as nice as all that sounds, I have zero formal education for any of that stuff you just mentioned. There must be tons of more qualified guys out there to choose from. Yes, I'm good at selling clothes—"

Rhys raised a brow and I winced.

"Okay, really good," I admitted because I was. "But as for the rest?" I shrugged. "I barely graduated school. I don't have a degree. You only hired me because in the ten minutes I was waiting to be interviewed, I rearranged your service desk and half your store for the better, which wasn't hard to do. Just saying. But mostly you hired me because we both know I *can* sell a look, and I'm mouthy as shit with a dangerous dose of charm."

Rhys snorted. "All true, although that charm comes with a set of sharp teeth. You absolutely do have an innate sense of fashion, the gift of the gab, and the ability to wear a paper bag down the street and have a dozen orders for it before you get two blocks. *But* you're also one of the smartest people I know. You have a nose for marketing that can't be taught in any university, you're meticulous with the accounts, a tiger with my debtors, and you have more social connections than I could hope to accumulate in a lifetime. You're great at what you do, and you deserve the recognition."

I sighed and put my doughnut down, suddenly not hungry anymore, the niggling self-doubt I'd been feeling for the past few weeks as Rhys had tried to convince me about his plan rising to the surface once again.

“Look.” Rhys placed a hand on my arm and gently squeezed. “If the qualification side worries you so much, I’m happy to pay for any night or part-time courses you think you need. Go ahead and enrol in whatever you want.”

My gaze jerked up. “Really? I mean, I sucked at school, and I’m not sure I could manage it with my hours. The store comes first—”

“We can work around that, especially if we take on another person.” He shot me a pointed look. “Then your hours could be more flexible. I have no issues with you using some work time for study when you need. The business will benefit in the long run, and Drew can handle the store on his own for short bursts of time if he has some help. Sucking at high school doesn’t mean you won’t ace at something you have a natural talent for, Kip. And you have a talent for business, especially the fashion business.”

I stared at him, not daring to believe. I’d fallen into my dream job by total chance, bringing only my love of fashion. I wanted all that Rhys was offering but I also didn’t want to let him down. My job at Flare meant the world to me. So did Rhys. His faith in me had saved my life in so many ways, I owed him everything.

“But Drew is only filling in time while he decides what he wants to do, and until he gets his surgery done,” I pointed out.

At nineteen, Drew was mature beyond his years—no surprise with all the shit he’d taken from his transphobic family before he finally walked out and finished school while living with Rhys’s mother. After he graduated, he’d been at a bit of a loss and I’d suggested to Rhys that maybe he could work at Flare until he found his feet. He’d fitted in like he’d always been there, which in some ways he had, having spent many hours hanging out in the back yard to escape his family and the school bullies. He had a calm, no-nonsense manner that balanced my admittedly more . . . blunt approach, and we made a good team.

In addition, Drew had a pretty good sense of style for a kid who hadn’t been able to express much of it while growing up.

And once we broke through his tendency to wear baggy clothes—understandable with his body dysmorphia—we spent a lot of time working looks together until he was comfortable. As he grew in confidence, his dress choices became more fitted and daring. And with his fine features, sultry androgynous looks, killer brown eyes, and sassy dry wit, Drew had been an instant hit with the customers.

“All the more reason to take on someone new.” Rhys’s frustration showed in the weight of his sigh. “Train them up and then hire again when Drew leaves. Look, Kip, you don’t have to make any decisions now, at least not about the courses. But as for taking my office and getting another salesperson? I’m sorry, but that needs to happen. When I get back from New York in a couple of weeks, I expect to see you moved in there—” He thumbed over his shoulder. “—and to have a draft ad ready for the new hire. I’m moving my design workshop above Leon’s as soon as we can make it happen. Until then, I’ll continue to work from home just like I have since we rented the flat to Hunter and Alec.”

My stomach sank. “But—”

“No buts, Kip. No more fucking around. I’m serious about this. You can do this. We’re a team, right?” He looked so earnest I had to swallow around the sudden lump of gratitude clogging up my throat.

I tore my eyes from his before I fucking cried and stared through the glass into the dim office instead. “You do realise it’s a dark shithole in there.” I sniffed in mock disapproval. “I don’t know how you expect me to work under those conditions.”

Rhys barked out a laugh. “Then redecorate it for fuck’s sake.” He crossed to the bottom of the stairs and shouted, “Alec! Hunter! Get down here. Coffee’s up.”

There was a muffled shout of “fuck yeah,” followed by the unmistakable sound of laughter and running feet. Rhys and I exchanged a knowing look. It had taken a wee bit of adjustment having the two lovebirds overhead after more than a year of the flat being empty, but it worked. Between Alec’s

modelling, Hunter's fashion and travel photography, and their model agency in Auckland, the two men were always going somewhere. But they were also ridiculously and sickeningly in love.

Hunter hit the bottom of the stairs, took one look at me, and barked out a laugh. "Whoa! What the hell happened to you?"

"Not. A. Word." I raised my palm. "Or I'll be morally obligated to ask why you're shirtless and looking thoroughly debauched at eight thirty in the morning. *And* your dick's hanging out of your sweats."

Hunter's horrified gaze shot to his neatly zipped jeans and then back up to me. "Lying fucker."

I waggled my brows. "And yet you looked." He reached for the chocolate doughnut with sprinkles, and I slapped his hand. "That one's not for you."

He narrowed his gaze and took an almond croissant instead. "These are my favourite anyway," he sulked, and I smiled.

"Who's a lying fucker?" Alec landed at the bottom of the stairs and slid in behind Hunter, snaking his arms around his fiancé's waist. "Mmm, is that an almond croissant, babe?"

Hunter groaned and handed the pastry over his shoulder, repeating the same gesture with a coffee a few seconds later.

"Oh my god, real coffee." Alec hummed in pleasure as he swallowed a mouthful.

Rhys shook his head at Hunter. "In all our years of friendship, you never once offered your almond croissant to me."

Hunter snorted. "You never woke me with an epic blow job."

Alec smirked and saluted Rhys with the croissant before his gaze landed on me and coffee snorted from his nose down the front of his rumpled T-shirt. "Holy shit, Kip. What happened to you?"

“Tequila,” Rhys explained, and Hunter and Alec both winced.

“Damn.” Hunter’s grin reached both ears.

“Shut up,” I grumbled, pointing to Alec’s black briefs. “Don’t you possess any trousers?”

He shrugged. “The word coffee was mentioned.” As if that explained everything.

I rolled my eyes. “All right, all right. If everyone’s done taking the piss, I have a store to get ready for opening.”

“Not looking like that, you don’t.” Alec held out his hand. “Come on, Cinderella. My model bag is upstairs. I’ve got enough concealer and makeup fuckery in there to make even this disaster look good.”

I narrowed my gaze, then sighed and took his hand, because he was right. “I’m bringing my coffee.”

Ten minutes later, I studied a much-improved reflection in Alec’s mirror and gave a low, satisfied whistle. “You *have* to teach me how to do that. My eyes still look like someone swapped them out from a dead fish, but at least the black bags are gone. You’re a magician.”

“You won’t find a model who isn’t.” Alec brushed a final swathe of whatever the fuck across my cheeks and studied me with a critical eye. “Yeah, you’ll pass.”

“I’ll pass?” I feigned horror. “I’ll *pass*?”

Alec grinned. “Whoops. My mistake. What I *meant* to say was that you look gorgeous, as usual.” He peered over my shoulder into the mirror. “Better?”

“Much.” I kissed him on the cheek, then grabbed his hand and headed for the stairs. “Come on before those ungrateful bitches scoff everything I bought.”

We were still working our way through the pastries when Drew arrived five minutes later. I handed him the chocolate doughnut, which earned me another glare from Hunter.

“How come he gets special treatment?” Hunter whined.

I patted a grateful Drew on the cheek as he waved his doughnut in Hunter's face. "Because *he* works hard and makes my life easier. While *you* do little more in this shop other than stand around and look pretty."

Alec snorted. "But you have to admit, he's *really* pretty." He pressed his sugary lips to Hunter's, and I stuck a finger down my throat.

Drew studied the two men kissing, looking them up and down like he'd only just twigged that Alec was in his underwear and Hunter was shirtless. "Was there a twunk and bear party I missed the memo for?" he deadpanned, giving them another once-over.

Hunter almost choked on his tongue and Alec hooted with laughter and slapped his fiancé on the back. "He nailed you there."

"Fuck off. I'm not a damn bear," Hunter blustered, red-faced. "I'm just . . . well-insulated."

Which sent everyone into peals of laughter again.

I held my fist out to Drew, wiping my eyes. "You make me proud, grasshopper."

He tapped it with his and shot me a sly smile. "Want me to open up?"

"Nah, I'll do it when this lot clear out. But you could steam those new shirts that came Saturday."

"On it."

Rhys watched him go, shaking his head. "That kid's going to be prime minister one day."

CHAPTER TWO

Leon

“NO, NO, NO!” I SWEEP SUSIE INTO MY ARMS SECONDS BEFORE she planted her cute little tush in the lake of water otherwise known as my current bathroom floor. I’d paddled through it in the middle of the night, and that had been the end of my sleep. “Very yuck,” I explained to the three-year-old and quickly handed her and her bouncing mop of blond curls and killer grey eyes off to her mother.

Jenn popped Susie onto her hip, groaned at the weight, and then regarded me with a wry smile. “Very yuck?”

I shrugged. “It was a pressure moment.”

Susie frowned at me. “Mummy says yuck is a silly word.”

I shot Jenn a look and she shrugged. “Well, it is.”

I turned to the wiry forty-something plumber who was elbow deep in my cistern. “How’s it looking?”

He shot me a look that was at best cautionary. “Let’s just say it’s not a simple fix.”

My heart sank.

“This plumbing is ancient,” he explained with a shake of his head. “And shoddily done to start with. I’m gonna have to get behind this wall for a better look before I can give you a clear idea of what needs to be done, and that won’t be today. I can, however, jerry-rig a workaround so that you can run your business and the ground floor, but you can bank on being without water for the morning, at least. I’ll call your landlord and let him know.”

Shit. “The owner of Flare is supposed to be moving his studio up here in a couple of weeks,” I pointed out.

The plumber ran his palms down the front of his coveralls. “If I have to rework the pipes, half of this wall and parts of the floor are going to have to come up, and the connections outside might need digging up as well. You’re talking a few days at the minimum. Up to a week if the repairs extend to

reworking any of the downstairs, in which case you'll have to shut up shop until I'm done."

My eyes bugged. "Close? For a week?"

He shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. It all depends on what I find. If the problem is confined to upstairs, you're golden. If not, then just be prepared." He must've seen the horrified look on my face because he added, "What can I say? I'm a plumber. There are pipes involved. The water has to be turned off."

Everyone's a comedian.

I sighed. "I guess if it can't be avoided, I'll just have to deal. When can you start?"

He grimaced and my heart sank. "I've got work backed up for the next ten days at least, but I'll try and get to you as soon as I can after that. You'll be fine with the workaround until then. You just won't have any water upstairs."

Ten days! Just what I didn't need. "Is there anyone else . . ." I trailed off when he looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

"You are aware there's a tradesman shortage, right?" he said patiently. "The only reason I'm even here today is because your landlord is an old client. This is a favour." He huffed and searched in his toolbox, pulling out a wrench. At least I thought it was a wrench. Then he turned his back and started banging on a pipe under the vanity.

"Down, Mummy, Susie wants to play." Susie lunged forward, almost toppling out of Jenn's arms, but my sister-in-law hauled her back just in time.

"No, munchkin." Jenn glanced at me and smiled. "It's very *yuck*."

I smirked.

"It's not yuck!" Susie shot me a winsome smile that usually got her exactly what she wanted. "It's a swimming pool. Just like Gramma's."

I bit back a smile and shook my head. "Not this time, sugar."

“Why?” She glared.

Jen sighed. “Because, I said no.”

Susie thought about that, then took a breath and turned up the volume. “Yuck! Yuck! Yuck! Yuck! Yuck! Yu—”

“Shhh,” Jenn warned, then sighed as Susie continued to chant in a marginally quieter voice. “You do realise that at her next playgroup, she’s gonna come out with that and half the mums are gonna think she said something else.”

The plumber chuckled and I steered Jenn into the other room out of earshot. The change in scenery also distracted Susie from her shouting which was a win no matter how you looked at it. “I hardly think I’m your main source of concern, in that regard.”

Jenn’s shoulders slumped. “Believe me, I know. Kev and I instituted a swear jar at home. We had to do something after Susie called the neighbour’s yappy dog a ‘little shit’ in front of half the street.”

I choked on a laugh and Jenn flashed me a glare. Both she and my brother, Kevin, swore like troopers. It would be a miracle if Susie made it to her first day at school without a catalogue of curse words in her cute little pocket that would put a sailor to shame.

I made no effort to hide my amusement. “And how’s that working out for you?”

Jenn flushed and looked away. “It’s a work in progress. But on the plus side, our holiday fund is looking fu—” She glanced at Susie and winced. “—freaking awesome.”

I laughed and kissed her on the cheek. “Don’t sweat it. You’re great parents.” I kissed Susie’s button nose and she giggled. “You want me to take her? She’s hardly a lightweight these days.”

Jenn waved me off. “She’s been a bit clingy lately. I spend half my day with her hanging off my leg.” She studied me. “What are you going to do for today? You can’t tattoo without running water.”

I glanced into the bathroom where the plumber was still busy and blew out a sigh. “Cancel all today’s clients for a start. Then I’ll have to figure out where I’m gonna bunk down until I get the keys to my new place. Fu—” I shot a look to Susie. “Flip if I know where. Mum’s, probably. God knows, I’ve been trying to avoid that. Thirty-five years old and moving back in with my parents.”

Jenn chuckled. “You could always stay with us.”

I shook my head. “Thanks, but you guys only have two bedrooms and the last thing you need is an extra body in the house. You barely get enough rest as it is.”

She sighed. “True. But Susie loves you. Honestly, it wouldn’t be an issue.”

“No,” I said firmly. “But I might be a frequent babysitter to get out from under Mum’s eagle eye.”

“Well, I’m not saying no to that.” Jenn chuckled. “Do you think you could run to a Saturday overnight? Then maybe Kev and I can book a hotel and have very loud monkey sex with no interruptions from the patter of tiny feet. I can’t even remember what that kind of freedom feels like.”

I barked out a laugh. “Deal. But just so you know, I’m available for that *anytime*. All you have to do is ask.” I groaned. “Mum’s gonna invite every single person she knows to dinner while I’m there, isn’t she? And that’s just the women. For the men, she’s likely to troll the internet.”

Jenn snorted. “Truth. She just wants to see you happy.”

I nodded. “I know she does.”

She shot me an evil grin. “But speaking of blind dates, Kev mentioned there’s a new guy at his work he thinks might be a good match—”

I clamped a hand over her mouth. “No way. Bad enough dealing with Mum’s matchmaking. I don’t need my brother setting me up as well.”

Her eyes danced with mischief. “Then you shouldn’t have told us you were binning your whoring ways to look for mister

or missus right. Although *my* bets are on the mister, just saying.”

I shot her a glare. “I never said that. *You* said that. I simply said I was getting tired of the club scene, and that maybe, just maybe, I might try looking for something . . . different. I never said anything about . . . marriage. Jesus, I can hardly even say the word.” I’d never been so happy for the short beard that covered my flaming cheeks.

She grinned and bit her lip. “Riiiiight. So, how is the whole *different* thing going for you? We liked that Brant guy you were with a couple of months back. What happened to that?”

I narrowed my gaze. “We parted company. He was a nice guy, but there wasn’t enough there, you know? No real chemistry.”

Jenn looked thoughtful. “Well, that sucks. It would’ve been great to have a builder in the family. Very . . . convenient.” I rolled my eyes and she grinned. “Relax. You’ll find someone. You’re a great catch.”

I huffed dispiritedly. “Yeah, right. Thirty-five-year-old tattoo artist with two business loans, a mortgage, and a tad lacking in any relationship experience—aka doesn’t know what the fu—heck he’s doing? I’m sure that’ll bring the boys and girls running to my yard, right?”

Jenn laughed and patted my cheek. “Well, when you put it like that . . .” Her expression turned serious. “Look, don’t fret. Mr or Mrs Right is out there. You’ve ticked the most important box in your search—*stop wasting time fucking around.*”

Susie beamed up at her mother.

Jenn winced and corrected herself, “Flapping, flapping around.” She spun Susie in her arms and Susie laughed delightedly. “Silly Mummy got the word wrong,” Jenn lied to her daughter with a smile on her face.

I snorted. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

“Do you want me to cancel your bookings while you call JJ and Tyson so they don’t come in? Tell them I can call their clients as well, if they want.” My sister-in-law was an

organised force of nature, which was just as well since my brother could barely spell the word calendar.

“Oh god, would you?” Relief coursed through me. “That’d be amazing.”

“Of course. It’s not like I have a life or anything, right?” Jenn elbowed me gently. “The world of back-stabbing corporate finance can wait until this afternoon and the God-given miracle of day care. Working from home even part-time is a fu—pain with a little one.” She shot me a tired look. “But I’ll let you buy me coffee and something disgustingly sweet to thank me.”

I pulled them both into a quick hug. “You’re the best sister-in-law.”

Jenn chuckled. “Damn right. And just you... flipping remember that.”

I stepped back. “Thank you. First appointment isn’t until nine.”

“No problem.” Jenn wandered the tired but spacious room with Susie wriggling on her hip. It was empty, bar a queen bed, a single armchair, a small flat-screen television, and three suitcases open on the floor. “This is a great space,” she mused. “Plenty of light. It’s perfect for Rhys.”

“It is. He’s pretty excited about it. And put Susie down,” I tried again. “She’s too big for that now. You’ll hurt your back. I’ll watch her.”

“You’re right.” Jenn lowered her daughter to the floor and Susie scuttled to my open suitcase and began searching through it.

“I’ve only ever used up here for overflow storage.” I followed Jenn to the window. “Plus, it means my rent will halve and the landlord’s agreed to let him open up the original access from his side, so he won’t have to come through my place. I think he hopes Rhys might eventually buy the whole building from him. He’s been making noises about selling ever since the fire.”

Jenn's brows bunched. "Do you think Rhys would be interested?"

I shrugged. "Who knows. We're going to talk when he gets back from New York, but maybe we can pitch in together? Or maybe he'll give me a longer lease. I've only got two years left on this one, and I don't want to move."

"Leeeeeeee, come here," Susie called me over to admire the mess she was making of my clothes.

"In a minute. I'm talking to Mummy first."

She pouted but went back to creating chaos on my floor.

"Is that Kip's new car?" Jenn stared down through the window and I followed her gaze.

"Yeah. I think so."

She turned and regarded me for a long minute. "You *think* so. You, the man who can name almost every car and bike by just listening to its engine. And isn't Kip's car the reason you gave up your parking space?"

"I didn't *give it up*," I grumbled. "There was simply no reason to take up the whole thing when I could share it." I glanced over my shoulder at the plumber who was heading for the stairs with his phone at his ear talking to my landlord.

"Right. Of course not." Jenn eyed me hard enough to make me squirm. "You know, I've always thought there was some kind of spark between you two."

If only. I summoned my best are-you-fucking-crazy stare. "Where the hell would you get that idea? For one, Chris hates me. And two, Chris hates me. Where have you been for the last two years?" I dragged my gaze from the bright red speed machine that suited the annoying and feisty man's temperament and made me smile every time I laid eyes on it.

"Mmm. *Chris*, huh?" Jenn's shrewd gaze had my cheeks flaming. "You *never* call him Kip. It's always Christopher, or more recently, Chris, like just now. Why is that?" She pulled a puzzled face. "You know he hates it."

Because it makes him pay attention to me. Yeah, like I was going to admit that. Instead, I flipped her off. “Shut up. It’s none of your business.”

She grinned. “Methinks the man protests too much. You have to admit that *Chris slash Christopher slash Kip*—whatever name you use for him—the man is pretty hot.”

Like I didn’t know that. “He’s also precisely what I’m supposed to be avoiding, right?”

Jenn shot me a wide grin. “That wasn’t exactly a”—she made air quotes—“‘not interested’ on your part, was it?”

I scowled and turned to where Susie had my suitcase upended on the floor. “Mummy’s so annoying, isn’t she? Do you remember where we put your special box?”

Susie’s grey eyes went wide at the mention of her favourite colouring box. “Yes! Susie find it.” She scrambled to her feet and ran to grab my hand. “Come on Lee. Let’s go!”

“Just wait for Uncle Lee and Mummy to finish.” Jenn ruffled her daughter’s hair.

Susie’s pout returned, but she stopped tugging on my hand and started tracing her finger over my tattoos instead.

Jenn shot me a fond smile. “You realise she’s looking more and more like you.”

The comment jolted me. “Do you really think so?”

She nodded. “Everyone does.”

I frowned. “Is . . . is Kev okay with that? I mean, I know we talked about it, but . . .”

“He loves it.” Jenn squeezed my arm just as Susie lost interest in my tattoos and headed back to the suitcase. Jenn’s gaze followed her. “We both do. We can never repay you for what you’ve given us. And you’ll always have a special place in her life.” She held my gaze and lowered her voice. “We’ve actually started talking to a therapist. Laying the groundwork for how to introduce the idea to her as she gets older.”

My face must've shown my shock because Jen laughed. "Relax. It's just baby steps. Stuff like talking about different sorts of families, story books around infertility, stuff like that."

"But—"

"It's okay," she said softly. "We're taking things slowly. Explaining the details is for way, way in the future. But since we're on the subject, have you thought any more about being her guardian should anything happen?" She fell quiet, her eyes intent on mine. "We know it's a big thing to ask. If it's too much, we'll understand, but we want to get the legal side of it finalised soon."

My heart thundered in my chest, just like the first time they'd brought it up a few weeks back, and my gaze shot to Susie once again. Because big? Fucking hell, it was the biggest. But watching them grow into a family had been the main driver for my own life reset. Kev was Susie's daddy in every way that mattered, but seeing myself in her eyes and watching her grow? That shit had done crazy things to my head and turned everything I thought I'd wanted upside down. But putting my hand up to take responsibility for Susie if it was needed now? The thought scared the shit out of me.

I met Jenn's gaze and sighed. "I guess I always expected Mum and Dad, or your mum and dad . . ."

"We want *you*," Jenn said softly. "But only if it's what *you* want. She's your biological daughter, Leon, and you're amazing with her. You'll make a great dad when it's your turn. There's more than enough love in this old thing." She patted my chest. "We know she'd be in good hands."

I blinked. "How can you be so sure? You know my history, Jenn. I didn't come out as bi until I was twenty-two." I lowered my voice. "And then I made up for lost time like the world's supply of dick was in jeopardy."

She laughed. "And your point?"

"I wouldn't want to let *her* down." I indicated Susie. "Or *you* guys, either. Susie deserves a proper family."

“And she’d have one, just like she does now.” Jenn took my hand. “If it’s not what you want, just say no, but don’t turn it down because you think you’re not worthy. That’s crap.”

Easy for you to say. “Okay.” I blew out a sigh. “I’ll do it.”
Oh god. A host of butterflies took flight in my belly.

“Yes!” Jenn smooshed my face between her palms and dragged me down to kiss my forehead. “Kev’s gonna be thrilled.”

A small hand tugged on my jeans, and I looked down to find Susie back beside me, wearing a worried frown. “Uncle Lee, you okay?”

Jenn’s expression turned sappy and I wiped my eyes. Jesus Christ, I was a mess. I knelt on the floor and hugged my niece. “I’m just fine, pumpkin. But I think it’s time we go downstairs and find your special box. You can colour while Mummy makes some calls. How does that sound?”

“Yes!” Susie made a break for the stairs, but I grabbed her hand just in time.

“Slow down, little one. And hold the handrail.” I followed her down, hands ready to grab her if she missed a step, but she was fine. And when we reached the bottom, the familiar, astringent waft of antiseptic and ink filled my head and made me smile. It got me, every time. My own place. I still pinched myself.

With three stations and room for more, we were booked solid most of the time, thanks to rave reviews from a few celebrity clients including actors, singers, and even the odd All Black, the likes of Reuben Taylor. People flew in from as far away as London just to sit in my chair, go figure. My small-time dream had morphed into a huge success.

Susie found her colouring box and I cleared a space for her to doodle to her heart’s content. Then I called Ty and JJ, the other two tattoo artists, and gave them the bad news. That done, I joined Jenn at the service counter.

“When the plumber’s done speaking with the landlord, I’ll head next door to give Rhys the bad news before he leaves. I’ll

take Susie to say hi.”

“Cool.” Jenn added something to a list she was running, then carefully put her pen down. She looked up at me and sighed. “Look, I know it’s probably the wrong time to bring this up.” Her worried gaze tracked my face. “But about Caitlyn’s memorial—”

“Don’t.” The word burst from my mouth, sharper than I’d intended, and I winced. “Sorry.”

“No.” Jenn flushed to the roots of her hairline, something I rarely saw. “I get it. I know it’s not really my place to say anything. She was your sister, not mine—”

“Maybe you should stop there, Jenn.” I wanted to nip the conversation in the bud. “Before you say something we’ll both regret.”

Jenn grimaced. “I’ve been part of this family for eight years. I was there when it all happened, remember? I knew Caitlyn. I loved her. I’ve been at every one of her memorials.”

“I know you have,” I said evenly. “And I appreciate your concern. But you and I both know it’s not quite the same.” *It couldn’t be.* I ignored the sting in her eyes as she sighed and picked up her pen.

“Fair enough.” Her voice cracked with emotion, and I could’ve smacked myself. It had been an asshole thing to say. She added quietly, “Is there enough water in that kettle of yours for coffee? I’m not sure I can wait for a Bump n Grind one. But I’m taking a rain check on the sugary accompaniment. You’re not off the hook with that.”

“I expect nothing less.” I headed to the kitchen and switched the kettle on. Then I stood at the window, clenching and unclenching my fists as the dull grey sky slowly cleared to a crisp spring blue. Jenn didn’t deserve my anger. No one did. But what my family wanted wasn’t going to happen, not on my watch. I ran my hand over the ink on my shoulder and swallowed hard. I’d promised myself this year was going to be different. I snorted and shook my head. Yeah, good luck with that.

The kettle sang and jolted me back to the present. I wiped my eyes and focused on making coffee. Jenn accepted hers with thanks and a nervous smile, and I was about to apologise when the plumber appeared.

“Your landlord’s in agreement with the plan, so I’ll start disconnecting the upstairs, and then you can get back to work, lunchtime at the latest.”

I nodded. “I’ve cancelled the day’s appointments, so take what time you need. I appreciate it.”

The plumber nodded. “I’ll get right on it.”

I held out my hand for Susie to take. “Come on Suze. Let’s go visit Uncle Rhys and tell him the bad news.”

When we stepped into Flare, the four men standing at the service desk turned as one, including Chris. *Damn*. I groaned under my breath. Just my luck.

Rhys waved me in with a big smile, while Chris looked like he’d swallowed something nasty, again. But when his gaze landed on Susie, a smile lit up his face and I couldn’t deny how much I wished it was for me. Never. Gonna. Happen.

Two years we’d been doing this dance and I still didn’t know how to change the tune. No matter how many times I’d tried to apologise for my behaviour at the party, Chris was having none of it. The man held a mean grudge.

My churlishness that night had been pure self-preservation. Mostly because I’d really, *really* wanted to tangle my fingers in those auburn locks and fuck his brains right out of his head, just like he was offering. I’d been wanting nothing more from the very first moment I met him.

Christopher entranced me. Blunt, bursting with life, caustically funny, and sexy as fuck, he did it for me on so many levels, it messed with my head. But he’d arrived in my life the exact time I’d decided I was done with greasing the

revolving door on my bed. Christopher Grantham was a temptation I absolutely didn't need.

He was young, hot, and repeatedly and very loudly vocal about how he *wasn't* into relationships. No one had managed to snag him for more than a night or two as far as I knew. Not that I blamed him. Hell, I'd *been* him for over a decade. But I was done with that lifestyle.

It wasn't like I *never* hooked up, but I sure as shit wasn't going to do it with a guy who pushed all my buttons, who worked right next door, who I'd see every day, and who went through men like I changed underwear.

I should've pushed harder to explain, but aside from growing to enjoy our snarky bantering—since it came with his attention—Chris's obvious disdain for me kept him at a reassuringly safe distance. And for that alone, I'd learned to live with his low opinion.

“Morning, all.” I made my way to the desk and tried not to stare at Chris who looked positively edible. His hair had been swished up and over to one side in an effortlessly sexy do that highlighted his sharp-cut cheekbones, the black feather earring dangling almost to his collar, adding a roguish quality. Black slacks hugged the swell of his arse, and a forest-green button-down popped those amazing emerald eyes that turned me to jelly on a regular basis.

I looked again and frowned at the dark circles just visible under the cover of makeup. *Mmm*. Someone had been up late. A twinge of unexpected jealousy cut across my belly and I yanked my gaze away. “I hope I'm not interrupting.”

Chris narrowed his gaze. “When has that ever—”

“You're not.” Rhys fired his manager a warning glare and pushed an open bag of pastries my way. “Help yourself. Things are a bit chaotic in here today.” He silently flicked his gaze between the pastry bag and Susie. I nodded and he leaned in to speak directly to her. “Well, hello there, Miss Susie.”

Susie tapped a pudgy finger to her cheek and Rhys popped a kiss on the spot.

“Would you like a pastry?” he whispered.

Susie sent me a hopeful look. “Can I, Uncle Lee? Please?”

I didn’t hesitate. Jenn could kill me later. I sat my niece on the service desk and Chris held the bag open for her to choose.

“How about the vanilla swirl?” Chris suggested in a whisper that was still blatantly loud enough for me to hear. “They’re Leon’s favourite and there’s only one left. I’m sure he’d love you to have it.”

Susie stared into the bag and Chris fired me a smirk. *Fucker*. I rolled my eyes but couldn’t hold back the smile. He was such a cheeky prick sometimes.

“Can I?” Susie looked at me with concern in her eyes.

“Of course you can.” I reached into the bag, broke the pastry in half and handed the biggest bit to her. “I think I’ll take the cherry roll today.”

I got my hand into the bag before Chris decided to whisk it out of reach—I wasn’t stupid—and he shot me a smirk. I took a bite and groaned in approval. The store went quiet, and when I looked up, there was a flush on Chris’s cheeks, and the others were glancing between us with obvious amusement.

For fuck’s sake. I ignored them and said, “Interesting breakfast, guys.”

“Don’t ask.” Rhys tossed his empty takeout cup in the bin. “Suffice to say, Beck is in special-forces cleaning mode. My mother arrives today.”

I snorted and stole a glance sideways to find Chris watching Susie lick the icing off her vanilla swirl with a wide smile on his face. When he caught me looking, the smile dissolved and that familiar scowl he seemed to save especially for me returned.

Still, I couldn’t resist poking the bear. “Hard night, Christopher?”

His scowl deepened, and yeah, I was my own worst enemy. Everyone got the charming, funny version of Chris that

I'd met that first day, except for me. I got sour, pissy lemon lips. It was all I had to work with.

Rhys snorted but said nothing, while Chris looked . . . pissed. Surprise, surprise.

"I'm fine," he replied haughtily. "More than, actually. But my social life is hardly your concern, Leon. Life's too short to worry about other people's opinions." The acid in his tone made me wince, and it drew curious looks from the others. "Can't let the sheets grow cold, right?" He threw me a challenging stare.

And suddenly, I simply didn't have the energy anymore. "You're right, of course. That was rude, and I apologise." I held his gaze in a last-ditch attempt to drum home that I meant about more than just my current stupid comment. Chris frowned, clearly thrown, and I took the opportunity to change the subject by turning to Rhys. "We've got plumbing problems next door," I explained. "I woke in the middle of the night to a lake on the upstairs bathroom floor. The plumber has to pull off part of the wall and lift some of the flooring in order to fix it." And when I explained how long that might take and why, Rhys's face fell.

"Damn." He shook his head. "I was hoping to move in when we got back, but I guess another week or two doesn't really matter."

"It could still be ready on time," I reminded him. "But no guarantees."

Chris slid a sly glance Rhys's way. "So, that means you'll still need your office, right?"

Rhys replied with a wag of his finger. "Nope. Not at all. But good try. I'll make do at home for another week or two. You're not off the hook that easily." He turned to me. "But what are *you* going to do? You're still sleeping there until settlement day on your new house, right?"

I blew out a sigh. "I'll be bunking in with my parents, Lord help me."

Rhys chuckled. "That'll put a crimp in your wild ways."

Chris arched a brow. “Don’t expect that’ll be a problem for Leon.”

I held those green eyes but was too tired for a snappy counter. “Yeah, that’s right, Chris. You know me so well. Boring as shit.”

Chris frowned and Rhys elbowed his manager. “Kip.” His tone carried a warning and Chris’s gaze darted away.

Susie tugged on my sleeve and held up her sticky hands. “Yuck, Uncle Lee.” I would’ve almost sworn there was a smirk there but that would’ve been ridiculous.

I smiled, knowing I was going to regret teaching her the word. I took the napkins Hunter passed over and cleaned her up as best I could. “There you go.” I kissed each palm and she giggled and set about vigorously wiping her hands, and when I looked up, Chris was watching us with the softest expression I’d ever seen—at least until he caught my eye.

“Why don’t you take the flat while we’re away?” Alec suddenly offered brightly. “We’ll be gone six weeks.”

I caught Chris’s horrified gaze shoot to the gorgeous model.

“That’s a brilliant idea,” Hunter agreed. “You’ll be covered if you get caught out and need to stay longer or if you want to do some stuff to the new place before you move in. And you’ll be doing us a favour by keeping an eye on things.”

“Who’s doing who a favour?” Drew appeared from the back of the store.

“But *I’m* keeping an eye on things,” Chris argued with a slightly desperate edge to his voice because, hell no, *he* wouldn’t want *me* there. “Besides,” he softened his tone in response to the glacial silence that filled the store. “I’m quite sure Leon doesn’t want to cope with all the noise, the bell on the door, the lack of privacy.” He waved a hand airily. “All of that.”

Drew frowned. “We don’t make *that* much noise.”

Chris fired Drew a killer look and Drew blanched.

“Well, I think it’s the perfect solution,” Rhys chimed in with a mischievous glint in his eye that told me he knew exactly what he was doing. No one who’d spent more than five minutes in a room with me and Chris could possibly have missed the tension between us.

I didn’t know whether to be pissed or amused at Rhys’s obvious meddling. I also didn’t miss the fulminating glare Chris sent Rhys’s way at his words, and neither did Rhys, although his response was simply a huge grin.

There was no way in hell Chris would want me living above the store, even temporarily. I might’ve accepted Alec’s offer on the basis of that piss-off value alone, but Rhys was right. It *was* the perfect solution and I needed to take it. “Thanks. I’d love to.”

Chris’s face turned an intriguing shade of red and Rhys was clearly struggling not to laugh.

“That’s settled then.” Hunter clapped me on the back. “Bring Susie upstairs and we’ll show you where everything is.”

“And when you’re done with that,” Rhys added, “Kip will walk you through the alarm system.”

Oh boy. I stole a glance at Chris who looked about as close to homicidal as I’d ever seen him. He also looked almost . . . panicked?

Fuck.

I enjoyed riling Chris, giving back as good as I got, but if he genuinely hated the idea, well, the last thing I wanted was for him to feel rattled in his place of work. I knew he loved it at Flare. And when I thought of how upset I’d be if the situation was reversed—

I sighed. “You know, maybe Chris is right.”

Chris turned to stare at me, eyes wide.

“I don’t want to make things difficult,” I explained, keeping my eyes on his. “I’ll be more than fine staying with my parents.”

Everyone looked to Chris while he continued to stare at me, his jaw working, a war raging behind those beautiful eyes. I tried to tell him with mine that I understood and it was okay if he said no, but he just kept staring. Eventually he sighed and waved a dismissive hand. “Fine. Stay. We’ll barely even cross paths.”

Rhys slapped Chris on the back. “That’s the spirit.”

“Excellent,” Hunter agreed, and Alec beamed.

I ignored them all, my eyes still on Chris. “Are you sure? It’s your call.”

He nodded, if somewhat reluctantly. “I’m sure.” And then I saw something unexpected in those green pools. Acknowledgement, maybe even gratitude, for giving him the choice.

I gave him a quick smile. “Thank you.” Then I whisked Susie into my arms and followed Alec and Hunter up the stairs with Chris’s molten stare burning two holes in my back.

CHAPTER THREE

Kip

I WATCHED THE MOUTH-WATERING TOWER OF A MAN CLIMB THE stairs and tried not to swallow my tongue. I might not like the guy much, but there was no denying his sex appeal.

Long waves of strawberry-blond hair framed clever hypnotic grey eyes, and that tightly groomed beard with more than a fleck of reddish gold to catch the light was an unwelcome siren song to my ridiculous hormones. I didn't even like stupid beards, or at least I hadn't up until two years ago.

If that wasn't enough, and no doubt just to piss me off, the man wore a black Henley that clung to his arms and chest like a suntan, revealing just a hint of all that glorious ink at its edges—ink I was desperate to see in its entirety. And those thigh-hugging jeans clung to an epic arse—larger than I usually went for but solid as fucking stone—and yeah, I might've spent the last two years having to rethink a whole damn set of tick boxes in that department because, man, that arse was a thing of beauty.

My club hook-ups had steadily morphed into sad second-rate copies of the real thing. My favourite swipe rights were now a catalogue of ink, height, and beards, and although I really, really tried not to dip into that pool too often in an attempt to preserve my mental health, the cock wants what the cock wants, and mine clearly wanted . . . Leon. Or at least a close second, which, just so we're clear, was an absolute, mind-melting, fucking impossibility, because there *was* no one like Leon. And no matter what I did to evict the irritating man from the increasing amount of real estate he occupied in my brain, nothing was fucking working.

Leon turned the corner on the landing and disappeared from view, and my sigh of unrepentant appreciation was out before I could stop it.

“You're drooling on my polished floors.” Rhys smirked and tipped my chin up to close my mouth.

I jerked free and whacked him on the arm.

“Ow. What the fuck?” He rubbed his bicep.

“What the hell did you do that for?” I turned my frustration on him. “Now I have to put up with Mister Arrogant living above my—*our* store for the next few weeks. And you won’t be around for me to whinge at.”

Rhys’s put-upon look turned sly, and he leaned back against the service desk and cast an unnerving eye over me.

“What?” I snapped, then spun to where Drew was watching the two of us with a curious look in place. “Don’t you have shirts to steam?”

“All done,” Drew said breezily.

I kept staring until he flushed.

“But I probably missed a couple?”

I nodded.

“Right.” He swallowed a smile. “I’ll leave you to it. Holler when you’re done yelling at each other.”

Rhys waited until the storeroom door closed before he spoke. “Their flat’s empty, Kip. And Leon needs somewhere to stay. It was a perfect solution, not to mention the neighbourly and *friendly* thing to do,” he reminded me, making altogether far too much fucking sense. “But what I don’t understand is this crazy dislike you seem to have for the guy. He’s a good man and a great business neighbour. And you know damn well he went the extra mile for us after the fire. He even gave up his parking space for you.”

Good god, enough with the damn parking space. My gaze shot to the stairwell, and I lowered my voice. “I never asked him to do that.”

Rhys eyeballed me. “Which is exactly my point. He’s nice people, not to mention you looked ready to eat him alive the first time he showed his face in Flare. Then a month or so later, you couldn’t stand the guy. This is getting ridiculous, so spill. What happened?”

I drummed my fingers on the glass top of the service desk and narrowed my gaze. “It has to stay between us.”

Rhys crossed his heart with a smile that looked ready to tip into laughter at any moment.

“I mean it,” I warned.

“All right, all right. I promise.” He edged closer. “I won’t say a word, although I don’t keep secrets from Beck. If he asks, I won’t lie to him.”

I shot another glance to the stairs. “Fine.” I grabbed his hand and dragged him into his office—*my* office, goddammit—and shut the door. He sat on his desk amongst a pile of half-packed boxes, looking two seconds away from pissing himself with laughter.

I stabbed a finger at his chest. “Don’t.”

He tried and failed to stem the squeaky snort that escaped regardless and raised his hands at my scowl. “I can’t help it, all right? And why the hell all this secrecy? This ridiculous beef you have with Leon has been going on for two years. I’ve never seen you so discombobulated by a guy.”

“Discombobulated?” I raised a brow. “You’ve been hanging around the sexy professor too long. Cross a lumberjack with a marshmallow, feed him a dictionary every day for breakfast, and you get Beck.”

Rhys snorted. “That’s actually . . . pretty accurate. Now stop procrastinating.”

“All right. All right.” I sighed and leaned against the closed door with my arms crossed. “So, I might’ve run into Leon not long after we first met, at a party . . . somewhere.” I waved a hand in the air.

Rhys held my gaze. “Aaaaand?”

“Aaaaand . . . I might’ve . . . maybe . . . possibly . . . hit on him.” I winced and checked through the glass, but the stairs were still clear.

Rhys said nothing, the weighty silence of which somehow filled the room.

I sighed and turned back to him. “And before you ask, no, we didn’t do the nasty. He turned me down . . . flat. Like ‘squashed as a bug under his shoe’ flat. Like I was ‘some kind of manwhore that would require the use of disinfectant after contact’ flat.”

Rhys bit back a smile. “Dramatic, much?”

I shot daggers at him. “No. It’s exactly how his words made me feel.” I gave Rhys a summary of what happened, admittedly a little one-sided, and the smile slipped from his face.

“Jesus, I’m sorry, Kip. I shouldn’t have made that joke. No one has the right to shame you like that.”

My gaze was drawn back up the stairs as I remembered Leon’s earnest offer to stay elsewhere. I sighed and turned back to Rhys. “Okay, to be fair, it’s not that he said anything *specific*. It was more his tone, and maybe I was too sensitive at the time. But I’m twenty-six and single for fuck’s sake. I like sex and men like *me*. Life’s too short to walk away from that happy arrangement, right? There’s *nothing* wrong with how I choose to live my life.”

A small frown creased Rhys’s brow. “No, Kip, there’s absolutely not. And if Leon implied that, he was well out of line.”

I continued, trying not to sound like I was convincing myself. “And it doesn’t mean I don’t have principles. A few of them, anyway.” I listed them off on my fingers. “I don’t fuck anyone that I don’t like, or that I don’t have a good feeling about. They have to be single, as far as I know. I don’t fuck if I’m stupid drunk or if they are. I always play safe, and I don’t do repeats. I avoid hurt feelings or raised expectations. And I’m crystal clear about not looking for a relationship.”

Rhys nodded. “I know you are. And I know you care about people.” He reached for my hand, and I blinked back an unexpected emotion that threatened to unravel me. “But Leon’s never struck me as the judgmental type, either.”

I shrugged. “That’s what I thought too. And okay, he did try to apologise after, sort of. But every time I see him, I remember, and I feel so fucking small in his eyes. Next thing I know, I’m angry before I even realise it.”

“And that’s why you’ve given him such a hard time for two years?”

I huffed. “Consider them random acts of resistance.”

“Against what?”

I thought about that. “Against not measuring up to some moral high ground he seems to lay claim to that isn’t real and that I shouldn’t give a fuck about.”

“So, why do you?” Rhys studied me closely. “Because you clearly *do* care what he thinks or you wouldn’t still be in such a fury about it.”

“Nope.” I wagged a finger at him, because I wasn’t going to touch that wriggling bag of snakes with a ten-foot pole. “Don’t try and make this more than it is by suggesting this is all because I like the guy and got my feelings hurt.”

Rhys folded his arms. “So, do you? Like him, I mean?”

“No,” I lied, ignoring the flip in my belly at the image of Leon talking to Susie with such obvious adoration while she looked at him like he hung the fucking moon. “He’s sexy as shit and I wouldn’t say no to fucking him, but like? Nah. The crew mutinied on that ship a long time ago.”

Rhys blinked. “Okay, look. Maybe Leon meant it, maybe he didn’t. And maybe it was simply a misunderstanding that blew out of proportion. All I know is that in all the time I’ve known him, I’ve never heard Leon say anything unkind to anyone. So, maybe the two of you could take these few weeks to clear the air. It couldn’t hurt to try, Kip. He’s a great business neighbour and I’d like him to stick around.”

I shot Rhys a withering look, mostly because it saved me from admitting he was right. Then the thud of Leon’s feet on the stairs thankfully ended the conversation.

“Okay, I’ll think about it. But only for you.” I stepped away from the door, but before I could open it, Rhys surprised me with one of his rare hugs.

“I’m only a phone call away. For *anything*,” he reminded me.

I rolled my eyes and pulled open the door. “Don’t fuss. I’m sure I’ll survive.”

“I’m sure you will.” He dusted off my shoulders and straightened my shirt. “Would it make you feel better if I promise to bring you back a Marc Jacobs freebie?”

“Make it a Moschino and you’re on.”

Rhys laughed and I left him to finish packing his office into neat little boxes while I took a deep breath and made my way to the service desk where Leon waited with a nervous smile in place.

“Come on.” I crooked my finger at him. “I’ll show you how the alarm system works.” Then I looked him up and down. “At least you won’t need a stool to key the code in.”

He snorted. “Does anyone?”

I flipped him off over my head. “I refuse to answer that.”

The rest of the morning passed uneventfully, then Rhys, Beck, Hunter, and Alec all headed to the airport just after lunch, which left me the afternoon to set my little fiefdom plans in motion. I might’ve thought Rhys was nuts for trusting an unqualified guy like me to run his business, and I was admittedly more than a little daunted at the prospect, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t up for the challenge. It was the fact of making the whole thing official that scared the shit out of me. Other designers would surely think he was crazy, and the last thing I wanted was to let Rhys down or embarrass him.

Still, he’d given me carte blanche to reorganise things the way I wanted, and once I’d accepted that he was determined to

make this ridiculousness happen, the idea made me giddy with power. I colour-coded my wardrobe, for fuck's sake. One look around the store I was now fully in charge of and I almost creamed myself at the possibilities.

A draught of cool air made me blink and I turned to find Drew fanning me with a catalogue. "You're looking a little flushed there, Boss." He smirked. "Plans for world domination going to your head?"

I snatched the catalogue and flicked him on the wrist with it. "One small step at a time, grasshopper. First, we take Manhattan." I glanced at the catalogue and frowned. "What's this?"

Drew's cheeks pinked. "I, um, needed a few things."

I raised a brow and he sighed. "Go on, take a look."

I scanned the catalogue noting the pages of binders, packers, and a whole range of transgender clothing options, including brands who specialised in transitional apparel. I browsed through the collections with growing interest. Some of the designs were pretty damn good.

Drew nervously chewed on his lips as I flicked through. "My top surgery has been delayed until next year," he said, refusing to meet my gaze when I looked up. "I've been putting off buying stuff, thinking I'd be able to ditch the binders soon, but I won't, and I could do with some other basics as well. I know I need to look good working here. I don't want to let you guys down."

I frowned. "You know that you can take any of the samples that interest you, if you want. Just okay it with me. And if you need a bigger discount on shop stuff, we can work something out."

"Thanks." The flush spread to his hairline. "Rhys has given me some things, but straight off the rack doesn't always work for us. And I know what's in *there*—" He nodded to the catalogue. "—isn't up to Flare's standards, but I can make it work. You've taught me how to do that, and it's really hard—"

“Hey, don’t apologise,” I hushed him. “You always look amazing. It’s as much about the attitude as the clothes, remember?”

Drew’s mouth curved up in a smile and he nudged me. “Yeah. I’ve learned from the master.”

I snorted, but a warmth spread through my chest at his words. “That’s nice of you to say, but you’ve developed a great style that’s all your own. I know that working in a place like this is a huge thing for you, especially with the dysmorphia. We all understand that.”

Drew shuffled on his feet. “The therapy helps. But mostly it’s you guys. I feel . . . safe here, I guess.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat and cursed his arsehole parents for the millionth time. “That’s . . . good. You deserve nothing less. And just so you know, you could never let us down. We are all so fucking proud of you. Me, Rhys, Beck, Hunter, Alec, Rhys’s mum, Leon and all the crew next door. You’re a great guy and I hope you know you can come to us with *anything*.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“Good. Now, come ’ere.” I opened my arms and Drew walked into them for a quick hug. When he stepped back, his cheeks were still flaming but his smile finally reached his eyes.

“Okay, so back to the catalogue.” I laid it open on the service desk. “Don’t be embarrassed. Some of this stuff is really good.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right.”

“No, I mean it. These, for example.” I indicated a page of really sharp button-downs and another of trendy sweaters and hoodies. “I’d wear something like that on a weekend.”

He stared at me with an eyebrow raised.

“Okay, well maybe not *me*,” I admitted. “But that’s because we all know I break out in hives if the label doesn’t include the word silk.”

Drew laughed and I counted that as a win.

“But that doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with what’s in here. It’s more that I don’t see many dressy options. I get that this catalogue is geared for the basics, but where *do* you go for that kind of thing? For work, or for when we need you at fashion week, or even just for some sexy underwear?”

Drew’s lips flattened and he sighed. “There’s more variety overseas but not a lot of local options. And to be honest, many of us can’t afford much beyond the basics. We don’t always have the easiest lives, you know?” He held my gaze, and I could’ve kicked myself.

“I’m being a douche, aren’t I?” I offered and he smiled.

“Maybe a bit unaware. The thought of being able to buy sexy packer briefs kind of falls second place to getting much of a choice in packer briefs *at all*, at least in New Zealand. I try and support companies like these when I can, those run by trans people. Or I make do with what I can get off the rack, or second-hand labels that I can pick up cheap. Then I alter them myself.”

I blinked. “You sew?” That was news to me.

He shrugged. “Makes life a hell of a lot easier.”

How had I not known this? We’d spent a lot of time together talking about style and creating looks, experimenting with colour and shape on his body. We’d even talked about some of this stuff, but I’d . . . forgotten? Dismissed it? Not paid enough attention? And it wasn’t good enough.

If I’d taken my head out of my arse for more than two seconds, it would’ve been obvious to my dull brain. It wasn’t like I didn’t know Drew had to work around binders and packers and stuff. Then again, the fact I *didn’t* notice spoke volumes for his obvious skill.

“I should’ve asked more about this, all those times we talked. I’m sorry,” I apologised.

“It’s fine.” His gaze slid away. “It’s *my* problem, not yours. It’s up to me to take what you’ve taught and work it around what I can get or alter.”

“Well, you’ve done a damn good job of it.” I cast an eye over his skinny black-and-white-check jeans, black button-down with its cuffs turned up to reveal a heavy link silver bracelet, and the glimpse of a recent forearm tattoo courtesy of Leon. Drew had paired the ensemble with his third- or fourth-hand red-patina Cortray Casanova shoes, which raised the whole outfit several notches, and with a carefully nurtured veil of thin scruff, a white gauge in one ear, black eyeliner, and glossed lips, he looked fabulous.

A styled moody twink with a slightly dangerous edge. Fucking heaven on a plate, and I was proud as punch.

“Today is a perfect example,” I told him. “You look dazzling.”

He blushed but gave a small, pleased smile. “Thanks.”

I leaned an elbow on the desk. “So, explain for me the main issues you face buying off the rack? I need examples.”

Drew blew out a sigh. “Okay, well, remember that Chanel shirt I got on Trade Me last February?”

I did. “That was hot, and a fucking steal at the price.”

He grinned. “Right? But I had to borrow Rhys’s mum’s sewing machine to reshape the bottom hem and the sides. I generally have to buy a size up to not have anything too tight over my binder, but that usually means everything needs slimming at the hips. But I’m lucky that I’m relatively slender there because I can wear skinny trousers without looking too curvy. The guys with wider hips have trouble with fitted trousers emphasising the curves. But buying bigger to hide the curves can leave the crotch baggy. Another hack is knowing that straight cut trousers hide the difference between ankles and hips, which is a defining trait of a feminine body.”

I shook my head. I was beginning to understand the problem.

Drew continued. “The thing is, we’re all different. And not everyone chooses or wants surgery or even hormones, so it ends up a lifelong challenge for some to find clothes that fit well, let alone make us feel sexy.”

Outrage sparked in my belly on Drew's behalf. Not being able to buy something sexy, if you wanted, wasn't okay for *anyone*. "Okay, what else?"

He thought a minute. "Patterned shirts or darker colours distract the eye from the chest. No clingy fabrics, and a hell no to elastic at the bottom of sweatshirts and jerseys." He spread his hands. "There's a ton of stuff."

"Mmm." I tapped my lip with my finger. "Maybe Flare should develop some kind of niche side label?"

Drew went quiet, catching my attention. "What?"

He sighed. "Can I be honest with you?"

"Of course."

He blew out a slow breath. "Okay, so what we *don't* need are more cis gender people making products that capitalise off the backs of people like me. As I said, I try to support our own designers, people who really understand us, and are trying to make a difference."

I smiled. "I couldn't agree more, and I'm sure Rhys would feel the same. And that's exactly why I think *you* should do it." I tapped Drew's chest with my finger. "*You* have the passion, the experience, the style know-how, not to mention the whole sewing thing, and you have the best resources available in your wonderful bosses to lend a hand and teach you the tricks. Don't look at me to draw anything, but I have an eye."

Drew's mouth dropped open. "Me? Design something?" He choked on a laugh. "You can't be serious."

I narrowed my eyes. "Oh, I'm *deadly* serious. And to that end, I want you to sketch up some ideas, maybe starting with underwear-related stuff—briefs, binders, something sexy. And when you're done, bring them to me. I'll give you a couple of weeks to come up with something."

His head was still shaking in disbelief. "But . . . I can't. Where would I start?"

I smiled at the horrified look on his face. “Start with what *you* would like to wear. Most designs aren’t new, Drew, they’re plays on history, on other designs, on a cultural take. Have a look around the store for inspiration, then mix it up. Rhys won’t mind.”

Drew gaped but there were threads of excitement kindling in his eyes. “You really mean it?”

I nodded. “I do. No promises beyond taking a look at what you come up with, and if it’s good enough, taking it to Rhys when he gets back. Maybe it’ll turn into something, maybe it won’t, but you won’t know unless you try.” I handed the catalogue back to a stunned Drew whose fingers curled around it in a death grip. “So, are you up for it?” I waited.

Drew blinked hard and then started nodding. “Yes. I . . . guess.” He blew out a shaky breath and cleared his throat. “Shit. Did I just say that?”

I grinned and patted his arm. “You did.”

“Holy crap.” His face blanched. “So, um, do you want another coffee before I head home and completely lose my shit? I take it you’ll be staying late.” He indicated the office, the tarp on the floor, and the small library of paint colour test pots and brushes I’d collected on my lunch break.

I followed his gaze and smiled. “And you’d be right.” With an office to make my own, I was in no hurry to get back to my one-bedroom, pretty-but-tiny apartment with its sliced view across the Hauraki Gulf and crippling subscriptions to every streaming service known to humanity. “But it’s a no on the coffee. Any more caffeine and my balls are gonna start flashing neon.” I checked my phone to find it was almost six. “You get home.”

Drew was out of there in under five minutes, still looking pale but practically vibrating with excitement.

Ten minutes later, as I was brushing a wide swathe of April Sun across one of the office walls, sandwiched between Burnt Sienna and English Sage, the bell on the door jangled and I

smiled, assuming Drew had forgotten something as he was prone to do.

“I’m gonna put a checklist on that door,” I called out to him.

“Not sure I need one, but I appreciate the offer.”

I spun at the deep voice, heat racing to my cheeks. *Leon*. Dammit. I’d been so engrossed in what I was doing, I’d almost forgotten he was moving into the flat.

“Oh, it’s you.” I spied him through the glass. And yes, that was about as welcoming as it sounded.

Leon snorted and lowered the two suitcases he’d been carrying to the floor. Then he strolled toward my office in that effortless loose-limbed way he had. For a giant of a guy, he was surprisingly graceful. Not that I paid much attention to that sort of thing, of course.

“And it’s nice to see you too.” A trace of amusement tugged at his lips, which only served to further piss me off. Then he caught sight of the paint cans and tarp and leaned on the doorjamb to study the wall. “Redecorating already?” Those silvery eyes sparked with mischief, but I wasn’t in the mood.

I shot him a withering look. “I’ll have you know this is all Rhys’s idea. He insisted I take over his office since he’s moving above your place and my role has . . . expanded.” My tone was far less convincing than I would’ve liked, and Leon frowned. I narrowed my gaze. “I’ve no doubt you think Rhys has a screw loose putting me in charge, but I don’t want to hear about it. He set aside a budget and threatened dire repercussions if I’m not moved in by the time he gets back. So, if I have to do it, it’s going to be done properly.” I cast an eye over the paint swatches. “I’m gonna have to live with these colours for a bit before I can make a decision.” I felt the heat of Leon’s shrewd eyes and kept my gaze firmly on the wall.

“Well, contrary to your worryingly low opinion of me, I don’t think Rhys has a screw loose at all. In fact, I think he’s made an excellent choice.”

What? I spun around, expecting to find that familiar smirk, but Leon looked nothing but serious.

“Rhys’s business is hugely important to him.” Leon’s gaze remained steady on me. “And I know for a fact he thinks very highly of you. He trusts you, Christopher.”

Huh? I searched his face for that single glint of sarcasm to prove Leon was fucking with me, because it had to be there, but I saw nothing. *What sorcery is this?* Heat crept up my throat and I shrugged and looked away before he caught it.

“Well, of course he does.” I lowered my brush to rest on the test pot. “He’d be lost without me. Now, is there something I can help you with, or did you just pop in to offer your decorating opinion? I need to finish up so I can head out and grab myself another anonymous bed-warmer for a few hours.” I shot him a saucy wink. “That’s what guys like me do, right?”

He blinked, then gave me a strange, almost regretful look, and shifted his gaze to the colour swatches on the wall. “I like the dark orange. It fits you. Have a good night, Christopher.” He gave me a sombre nod and headed for the stairs.

I watched him go, not liking the twinge of something too close to guilt in my belly. “Kip,” I corrected, just loud enough to be heard, although the usual sting was missing. And what the fuck did he mean by it *fits* me?

I shook the Leon-shaped fog from my brain and refocused on the wall, my gaze lingering over the burnt sienna swatch, which had been my favourite even before Leon’s comment. It definitely worked best in the space, dammit. And then it occurred to me that Leon worked with colour every day, so of course he had a good eye, although it still didn’t explain his comment about it fitting me. And that really shouldn’t have been as irritating or as sexy as it was.

I blew out a sigh because I wasn’t petty enough to choose another colour simply because Leon and I liked the same one. But I didn’t have to stroke his ego, either. I’d buy the paint but wait before revealing my decision.

Okay, so maybe a little bit petty.

CHAPTER FOUR

Leon

I LOUNGED ON THE COUCH WITH A BEER IN HAND, HUMMING with contentment. After two weeks camping above my studio, living on takeout and whatever I could cook in a microwave, the luxury of having actual furniture, a shower with decent water pressure, and a bed with a comfort factor somewhere above granite was a gift from the gods. The sooner I moved into my little villa in Meadowbank, the better. Even if it came with an eye-watering price tag, and a shopping list of renovations that included at least a semblance of insulation, so it didn't bleed every scrap of heat out into the universe.

But those were problems for another day. For now, I could relax and be thankful for the kindness of my neighbours. Well, some of them. I thought of Chris and sighed. I was going to have to do something about our unresolved issues. I just wasn't sure what.

The beep of the store's alarm system arming jolted me from the couch to sneak a peek through the bedroom window at Chris leaving. The security light lit up the parking area and the Mini's headlights flashed. Chris threw his satchel in the back and then unexpectedly turned and glanced up to where I was standing in full fucking view.

Shit. I jerked out of sight, my heart thumping in my chest, mortified at my own ridiculousness.

One, two, three. I peeked back around the curtain to find Chris was now staring at my Harley. What the hell? I'd set the bike's alarm, so I was a little concerned when he reached out a hand and almost touched the cover. But then he appeared to catch himself, and seconds later he was behind the wheel of his Mini and zooming up the alley into the night.

I leaned on the window frame and stared at my Harley. Chris didn't like bikes. Hell, he called the Harley a fucking Honda more often than not . . . I narrowed my gaze. *Oh, that sly little minx.*

I chuckled and shook my head. It was another little mystery I intended to solve before my time in the flat was done. That was if I could get Chris to lower his guard and actually fucking talk to me. But based on our most recent encounter downstairs and his response to just the idea of me staying in the flat, I figured that opportunity was nowhere near a slam dunk.

But I deserved his disdain. I'd behaved like an asshole at that party. Chris might be off-limits but that didn't mean we couldn't be friends, right? Hey, I was a friendly guy. But if that was ever going to happen, I needed to come up with a plan to get through those steel-clad defences.

I wandered back to the couch and tried to think of one that wasn't going to get my balls laid on a platter and handed back to me. I'd come up with precisely nothing when my phone went off in my pocket. One look at the screen and I sighed. My brother.

“Hey, Kev. What's up?”

“Hey, asshole.”

Okay, not a great start. “I take it this is about this morning?”

“You know damn well it is. Jenn was only trying to help.”

She had been. And Kevin was right. I *was* an asshole. “Look, I told her I was sorry, but it doesn't change how I feel. She's not—”

“If you say *family*, so help me god, I'll come over there right now and deck you where you stand.” Kevin sounded as angry as I'd ever heard, and it took me aback.

“You can try,” I answered carefully, aiming to defuse things a little with the long-standing tease. Kevin had missed the family giant genes, sliding comfortably in at just under six feet if he stood on a small footstool. “But I didn't mean she wasn't family. You know I love her. It's just that—”

“How many fucking times has she been there for you when you've needed her help over the years?” Kevin's voice rose. Score zero for the defusal. “You know, like *today*, for

example? Or when you needed her financial opinion on your business. Or when she stayed up all hours helping you fill in all those damn business loan applications?”

Fuck. “I’m sorry. She caught me at a bad time. The water leak, needing to cancel appointments, having to move again, Caitlyn . . . My head’s messed up, okay? I didn’t mean to hurt her feelings.”

“You didn’t. She’s tougher than that, and you know it. She’d eat you for breakfast and not blink an eye.”

All true.

“But she is upset, and that hurts *me*, you jerk. I’m not saying Jenn should’ve said anything, but I am saying she had as much right to do so as anyone else in this family after the last few years, and you fucking know it. She knew Caitlyn. She was here that day. And she helped pick up the pieces, me *and* you, included.”

Well, shit. “Low blow, brother.”

He huffed. “Not low enough if you can still breathe through the pain. Now, what the hell has crawled up your butt and built itself a home, cos we are all about done with it? Caitlyn’s anniversary is coming up fast and you’ve got everyone tiptoeing around you like you’re something special. But you’re not the only one hurting. Caitlyn didn’t belong to you. We *all* miss her, and we *all* get a say in how we remember her, as a family. What you do on your own is up to you, but what we do as a family *needs* to be talked about. And if we feel it’s time to change how that happens, *you need* to listen to us.”

Fuck. The worst of it was, he was right. In my brain, I knew that. But my heart couldn’t see past my own guilt and grief and the relief of drowning that in everyone else’s. How the hell could they not still feel the same?

“I understand what you’re saying, Kev. I just . . . I don’t get what’s so wrong with what we’ve always done?”

“Because it’s become about what *you* want, not us. Some of us want to move past the gut-wrenching churn of self-

recrimination and grief and focus on something better about her.”

And there it was. Air whooshed from my lungs as my mother’s gentle voice rang in my ears from a few weeks back.

“We want to smile when we remember her. We want to build something different. Caitlyn wouldn’t want this, not now. Not seven years later. No one had more zest for living than her, and you know that.”

“I . . . I don’t know if I’m ready. I . . . god, I don’t know if I can.” I wiped at my eyes and a heavy sigh broke down the line.

Kevin’s voice gentled. “And that’s okay. No one’s saying *you* can’t keep doing what you’ve been doing. It’s what we all do together that we want to change.”

“But . . .” I struggled for the right words without sounding pathetic. “It wouldn’t be the same.”

He sighed and the weight of it filled my head with guilt. “Leon, listen,” he said, sounding way more like the older brother than me. “At the beginning, it was the right thing to do. The right way to remember what happened. Going to the site of the accident, then on to her grave. Sharing a meal of her favourite foods. Being angry. Railing at the injustice. The photos, the toasts . . . watching you get . . . drunk . . . crying. All of it. But it’s like this weight around our necks now.”

Heat bloomed in my cheeks, and I spoke through gritted teeth, pain slicing my heart. “So, why wait until a few weeks before her anniversary to say something?”

“Don’t you dare,” Kevin fumed, his voice rising again. “Mum and Dad have been trying to talk to you for months, but you keep shutting them down. Caitlyn was *their* daughter. And there’s a new generation coming through. Susie’s just the first. Grandkids who never knew Caitlyn. Things are changing whether you want them to or not.”

Oh god.

“Jenn and I want Susie to smile when Caitlyn’s anniversary comes along, not dread the day like—”

“Dread?” I echoed, not hiding my shock. “Is that what people feel? Is that what *you* feel? Caitlyn was our bloody sister. And she was *my* twin.”

“Yes, she was,” Kevin answered evenly, lowering his voice. “And her death was a fucking tragedy. But she’s been gone seven years—”

“And I, for one, am *not* going to forget her, unlike some.” I regretted the words the minute they left my lips and caught Kevin’s sharp intake of breath.

“Jesus, Leon. What the actual fuck?”

“Fuck.” I slapped my palm against my forehead. “I’m sorry.”

“No one’s asking you to forget her,” he railed. “And none of us are trying to forget her either. So don’t you ever say that again, you shithead. I loved Caitlyn every bit as much as you, and you know damn well that’s not what this is about.”

Fucking fuck, fuck. How did we get here? I sighed, blinking hard. “I said I’m sorry. It was a shitty thing to say.”

“Fucking oath, it was.” He huffed down the line. “You’re damn lucky I love you, although at the moment I wouldn’t take odds on that lasting.”

I almost smiled. Almost.

The line went quiet for a moment before Kevin softly said, “You have to stop blaming yourself. Remember Caitlyn, grieve her, but live your life and let everyone else do the same.”

“I *am* living my life.” I sliced a hand through the air, frustration boiling over. “And I don’t blame mys—”

“Yes, you do. It’s why you torture yourself every year by reliving every second of that godawful day, and then the funeral, in excruciating detail. But you make us relive it too, and it hurts now. We’re done. It’s time, at least for some of us, to move past agonising over her death, and start celebrating

her life and who she was as a person. No one wants to hurt your feelings. Caitlyn was a firecracker, remember? What do you think she'd want? We thought we could do something symbolic, like plant a tree or put a bench somewhere with a nice view where we could go and sit and—”

“Plant a tree?” Disdain dripped from my unchecked words. “Jesus Christ. Really, Kevin? That’s the best you can come up with?”

“What would you suggest?” He gave a frustrated sigh. “Maybe some self-flagellation? Or should we all don hair shirts? Although I think you’ve cornered the market on that shit already.”

His words hit like a fist to my chest and my throat choked closed.

“Fuck.” Kev hesitated. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. Jesus, look at us. We’re better than this.”

I took a second to breathe and stitch up my heart. “Yeah, I know.” My voice was less than steady. “And I know I don’t make it easy for you . . . for anyone.”

Kevin sighed, and the thickness in his voice when he finally spoke said everything about how much he loved me. “You’re a good man,” he said, like he was trying to imprint the words in my brain. “And you’re the best big brother a guy could ask for. But please stop punishing yourself. Maybe if you talked to someone. A . . . professional. It’s just a thought.”

I said nothing because I was too fucking scared that he was right. That *I* was the problem. That *I* was holding them back. I wanted to tell him that it was fine. That I understood. That I wanted to move on, just like they did. But the words wouldn’t come. There was only hot guilt and cold anger and a pain of grief that sliced through my heart like it was yesterday.

“I think you guys should do whatever makes you happy,” I finally managed, shocked at getting the words out at all without throwing up. “I’m going to the accident site and her grave, just like always, and after that, I really don’t know. I might see you back at Mum and Dad’s. I might not—”

“Leon, please,” Kevin pleaded. “Can’t we discuss it together, as a family?”

“Why?” I huffed angrily. “What’s there to discuss? You guys seem to have already made up your minds. Look, tell the others they have my blessing. Plant your tree, build your bench, whatever. I’m doing what we’ve always done, what I promised Caitlyn I would. I’m going to remember *all* of it.”

“For fuck’s sake—”

“It’s fine. I’m not angry.” *Like hell.* “Tell everyone you tried but I’m not ready yet. And tell Jenn that I’m sorry about this morning. I’ll make it up to her.”

I ended the call without giving him a chance to reply, switched the phone to silent, and threw it on the couch. Then I headed for the shower to let the tears fall.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kip

“HAVE YOU SEEN THOSE MATERIAL SAMPLES THAT ARRIVED yesterday?” I called out to Drew who’d just finished with a customer. “And what did you do with the sale signs?”

Drew watched two shoppers head for the fitting rooms with an armful of clothes and then popped his head through the open door. “The samples are exactly where I showed you earlier.” He pointed to the bunch of swatches on a chair, poking out from under the tarp I’d thrown on top of them. “And I put the sale signs back in the storeroom, exactly like you told me to.” He raised a very judgy eyebrow for one so young.

Well, shit. “Sorry.”

Drew fired me a pointed look. “No problem. But what the hell’s up with you today? You’ve been pissy as a caged alley cat ever since Rhys left barely twenty-four hours ago.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said loftily, reaching for the samples and starting to flick through them. And the fact I couldn’t look at the swathe of burnt sienna on my office wall without recalling Leon’s fresh scent, or the way his body had lounged invitingly against my door, had absolutely nothing to do with it.

“Well, can the grumpy arse routine, then,” Drew practically growled, forcing me to look up and admire his spunk. “You’re giving me wrinkles—almost as many as you.”

I swallowed a laugh and shot him a glare instead. “Very funny. I’m only seven years older.”

“That’s forty-nine in dog years,” he deadpanned, and this time I did laugh.

The kid made me proud. “Feeling brave today, I see.”

He shrugged. “You don’t scare me, Kip Grantham.”

And the crazy thing was, I believed him. Which only made me like him even more.

“You’re a teddy bear with a white-pointer smile.”

My jaw dropped in mock horror. “Hush your filthy mouth. You are never to use the words *teddy bear* in reference to me ever again, got it?”

He grinned and ignored me. “We’re doing fine on our own without Rhys, you know that, right? It’s not like he hasn’t been gone before. Our takings are great. I’m winning them over with my charm and stunning good looks. And you’re . . .” He hesitated and eyed me up and down. “Well, you’re being you. Selling a million things to people who didn’t know they needed them and scaring away the mice. What more could you want?”

I bit back a smile. He really was coming along nicely. “Your charm and good looks, huh?”

He gave a dramatic flick of his hair. “It’s a burden, what can I say? I try to use my power for good.”

I chuckled. “And the world is deeply indebted. But right now, you can take that charm and use it on the coffee maker. The gay chain of command stipulates that you provide me with one on a regular basis. And bring those sale signs you hid from me as well.”

Drew snorted and raised a brow. “The gay chain of command?”

I waved a hand in the air. “It’s like the army but with glitter and a way more interesting bedside drawer.”

Drew saluted. “Can’t argue with that. Although I’m not sure Rhys knows anything about this *theoretical* gay chain of command since he’s the one who mostly gets the coffees.”

I smirked. “I’ve found it’s best not to bother him with too many details.”

Drew laughed and headed to the kitchen while I left the office to check on the two customers who’d emerged from the fitting room. The silver-fox hottie had a shirt slung over his arm while his companion carried a couple of Rhys’s new T-shirt designs that were selling like hotcakes. I took their money and smiled at the phone number on the back of the card

the older man slipped into my hand. I pocketed it, tidied the racks, and then headed back to my office to do battle with a few more suppliers. Man, I loved my job.

And Drew was right. The store was doing just fine. I needed to chill out. But my nerves weren't actually about running the store on my own for a bit, as Drew thought. I could do that in my sleep. My worry was about stepping up into this new role Rhys wanted of me, on a permanent basis. A part of me knew I could do it just fine, if only I could shut up the other part that said I was just fucking fooling myself, and who the hell did I think I was?

"Here you go." Drew slid a cup across the office desk and perched his bum on the edge. "So, how's it going with our new roomie?" He glanced up to the ceiling. "You're both still alive, so that's something, I guess."

I nudged his bum from my desk and continued to study the order forms spread across my two computer screens. "We're *not* roomies. I didn't even see him yesterday, so things are just dandy."

"Mmm." Drew blew on his coffee. "He is hot though, right? And by that, I mean *super-hot*. Like crazy, bend-me-over-a-couch *hot*."

I lifted my gaze to find him innocently batting his lashes at me. "He's too old for you."

Drew grinned and arched a brow. "But you're only seven years older than me, right? Isn't that what you said?"

Did I mention the kid was getting way too good at this?

"And he's got that whole mountain man, biker, tatted daddy thing going on. Who knows? I might be just what he's looking for. Jesus, imagine all of that all over you."

I didn't dare meet his eyes because I'd done just that on far, far too many occasions. I took a sip of my coffee and grimaced at the lack of sugar. Drew had made it his mission to cut me back. "Maybe," I grunted. "He's an acquired taste, I guess, but he's still too old for you."

Drew smirked. "Oh, I dunno. Nothing to lose, right?"

His words sat cold in my chest as I focused on the red bleeding all over my computer screens. Or maybe that was just me. It was none of my business what Drew did, *or* Leon. But just the thought of the two of them . . . And, oh hell to the no . . . that was not fucking jealousy simmering in my gut. I wouldn't allow it.

“Do what you want.” I kept a neutral tone that I doubted fooled him for a second. “I just don't think—”

The store bell interrupted my caution, which was likely a good thing, and a familiar shock of strawberry-blond hair appeared over the shirt racks. I glanced at my screen and frowned. It was barely four thirty. Hoping Leon would head straight upstairs, I swore softly when he strode right on past and stopped at the service desk.

Drew shot to his feet like his tail feathers were on fire. “Whoops, I forgot those sale signs you wanted. I'll go grab them.” He waved hello to Leon, adding a cute little smile that made me want to smack him, and then bolted out the door.

I smelled a very pungent rat and scowled at his departing back. He'd obviously been fucking with me. But Drew could wait. I had bigger problems to contend with. Leon was smiling at me from the service desk. *Smiling*. A big, broad, charming, toothy grin, and I wasn't at all sure what to do with that.

He crooked his finger, and my balls sat up and took notice.

Fuck. My. Life.

I sighed and left my office to see what the confounding man wanted.

“What's that?” I eyed the steaming cup of Bump and Grind coffee Leon pushed my way.

“I'm gonna go with that not being a real question. Two sugars, no milk, right?” He offered another of those heart-stopping smiles, and I squashed the pocket of warmth that dared to flare in my chest.

“Do I even want to know how you know that?” I drank in the glorious aroma of Danielle's exquisite brewing and

scowled so I wouldn't drool. "You wouldn't happen to be stalking me, would you, Leon?"

His cheeks pinked in an unexpected way that absolutely didn't curl my toes in my socks. Six-foot-six behemoths looking cute as fuck clearly pushed a button I didn't even know I had. And there it was again, that little curl of heat flicking like a rattlesnake's tongue on my balls, and about as trustworthy.

"No, Christopher. I'm not stalking you," he answered flatly. "I happened to hear you make the order once or twice when I was picking up coffee at the same time."

I stared at him. "Funny, I don't remember ever seeing you in there." *Lies. All lies.* "Still, I was probably checking Grindr on my phone. I do it so often, I lose track. Rack 'em and stack 'em, right?"

The pink on his cheeks deepened but a smile tugged at his lips. "Whatever floats your boat."

I waited for the sardonic punchline, but it didn't come. "So, what's the catch?" I nodded to the coffee.

Leon let out a long-suffering sigh and pushed the coffee closer. "There's no catch, for fuck's sake. My last client of the day cancelled. I left JJ and Tyson to close and decided to grab a coffee. I knew your order, so . . ." He nudged it again. "But, whatever. If you don't want it, throw it out. Catch you later." He turned and headed for the stairs.

"It's Kip," I grumbled to his back, and he stopped and turned slowly to face me. "Why do you refuse to use it? Is it just to piss me off, because congratulations, it works. It's three letters, Leon. I'd have thought even you would have a good chance of getting that right." That came out a lot more pissy than I'd intended and Leon recoiled a little.

He blinked slowly. "You're right, and I'm sorry . . . Kip." He turned back around and headed up the stairs.

I watched him every step of the way, thinking the name sounded so fucking wrong on his lips. And when he was out of

sight, I swore softly and kicked the leg of the service desk just because I could. “Ow, ow, fucking ow.”

A snort came from behind. “So, that went well.”

I spun and pinned Drew with a glare. “Is there no fucking privacy around here?”

He shrugged. “It’s a small space. Kind of hard not to hear. What’s up with you two, anyway? You dance around each other like a couple of snarling cats in heat.”

“We do not,” I snapped and immediately regretted it. “Sorry. He’s just the most exasperating man I’ve ever met. Every time I talk to him, he fucks with my head. I know you all think he’s this sweet guy, but he can be an arrogant, self-righteous, judgemental son of a bitch, just like everyone else.”

“Quite likely more,” Leon’s voice floated down from the upstairs landing seconds before the door to the flat closed.

“Fuck!” I rapped my palm on my forehead a couple of times, then shouted up the stairs, “It’s your own fault for eavesdropping.” I spun to Drew. “Why didn’t you tell me he was still there?”

Drew gave a Cheshire-worthy grin. “Totally my bad. My X-ray vision’s been on the fritz. I’ll do better next time. Here, have a mint.” He slid a small tin toward me.

I absently popped one in my mouth and talked around it. “And don’t disappear on me like that again. If Leon comes in and you’re here, he’s all yours, understand?”

Drew bit back a knowing smile and I wanted to throttle him. “I can try, but I might find it hard not to hit on him. Just saying.”

I shot him a killing look that slid right off.

He shrugged. “But also, I’m pretty sure it’s not me he comes to see. The sexual tension burning between the two of you is driving me nuts.” He fanned his face. “It’s not good for a young boy’s heart.”

I gaped, the reflexive denial teetering on the tip of my tongue before I slammed my mouth shut and rethought my

approach. “That’s just lust. As you said, the man’s hot. You think you know me so well, huh?”

Drew regarded me warily, knowing there was a trap in the question somewhere. “Nooooo, I wouldn’t say that,” he ventured gingerly. “But you kind of just answered my question about the other.” He looked way too pleased with himself.

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m sure our staff bathroom is up for another clean this week.”

The smile dropped off his face. “Damn, that was low.”

I wagged my brows. “You’re a princess messing in queen territory, honey.”

He sighed. “Noted.” Then he grinned. “But I almost had you there, right?”

I couldn’t hide my smile. “Don’t let it go to your head.” I offered a high five and he obliged.

He leaned in and lowered his voice. “I still think I should hit on him. I mean, if you’re not—”

“Don’t you have work to do?” I interrupted tartly. “I hear your boss is a bitch.”

“So, they say.” Drew winked. “But I happen to know he’s a pussycat.”

I snorted. “You just keep telling yourself that.”

He kissed my cheek and headed for the dressing rooms. “I know you love me.”

I chuckled and shook my head because he wasn’t wrong. And he was the best thing to happen to Flare since . . . well, since me.

I glanced up the stairs, then back at the coffee on the service desk. I wasn’t going to drink it, no matter how much I wanted to.

I kept staring.

Well, maybe just a sip.

I checked Drew was out of sight before stealing a swallow, and then another, trying not to groan too loudly as the heavenly liquid slid down my throat. Danielle was a caffeine maestro.

“I heard that,” Drew called from the changing rooms, and I looked up to find him grinning at me.

Fuck. I flipped him off and poured the remainder of the coffee down the kitchen sink before I embarrassed myself further.

This couldn't go on. Even I could see that. Leon was a thorn in my shapely butt that I was going to have to do something about.

Tomorrow.

Maybe.

But tomorrow didn't happen. Wednesday was a store sale nightmare, and regardless of the troubling appearance of yet another late-night coffee slipped onto the service desk along with a casual wave from an equally late Leon, he disappeared upstairs before I could accost him and tell him to stop being so fucking nice. It was giving me a rash.

The last thing I needed was to feel grateful to him in any way, which was exactly what I'd told the empty stairwell as I'd drunk his damn coffee and stared up at the sound of his footsteps crossing the ceiling. Leon being considerate was proving an unexpected and particularly devious low-blow tactic that I hadn't quite worked out how to counter.

Clear the air. Rhys's words echoed in my head, and okay, there was a miniscule chance the whole coffee thing wasn't just a sneaky battle manoeuvre on Leon's part. Maybe I should give him the benefit of the doubt, much though the idea rankled me. But with our sale in full swing, there was little time to consider how to handle that unnerving prospect. Drew

and I were run off our feet just keeping our heads above water, as people flocked to Flare to grab a bargain.

And Thursday went much the same way. By the time we'd shut the doors at six, we'd smashed our daily sales record by a few thousand and my feet were pulsing bright red. The only plus? Beck's nephew Jack worked after school on Thursdays, Fridays, and sometimes Saturday mornings, which meant an extra pair of hands to clean up and restock.

At six twenty, I ditched my shoes and collapsed into my chair. "Go home." I waved a hand at Drew and Jack, both of whom were slumped on the floor of my office with their backs against the wall, looking about as shattered as I felt. "We're gonna have to do it all again tomorrow."

"Jesus, and I thought final exam prep was bad," Jack grumbled, hauling his school bag close to grab his phone from the pocket. "I'm supposed to be studying history tonight. I'll be lucky to keep my eyes open."

My gaze lingered on Jack's face and the sharpening angles of his cheeks and jaw that promised the man to come. In his last year of school, it seemed like yesterday that he'd first walked into the store and brought his Uncle Beck into Rhys's life.

Jack frowned at me. "What are you looking at?"

"You. You're all grown up. Those university girls aren't gonna know what's hit them next year."

He flushed a deep red. "Shut up."

"Hello? Anyone home?"

We turned as one toward the front door, and I waved Gary inside. The dapper thirty-year-old man was Hunter's assistant photographer and an important pillar of Hunter and Alec's new modelling agency venture, Melt, New Zealand. He organised most of our shoots and was ruthlessly efficient, something that had initially caused us to clash, since control was usually my forte. But once we retracted our claws and I learned I could trust him to get shit done, we got on like a house on fire.

“Hey, team.” Gary strolled into the office wearing his customary bow tie, startling green clearly the colour of the day. Fine-boned and barely pushing five seven, Gary was a pretty man with shrewd blue eyes and a no-nonsense approach to life. He wore painted-on charcoal trousers over his pencil-thin legs, an immaculate white linen shirt with black buttons, and a nervous smile, the latter definitely not something I’d seen often, if at all.

My curiosity was definitely piqued.

“Hi, Jack . . . Drew.” Gary’s gaze lingered on Drew who stared up at him with pink cheeks and a shy grin.

Oh. My. God.

“Hi,” Drew answered, and Jack and I exchanged a what-the-fuck look as the office fell quiet. Drew shuffled on his butt, his gaze sliding off Gary and onto a stain on the tarp covering the floor.

“So . . .” I broke the silence and Gary’s gaze shot to mine. “What can we do for you this fine night?”

He snorted. “Have you seen the rain pissing down out there?”

He wasn’t telling me anything new. I’d spent half the day mopping up the tiles and offering to stow people’s umbrellas in the holder by the door before they put water marks on the silk shirts.

Gary cleared his throat. “I was on my way home and thought I’d drop off the roughs from the photo shoot we did for the *Fashion Downunder* mag.” He slid a packet onto my desk. “Let me know what you think by the weekend.” He stole a sideways glance to Drew.

“Will do.” I barely contained my grin. “But I thought you lived south of the city? This is hardly on your way.”

He gave me the hairy eyeball. “I do. I um, I had a couple things to do in the city first.”

“Aha.” I didn’t believe him for a second. “Well, I’d offer you a coffee, but after the day we’ve had, I’m not moving

from this chair. So, unless you can bribe the world's best assistant here—" I nodded to Drew. "—you're on your own. You got anything you think you could tempt him with?" I held his gaze and saw my about-to-be-very-short life reflected back at me. "No? Nothing spring to mind?"

Drew fired me a death stare and Jack almost choked on his tongue. I answered Drew's glare with my patented pay-back's-a-bitch smile. Master, 1. Apprentice, 0.

Drew ignored me and spoke directly to Gary. "*I'll* make you a coffee. No incentive needed."

I jumped to my feet and put a hand on Drew's shoulder. "No, you stay right there. I was just kidding." I kept my sly smile hidden from Gary. "You've already done me a favour today." I gave him a pointed reminder. "Jack can help me."

Gary immediately protested, "That's not necessary. I'm kind of coffee'd out."

"A water then. Won't be a minute." I grabbed Jack's hand and yanked him off the floor and out of the office.

"What are you doing?" Jack whispered, fighting my attempt to drag him down the hall. "I wanted to watch. Did you know they liked each other?"

"Not a fucking clue." I shoved him into the kitchen and shut the door. "But I do now." I wagged my eyebrows and Jack laughed.

"You're evil."

I patted his cheek. "Why, thank you."

We gave the two men in my office a good ten minutes before rejoining them. Drew was on his feet, the width of the office between him and Gary, and conversation died the minute we arrived, a scarlet-faced Drew looking like a butterfly caught in a bottle.

I shoved the glass of water into Gary's hand, and he stared at it, then at me. But when his gaze narrowed, I wondered if I might've miscalculated. Teasing Drew was one thing. But Gary was a much more dangerous and wilier opponent.

He pushed the glass back at me. “I said I wasn’t thirsty.” Then his expression turned wistful, and he sighed. “But thanks.” His gaze held mine long enough for me to understand he wasn’t talking about the water.

I nodded, keeping my back to Drew, who was trying unsuccessfully to wriggle past Jack and out the door. “You’re welcome. Anytime.” I hoped he took my meaning. Gary might be prickly, but he was a good man. And if he was interested in Drew? Well, I could actually see that working, which kind of surprised me. I’d never even considered them together. Not that it would stop me strangling Gary with his own tongue if he hurt a hair on Drew’s head.

“I look out for my friends,” I added, and by Gary’s wince, I knew he understood. I walked him to the door and he left without another word.

Back in the office, Jack and Drew had their heads together in hushed conversation, but when I slumped in my chair, the room fell quiet. I barely got my mouth open when Drew stared me down.

“Don’t.” He raised both palms. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I plastered an innocent smile on my face and tut-tutted. “Honestly, it’s like you don’t even know me. All I want—” My phone rang on my desk and I stared in disbelief at the name on the screen. My brother. My gut clenched and I sent the call directly to voicemail. My shock must have shown on my face because Drew’s brow creased in concern.

“Kip? You okay?”

“Yeah,” I lied, hearing the ding of the voicemail that would burn a hole in my pocket until I deleted it before I was tempted to listen. “Just an old hook-up.”

Drew’s expression said he didn’t believe me for a minute, but he let it go. “Come on, Jack.” He pushed Jack out the office door ahead of him. “I’ll give you a ride home before our resident spinster and agony aunt decides to continue with any dating advice.”

My hand hit my chest. “You wound me. But go ahead. It’ll keep.”

Drew glanced back and his smile was gone, replaced by something slightly more desperate. “Please don’t,” he mouthed silently, and the misery in his eyes sliced right through me.

I frowned but nodded and let them go. Whatever had happened in the short spell we’d left the two of them alone, it clearly hadn’t been productive. I’d find out exactly what, but I had other problems to see to first. I pulled out my phone and deleted my brother’s message. There was nothing he had to say that I wanted to hear.

That done, I got lost in work until I heard Leon’s key in the lock. A horrifying flutter of expectation ran through my chest that pissed me the hell off. There had to be a drug you could take for that shit. Then my belly grumbled, and I glanced at the clock to find it was already ten-thirty. I’d completely lost track of time.

But I hadn’t been the only one working late and I forced myself not to look up at the sound of Leon’s footsteps crossing the floor, half-dreading, half-anticipating that bearded handsome face appearing through my open office door at any moment.

When it didn’t and I caught the thud of his footsteps on the stairs themselves, I felt oddly disappointed. He wasn’t stopping by or even taking the time to call out hello as he’d done most mornings when he’d left, when he came and went at lunchtimes, and then evenings too, and I suddenly realised I’d gotten used to him doing exactly that. Maybe even started looking forward to it.

I cursed my foolishness. *This is exactly what I want, isn’t it? Leon minding his own business and leaving me alone.*

I sighed and pushed back from my desk. I’d been staring at my computer so long I was seeing cross-eyed. If I didn’t pack up and head home, I may as well bunk on the floor and be done with it. I gathered my things and hit the office light before heading to the service desk to log off.

And that's when I saw them—a coffee from the food cart around the corner alongside an innocuous paper bag. I stole a glance up the stairs, but all was dark, and one peek in the bag sent a rush of saliva to fill my mouth. Because nestled at the very bottom sat a savoury scroll with warm cheese oozing from its swirls and crispy bacon resting tantalizingly on top.

Fuck. Me. I was pretty sure I popped wood.

The pope himself wouldn't be able to resist.

I ripped open the bag and bit off a warm unctuous mouthful. The gooey deliciousness exploded over my tongue like heaven, and I almost had to hold myself up from the flood of endorphins that raced through my system to wobble my knees. I washed the mouthful down with a swallow of perfectly doctored coffee, thought for two seconds about going upstairs and thanking the man responsible, then decided to deal with that conundrum tomorrow.

Instead, I texted a simple *Thank you*.

Then I set the alarm and headed out the back door to my Mini. I'd barely buckled myself in when Leon's reply lit up my phone.

You're welcome. Don't stay too late, Kip.

I glanced up at the soft glow emanating from Leon's bedroom and tried not to think about how long it had been since anyone gave a shit about how late I worked. Short answer: Never.

I also tried not to think about how that long, broad body might look stretched out on a bed. *My* bed. Or how I missed Leon calling me Chris.

Tried and failed.

I took another bite of scroll, threw Delilah in gear, and headed back to my empty apartment.

CHAPTER SIX

Leon

“WOW, THAT’S AMAZING.” THE YOUNG BUSINESSMAN BEAMED at the mirror and the large tribal design I’d outlined over the stencil on his back. It covered both shoulder blades and down to his waist. I genuinely admired the guy. It was his very first tattoo and he’d come up with the basic design, tweaked it with my help, and then barely flinched once we started.

“I hate wearing a damn suit every day.” He continued to study the outline. “Just knowing this is underneath will be epic. When do we start shading?”

I capped the cream and set it back on my station. “It’s a large design, Col, so I’d like to wait two to three weeks to let it heal properly before we do anything more.” I moved aside as JJ fixed a light dressing over the design. “The shading is gonna need a few long sessions and healing time between each one, so you need to think about how you want to plan that into your schedule. I’ll book an appointment for three weeks. After that, we can take it step by step.” I handed him a printout. “Here’s the aftercare we discussed. You can call with questions, anytime.”

JJ caught my eye. “I’ll organise the next appointment. You clean up and then go take a break. You missed lunch, remember?”

On cue my stomach growled, and I nodded my thanks. JJ headed for the reception desk, black ponytail swishing, her ballsy attitude belying her five-foot-nothing, knock-you-over-in-a-stiff-breeze, fine-boned South-East Asian genes. JJ inked like she was born with a tattoo machine in her hand and was one of the best freeform artists in the country. You crossed her at your peril.

When she was gone, I turned to the young man who was slowly easing into his shirt. “Any questions?”

“Nope, don’t think so,” he said, still smiling. “I’m just so stoked about how it looks.”

I grinned along with him. Clients like Col made my day. “You’re welcome. Follow the instructions and I’ll see you in three weeks.”

He nodded and headed over to JJ while I set about cleaning my station in preparation for my next client—a new dad who wanted his three-month-old daughter’s name inked on his rib cage, just under his heart. It was a simple job that I could’ve easily handed off to JJ whose turn it was to take the walk-ins, but the request struck a chord in my heart. I had Susie’s birth date on my right hip and an angel above my heart, so I got it, and I’d told the man to return in a couple of hours.

As I cleaned, I smiled at Tyson’s rumbling baritone singing along to Ry Cooder’s “Prodigal Son.” Ty was inking an intricate floral piece onto the thigh of a strapping forty-something gym franchise owner who’d been a regular in Ty’s chair for over five years. He belted out the chorus above the clamour of the rain ricocheting off the front windows of the store. It hadn’t let up all day and puddles the size of small lakes were inching their way from the gutters toward the middle of the road.

“Sing it, brother,” I called through the curtains and he obliged, raising his voice until the walls of the studio practically vibrated.

The gym owner laughed. “Don’t distract him or I’ll end up with a daisy instead of a bird of paradise.”

“Oh, ye of little faith,” Ty scolded, and we all laughed.

We were an eclectic bunch when it came to music. Tyson loved his old school guitarists. JJ nursed a kink for K-pop and Scandi rock. And my tastes ran to swamp blues and jazz. It was a potential minefield when it came to work playlists, and so we took turnabout on a half-day basis and kept our opinions to ourselves . . . mostly.

Unlike JJ, Tyson was a big man in every sense of the word, including his heart, but he had a surprisingly delicate touch when it came to his art, and he regularly blew me away with his elaborate pieces. He also handled most of the more *delicate* male piercings—the tattoo artist had more metal hidden in his

briefs than Wolverine stocked in his arms. JJ handled most of the female requests. Both were independent operators, renting their booths from me on a monthly basis, and we split the walk-in profits sixty-forty. We'd been a team for five years, more family than colleagues, and it worked well.

With my station clean and half an hour to kill before the new father's appointment, I headed out back to grab a real break. I'd barely switched the kettle on when my phone rang and my mother's name popped up on the screen. *Damn*. I took a breath and answered.

"Hey, Mum." I tried to sound cheerful and not like I'd been avoiding her all week.

"So, you're still alive then. Hang on a minute. Henry, you can stop searching for the insurance papers," she called out to my father.

I grinned. Michele Steadman could never be accused of not having a sense of humour. "Sorry. I've been slack. I should've called."

"Yes, you should have," she scolded, but her tone was soft. "You've been sulking long enough. I know you have strong feelings about Caitlyn's day, but hiding away and refusing to talk isn't helping anything."

"I am *not* hiding away." I totally was. "And I did talk, to Kevin . . ." I trailed off.

"Yes, to *Kevin*," she repeated, making sure I understood exactly how pissed she was that I hadn't talked to them. "And from what I understand, that was more shouting than discussion."

Someone had ratted. "Okay, so maybe I should've come to you as well."

"Ya think?"

Silence filled the space between us. We'd always been close, especially since Caitlyn had gone, and I felt my mother's hurt and frustration.

“I’m sorry, okay? I don’t know how to do this, Mum,” I admitted. “I get what you’re all saying, but I still miss her so fucking much.” I swallowed around the lump in my throat that threatened to choke me. “It feels like she’s dropping into the background, you know? Like it’s all okay now and we can just get on with our lives.”

My mother gasped, the sting of my words hitting home. “Like it’s all . . . okay? Can you even hear yourself?”

Shit. “I don’t mean it like that,” I rushed to explain. “I’m just not ready to stop raging about it, I suppose. I don’t want to feel better about her not being here. But that doesn’t mean I’m not moving on with my life.” *Doesn’t it?* “I give myself permission on that one day a year to really feel it, that gaping fucking hole in my heart.” And to get drunk and rail at myself and everyone else. Jesus, no wonder they’d had enough. I breathed a broken sigh. “I’m sorry, Mum.”

“Don’t be.” Her voice was soft and thick with tears. “You two had something special. I get that. We *all* get that. But maybe if you have to give yourself permission, then that says something in itself. Wouldn’t it be better to work through those feelings with someone, and not bottle them up?”

“You’ve been talking to Kevin.”

She sighed. “He’s concerned. We all are. But that’s for you to decide. All I’m saying is that what’s right for you at this point, isn’t necessarily what’s right for the others. It was bound to happen, son.”

“And Dad?”

She was quiet a minute. “Your father keeps things close to his chest, you know that. But yes, he wants to do it differently as well.”

I digested that bombshell and the sense of aloneness that went along with it. “So, it really *is* just me.”

“That doesn’t make it wrong, on either side. Everyone grieves at their own pace. Come and talk about it, Sunday night. The others will be there and Evie’s going to Zoom. We’re a family. We need to work this out together.”

I shook my head even though she couldn't see it. "I . . . can't. It's just not a good idea. I meant what I said to Kevin. I can live with you guys doing something different, but if I have to be part of the discussion, I'll only get angry and fuck things up for everyone. So, I'm going to keep doing what *I* need to on Caitlyn's anniversary. You guys let me know what you're doing, and maybe I'll come over later on the day."

Silence.

I waited, drowning in guilt, no matter what I did.

"All right then." There was no hiding the choke to my mother's voice. "But if you change your mind, the offer stands. We want you to be there, but we understand that this is hard for you. But we're going to talk, and I won't take no for an answer."

"Mum, I don't want to argue—"

"We won't," she assured me. "I promise. We just want to give our son a hug and talk face to face, is that okay?"

Said every mother everywhere before they nailed your balls to the wall. I closed my eyes and hung my head. "Fine. How about Saturday, a week from now? I'll make us lunch, at the flat."

In my mind's eye, I saw that broad familiar smile sweep over my mother's face. It had been a constant most of my life, a safe, warm, soft place to fall and I hated that I was causing her any worry.

"That sounds like a plan. Saturday week it is. But promise me you'll call if you want to talk before then?"

"I promise."

"Good. And Leon?"

"Yeah?"

"Caitlyn loved you so very much. She would never want you to blame yourself. Just remember that. See you next week."

The denial sat sour on my tongue and so I said nothing. She ended the call and I stared at the black screen and wondered why I couldn't just give them what they wanted. What was wrong with me? Why was everyone else ready to move on and I was still stuck wanting to burn the world?

"Hey." JJ stuck her head around the open kitchen door and I startled, almost dropping my phone. "Sorry, but you've, um, got a visitor." Her eyes danced with mischief.

I frowned, glancing at the clock on the wall. "Is my client early?"

"Nope." Her mouth curved up in a sly smile.

Jesus Christ. "Then who?"

She gave an innocent shrug. "Now, that would be telling, but he's hot."

I arched a brow. "He?"

"Yep."

"And hot?"

JJ batted her eyelashes. "Sizzling."

"Please tell me it's not an ex?"

"Not an ex . . . that I *know* of," she amended, with a glint in her eye. "Unless you've been a very naughty boy and kept secrets from us?"

I sighed. "I'm gonna regret this, aren't I?"

JJ said nothing and I sighed. "Oh, for fuck's sake." I followed her out, getting as far as the end of the hall before freezing at the sight of the man standing at the service desk with a dripping coat hung over one arm and a wayward lock of hair plastered to his forehead. Unaware of our approach, he was busy rearranging our business cards and dusting off our brochures like they personally offended him. As we drew close, he looked up, face still damp from the rain, and I wanted to lick every inch of him dry.

Chris.

Well, fuck me.

He looked anything but comfortable, agitated even. He also looked ready to take flight at any second and it was so unlike the Chris I knew that it gave me pause, long enough to appreciate his slim, fit body poured into a fitted black button-down over a pair of arse-hugging scrumptious shiny grey trousers. Both of them damp and clingy, which only added to the overall appeal.

“Chris? Sorry . . . Kip. This is a surprise.” Then a stab of worry hit me. “Shit, is there a problem with the flat?”

Chris stared at me, and if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed the red stain that crept up his beautiful neck. He was actually blushing. Well, damn.

“Hi.” His pale green eyes flicked nervously over my face. “And no, the flat’s fine. It’s nothing like that.”

“Oh, right. So, what can I do for you?” I tried not to smile as I took in his unusually dishevelled appearance. “A towel, perhaps?” My gaze lingered on the brochures in his hand. “Or maybe a dusting cloth?”

He scowled and slid the brochures back on the desk, shuffling them to the back of the cards before smoothing his hair. “You should always have your business cards up front,” he said, deadly serious. “Brochures at the back.” He pulled a cloth from his pocket and waved it. “And I have my own duster, thank you.” He ran a fingertip across the desk and studied it. “But it’s not too bad, surprisingly.”

I ignored the snorts of amusement coming from JJ and Tyson, both of whom had witnessed Kip dressing me down on more than one occasion and were clearly beside themselves with delighted anticipation at whatever was about to happen next. I could almost hear the popcorn popping. As if she’d heard me, JJ reached for the lolly jar we kept on the service desk and helped herself to a handful before handing it on to Ty.

Chris glanced awkwardly between the two of them, the colour on his cheeks rising by the second. I almost felt sorry

for him. Almost. Then I remembered his fondness for putting me in my place on a regular basis and held my ground.

When Chris realised JJ and Ty weren't about to give us any privacy and that I wasn't going to rescue him, he sighed and turned to grab something from the table in the waiting area. Walking back to the desk, he shoved a Bump and Grind coffee my way, grumbling something that sounded suspiciously like, "This is for you."

For a second, I simply stared at it, blinking like an idiot. "For . . . me?"

"Yes," he huffed. "Figured I owed you one. Milk and one sugar, right?"

I bit back a smile. Only Chris could make a peace gesture sound like a criminal sentence. I put a hand to my chest. "Why, Mr Grantham. Have you been stalking me?"

JJ almost choked on the jellybeans she'd been furiously shovelling into her mouth, and I shot her a warning glare.

Chris rolled his eyes. "You're not the only one who pays attention. But if you're going to make me regret it, I'll just leave this here and let you get on with your day." He spun on his heels to leave.

I lurched forward and grabbed him by the wrist. "No, please. Stay. I'm sorry." Except I couldn't help the grin. "But it *was* kind of tempting."

He said nothing for a few seconds, and then a smile tugged at his lips. "I guess I can see that."

I let him go and picked up the coffee instead. "You went for coffee in that?" I nodded to the torrential rain hammering on our windows.

He shrugged. "It wasn't so bad when I left. But yeah. It sucked coming back."

More silence as we both took a sip of coffee and studied each other over the rims. Behind Chris, JJ and Tyson were almost pissing themselves with laughter and JJ was fanning her face with her hand. I scowled at them both and offered

Chris a towel from our stacks. “Here. Hang up your coat and come out back.”

Chris hesitated just long enough for me to realise exactly how much this whole peace offering was costing his dignity, but eventually he did as I said and I waved him ahead of me down the hall toward the kitchen. Before following him, I made a throat-cutting gesture at my associates, hoping my look conveyed exactly how much trouble they’d be in if I caught them snooping. They stared blankly back with bemused smiles that conveyed exactly how much they didn’t give a single fuck.

I sighed and followed Chris into the kitchen, shutting the door soundly behind us. I gestured him to a chair at the small table and he stared at it like it might bite him in the arse, but eventually sat, albeit begrudgingly. I hid a smile and took the seat opposite, and for a few seconds we sipped on our coffees and stared out the window at the bleak weather, which had plunged the kitchen into gloom. I reached for the light switch just as thunder shook the building.

“For fuck’s sake.” Chris peered through the glass. “When is this going to let up?”

“Forecast says we’ve got it till tomorrow, at least.” I could do small talk. “Sunday looks good though.”

He caught my eye and I glimpsed humour in them. “Sunday, huh?” He almost smiled. “Fancy that.”

Enough already. I held up my coffee. “Forgive me for appearing a little on the backfoot, but this was . . . unexpected.” I met his gaze. “And surprisingly thoughtful.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re gonna milk this for all it’s worth, aren’t you?”

I grinned. “Abso-fucking-lutely. Wouldn’t you?”

He snorted and raised his own cup. “Touché.”

I touched my cup to his and we both took a long swallow, our gazes locked like neither believed this détente was actually happening. I might’ve hoped my coffee and pastry deliveries might mellow Chris’s attitude toward me, but there’d never

been any guarantee. And even as my heart kicked up, I wasn't taking any bets. This was Chris's show now. It was up to him.

Finally, he spoke. "So . . . I just wanted to say thank you for last night. We had a crazy day and I didn't get lunch. The hot drink and scroll were much appreciated."

"Wow." I couldn't hold back a laugh. "How did those words feel rolling off your tongue?"

He snorted. "Fucking awful, thanks for asking. So, tell me. What is it with the coffee thing? Are you trying to wear me down?"

I shrugged, not wanting to give too much away. "Yeah, something like that. Breaking through that snarky armour of yours one caffeine shot at a time."

He sat back and studied me with those shrewd green eyes. "My *armour* doesn't seem to have bothered you for two years. Why now?"

Good question, but he wasn't getting away with things that easily. "In case you've forgotten, it's not exactly my first attempt to talk with you. I just thought maybe the timing was right."

Chris arched a curious brow. "Is that so?"

When nothing more was forthcoming, I figured it was my turn to offer something. "It's no skin off my nose to drop you off a coffee now and then. You work hard, Kip. Flare's lights are often still burning when I finish work, and I know it's you. Rhys is lucky. You put in long hours for a business that isn't yours."

Chris's eyes widened and red blew back into his cheeks as he looked away. "It's my job. Rhys is a great boss and I love working there. I want him to succeed."

"He knows that. And as I said, he's lucky."

More silence and a flash of light split the sky before thunder once again rolled through the building, shaking the kitchen to its bones.

Chris pushed back his chair. “I should get back.” He walked his unfinished coffee to the sink and disposed of the contents before throwing the cup in the bin.

I stood and followed suit, desperate for a way to keep him here. I’d worked for this opportunity and I was fucking it up.

Chris reached for the door handle.

It was now or never.

“I never meant to offend you,” I blurted, and Chris froze with his fingers wrapped around the handle. “That night at the party, I . . . shit,” I fumbled. “It was a stupid thing to say and I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry. Really sorry.”

His shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath before he finally released the handle and turned to face me, his expression all kinds of wary. But he still said nothing.

Okay then. I sucked in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I never meant to imply that I didn’t approve of your . . .”

Chris arched a brow.

“Social strategies,” I finished carefully.

He folded his arms over his chest. “You mean how many men I fuck and how often?”

I winced, then sighed. “Yes. That. I don’t give a shit how many men you fuck, Chr—Kip.” I ignored the twinge in my belly that felt an awful lot like I was lying.

His gaze narrowed. “That’s not how it sounded.”

I raised my palms. “I know. I know. And that’s totally down to me. You looked hot as hell that night, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t tempted to take you up on your offer.”

“I know.” Chris cocked his head and leaned back against the door. “You couldn’t take your eyes off me all night. And I was watching you too, in case you were wondering, along with most of the people in that room. You looked . . . delicious.” His gaze ran hot over my body and heat bloomed in my cheeks. “And yet you didn’t take me up on the offer.” His

startling green eyes stayed steady on my face as the unspoken *why* hung like a sword between us.

“No, I didn’t. But not for the reasons you think.” *Oh god, am I really going to do this?* The answer was yes. I’d been a shithead that night, and everything between us since then had been my own damn fault. “My own bedroom had a revolving door on it for more years than I care to remember. I have no moral skin in this game, Kip. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with how you choose to live.”

Chris arched a brow, his sharp cheekbones and fine features illuminated by another flash that briefly washed those green eyes with silver. “Go on,” he said flatly.

“But I’d been trying to change that, starting right around the time of that party. To be honest, *you* were my first big test,” I admitted. “One I came very fucking close to failing.”

His mouth curved up in a slow sexy smile. “I did look hot that night.” He smirked and I almost laughed. The guy was an arse.

“I should’ve just said no thanks and wished you well.” I wanted him to understand. “But instead, I deliberately pissed you off to keep you at a distance. I knew you wouldn’t let me near you after that. It was a shitty thing to do and I’m sorry. But I wasn’t judging you.”

Chris watched me intently, no doubt gauging my sincerity, and it was all I could do not to wipe my clammy palms down the front of my jeans as I waited out his silence. If he didn’t accept my apology, we’d be stuck circling the drain for the foreseeable future, and I’d just have to live with that.

Eventually, he spoke. “All right . . . in the spirit of full disclosure, I might possibly have over-reacted. My family and their church—” He circled a hand in the air. “—disapprove of practically everything about me, including the fact I’m gay. But my slutty behaviour absolutely scandalises them. Not that I give a fuck. We don’t talk. It took me a long time to get past that shit and it’s not a subject I like to be reminded of . . . which you did.”

Way to go, idiot. “I’m so sorry I did that.”

He shrugged. “There’s enough grief thrown our way without shitting on each other, right?”

Suitably chastised, I nodded. “I imagine it feels good to stick one to your family like that?”

Chris cocked his head. “Are you analysing me, Leon? I’m touched.”

“No.” Heat raced back into my cheeks. “I’m just curious.”

He grinned. “Then, hell no. Their outrage is just a happy bonus. I do it because I love sex and I love men, and the two together are what good times are made of. Why did *you* do it for all those years?”

I grinned and nodded. “Touché. I was twenty-two when I came out as bi, and I couldn’t wait to explore everything I’d been missing and then some. I like women, don’t get me wrong, and I’ve fucked my fair share. But I’ve always had a soft spot for men.” I grinned. “Or a hard spot, to be more accurate.”

Chris chuckled. “You know, it’s a shame we didn’t talk more at that party *before* you shat on me. I might’ve forgiven you.”

I wish we had too. “My fault. I was avoiding you. See aforementioned comments about how hot you were that night. I just want you to understand that I get it. The whole ‘as many men in as many ways as you can’ thing. Exciting times, right?”

Chris’s expression relaxed. “So, what changed? What decided you to turn . . . respectable?” His green eyes glinted in amusement.

I gave a half shrug. “Age. Experience. Boredom. Call it what you like. I’m thirty-five. My friends and family are mostly settled with partners and growing their own families. One day I woke up, took a look around, and shocked the hell out of myself by realising I wanted that too. And continuing to fuck my way through as many men and women as I could wasn’t going to get me there.”

Chris blinked, horrified. “Well, that sucks. Can you take a pill for that?”

I laughed.

“I can’t imagine ever settling down with one guy.” He shook his head. “I love my life. A different guy riding my dick whenever I want? It’s the best rush.”

For a few seconds, I was struck dumb by the mental image of Chris fucking a guy, fucking *me*, *me* riding *him*, *him* riding *me*—all of the above. That he liked to top was no surprise given his ballsy nature and it had been a long time between drinks for me. At six foot six, most guys expected me to top. But the truth was, I could go either way. I just didn’t get the opportunity as often as I liked.

From the satisfied smirk Chris wore, I realised I’d been played. He’d been fishing for a reaction and I’d just handed it to him on a platter.

I cleared my throat and soldiered on. “I felt the same way, back then.”

He scowled. “Now I hope you’re not about to say that I’ll change my mind as well, when I grow up, because that would be helluva patronising.”

I shook my head. “No, of course not. Only that things changed for *me*. And it’s not like I don’t *ever* hook up. I’m only human, right? It’s just that I keep my eyes open for the chance at something more than that. I actually date now, something you wouldn’t have caught me dead doing back in the day.”

Chris studied me like I was a puzzle. “So, how’s that working out for you?”

I sighed. “To be honest, it’s hard work. Finding someone I like enough to date, but also have chemistry with, is like the proverbial needle in a haystack. But I’m not giving up. In two years, I’ve at least learned what I *don’t* want.”

Chris eyed me in that predatory way I hadn’t felt since that night at the party. The way that made my balls draw up and my dick pay attention.

He pushed off the door, took a step into my space, and smiled up at me like he just fucking dared me to step back. I almost did. He stood so fucking close I could see a fine edge of grey that circled his beautiful green eyes, and the hit of something sweet and musky—possibly amber—rose from his smooth pale skin to drown my senses.

The intoxicating combination, along with his sheer proximity, sent sparks of arousal banging about in my balls enough to stir my cock. And when the tip of his pink tongue peeked out from between those shiny plush lips, my brain was halfway to kissing him before I grabbed onto my senses and pulled back from the edge of disaster.

“So.” He ran his finger down my chest and I fought a shiver. He studied me through those long dark lashes, the wash of his hot breath brushing my lips. “If you still hook up on occasion, does that mean you’d be open to reconsidering my offer?”

Yes, please. “No.” I forced a smile I didn’t feel as his fingers trailed fire across my skin through the thin cotton of my T-shirt. I took his hand from my chest and he pouted at the move, a flash of lightning painting his lips a pearly pink. “Would *you* consider dating instead of a hook-up?” I played him at his own game.

He hesitated, clearly confused. Then he pulled a face worthy of a toddler offered a carrot instead of a sweetie. “You already know the answer to that.” He licked his lips and looked me over in a way that made my stomach do that flippy thing I didn’t want to think about too closely. “Shame. I think we’d be fucking fireworks together.”

He was right. I felt it too. “Which is precisely my point. You are way, way too tempting for me to keep you to a single hook-up. And the fact you work right next door just messes with my head. I couldn’t avoid you or forget you. We’d be playing with fire, and you know it.”

He gave a sly grin and stepped back. “True. But it’s rather presumptuous to think I’d let you have me for more than a

single hook-up. In case you didn't get the memo, I don't do repeats."

I eyeballed him. Two could play at that game. "Trust me, you would. With me, you would."

He stared at me for a long second, the room fading around us, until all that was left was the crazy ridiculous heat that flamed between us.

Chris broke it with a slow chuckle. "Well, I guess we'll never know. But does that mean if I *didn't* work next door, your answer would be different?" He batted his lashes and I laughed.

"You're a fucking tease." I leaned my butt on the edge of the table and raked my gaze over him, enjoying the way his eyes lit up at the attention. "And we both know my answer would be a hell yeah, which is exactly why we're not going there."

He gave me a long sideways glance up and down, returning my interest. "We'll see about that. I do like a challenge."

And oh fuck, did my cock like the sound of that.

"And also—" He bit his lip suggestively. "—you're still holding my hand."

Shit. I dropped it like a hot stone, and he laughed. I wanted nothing more than to kiss the smirk right off those soft lips and his laughter bled away to a choked silence when I tipped his chin up with my fingers and our eyes met. His darkened to a deep olive green. He looked about ready to eat me alive, and I was so, so down with that. He leaned forward just a little and I was so fucking tempted.

But at the last second, I clawed myself back from the edge and moved my fingers from his chin to his chest, pushing him back a step. "You're gonna make me regret telling you all of that, right?"

His expression bubbled with mirth. "Absolutely. Now that I know you want me and it's just the pesky little issue of you looking for an actual boyfriend that's keeping me from

blowing your mind in bed, we'll see just how long you can hold out against my charms. But believe me when I say, as delicious as you are, if you give in to the temptation, I *won't* be breaking my no-repeat rule, not even for you. I don't carry torches, not for anyone, and I don't get attached. And you'll get no grief from me afterward. I get on well with *all* my past hook-ups."

I had no doubt about that. But it wasn't Chris I was worried about getting attached. I already liked the prickly guy way too much to risk finding him irresistible in bed as well. "Blow my mind, huh? Now who's being presumptuous?"

Chris gave a shark-like smile. "It's not presumptuous if it's fact, sweetheart."

I snorted. "Get out of here before I start believing half of what you say." I went to open the door but then paused. "I *am* sorry for what I said that night. And I should've done a better job at an apology much earlier. I hope we can try and be friends." I offered him my hand.

He looked at it for a moment before accepting, the strong warmth of his grip making my belly swoop.

"Friends," he said softly, holding my gaze. "At least for now. I haven't given up on fucking you." He winked and slid his hand free of my grip, his fingers trailing lightly over the underside of my wrist. Christ, he was potent. "And just so you know," he added, shaking his head like he couldn't believe what he was about to say. "I might actually like it when you call me Chris. But *not* Christopher. *Never* Christopher. It's the name my family uses and the less said about them the better. That's mostly what got my back up. But Chris is... good." He flushed. "Okay, so I might actually like it."

I felt way too happy about that. "Do you like the name or the fact it's me saying it?"

His expression shuttered and he wagged his finger in my face. "Don't start with me. You still haven't told me why you insisted on calling me anything but Kip."

“Fair enough.” I perched my butt on the edge of the table. “It wasn’t only to rile you up. I happen to like the name Christopher, and after a while it kind of morphed into Chris in my head. Kip’s cute and sassy, and it suits you. But it didn’t seem to capture the other side of you.”

His eyebrows rose. “Other side?”

“The more serious, businessman side.”

Chris flushed but said nothing, and I guessed it wasn’t a characteristic he was used to having complimented.

“Christopher or Chris just seemed to better fit. And okay, maybe I also liked the fact that no one else called you by either of those.” My own cheeks heated. “And after the . . . *incident*, I admit I might’ve enjoyed the way it seemed to piss you off, but that wasn’t the reason I started. I just think there’s a lot more to you than what you let people see on a day-to-day basis, and Chris sits better with me.”

“You think I play a role?” he asked softly, but there was a warning edge to his tone.

I held his gaze and answered steadily. “No. I just think you’re careful about what you show to others.”

He stared at me with a frown in place and said nothing.

I’d clearly fucked up, again. “Sorry, if that was out of line,” I offered, kicking myself.

He blinked and cleared his throat. “No, it’s fine. But there’s something else I’d like to clear up while we’re at it.” And the cheeky smile was back. “I don’t actually queue my Grindr hook-ups while I’m ordering coffee at the bakery. I’m extremely picky. I’d need at least a four-coffee, six-doughnut order to find a decent match.” He looked me over. “And I suspect I fuck a lot less than you think I do.”

I laughed and leaned close enough to rest my lips alongside his ear. He startled but didn’t move. “Now, you’re just lying.”

He snorted and turned his head, his green eyes dancing just a breath away from mine. “And you’re a flirt. Something that

absolutely *does* surprise me. But it's gonna make my mission to bed you that much easier." He wagged his perfectly manicured brows and I laughed.

"Bed me, huh? How very Jane Austen of you. And also, never gonna happen."

All humour left those green eyes, leaving only heat. Lots and lots of heat. "And I'll take that bet." He licked his lips, and just like that we were back in kissing distance, the kitchen disappearing until it was just the two of us standing close, way too fucking close.

If I leaned just a little more—

I stepped back.

Chris glanced at my lips and gave a smug little smile. "Me thinks you may as well give up now." He retrieved his phone from his pocket and made a pretence of scrolling. "I have an open slot at seven between a gym bunny and a silver fox. Whaddya think?"

I choked out a laugh. "I'm slightly terrified that you might be serious, so I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. Go back to work. And maybe go home before nine tonight."

"Your loss." He shrugged and pocketed his phone. "Catch you later, Leon." He opened the door and JJ and Ty scuttled back toward the studio.

For fuck's sake. I glanced at Chris who simply shrugged.

"That's nothing. I once caught Rhys with a glass to his ear against the closed kitchen door while Drew and Jack were in there. He and Beck wanted to know if they should broaden their sex talk parameters. There was nothing going on, of course, and they got a flea in the ear from Jack when they were caught. It was funny to watch."

As I walked Chris to the desk, it occurred to me I hadn't thought about my mother's call, or Caitlyn, or the whole shitshow of her anniversary the entire time I'd been with him, something I would've thought impossible not twenty minutes before. And when he was done struggling back into his wet coat, I darted ahead and opened the door for him.

He froze and shot me an amused smile. “I said I’d fuck you, Leon, not date you. There’s no need for chivalry.”

I glanced at the door and groaned. “Sorry. I’ve got into the habit over the last couple of years.” I stepped back and let the door swing closed in his face. “Better?”

He blinked, then barked out a laugh and pulled it open again. “You’re beginning to grow on me.” He winced at the torrential rain, turned the collar up on his coat, and headed for Flare.

And as I watched him go, I had the sneaking suspicion I’d just entered the lion’s den and my name was at the top of the dinner menu.

Worse? I didn’t exactly hate the thought.

I turned to find Ty and JJ staring at me with unrepentant glee.

“Oh. My. God.” JJ clapped her hands, then leaned over the service desk with her chin resting on her palm. “I’ve never ever seen Kip looking like a rabbit in the headlights. That was epic. What happened? What did he want? I thought he hated you for whatever reason you’ve always refused to talk about. And did he just say he’d fuck you? Oh my god, tell us *everything*.”

“No.” I gave both a thundering glare. “Besides, you were obviously listening at the damn door.”

“I was just restocking my ink.” Ty grinned brazenly from his station. “It’s not all about you, you know.”

“Like hell.” I refocused on JJ. “And what’s your excuse?”

She wagged her brows. “None. I was shamelessly eavesdropping. Although to be fair, I only caught a few words and I’d appreciate more context.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, nah, never gonna happen.” My gaze swept the studio. “Where is everyone?”

“Ty’s client cancelled and I’m free until five.” JJ glanced at the door. “But here comes your sweet little daddy now.” She

nodded to the beaming man about to open the front door. “I guess the interrogation will have to wait.”

Thank Christ for that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kip

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU CAN’T REDO THE ORDER BEFORE November?” I seethed at the factory owner’s dissembling at the other end of the phone. “It’s *your* mistake. How do you get a whole run of shirts ready for shipping and only then realise you’ve used the wrong bloody fabric? Not only is this a lower grade cotton, but it’s not even the right dye. I can’t send these to our London and New York boutiques. They’ll laugh us all the way out of their stores. You have to fix this, Phoebe.”

And as Phoebe whined in my ear about all the reasons she couldn’t do what I needed her to, I watched Drew working the busy service desk. He was drowning in customers, and every now and then he’d shoot me an irritated get-your-butt-out-here look. The storm blowing horizontal against our windows had done nothing to dissuade the late Friday afternoon bargain hunters and we’d been run off our feet.

I mouthed the words “five minutes” to Drew and went back to being pissed at our supplier.

“My hands are tied.” Phoebe’s voice grew more frustrated by the second, but not nearly as much as mine. “The flood took half our work floor out, and we’re way behind schedule. I can maybe get it done before Christmas, but I can’t even guarantee that.”

“Christmas!” I was pretty sure steam shot out of my ears. “We can’t wait until Christmas. I need those shirts in stores and boutiques by the beginning of December, Phoebe, so people can buy *for* Christmas. And that means I need them in *my* hands by November, like our contract stipulates, remember? If we miss Christmas, we won’t sell enough to cover our costs and we’ll have lost the shoulder season market.”

Phoebe sighed. “But the contract also has a clause to cover delay issues that are out of our control, like floods, Kip. You have the trousers—”

“The two are a complete look,” I growled. “And the advertising is already done.”

Phoebe sighed. “I don’t know what to tell you. We fucked up. I get that. But it doesn’t change the fact there’s no way we can get another run completed within the next three weeks. Our lines are full. And we can’t get the right fabric in that time, either. Believe me, I’ve tried, but we’re too small to put any pressure on the supplier. If you can change the fabric to something we have in stock or can source locally, then maybe we can squeeze it.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. “Okay, okay. I’ll get back to you when I’ve worked out how to solve this shitshow. But I’m not happy, Phoebe. This is the second major mistake in six months. We can’t afford this.”

“I know, Kip, and I’m sorry. We’ll discount the next run if that helps?”

It didn’t. I ended the call and sent my phone skidding across the desk. “Goddammit.” I debated calling Rhys but figured it could wait a day or so until I could get my head around our options. No need to ruin his big weekend in New York. He’d checked in a few times, sounding excited and the most relaxed I’d heard him in a long time. And it wasn’t like there was going to be an easy solution he could somehow magic up to get us out of the hole. I knew as much as he did about this shit.

In the meantime, I got out of my chair and went to help Drew, ignoring the umpteenth text on my phone from my posse of friends, wondering where we were meeting up for our standard Friday night out. Not gonna happen. But explaining the why of that was only going to earn me a ton of questions. Ghosting them wasn’t any better. I’d be hit by the same interrogation the next day, but at least by then I’d have had some sleep.

There was no way I was up for a raucous night of dancing and drinking, not the way I felt. And the thought of cruising for a warm body to while away a few hours wasn’t doing it for me either, a novel state of affairs I wasn’t about to dissect.

Along with the fact that I hadn't been out or had a man in my bed, *at all*, in the five days since Rhys had left. The fact that coincided with Leon moving in upstairs had nothing to do with it. Still, it had to be a record.

I shoved those troubling thoughts aside and busied myself with customers and fretting about the manufacturing fuckup. It was exactly the sort of issue that had me nervous about this new role Rhys wanted for me. I could serve customers all day long with my hands tied behind my back, but shouldering the responsibility of supply issues that could tank an entire season of his business? Not so much.

With customers still packing the store at six and sale items flying out the door, Drew and Jack offered to stay late, bless their cotton socks, and we kept the doors open an extra hour. By seven, the flood of shoppers had slowed to a trickle, and I finally managed to get a closed sign in place and shoo an exhausted Drew and Jack out the door.

I grabbed a pen and paper and retreated into my office to mull over the supplier debacle in peaceful misery. I had precisely one idea on my list, and not a very good one, when I heard the key in the lock and the front door opened.

Leon.

My heart kicked up, and a disconcerting flutter in my belly caused me to frown. "Enough of that," I hissed softly to myself. The exchange in Leon's kitchen had done nothing to tamp my interest in the man. The exact opposite. So, he wasn't the jerk I thought he was. I should be happy about that, right? Yeah, not so much. Instead, I felt like the rug had been pulled from under me, all my excuses to keep him at a distance gone in a puff of smiling bearded smoke.

Would I consider dating rather than just a hook-up? Leon's question still rattled through my brain like a gunshot. Because for all of the light-hearted humour he'd injected into the moment, those grey eyes had been deadly serious. Leon was asking to date *me*? I'd wanted to laugh in his face, but instead some hitherto unexplored corner of my brain sucked the fun right out of that and put the brakes on, keen to at least

consider the possibility. *And where the hell had that come from?* I'd blustered my way out of trouble by the skin of my teeth.

A few seconds later, I caught sight of a familiar tall, rangy body and handsome face gracing my open doorway. Leon looked just as loose-limbed and lickable as he had earlier, in soft as butter faded jeans, black Chucks, a white fitted Henley, and a black leather jacket currently dripping with rain. His damp blond waves were pulled into another messy tail—something that shouldn't have been as sexy as it was—and water droplets hung tantalisingly off his neatly trimmed beard.

I squirmed a little in my chair but managed a cool and distracted, "Hi."

Go, me.

"Working late again?" He shot me a friendly smile which was going to take some getting used to. But then he frowned. "Something wrong?" He walked across and slid yet another coffee my way before dropping his bag to the floor and taking a seat. "Should I have brought beer?"

"Oh, please sit, by all means," I said tartly, reaching for the coffee. "And make that a Mai Tai, and you're on. But thank you. Coffee is fine. Still raining, I take it?"

He shucked off his wet jacket and dropped it on the tarp. "Pissing down. And yeah, figured you'd be a cocktail drinker."

My brow arched. "Because I don't look like I could throw back a beer?"

"No." He smiled with far too much charm. "Because you look . . . expensive."

I snorted. "Well, you're not wrong there, at least not if someone else is buying. But don't let looks deceive you. I like a good beer as much as the next guy, and I can make a decent cocktail last an hour. I can't afford to throw money around. It has to work for me."

Leon's gaze steadied on mine. "I don't doubt that for a moment. It would be too damn scared to do anything else . . . along with the rest of us."

I studied him in return. “You seem to do just fine holding your own, irrespective of my . . . moods.”

He cocked a brow. “True. But that doesn’t mean I’m not aware of the risks. I’m just up for the game.” His gaze locked with mine and that lick of heat curling low in my belly was back again. “And I carry a vial of holy water, just in case.”

I barked out a laugh. “Are you flirting with me, Leon?”

He bit back a smile. “Not at all. Because that would be an exceedingly dangerous thing to do under the circumstances, wouldn’t you say?”

“The circumstances?” I took a long swallow of coffee and watched his eyes track down my throat. Oh, this was going to be so much fun.

He looked back up. “Yes. The circumstances in which you’re determined to . . . *bed me*, I think were the words you used.” He batted his lashes, which almost cracked me up.

“Oh.” I tapped my lip with my finger, then slid the tip inside to suck on it just for a second. “*Those* circumstances.”

“Nuh-uh.” He wagged a finger at me. “I’m immune to your wicked ways.” He tapped his fingers twice on the desk. “You shall not pass.”

I laughed and relaxed back in my chair. “I’m gonna take that as a compliment. That scene was an epic battle and you’ve a lot to live up to. But *no one* is immune to all this.” I waved a hand over myself and this time it was Leon who laughed.

“So you say. Now, drink your coffee and tell me what’s got your dander up. Leave me to worry about casting you into the fires of damnation.”

I snorted and reached for the coffee. “Trouble is, I suspect I might like it down there.”

He finished the last of his coffee and nodded. “Me too. Beats the hell out of sharing eternity with a bunch of overachieving do-gooders.”

We sat grinning at each other for far too long, and then, for some unfathomable reason, I told him about my day.

Leon listened without comment until I was done, and even then, he didn't rush to offer me a solution. They were both admirable traits I'd found to be scarce in men who mostly wanted to solve my problems to show how clever they were. I might've been just a little bit impressed.

"So, what are you going to do about it?" He steeped his hands over his chest and waited.

"I've been racking my brains trying to think of an alternative before I call him." I slumped in my chair. "But so far, nothing brilliant has sprung to mind. And I don't know why the hell I'm telling you all this."

Leon threw his empty takeout cup in the bin and leaned forward. "Maybe because I've run my own business for ten years and I get it."

I blew a worried sigh. "Yeah, maybe. I'm swimming way out of my depth on this."

He sat there and said nothing, long enough to make me fidget.

"What?" I narrowed my gaze. "It's true. And it's exactly what I was worried about when Rhys said he wanted me to run his business."

Leon grinned. "How can a kick-arse guy like you, a man who's run social media campaigns that have aided in the take down of thieving designers and disgusting sexual predators, feel so rattled by a simple manufacturing delay?"

Anger sparked in my gut and I shot him a fulminating glare. "Because it's *not* simple. And because all that other stuff is second nature to me. Because I understand social media and how it works. Because it doesn't need degrees or qualifications. Because anyone could've done what I did. Because this is Rhys's business, and I owe him. I can't fuck it up for him. *This* is different."

Leon settled back in his chair and a tiny smile tugged at his lips. "I know it's not simple, Chris. That was just a nudge to fire your passion up because that's who you are. That's the energy you use to get shit done. You're a fierce campaigner for

justice.” Leon’s gaze drilled into mine. “You *love* fighting for the underdog or when the odds aren’t in your favour, just like with this problem you have. And maybe in those other fights nothing was on the line for you personally, but that doesn’t mean they were simple problems, either. Yes, this is Rhys’s business, but he’s trusted you with both and has for a while now. And from what he’s told me about you, and what I’ve seen for myself, he’s totally justified.”

“What?” I stared at Leon. “Rhys has spoken to you . . . about me?”

He shrugged. “A little. We talk business and, of course, your name comes up. He’s said time and time again, he couldn’t do what he does without you. You’re a natural businessman, Chris, albeit a little scary sometimes.”

Well, shit. What the hell did you say to something like that?

Leon continued. “You treat this place like it’s *your* business, in the best possible way. And that’s what every business owner wants from their manager. You said Rhys wants you to take on a formal role with more responsibility, so that he can focus on his designing. But from what he’s told me, you’re already doing nearly all of what he wants. So, I don’t get what the problem is.”

My voice rose. “The *problem* is, I don’t know enough. This manufacturing thing is a classic example. I should have had a solution by now.”

He gave a frustrated sigh, but there was no judgement in his stormy grey eyes, just concern. “No, that’s not the problem.”

Goddammit. I rolled my eyes as he pushed on.

“The problem *is* this whole belief that you don’t have what it takes. That’s what’s screwing with your ability to think clearly, and I’m calling bullshit on that. For the first couple of years after I opened The Tattoo House, I felt exactly the same. Like I was an imposter. Like I didn’t have any right to be

running a business. That I was going to fuck up at any moment.”

I blinked. “But you’re always so calm. It’s one of your most irritating traits.”

He grinned. “Or maybe I’m just better at bluffing. But back then, not so much. I knew nothing. *Nothing*. And I also didn’t have *your* natural talent for organisation, or your insight into people and your quick mind.”

What? “I don’t—”

“But what I *did* have,” he talked over me, “was determination. If I didn’t know something, I found out. What you achieved when you helped Rhys and Alec wasn’t easy, and contrary to what you think, most people could *not* have done it. *I* couldn’t have done it. I’ve seen you take charge at fashion week and during the aftermath of the fire—just two examples of complicated logistical management. You’re one of life’s natural problem solvers. You’re a fixer. And that’s a rare and highly transferable skill, and I have no doubt if you put that big brain of yours to work, you’ll come up with a possible solution or two for your problem.”

I sat, speechless, staring at his earnest expression while I tried to get my head around his shocking appraisal of me. Leon thought I was smart? Capable? A natural businessman? A fixer?

Warmth flooded my chest. Apart from Rhys, no one had ever taken the time to consider who I really was underneath the banter, let alone spell it out for me like Leon had done. The idea that I might have something to offer other than looks and entertainment and the ability to sell some clothes. I chewed on my lip because I wasn’t going to fucking cry.

“How can you be sure about any of that?” I demanded, almost angry that he’d read me so clearly and, apparently, effortlessly. “You barely know me. In fact, before today, I’d have said you knew fuck all about who I am. So where did the CliffsNotes on my psychology suddenly spring from?”

He flushed pink above his beard. “I . . . notice things. I observe people. It’s what I do. Especially people I’m interested in.” The flush deepened. “And I’ve observed *you* for two years now.”

I blinked. “You’ve *observed* me?” My brows hit my hairline. “Like that’s not creepy at all.”

He shrugged. “When someone interests me, when *a woman or man* interests me, I want to learn about them. And you interest me, Chris. I believe we’ve covered that. And it’s precisely why I won’t fuck you . . . under the circumstances.”

Well, shit. He was serious. And that annoying little voice inside went up a notch. “But aside from today, you’ve never really even talked to me,” I protested, because it seemed somehow vitally important that he was totally fucking wrong. “Hell, we’ve barely had a conversation in two years that didn’t involve bullshit and snark on both sides.”

His eyes danced. “I believe the bullshit and snark has mostly been on your side.”

And yeah, okay, that was fair. Still. I huffed. “No less than you deserved.”

He raised his hands. “You’ll get no argument from me.”

I folded my arms and studied him, still stuck on the whole *interested in me* part of the conversation and what the hell that even meant.

“And I think that’s my cue to leave.” Leon got to his feet and smoothed the soft denim over his thick thighs. Thighs that were front and centre in my line of vision, along with one or two other interesting appendages which looked equally inviting and shockingly proportionate to the man’s towering height.

I swallowed hard and dragged my gaze up to meet his smirk. “Fucker,” I sniped and tipped my head toward his groin. “You got a pair of socks shoved down there?”

“Hardly.” He grinned, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “As the saying goes, if it ain’t broke . . .”

I leaned back in my chair and clasped my hands over my stomach, feeling suddenly on much safer ground. “Well, as *I* always say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

He snorted and adjusted himself and, in the process, dried every scrap of saliva in my mouth. Then he eyeballed me. “Shame the kitchen’s closed.”

I gave him a slow smile. “Oh, I dunno. There’s always a key around, somewhere.” We stared at each other for a long minute as we seemed wont to do, all too frequently.

Leon grinned and shook his head. “You’re a wicked temptation, but I assure you, I’m not that easy to unlock.”

I held those electric eyes. “Wouldn’t be any fun if you were.”

He chuckled. “Have a good night.” He grabbed his wet jacket from the tarp and stopped to read the label on the large can of paint sitting just inside the door. “Mmm. Burnt sienna.” He looked back with a broad smile in place. “An excellent choice.”

I threw my pencil at him and he laughed and headed for the stairs. And I absolutely did not lean forward in my seat and crane my neck to watch that glorious arse bunch and stretch with every step. No sir, not me.

What I definitely *did* do was spend an hour mulling over what he’d said about me. A bitchy part of my brain hated that Leon had so easily intuited all of that, so easily seeing past the me I wore on the surface, to what lay beneath. Fake it till you make it. Never let them see the whites of your eyes. Never show fear. Never show hurt. Be someone else, someone better, someone who didn’t give a shit.

Be. Someone. Else.

There’d been a time when doing that had meant the difference between surviving and drowning. When it had saved my sanity.

But Jesus Christ, when had it become a mantra for my life?

So maybe Leon had a point.

The endless second-guessing of myself *wasn't* me. And if I was already doing the job, as Leon thought, then maybe I should just fucking own it. And to do that, I needed a plan. A plan, not a problem. I jotted a few more ideas on the paper in front of me, more as jumping-off points than genuine solutions. The answer wasn't as easy as swapping to another manufacturer because, without an existing relationship, getting an order expedited would be almost impossible. And it didn't solve the issue of the fabric itself.

So, the first thing to do was get Rhys to choose another fabric. Not ideal, but there couldn't be any manufacturing solution without that change. There was no choice.

The second thing was to find another manufacturer who could get the job done in time. That ruled out all the main competitors whose production schedules would already be full, including those offshore. The time suck in transport alone ruled out the latter. Which left local.

And then I remembered. *Holy shit*. I yanked open the drawers of Rhys's desk one at a time, but he'd emptied them all before he left, so I checked the service desk drawers as well, but still nothing.

I stopped and brought up the memory. A woman had come into the store in the lunch hour while Rhys was out. She was starting her own manufacturing business and was touting for clients. I hadn't really paid attention because we had our contracts locked in, but I'd taken her card.

It was a long shot. A really, really long shot, especially with the standard we needed. But she'd had a strong tailoring background, so who knew? It was better than the nothing I'd had five minutes before. Being a newcomer, she might still have room on her books, especially for an up-and-coming label like Flare, which could cement her name in the business. I'd have to get a sample done, but at least it was something. If only I could find the damn card and promotion leaflet.

I headed for the kitchen where we kept magazines and other trade information to peruse during our breaks. Halfway through the stack, I found it.

Heather Brady. Eden Clothing and Textiles.

Yes! I fist pumped the air, shoved the card in my satchel, and grabbed my coat. I'd call the next day. I paused at the foot of the stairs as some kind of bluesy guitar music floated down from the flat. Then I recognised Leon's voice and a smile bloomed on my face. He was surprisingly good, and it struck me how much I didn't know about him. Unlike what he seemed to know about me.

Not that I needed to know *anything*. The whole flirting thing happening between us was clearly making me twitchy, that's all. And once I convinced Leon to fuck, that would put an end to all the stupid bullshit rattling in my brain. We'd be friends and life would go on.

I glanced up at the ceiling and shook my head. Enough. I set the alarm and headed out the back door, gasping into the buffeting wind as the rain slashed like tiny knives across my face. In twenty metres, my hair clung to my scalp like a pile of limp noodles while rivers of water trailed icy fingers down my back. Welcome to spring in Auckland.

I threw my satchel and coat onto Delilah's passenger seat and slammed the door, cursing the rain splatters all over my fancy leather seats. Grabbing a towel from the back, I mopped it up as best I could, then while I warmed my baby's turbo, I stole a glance at the upstairs window of Leon's flat only to find it dark. *Don't be an idiot.*

I dragged my gaze away and scrolled through my playlists, deciding Glass Animals at ear-splitting volume was exactly what I needed. And when Delilah was purring nicely, I headed up the alley and out onto the rain-slick streets, my wipers fighting a losing battle, the neon signs of a rain-drenched city reflecting strobe-like over the wet tarmac.

Fifteen minutes later I pulled into the carpark of the three-storey, art deco apartment building where I rented a one-bedroom corner unit. Tiny but perfectly formed, and all mine. I pulled into my parking space and groaned at the fifty-metre dash that stretched between my car and the entrance, none of it covered. Art deco buildings didn't come with underground

parking, go figure. But the inconvenience was well worth the joy it gave my thirsty soul to trace those simple crisp architectural lines and to feel part of something special.

I clutched my satchel to my chest, took a deep breath, and hoofed it to the foyer, holding my key fob over my head to lock Delilah as I ran. I landed ankle deep in more than one puddle on the poorly lit path, soaking my shoes and trousers all the way to my knees. When I at last made it to the double glass doors, I yanked on the brass handle and practically fell into the foyer.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I gasped, shaking the rain from my hair.

“I see some things don’t change.”

My head snapped up at the familiar voice, and a groan escaped my lips. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Still cursing our maker, I see.” My older brother wore a wry smile as he sauntered down the last few steps of the staircase, presumably on his way down from my apartment on the first floor. At six feet to my five seven, with short dark hair, an athletic build, and penetrating brown, almost-black eyes, George took after our father. I, on the other hand, was definitely my mother’s son—auburn, fine-boned, and about as much use on a rugby field as a pair of Jimmy Choos on a hike. The two of us couldn’t look any more different.

I didn’t bother wondering how he’d found me; George had always been resourceful. A few more minutes and I’d have missed him. It really, really wasn’t my day.

“I repeat, what the hell are you doing here? No, don’t answer that.” I sidestepped around him and headed for the stairs, but he grabbed my wrist. “Take your damn hands off me.” I spun to face him, and he immediately let go.

“Sorry.” He stepped back. “Don’t you want to know why I’m here?”

“No,” I snapped, somewhat surprised at the truth of the word. “I figure it can’t be good news for me, regardless.”

“Oh, come on, Christopher.” George shook his head in that disappointed way my family had perfected over the years whenever they talked to me—like they couldn’t believe I came from the same blood.

Newsflash: I felt exactly the same.

George was still talking. “Do you really not give a shit about your family?”

I raised a brow at my brother’s language and his cheeks stained red. “See?” he huffed angrily. “Thirty seconds with you and I’m already swearing. You’re infuriating.”

I snorted. “I aim to please. But on that note, don’t let me keep you.” I turned again for the stairs and again he grabbed my arm. This time I shoved him away. “I told you, keep your hands off me.”

He raised his palms and sighed like I was some petulant child he needed to calm. “Do you really think I *wanted* to come?”

My eyes rolled as they were wont to do on a regular basis whenever I was in the presence of my family. “Let’s just say, I’d be shocked if you did.” I refused to give him the satisfaction of asking anything more.

“If you’d answered any of our texts or calls, I wouldn’t have to be here.” He waited, but I wasn’t going anywhere near that landmine and eventually he blew out a sigh. “Why do you always have to make things so difficult?”

Really, they should put that on my gravestone given the number of times it had been directed my way, along with a couple of other personal favourites such as, “You can like girls just as easily as you *say* you like boys, Christopher.” “It’s a choice, Christopher.” And then there was always, “No one thinks you’re lying, Christopher.” *Like hell.* And the evergreen, “Why does everything always have to be about you, Christopher?”

I clenched my teeth. “Are you done, because I haven’t eaten, and I have work to do.” I spun to leave but didn’t get far.

“Uncle James has pancreatic cancer. He’s dying.”

I froze, trying desperately not to reel sideways as my knees turned to jelly. *Fuck*. I fisted my hands around the leather strap of my satchel and tried to keep my shit together as I schooled my expression and turned slowly back around. *Breathe, Kip. Just fucking breathe.*

“Wow. So, it was good news after all.” I forced a smile. “Thanks for the heads-up. I’ll throw a parade.”

George frowned, my answer clearly throwing him. Well, good fucking job. He shook his head and there was that disappointment again. I tried not to let the guilt hit me. Once there was a time I’d idolised my brother. Back then, in my eyes, George could do no wrong. He’d meant everything to me and I’d hated whenever I disappointed him. Years later, after everything, I still hated seeing that look in his eye. Go figure.

George blinked slowly, struggling with his fiery temper. “I just told you he’s *dying*, Christopher. Can’t you at least show the tiniest bit of respect?”

Since smashing my brother’s face in was undoubtedly a bad idea, I tightened the grip on my bag instead. “No. Next question.”

George heaved a put-upon sigh. “He wants to talk to you before he . . . well, you know. Mum and Dad wanted you to know. It would mean a lot to him. To us.”

I raised a brow. “To *us*?” I looked around. “I don’t see Mum and Dad here, so I’m guessing this isn’t really about reaching out to me. This is about what *James* wants, so *James* can feel better?”

George sighed and shook his head. “Come on, Christopher. Everyone wants this. It’s a chance to heal.”

“Heal?” I almost choked on the word, reaching for the handrail to steady myself. “No.”

His jaw ticked. “You *can’t* say no. He’s dying.”

“So, you’ve said.”

“He obviously wants to clear the air.”

I choked on a breath as I fought the rising panic in my chest, my heart hammering against my ribs, bile coursing up my throat. *Fuck this. And fuck him.*

“Good for him, but it’s not happening,” I answered in a steely voice. “He’s had eleven years to talk to me. Eleven years when it would’ve made a real difference. And he didn’t, so I doubt he’ll have anything to say now that I want to hear. Especially since he asked Mum to set it up.”

“You don’t know that,” George insisted, colour rising in his cheeks. “Jeez, you were just a kid. You can’t be sure you didn’t get it wrong. What happened wrecked our family. I’m sure James just wants to build some kind of a bridge before he dies. We’ve all suffered long enough, don’t you think? This is a chance to change that. A chance for you to come home.”

I gaped at the sheer audacity. “*You’ve* all suffered?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “What the fuck? This is why I don’t answer my phone. This is why I don’t bother keeping in touch. Nothing has changed with you lot. *Nothing.* And just so you know, you lot are no longer my home.”

George’s shocked expression hardened. “So, you’re just going to let him die?”

“Yes. Now get out,” I said through gritted teeth. “You’ve done what you were sent to do, so you can tell Mum you tried. And tell *Uncle* James that if he wants to talk, he should fucking grow some balls and call me himself. If I like what he says, then *maybe*, just maybe, I’ll think about meeting him. That’s as good as you’re gonna get.”

George blew out a sigh. “It’s better than nothing, I suppose. But if you change your mind, he’s still living on the poultry farm, in the worker’s cottage by the main gate. The owners have been good enough to let him stay on even though someone else is now managing the place.” He searched my face, for what, I didn’t know.

But what he said next almost blew my socks off and I had to tighten my grip on the banister.

“I miss you.”

And the hell of it was, I believed him.

“We *all* miss you. And it doesn’t matter to me . . . that you’re . . . you know.” He waved a hand over me and flushed a deep pink.

It was all I could do not to laugh. Memories of the two of us growing up tugging at my heart. There’d been plenty of good times. Laughter. Fun. Family. But that was before.

Still, hope was a hard thing to crush. It kept you hanging on until your fingernails bled. And as I stared at my brother, I felt it rise again. So, I took a deep breath and asked the only questions I needed him to answer. “Have you changed your mind about what happened? Do you believe me?”

His hesitation said it all, and my heart sank as he finally replied, “To be honest, I don’t know if it matters what I think, but . . . it’s hard for me, you have to understand that. I never got any of that from him. He never—not with any of us. Maybe if someone else . . .”

“It’s hard for *you*?” My heart sank. “And so what? You needed a family quorum in order to believe me?” I shook my head in the realisation nothing had changed. “And yes, it does matter what you think. It matters and it hurts. I don’t know what else to say. Do I miss you? Yes. It rips me apart every day. But would I want to start seeing you again with nothing having changed, not to mention how you all feel about my sexuality? That would be much, much worse. Go home. If I talk to James, it will be my decision and on my terms. I won’t be guilted or coerced into it.”

He took a deep breath and nodded. “All right. But you have to know that Mum and Dad will never change what they believe about you being gay. They do miss you, though, and I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t raise the subject if you visited.”

I remained silent because what the fuck did you say to that? Thank you? *Jesus Christ*.

His shoulders slumped a little. “Could you at least send *me* a text once in a while? Let me know you’re alive.”

I held his gaze and tried to ignore the genuine worry I saw there. It was too painful. "I'll think about it." It was the best I could do.

He gave a resigned nod and pulled the hood of his jacket over his head. Then he pushed open the door and made a run for the visitor parking.

I watched him go, fighting back the tears as my stomach churned.

What the fuck was I going to do now?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Leon

I HUMMED WITH PLEASURE AND SLOWLY STRETCHED MY BODY head to toe, luxuriating in my one Saturday off a month. Alec and Hunter's bazillion-thread sheets slid across my bare skin like silk drawing a sigh from my lips. It was an indulgence I hadn't known I needed, but five nights sleeping in their expensive embrace and my polyester sheets were done for. I made a mental note to go shopping before I moved into my new house, then reached across the bedside table to yank open the curtains and spot the weather.

Weak grey light spilled into the airy space and a welcome silence replaced the hammering rain of the night. I threw a second pillow under my head and took a minute to appreciate the chic, cosy warmth of the room. It was no real surprise, considering a fashion photographer and an international model lived within its walls, but it hadn't been quite what I expected. It was less edgy, less sleek. More a cross between a New York loft and the Hamptons. Very different from when Rhys had lived there with his much more eclectic aesthetic.

Since then, the walls had been painted the palest blush, with bleached wood and soft cream and blue furnishings providing texture and giving the place a slightly beachy feel. The walls were uncluttered—another surprise, considering Hunter's job. Just two large framed photos hung side by side on the wall opposite the bed.

But they made a statement.

One was of Alec sprawled on a bed, naked, heavy-lidded, and oozing sensuality, the sheets rumpled discreetly over his groin. The second, right alongside the first, was of Hunter, laid out in a similar position, but angled the other way like yin and yang, his dark olive skin and thickly haired body in stark contrast to Alec's smooth pale complexion.

The two images had provided ample blushing material when Hunter had first walked me through the apartment, and he'd immediately offered to take them down. I'd sent him a

look that clearly said, ‘Are you fucking crazy?’ because really? What gay man in his right mind wouldn’t appreciate two gorgeous men for . . . inspiration? So, sue me.

A slice of sunlight braved the clouds to brighten the images along with my hope for a better day, weather-wise. I reached out and tapped my phone screen. Ten o’clock. It took a second to sink in before I jolted wide awake and checked it again.

What the hell? I never slept past eight. Damn sheets.

I stamped on the urge to check in with JJ and Ty, knowing they’d call if there was a problem. The downside of owning a business—I never switched off. Instead, I swung my legs out of bed and made a beeline for the bathroom, my bladder pushing urgently at the back of my tonsils.

That done, I took a quick shower and then studied myself in the mirror. Not the lean machine of ten years ago, maybe even five years ago. A little less defined. A lot softer around the middle. And more than a few grey hairs.

I sighed and finished drying my hair. So, I’d let things go a bit after Caitlyn’s death? At least my eyes were clear and not drowning in the aftermath of a bottle of Jim Beam sunk on my own in the dark the night before. Don’t ask how I knew what that looked like. I was here. I was healthy. I was finding my way. Kind of. The few extra kilos could go to hell. Still, maybe it was time to resurrect that lapsed gym subscription. Just the thought made me wince.

Reaching for the beard trimmer, the spiral of tui feathers falling down the slope of my left shoulder caught my eye. Ty had inked them three months after Caitlyn’s death. She’d crazy loved that bird, and the feathers danced down my arm and curled around the bicep next to my heart which still stuttered at the sight of them. I turned sideways to get a better look, swallowing hard at the reminder of her bright and too short presence in my life. I dragged my gaze away and headed to the bedroom to get dressed.

It was a great little flat, quiet and yet still somehow part of the city. Light poured in from the northeast-facing windows,

the hum of Saturday traffic leaked through the ancient glass, and the soft bustle of shoppers in the store downstairs floated up through the wide planked floor. Two cups of coffee, a cleaned and vacuumed apartment, and a toasted bagel with vegemite later, and I was stretched out on the couch in a sliver of that precious sunlight, the scent of cleaning product heavy in the air and my phone held in front of my face.

It was a long text from my introverted and usually conflict-avoidant younger brother, Geoff. Another sibling attempt to get me to the Sunday family meeting. I thanked him for his concern and lied, saying I'd think about it. I wouldn't. The last thing any of them needed was me getting all pissy about their new plans. And if another person mentioned a fucking tree, I was going to explode.

The relentless jangle of the downstairs bell made me smile. Chris had to be pleased with the sale. People had been coming and going from the store in great numbers all week. Which only made witnessing him so unsure about his ability to manage Rhys's business such a shock, and I'd needed a minute to adjust. Snarky, driven, controlling Chris was a captivating blast all on its own. But tender, vulnerable Chris with those defences partly down? Well, that Chris was downright irresistible.

And that had become a huge fucking problem in my world. I liked the guy enough before that. But after yesterday, I was suddenly flirting and imagining possibilities between us I had no right to. Possibilities Chris had made perfectly clear he wasn't interested in.

"Wake the fuck up," I scolded myself. Chris was the very definition of *not* boyfriend material. I was wasting time. And if I said it loud enough, I might even begin to believe it.

The downstairs bell sounded again and I glanced at the clock. One thirty. My stomach growled and the wheels in my brain cranked over. Flare closed at two, and knowing those guys, they'd have worked right through without a break. Maybe I could be nice and feed them, right? That it might also get me some one-on-one time with the store's enigmatic

manager was neither here nor there. I was a bigger man than that.

Thirty minutes later and with a tower of cheese toasties balanced on a platter next to some cut up fruit and paper napkins, I headed downstairs. When I hit the shop floor, Drew spun from where he'd just turned the shop sign to closed, clocked the toasted sandwiches, and almost puddled on the floor.

“Oh. My. Fucking. God.” A huge grin split his pretty face. “If even one of those are for me, I promise to be your sex slave forever.” He raced across and had snagged a toastie before I even made it to the service desk. “And just so you know—” He spoke around a mouthful of melted cheese and crunchy bread. “—I run an improving seven out of ten on deep throating, but I ace rimming, and I'm blessed with the refractory period of a rabbit.”

I snorted and slid the tray onto the service desk. “I'll bear that in mind.”

He swallowed the mouthful of toastie with a rumbling happy groan. “Oh man, these are the best.” He tipped his head toward the kitchen at the end of the short hall. “There's a weather warning for low-flying sarcasm brewing back there, just thought you should know. I banished our fearless leader until he can come out with his happy face on. Something has sure got his tits in a tangle.”

“Oh?” I glanced down the hall and wondered if it had anything to do with the manufacturing issue. “Is it safe to take a couple of these back there?”

Drew sucked in a breath. “Now, there's a question. Then again, nothing ventured, nothing gained. From my point of view, it'll be worth it for the entertainment value alone. And if you need help to hide the body, I'm your man. He's been driving me fucking nuts.”

I chuckled and wrapped a few toasties in a wad of napkins. “Wish me luck.”

Drew slumped onto the bottom stair, taking the plate and remaining toasties with him. “May the force be with you. I’ll be here if you need me . . . eating.”

I snorted and headed down the hall to knock on the closed kitchen door.

“What?” came a snarled reply.

Okey-dokey. I glanced back at Drew, who gave me his I-told-you-so look and encouraged me forward. I pushed open the door and Chris glanced up from his chair at the small table.

“Oh, it’s you.” He looked about to add something before his lips cemented into a thin line and he dropped his gaze to an open magazine, which I was almost positive he wasn’t reading.

He looked weary. No, he looked exhausted and about as un-put-together as I’d ever seen him. One leg of his plain black trousers was caught in his sock, and his white button-down looked like it could do with an iron. Strands of his usually immaculately styled hair hung loose over his face and there wasn’t a lick of eyeliner or lip gloss to be seen. It was so unlike the man, it almost stopped me in my tracks.

“And hello to you too.” I tested the waters and he looked up again like he was surprised I was still there.

“I’ve had a huge morning, Leon. I’m tired.” He lounged back in his chair. “What can I do for you?”

Not the best of starts. “How about what *I* can do for *you*?” I slid the small mound of toasties onto the table and he stared at them.

“What’s this?”

“Lunch.”

“Lunch? Shit. Did Drew put you up to this?” His eyes flashed guiltily at the same time his stomach growled. “I know I’ve been a prick to work with and he didn’t get a break—”

“Relax, he didn’t put me up to it. But before we get into the why of the whole you-being-a-prick thing, eat something. Then maybe you won’t rip me a new one as well.” I slid into

the chair opposite and watched a faint smile creep over his lips.

“You’re lucky I like you,” he grumbled as he reached for a toastie. “And don’t be too sure about the ripping thing. I can multi-task with the best of them.” He took a bite, slung a surprised look my way, and then groaned with pleasure, the sound going straight to my balls. “Oh, my fucking god,” he mumbled around the mouthful. “These are sooo good.”

I wriggled in my seat and watched him finish the toastie and then two more halves before he finally slowed and took a breath.

“You better have one before I finish the lot.” He pushed the remaining toasties my way, but I shook my head.

“I’ve had lunch.”

He studied me for a moment. “You made these just for us?”

I shrugged. “It’s my Saturday off and the store bell didn’t stop all morning. Figured you were busy, and it was the least I could do.”

“You made lunch . . . for us . . . on your day off?” His brows popped. “Honey, you need to get a life, but seriously, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Drew *did* mention you seemed a bit . . . stressed.” I left it at that.

His expression quickly shuttered. “Just busy. It’s been crazy.”

I nodded, not buying it for a second. “So, where’s Jack? Doesn’t he usually work Saturdays?”

Chris finished his toastie and wiped his mouth. “I sent him home early. He’s got exams coming up and has to study.” He binned the napkin and got to his feet. “Thanks again for the toasties, but if there’s nothing else, I really need to clean and restock, then go over the day’s takings before heading home.”

I stayed seated through the obvious dismissal. “Did you have any luck with your problem?”

Chris blinked like he had no idea what I was talking about, which only added to my curiosity about what was really up with him.

“Maybe,” he finally offered. “There was a new business that came touting for contracts not that long ago. It could amount to nothing. I called this morning but the owner’s away for the weekend. I’ll try first thing Monday.”

“That sounds promising. It’s more than you had last night, right?” It was like getting blood from a stone.

“Yeah.” He glanced behind me, up the hall. “I should really get going. Thanks again.”

I stood, bringing the two of us into close proximity, and pointed to his sock.

“Shit.” He reached down and freed his trouser leg. “Fuck knows how long I’ve been walking around like that.”

“You still look great. Here—” I’d reached up and smoothed his hair from his forehead before I could stop myself.

He froze, staring up at me.

“That’s better.” I dropped my hand and lowered my voice. “You got some lip gloss in those bottomless pockets of yours?”

He nodded, still staring.

“Then put some on.”

He pulled out a tube and slicked up while I tried not to imagine those shiny lips wrapped around my dick, along with a hundred other places on my body. Tried and failed. And by the small smile tugging at his newly polished mouth, Chris knew exactly what I was thinking.

“Feel better?” I asked when he was done.

“Much.” His grey eyes held mine. “Warpaint, right?”

“Exactly.” I hesitated. “You sure you’re okay? You seem a bit . . . off.”

He gave a slow blink, and I was on the brink of pushing him a little when his expression shuttered in that way I knew only too well, and a bite of bitterness entered his voice for the first time in days.

“I’m fine. This friendship thing we’re trialling is a long way from me sharing all my personal shit with you. Make no mistake, I’ll enjoy fucking you when the time comes, but you won’t catch me crying on your shoulder.” The sting of his words must’ve shown on my face and a flash of regret passed behind his eyes.

I raised my hands and took a step back. “Message received. But if you decide you do want to talk, I’ll be around for a bit. Call me.”

His jaw worked like he was fighting some kind of apology, but then he straightened his shoulders and his expression smoothed. “Like I said, I’ll be fine. I just need to blow off some steam. I haven’t been out this week, something I plan to rectify tonight.” He looked me over. “Unless you’re offering, that is?”

I said nothing, knowing full well he was baiting me. And it was working, at least judging by the unreasonable surge of jealousy curling in my gut.

His lip curled and he shook his head. “Didn’t think so.” Then he spun on his heels and left me standing.

And okay, ouch. That certainly told me, right?

I scooped my ego up off the floor, where Chris had walked all over it, and headed out to the service desk, ignoring the questioning look Drew sent from where he was restocking the sale table and clearly keeping out of Chris’s way. I gave him a shrug, collected the empty toastie plate from the service desk, and stole a glance into the office, only to catch Chris quickly look away.

I briefly entertained the idea of simply marching in and telling him what I thought of his rude and heavy-handed attempt to shut me up, but Chris was right. We’d barely dropped our walls to each other, and pushing things would

likely get me nothing except an end to our shiny new friendship, because whatever was going on, it had to be big.

This was way out of character for Chris. He was rarely short with Drew—always encouraging, always going the extra mile. And although I'd had that pissiness directed my way more times than I could count, in all those exchanges, Chris had teased and sassed and snarked, but he'd never deliberately aimed to hurt.

I stared through the glass a moment longer, wanting him to know I was there and that I wasn't going to be scared away by his little tantrum. He steadfastly ignored me, keeping his eyes on his computer screen, but he knew I was there. I could tell by his tense shoulders and the stubborn set to his jaw. When I figured I'd rattled him enough, I tapped on the glass and waited for him to look up.

“Don't stay too late,” I said. “You need to get some rest.”

He frowned and then opened his mouth to fire back some undoubtedly snarky reply, but I turned away before he had the chance, heading upstairs with a smile on my face and two balls of fire drilling into my back.

I made myself a coffee, threw on my favourite John Hiatt playlist, and curled up with my sketchbook on Alec and Hunter's massive couch to work some designs for a new client. The man was a television newsreader who'd recently lost his wife to breast cancer. It would be his first tattoo and I was keen to get it right. After losing Caitlyn and inking a reminder of her on my own body, I got how important it was. But I also wanted to provide him with some options that wouldn't hang a pall over any future relationship he might have.

An hour and a half later and I had three possibilities that I was reasonably happy with. And, unsurprisingly, my phone had remained silent. And since the back door had slammed about forty minutes beforehand, I figured Chris was home primping for his *big* night. Well, good for him. I swallowed the sour taste in my mouth, stretched the kinks from my back, and

grabbed my jacket and helmet. Time to blow the cobwebs—and Chris—from my mind.

The store was lit only by the light in the stairwell, the office empty, its furniture stacked neatly behind the service desk, and the tarp covered the office floor. The room was ready for painting, so I guessed Chris was coming back the next day. *After his bed partner leaves.* The thought niggled me until I kicked it to the kerb.

I was about to head out back when I noticed a phone lying atop the tarpaulin. I picked it up, then ran my fingers over the sizeable depression in the plasterboard above it. “Well, shit.” I frowned at the black screen. “Guess we’re both on his majesty’s shit list.”

I set the phone on the service desk, reset the alarm, and headed out back to my bike. There was zero point worrying about Chris when he’d made it obvious my concern wasn’t welcome. He was going cruising for his next hook-up while I was cruising for a heartache over a guy who’d been perfectly clear what he did and didn’t want from me. Maybe I *should* just fuck him or have him fuck me. Put an end to this ridiculous shit going on in my head.

I dispatched the locked bike cover and turned my face up to the sky, deciding on a route while watching a few scattered clouds race across with a fresh northerly up their butts. Settling on a slow cruise along the eastern bays, with maybe a coffee at the beach, I could circle back toward the city past my newly purchased house, and maybe even pick up a nice steak for dinner.

I felt better just thinking about it. With a lift in my heart, I straddled the Harley and let the rumbling throaty growl of its engine ripple up my inner thighs. And no, that didn’t make me think about Chris at all.

CHAPTER NINE

Leon

THE PREVIOUS OWNERS OF MY NEW HOUSE WERE WORKING outside in the garden as I rode up the street. When I pulled over to say hello, they invited me in for another look around. There were boxes everywhere, but it was great to refresh my memory of the three-bedroom 1920s villa that was my brand-new home.

And refresh my memory, it unfortunately did. The place had good bones, but it needed work. A *lot* of work. In its favour, it had maintained its original oversized and subdividable section—no small miracle—and which was the reason for my eye-watering mortgage. But it also allowed room to extend the kitchen and living space, as well as put in a fourth bedroom and a second bathroom, because . . . family, maybe. And no, it hadn't escaped me that I was in fact nesting, dammit.

The garden, although pretty and jammed full of perennials, wasn't really my style, but a landscaper friend assured me he could modernise it without losing too much of its charm. I trusted he was right, because the covered veranda out front and large double bay windows flanking the leadlight entrance door, screamed cutesy in a way most people wouldn't have dreamed a six foot six tatted-up guy would go for.

Neither had I.

But the first time I'd seen the place, I'd immediately pictured myself sitting out front, playing my guitar, with a beer at my feet. That there was also a second chair, a second pair of feet entangled in mine, a second beer, and a second every damn thing wasn't something I shared. But more worrying than that, was the image of the person to whom that list of seconds belonged. Increasingly of late, that image resembled a tart-mouthed, auburn-haired, prickly young beauty who'd probably throw up in his mouth at the very idea.

I stayed for a drink with the older couple, and we chatted about the history of the house, how they'd raised their entire

brood of four children in it, and how pleased they were to sell it to someone who intended to do the same.

Have I mentioned nesting?

By the time I left them at the front door, the sun had set on a crisp spring day, leaving just a sliver of orange teetering on the horizon, and I had a standing invitation to call again any time.

Traffic was light and I had a smooth ride back into the city, stopping to pick up a couple of steaks on the way, before finally pulling into the alley alongside The Tattoo House at around seven. I squeezed the Harley into its usual spot close to the wall, blinking at the sight of Chris's red Mini back in its space. *My space. Huh.* I stared at the car, and after covering and securing my bike, I put a hand on the cool bonnet and frowned. He'd been back a while.

I glanced at Flare's kitchen window and caught the soft glow of light from within, along with the loud chorus line of a song that sounded a lot like one of . . . Christina Aguilera's? I shook my head. Plans had clearly changed. Maybe Chris had decided to paint instead. Not that I expected to be any more welcome. And not wanting to pop the bubble on my good mood, I took a deep breath and headed for the back door. I'd avoid the man and slip upstairs, unseen.

Yeah, about that.

A blast of "Candyman" at ear-detonating volume split my head open the minute I stepped inside the kitchen. *Jesus fucking Christ.* It took a second to restart my brain, and a good few more to locate the source on the sound system under the service desk before I could turn that fucker down.

In the ensuing blissful calm, I heaved a sigh of relief and took a look around, but the place appeared . . . empty. The smell of fresh paint hung in the air and the store lights blazed bright enough to land most of the New Zealand Air Force. The office lights were off, but there was enough light thrown through the glass for me to see it was empty. Where was he? My gaze swept the store.

“Who th’ fuck turned th’ music down?”

I spun back, the slurred string of words coming from the, apparently, not-so-empty office. What the hell? “Chris?”

A familiar face along with a hand clutching a bottle of Deutz bubbly slid into view at about knee level.

I’d found Chris.

I bit back a laugh because . . . balls ripped out and all that.

“Well?” He glared at me, kind of. Eyes, glossy and unfocused, drifted on and off my face. “Turn it back up,” he slurred and began a slow sideways slide toward the floor.

“Whoa.” I raced across and pushed him firmly back against the office wall next to the door. He sat with his legs splayed out and the bottle of Deutz planted firmly between his thighs.

“Thanks.” He grinned up at me, none too soberly.

No wonder I hadn’t seen him.

When I was sure he was steady, I carefully let him go. Then I rested back on my heels and studied the small room, registering a second bottle of bubbly, that one empty, along with two mini bottles also minus contents. Good grief. No wonder he was in a state.

I reached above Chris’s head for the light switch. It took a few seconds for the state of the room to truly sink in, but when it did, holy smokes. A paint roller and tray of burnt sienna with a telling skin on top sat drying on the tarp alongside used cleaning cloths, two balled-up empty bags of potato chips whose remnants lay strewn about Chris’s legs, and a large puddle of something that looked like chocolate milk, or at least I hoped it was chocolate milk.

“Having yourself a party for one, huh?” I brushed a cowlick off his forehead and tucked it behind his ear. Chris half-grinned, half-leered up at me, his expression bearing more than a passing resemblance to Pennywise the clown in the movie, *It*.

“Yep.” He popped the p and began singing along with Christina who was obviously set on repeat.

I watched with a smile on my face. Drunk Chris was pretty fucking cute.

“Do ya think she’s hot? Chrissy?” Chris tried for an exaggerated wink which sent him lolling sideways . . . again.

I tipped him upright and patted his chest. “I wouldn’t give up your day job if I was you.”

He pouted. “Waddya mean? I can sing.”

I tried to hold his gaze, but not gonna lie, it was a mission. “Damn, Chris, how much have you had to drink?”

He pouted adorably then held up his hand up with his finger and thumb close together. “No’ enough. See.” And before I could stop him, he’d tipped the bottle on its head, pouring its contents between his legs to fizz and bubble on the tarp. “Oops.” He snorted with laughter and made a wayward grab for a paint cloth to mop it up. His clumsy efforts only succeeded in making more of a mess since the cloth was already laden with drying paint. “S not working.” He fell back against the wall and started to giggle.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” I grabbed the not-quite-empty bottle and the cloth and set them well out of reach. “That’s enough of that.”

“Hey!” He flailed a hand in the direction of the Deutz. “Give’t ’ere.”

“Nope.” I gave Chris the tiniest poke in his chest and he slumped back against the wall. The whole thing would’ve been hilarious if it wasn’t for the fact he was making such a damn mess. He was gonna hate himself in the morning. “I’d say you’ve had quite enough. What the hell have you been up to in here?”

I considered one of the half-painted walls and shook my head. Random roller marks cut across the surface, and long runs of paint bled to the floor. I sighed. “If there isn’t a law that says don’t drink and paint, there damn well should be, because holy moly. What a fucking mess.”

“S good colour, right?” He tried to follow my gaze, his eyes squinting against the light. “Youuuu picked it.” He stabbed a finger into my chest. “Bird shit,” he slurred, then roared with laughter.

I snorted and patted his cheek. “Burnt sienna. Not bird shit, you chook.” I winced as yet another round of Candyman geared up in the store. “For fuck’s sake.” I scrambled out to the service desk and hit stop on the sound system before returning to the office. “Stay put.” I held my hand out to him, although to be fair, Chris looked well past going anywhere under his own steam. “I’m gonna do something about this mess.”

“What mess?” He looked around and shrugged. “S fine.” He flapped a dismissive hand. “I’ll clean t’morrow.”

“I don’t think so.” I secured the lid on the paint can, then gathered the brushes and tray and walked them outside for a quick rinse before soaking them overnight. The half-painted mess on the office wall could wait until morning. It was nothing that a sand and repaint couldn’t fix. I grabbed the kitchen bin and a couple of towels I found under the sink and returned to the office to clean up the rubbish. I arrived just in time to watch Chris empty the last of the Deutz down his throat.

“Goddammit. Give me that.” I whipped the empty bottle from his hands and threw it into the bin along with the empty chip packets and other bottles. Then I threw the towels over the mess on the floor to soak it up, figuring Chris could spring for new ones. I knelt beside him and nudged his legs aside to get the towel under them.

He shot me a sly grin. “Ya gonna spank me, Mista Tattoo Man?” His mouth curved up in a slow sexy grin, or it would’ve been if his gaze hadn’t slid almost cross-eyed and there wasn’t a run of drool making its way out the left side of his mouth.

I chuckled and shook my head. “As tempting as that sounds, I think I’ll give that a hard pass.” I lifted his damp T-shirt to wipe his mouth and he stared up at me, the alcohol

fumes almost knocking me sideways. “Man, you’re gonna have one hell of a hangover. What idiot gets drunk on champagne? That’s the fucking worst idea ever.”

Chris leaned forward, bringing us even closer. “Ya know you’ve got really pretty eyes.” He stabbed a finger not so gently into the corner of my right one, making me flinch.

I wrapped my hand around his and lowered it. “And I’d kind of like to keep both of them, if you don’t mind?”

He tugged his hand free and next thing I knew his fingers were on my lips . . . and in my beard . . . and my body lit up like a fucking firecracker. “Leeeee-ooooonnn,” he sing-songed as he dragged his finger across my lower lip.

I couldn’t move. Hell, I could hardly breathe.

“Sooooo soft.” He began to lean forward. “Think I’m gonna kiss it.”

I jerked away just in time. “Not now, sunshine.”

Chris pouted like I’d taken away his favourite toy, then tapped at my beard. “Scratchy.” His fingers traced my jawline and I tried not to shiver. “Wanna feel it. Wanna kiss—” He went to grab my face, but I ducked and he fell back against the wall. “Shit.”

I tried not to laugh. “As lovely as that invite sounds—” I stood and offered him my hand. “—you’re not going anywhere but to sleep.”

He made an exaggerated swing with his hand which shockingly connected with mine, and I managed to get him to his feet. He swayed a little, then steadied and his face split in a wide grin. “Oooohhhh, are you takin’ me t’ bed?” He wagged a finger in my face. “Naughty, naughty boy.” He tried to tap my nose, missed, and landed on my cheek.

“No, I’m not. Come on, Casanova.” I threw an arm around his waist and steered him toward the stairs. “You can take the couch.”

We got as far as the staircase where I sat him down so I could shut off the lights and set the alarm. When I returned, he

was splayed out over the stairs with his eyes closed.

“You okay?” I checked.

Without opening his eyes, Chris gave me a crooked salute, and I was so fucking tempted to ruffle his sticky-out hair tipped with burnt sienna and kiss him on the head. I didn’t. Instead, I got him to his feet again and together we faced the stairs.

“Ready?” I returned my arm around his waist, and he leaned against me, his strong slender frame feeling so fucking right tucked into my side. “Come on. Up we go.”

“Kay.” One of his hands snaked under my shirt onto my back, hot and tempting on my skin. The other grazed my belly, sending a shudder through me. “Mmm.” He rested his head against my chest. “S nice.”

I was pretty sure he had no idea what he was doing, but I sure as hell wasn’t going to ask him to move those hands. If it helped steady him, so be it. At least that was my story, and I was sticking with it.

Once inside the flat, I propped him against the kitchen bench while I gathered an armful of towels along with an empty bucket, blankets and pillows, and some old newspapers, just in case. I got back to find him struggling to get out of his clothes, fairly unsuccessfully as it turned out, and I raced across before he crashed to the floor.

“Whoa, hang on there.” I helped him out of his shirt, which was caught on his shoulders halfway over his head, and damn, he had a beautiful body. I tried not to stare, or to think about the feel of his skin under my fingers as I helped him free himself of the sleeve. He was lean and smooth and . . .

Stop it.

I mentally slapped myself for perving on the poor drunk guy, dropped the paint-splattered shirt onto one of the old newspapers, and while I was debating what to do about the Deutz-drenched trousers, Chris made the decision for me, somehow managing to unzip the fly and shove them to puddle around his ankles, along with his briefs.

Shit. Okay then. I took a deep breath and averted my gaze. *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in a G-string.* Nothing had prepared me for a naked Chris. *Nothing.*

He turned and lurched in the direction of the bathroom. But with his feet still caught in his trouser legs, he wasn't going far.

"Wait!" I made a grab for him, only realising my mistake at the last minute when he tripped and fell against me, naked and giggling.

"I'm so fuckin' drunk." He wrapped his hands around my neck and hung off me like a rag doll.

I held myself as still as possible and tried not to focus on all that hot, naked skin pressed against me. Stretching sideways, I snagged the blanket off the back of the bar stool and wrapped it around his shoulders, then gently pushed him to his feet. "Hold those." I pressed the corners of the blanket into his hands, then crouched down to help him out of his trailing clothes. "Do you think you can manage in the bathroom on your own?" I made the mistake of looking up to find him staring down at me with dark eyes.

He cocked his head and leered. "You wanna hold it for me?"

I snorted, my cheeks blazing, not that Chris was in any state to notice. "That's another no." I smiled as I stood. "But thank you for the offer." I got him to the bathroom door, then watched him toddle unsteadily for the toilet, shedding the blanket on the way, which left me gawking at his pert, naked butt.

Fuck. Me. The universe was a vengeful bitch.

At the vanity, Chris paused and shot me a drunken leer over his shoulder. "Ya sure 'bout the holdin' thing?" He waggled his brows in a strangely haphazard way that made me laugh.

"Yep, pretty damn sure. Try not to miss the bowl, yeah? Maybe sit?"

“Pffft.” Spittle flew from his mouth. “As if. I’m hung like course—” He frowned. “Like . . . *a* horse.” He grabbed the vanity to steady himself. “It’ll reach right inside.”

I barked out a laugh and Chris must’ve thought I was mocking him, because he looked down at himself, frowned, and slammed the door shut. A few seconds later there was a loud thud and a pained “Fuck!” followed by “M’fine. Fuckin’ seat bit me.”

“Jesus Christ.” I sent a pleading look to the ceiling and shook my head. Then I set about making Chris a bed on Hunter and Alec’s couch while protecting it as best I could. That done, I put a large glass of water and a couple of ibuprofen on the coffee table, and when Chris finally emerged, naked, and trailing his blanket, I made a point of deliberately shielding my eyes, as much to protect myself, as to afford Chris some privacy. But rather than hear the couch settle under his weight, a wash of hot breath bathed the back of my fingers instead.

“That’s very gently . . . gentlelymanly of you.” He pressed a kiss to the back of my fingers, which were still covering my eyes. Then he pried two apart so he could peer between them. “There you are.” He grinned like a happy kid, and something warm flopped dangerously in my chest.

I sighed and dropped my hands, returning his smile. “Come on. Sit yourself down.”

He slumped onto the couch, and I draped a blanket over him. Then he looked up and whispered conspiratorially, “You wanna fuck?”

I snorted. “No.”

“Okay.” His eyes fluttered closed. “I’m gonna sleep.” And just like that, he was out.

I went to rearrange the blanket, but Chris turned and dragged it from my hands, revealing three parallel thin, white scars running across the inside of his left thigh. *Shit*. My heart slammed against my ribs because I knew exactly what they were. Hell, I’d done enough tattoos in my time designed to

cover similar ones. But the scars were old and it was none of my business.

I freed the blanket and pulled it over Chris's shoulders, adding another two until I was satisfied he'd be warm enough. Then I brushed his hair back from his face, startled to find him watching me with sad, sleepy eyes.

"Hey there." I managed a smile as I lifted a lock of burnt sienna-tipped hair off his lashes. "Time to sleep. I'm in the next room if you need me."

He blinked slowly, then hooked a finger around one of mine and sighed. "'S okay." He glanced down to his leg. "Life fucks ya up sometimes, right?" He held my gaze.

I nodded, my heart breaking for this man I barely knew. "Yeah, it sure can." I ran the back of my knuckles softly down his cheek and smiled. "We all do shit, sweetheart." I thought of the worst couple of years of my life after Caitlyn had died. That my liver had survived all the booze was a fucking miracle.

Chris smiled at the endearment but said nothing. His eyelids fluttered closed and his breathing slowed, and when I was sure he was out for the count, I lowered the lights and took a seat in one of the armchairs and watched him sleep.

How long I stayed, I didn't have a clue, the neon sign above Flare painting Chris's pretty face in a dim wash of reds and blues as he travelled his dreams. For whatever reason, it simply seemed important that someone, *me*, watched over this complicated man just for a little while. Someone or something had hurt Chris. It answered some questions and raised a whole lot more, and I was so fucking angry on his behalf.

He looked so young it broke my heart—squirrelled away under a mound of blankets, more relaxed than I'd ever seen him, his sharp tongue quiet, his body strangely at ease. Everything he wasn't when he was awake. I wanted nothing more than to crawl in behind and hold him tight, let him know I'd keep watch for a while. That he could let go and trust me to keep him safe.

And with that singular realisation, a groan escaped my lips. I didn't just *want* Chris. I was damn well falling for him, head over fucking heels.

I was so screwed.

CHAPTER TEN

Kip

“THERE’S WATER, A FRESH COFFEE, AND TWO IBUPROFEN ON the coffee table when you’re ready.”

The alarmingly familiar voice filtered into the hell that was my head and fired a fresh round of poisoned needles into my skull. “Do you have to be so loud?” I groaned and rolled onto my back, instantly wishing I hadn’t when a slurry of bile filled my mouth.

Jesus fucking Christ. I swallowed it down with a shudder and made a failed attempt to sit before flopping back onto the pillow. Also, a mistake, as some fucker must’ve squeezed my skull hard enough to fire my brain down my throat and out my arse, which accounted for the rank smell storming my nostrils and sending more bile up my throat.

Fucking hell. I had more success on the second attempt to sit, and when I was finally upright, I peeled open an eyelid and discovered the source of the odour. “Good god, what in the hell did I drink? Jet fuel?” I winced at the contents of the bin on the floor.

A snort of laughter accompanied the arm that crossed in front of my face, and the bin was removed. “Just as well I left it there. Better the bin than Alec and Hunter’s furniture.”

I tracked Leon’s loping stride as he disappeared into the bathroom to flush half my innards down the loo.

What the fuck was I doing on Leon’s couch?

Then it all started to come back to me. Calling it memory would be putting too fine a point on a process which more resembled throwing a dart at a range of mortifying static images with alarmingly large fucking gaps between them.

The first part was pretty clear. Getting the office organised to paint. Going home to get ready for my night out—a bath, a face mask, a douche—you never knew your luck, right? And then staring at the mirror, half-dressed and deciding, for some unfathomable reason, that I couldn’t fucking be bothered

anymore, followed by being furious with myself for said decision.

All of which landed me back at Flare and painting my office. I was pretty sure I'd begun a first coat, but how far I got, I had no idea. There was, however, one thing which was crystal fucking clear and etched in technicolour detail into my brain. My mother's voice—when I'd made the mistake of finally answering one of her calls—encouraging me to visit her brother, and to stop being “difficult,” and that “surely we can move past all that nonsense,” and that “it's a chance to do something important, Christopher.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

It was the first time she'd spoken to me in years, and I'd been an idiot to think it would go any different. What followed was a fair amount of yelling on my part, followed by me hanging up and throwing my phone against the wall—always a smart move—and then heading out to buy a new one. At some point on the way back, I decided that what I *really* needed to make the afternoon infinitely better were a couple of bottles of my favourite bubbly. Excellent decision, right?

The flashes of memory got a lot patchier after that, which was likely a plus for all concerned, but the amount of burnt sienna all over my hands was less than reassuring. Surely, I hadn't kept painting? And, oh fuck, there was something about that whole idea that didn't sit right.

I winced as the toilet flushed for the third time, quickly followed by the sound of the shower running, and I pictured Leon rinsing the offending bin. Why, oh why did he have to find me like that? I was never gonna live it down. I needed to get dressed and get the hell out of there.

I swung my feet to the floor and tried to stand. Pain exploded in my skull and froze me in place, not quite upright. Hardly the encouraging start I'd hoped for.

“Don't even think about it.” Leon returned from the bathroom with a damp washcloth and towel in hand. “Here.” He held them out for me.

I eased back down and took the cloth, its cool touch instantly soothing to my face. “What time is it?” I croaked, barely recognising my voice.

“Just after eight. You need water, a jolt of caffeine, and something in your stomach to soak up all that shit.” Leon indicated the coffee mug on the table next to me. “Drink what you can, and I’ll get some toast cooking.”

I think I groaned but I couldn’t be sure because my ears felt like a family of fire ants had set up home. And what the fuck was up with that? “Stop being so nice,” I grumbled. “I can’t hate you for seeing me like this if you’re so damn nice.”

“It’s all part of my secret plan to make you like me.”

I snorted and reached for the coffee and ibuprofen. “Yeah, well, don’t get ahead of yourself. I’m not that easy.”

Leon gave me a slow once-over. “I’m well aware.”

We locked gazes and I had a sudden flashback to the night before—something to do with a blanket and some very drunk flirting. *Oh, Jesus fuck.*

My few sips of coffee lurched ominously in my belly as I put the cup carefully back on the table and got to my feet. The fact I was apparently still butt naked registered too late—way too late—when a draught of cool air licked at my balls.

“Um, Leon?”

“Yes, Chris.” The man’s tone was solemn, but when I looked up, I caught him fighting a smile while studiously focussing on the toaster. *Fucker.*

“Where are my clothes and why aren’t I wearing them?” I grabbed one of the blankets to cover my junk.

“The answer to the first is, on the chair. The answer to the second is that you had yourself undressed before I could stop you. In case you’ve forgotten, you’d poured half a bottle of Deutz on your jeans and your shirt had an intriguing graphic print design in a colour which I do believe is burnt sienna.”

“Oh god,” I groaned, as more images of painting and singing popped into my head. “How bad is it down there?”

Leon laughed. “Nothing that a thorough sanding won’t fix. And do feel free to dress.” He waved to the chair where a pile of freshly laundered clothing sat waiting.

I blinked. “You washed my clothes?”

He shrugged. “I was doing a load and it only made sense to add yours. There’s a clean shirt of mine on top that you can borrow. I think the old one is toast.”

I stared at the clothes, glanced back at Leon, and frowned. “So, um, did . . . did we . . . ?” I flicked a hand between us, ignoring the dread rising in my chest. I might want the guy like crazy, but not that way, and certainly not if I couldn’t remember a single thing about it.

Leon’s smile dissolved in an instant and he looked . . . disappointed. “What the fuck? Do you really think I’d take advantage of you?” He huffed and turned his back to open the fridge.

Shit. “No. I’m sorry. I just . . . I don’t . . .” I shook my head, heat rising in my cheeks. “Forget it. It doesn’t matter.”

Leon turned back to face me, all trace of disappointment gone. “No. It’s me who should be sorry. Like you reminded me yesterday, we hardly know each other.” He waved me to the bathroom. “Go take a shower. I found a new toothbrush, which I left on the vanity for you. I’ll take the first round of toast.”

I ran my tongue around my sewer of a mouth and decided his suggestion was best for all concerned. Still, I raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you saying I stink?”

He looked up from where he was buttering his toast and grinned. “Like a fucking dumpster.”

I snorted and shook my head. “You sweet talker, you.” I hauled the blanket around my shoulders, grabbed the pile of clean clothes, and headed for the bathroom. “Feel free to join me,” I offered without turning my head. “I’ll leave the door unlocked.”

Knowing there was precisely zero chance of that happening, I dropped the smile and the clothes the minute I

closed the door and lurched to the toilet to empty whatever was still lurking in my stomach. Which wasn't much, as it turned out. Fucking champagne. I may as well have pulled the pin on the hangover grenade before I even took the first sip.

When I was positive there was nothing left south of my oesophagus but the fiery bowels of hell, I dragged myself in front of the mirror and groaned. *Good god*. Leon was right. Not only did I smell like a dumpster, but I looked like one as well.

I frowned and leaned forward for a closer look. Was that paint? Ugh. I teased a few splodges from my hair before laying eyes on a rag and bottle of turps sitting quietly beside the faucet. Because of course there was.

Leon.

Damn the man. Clean clothes, toothbrush, coffee, and then this. I'd fallen down the rabbit hole and somehow landed in a full-service fucking fairy tale. Or nightmare. Take your pick. Goldilocks and the tattooed bear. My snort sent a sobering dagger of pain through my head.

Well, I didn't need looking after. I did fine all by myself. I ignored the throbbing ache in my head that tended to disagree, and for a brief moment warred with the idea of simply refusing to use the stuff. The last thing I wanted was to provide any positive reinforcement for the man's thoughtfulness.

A second look in the mirror saw all my good intentions shot to hell and I grabbed the bottle. Twenty-five minutes later, one heavenly shower, a deep clean of my teeth, a sneaky spritz from one of Alec's colognes that happened to be sitting on the vanity, and a head of hair that smelled vaguely like a paint factory, and I felt a whole lot better. My stomach still wasn't keen on any company, but my headache was clearing nicely, and my legs felt less like jelly and more like workable appendages. Almost.

I sat on the toilet to pull on my briefs and jeans, because, hello, arse-kicking hangover, and then slipped Leon's shirt over my head. It still carried a hint of the musky cologne he favoured, and I had zero shame lifting it to my nose. All wood

and talc and bristling testosterone. The man was huge, hot, and hairy, in the best possible way, and I was holding out hope he was hung that way as well.

I froze halfway through a smile. *Hung.*

Oh god. My chin hit my chest and I groaned as the memory of joking with Leon about me being hung like a horse hit me like a Mack truck. *Oh god, kill me now.* I really, really had to lay off drinking to excess. Because obviously, I wasn't. Hung, that was. Not even close. It wasn't the size but what you did with it, right? But if Leon thought me a bad bet before, I was pretty sure I'd nailed the coffin shut on any chance I might have had with him.

A knock startled me from my musings.

"You okay in there?" Leon sounded concerned.

"Fine," I answered, reaching for my trousers. "Be there in a sec. Unless you've changed your mind about joining me?" Hope, thy name is Kip.

He laughed but said nothing.

Of course. Everything about Leon screamed steadfast and reliable, while everything about me screamed . . . well, neither of those things. Leon wanted to settle down and start a family. I shuddered at the very thought. I might covet his glorious arse, but once it was mine, I'd move on to somebody else's. And I ignored the way that thought sat less easily in my brain than it usually did. Hungover, right?

I pulled my trousers up my legs and another memory hit me. Leon's sad eyes on my thighs. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

I was never drinking again.

Had he asked about them? Had I . . . answered? *Shit.* No. I was pretty sure I wouldn't have done that, not even drunk. It wasn't that I hid them, but the guys I fucked were in and out of my life too quickly to care, most not interested in anything more than sliding tab A into slot B. And for the one or two that did ask, I shut them down. No one got to know that stuff about me. No. One. Especially not Mister Nice Guy.

Leon was right. We *were* too explosive together. Too risky. Maybe it was time for me to shelve the idea of us getting down and dirty as well.

I finished dressing and went straight to where my socks and shoes were placed *oh so neatly* beside the couch. Leon turned as I came out, then carried a plate of buttered toast across to where I sat staring at my feet with my socks in my hand. He put the plate on the coffee table in front but didn't move away. "Leaving already?"

"Yes." I didn't look up.

Leon said nothing but I could picture his concerned frown in my mind clear as day.

I kicked myself for being rude. It wasn't Leon's fault I'd broken too damn many of my own rules and was backtracking fast. I softened my tone and unbundled my socks. "Thanks for helping me out last night, and I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but I've got things to do today. Clean up downstairs, for a start." I hesitated. "And thanks for the other stuff, the turps . . . and cleaning up the bucket . . . and everything." I really needed bullet points.

"You're welcome." His voice carried a thick morning rasp and my skin prickled under his intense scrutiny. "You feeling any better?" His naked feet sat just centimetres from my own, peeking out from another pair of soft faded jeans that I just wanted to rip off his body.

"Yeah, surprisingly," I admitted, still staring at his feet, unwilling to meet his gaze because . . . lots of reasons. We were so very different he and I, in ways that seemed reflected in our two pair of feet. Mine—slender, pale, with two crooked toes broken in a trampoline fall and slightly knobbly at the joints. They railed at constraint, walked a fickle path, and ached in bad weather. Leon's feet were wide to support all that towering height, olive toned with a sprinkling of dark hair, and a glimpse of a thick inked tribal band around one ankle. They were solid on the earth, just like him. Strong in the face of stormy winds. They knew where they were heading. Unlike mine.

“Then at least eat something before you go.” He pushed the plate closer.

I finished with my socks and shoes and then stared at the toast, the slices perfectly buttered all the way to their neatly trimmed edges. I couldn’t stop my smile. It was so Leon. “You cut off my crusts?” I finally looked up and found his cheeks pink.

“Oh.” A nervous smile graced his lips and he shrugged. “Habit . . . I guess. I um, like it that way.”

“Of course you do.” I reached for a slice and took a bite, not believing him for a second. The buttered toast tasted like sour ash in my mouth, but I forced it down as I got to my feet. “I’ll get the T-shirt washed and back to you tomorrow.”

“There’s no rush.” He followed me to the door and opened it before I could say a word.

I wanted to hate him for it, but it was kind of hard when all I really felt was just how fucking nice it was to be considered in that way.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he pressed before I headed down the stairs. “I mean, last night was . . . well, I guess I was a little surprised.”

“That I was drunk?” I aimed for teasing. “Newsflash: sometimes I drink and let go.”

The smile didn’t reach his eyes. “No. More that you were drunk in your office. In your place of work, in Flare. It didn’t . . . well, it just didn’t seem like something you’d do. Unless . . .”

Heat raced into my cheeks all the same because he was right, and I’d been trying to push the shame of it from my mind from the minute I’d realised. What I’d done was so fucking disrespectful, to Rhys and to my job. Anything could’ve happened.

What if Leon hadn’t been living in the flat? What if I’d tried to drive home? Would I have remembered to set the alarm? I couldn’t even think about that last one—all of Rhys’s hard work at risk. I was going to have to own up to the whole

shitshow with him. Then maybe he'd decide that I wasn't right for his fucking job, after all.

So, the answer to Leon's question was no, but I couldn't tell him that. Which was why I hesitated when I should've kept going down the stairs and out the back door. Home to my empty apartment. Home to my empty bed. Home to shut the world out. Or maybe just to get laid and forget.

Now, there was a thought.

"Chris, I'm sorry. That was a crap thing to say. But when I saw your phone smashed on the floor . . . well, I guess it worried me."

My phone? Shit. Panic gripped me. How had I forgotten? My whole fucking life was on that phone. *What if Rhys called?*

Leon stepped back with his palms up. "There I go again when it's none of my business." But his concern showed in every line of that frown, and I simply couldn't have that. For all his bewildering charm, Leon had looked after me when he could've done a lot less.

"I think I made it your business by being a dickhead," I acknowledged. "But you don't need to worry. It was just family stuff. And right now, I really need to go."

I was lying, and Leon knew I was lying, but he let it go. I took the first step and then paused and turned to face him again. "You didn't by chance come across a new phone last night?"

His lips twitched but he shook his head. "Do you need help to look?"

God no. "No. I can do it. I must have decided to put it in a safe place. I'm careful like that."

He grinned. "Clearly." Then he glanced over his shoulder. "But you might need—"

"I'm *fine*." I rolled my eyes. "I'm a big boy. I've got this."

He looked about to argue, then simply nodded. "Of course you do."

He closed the door almost in my face and I frowned at it. Then I sighed and headed down the stairs, fighting the urge to run back up and say what I really wanted was to stay and share that breakfast with him, after all.

But this wasn't a fucking fairy tale, and I didn't need anyone's misguided attempts to help me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kip

OR MAYBE I DID.

Because thirty minutes later I was back knocking on Leon's door.

He opened it looking so fucking smug I wanted to lick him all over. Or punch him on the nose. Or punch him on the nose and *then* lick him all over.

Yeah, that last one ought to do it.

"Can I help you?" He positively hummed with self-righteousness.

It earned him my best glare. "So . . ." I scuffed the sole of my shoe on the wooden landing. "I found my new phone—" I waved the device as some kind of proof of life. "—in my satchel, of all places."

Leon nodded, biting back a smile, and obviously unimpressed with my detective skills.

Of course, I'd failed to tell him that it had taken me twenty minutes to locate said satchel . . . in the fridge . . . with a large tub of strawberry yoghurt tucked inside. It made sense if you thought about it.

Whatever.

But bonus? The search had given the ibuprofen time to really kick in and my headache had receded to a background four out of ten, which was a lot less than I deserved.

"In your satchel, huh?" Leon's eyes danced with mirth. "Who'd have thought? But I'm delighted you came back to reassure me. I've been rattled ever since you left. It's been hell," he deadpanned.

The man was walking a fine line and I narrowed my gaze. "I can tell." I noted the half-drunk coffee in one hand and the toast with marmalade in the other—crusts *on*. Something

warm tingled inside. “Aw, and far too rattled to cut off your crusts, it seems.”

Leon looked down at the toast and then back up to me, and a slow smile spread over his face. “You always rattle me, Chris.”

And nope, I wasn’t going anywhere near *that* look, and glanced away like the chickenshit I was.

“Was that all?” he asked, biting back another smile. “It’s just I’ve got another slice of toast waiting.”

I huffed and shot him a glare. “You know damn well it’s not. I seem to have also mislaid my . . . keys.”

“Oh.” Leon held out his cup and I took it without thinking, freeing him to dig in his pocket, producing a familiar lime green ostrich feather keyring which he held aloft. “You mean this? I found it in your trousers before I washed them.”

I snatched the keys from his hand and mumbled, “Thank you.” Then I turned to leave.

“Stay, please.” His hand landed on my arm, then fell quickly away. “I mean, you still have your office to paint, right? And as it happens, I’ve got nothing in particular planned for this afternoon. I could help . . . if you want. We could get it done in half the time.”

Alarm bells rang in my head as I stared at those pretty grey eyes. The thought of spending more time with him wasn’t exactly . . . terrible . . . and that was precisely the point. Feelings, especially *my* feelings, were never part of the deal. There was really only one safe answer.

“Look, Leon.” I sighed as he stiffened. “I appreciate you looking after me, but I never asked you to do that. And maybe this joke between us about me getting you into bed was a bad idea. Just like you thought.” I took a deep breath and reached for his hand. “I’m not and I won’t ever be that person you’re looking for, and us ‘doing things together’—I made air quotes—“isn’t going to change that. I won’t date you, Leon.”

He blinked but didn’t look away. “I don’t recall asking you to. Wasn’t this just about painting your office?”

“Was it?” I stepped into his space, his freshly showered scent making my pulse flutter, his huge presence an aching invitation to burrow in close. I went up on tiptoes and lifted my mouth to whisper just under his ear, “Are you sure about that?”

He stilled, and I dropped my heels to the floor but didn’t move, the raging heat of his body, so close, so fucking there, rolled like a wave through mine, burning my cheeks and drying my mouth. *Move*, something warned from deep in my brain, but the call went unanswered as Leon bent over to put his cheek against the side of my head, his hot, hot breath raising every hair on my neck as he pressed a single desperately soft kiss to the shell of my ear, the sound of it echoing through my body like a soft thunderclap.

“The answer to that depends on you,” he whispered. “Because I am done resisting you.”

His words floated through my brain as we stood frozen in his doorway, electricity humming between us. Then his mouth brushed my ear once again, the barest hint of plush lips and the soft hair of his beard moving over my skin.

My eyelids fluttered closed and a whimpering sound I didn’t think I was capable of fell from my lips. I turned my head just enough to bring our mouths within kissing distance but kept my eyes closed. “I can’t be that guy for you, Leon,” I whispered, although there was little force behind it. “This would have to be it. One and done. Can you do that?”

Leon ran his nose up my cheek to my hairline, inhaling deeply, a low growl rumbling in his throat as he pressed a kiss to my temple. Then his lips glossed over mine like a feather, once, twice, the delicate slide of his tongue teasing along the seam but no more.

I couldn’t move. Hell, I could barely breathe as my heart slammed into my ribs and my dick began to strain against my jeans, my common sense in tatters. I was so fucking turned on my hands were clenched at my sides just to keep from shoving Leon back into the flat and just getting the fuck on with things.

“You need to tell me that you understand.” I forced the words between our lips.

He pulled back just enough to meet my gaze, his pupils blown all to hell as he answered steadily, “I understand.”

I searched desperately for what I needed to see—lust, want, but more importantly, acceptance and resignation. But what I found instead was who the fuck knew what, because whatever lay in Leon’s eyes was a hazy mess of emotions I couldn’t decipher. Worst of all, I couldn’t find a single fuck to give about it because I was too far gone down this path already. I wanted him. I’d wanted him for two years. I wanted him more than I could remember wanting anyone in my life. It scared the hell out of me, but hell if I was going to walk away now.

“Happy?” He ran his lips lightly over my face, pressing soft butterfly kisses to every inch as I purred my approval.

Happy? I was fucking ecstatic.

“Can I kiss you, properly?” He rubbed his cheek against mine, humming softly like I was some frightened child he needed to soothe, like he knew.

Leave. Don’t hurt him. The warning rang in my head and a stronger man might’ve walked away, but that sure as shit wasn’t me. And I could *always* walk away.

Leon cradled my face, his lips brushing across my forehead and down the other side. “Let me kiss you.” He locked eyes with mine, his a stormy grey sky.

“Yes.” It came out on a sigh, more plea than permission.

His thumbs caressed my cheeks as he stared deep into my eyes. “So that’s a yes?”

Jesus Christ, say no. He’s given you a chance. Say no. “Yes.”

His mouth curved up in a wicked smile, and then his lips sank down onto mine, and after two long years, Leon was finally fucking kissing me. I almost sobbed with relief.

Warm, full, and firm against my mouth, he kissed me like he meant it, groaning as he circled his arms around my waist and gathered me close. He bent his knees, cradled my arse in those big fucking hands, and lifted me up, his hard cock sliding alongside mine, and *oh god, yes. Hell to the fucking yes.*

I wrapped my legs around his waist and deepened the kiss, sliding my tongue alongside his to plunge deep into his mouth, desperate to taste. He tasted of sugar and oranges and coffee, and a whole lot of promise. And at the first touch of my tongue, he groaned and carried me into the flat, kicking the door shut before making his way through the kitchen and down the short hall to the bedroom where he laid me down. I scooted up the bed, dismissing the slight queasiness still circling my belly, because who the hell cared about that when a man like Leon was about to fuck me to kingdom come?

Or was he?

Because right then he was standing at the side of the bed, staring at me like he might be having second thoughts.

“Leon?” I asked cautiously. *Please don't walk away.*

But he just smiled. “You are so fucking gorgeous, and I’ve dreamed about this for so long that I don’t even know where to begin.”

Oh. My heart thumped helplessly in my chest. Guys didn’t say that shit to me. They didn’t look at me like I was some kind of gift from heaven. I grabbed his hand and tugged. “Come on. Let’s do this.”

His eyes clouded and he shook his head. “Wait up a minute. I think I need to be clear about something.”

I arched a brow. “Rules, Leon?”

His lip twitched. “No, not rules. I’m up for pretty much anything. But if I only get to have you in my bed this one time —” He shot me a pointed look. “—we are *not* going to rush this. I’ve thought about being with you for over two years, and I intend to enjoy every damn second. Do we have an understanding?”

Well, shit. A flush of warmth ran through my body, and I nodded wordlessly, because what the fuck did you say to something like that? I was more accustomed to, “fuck, you’re hot” or “man, look at your arse,” or “you’re a great lay” as whoever it was walked out the door, or as I did; take your pick.

But Leon’s heartfelt determination to enjoy me left me caught between feeling incredibly touched and thinking I should run for the hills while there was still time. Mostly because I wanted to hear a whole lot more of it.

“Fine,” I eventually rasped, not trusting myself to say any more, and Leon practically beamed.

I thought again about stopping the madness in its tracks, but then Leon pulled his shirt over his head, and holy mother of God and sweet Jesus on a bicycle, wild horses had zero chance of dragging me out of that bed.

The man was a six-foot-six tank of kaleidoscopic ink over olive-skinned muscle with nothing remotely gym about any of it. And I was down for every glorious millimetre of that particular action headed my way.

An entire forest covered his torso and arms. Trees, birds, animals, and even a small angel above his heart, all playing peek-a-boo behind a mass of chest hair that was just begging for my tongue to part it right down the middle between those dark, pierced nipples. I groaned, imagining the feel of them on my tongue. I loved piercings. Too chicken to get my own but I loved them none the less.

And below Leon’s chest lay a wonderland of soft welcoming belly and a happy trail that was more of a six-lane highway. It disappeared under the waistband of his comfy jeans, which hung temptingly from his hips. A sharp breath in the right direction might see those suckers on the floor.

Enthralled by the sight, for a few seconds I could do nothing but stare. He might’ve irritated the fuck out of me, but that didn’t mean I hadn’t lusted over every square inch of that rocking body. And if sometimes it had been Leon I’d imagined slamming into me instead of some random swipe right or

hook-up, well, that was nobody's business but my own. A flicker of nerves rolled through me. Leon lived up to everything I'd imagined. But would I do the same for him?

"Like what you see?" he asked in a joking voice, but with a flicker of concern that let me know I wasn't the only nervous one in the room.

"Like?" I shook my head in disbelief. "Jesus, Leon. You're all my fucking fantasies and then some. But you're also way too far away. So, how about you ditch those jeans you're wearing . . . slowly." I crooked my finger at him. "And then come here. I want to explore." I perched on my elbows to watch.

He popped the button on his jeans and eased the zipper down, and just as I thought, they fell straight off to puddle around his ankles on the floor. And damn, I was pretty sure my eyes bugged out of my head. The man was commando which was enough of an excuse but that wasn't the only reason.

Leon was . . . huge, like "put the rest in a doggy bag and I'll take it home for later" huge. I gaped unattractively and then licked my lips, because how in the hell could you not? Man, oh man, that had been worth the wait.

I croaked something unintelligible, cleared my throat, and tried again. "Jesus Christ, Leon. Get that thing over here. I might need to take out a mortgage to cover my medical expenses after you're done drilling me with that."

He flushed all kinds of red and looked suddenly concerned. "Is . . . is that what you want? Me to fuck you? Cos I can go either way. I know I'm a lot—"

"Shut the fuck up and come here." I scooted onto my back and waved him over. "And hell yeah, I want that sucker inside me. My mamma didn't raise no quitter. Although I have to say, I haven't been fucked by a dick with its own postcode before, so we're definitely gonna need a lot more lube than the tiny packet I carry in my wallet."

Leon took a detour to the bedside table and threw a large tube of lube on the bed. "Will that do?"

I glanced at the tube and grinned. “It’s a start. I was negative three weeks ago. I always suit up, but there’s been one or two since, so if you don’t want to do this—”

“I do want,” he interrupted. “I tested negative four months ago. No one since.” His neck stained red, and I almost swallowed my tongue.

“Four months?” I shook my head and tsked. “As hot as you are, that’s a fucking crime.”

“Shut up.” The red deepened and he threw a couple of condoms at me.

I ducked and grabbed his hand. “Get down here, gorgeous.”

The mattress dipped and the next thing I knew Leon’s ample body was crawling all the fuck over mine, and electricity sizzled through my veins. The size difference was such a fucking turn on as I slowly disappeared beneath him, lost in all those acres of hot skin and muscle and swirls of startling colour.

Before he lowered himself fully, I slid a hand around that gorgeous cock because . . . damn, who needed a reason to do that. It was a thing of beauty and as I felt the heft of it in my hand, it almost blew my mind wondering how I was gonna get it inside me. But I would, come hell or high water, that monster was toast.

“Impressive.” I gave it a firm tug and gasped as my trailing fingers slid over metal, lots and lots of metal. I caught Leon’s eye and cocked a brow. “My, my, my. What *do* we have here?”

He grinned and let me shove him over onto his back so I could investigate fully. With his cock standing proud, the four silver rings were easy to spot. One sat on the underside of his cock close to the base in front of his balls, with three more laddered back along his taint.

“Huh.” I lay my head on his thigh so I could inspect them more closely while Leon watched with an amused glint in his eye. “Now, I know this is a guiche ladder piercing, right?” I ran a finger down the set of three rings and his cock jerked in

response. Mmm. I tucked that tasty little bit of information away for later. “But what’s this one?” I tapped the ring at the base of his dick.

“A lorum piercing.” He held my gaze. “You like?”

I reached up and licked a stripe over all four, making him shudder. “I like very much.” I crawled up his body and lowered my mouth to his ear. “Would you like me to play with them . . . during . . . ?”

He nipped my nose. “Yes.”

“Mmm.” I kissed him, hard. “So, fucking hot.”

He flipped our positions and settled his body over mine, the weight of his lower half pinning our hips together. Our cocks got busy with introductions, and Jesus, that felt good. All except the bit where I was still dressed. A slight error in judgement on my part.

But Leon had it covered. He yanked my T-shirt over my head and then kissed down my neck to my nipples. Goosebumps rippled over my skin as he took his time, laving and nipping and suckling each one, until I was squirming with pleasure. “God, you’re good at that.”

He sat back and ran his hands up my ribs and down over my belly. “You’re so beautiful.” He stroked me through my jeans with feathery brushes of his fingers and my eyelids fluttered closed. “Soon, baby.” Leon tapped my dick through my trousers, which didn’t exactly help matters. Then he kissed up my neck until his lips once again found mine, and the groan of satisfaction as he sank his tongue deep into my mouth sent shivers of pleasure rushing to my toes.

And while one hand wrapped around my jaw to hold me in place as he explored and delved deeper, the other went to work on my trousers until he had both them and my briefs down to my calves, and with a bit of wriggling, I managed to kick them off. And not once did we stop kissing.

After that he was back on top with his body covering mine, but this time we were skin to skin. Yes! Fucking A. I couldn’t have moved if I’d wanted, held in place not only by his sheer

size, but more specifically by his very loud and unmistakable pleasure in *me*. In something as simple as kissing me. He hadn't really even touched me much, but he kissed like I was the last drink of water in the desert. Like I mattered in ways I couldn't even dream about and didn't want to know. In ways I hadn't let myself feel, or hope, or believe was possible.

Like this wasn't just lust.

Like it was somehow important . . . special.

Which was exactly why this was a bad, bad idea. Too fucking late now.

I filed my worries away and started my own reconnaissance. I had a hot naked god on top of me, and while Leon was still focused on my mouth, I got busy with all of that delicious skin at my disposal. The rise and fall of his shoulder blades and the smooth run of skin down his back to his hips. The dimples in the small of his back and the swell of his ample arse dusted with hair. The man was a walking carpet, a very sexy walking carpet.

I flapped a hand up and down the bed until I hit the lube and then ran my slicked fingers into Leon's crease. He groaned and bent his knee up, opening himself so I could trail over his tight hole and press the tip of one finger inside.

"God, yes." He moaned and gave a buck of his hips that did all sorts of unspeakable things to my cock, the little spoon to his significantly larger one. I wasn't too proud to admit it. Because that fucking soup ladle was all mine, at least for the next little while and I was gonna sup at my leisure.

Another groan and Leon's lips were suddenly gone and he was staring down at me, breathless, on his knees and straddling my hips, as I finger fucked him slowly in and out. "Fuck." His face screwed up like he was in agony. "I'm too damn close and I've barely even started with you."

I slipped my finger deeper, pumping in and out as his eyes rolled back. "Can you go more than once?"

He nodded, not bothering to open his eyes, and I lifted my head to suckle on one of his nipples, running my tongue over

the metal piercing to make him moan. Then I caught the ring between my teeth and tugged gently.

“Oh Christ.” He groaned shamelessly, his breath catching as my finger slid free of his arse.

“Roll over, baby.” *Baby?* My gaze jerked up, but he appeared not to have noticed the slip and simply did as I asked. And when he was flat on his back, I sank down between his legs and studied his cock, pretty sure I couldn’t deep throat the whole thing on my first attempt without giving myself an unplanned appendectomy.

I lifted it up and down, getting its measure. Then I flicked my tongue over the metal rings behind his balls before running my thumb over his slit, lifting it to my mouth for a hit of that salty, musty tang—fucking heaven.

Leon shoved a pillow under his head so he could watch, his nostrils flaring, those grey eyes a dark slate. “Need a map down there, beautiful?”

I shut him up with a finger shoved back into his hole and then swallowed as much of his cock as I could manage in an eye-watering slide that rolled Leon’s eyeballs almost out the back of his head.

Mine too, as it turned out, because yes, I might’ve overestimated my abilities just a smidge, as well as the still dubious state of my stomach, and I almost coughed that sucker right back out when it hit somewhere south of my tonsils. But I rallied admirably, and what wasn’t going to fit—at least four inches of it, okay five—got a sharp introduction to my right hand and we were golden.

But it wasn’t a walk in the park.

No matter how you measured him, Leon was big. Which meant some kind of strategy was called for. But I fucking loved giving head and I was damn good at it. So I relished every gag-worthy, tonsil-flattening, stomach-lurching second of having him in my mouth. And by the filthy sounds falling from his lips as he fisted my hair and growled his pleasure, I was doing a pretty good job. And by the time I crooked my

finger inside and found that sweet spot, Leon was right there ready for me. He arched off the bed, embedded his cock in my throat, and came like a fucking train.

I swallowed every mouthful, filing away the memory of his taste before crawling up his body and shoving my tongue into his mouth so he could lap at it greedily. When he was done, he flipped me onto my back like I weighed nothing and stared down at me.

“Okay,” he puffed, giving me a sly smile. “I admit you’re pretty good at that. But now, it’s my turn. And just so you know, I’m not too shabby either.”

I bit back a smile. “It’s only words until you deliver, sugar.” I flicked my tongue across my lips.

He grinned and kissed me hard. Then he knelt to one side and pressed his lips down my body, centimetre by excruciating centimetre. He took his time, too much time if you asked my aching dick, but the rest of me wasn’t complaining.

As he amped me up until I was zinging, my gaze swept back and forth over his ink—beautiful tumbling feathers down one shoulder, the other stunningly bare. Animals, birds, ferns, and kauri trees. Crashing waves and mountain peaks, stars and a moon in a midnight sky.

And still he kissed and sucked and nipped, driving me crazy until I arched up and shoved at his shoulders to get him where I wanted, onto my cock. But Leon wasn’t about to be rushed, and instead of swallowing me down, he blew cool air across my aching shaft, brushing it lightly with his beard, the soft hair crazy erotic on my sensitive skin, stoking the burgeoning fire in my balls.

He flicked my dick back and forth with the tip of his tongue, then smoothed his cheek along its length while I waited and trembled and begged, frantic for the feel of his hot mouth around my cock. It had to be next.

But no, he leapfrogged my dick to kiss down my legs to my toes, leaving me close to homicidal. But then he sucked each one into his mouth and I forgot about my cock as his

tongue rolled over the sensitive appendages and pleasure wound tight in my belly. I cursed and bucked and counted anything and everything, worried I might come from the delicious sensation alone.

“Too close,” I panted, and he pulled off, kissing back up my legs to linger around the scars on my inner thigh, kissing along their length with such tenderness I didn’t need to ask.

He knew. Somehow, Leon knew.

I shoved that uncomfortable thought aside and focused on the inferno stirring in my body as Leon finally moved toward my cock, hovering over it for just a few seconds until I was ready to scream. Then he sucked it down to its root, and *holy Jesus*, I was pretty sure I saw the second coming. My entire dick disappeared into his mouth, his facial hair tickling my groin and balls. If I lasted a minute, I’d be shocked.

Like he knew, Leon rested an arm across my hips to gently hold me in place and sucked back up the length of my cock, his thick tongue swirling around the shaft. Then his finger found my hole and slid inside and . . . oh god, I needed a lot more of that. I arched up, straining against his hold to thrust deep into his mouth, then fell back to force his finger higher—back and forth, up and down, until I was so fucking close, I could almost taste the stars.

Then his mouth was gone and my cock bounced wet against my belly. “What the fuck?”

A mountain of hot skin and muscle slid up my body and a voice rasped in my ear. “You want me to fuck you? You want me to bury myself in your sweet arse and make your body sing? Tell me you want that as much as I do.”

Holy crap, who was this guy? “Yes. Yes, I want all of that, you total asshole.”

He pulled up with a grin in place and I wrapped my legs around his waist, digging in my heels to force his dick down onto mine.

“And don’t hold back,” I warned him. “I’m no fragile queen. I wanna know you’ve been there.”

“Oh, you’ll know.” He lowered his mouth to mine and kissed me hard, letting me taste myself on his tongue as he feasted on mine. Then he sat back up and scanned the bed.

“Looking for this?” I pulled the lube from under the pillow and slapped it in his hand. “I wasn’t letting that sucker out of my sight. Don’t be frugal.” I shot him a warning look and grabbed one of the condoms. “Give me some room.”

He straddled my hips and sat back on his heels, his hard cock front and centre and dripping. The condom was a bit of a struggle but I was up for the challenge, and once it was on, Leon squeezed a fat blob of lube onto my palm and I slicked him all over with long slow strokes. When he was good and slippery, I moved my hands down to his balls and those sexy as fuck piercings, noting the way he panted with soft groans when I played with the lorum in particular, his cock twitching with every pass of my fingers.

I couldn’t rip my eyes from his face and all that beautiful ink. He was so fucking sexy, lost in a rolling tide of pleasure as I worked him hard, making sure he was fully back on board after the first time.

And when he was quivering and close to the edge, I brought my hands up to his belly and plotted every gentle crease, every soft run of hair as it threaded between my fingers. “This is going to be the best fucking magic carpet ride ever.” I sighed happily.

He laughed and grabbed the lube, squeezing a mountain of the stuff into his palm. Then he leaned down and kissed me. “Spread ’em, beautiful. High and wide.”

“Oh boy, oh boy. Here we go, kids.”

Leon laughed and shook his head. “You’re an idiot.”

I studied his face, the endorphins loosening my stupid tongue. “Is that a good thing?”

His eyes locked on mine, a thousand questions floating in their depths. “The very best.” Then he looked away and settled between my legs, prepping me with the kind of detailed and

careful attention you might give a Formula One car before it hit the track. And probably about as much lubrication.

I was no slouch in the arse department, and not to put too fine a point on it, regular sex meant I was pretty . . . welcoming. But Leon's fingers were in proportion to his size, and even with only two of those babies stuffed inside, things were getting . . . snug.

"Um, Leon?"

He glanced up from his work. "Yeah."

"Just making sure we're on the same page here. Lots of lube means Lots. Of. Lube. Like a fuckton. Like you have shares in the company. Like there's a world glut and you've been given the job of reducing the stockpile. Oh, and maybe a shoehorn wouldn't go amiss."

He laughed. "It's not too late to change your mind."

Was he crazy? "Hush your mouth. Just . . . more lube . . . that's all I'm gonna say. Except maybe . . . slow . . . yeah, that's another good word. Slow."

He smiled, grey eyes twinkling. "Noted. Although there's another word you might find useful."

I gave him a sideways look. "What's that?"

"Stop."

I snorted, but his eyes were serious.

"I mean it. Any time, okay?"

I nodded, feeling a little trepidation for the first time. But then I added in a whisper just loud enough for him to hear, "And I've got two for you."

He glanced my way.

"Like hell."

He chuckled but I needn't have worried. Leon was nothing if not thorough. By the time he was lined up against my hole with my legs dangling over his arms, I'd been teased, softened, finger fucked, and edged almost to oblivion, and was

threatening all kinds of bodily harm if he didn't get on with things and fuck me.

“So bossy.” Leon nudged just a little in warning, and I concentrated on my breathing, ready to bear down and take that sucker in. But as the wide head of his cock started to press against my hole and I began blowing out breaths like I was about to give birth, he paused.

“Hey.” He leaned down to place a soft, sweet kiss on my lips. “Relax, beautiful.” His tongue dipped inside to drink a taste. “Relax and let me in.” Another kiss, this time with his hips rocking ever so gently, probing, pushing, his open mouth swallowing my soft cry as his cock breached the tight ring of muscle and a raging burn fired through my arse and up my spine.

“Oh, fucking, fuck, fuck,” I swore into his open mouth.

He paused but kept pressing kisses to my lips. “Breathe, baby. You feel so good. So good.”

“Mmm, hmmm.” I panted into his busy mouth, digesting his use of the words baby and sweetheart and the way I liked the sound of them far too much. “Whereas you feel—Jesus, Christ—like a damn elephant trunk. More, please.”

He snorted. “You sure?”

“Yep. Too wide to stop. Too wide. Keep going.”

“Okay, baby. Here we go. Easy now.”

I ignored the ongoing endearments because this was fucking, after all. Endearments went with the territory, and besides, I was kind of distracted by the fact my body was in imminent danger of ripping in two straight up the middle. So, there was that.

But Leon was so careful, rocking inside a centimetre at a time, slow and steady, kisses landing anywhere he could reach, neck, shoulder, face, lips, soft murmurs of encouragement in my ears all the way until he was fully seated, and my head fell forward on his shoulder in relief as I panted my way through the residual screaming burn.

I'd done it. No, *we'd* done it, because that had definitely been a team sport.

"You feel so good." Leon sighed against my cheek, then pulled up and studied my face. "You still with me there, champ?"

"No," I squeaked. "But I will be. If you could maybe stop moving, just for a bit?"

"Got it." He kissed my nose and held still as I continued to breathe. In and out. Breathing helped, right? Breathing was good. Because, oh boy, I had the Titanic berthed in my arse and I wasn't going anywhere.

I breathed, and then breathed a little more, and slowly, like a turning tide, the burn morphed into hunger and need, and oh hell yeah. Now we were talking.

I wriggled my butt and dug my heels into Leon's back. "Punch it."

He laughed. "Only you could quote *Star Trek* while being fucked. So you're ready?"

I smiled up at him. "Like I was born for it."

He glanced down between us at my soft dick and cocked a brow.

I shrugged. "It'll get with the program."

He kissed me soundly, then eased his cock slowly back before giving a careful thrust forward, watching my reaction.

I rolled my eyes. "If that's all you've got, I'm gonna be hella disappointed."

His grin widened. "Then I suggest you find a handhold." He pulled back for a second go, harder this time, and I rocked a few centimetres up the bed.

"Pffft." I fired him a challenging look and fisted the covers. "Come on, slugger. Show me what you've got."

He chuckled and repositioned my legs, pushing them higher and opening me wide. Then he drew back and thrust hard, slamming me up the bed.

“Son of a bitch.” I hissed and bit down on his shoulder until he yelped. “More.”

He thrust hard again, and again, the sheer size of him ensuring he hit my prostate in some way every damn time. There was no angling because there was no room to move, at all. But between his thrusts and the friction on my dick caught tight between us, I was hard again in no time.

“I’m close,” he huffed, his breath fast and fiery against the side of my neck, his grunts urgent and filthy and so fucking hot. “You’re too.” Slam. “Fucking.” Slam. “Perfect.” Slam, slam.

My heart thundered at his words because I couldn’t deny I felt it too. That intangible *something* between us. Couldn’t deny it and didn’t want it. “Best news all day,” I gasped as the back of my head thumped on the wooden headboard and I wondered how the hell I’d gotten up there.

Leon gave another thrust, and okay, that answered that.

But preferring my orgasms minus the concussion, I slipped my legs off Leon’s shoulders and wrapped them around his hips instead, sliding my hand between us to grab my dick. “Oh god.” I was so fucking close.

“You good?” He mumbled against my shoulder.

“Mmmmmph” was all I could manage with Leon ringing my prostate bell on every stroke. One, two, three, fo—the burn ignited at the base of my spine and a wave of pleasure rushed through me. “Oh fuck!” I stroked myself through as Leon buried his face in my shoulder, his beard rasping against my skin, and came with a muffled roar, so far inside my arse I was gonna need dog rescue to sniff him out.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” He threw his head back and slid home a couple more times, shuddering and jerking with every pulse until he finally stilled and collapsed on top of me, his breathing ragged, his body slick with sweat.

“Damn,” he gasped. “I died and went to heaven. Only explanation.”

I snorted and kept my legs wrapped around him, savouring whatever the hell had just happened between us, because my brain was in lockdown. Not sure I wanted to think about it. Not sure I'd ever forget.

Just once, Kip, I reminded myself. You only get to have him once. Problem solved.

I tightened my hold around his huge body and shoved a sudden and unexpected surge of regret right back where it belonged.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Leon

CHRIS LAY QUIET IN MY ARMS FAR LONGER THAN I EXPECTED. My soft dick had fallen free of his tight heat minutes before, and yet still he hadn't moved. The surprise of that lit a spark of hope that maybe, just like me, Chris didn't want to end this . . . whatever this was. I'd never had sex like it. Never felt so connected to the other person. But if Chris was feeling anything similar, I knew he'd be freaking the hell out, and he'd soon be shoving me aside to get free.

The thought had me tightening my hold in an attempt to delay the inevitable. I couldn't stop him and I wouldn't try. He'd laid the rules out right from the start and I wasn't about to break them. This was a one-time thing. I was going to respect that. Respect him.

But it was gonna hurt.

He began to wriggle and I took that as my cue to move. I rolled onto my back and disposed of the condom, fully expecting Chris to head to the bathroom. So, colour me shocked when he turned and lay his head on my chest instead, tucking his chin so I couldn't see his face. He felt so fucking good, so right, so . . . impossible. I turned a little more onto my side, drew him close, and nuzzled his ear. His fingers threaded through the hair on my chest, and he hummed happily.

"How's the hangover?" I smiled against the top of his head, and he yanked a tuft of hair on my chest. "Ow!"

"Just fine, thank you very much." He burrowed into me again. "Did you hear me complaining?"

"No." I nibbled his ear and he grunted and went quiet again. Long enough to make me nervous. "Penny for your thoughts?"

He took a moment to answer, which told me I wasn't going to get an honest answer. Fine by me. I wasn't about to tell

Chris that I was a sparrow's fart away from falling for him, either.

"I was thinking about your tattoos." He tilted his head back so he could see my face. "And I have all the usual questions, I guess. Why you chose what you did? And why there's a glaring blank spot on your left shoulder?"

I almost laughed. Trust Chris to cut through all the bullshit. I tugged the pillow under his head so he'd be more comfortable and kissed his forehead simply because I still fucking could.

"I guess I like themes," I answered simply. "I'm not one for lots of disconnected designs. No shade on those who do, it's just not me. I like the imagery to be cohesive, and I love nature. A forest theme was a no brainer. The wildlife doesn't necessarily belong together, but each one has meaning for me. They represent people or events in my life."

"Let me see." Chris pushed me over onto my other side, facing away, and ran his fingers over my art.

My cock stirred, a surprise, considering I didn't think it had an ounce of fight left in it.

Meanwhile, Chris listed off what he saw on my back. "A kiwi, black robin, eagle, weta, cheetah, kingfisher. There's so many. It's like one of those puzzles where you have to find all the hidden creatures." His fingers slowed over the feathers. "But this one is different, right?" He tapped the tui feathers on my shoulder, like a fucking homing pigeon. "And then there's the big elephant in the room." He tapped the other shoulder, devoid of any art at all, because of course he did.

I hesitated before answering, debating how much I could let him in and still safeguard my heart. But when I didn't answer straight away, his arm circled my waist and he kissed the bare shoulder. The unguarded sweetness of the gesture almost stole my breath.

"I'm sorry." His lips moved gently against my skin. "You're entitled to your secrets."

The perfect fucking answer.

I sighed and relaxed back against him, letting myself be held. “It’s not a secret. I just don’t talk about it much.” Chris tightened his hold, his cheek still resting on my shoulder, and the extraordinary tenderness of the moment smashed through any remaining walls I was trying desperately to shore up.

This was a Chris I didn’t know. A Chris I’d never expected. A Chris I wanted a lot more of. And it was proving an even worse idea than I’d expected. It might even break me. But for the moment, Chris was still there, and I wasn’t going to waste time worrying about what was coming.

I placed my hand over his and threaded our fingers together. “The feathers are for my twin sister, Caitlyn. She died in a car accident seven years ago.”

Chris drew a sharp breath. “I’m so sorry. Were you close?” He huffed. “Scratch that. You were twins. Close whether you wanted to be or not, I’m guessing.”

I chuckled. “Pretty much, although we *were* best friends. Birds of a feather, everyone called us.”

He stilled. “Hence the feathers?”

I nodded. “And she loved tuis. I’d inked one on her back for her twenty-first birthday. They’re supposed to be messengers of the gods and goddesses, according to some, so it seemed a fitting choice when she was gone. Inking the whole bird didn’t feel right, but the tumbling feathers . . .” I trailed off and Chris pressed another hot kiss to my skin, this one right over a feather.

“And the blank space?” He ran his smooth cheek across my back to press his lips to the uninked skin.

“It’s blank, mostly because of where it sits, opposite Caitlyn’s tattoo. For some stupid reason I feel like whatever goes there has to balance her imagery in some way. When she was killed, it felt like someone chopped off half my body. I’d had no idea just how linked we’d really been until she wasn’t there anymore. This huge gaping hole ripped open in my life. In *all* our lives.”

“I haven’t heard you talk about your other siblings much,” he pointed out.

“Rhys has met them, but you and I?” I elbowed him lightly. “Well, we’ve hardly been chatting over coffee the last couple of years, right? Shot barbs over our ramparts at each other, but talked? Not so much.”

He snorted. “You make an excellent point. We should remedy that.”

And so much more. But I kept the thought to myself. “You’ve met Kevin and Jenn and Susie, but I have another younger brother, Geoff, who lives on the North Shore, and Evie who lives in Brisbane. The anniversary of Caitlyn’s death is in a few weeks, and Evie always tries to come home for that. Maybe I’ll introduce you. It’s hard to believe it’s been seven years.”

Chris rested his chin over my shoulder, the warmth of his body pressed hard against mine, sending my heart tumbling. I was in so much trouble. He took a breath and asked, “Will you tell me what happened?”

I briefly considered saying no, then thought, fuck it. Maybe talking to someone not involved in any of it would help. Not talking about it sure as shit wasn’t.

I turned my face just enough to kiss him lightly on the lips and took a deep breath. “I was supposed to take Caitlyn to a party that night, a mutual friend, but I pulled out at the last minute when a mate invited me to go clubbing with him and a few others, instead. Caitlyn had moved back home while she was saving for a house deposit. Anyway, instead of taking an Uber, Caitlyn decided to catch a ride with her friend, Gina. It was a bad move. Gina was a good friend, but she wasn’t the world’s most focused driver. I’d have never gotten in a car with her driving if I had a choice. But I let my sister. What does that say about me?”

“That you’re human,” Chris quickly answered.

“That I was too fucking selfish,” I shot back. “Anyway, according to witnesses, Gina sailed through an intersection

without looking, and a delivery van ploughed into the passenger side. Caitlyn died at the scene, while Gina walked away with a few broken bones.”

“Fucking hell.” Chris pressed a run of kisses to my shoulder.

“My whole family was shattered.”

“You must miss her so much.” The hot breath of his words washed over my neck.

“We all do.” I focused on the wall in front of me, and another of those devastating sweet kisses landed on my shoulder, melting right through to my heart.

“She was your twin. I can’t even imagine what that must’ve been like, losing her.”

I swallowed around the lump of concrete in my throat.

“Sorry,” Chris whispered. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

I reached a hand over my shoulder and stroked his cheek. “It’s okay. At the time it felt like I’d died as well. And for a long time after, I lived like I was gonna make damn sure that happened. I blamed myself. Drank too much. Fucked even more. Almost lost my business.” The words were out before I could stop them, the honesty of the admission on my lips shocking the hell out of me.

Chris stilled for just a couple of seconds, then he gathered me even closer in his arms. “You don’t have to explain that to me. Been there. Enough said. But Caitlyn also chose to get into that car, right? She must’ve known what her friend was like as a driver.”

“My head knows that,” I admitted with a heavy sigh. “But my heart keeps reminding me it wouldn’t have happened if I’d just taken her that night.”

Chris tucked his knees in behind mine and started to rock us together, slowly back and forth, the beat of his heart like soft thunder on my back, undoing me a stitch at a time until I was frayed in his arms. Until the tears started to fall. Until the fight to hold my whole fucking world together in front of him

fell away. And then it was just me. Not the sensible older brother. Not the worrying son. Not the half a twin left, trying to keep going. Not the man trying desperately to plug a gaping hole in his life.

Just me.

And somehow, with Chris's limbs entwined around mine like a damn octopus, that was okay. I might not get to keep him, but I trusted him—a realisation which pretty much blew my mind. And after months of refusing to talk to anyone in my family about how I was feeling about the anniversary, when it came to Chris, I couldn't seem to stop.

“We've done this remembrance thing as a family every year on the day Caitlyn died. Evie flies in from Brisbane and we all go to the site of the accident and then on to Caitlyn's grave. Afterward, we head back to Mum and Dad's, have a meal of her favourite foods, look at some photos, and relive the whole awful ordeal all over again like it was yesterday.”

“Tell me more,” he whispered.

And so I did, part of me wondering how it would sound to someone who didn't know Caitlyn or my family, and especially seven years down the track. Did Chris think I was crazy too? I waited for him to comment, but he said nothing, and the relief and gratitude I felt at that gave me the courage to keep going.

“Mum and Dad somehow stopped us from falling apart, and for a while the anniversary thing gave us all an opportunity to blow off steam about it every year. But now it seems the others are finding it too . . . intense. They want to move on and focus on more positive things about Caitlyn. Not just for them, but for Susie as well.”

Chris stroked my cheek. “But not you.”

I turned my lips into his palm and dropped a kiss there. “No, not me. I get what they're saying, but I'm not ready. Or I'm stuck. Or something. I want them to do what they need to for themselves, but at the same time, I'm furious with them for

having the audacity to move on with their lives.” I winced. “Sounds ridiculous when I say it like that.”

“Is that what you think they’re doing?” he asked gently.

And I knew what he was trying to do. “No, it’s not. I know they’re trying to deal with it in the best way for them, just like I am, but I’ve said some shitty stuff lately. They’re actually having a family meeting about it tonight, and they want me to be there.”

Chris went still at my back.

“I know. But I’m scared I’ll screw up and say something I can’t take back, because no matter what I understand in my head, I can’t shake the feeling that she’s being forgotten, and yet at the same time, I know that’s nuts. Why is that?”

Chris huffed. “Don’t ask me. I’m no therapist. Lord knows, my own issues have issues and then some. But here’s a random thought for you. Maybe it’s not them you’re worried about forgetting her. Maybe it’s you.”

I jerked my head around to see his face. “Me?”

He shrugged. “Ignore me. As I said, I’m no therapist. I can’t imagine how tough it is to lose family like that.”

I rested my face back on my pillow and sighed. “Kevin thinks I should be talking to a therapist.”

Chris hesitated before carefully asking, “And what do you think?”

Excellent question. “That was very diplomatic of you,” I pointed out. “Which is somewhat surprising.”

He chuckled.

“But I *think* that maybe he’s right. If nothing else, it might help me navigate this gulf between me and my family. I don’t want to hurt anyone or create something I can’t undo.”

Chris dropped his hand to rest over my heart. “Those sound like very good reasons.”

I rolled over in his arms to face him and pressed a kiss to those plush lips. “And you don’t sound like a stranger to the

idea, either.” I left it at that, and those green eyes narrowed on me.

But then his expression softened. “Everyone suffers at some stage, right?” He cradled my face and stroked my cheek with his thumb. “Guilt is a bitch of a mistress and pain of any kind is a great distraction, right? Sometimes it’s hard to give it up. We’re all in this strange life, together, trying to make sense of it all. You said the family meeting is tonight?”

My turn to narrow my eyes. “I see what you did there, but it’ll keep.”

Chris batted his lashes. “I’ve no idea what you mean. Back to the question.”

“I’m not going,” I huffed. “I feel like one spark and I’ll detonate. None of them deserve that. I’ll talk eventually, but I’m not ready. Part of me is still stunned that we’re in this stalemate at all. I thought we were on the same page. Then I find they’ve been doing it just for me the past couple of years, and I have no idea what to do with that. Nobody blames me, they never did, but I spent a long time blaming myself. And yes, I realise that maybe I still am. I’m not ignorant of how the psychology works, you know. I just don’t know how to change it.”

Chris poked his finger into my chest. “And does any of that have anything to do with your urge to settle down? Provide grandchildren for your parents? Mend your wicked whoring ways?”

I laughed, which was a miracle in itself, but I couldn’t deny he’d struck a chord. “Arschhole. But maybe, yes, I can see that, although everything I told you before still stands. I *do* want something different for me as well. It’s time.”

Chris was quiet for a long moment before he spoke. “Well, if your family is anything like you, I’m sure you’ll find a way to make it work. It sounds like there’s enough love between you all to handle any hurt that might eventuate, and that’s pretty damn special. Don’t take it for granted.” His wistful tone gave me pause, but his glistening eyes tore at my heart.

“Hey, there.” I cupped his face and kissed each eyelid in turn, before cradling his head against my chest. “I’m sorry,” I whispered into his hair. “You just looked . . .” I didn’t finish.

Chris remained quiet, all except for the in-and-out wash of his hot breath across my nipple. Then he slid an arm around my waist, burrowed against me and murmured, “Thank you.”

It was the only encouragement I needed to envelop him slowly, gently, like you would a nervous animal, one hand finding the small of his back, the other, his head. The distant hum of Sunday traffic floated through the room and over our still bodies, a splash of late morning sunlight spilling across Chris’s lean leg to dust his red-blond hairs with gold.

“Is the angel on your chest for Caitlyn?” His finger drew small circles down my spine, letting me know he was still awake, still present to whatever we were doing.

“No, that one’s not hers.” I didn’t offer more, and Chris didn’t ask, and my hand found its home, caressing his back with soft sweeps up and down, shoulder to hip to thigh, and back up again, every small hum of his pleasure elicited, a treasure to store away.

Whatever the fuck we were doing, this wasn’t casual sex, or a hook-up, or whatever else Chris wanted to call it. In all my experience of those, which was legion, this level of intimacy didn’t happen.

I knew exactly why *I* was there, because I wanted more with this complicated man, and I’d take whatever scraps of affection he was willing to throw my way. But none of that explained why *Chris* was still there in my arms, letting me hold him, letting me see his tears, more open than I’d ever seen him. None of that gelled with all his rules and warnings.

Chris was everything I’d vowed to stay away from, and yet somehow, he fit. *We* fit. I just needed to convince him of that. Convince him to at least try. And that troublesome spark of hope rallied again, making me brave.

“So, are your family local?” I ventured, keen to move the focus off me and learn a little more about Chris and maybe

why he'd gone so quiet. But as soon as I asked, he tensed, and his ensuing silence spoke volumes.

“Sorry. Forget it.” I kissed his head. “This doesn't have to be show and tell on both sides.”

His hands stilled and he said nothing for a long time, long enough for me to wonder if he'd actually fallen asleep. But when I angled my head to check, he immediately tugged me back into place, hiding his face. Message received, and I wrapped him up tight. If that's what Chris needed from me, then that's exactly what he'd get.

He lay quiet in my arms for another few minutes, although I could almost hear the cogs spinning in his brain. Whatever it was about, whatever had him on edge, I was pretty sure he wasn't going to tell me.

But then he turned his head to the side and sucked in a broken breath, and it was my turn to tense.

“My family isn't like yours,” he began, so quietly I had to strain to catch the words. “But yes, they're local. Unfortunately,” he added with such profound disgust that I pulled back to check on him. “Don't.” He pulled me close again. “It's . . . easier like this.”

I did as he asked, not liking where this was going.

He hesitated, taking another stuttering breath that told me he didn't often talk about whatever this was. I stilled the million questions on my tongue and waited him out.

He snuggled down, his grip tightening around my waist. “We lived in Tauranga until I was about fourteen. Then we moved up here with my dad's job. But my mother was actually born in Auckland, and she still had family here—two married sisters and a brother. It was kind of nice having my cousins close by for the first time. We got on pretty well, which was a bonus since I didn't really fit in at school. Too mouthy, too fabulous, too . . . questionable in my sexuality for most of my peers.” He rolled his eyes. “I did have one friend, another gay kid, Jared. But I would never have introduced him to my

parents. It would've invited way too many questions about me." He gave a hollow chuckle.

"Anyway, Mum had a brother, James, who managed a poultry farm just west of Auckland, and we saw a lot of him after we moved. I really liked him. He was single and always coming around for dinner or to watch the rugby with Dad and my older brother, George, and I would often spend a Saturday with him on the farm. There was a river with a deep swimming hole on the property and we had some of the best times just chilling out and mucking around. James had this cool collection of video games that George loved, but I enjoyed trailing around after James and helping out. I got to do all kinds of neat stuff that Mum and Dad would've flipped their lids about. And it's where George and I both learned to ride a motorbike." His mouth quirked up.

"You can ride?" I asked, not hiding my shock.

His smirk grew. "Mm-hmm. James had an old farm bike that he taught us on, but he also had a Harley Fatboy in the shed that he took out on weekends. So, yes, I like bikes and yes, I know you have a Harley and not a Honda. Sorry, not sorry."

"Cheeky shit." I nipped his nose and he snuggled back against me. "Did James know you were gay?"

Chris hesitated. "Looking back, I think he must've guessed. Not that I'd have ever contemplated coming out. As I said, being gay wasn't exactly acceptable in our house. Or church. I'd overheard my parents and others at church whispering about another boy in our congregation, and it wasn't pleasant. I'd known this boy wasn't straight the first time I'd checked him out and been caught and had the look returned. There was no way I was going to risk those kinds of conversations about me, especially since my parents were already starting to look sideways at me. I decided early on to bide my time until I left home."

"I think I'd have done the same," I agreed.

"Yeah, well, my plan didn't exactly work out." He shuffled back so I could finally see his face, his expression set, like he

was determined to get the whole story out.

“You don’t have to—”

“I know,” he said quickly. “And believe me, I’m fucking shocked that I’m telling you any of this. But now I’ve started, I want to finish.”

“All right, but if it gets too much . . .”

“I know.” He took a deep breath and continued. “Time at the farm was like this bubble where I got to feel okay about me. Like maybe I wasn’t this weird kid after all. Like he got me. Don’t get me wrong, I hated the whole chicken-in-a-cage thing, but I liked being treated like an equal for once, like I mattered, I guess. I felt . . . special.” He shot me a look.

I was liking less and less where the conversation was going, and Chris was starting to fidget. I pressed a kiss to his head and steeled myself.

“But just after I turned fifteen and was helping James in the machinery plant that controlled the industrial automatic feeding system, he . . . kissed me.”

And even though I knew something was coming, my hand froze mid-stroke on his back and anger erupted in my brain. I clutched him to me and growled, “Fucking hell.”

Chris’s voice grew small and his gaze skittered on and off my face. “I didn’t see it coming. I had no fucking idea. I was handing him tools, and he’d been joking about getting his head stuck in the small hole he was working in, and then the next thing I knew he had me backed against the wall and was kissing me.”

I blinked hard, trying not to completely lose my shit.

“But that’s all that happened. Just the kiss,” he rushed to reassure me. “But I was so stunned, it took me a while to get my head around what he was doing.” Chris played with the hair on my chest and avoided my eyes. “I remember him telling me how beautiful I was. How he knew I wasn’t straight and how hard it must be for me with my family. That no one had to know. That he could help—” He rolled his eyes. “—for fuck’s sake.”

“I can’t fucking believe this,” I ground out. “What an asshole.”

“I know, right? And I was terrified. I was just a skinny little kid. And I trusted him. All that crap you believe at that age because you don’t really know how the world works and you trust the people who are supposed to be your family.”

His voice faltered and I wanted to hurt something, badly. I settled for taking his hands in mine, gently squeezing until he finally looked up.

“When I finally got my head in the game, I told him to fuck off and kneed him in the balls. I still don’t know where I found the courage, but I remember the shock on his face as clear as day. Then I shoved him out of the way and took off back to the house with him shouting at me that I better not say anything.”

“Fucker.” I tipped his chin up. “What happened?”

“I got to the house and planted myself next to George and pretended to watch him while he played his video game, hoping James would leave me the fuck alone. I didn’t know what the hell else to do. James came inside not long after, but he ignored me and disappeared into his office, and all I could think was *thank God*. If he was going to pretend like nothing had happened, that suited me just fine. I was already hiding the fact I was gay from my parents. How the hell could I tell them something like that?

“I’m so fucking sorry.” I brushed a lock of hair from his eyes and tugged the covers over his shoulders.

His eyes clouded. “It was just a kiss.”

I ground my teeth and growled. “That makes zero fucking difference and I’m pretty sure you know that. You were fifteen, underage. He was an adult, and your uncle, and you didn’t consent in any way.” I mustered all the outrage I felt. “That asshole took advantage of the fact you were a little lost. He practically fucking groomed you.”

“Yeah, he did.” Chris gave a sharp nod, and I was relieved he understood. “When I talked to a counsellor a couple of

years later, that came out pretty quickly, and looking back I can see it.” He blinked back angry tears.

“Did you tell anyone?”

“I hadn’t intended to, but . . .” He rolled his eyes. “Okay, so this is the bit where my family isn’t like yours. My parents were supposed to pick us up later that afternoon, so when I heard their car pull in next to the house about forty minutes later, I knew that couldn’t be good. Sure enough, I quickly found out that James had called them.”

I frowned and shook my head. “But why would he do that?” Then it clicked. “Oh, shit. I’m not going to like this, am I?”

Chris glanced away and was quiet for a moment before finally looking back, eyes glassy. “He must’ve been worried I was going to say something after what I did. He clearly hadn’t expected me to fight back. And so he told them first. *His* version. He outed me as gay and said that I’d come on to him and tried to kiss him, and that he’d had to politely but firmly tell me no.”

“What the fuck?” Oh, I hated this guy. Five minutes alone with the asshole would be all I’d need.

“Yeah, colour me shocked.” Chris blew the biggest sigh. “I was still in a hell of a state, and then to hear him lie like that and drop me right in it, well . . . my brain kind of shut down. I tried to tell them it was James and not me who’d initiated the kiss, but they weren’t listening. They already had their suspicions about my sexuality, and of course all gays are confused and deviants—” His eye-roll couldn’t have been bigger. “—and so what James said made some twisted sense to them.” Chris looked to the ceiling and went way too quiet.

“Fucking hell.” My hand clenched around his. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“My mother point-blank refused to believe her brother would do something like that. Then they asked George if James had ever been inappropriate with him, and of course,

George said no, adding that James was the best, and so my parents chose to believe James' version."

My blood boiled. "I have no fucking words."

Chris nodded. "Yep. Pretty much. And with James sitting on his couch listening to the entire conversation. And then, of course, there was the whole gay thing to confront. Mum clutched her pearls and Dad fanned his face with his bible. But the fact I wouldn't cave and admit to anything other than the fact that, yes, I was indeed gay—a disaster all on its own—pretty much made me the family pariah."

"Oh, Chris." I brought his knuckles to my lips.

"To be fair, they didn't just kick me out or even yell and scream too much, probably because they thought I was simply confused and misguided and that I could be *saved*. But I was watched like a hawk from that point on and found myself in the *special group* in church, meaning I needed straightening out. I lasted a year until I was sixteen and legally able to get the hell out of there."

"Arseholes," I said bluntly. "What the fuck is wrong with your parents?"

Chris sent me a shining look. "It's nice to know it's kind of fucking obvious to most other people." He rolled out of my arms and onto his back.

"I'd bet they still pray for my wayward soul, and when I look back, I think they probably loved me in their own way. They just didn't know how to reconcile that with who I was and what they believed." Chris blinked several times, his eyes glassy with unshed tears.

I cupped his jaw and turned him to face me. "Well, *I* believe *you*. You're nothing if not brutally honest, and for that I am eternally grateful. What your parents did, on the other hand, was criminally neglectful."

His gaze never shifted from mine, a flash of something impossibly young and fragile in those green depths. One glimpse of that and I knew I'd go to battle for this man,

whatever it took. The realisation stunned me, and I blinked to clear my thoughts. “Did you ever tell anyone else?”

He gave a quick shake of his head. “Most of the adults I knew were all in the same church. They’d have gone straight to Mum and Dad. And I wasn’t exactly a prize pupil at school. Most of my teachers didn’t know what to do with me as it was.”

I frowned. “So, what happened with James?”

Chris kicked the covers off and studied the ceiling. “All that year, he visited our house, ate Christmas dinner at our table, sat with us in church, and was part of family celebrations just like nothing had happened.”

“What the fuck?” This fiasco got worse and worse.

“On the plus side, I never went to the farm again, so that was something, I guess. But there were a lot of creepy looks sent my way, and inappropriate closeness when he thought he could get away with it. At least until the day I turned around and socked him in the balls for the second time.”

I snorted. “Good for you.”

Chris shrugged. “Yeah. But it was still hard.” He took my hand and placed it over his scars, his green eyes steady on mine. “It was a way to cope . . . during that year. But when I finally left and got some free counselling through an LGBTQ outreach program, I was able to stop. I landed a retail job at a local department store, couch surfed until I could afford to share a flat, and started building a life, a pretty good one, as it turned out. And eventually, I found my way here.”

I stroked my hand over the scars on his thigh. “Have you seen your family since?”

He huffed. “Not if I can avoid it. They have my phone number, and Mum sends a text at Christmas and my birthday. I don’t reply because I know she hasn’t changed how she feels. But things have taken a recent turn. James has pancreatic cancer, or so I’ve been told. He’s on the way out. Good riddance, if you ask me, but he told my family he wants to talk with me.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” I pulled him closer.

He snorted. “Right? My mom swears she only wants what’s best for the family. Bury the hatchet and move on. Forgive and forget. And maybe give her a chance at saving my wicked gay soul in the process.” He paused. “She called me last night to press the point.”

“Aaaah.” I nodded as everything suddenly became clear. “Hence the phone-into-the-wall affair?”

He grinned. “Seemed fitting at the time.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I’m . . . thinking about it, not that I’ve said that to any of them. As far as they know, I’m not interested.” His tone didn’t invite any further discussion and he drew the covers up his body and rolled to face me. “So, how *did* you know about the scars?”

I kissed the end of his nose and breathed him in. “I’ve worked on a few clients who wanted similar ones inked over.”

His brows bunched but he said nothing.

“So, if you ever decide you might like something similar . . . you know where to find me.” I moved my hand back to the warm skin of his inner thigh and over the pain of a young boy trying to find his way back. “We could work on the design together.”

He tensed and I sensed a cool curtain drift between us. “Thanks for the offer. But I’m okay. Anyway, there you have it. My sad little story.” He rolled away, sliding his thigh free of my hand. “The answer to why I’m so fucked up.”

I sighed. “Don’t do that. Don’t push me away because you don’t like the fact I know a little something important about you.”

He gave a disdainful snort. “Knowing *stuff* about me doesn’t change what we are. It doesn’t make what we did more than sex. It doesn’t make us . . . close.”

I ignored the sting of his words and the obvious lie. *This* Chris had armoured up and pushing him wasn’t going to get

me what I wanted. I took a calming breath. “Funny, I don’t recall asking you for anything more than sex.”

He squinted, like he hadn’t expected that answer. “Just so we’re clear.”

“Crystal. But I have got one more question for you.”

He eyed me suspiciously. “What?”

“How many others know this story, other than the counsellor?”

He stared at me, the tick in his jaw working hard, but he said nothing.

“Rhys?”

Chris grimaced and shook his head. “No one else knows.” His gaze narrowed. “But don’t think that makes us close or makes you special. I’m already regretting it.”

I shrugged. “I’m hardly special. But just so you know, no one else knows about what’s going on with me either, other than you.”

His eyes widened just a little.

“So maybe that makes us just a teensy bit close?” I held my thumb and forefinger close. “Like friends, maybe?”

He stared, reading whatever the hell he saw in my face until he finally sighed and offered a reluctant smile. “You’re a pushy bastard, aren’t you? But okay, yeah, I guess I can do friends. I get on well with all my hook-ups, remember?”

I schooled my expression at the pointed reminder.

“But no benefits.” He shot me a look. “You like looking after people, Leon, and you’re good at it. You’re one of life’s caretakers and I know my story has you all jiggling to help. You’ll be a great boyfriend or husband or whatever, and whoever you find to do it with will be a lucky man or woman. But it won’t be me.”

I wasn’t letting him off the hook that easily. “And you’re better at the whole caring thing than you give yourself credit

for. You'd make a pretty awesome partner for the right guy as well."

He eyed me like I'd lost my mind. "Oh, I care about people, all right. Not saying I don't. I just don't want the twenty-four-hour handcuff version. I like it in nice bite-sized chunks that don't come home with me."

"Fair enough," I agreed. "But when it works, the payoff seems to be worth it. At least it does when I look at Rhys and Beck, or Hunter and Alec."

He shook his head. "Yeah, well, I'm not trusting the testimony of a bunch of coupled-up people who have a vested interest in me drinking the Kool-Aid just so they're not alone in their misery."

I threw back my head and laughed. "For twenty-six, you're jaded as fuck."

He didn't smile. "Do you blame me?"

I sobered. "I guess not. So, friends, with absolutely zero hanky-panky involved. Got it." I grinned. "Although, considering the crazy chemistry we have, it seems a damn shame." I brushed a stray lock of hair from his eyes. "Just saying."

"And you can keep saying it." Chris rolled to face me again, his sultry eyes locked on mine as he ran a finger down my chest. "You might be the biggest temptation since Sebastian Stan donned his leathers in *Winter Soldier*, but I'm made of sterner stuff."

I grabbed his hand before it latched around my cock. "And I thought we agreed to no benefits? Have a thing for superheroes, do you?"

Chris freed his hand from mine and yanked the covers down off my hips. Then he eyed my dick with a lick of his lips. "Define superhero."

I barked out a laugh. "Just so you know, this thing will never wear a cape. Still, it's nice to know you're tempted even if the buffet is apparently closed."

He pouted.

“Why, Mister Grantham, I do believe the tables have been turned. I lasted a week. I wonder how you’ll do?”

His mouth curved up in a sly grin. “Long enough for you to have to chase me with your walker.”

I stretched catlike, aware of his gaze travelling my body. “I believe I’m up for the challenge. But in the meantime—” I shuffled closer and kissed his shoulder. “—I have a proposition.” I pressed my lips to his neck.

He hummed and ran his nose up the side of my face. “I’m listening.”

“Well, since we haven’t actually gotten dressed and said goodbye, I propose that this *one-time* hook-up is *technically* still in process.”

He chuckled and kissed me on the lips. “Well, *technically*, I suppose you’re right.” He took hold of my cock and it jumped in his hand. “It appears someone else is on board with that idea.” He kissed me firmly, his tongue sliding through my mouth, sparking licks of fire in my balls. “Maybe I can take your mind off that family meeting you’re so determined not to attend, and we can explore the fascinating matter of me owning *your* arse this time.”

The thought burned my brain. I wasn’t entirely sure my heart would survive being fucked by Chris, but my body was definitely up for the challenge. I nuzzled up his neck and along his jaw to suck on the sensitive lobe of his ear, and his head fell back with a happy sigh. “You can have me anytime and anyway you want,” I told him. “I can’t wait.”

A growl rolled up his throat and he cupped my face and kissed me. “How do you feel about shower sex?”

I blinked because . . . shower sex? Nothing against it, but we were in a perfectly comfortable bed.

He grinned at my surprise and kissed down my neck to suck each nipple into his mouth, before tonguing the rings and sending jolts of electricity to my cock. “You see, the word is —” He kept kissing. “—Alec and Hunter ditched the old bath

and upgraded to a double shower with a convenient . . . bench.” He ran his hands over my chest. “Imagine all this inked skin, slippery wet and sudsy, and then me taking your monster down my throat before you ride me on a towel on the floor, or I fuck you over that bench until you can barely walk.”

“Jesus, Chris.” The imagery barrelled through me, my cock hard and aching like a bitch.

Chris slung a knee over my thighs and straddled my hips, putting his hands either side of my head. He dragged his lower lip between his teeth and studied me with enough heat to fry the skin off my bones. I’d never seen anything so damn sexy.

“So, what do you say? Shall we close this show with a standing ovation?”

What did I say? Was he fucking kidding me? “What I say —” I stopped to clear my throat because . . . damn. “What I say is that we’re wasting too much time talking.” I bucked him off me, grabbed his hand along with lube and condoms in the other, and pulled him laughing from the bed and across into the bathroom, where, true to his promise, he sucked my brains out of my cock and then fucked me until I could barely stand, let alone walk.

And when we were sated and boneless and crashed out on the floor of the shower, we washed each other clean in a weighted silence that neither one of us were brave enough to break.

Hook-up, my arse.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Kip

“SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK?” I HELD THE SAMPLE SHIRT UP TO the computer screen and turned it slowly so Rhys could take a good look.

After talking with Leon, I’d called Rhys Sunday night to tell him about our problem and my possible solution. He hadn’t panicked nearly as much as I’d expected. Rhys in love was a much chiller version of my friend, and one I was still getting used to. He’d given me the go-ahead and I’d emailed him a list of fabric alternatives that we could source quickly.

On Monday morning, the owner of the new manufacturing business was in my office, and twenty-four hours later, I was sitting with the sample in my hand, and pleasantly surprised by her work. There was still the embroidery detail to add, since that would’ve slowed the sample process, but overall, it was a good pass, and it looked like we had a fighting chance to save the pre-Christmas orders, after all. I’d Skyped Rhys immediately.

“Not bad at all.” He smiled. “Show me the back again.”

I did and he nodded. “How about the seam work?”

“Strong and tidy,” I assured him.

He sat back in his chair and nodded. “Then if you think it passes, I say we go for it.”

I blinked. “Me?”

He grinned. “Yes, you. I’m not there and you’re Johnny-on-the-spot. Without actually holding the shirt in my hands, I’m going to rely on your judgement.”

What? “But—”

“I trust you, Kip.” Rhys held my gaze. “If you say it’s good, then I say we do it. And I also agree with your personal top fabric choice, out of the ones you sent. The others are either off in colour or the fabric is not good enough. It won’t

be as crisp as the original, but it will work. So—” He eyeballed me. “Are we good to go?”

All I could do was stare, my thoughts warring between the horror of the responsibility he was putting on me and the warm swell of satisfaction and pride his words engendered. Then Leon’s words came to mind.

It’s the fact you don’t think you have what it takes is what’s screwing with your ability to think . . . you’re already doing the job . . . You’re a fixer . . .

Rhys waited, a smug quirk tugging at his half-smile.

I took a deep breath and nodded. “I’ll get on it right away.”

“Excellent.” He shot me a pleased smile. “You’ve got this.”

“Pfft. Well, of course I do.” I traded glances with Drew who’d stuck his head into the office to see how the call was going. “What’s a pressure cooker deadline and contracts worth tens of thousands of dollars? It’s what you pay me for, right? Whereas you’ve only recently cracked our point-of-sale machine after almost three years.”

Drew grinned and Rhys barked out a laugh. “And he’s back.” Rhys looked over my shoulder to the new colour on my walls. “I see you painted the office.”

“I, um, yeah.” My cheeks flamed without permission. After our little *excursion* Sunday morning, I’d accepted Leon’s offer and we’d spent the afternoon doing just that.

“He and Leon did it *together*,” Drew added unhelpfully, and I shot him a warning glare. “Well, he did,” he insisted with a grin. “He even left his shoes and socks here, remember?”

“Shut up.” I threw the sample at him, but all he did was duck and wander back into the store completely unfazed.

“Leon, you say?” If Rhys had rubbed his hands together, he couldn’t have looked any more gleeful.

“He had nothing to do, and I’d have been stupid not to accept his help. It took half the time.” My gaze slid from Rhys to the walls. “What do you think? Too much?”

“No. It’s perfect for you. Good choice. So, I take it our new tenant is growing on you?” Rhys circled back. “Or at least, you haven’t killed him yet? I mean, socks and shoes?” He arched a brow.

“He didn’t want paint on them,” I hastily explained. “And no, he’s . . . fine.” I caught the horrifying edge of fondness in my tone as images peppered my brain of just how very fine Leon had been while bent over that bench in the shower for me. *Had that really only been two days ago?*

Rhys leaned forward, studying me intently. “Fine, huh? Don’t tell me you two have actually . . . talked?”

I tried and failed to hold his gaze. Rhys knew me too well. He’d sniff the truth out, regardless. “Define . . . talk. Do you mean actual words and shit?”

Rhys stared at me for a second, then gasped and fell back in his chair, his eyes bugging out of his skull. “Oh. My. Fucking. God. Jesus, Kip. Don’t tell me you two—”

“Then I won’t.” I drilled him with a glare. “And it’s none of your damn business, anyway.”

He started to laugh. “You fucked him? Holy shit. Wait until I tell Beck—”

“Nothing. You will tell Beck nothing.” I fired him a killer look. “It was a one-time thing, understand? Once, just to clear the air between us. Nothing more. So stop with the whole matchmaking-eyes bullshit.”

He blinked innocently. “I don’t have match—”

“Yes, you do,” I growled. “And you’re going to stay out of it. I’m not looking for a relationship with Leon. Or anyone else, you know that. We’re just friends, that’s all.”

Rhys held up his hands. “Okay, okay. I get it. Cross my heart. No interference.” But he couldn’t hide a smile that threatened otherwise.

“No interference in what?” Beck appeared over Rhys’s shoulder. “Are you causing trouble with our resident tattoo artist again?”

I put my hand over my chest. “Why is it always my fault?”

They simply stared at me.

I might’ve flushed. “Okay, so don’t answer that.”

Beck laughed. “So, what *have* you done?”

“Nothing!” I tried to sound appalled, then caved. “Much.”

“He fucked Leon,” Rhys offered bluntly, and I shot him a glare.

“So much for keeping your mouth shut.”

He shrugged. “We could always discuss all those times you took the piss when I was dating Beck—”

“No, let’s not do that,” I grumped. “Okay, okay. But the fucking was very definitely mutual. You make it sound like I deflowered the guy, for fuck’s sake. And I repeat, it was just fucking.” But the heat in my cheeks wasn’t exactly helping my case.

“Bullshit.” Beck grinned like a cat who’d got the cream, and I wanted to slap him. Then his eyes blew wide. “Whoa. You actually like him.” For an ivory tower poetry professor, he was too damn intuitive, not to mention annoying.

“He likes him?” Rhys frowned and looked between us, then zeroed in on me, and try though I might, I couldn’t stop my gaze sliding away. “Oh my god.” Rhys fell back in his chair. “You’re right, babe.” He held up his fist and Beck met it with his own.

“As a *friend*. I like him as a *friend*.” I put every ounce of determination into my tone that I could muster. “We fucked. We talked. We moved on. That’s it. Now we’re friends, nothing more. That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it? For us to stop the feud and be friends?”

Rhys’s eyes danced with mirth. “Riiight. So, you were only taking one for the team.” He shot Beck a sunny look. “See, it was all for us, baby. Wasn’t that kind of Kip?”

Beck snorted. “Such a big-hearted guy.”

“Oh, shut up,” I growled. “I’m going now. *Someone* has to save your label from the ghost of Christmas financial ruin, after all.”

Rhys was still laughing. “Oh, don’t be like th—”

“Go . . . now . . . line . . . breaking up . . . can’t he . . . next time—” I ended the call to the sound of the two of them still laughing their heads off. Arseholes. Then I fell back in my office chair and chuckled because, arseholes or not, I loved them to bits.

None of which solved my problem about Leon.

I shoved it from my mind and set about ordering the substitute fabric and emailing our new manufacturer to give her the good news. I’d just finished when Drew once again poked his head into the office, looking sharp in red trousers and a killer black-and-red striped shirt.

“Hey, Boss. Store’s empty and I moved all the remaining sale items onto the two front racks like you asked. The new setup is working really well. Rhys is gonna love it.”

I hoped so. I’d decided to embrace Leon’s advice and just do the fucking job, like I already was. I’d already made some shelving and stock changes. Next had been a rejig of the whole store layout to create a better flow for customers and cleaner lines of sight from the service desk. It looked great, even if I said so myself.

“Can you keep an ear out for customers and I’ll make us a coffee?” Drew offered.

“Will do, but first . . .” I waved him to a seat and took a deep breath. “At the risk of getting my head bitten off . . . about the other day . . . with Gary?”

Drew stiffened. “Please, Kip, I’m not in the mood for—”

“He likes you,” I blurted with my usual tact. “It’s so fucking obvious, it’s painful. And if I were a betting man, I’d say he’s already asked you on a date.”

Drew’s eyes widened. “That’s beside the point. It’s not like he and I could ever be . . . *anything.*”

I frowned. “And why the hell not?”

“Because—” Drew hesitated, then shook his head and sighed. “I’m not sure if he knows . . . you know . . . and if he doesn’t and I tell him, then he probably wouldn’t . . .” He trailed off, his gaze sliding away. “Look, it doesn’t matter. I get it. I know I pass. But it’s different when—” He glanced back and the pain in his eyes cut straight to my heart. “It’s just easier not to—”

“Try? Hope? Take a chance?” I offered, and Drew’s expression turned to misery. I rounded my desk and crossed to where he sat chewing on his lip, taking the seat alongside. “Believe me, I know all about not taking chances. But I’m happy on my own, Drew. Whereas you were made to be loved, and you deserve to be.” *And what about me?* I quashed the thought. “You deserve to have someone at your back and a soft pair of arms to land in.”

He frowned, eyes brimming. “You sound like Beck. That’s very poetic and all, but I’m not sure I could take another . . .”

“Rejection?” I scowled, wanting the names of every man who’d hurt this sweet man.

Drew shrugged. “It’s hard. Knowing and believing in who I am is one thing. Putting myself out there for someone else? Shit, Kip. That’s a whole lot of terrifying.”

“There will always be arseholes, honey.” My heart broke for him. “God knows I’ve met more than my fair share. And maybe it’s not the right time or the right man, but Gary is good people. And if I’m not mistaken, he’s a smitten little bow-tie-wearing kitten over you. Just saying.”

Drew met my gaze and held it. “You really think that?”

I grinned. “Really. He asked you out, didn’t he? And he’s also well aware I’d crucify him slowly and painfully if he ever hurt you. Maybe you could give him a chance rather than decide for him.”

Hope played in Drew’s eyes for a bit before fear quickly replaced it again. “I dunno. What would he see in someone

like me? He's this up-and-coming fashion photographer, and I'm just—"

"An awesome, smart, hot guy, with a heart like a lion. Who's generous, kind, quick witted, funny, and honest." I threw up my hands. "Yeah, I can see how he'd hate that. Must be such a drag to date someone like that."

"Shut up." Drew flushed and dropped his eyes to the floor. "That's not me."

I tipped his chin up with my finger, forcing him to look at me. "Yes, it is." I dropped my hand and stepped back. "Do you like him?"

A smile tugged at his lips. "Of course. Who wouldn't? He's fucking hot."

I kept my mouth shut on that little gem because Lord knew Gary wasn't on *my* shortlist, but each to their own. "Well, it must be your lucky day, since he obviously likes you too."

Drew was back gnawing on his lip. "It's terrifying."

I blew out a sigh. "I know. All I'm saying is think about it. Gary is a great guy. I'd trust him to be kind, at the very least. It's a good start. A teething ring, maybe?" I grinned at Drew's snort of laughter.

"So, you think I should give him a chance, then?" The yearning in his eyes struck an unwanted chord in my own chest, one I'd been trying not to play.

"Kip?"

I blinked to find Drew frowning at me. "Sorry." I scrambled to remember what he'd asked, then it suddenly popped into my brain. "Yes, I definitely *do* think. But in the end, it's up to you."

"Okay." He nodded. "I'll think about it."

It was a start. "Good. And don't forget I want to see some underwear sketches before Rhys gets back."

"Yeah, yeah, they're coming. And now, I have a question for you."

I blinked. “Fire away.”

He narrowed his gaze on me. “When do *you* start taking the same chances you’re so blithely keen to encourage others with?”

My mouth dried. “What?”

“You know what I mean. You deserve to be loved too, Kip.”

“That’s . . . not for me,” I floundered, suddenly wishing I’d never started the whole damn conversation.

“Is that right?” He never flinched. “Well, maybe it should be. And maybe you should give yourself a chance too. If I deserve it, then so do you. Stop pretending you don’t care. Now, are we done? Can I go make that coffee?”

“What?” The shockwave of his words rattled through my brain, but I managed a weak nod. “Um, sure. Thanks.”

Drew left with a smug little smile in place while I cast my eyes over the office walls once again and groaned. Burnt sienna. I was never going to be able to look at these walls and not think of Leon. *Goddamn the man*. He’d infested my brain like a bad song.

Not to mention, I hadn’t laid eyes on him since we’d finished painting, and I . . . ugh . . . I missed him. I ran the horror of the words through my brain again. I *missed* him. And what the fuck was up with that? The guys I took to bed sometimes missed *me*. Called *me*. Texted *me*. Wanted to meet up again with *me*. I never missed *them*.

But on Monday I’d looked up every time the store bell chimed. Tracked his steps on the wooden floors above. Imagined his voice at least a couple of times an hour. Hid like an idiot in the kitchen when I heard his footfalls on the stairs. Waited an hour past my usual leaving time, hoping he might drop by my office, only to hear him climb the stairs and shut his door. Admittedly, I’d been hiding in the kitchen . . . again.

He hadn’t left a coffee, a pastry . . . nothing. And what was up with that? You didn’t spend a week flirting, chatting, and buying a guy coffees and shit and then make them go cold

turkey. No explanation. Nothing. We were supposed to be friends now, right? And you buy your friends coffee, dammit. You at least say hello.

And no, I wasn't listening to myself because that would've been far too mortifying. And the fact that I hadn't done any of those things myself was beside the point. Way, way beside the point. So much beside the point it may as well have been on a different continent.

Did I believe my own lies? Hell no, but I was trying.

The trouble was, I'd enjoyed Sunday afternoon far more than I should have. We'd painted alongside each other like we'd been doing stuff like that for years, and I'd ignored all the texts from my friends wondering if I was dead. And in-between coats, we drank coffee and snacked on pad Thai from the food truck two blocks away. We alternated playlists to check each other's music tastes and were shocked to find we had a surprising amount of common ground. I particularly loved some of his new-to-me singer-songwriters, and I admitted to eavesdropping on his singing earlier in the week. He'd been taken aback at first; then a blush crept up his throat and a tiny, pleased smile made its way to his lips.

Leon's playlists were, however, sorely lacking in gay anthems and held zero tracks by the goddess of song, Christina Aguilera—glaring omissions that I immediately rectified by downloading a playlist of my personal favourites onto his phone there and then. Leon promised to give them the rapt attention they deserved, and I'd painted a stripe of burnt sienna up the back of his old T-shirt for the outright lie.

But more surprising than the shared music appreciation was the easy conversation. Hours of it. He'd told me more about Caitlyn and what it was like growing up as a twin, and we chatted about his passion for ink and bikes. I talked about . . . well anything that wasn't about my uncle or my arsehole family, although I did tell him about my brother's visit and how I missed him in my life.

Leon had stopped painting at that point and pulled me into a hug that almost fucking undid me, a worrying state of affairs

that was becoming all too frequent. Leon was a good man, a great lover, and interesting as hell, and I was increasingly struggling to come up with a reason that I shouldn't ditch every rule in my damn book and just date the guy.

I barely recognised myself. Ridiculous, foolish, and very fucking confused. And Drew's push back on my advice wasn't helping.

For the first time in my life, I found myself wanting to really trust a man. To trust him and let him in. All that therapy and I was still as skittish as hell. I couldn't even remember what that sort of trust felt like, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

But I hadn't planned on Leon in my brain. And yet there he was. Front and centre. Like a mosquito at night, impossible to ignore and leaving me desperate to scratch the itch he left in his wake.

And the worst part was that it wasn't the sex . . . or not only the sex. Or Leon's glorious big body. Or the hair. Or the addictive gentle power of the man. It wasn't any of that. The worst part was how Leon made me feel simply lying in his arms, like I was precious. It was how he made me laugh. How he had me talking before I even knew it, stripping me bare so I couldn't even meet his eyes.

I'd told him about James, for fuck's sake. Not even Rhys knew about that. And I hadn't meant to. Leon was just there, all concerned and soft and aching over his sister, and it felt like maybe he could hold my words and they'd be safe with him. Whatever the reason, I was sure it would come back and bite me in the arse.

Because I could never be the man Leon was looking for. A husband, a father to his planned children, one half of a committed monogamous couple? Jesus Christ, I could barely think the *m* word without sprouting hives.

And above everything else, it felt vitally important that I didn't hurt him.

A weighty sigh broke my lips. Burnt fucking sienna. I should probably paint it white and be done with it. Erase the

memories of Leon's T-shirt riding up as he stretched to paint. The inviting peek of all that swirling colour. The hard muscle of his arse as he replenished his roller. The exhilarating rush of his clean scent. The soft scratch of his beard on my thighs. The feel of his arms—

And, oh my fucking god, I was getting hard.

I pressed my palm down on my rising dick and shook my head. This was getting ridiculous.

Drew rounded the corner into my office with a steaming coffee in each hand. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Since I didn't have my desk as cover, I discreetly crossed my legs, accepted my bright pink cup, and avoided his gaze. But before I got the cup to my mouth, I found myself on my feet. "On second thought . . ." I put the cup on my desk and grabbed my coat off the back of my chair. "I need to pop out for a minute."

"But—" Drew shadowed me to the service desk looking every bit as confused as I was. "What about your coffee?"

"I'll heat it up when I get back." I waved to him over my shoulder. "Won't be long." I hoofed it to the front door before I came to my senses and changed my stupid mind.

"But *where* are you going?" Drew's shouted question trailed me onto the sidewalk, but I ignored it, hoping with everything I had that he didn't actually follow to see me take ten steps past Flare and then hang a sharp left into The Tattoo House.

JJ glanced up from the reception desk, her eyes going wide the second she saw it was me. She shot a look to Tyson, who glanced over from where he was chatting with a client and instantly grinned. I ignored him.

"Kip." JJ's mouth curved up in a cute little smirk. "How delightful to see you again, and so soon."

Cheeky tart.

"Leon is stocking out back." Her gaze dropped to my hands. "What? No coffees this time?"

I wagged a finger at her. “Cute. But it’ll keep. Is the plumber here?”

She frowned. “No. He pushed the work back another ten days or so.”

“Excellent. Tell Leon I need to talk to him . . . upstairs.” I liked JJ and Tyson, although I doubted they had any idea, what with the whole Leon thing overshadowing bi-partisan relationships.

With that sobering thought in mind, I ran an eye over JJ’s bright orange dress and her swept-up fifties hairdo that popped her dark brown eyes. Curvy and with a ton of smarts, she was a genuine heartstopper. “That colour is hot on you, by the way. You should wear more of it.”

She blinked like a possum in the headlights. “Ah, thanks?” Her brows dipped. “Are you okay, Kip?”

“Couldn’t be better.” I brushed past and headed for the second floor. “Don’t forget to tell Leon.”

“Oh, right.” She made a beeline for the storeroom, while I took the stairs two at a time before turning left into the single large room just off the landing. I threw my coat on the only chair and walked to the window and briefly considered the dull sky, burdened with rain-heavy clouds. Then I began pacing.

What the hell was I doing here? Nothing sensible, that was for sure.

It wasn’t too late to change my mind.

Yes, that. Good idea.

I made for my coat.

“Chris?” Leon walked into the room, looking a million fucking dollars in soft caramel camo pants and a black T-shirt stretched tight across his broad chest. He looked like the absolute best khaki lollipop, and my dick was all about saluting that fucker in every possible rendition of the word.

“Stop right there.” I marched over and shoved him back against the wall, holding him in place. “You’ve been avoiding

me.”

“Um, no?” He looked genuinely confused.

I huffed in disbelief. “Try again.” I locked eyes, and our physical proximity, his heat, the feel of his muscles moving under my palm—it all threw my brain right back into bed with him on that Sunday morning. The walls around my heart wobbled. The man was killing me.

“No, not avoiding,” he said the words carefully, his eyes steady on mine. “Giving you space. That’s all. You were crystal clear. It was a one-time thing, and I didn’t want to spook you by hanging around all puppy-eyed.”

The corner of my mouth quirked up and a knot unfurled in my stomach. “Puppy-eyed?” I arched a brow.

He shrugged. “I told you, I like you. But you’ve made no secret of the fact you’re not interested in more from me. I was trying to be respectful. And to be honest, I wasn’t sure you’d even notice. And if you did, then you’d be . . . relieved.”

Dammit. The perfect fucking answer. “Well, I did . . . notice,” I huffed. “I was . . . worried about you.” I winced. “There, I said it. Friends, remember?”

His turn to raise a brow. “You were worried about me?”

I scowled. “Don’t look at me like that. Friends worry.” I flicked a dismissive hand. “With the family meeting and all that. I wondered if you’d heard anything. I was concerned, that’s all.” It wasn’t a lie. It was far worse than that. It was hideously and undeniably true. I’d been angsty over the whole Leon grief and family things from the minute I’d left him Sunday and I hadn’t fucking stopped.

“Oh.” His grey eyes turned wary. “Well, thanks, but I’m okay. My mother did call, as it happened, and everything went well. They’re going ahead with the tree thing.” His nose wrinkled. “They want me there, and I said I’d think about it. They don’t want me to go through the day on my own and offered, once again, to come to the cemetery with me.”

I perked up. “Well, that’s good, right? A compromise?”

He sighed. “I told them no. If I was going to the accident site on my own, I’d go to the cemetery alone.”

What? That sounded an awful lot like the stamping of feet, but I kept my mouth shut.

“I don’t want them there if they don’t really want to be.” His eyes glistened. “If it upsets them.”

“But—”

“No.” His expression hardened. “It’s *my* decision. I’ve had texts from everyone wanting me to talk, and I will. But I’m not ready yet. My parents are coming to lunch next Saturday. We’ll talk then.”

I swallowed several responses, deciding to let it go. What the fuck did I know about how actual functioning families worked, anyway?

Silence filled the space between us, but it was gentle rather than awkward. Leon brushed the back of his fingers across my cheek, and I couldn’t suppress the soft moan that escaped my lips or the way I leaned into his touch and his thumb traced my jaw. “Do you regret telling me about your family . . . about James?” His voice was full of concern.

“No.” I marvelled at the admission. “I should, but for some reason, I’m okay with it.” *And God help me, I was.*

A slow smile spread over Leon’s face, softening all those worry lines he carried. “Good. Because I don’t regret sharing with you, either. But I’m just wondering if there’s another reason you came to see me today?” His eyes danced.

I moved closer, sliding my hand around his neck. “I can’t stop thinking about Sunday.” *About you.* “We were on fire, right? Tinder to flame.” I pulled him down, the heat of his body searing my skin right through the fabric of my clothes, his rain-fresh scent washing over me in waves of arousal.

“Chris—”

“You asked if I had another reason for coming?” I interrupted with a soft smile. “And this is my answer. Kiss me.”

“What are you—”

“Just fucking kiss me.”

He stared for just a second, and then a smile broke over his face. “Then you better come here, baby.” His arms circled my waist, pulling me close, tight enough to feel the hard swell of his cock against my stomach.

I fought a smile at the endearment, telling myself it wasn't what I was there for, but when Leon's mouth covered mine and his hot demanding tongue slid between my lips, a wanton growl I didn't know I was capable of issued forth from my throat. We grappled for a few moments, fighting for control, but then I found my back against the wall and . . . oh yeah, I could get down with that.

Leon kicked the door shut with his foot and I jumped at the crack that split the room. “We shouldn't be doing this.” I tore his T-shirt from his trousers so I could get my hands on his skin, groaning shamelessly at the first touch, like he was the drug I'd been missing.

“You're right, we shouldn't.” He gasped as I tweaked the piercing in his nipple.

“But maybe just one more time, okay?” There was a desperation to my voice, like I was trying to convince myself, and I prayed Leon missed it.

“Absolutely. Just once mo—” He moaned as I palmed his solid dick. “Oh fuck.”

“We could always stop.” I squeezed, and he bucked forward.

“We could.” He buried his teeth into my neck and nipped a line down the slope of my shoulder. “You first.”

“Yeah, I'll get right on that.” I ripped his shirt over his head and threw it on the floor, cupped his face, and kissed him hard.

“Just so you know.” He found my aching cock and rubbed his hand over it as he kissed around my throat. “That doesn't qualify as stopping.”

I pulled back and looked him in the eye. “Oops.” I batted my lashes and he laughed. “Enough talking, Mister Tattoo Man. Let’s get this show on the road.”

And like a switch flicked on, Leon was all over me. Hands cupping my arse, cock grinding hard into my hip, lips and teeth on my ears, my jaw, my throat, growls of need, hands yanking up my shirt, fire on my skin, lips brushing my nipples.

“You get me so hot,” he grumbled against my throat as his hand dipped down the back of my trousers, one finger making it into my crease.

“Shhh. Keep it dow—oh fuck. Son of a bitch.” I arched into him, my back slamming into the wall. “Get these fucking things off me.”

He fumbled with my button and fly until I had my trousers and briefs around my ankles. I stepped free and immediately stayed his attempt to loosen his own.

“No. There’s no time to prep me and you’re too big to just wing it.” I laughed a little maniacally. “And I want you just like this.” I undid only the buttons of his fly. “Half-dressed. So fucking hot.” I tugged his khakis down only enough to expose his briefs straining over that proud cock. I gave it a friendly pat. “Sorry, baby. But I can’t have you checking in when your room isn’t ready.” I looked up to find Leon shaking his head with amusement. I went up on my toes and pressed a kiss to his lips before sliding my hands around his neck. “Lift me up.”

He did as I asked, and I wrapped my legs around his waist until I felt his cock nudging my taint. “Fuck yeah.” He pushed me back against the wall, got me better positioned, and started a slow piston of his hips. The head of his covered cock ground right behind my balls, a delicious rhythm that stretched my hole and fired that internal button time and time again, sending white-hot bolts of pleasure up my spine.

“More,” I demanded, pressing down on him.

He groaned right next to my ear, “Do you need to—”

“No . . . fuck.” I slammed my head back against the wall as his dick caught on the underside of my balls. “No, I can go

like this,” I assured him, surprised that it was true. I was so close. “Just shhh. We’re making too much noi—oh shit!” I whisper-shouted. “Right there. Just like that.” My back jackknifed up the wall with each of his thrusts and all I could do was hang on for the ride, my face buried in his shoulder.

“Almost . . . there . . .” I gasped. “So . . . close . . . so—” I cried out as pleasure exploded in my body and I shot all over Leon’s bare abs, shuddering with every wave that arced through me. He held me through it, whispering encouragement, saying how hot I was, how he’d never seen anything so beautiful.

“Jesus, Leon.” I fell forward into his arms, my body still convulsing. “They should really name a constellation after that. I’m thinking The Mortar and Pestle.”

He laughed and eased me down until my feet hit the floor.

“Well, looky here.” I wrapped my hand around his cock to give it a firm tug. “Someone needs a helping hand and I know just the man for the job.” Our height differential didn’t make for an easy standing blow job, so I walked Leon back until his legs hit the chair and he sank down. “Much better.” I elbowed his knees apart and freed his beautiful cock from his briefs. Then I took a good look at the main event, my finger tracing a line from slick top to thick base.

“Damn, it gets me every time,” I marvelled. “Buckle up, sunshine.” I leaned forward and licked a stripe up his length, then swallowed him down as far as I could to meet my pumping hand.

He groaned and wrapped his hands around my head. “Jesus, that’s some mouth you’ve got.”

I hummed in agreement, because yes, it had been said before. And then I knuckled down and went to town while Leon moaned and growled and hissed somewhere above me. I loved giving head and I’d worked hard to be good at it. He wasn’t going to last long, and I wanted to remember every second of this *final* last time between us.

When I was sure he was teetering on the edge, I eased back and gave him the reins, trusting him to be careful. He was, starting with gentle thrusts, feeling his way, tipping my head back so he could see my face, gauging my response, those grey eyes so soft on mine, so wrapped in pleasure, so full of something I couldn't and wouldn't acknowledge.

Tears streamed from my eyes as he filled my mouth and throat, but never too far, never too long, his thumb brushing my cheeks, his gaze full of wonder.

“So beautiful,” he said in a strained whisper, his arousal beginning to peak. “So perfect. Look at you, taking me like this. So fucking hot.” Then his eyelids fluttered closed and his cock swelled against my tongue, and he tensed and came on a little more than a soft grunt, flooding my mouth with his come, and it was . . . everything.

More than everything.

It was too much.

Too . . . tempting.

Drew's words echoed in my brain. “*Stop pretending you don't care.*”

I pulled off Leon's cock and licked him clean, root to tip, carefully avoiding his gaze so he couldn't see the glisten in my eyes. Finally done and put together, I tucked him back into his pants and looked up.

“Look at you.” He ran a finger through the damp smear of come on his abs and fed it to me, then repeated the action for himself. “So good.” He licked his lips and I almost fucking preened.

I cleaned the remainder once again with my tongue, taking my time as Leon watched in rapt interest. Then we dressed in silence, but as I surveyed the end result, I groaned. The previously crisp folds of my shirt were crushed to hell and a damp spot that looked suspiciously like jizz sat just right of the last buttonhole. *Fuck*. I shoved the shirt into my trousers and sighed, doubting the rest of me looked any better.

“I’d give up now, if I were you.” Leon shook his head at my attempt to finger some style back into my slightly sticky hair which was going to need some repair. “To be honest, I kind of like this dishevelled version. It’s hella sexy.”

I gave him my best eye-roll. “Shut up. They’re all going to know, you realise that?” I nodded downstairs.

He shrugged. “Does that bother you?”

I thought about the question. “Not as much as it probably should.” I abandoned my hair and went up on my toes to kiss him for the last time. The *last* time. Regret and something else caught in my chest. “But as good as that was—” I straightened his T-shirt over his camo trousers. “And trust me, it was really, really good. But that definitely has to be the last time. I just needed one last taste.”

He tipped my chin up with his fingers, forcing me to look at him. “It doesn’t have to end.”

“Yes, it does,” I repeated firmly. “I said I wouldn’t hurt you.”

“Why don’t you let me decide what I’m willing to risk.”

I patted his chest. “Say good night when you pass by the office tonight. And stop avoiding me. Friends, right?”

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded. “Sure. But if you ever need—”

I put my finger to his mouth. “I won’t.”

He kissed it sweetly and my heart tripped. *Enough already.* I turned tail and fled like the coward I was, down the stairs and out the back door to avoid running the gauntlet of Ty and JJ’s scrutiny. JJ’s workstation curtains were closed, thank God, but Ty sent me a knowing wink as I flew past the service desk.

Dammit. I was never gonna hear the end of it.

I sneaked into Flare via the kitchen, hoping to make it to my office unseen by Drew. If I could make a few emergency repairs to my hair and face before he caught me, I’d be golden. But the store was quiet and the man himself was planted right behind my desk, my cold cup of coffee front and centre.

He took one look at my face, my hair, and my undoubtedly swollen lips and snorted a laugh. “Holy shit. I’d ask where you’d been all this time, except JJ rang to enquire what the fuck was going on between you and Leon as you’d both disappeared upstairs.”

Damn. “That would be precisely none of your business.” I gathered the skirts of my dignity as best I could.

He grinned. “Is this the part where I remind you how you stuck your nose in mine earlier?”

“Only if you don’t value your job . . . or your balls.”

He mimed zipping his lips. “Fine. Then perhaps you’d like me to reheat your coffee after all that thirsty work?”

I shot him a glare, which he happily ignored, adding, “Running, of course. I’ve no idea what *you* thought I meant, Kip. Because that’s the reason you’re out of breath, right? Running. And so—” He ran an eye over me, head to toe. “—messy.”

“Think you’re funny, don’t you?” I waved him out of my chair.

“Pretty sure I am, actually.” He moved aside to let me sit and I bit back a smile.

He really was coming along nicely. “Don’t you have work to do?” I eyed him and his grin widened.

“Nope. All up to date. Which means I’ve got plenty of time to talk, in case you’re wondering.”

I woke my computer screen, then shot him a glare. “If you’re not out of here in three seconds flat and looking busy, you can steam the contents of those three boxes that arrived this morning before you go home.”

The grin left his face. “But we don’t need—”

“Three, two—”

And he was gone so fast he left dust devils in his wake, the little minx.

I went to shut the door after him and then collapsed in my chair and tried not to think about what a complete idiot I'd just been.

I also tried not to think about the siren look in Leon's grey eyes that seemed to promise so much.

And when my cell buzzed on my desk and George's name popped up on the screen, I tried not to break another fucking phone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Leon

CHRIS ROLLED OFF MY BACK AND STAR-FISHED FACE UP ON THE mattress. “Goddamn, that was good,” he panted, absently patting my arse. “But it is absolutely and positively the very *last* time.”

“Uh huh.” I collapsed face down over the pillow and tried to suck some oxygen back into my lungs. “You know, I might be wrong,” I gasped, “but I’m not sure you entirely grasp the definition of the word *last*. You’ve used it four times already.” I listed them off. “Sunday, in this bed. Tuesday, upstairs next door. And then there was the best fuck of my life over your desk, Wednesday. At least it was until you ruined my arse tonight. And it’s only Thursday. The week isn’t yet done. Which reminds me, it’s my turn to top.”

Chris tsk-tsked and slapped my butt. “Details, details. And considering your size, you surely can’t begrudge me a vacation between repeat mountings of the Matterhorn . . . just saying. Besides, I can’t possibly be held responsible for my actions when you parade wantonly past my office after hours, all but naked, and then practically drag me upstairs to ravish me.”

I snorted and shuffled over to face him. “Ravish you, huh? As much as I like the sound of that, I was actually fully dressed at the time, including raincoat and drenched woolly cap, and all I did was say goodnight and mention I’d be upstairs if you needed anything. Two minutes later you were at my door, and here we are.”

“But it was *how* you said it.” Chris turned and ran a finger down my sweaty chest. “There was an unmistakable subtext of ‘please fuck me’ behind the whole *upstairs* thing. And I can’t help if my mind undresses you the minute I see you, ergo, to all intents and purposes, you *were* naked.”

I leaned forward and kissed his nose. “I like that you see me naked in your head, as creepy as that actually sounds when I hear myself say it, but I think that maybe it’s about time we talked about what’s happening.”

He fell onto his back with a pained groan. “Oh god, do we have to?”

I grinned and scooted up the bed. “Yes, we do.” I leaned against the headboard and tugged on Chris’s arm until he relented and let me pull him up and onto my lap.

He grumbled all the way but eventually straddled my hips, nuzzling our soft cocks together. He slipped his hands around my neck and rested his forehead on mine. “Okay, I’m listening.”

I snorted and pushed him back enough to see his face. “I’m not the one whose breaking all his rules,” I reminded him. “I’d like to know what’s going on in that beautiful big brain of yours.”

He dragged his lower lip between his teeth and eyed me like a big juicy steak. “I would’ve thought that was obvious.”

“Nope.” I grabbed his wandering hand and then the other, just in case. “Talk.”

He pouted, making me laugh.

“Come on.” I kissed him softly. “Talk to me, baby.”

He scowled. “Don’t call me that. We’re not . . . *that* to each other. This is just sex. Cute names muddy everything.”

I swallowed a smile. Like I didn’t know that. Like I hadn’t noticed his eyes soften for just a half-second every time I called him baby or sweetheart, before his resolve to keep me at a distance rallied and they turned a cooler shade of green. I was chipping away at his walls the only way I knew how, but I wasn’t sure I was getting anywhere.

If I’d had a lick of sense, or an ounce of self-preservation, I’d have high-tailed it out of there and put my heart on lockdown after our first encounter. Falling for Chris had heartbreak written all over it, but it was already too late.

I liked the guy, always had. And now I’d had a taste of him, there was no way I was walking away before doing my best to change his mind. That was if I didn’t spook him away entirely. And if it all turned to custard, which it most likely

would, I'd have to deal with it. This *thing* we were doing, him and me, this dangerous to and fro, was so much more than sex. All I had to do was get Chris to see that too. It was my best shot. It was all I had.

"I think you secretly like the cute names," I ventured, immediately feeling him tense.

"You know the score, Leon." Chris eyed me warily. "I'm not what you're looking for."

I held his gaze. "And yet here you are."

He pulled his hands free. "*Fucking* you, yes. *That* I can do."

"So, let's keep doing that," I pressed. "Because we're pretty damn good at it."

He snorted but said nothing, his gaze sliding off mine as he fingered the lines of colour on my chest.

I figured it was now or never. "But we're good at more than sex."

His gaze shot up. Then he frowned and dropped it once again to my chest. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do." I tipped his chin up. "Because that's why we're here, right? Because we actually like each other, a lot, even though you don't want to. We talk. We argue about music. We joke and rib each other. We could be good together. Can we please give it a try?" The question came out barely a whisper, but it was too late to yank it back. "Give *us* a try. I know you feel it, this pull between us that's so fucking more than just sex, no matter what you tell yourself."

His eyes roamed my face and he lifted a finger to gently stroke my cheek. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Because you *care* about me," I countered. "Because what we have *means* something."

He pulled a troubled face. "I'd be crap . . . I don't . . . I've never—"

“So you’ve said.” I brushed his sweaty hair back from his face. “Repeatedly. And *I* say, let *me* worry about that. I’m a big boy—”

Another snort.

“Yeah, yeah. Funny guy. But I mean it. I’m not a fucking child. I don’t need or want your protection.”

He frowned, like he wasn’t quite so sure, and it was kind of sweet but totally unnecessary.

“All I’m suggesting is that we try spending some more time together, kind of like we already are.” I arched a brow. “See how things go. Doesn’t have to be formal or serious. We don’t have to name it. You’ve been perfectly clear how you feel about dating.”

His brow creased. “Is that what we’d be doing?”

I sighed. “Call it whatever you like, or nothing at all. I don’t care. I’m not asking you to be exclusive or anything like that.”

Like he’d read my mind, Chris shot me a challenging look. “I’m pretty sure you don’t work like that, Leon.”

I wasn’t going to lie. “I’m willing to try. For a little while, at least. If it helps you agree.” I shrugged as nonchalantly as I could manage without throwing up, because just the thought of Chris being with anyone else was already fucking killing me.

He blinked and then stared at me for so long I found myself struggling to hold fast on those shrewd green eyes. “You’d do that? For me?”

I’d do just about anything. The thought sprang from nowhere and the truth of it almost sucked the breath from my lungs. “Yes, I’d do that for you. And no, I won’t like it. But you’re worth it.”

He shook his head. “You barely know me.”

“Really?” I cocked a brow and his cheeks flushed.

“Okay, so maybe you know me a little.” He pushed my head back against the headboard. “Don’t get cocky.”

I smiled. “I know enough to want a whole lot more.”

He took a deep breath and let it go slowly, watching me all the while. “What if I can’t give you what you want?”

“Then we stay friends.” *Even if it kills me.* “I’m not going to hold this against you. Cards are on the table, right? I’m going in with my eyes open.”

“Easy as that?”

Not even close. But I nodded, if only to stop from screaming at him to wake the fuck up and see what was right in front of him. “Not easy, but it’ll be okay.” I was impressed at how calm I sounded.

Chris shot me a look that said he didn’t believe me for a second. And to be honest, I half-wondered whether the gut-wrenching knowledge of him fucking other people while we got to know each other better might just make it that much easier for me to walk away when the time came. I could only hope.

After far too long, a smile finally touched his lips. “All right. I agree. We can try.”

His answer startled me. “Really?”

He leaned in, his breath hot on my lips, his eyes soft, something I rarely saw. “Yes, really, as terrifying as the idea is.” He brushed his lips over mine, his tongue darting inside for a quick taste before retreating again. “You’re certainly right about one thing.” He rocked our groins together. “The sex between us is fucking outstanding.”

Shit. “Wait.” My hands stilled his hips. “I want to be clear about what just happened. We’re going to try to be something *more* than just good in bed, right? Because that isn’t what this is about, at least not for me. This isn’t a friends-with-benefits offer.”

He sighed. “I know. I heard you loud and clear.” But when he sat back, that soft look had muted, and a familiar guardedness sat in its place. “But I want to add a condition of my own.”

My heart sank, expecting the worst. “Fine. Name it.”

He took a deep breath and his cheeks pinked. “I really think we should be exclusive . . . while we’re trying this . . . whatever this is.”

My eyes sprang wide. “What? But I thought—”

“I said I didn’t want to hurt you.” His gaze was unwavering. “And *that* would hurt you. Besides—” His lips curled up in a sultry smile. “—as far as sex is concerned, I’m going to be far too busy with you to need to look elsewhere. If that changes, I’ll let you know. Understood?”

I gaped, not daring to believe. Chris was willing to be exclusive? With me? I couldn’t get my head around it, but I also wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. “Sure. I mean, yes, I understand. I just can’t believe you’d agree—”

He kissed me hard, shutting me up. “I’m not a monster for fuck’s sake. You think after hearing about your sister that I don’t know what loyalty means to you? You practically have the word carved on your damn forehead. It’s one of your most endearing qualities.” He ran a fingertip down my nose. “And it’s not like I’m incapable of showing restraint, you know?” His pink-stained cheeks darkened to crimson. “Okay, full disclosure since it seems we really are doing this . . . *thing*.”

I couldn’t help my smile.

“It’s possible I might not have been with another guy since . . . Rhys left.” He said the end bit so fast I almost missed it. “Since *you* started being so goddammed nice. My friends are threatening an intervention.”

I quashed the urge to fist pump the air, my heart taking the admission and painting way too hopeful rainbows with it. “Well, as you know, I’ve been in a dry spell as well, a little longer than yours, obviously.” I grinned at his deepening blush. “But since you’ve raised the question, what exactly *are* we going to tell our nosy friends when they ask, because there’s no way we’re gonna keep this under wraps. If you even look at me sideways, I pretty much spring wood. And after

Tuesday, Ty and JJ know for sure there's something up. I can't keep my eyes off you."

He snorted. "Is that right? Methinks that's a topic worth returning to, but to answer your question—" He winced. "—for a start, Drew had us nailed by Monday after the painting thing, and Rhys and Beck already know, about the fucking part, anyway."

I almost choked. "How?"

Chris waved a hand airily. "I can't hide anything from Rhys. He has this wheedling way of getting into my head, and then before I know it, I've confessed everything. And I can't look at Beck without the urge to blurt my entire life history. It's something to do with that whole professor vibe. They're both so fucking annoying."

I laughed and slid my hand around his neck, pulling him in for a kiss. "So, no hiding, then?"

"Yeah, all right. No hiding. But no words like dating or boyfriends either," he warned. "Let them think what they like."

Small steps, I cautioned myself. *Don't be greedy*. "Agreed. But when we're alone, I can't promise I won't use the cutesy names."

He rolled his eyes. "I guess I can live with that." His lips curved up in a slow, sexy smile. "But now that that's all settled, I believe you mentioned something about it being your turn." He ran his lips up my jawline to my ear and whispered, "Come and get me."

I flipped him onto his back and set about doing exactly that.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Leon

AFTER A MISERABLE WEEK OF RAIN AND GLOOMY BILLOWING clouds, Saturday dawned blue-skied and crisp, with air so cold you could slice it with a knife. Oh, the joys of spring. It was midday before the warmth of the sun nurtured even the smallest spike in temperature. Even then it couldn't convince people to abandon their scarves and gloves and stamping feet. Aucklanders knew a lost cause when they saw it. A pretty sun was tempting, but none of us were fooled for a minute.

"That's enough for today, Carla." I downed the tattoo machine and set about gently cleaning her arm before applying a thin layer of antimicrobial cream. "It's taking shape nicely."

She twisted her head to take a look in the mirror. "Wow." She grinned at the horse's head that ran the length of her upper arm from shoulder tip to just above the elbow. The stallion's black forelock danced over a pristine white star, his dark eyes wild. "I love it. Jim Jam was my best showjumper. I still can't believe he's gone." Her eyes filled with tears.

I gave her hand a squeeze as she continued to stare in the mirror and then let her have a moment while I cleaned my station.

"I can't thank you enough. This whole experience has been everything I hoped it would be. How many more sessions do you think?"

"Two should do it." I wrapped a light bandage around her arm. "And it's been a pleasure. You know the drill for the aftercare. I'll see you at the desk when you're ready."

Carla shimmied off the chair and I made my way to the reception desk, leaving her to dress.

JJ elbowed me as I scrolled through the appointment calendar. "You're so good with those guys." She nodded toward the curtain and dropped her voice. "The whole grieving thing."

I glanced at the closed curtain and thought of my family. “Not all of them, apparently.”

JJ knew about my impending lunch with my parents and gave my arm a gentle squeeze. “It’s gonna be okay. You guys love each other.”

Something Chris continued to remind me of as well. I checked the clock and sighed. It was almost noon.

JJ nudged me aside. “You need to get going. I’ll finish up.”

I hesitated, then kissed her cheek and thanked her. “Close up after your last appointment. Don’t worry about any more walk-ins.”

“Will do.” She saluted and hustled me out from behind the desk.

I said goodbye to Carla and Ty, grabbed my coat, and headed for the flat, trying to ignore the squirming dread in my stomach at having to face my parents. When I walked into Flare, Jack was polishing the glass on the service desk, and both Drew and Chris were busy serving customers.

Chris turned at the bell and raised an inquisitive brow. He mouthed the words, “You okay?” and he was so fucking beautiful I wanted to scoop him into my arms and kiss him senseless. As far as delaying tactics went, it was a pretty damn good one, and I was still pinching myself that we were actually trying this thing between us.

Not that there had actually been a lot of trying involved since we’d decided. Chris had spent Friday evening catching up with his friends to head off any intervention they might have in mind—no clubbing involved—while I’d used the time to have a beer with one of my Harley mates before updating my accounts.

It was as if we were clearing our social decks in readiness for this next phase, making sure we had enough time squirrelled away to focus on us. *Us*. The idea made me giddy. But a day was still a day without touching him, and I was itching to remedy that. Sex? Yes. But mostly I wanted him close; his sharp tongue and snarky humour aimed in my

direction again, making me smile. In my arms, on my lap, in my kitchen, my bed, or on my dick, it didn't really matter. I'd take Chris any way I could get him. And if it turned out he didn't want me the same way, it was gonna hurt like a motherfucker, but I wasn't about to let that deter me.

I nodded to Chris that I was fine and headed upstairs to shower. Five minutes later, I turned and caught sight of someone watching me through the steam and almost had a heart attack. "Jesus Christ!" My hand flew to my chest. "You scared the shit out of me."

Chris grinned and opened the glass door. "Give me that cloth and turn around."

I narrowed my gaze. "I don't have time—"

"Neither do I. Jack's gone home and Drew's on first lunch, so I've got ten minutes tops." He eyed me up and down in appreciation. "Not nearly long enough for all the dirty things I'd like to do to you. Now turn around and I'll wash your back. Chop, chop."

I did as he said, enjoying the rough brush of the cloth down my back. At the sound of his phone, I glanced over my shoulder in time to see him frown and shove it back in his pocket. "Everything okay?"

He nodded, and although I recognised it for the lie that it was, I didn't push.

"Turn around." He slapped my butt.

I pushed my questions aside and let Chris wash me with long, slow strokes, my body responding to his presence and touch as it always did, arousal kindling in every cell. He washed me thoroughly, every crevice, every dip and curve, his slick fingers finding my piercings and rolling them gently before cupping my balls and sliding up my thickening cock. I grabbed his hand before I threw caution to the wind and simply launched myself at him—lunch be damned.

"Dammit, Chris." I spun to face him. "I truly worry about the quality of your English education. Your definition of *back*

is about as accurate as your definition of *last*.” I kissed him softly. “You’re getting me hard, baby.”

He flushed as he always did when I called him that. Then he wrapped his hand around my dick and tugged gently. “Well, look at that. Shame we’ve run out of time.” He unceremoniously dropped my cock and held out a towel.

I turned the water off and snatched the towel from him, grumbling, “You’re nothing but a bloody tease. How am I supposed to face my parents with a stiffy?”

“You love being teased.” Chris took a second towel and began drying my back, shocking the hell out of me. “And I haven’t heard the word stiffy since I was fifteen.”

I kept my head down and tried not to grin too hard.

“Are you okay about lunch with your mum?” he asked tentatively as he rubbed me down.

“No,” I answered baldly. I wasn’t going to lie. Caitlyn’s anniversary was drawing closer, and I was no nearer to sorting myself out. No less angry. No less disappointed in my family. Even though I knew it wasn’t really about them, not really.

Chris waited for me to secure the towel around my waist and then took my hands. “It’s okay to feel what you feel. You don’t have anything to prove. She was your twin. That’s a special bond.” He paused and rolled his eyes. “Listen to me. I sound like I know what I’m talking about. Newsflash: I don’t. All I’m trying to say is you’re not your family and they’re not you. But maybe it might help to close that beautiful mouth of yours for a bit and listen to what they have to say *before* you react. They might not understand you, or you them, but you all want the best for each other, and fuck knows that’s nothing to sniff at.”

I thought of Chris’s mother letting him walk away rather than believe him, and I took the reality check for what it was. It fired rage in my heart and a sour taste in my mouth and jolted me from any self-pity.

Chris was right. My parents would’ve torn someone like his uncle limb from limb rather than put a child of theirs

through a second of having that asshole around any longer than they had to.

“Come here.” I pulled him close and kissed him deeply, relishing the taste of coffee and something sweet on his tongue. “Thank you.”

He frowned up at me, his cheek damp from mine, his lips slick and inviting. “For what?”

“For reminding me how lucky I am. And I’m so fucking sorry that your family couldn’t see the precious cargo that you were—*are*—and that you needed their protection. They lost something precious when they let you go.” I eyeballed him. “And I won’t be repeating that mistake.”

His eyes filled and he blinked furiously. “Jesus, Leon.” He breathed the words. “You can’t say shit like that. I hate crying.”

“I know you do.” I kissed him again. “But it’s worth saying, and I’ll repeat it as often as you need to hear it, until you believe that I won’t walk away. I’m not your parents, or your brother, or that asshole. All I ask is a chance to prove it.”

He swallowed hard. “I’m . . . trying.” He circled his arms around my waist.

“That’s all I’m asking.” I buried my face in his hair, still stiff with product, and drank in his cologne, which seemed to change from day to day. But underlying each one was something that was uniquely Chris—bold, fresh, and if you looked for it, just a little uncertain.

He let me hold him a few moments longer before he started to wriggle and pull away. It was how he’d always been. Free with his hugs, but careful about any show of need. But unlike all the other times I let him go, this time I didn’t. Things had changed between us, and I wasn’t about to let him run any longer.

“Stay.” I cradled his face in my hands and then pulled him back against me, the last remnants of steam painting soft circles around us. “I need to hold you. I’ve missed you.”

His arms returned around my waist, and he relaxed. “I . . . missed you too. I’m so pathetic. I don’t know how to do any of this.”

“I know.” I stroked up and down his back. “And that’s okay.”

When I finally let him go, he stepped slowly away, grumbling at the damp creases on his shirt while flattening them with his hands. But there was a smile on his lips that made me happy.

When he was done, he looked up. “So . . .” He hesitated, his gaze locking with mine. “I was wondering if maybe . . . after you’re finished with your mum . . . you’d like to come over to my place . . . for dinner . . . or a drink . . . or . . . something?”

I froze, positive I hadn’t heard right, but Chris clearly took it for a lack of enthusiasm because he quickly added, “I mean, I get that you might not feel like it, but if you wanted to get out of here . . . well . . . I’m a decent cook as it happens . . . or we could order in or . . .” He threw a panicked look to the side. “Shit . . . it was a bad idea, wasn’t it? I—”

“I’d love to.”

He looked back, a tiny smile playing on his mouth. “Well, okay. That’s . . . good. But no pressure. Text if you change your mind. And don’t expect too much. I don’t cook for people often. Or at all . . . really. Oh god.” He buried his face against my chest and I stroked his hair. “But I can. You know. Cook. I promise I won’t poison you or anything.”

“I trust you.” I kissed the top of his head. “And thanks.”

“This is all your fault,” he murmured against the bare skin of my chest, his breath washing over my nipple. “Less than two weeks hanging out with you on a semi-regular basis and look at me. My quills are all flat and I’m a fucking sappy mess.”

I chuckled. “I happen to like this unarmed version of you. Besides, we’ve known each other a lot longer than that.”

He shot me a warning look. “Yeah, well, don’t get any ideas. This is just a temporary glitch. There’s plenty of sting left in me yet.”

I kissed his forehead. “I’d be disappointed if there wasn’t. I happen to like that version too.”

He huffed. “Yeah, well, it’s all right for you, everyone knows you’re a marshmallow. But if any of my friends see me like this, the vultures will circle and the hordes will start to gather, sharpening their spears.”

I gave a soft snort. “Then it’ll be our little secret. I’ve got your back, baby.”

He frowned up at me. “Do you, Leon? Do you really?”

“Yes. I do.”

He stared for a long moment before finally nodding, although I wasn’t convinced that meant what I hoped it did.

“I should go,” he said. “Drew will be starving, and I have to change my shirt.”

“Say hi from me. But about the whole marshmallow thing? You didn’t really mean that, right?”

His face lit up. “Oh, I totally did. The masses have spoken. The votes have been counted.” His arm whipped out and my towel dropped to the floor.

“Shit.” My hand shot to cover my junk and Chris laughed.

“I wouldn’t bother. You need a big-top tent to cover that lot, sunshine.” He turned and gave a jaunty wave over his shoulder. “Yep. Sweet, fluffy, and soft on the inside. Although . . .” He turned his gaze to my still bobbing cock, which only served to make it bob harder. “*That* is definitely not marshmallow material.”

He winked and was gone.

My parents were right on time, as usual. My mother strode into the flat, taking her time to look around with unabashed interest, while my father immediately grabbed a diet Coke from the breakfast bar and settled himself on the couch with his gaze laser-focused on me. The quieter of my parents, he was no less shrewd.

“Oh, please, make yourself at home.” I rolled my eyes and headed back into the kitchen.

My father’s mouth quirked up and he lifted his Coke in salute. “Don’t mind if I do.”

“It’s a very nice place.” My mother stood at the window, taking in the view over the rooftops to the Hauraki Gulf, the sea awash with white sails under a bluebird sky. “I can see why you jumped at the chance to stay here versus coming back home.”

“Mum, you know that’s not—”

“Just joking.” Her bright hazel eyes danced as she walked across and pulled me into a hug. It was a little like the mouse hugging the elephant since my mum barely scraped five feet. It was my dad, at six feet eight, who harboured the giant genes.

We passed the time in general chitchat while I busied myself seasoning the vegetable soup in the slow cooker and getting the garlic bread out of the oven. My mother laid the table—mostly so she could snoop in the drawers—and my father, well, he studied me. I was grateful to finally call him to the table and rid myself of that prickly scrutiny.

Another twenty minutes passed innocuously enough as we ate and talked about a number of subjects, including what my siblings were up to and how Susie didn’t stop asking about her Uncle Leon—a not so subtle dig about the two weeks since I’d last seen her. But they were right. Between Caitlyn and Chris, I’d dropped the ball. I needed to fix that. But when my father pushed his empty bowl aside and sat back, I knew from the set of his jaw that playtime was over.

I rested my spoon in my bowl, pushed it alongside my father’s, and glanced between them. “Okay, let’s get it over

with.” I spread my arms wide.

My dad frowned. “It’s not a matter of getting it *over with*, son. We’re all worried about you. We’re your family. It’s what we do.”

I opened my mouth to argue that they didn’t need to worry and then remembered Chris’s words.

“. . . maybe close that beautiful mouth of yours for a bit and listen to what they have to say, before you react.”

I snapped my mouth closed and waited.

“We know how you feel about the tree thing,” my mother began, putting her hand up as if to stop my protest. “And that’s just fine. You don’t need to agree with it, but we’re going ahead. Caitlyn loved kauris just like she loved tuis.” She arched a brow in reference to my tattoo and I winced. It wasn’t like I’d asked their permission to go ahead with that, was it? It kind of made my pissiness about the tree look all kinds of silly.

“Point taken,” I admitted grudgingly.

She smiled softly. “We’re not here to score points, sweetheart. We’re here because we love you. *All* of us love you.”

Tears welled in my eyes, but I was determined not to cry. That lasted until I remembered Chris’s asshole family and that mine really did care. And that was when the damn broke. My mother rounded the table and was at my side with her arms around me in an instant. My father reached for my hand and covered it with his own.

“The two of you were like peas in a pod.” My mother wiped my cheeks. “We couldn’t have been any prouder of both of you. It ripped us apart when she died, just like it did you. None of us truly understood that special bond you shared, but we all felt her loss. I would’ve given everything I had to stop that happening. It nearly destroyed me. Caitlyn had her whole life ahead of her and I miss her like crazy. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of her, miss her silly laugh that sounded like a squashed duck.”

I snorted tears and bubbles popped out my nose. I eased myself from my mother's arms and wiped my face.

She pulled a chair close and sat with one hand on my shoulder and the other on my leg. "Just because we want to change things doesn't mean we've forgotten, or want to forget, or care any less, if that was even possible. It just means we want to focus on the positive light she brought into this world and not on the pain of how she died and how it almost buried every one of us with her."

"I spent years blaming myself."

I spun at my father's broken words. "You? But you weren't even home that night, Dad."

"And that's exactly why." His glistening eyes studied me with overwhelming sadness. "I was *supposed* to be home, but at the last minute I'd gone to our office social golfing event instead. Then I stayed late for drinks. If I'd been home, maybe I could've taken her."

"And if I hadn't had two glasses of wine, I could've done it as well." My mother's voice was so quiet, I barely heard her. "We *all* blame ourselves. We *all* think we could have done something to save her."

"But that's only because *I* failed her. *Me*," I protested. "If I'd done what I promised, none of it would have happened. I was such a selfish fucker—" I glanced up. "Sorry, Dad."

He shook his head. "I was a selfish fucker too." He shocked me with his words. My father never, ever swore. "But this isn't a competition about who's the most to blame for Caitlyn's death. If it was, we'd all lose to Gina, who sailed through that intersection without paying attention. She was a mess for years. Her parents thought they'd lose her too."

His words stilled me. "You . . . you spoke to her?"

My parents exchanged a look and my father answered. "We talk to her and her parents on a semi-regular basis."

"What?" I stared between them. "Since when?"

This time it was my mother who replied. “We first called about eight months after Caitlyn died. I’d heard through a friend that Gina wasn’t doing too well. Your father and I thought that enough lives had been broken by your sister’s death. We didn’t want Gina to be another casualty.”

“But—” I couldn’t get my head around it. “I mean, how can you even bear to listen to her. And you never said anything? Do the others know?”

My father sighed. “They do now. It all came out last Sunday at the family meeting. We hadn’t planned to say anything, but there it was. They were . . . shocked, like you, I imagine. And we wanted to tell you in person as well, which is why we waited until today.”

I fell back in my chair, speechless, not knowing what to think.

“We kept it quiet because we weren’t sure how you’d all take it,” my mother explained. “Everyone was so angry with Gina at the time, including us. But the more your father and I talked, the more we realised Caitlyn loved Gina too, and that she’d hate it if Gina’s life was ruined by that one stupid mistake, as costly as it was to the rest of us.”

I couldn’t look at them. I didn’t know what to think. I’d spent seven years hating Gina for what she’d done, for her stupidity that had gotten Caitlyn killed. The only person I loathed more than myself was her, and that one thing had played some small role in keeping me sane. And all that time my parents had been . . . trying to help her?

“We know it’s a lot to take in, for *all* of you,” my father admitted. “But it’s time everyone knew. And no matter what anyone thinks, including you, we don’t regret helping and we never will. Gina is doing better now, and at some point, we hope to visit face to face. Maybe convince her to do the same with us.”

My horrified gaze jerked to his. “I hope you’re not thinking of inviting her to—”

“No.” My father raised his palms. “Definitely not. And we’re not expecting anything from the rest of you, either. We’re just letting you know. We intend to see her first at her parent’s house, that’s all. Your brothers and sister are considering whether they’d like to write something that we can take with us for Gina to read. It’s time. That’s all.” He raised a questioning brow that didn’t require an answer.

And there was a small sting in that. The fact they weren’t asking my permission. They weren’t even asking my opinion. They were simply letting me know. And with that realisation, something else occurred to me. They really were moving on with their lives, in stark contrast to the anger that still boiled in my own heart. Everyone except me, that was.

I drew a deep breath and let the weight of the realisation sink in, before speaking in a small voice I barely recognised as my own. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

My mother patted my leg. “Then don’t say anything. Just think about it. Your brothers and sister would love it if you came to the tree planting in Landford Park if you feel up to it on the day. We’re also going to sponsor a bench to be put under it. But if you can’t get there, we understand. And we can still be there at the cemetery, you know that.”

Fucking, fucking tears. “No,” I finally croaked, far too loudly. “Sorry. I just mean that I’ve got some thinking to do after . . . today. I get that this is about me, not you guys.” I managed a small smile. “Someone recently helped me understand how lucky our family is to have each other.”

My mother raised a curious brow but said nothing.

“But that doesn’t mean I’m ready to write a letter to . . . Gina or . . . plant a tree, although I’m not opposed to the latter, I suppose. Can I just say, I’ll think about it?” I surprised myself by not choking on the words. “But I also don’t want to drag you guys down with my issues. I won’t be hurt if you’re not there. It might actually be easier that way. I think there are things I need to do. But I promise I’ll join you all for dinner, if that’s still okay?”

“Oh, sweetheart.” My mother enfolded me in her arms and I felt twelve all over again, in the best way. “Of course, it’s okay. We just want what’s best for you. And if that’s different from the rest of us, that’s perfectly fine. But if you change your mind and want some company, even if it’s just your father and me, we’ll be there, no questions asked.”

I nodded silently and my mother let me go. I set about guzzling the rest of my Coke because, who the hell knew why, and then sat there twirling the empty can in my hands and staring at the table.

After a minute or so, my father cleared his throat. “We’ve also discussed starting a happy scrapbook about Caitlyn,” he began carefully. “For Susie and any other grandchildren or in-laws we might be lucky enough to collect along the way. Memories, photos, newspaper clippings, anything that reminds us of how special she was. We thought we could each bring something to the dinner to start it off . . . if you wanted to contribute, that is.”

I struggled to swallow past the lump in my throat. A happy scrapbook. It was so very Caitlyn. And it was something I should’ve thought of. Something I could’ve done for myself. I had a head full of happy memories. Funny that the painful ones seemed so much easier to access. God, were they right about me?

I drew a sharp breath. “I, um . . . yeah . . . thanks. I’d like that.”

We talked a little more, and by the time we parted ways, it was five in the afternoon, Flare was closed, and the ache in my heart was filling my head. My phone screen flashed on the countertop and I grabbed it, noting the string of missed messages and calls.

Chris.

My heart tripped at the thought he’d been worried about me.

How did it go?

Do you still want to come over?

No problem if you don't.

I'm here if you want to talk.

Or not.

We could just watch a movie.

I promise not to pry.

If you're getting these please just let me know you're okay.

Is this too much?

This is too much, right?

I'm going to put my phone away.

Sorry. I'm just worried.

I told you I'm no good at this boyfriend shit.

A grin split my face at the last one—a miracle in itself. I typed back. *Boyfriend, huh? That's pretty damn cutesy for you.*

Dots appeared and disappeared and then my phone rang in my hand.

“Out of everything I said, *that's* what you take out of it?” Chris demanded loudly and I held the phone away from my ear. “You better tell me how the fuck you are before I reach through this phone and pull your balls out through your mouth.”

I couldn't help but laugh, another miracle. “Sorry. I'm okay, kind of. And is it weird that I'm slightly turned on by that threat?”

“Shut up,” Chris huffed. “I've been losing my mind waiting to hear. I've made three different salads and I've got no clue what to put with them. Get the fuck over here. My carrots are limp.”

I snorted. “Is that a euphem—”

“Leon!”

“I'm on my way.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kip

I THREW SOME LAMB CHOPS INTO THE MICROWAVE TO DEFROST while I set the table, my nerves jangling like shorted electric wires. How the hell did people cope with this shit? It was exactly why I'd never been keen on relationships. They sucked your common sense right out your arse and spat it back in your face—a minefield for someone like me who'd used insulation tape on their emotions for most of their adult life.

Emotions hurt. Letting people close hurt. Relationships hurt. Trust hurt. It wasn't that I didn't know what I was running from. Hell, my therapist might've come cost-free, but he'd been bloody good. I just hadn't had a reason to change . . . until Leon. And I still wasn't sure I could actually do it.

The pain of Leon's loss and his still-raw grief undid me in ways I couldn't understand. Sure, I felt bad for people in pain, and Leon was right—I was a warrior for justice—but Leon's struggle hit a different note somewhere inside. I'd been on tenterhooks ever since I'd left him in the flat. I understood some of his ache. I'd pretty much lost a family, after all. But when he spoke about Caitlyn, it was as if he'd lost half of himself, and I couldn't even begin to fathom what that felt like.

I'd never felt quite so unsettled by someone's personal battles before. Like deep-down-in-my-heart desperate to make things better for him. To take his pain if I could. To have his back and stand guard against all comers while he healed, roll him in bubble wrap and tuck him safe behind me.

Yeah, mostly that last one. And I didn't need a therapist to tell me what that likely meant. I had no defence against him. He was unbuttoning me from the inside out whether I wanted him to or not. *Fuck.*

It hadn't been difficult to pick Leon's parents when they arrived. His father was as ginormous as his son and with those same hypnotic grey eyes. I'd rushed to greet them, heading off

a bemused Drew, and introduced myself as a friend. Then I'd directed them up the stairs and spent the next couple of hours before I left in a state of full-blown dipshit crazy, my eyes glued to the stairs and jumping at every footstep that passed overhead. In the end, Drew ignored my blustering threats to his job security and herded me into my office.

"Like you could ever manage without me," he said bluntly, pushing me into my chair. "And also, you can quit pretending the two of you aren't fucking each other's brains out."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he shushed me. "Save it. I need a cigarette and shower every time Leon so much as glances your way. I just hope he's worth all the trouble he's causing me."

"You?" I stared at him.

"Yes, me," he answered tartly, which was usually my job. "You're strangely off-kilter when he's around, almost . . . likeable. Ugh." He visibly shuddered. "It's . . . disturbing and yet oddly endearing at the same time. Either way, it's screwing with my head. I never know which version of you I'm gonna get at any one point in the day. The familiar and slightly terrifying snarky Kip, or this cute-as-shit Leonesque version, which quite frankly is taking a bit of getting used to."

I gaped. "You did not just call me cute. Or Leonesque? And what the hell even is that?"

He bopped me on the nose. "See, cute as fuck."

"You are two seconds away from testicular evisceration." I glowered at him.

The store bell jangled and he quickly glanced that way. "Oh look, a customer. I must fly."

I narrowed my gaze. "Mmm, fancy that."

He turned back. "But here's a thought. While you're in here and not fucking with my day, how about drafting that ad for the new retail assistant? You know, the one Rhys made you promise to have ready by the time he got back, in case you've forgotten."

I had. Shit.

Drew rummaged in his satchel and slapped a fistful of papers on my desk, his face scarlet. "Design ideas, as requested. They're, um, well they're not very good, but it's the best I could manage." He rubbed his hands nervously down his thighs. "But thanks for the opportunity." He spun on his heels and left, slamming the door behind him.

I watched him through the glass for a few seconds, then did as he suggested—distracted myself with drafting the ad and then leafed through his sketches.

They were good. Damn good.

Cheeky, sexy underwear designed for a range of customers from post-surgical to those needing packer support or stand-to-pee options. There were G-strings, lace, fishnet, boy shorts, and regular briefs and boxers. Not to mention some leather harness ideas that had binder attachments with sexy lace-ups or chunky silver zips. They were creative, sexy, and they'd sell like fucking hotcakes—and not just to his own community.

I rapped on the glass and waved him in. He was a pack of nerves, the red bloom on his face spreading south down his throat and under his shirt. I figured his balls were glowing. And telling him I thought his designs were great didn't seem to help.

He gaped. "They're . . . good? Really?"

"They're amazing," I corrected him. "And yes, really. I'll be taking the ideas to Rhys, if that's still okay with you?"

"Oh." And as it finally sank in, he couldn't hide the shining smile. "Sure. Wow. Of course. And . . . thanks, Kip. I can't tell you what this means to me." He blushed furiously and disappeared with a spring in his clever little step.

And when Leon's parents still hadn't come down by the time I was ready to close the store, there was nothing for it but to head back to my apartment and chew on my nails.

And text Leon.

A lot.

I checked the microwave, prodded the lamb, reset the timer, and pretended I wasn't checking the clock every minute or so as I counted down the time until Leon arrived. When his knock finally came, I almost jumped out of my skin and raced to let him in. I grabbed his hand, hauled him inside, and tugged him over to the breakfast bar. I pushed him onto a stool and shoved a beer in his hand.

"You can talk while I cook," I told him.

He blinked and then laughed. "And hello to you too. Don't I at least get a kiss?"

I narrowed my gaze and huffed, "I suppose, if I must." I sidled over and he opened his legs for me to walk between them.

"Mmm, come here." He circled his arms around my waist and pulled me close, and there was no denying just how damn good that felt to my frayed nerves. "There, that's better." He

nuzzled his nose into my hair, sending shivers rippling over my skin. “I need this a lot more than I need to talk, baby. I need *you*.”

Well, shit. I let the warmth of his words fill my chest, and for once I didn’t try to fight it. Instead, I slipped my arms around his neck and rested my head on his shoulder, enjoying the feel of his hands travelling up and down my back and his soft murmurings of pleasure. Pleasure at holding *me*. Not for sex. Not for making out. Just me. And for the first time, I wondered if maybe I could get used to this.

“I was worried about you.” I tightened my hold around his neck. “I was ready to storm those stairs if I’d heard any raised voices while I was at work, and I’m not sure what that says about me, nor do I want to know.”

He pressed a line of kisses down the slope of my shoulder and back up again. “My hero.”

I tried not to smile, even though he couldn’t see me, but lost that battle pretty quick as he nuzzled beneath my ear—a spot I had a particular fondness for.

“I love that you care, but I’m okay,” he reassured me with a little nip to my earlobe. “A little battered and bruised—” Another nip. “—and with some serious thinking to do, but okay.”

I leaned back and cradled his face, studying his eyes until I was sure he was being honest with me. He was. “That’s all well and good, but I’d still like to know what happened. I know I should be all, ‘you only have to tell me if you want to.’ But that’s not me. And since we’re trialling this *thing* between us, you should know that about me. If someone I care about is hurting, I am relentless.”

Leon grinned. “Pretty sure I knew that part.”

I rolled my eyes. “And why the fuck am I blushing?”

“Because you know that I see you, Chris. *You*. And that makes you nervous.”

I stared at him. “You’re very sure of yourself.”

He shook his head and the smile faded, and I immediately wanted to claw it back. “Not in the slightest.” His brows knotted. “I guess I’m just . . . hopeful.” He pulled me close and kissed across both my cheeks until he found my lips, and I sank into his taste like he was a cool glass of water on a hot day.

And oh my god, I was starting to sound like a fucking romance novel.

And when Leon was done licking the lining right off the inside of my mouth—not that I was complaining—he stood me back with a happy little sigh and a sweet look that I couldn’t quite meet because . . . melting issues.

“I’m sorry for the command performance,” I told him. “But I’m glad you came.”

“Me too.” He softly knuckled my cheek. “Then again, you had me at wilted carrot. You know I can’t resist a challenge.”

I snorted. “Well, that’s tough luck, because my carrot is currently out of commission. It has . . . anxiety issues.”

He smirked. “If I promise to talk, do you think it might feel more . . . social?”

“Maybe.” I flicked my hair dramatically and pulled the lamb chops from the microwave. “I’ll *raise* the matter in due course.”

He laughed. “You do that. I do love a good hard root veg ___”

“Oh my god.” I aimed my chef’s knife his way.

“Okay, okay.” He raised his palms. “I’ll talk.”

And so he did. He talked for an hour as I cooked and while we ate. Things had gone better than he’d expected, which was a relief to my frazzled nerves, but my heart broke a little as he talked about his parents’ contact with the woman who’d been driving the car when Caitlyn was killed. It clearly shocked him. And I could tell he still wasn’t sure of his reasoning about not wanting his family with him at Caitlyn’s grave, but I’d back him for having the right to do it his way. Lord knew, I

didn't have my own shit together enough to judge anyone else on theirs.

But as exhaustion crept into his eyes and his words began to falter, I got to my feet and kissed him into silence. "Enough." I walked our plates to the sink and then held out my hand. "Come on, I know exactly what you need."

His expression perked up.

"Not *that*." I rolled my eyes in response to his heated look. "This is *much* better."

He leaned his head over my shoulder to whisper in my ear. "Now you're just lying. There isn't anything better than you."

I blinked and my heart did a silly flip-flop thing that should've made me throw up in my mouth for its sheer sappiness factor alone. But I rallied admirably and ignoring the way Leon's hot breath made me shiver, I tucked his hand behind my back and led him into the hallway. "As flattering as that is—" I cut him a quick look. "—I'm not exactly enamoured with the idea of you falling asleep on my dick, which seems the most likely outcome of any hanky-panky we engage in."

He laughed. "Hanky-panky, huh?"

I pulled him into the apartment's oversized bathroom, flicked on the fairy lights I'd strung across the ceiling, and smiled as he blinked in wonder.

"Wow."

I stood at his side, remembering seeing the space for the first time, twelve months before. "It's great, right?"

The four-by-four metre bathroom held two sinks, an ancient but supremely workable bath big enough for two, maybe more, a large-screened shower which was also big enough for two if you didn't mind snuggling under the single head, and a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the city lights and was well hidden from nosy neighbours.

Leon wandered across to the window and hummed appreciatively, the glass fogging from his warm breath. "Pretty

impressive bathroom for a one-bedroom apartment,” he commented, turning to face me.

“Glad you like it.” I set to lighting the million or so candles I’d placed around the room. “This is apparently one of the few original bathrooms left in the building, so they decided to keep it as it was. To be honest, it’s what sold me on the apartment. I love art deco, but I love a good soak even more.”

He grinned slyly. “Is that right?”

“Pervert.” I flicked him on the forehead as I passed by to light the candles on the windowsill.

He laughed and the sound bounced around the room and chased the last of my worries away. He pulled me in for a quick kiss. “With you? Always. But I can see you soaking in that with a cocktail in hand and Christina on repeat.”

I snorted and wriggled free of his hold so I could finish with the candles. “It’s like you know me or something.”

“And *that* explains a lot.” He waved his hand to the fifteen or so colognes staggered in neat lines on the vanity. “You always smell delicious, but it’s different every day.”

He liked how I smelled? I almost fucking blushed. It was those little things that got to me. “That’s because when I had zero money, I collected all the free samples I could from the department stores. And when I finally had some spare cash, I realised I still liked switching things around.”

He snagged me around the waist and pulled me close. “Stand still for a second, will you?” He ran his nose up my neck and into my hair, making me shiver. “Mmm, so good. And I like that it changes. I like that I never know what it’ll be each day, and I can’t wait to find out. It’s intriguing and unpredictable . . . a lot like you. A scent for every mood. But I’ve learned a thing or two these last couple of years.”

I rested in his arms. It felt good. “Like what?”

“Like the fact you wear the citrus ones when you’re feeling up.”

I jerked back and stared up at him. “How did you—”

“And the one that smells like amber is for when you’re pissy about something.”

I swallowed hard.

“The spicy lemon one is for when you’re cruising, although for that same reason, it doesn’t rank high on my personal favourites.”

What the? “How did you—”

“You wore it that night at the party when I so stupidly turned you down. But when you’re on a mission, like during the MeToo thing for Alec last year, that’s when you pull out the big guns—the smoky-woody numbers.”

My mouth worked but no words came out. *How the fuck did he know all that?*

Leon touched his finger to my lower jaw and closed it. “You think I don’t notice things like that about you?” He tilted my chin up and kissed me softly. “I notice *everything* about you.” His eyes held mine and I couldn’t look away.

“I . . . I don’t know what to say,” I choked out, lost in the ash of his gaze.

“You don’t have to say anything. I just wanted you to know that I *always* see you, Chris. No matter how many people are in the room or what’s going on, I always see *you*.” He stared at me a moment longer before finally looking away and taking my heart with him. “It’s the same with this apartment. The quirky art. The expensive cookware. The bright red sofa. It’s all very . . . you.”

Heat flashed in my cheeks and I really, really needed him to stop before I did something stupid. Like tell him how touched I was, or how I noticed him too. How the Versace Eros pour Homme he religiously wore, made me itch to get my hands on him. Or the way he always picked off both ends of his almond croissants before he ate the rest. Or that he talked to his bike each time before he rode her.

But I didn’t tell him any of that. Instead, I said, “I won’t apologise for liking quality or comfort, but it’s done on a budget. I buy on sale or second-hand if I can. And I’m a

pretentious label queen, so yes, the cookware is expensive, but I love to cook and I spend a fair amount of time in the kitchen. I just don't cook very much for . . . others."

"Not for your many conquests, then?" His jaw ticked and I almost smiled.

"Never. I don't cook for the men I bring here to fuck. That just . . ." I didn't finish, pressing my lips together.

"Muddies the waters?" he offered with a knowing smile.

And I might've flushed. "Exactly."

His eyes lit up. "Then I'll count myself among the lucky few that have sampled both. A point in my favour."

I held his gaze. "Possibly more than one, but don't get too excited. There's a long way to go. Now strip and do what you need to while I run you a bath."

He frowned. "A bath? I don't need—"

"Yes, you do." I summoned my best don't-argue-with-me glare and Leon immediately started shedding his clothes. "Let me pamper you. After that you can fuck me through the mattress, and we'll call it even."

He laughed and almost tripped on his trouser leg. "Helluva deal."

Ten minutes later and we were both stretched out in the enormous tub. I had my legs wrapped around Leon from behind, washing his hair as he relaxed back against me, and trying not to freak out at the realisation I had never done this with another guy, ever, or how fucking good it felt.

"Can I ask you something?" Leon shielded his eyes from the suds as I tipped a cup of water over his head.

"Of course."

He hesitated. "Do *you* think I should talk to someone about Caitlyn?" His question barely broke the hush of the room.

I paused with a cup of water halfway to Leon's head. "Me?"

He swivelled on his hip so he could see me, water and shampoo bubbles dripping from his tight beard, the heavy scent of vanilla wafting between us. “Yes, you.”

“You want *my* opinion?” I abandoned the cup and cleared the soap bubbles from his face, flicking them into the water.

“Yes.” He grabbed my hand and kissed the tip of each finger. “When Mum and Dad left, I got to thinking, and I’m wondering if maybe Caitlyn would be disappointed in me because of what’s happened. But it also occurred to me that she would’ve really liked *you*. She’d think you were good for me. Loosen me up and all that. So, I want to know what you think.”

Caitlyn would’ve liked me? I tried not to let that idea nestle too deeply in my heart because it came with a whole lot of responsibility. “Leon . . . I . . .” *I what?* I had no fucking idea other than things had taken a sudden turn into serious and I wasn’t sure I was ready.

His face pinched and he groaned. “Shit. Too much, right?”

I nodded. “A little. I mean, I like that you think Caitlyn would approve, but it’s a bit . . . I’m not . . . we’re not quite . . . you know . . . at least not yet. Things are still . . . unsure, right? Besides, you do realise I have *the* worst track record in family relations? No one in their right mind would want my opinion.”

He kissed me, but the angle was awkward, and we gave up, laughing. “Well, I do,” he said firmly. “Because you have some of the best instincts of anyone I know.”

“Okay, okay.” I flicked water at him. “But turn around. I can’t talk while you’re looking at me.” I shoved him back around and began sponging all that gorgeous ink, the cascade of soapy water creating a ripple of colour spilling down his back. “I don’t know if you should try therapy, Leon, and it’s not my place to say, no matter how much you think you trust me. Which, by the way, you have to stop doing. You really don’t know me well enough. Trust me, I know.”

He laughed, and when I realised what I'd said, I did as well. "Idiot." I smooshed another sponge of suds over his shoulder. "All I can say is that if you're asking *me*, then maybe that says something. Maybe you're more open to the idea than you think. Maybe you even want it at some level, even if you're fighting it. It was the same for me."

He nodded but said nothing.

"And I think you're looking for someone else to have the casting vote so you don't have to make the decision on your own. Newsflash: I'm not gonna do that for you."

I wriggled my legs free of his waist and braced my hands on his shoulders so I could get out of the bath. Then I grabbed a towel and Leon scooted back to watch me dry off. I wasn't averse to putting on a bit of a show, taking my time and making sure to lift my foot onto the edge of the bath to dry my leg—just so he could perv at my arse, his dick thickening in the water to bob amongst the bubbles.

"I won't tell you what to do," I picked up the conversation. "If you trust me, then trust me when I tell you that you know already what you want to do. You don't need me to sign off on it. I'll support you either way."

The corners of his mouth turned up in a slow smile. "That's an awfully big commitment from someone who won't even give what we have a name or an expiry date."

I flicked him with the end of the towel, but he grabbed it mid-air and tugged me down for a wet kiss, his mouth warm and inviting, the fresh clean scent of him doing electric things to my body, to my heart. I was drowning in him, and I knew it.

He pulled away and brushed noses with me. "Thank you."

I swallowed hard, my voice when it came, little more than a croak. "You're welcome. Always." I held back the words teetering on my tongue that couldn't possibly be true and passed him a towel. "Get yourself out of that bath and meet me in bed. I'll be the one with no clothes on and my dick in my hand. Time to pay the piper, sugar." I winked.

He smiled and my heart tripped again. "So fucking bossy."

“You better believe it.” I gathered my tattered resistance and fled to the bedroom, sprawling atop the mattress to stare at the decorative plaster angles carved into the ceiling, so neat and clean, so . . . reassuring.

I breathed through the panic of my racing heart. I could hear Leon moving in the bathroom and I searched for that familiar, reassuring annoyance I generally felt whenever someone was in my house. The prickling irritation to get rid of them. I didn’t need people. I didn’t need *men*. I’d been fine on my own. Perfectly fucking fine. And the fact I was speaking in past tense just pissed me off even more.

When I could breathe again, I crawled under the covers and thought of all the men that had passed through my bed, none of them lasting for more than a few laughs and mutually sated bodies. None who I’d worried about. None who I’d bathed. None who I’d fed. None who would be there in the morning and who I’d want to stay even longer. None who I’d held as they’d poured out their frustrations and pain. None, except Leon.

And when he finally joined me, looking more than a little unsure in my space, I never once hesitated. I held my arms open for him like he was something special and choked down the ball of fear in my throat.

He switched off the light, smiled that sneaky smile that did stupid things to my heart, and crawled into my arms. But then, instead of fucking me through the mattress as promised, the bastard took my body apart inch by delicious fucking inch—an exquisite, slow-burn annihilation of all the crumbling walls I’d tried so desperately to shore up.

In a last-ditch attempt to hold my ground, I finally pushed him off and rolled to my hands and knees, buried my damp face in the pillow, and offered myself for his taking—anything to escape the bruising tenderness in his eyes as Leon rode my sweat-slick body to climax, fucking me deep until he cried out and exploded inside me like a million shooting stars.

And when he folded his big body over mine and reached around to finish me off, a single touch was all it took, and I

rode a wave of pleasure, with him still buried deep in my body. I shouted and slammed my fist on the mattress and he pressed soothing kisses the length of my spine until I was floppy in his arms. And when I was still and sated, he slipped gently from my body, disposed of the condom, and flipped me to my back. All those big muscles curled around my slim frame, and with his head on my shoulder and his leg stretched across my thighs, he pinned me down.

Oh, the irony of it.

I kissed the sweat from his brow as he hummed contentedly. All the men I'd had in this bed and I'd never felt anything close to the peace I felt in that moment. I sighed and stroked his hair. "So, that was pretty okay, I guess."

He snorted. "Yeah? When my dick checks back in, I'll let you know. But there's always room for improvement. You can never have too much practice, right?"

I chuckled and nipped his nose. "Mmm. A training schedule. I like it. But we're gonna need a lot more lube."

He closed his eyes and let me hold him. A shaft of weak grey moonlight striped our bodies at the hip, and I pressed kisses to every part of him I could reach until his breathing slowed and his body sank like a leaden weight against me. Not that I was going to move. Leon needed to sleep and rest his demons, and he was going to get what he needed if it fucking killed me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Kip

“FOR FUCK’S SAKE,” I HISSED, EASING MY BEDROOM DOOR closed on a still-sleeping Leon so I could go rip a new one in whoever the hell was hammering on my front door at zero arse o’clock on a Sunday fucking morning.

“What the hell is *wrong* with you?” I had the words out before the door was even halfway open and I had time to see it was George. *Shit*. I sucked in a sharp breath and schooled my expression. “On second thought, don’t answer that.” I folded my arms and leaned on the jamb. “We really don’t have time to do the question justice.”

He blinked slowly and I carefully ignored his flinch. He could go fuck himself for all the times he’d ignored worse than that with me. Like watching me walk out the door when I was barely old enough to look after myself. And for taking their side.

“What do you want?” I eyed him disdainfully. “I thought I made myself clear last week.”

“Can you not just answer your bloody phone?” he grumbled. “Is it really too much to ask?”

“Yes. Now what do you want?”

“Chris?” A sleepy voice came over my shoulder and I turned in time to catch a half-naked, hair-mussed, gorgeous Leon emerging from the hallway. “Problem?” He threw a glance over my shoulder at George, who was busy swallowing his tongue and, by the looks of it, most of the rest of his body if the colour in his cheeks and wide-eyed disbelief were anything to go by.

“No, babe.” I ignored the quirk in Leon’s lips at my endearment. “Just family stuff. Nothing I can’t handle.”

His expression instantly cooled and he gave George another, longer once-over before joining me at the door and casually slipping an arm around my waist. I could’ve kissed

him. And so I did, just on the cheek but worth it to hear my brother's soft gasp.

"Do you need me to deal with this, sweetheart?" Leon asked softly, and I almost laughed. The man caught on fast.

"Nah, I've got it." I turned back to find George staring at Leon's impressively inked chest with undisguised astonishment. "George, this is my *boyfriend*, Leon." I almost jumped as Leon lightly pinched my arse, the fucker.

I was expecting shock, but my brother surprised me by proffering his hand and croaking, "Nice to meet you . . . Leon."

Leon stared at his hand for a few seconds, then gave it a quick shake. "Yeah, well, wish I could say the same."

My brother's face turned a dark crimson but all he did was nod. I slipped my hand into Leon's and squeezed it in thanks, remembering his words from the night before that I'd dismissed so loftily as a trite nothing. "*I've got your back, baby.*" I took it all back.

"Can I maybe come in?" George's gaze flicked nervously between us.

"No," I snapped. Then I sighed and stood back and waved him past. "Fine. Whatever. Just keep it short. We're . . . busy." I threw a deliberately sultry look Leon's way and he caught it mid-air and bent to kiss me. The man was so getting laid senseless the minute my brother was gone.

I closed the door and faced my brother. "Is this about James again? Because I've said all I'm going to on the subject."

George flicked Leon a wary glance.

"You can talk in front of Leon. He knows *everything*."

George turned a deeper shade of red than I thought possible and glanced between us again. "Yes. He's, um—the doctors say he's on his way out. A month or so, maybe. He's on oxygen and a lot of pain relief, and he's got nurses coming

twice a day for his meds and home help. Mum visits when she can, but James wants to stay home as long as possible.”

I blinked. “That happened fast.”

He winced. “Yeah. Caught us all by surprise. I just wanted to let you know in case you . . .” He trailed off.

“In case I changed my mind?” I finished tartly.

George nodded. “I know you said you didn’t want to see him, but I wanted to let you know, just in case.” He hesitated. “He’s, um . . . still at home, although I don’t know for how long.”

“Did *they* send you?” I asked in a bitter tone, and Leon tugged me closer, slipping an arm around my shoulders.

George looked between us, but I couldn’t read his expression. “No. Mum and Dad don’t know. I guess I, um . . . well, I wanted to see you again.”

Huh. I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to hate him. I wanted to sneer and shove him out the door and tell him to fuck off. I wanted to tell him that I didn’t need any of them, and I especially didn’t need him. I didn’t need his platitudes, or his blushes, or his so-called consideration. I wanted to tell him that I didn’t miss his laughs or his hugs or his joking around. That I didn’t miss my only brother like a black pit of aching grief in my heart that I’d been carrying around for ten years.

But there was an earnestness in his eyes that kept the cork in that bottle of sour contempt bubbling in my chest. “Yeah, well, I suppose I should thank you for that, at least,” I managed and tried to ignore the immediate relief in George’s eyes.

“Right, well, I’ll leave you to it.” He reached for the door handle, then turned back. “Look, I’m sorry, Christopher. I hate what happened to us and I wish I could go back and do it differently. We were so young, for fuck’s sake. What was I supposed to do? They’re our parents—”

“And I was your fucking brother, George. Your *little* brother. And we haven’t been young for a long time now.

Long enough for you to have come to me if you really wanted to talk.”

He stared at me, his jaw working like he had a million things on the tip of his tongue, but in the end all he did was nod and say, “I know. But I’m still sorry.” And then he left.

The minute he was gone, Leon pulled me into his arms. Trembling turned to tears, and tears to fists on Leon’s chest. I wriggled and complained, but he refused to let me go until I’d calmed enough to stop sucking in stuttering gulps of air. Then he pushed me back and brushed my hair from my face. “Boyfriend, huh?” He smiled down at me. “That’s twice in two days. You wanna be careful or you’ll be throwing the word around willy-nilly like you might even like the sound of it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Shut up. And get your sweet arse in that bedroom. You’ve earned yourself a treat.”

But he didn’t move. Instead, he took my hands in his and waited until I met his gaze. “Do you want to talk about what just happened?”

The bitch of it was, I did. And since when was that ever a fucking thing with me? Since never. “Not now, please.” I traced his mouth with my fingertip. “Now, I just want you to make me fly for a bit. Can you do that?”

He lowered his lips to mine and slipped his tongue between them, sending my legs to jelly, kissing me like it was the most important thing he had to do that day. “Yeah, I can do that.” He smiled down at me. “And then after breakfast, how about we take a ride on the Harley and blow those cobwebs from both our brains? I brought the spare helmet, just in case.”

My heart kicked up at the thought of Leon’s grunty machine. “Awesome.”

“And pack some clothes.”

I arched a brow.

“You’re staying with me tonight. I want to wake up with you in my bed.” He waited on my answer, even though it

hadn't really been a question. Staying the night in his space was a step, and we both knew it.

And eventually I nodded. "All right. But I get the left side, same as here. It's a law, like gravity. What can I say? The stability of the universe depends on it."

"As long as you're next to me, I don't give a rat's arse where I sleep." He took my hand and kissed the palm. "I'll do what I'm told."

I graced him with a suitably lecherous grin. "Then we're gonna get along just fine."

"I'm sure I set the alarm." Leon stared at the control panel as I closed the back door to Flare.

We'd stopped by to grab Leon's spare set of leathers for me to drown in before we hit the road for Piha Beach. The sun was out, but an icy southerly licked at any skin it could lay its mitts on, and I'd spent the ride into town with my face smooshed into Leon's back and my hands up the front of his shirt. Okay, so that was hardly a hardship and not necessarily down to the weather, but I preferred to keep my skin attached to my body if we had an accident, and leathers would certainly help.

"You were a bit distracted." I grabbed his hand and pulled him around to land a smacker on his lips.

"Mmm." He deepened the kiss and his hands sneaked under my jacket to cup my arse. "Maybe we could just stay here. There's a bed upstairs with our names on it."

"I like the way you think." I licked a stripe up the side of his face and palmed his dick. "But you promised—"

"Well. Well. Well. What do we have here?" Rhys's all-too-familiar chuckle floated over Leon's shoulder.

Shit. I jolted from Leon's arms, but he grabbed my hand and just as quickly pulled me back, locking me into place. I

tried to be mad and failed. *Well, okay then. I guess we're doing this.* “Goddammit, Rhys, do you have to be so fucking sneaky?” I shot my friend a glare, which he dutifully ignored, grinning from ear to ear like the cat who’d got the cream.

“I go away for two weeks and look what happens.” He leaned back against the door. “The United Nations have got nothing on me.”

I groaned. “But what are you doing here?”

He looked around. “If I’m not mistaken, I own the place.”

I huffed in annoyance. “Yes, yes. But you only flew in at some godforsaken hour this morning, right? Shouldn’t you be jet-lagged or something?”

“Six a.m. to be precise.” Beck appeared behind Rhys, his equally amused gaze flitting between us and my shoulders slumped.

“Oh, god, not you too.”

Beck grinned broadly. “Aw, such a touching welcome. And yes, we’re both jet-lagged. But someone—” He tipped his head sideways at Rhys. “—was too wired to sleep, and so here we are.” He glanced at our held hands and Leon’s grip tightened around mine like he was worried I’d drop him like a hotcake, and okay, the thought wasn’t without merit.

“A good call, as it turned out.” He kissed Rhys on the cheek. “I wouldn’t have missed this for the world.”

Rhys smirked. “I told you, I have the best ideas.”

“Oh look.” I nudged Leon. “It’s Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Shame we can’t stay and chat.” I tugged Leon forward, but Rhys put out a hand to stop me.

“I’m sure Leon can grab whatever it is on his own.” Rhys’s eyes danced with humour. “I think I need a word with my manager.”

Leon snorted and planted a kiss on the corner of my mouth. I startled and then glared at him for all of two seconds before groaning and kissing him back. “Don’t be long.”

Leon turned to Rhys as he passed. “Leave him in one piece, okay?” Even with an attached smile, it sounded almost a threat, and when I caught Rhys’s surprised look, I poked my tongue out at him.

“And I think that’s my cue to wait in the car.” Beck headed to the front door.

And suddenly it was just the two of us left. Rhys bundled me into the office, shut the door, and shoved a Coke in my hands from a six-pack he had sitting on my desk. Then he took my damn chair.

“Sooooooo, you and Leon, huh? I thought it was just a one-time thing.”

I sighed and fell into the chair opposite, cracking the can and taking a long swallow. I didn’t even like Coke, but it provided temporary reprieve from answering. “It was meant to be.” I twirled the can on my jeans. “But then a second time kind of . . . happened, and then a third, and now—” I threw up my hands. “Well, now, who the fuck knows what it is? Certainly not me.”

He studied me for a few seconds, then grinned from ear to ear. “It looks good on you.”

I frowned. “What?” I took another slug of Coke and winced at the taste. God, I hated the stuff.

“Being with someone. Falling for someone.”

I snorted the Coke out my nose, down my jacket, and all over my desk. “Shit.” I grabbed a Kleenex and madly set about mopping it up. “What the fuck are you talking about? We’ve barely even been talking a couple of weeks.” I threw the Kleenex in the bin and glared at my friend.

Rhys didn’t bat an eye. “That might be so, but you’ve been eyeing each other for two years. Two long, frustrating years. At least it felt that way for those of us on the side-lines. You’re not strangers, Kip. No matter how much you argue the point. You know each other better than you think you do.”

I scowled, hating that he was right. The whole rushed-time thing had been an excellent fall-back excuse. “And you’re

sitting in my chair, by the way.”

He ignored me. “You forget that I know you, Kip. And I have never seen you look at a guy like you were looking at Leon when I walked in just now. Not to mention, I have never *ever* seen you hold hands with . . . *anyone*.”

My gaze slid to the wall, which seemed suddenly very shouty. Fucking burnt sienna. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I hold hands with plenty of people.”

“Who?”

Bugger. I took another sip of Coke and muttered, “You wouldn’t know them.”

He laughed. “Don’t lie to me. You suck at it. You’re too damn honest. Besides, this is good, Kip.”

I bristled. “Good? Why? Because then I can become like you lot? All coupled up and happy. What if I don’t want that, Rhys? Not everyone wants to have their hand held through life —” I caught the flinch in his expression and stopped short, wanting to claw every word back. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.” I reached across the desk and covered his hand with mine. “I’m happy for you and Beck. I really am. And you’re the strongest person I know. I just don’t know if that’s what *I* want.”

He stared at me for a long minute before his shoulders finally relaxed. “I get that you might see things that way.” His tone was uncommonly cool. “But loving someone isn’t a fucking character flaw, Kip. It’s an incredibly courageous act of trust and faith in another person, as opposed to running away from every relationship possibility that crosses your path.”

And ouch. I guess I deserved that.

He took a breath and softened his tone. “Look, I don’t know who hurt you and I don’t need to know. But I recognise the signs. Do what you want, Kip, you always do. But don’t throw away a chance at something special with Leon, if that’s what this is about, just because you’re scared. I spent seventeen years running away from relationships, and I’m so

fucking glad that people like you and Hunter steered me in the right direction when Beck finally came along. So, maybe you should listen to your own advice. You deserve to be happy, however that looks for you. And whoever snags your heart will be one of the luckiest men in the world. Because you will love hard, my friend, just like you do everything else in life. And I'm sorry if I put you on the spot."

Oh god. Friends were the absolute worst. I dropped my forehead to the desk and banged it a couple of times, welcoming the sting. Hopefully it would pass as an excuse for the welling tears.

Rhys's warm hand landed on my shoulder, and I chanced a look up. "I'm a fucking mess." I stood to face him. "And I'm so sorry for what I said."

He smiled kindly. "You like him that much, huh?"

I sighed and perched my butt on the corner of the desk. "To be honest, I don't know how I feel, only that he makes me feel . . ."

"Safe?" Rhys offered.

"God, I hate it when you do that," I grumbled. "He's got me so screwed up in my head, I can't think straight."

Rhys snorted. "As I said, you like him *that* much, huh?"

I let out a sigh. "Maybe."

He nodded. "Close enough. You know you can tell me anything, right?" His eyes remained steady on mine and I nodded.

"I do. And thanks."

"Anytime. Now, I think someone's waiting for you." Rhys nodded to where Leon was lounging against the service desk, watching us. "And would he really have ripped me a new one if I'd got you upset?"

I smiled at the complicated man watching me from the other side of the glass. "Oh yeah. In a heartbeat." The thought made me itch to kiss him.

“Good.” Rhys nodded in satisfaction. “You deserve nothing less.”

There was no answer to that, and so I left it alone. “I take it you two had a great time in New York?”

His mouth tipped into a smile. “The best.”

“And you were right, by the way.”

“I’m always right.” Rhys grinned. “But what was it about this time?”

I levelled a look his way. “I think I’ll do just fine in this new position of yours. The run of shirts should be ready in time to get them to the stores, fingers crossed. You’ll find a mock of that retail assistant ad you wanted in my top drawer. And if you want something to make you smile, there’s a pile of sketches in there as well, courtesy of our current junior salesman and requested by me. They’re ideas for a line of transition-friendly garments.”

Rhys’s eyes popped. “Wow. Now you’ve really got me curious.”

“He’s got talent, Rhys. And I think we should consider this seriously. But if you decide it’s worth a go, he needs to head this. Not you. Not us. With our help, but with him in front. It’s about pride and ownership, right?”

He nodded. “Message received. Now, go have a great ride.” He winked and I was pretty sure I blushed. “And as someone who looks a lot like you once told me, maybe try letting Leon in a bit more. Tell him how you feel, even if it’s just that you’re confused. You can’t expect him to read your mind. There’s a lot to love about you, Kip.”

I gave a wry smile. “This is not news. But the trouble is, he’s *already* in. It’s the getting him out that I totally suck at.”

Rhys chuckled. “Then maybe leave him alone and see what happens.”

I rolled my eyes. “Easy for you to say.”

He frowned. “No, it’s really not, Kip. And you of all people should know that.”

And I did. “You’re right. And thanks. For everything.”

“You’re welcome.” Rhys looked around the room. “Nice colour, by the way. What did you say it was?”

I glared at the walls and grumbled, “Burnt sienna.” The damn colour was gonna be etched on my headstone.

“Mmm.” Rhys nodded. “It suits you.”

I rolled my eyes as the universe laughed in my face. “So I’m told.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Leon

THERE WAS A LOT TO BE SAID FOR HAVING A WARM, HARD body pressed up against me on the back of my Harley for an hour or so, especially when said body belonged to Chris. It was a world-class distraction from my problems, not to mention the man was an octopus when it came to finding ways to sneak his hot hands up, under, and down my leathers, not that I was complaining.

But manoeuvring the Harley through traffic with an aching semi required dedicated focus, and the cheeky little shit had to know I was struggling. By the time we reached a surprisingly busy Piha Beach, chock full of surfers and families out for a Sunday drive, my dick was doing a fair impersonation of an origami swan, and I had to drag a laughing Chris fifty metres into a patch of native bush for a kiss that was emphatically not PG. I made sure every part of his mouth was licked to within an inch of its life, so that by the time I was done, Chris wobbled a little on his feet. Point to me.

To bolster our glucose levels after the strenuous exercise, we grabbed ice cream cones from the food truck in the car park—hokey pokey for me and passionfruit for him—and ate them under a pōhutukawa tree while watching a large group of brain-dead teenagers squeal and frolic in a rolling dark-green winter sea that was only a few icebergs short of the Antarctic. The future of our country was clearly in safe hands.

When we were done, Chris disposed of the rubbish in the bin and we sat side by side on the grass with my arm around his waist, his warm body so very right against mine. We ignored the raised eyebrows of a group of twenty-something men drinking beer in a car parked close by. To hell with the haters.

Chris leaned closer and I tightened my hold. He'd been quiet ever since the arrival of his brother that morning, and whatever had passed between him and Rhys didn't seem to have improved things. I had to assume the conversation had

been about us, and Chris's reserve didn't bode well for what we were doing. Did he regret his decision? Should I expect the worst? I wasn't ready for this thing between us to end before it had barely even started. But I also wasn't one for prolonging the agony.

Fuck. I took a deep breath and steeled myself. "Should I be worried?"

Chris turned to me, frowning. "Worried? About what?"

"About us?" I rested my head against his. "It's okay if you want to finish this trial, or whatever it is we're doing." I swallowed around the lump in my throat. "I mean, it's not okay . . . or it won't feel okay, for me . . . but I understand if you've realised it's not what you want."

His frown deepened and he turned to face me full on, pulling my hand from his waist. "That's not what I'm thinking. Jesus, Rhys was right."

"Rhys?" I didn't get it.

Chris sighed. "He said I should try letting you in a bit more. That I couldn't expect you to read my mind."

More? I somehow managed a smile. "Smart man. I knew I liked him."

Chris chuckled, turned, and settled back against me. My hand slipped under his jacket to wrap across his hot, flat stomach and find a home. I couldn't pretend anymore. Regardless of what Chris felt about me, I was gone like three-day-old fish as far as he was concerned.

"I like what we're doing." Chris spoke to the sea without meeting my eyes. "It's just hard for me to tell you. I've never . . . I don't know how to do this. But that doesn't mean I don't want to, because I do." He flicked a glance over his shoulder. "Last night, you asked if I thought you should talk to someone, about Caitlyn."

I nodded. "And you said you couldn't tell me what to do."

He turned sideways and I moved my leg so he could scoot between them. "So, here's a question for you, which I already

know has the same answer, but I want your thoughts.”

My brows peaked. “Chris Grantham wants my thoughts on something?” My hand flew to my chest. “Be still my beating heart.”

“Oh, shut up.” He pushed me and I fell backward onto the grass, laughing.

“Okay, okay.” I accepted his hand to pull me back up. “I take it this is *you letting me in?*”

He rolled his eyes. “If you’re gonna take the piss—”

“No, absolutely not.” I raised my hands. “I’m all ears.” I circled a finger around my face. “See, deadly serious.”

He narrowed his gaze but continued. “I don’t know what to do about my uncle.”

Oh. That sobered me fast. “Your uncle? Okay, serious stuff.”

Chris sighed. “It’s not only because of George’s visit. James texted me last week. He even tried to call.”

I thought of the call Chris declined while I was showering, and anger fired in my belly. His prick of an uncle really was a selfish jerk.

Chris patted my clenched hand. “Drop your hackles, Cujo. I didn’t reply or answer, but I have been thinking.” He frowned at whatever was showing on my face. “Yes, I know. He’s fucking with my head and I hate that he can still do that, but I also can’t ignore what’s happening. What if—” Chris hesitated, and I hated the hunted look in his eyes. “What if he’s genuine? What if he really does want to apologise? What if he wants to clear my name with my family?”

Jesus. I bit my tongue and said nothing, mostly because I had no fucking idea how to respond to questions as loaded as those.

Chris nudged my knee. “This is the part where you give me your thoughts,” he prompted, shooting me a weak smile.

I took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “Thoughts, not suggestions, right?”

He nodded. “Like I did with you last night.”

Like that still wasn't a minefield. “Okay, then. Well, playing devil’s advocate for a second, couldn’t the guy tell your family anytime he wanted? He doesn’t need to see you to make things right, does he? In fact, that would be the very best way to show he was genuinely sorry. Simply go ahead and set it right. Not expect anything of you.”

My heart sank at the expression on Chris’s face, like I’d just confirmed everything he’d suspected. But it still had to be said. Chris needed to make a decision on something other than a hope that might never eventuate and had the potential to hurt him, badly.

And so I pressed on. “But calling and texting you? After what he did? Jesus. That’s almost bullying or revictimising you. It’s *his* fucking conscience after all. *You* did nothing wrong. You don’t have to do *anything*. And considering what happened, my *opinion* is that practically summoning you to see him, going through your mother and your brother, is *not* the way to apologise.” I took his hands between mine. “And I’m concerned.”

He stared at me for a moment, then dropped his head. “Fuck, I knew it. I’ve been telling myself that all week. If he really wanted to make things right, he’d already have done it.”

I tipped his chin up with my finger. “But the real question is not whether *he* wants to see *you*, but whether *you* have anything to say to *him* before he’s gone and you lose the chance? This is not about what *he* wants. It’s especially not about any potential apology. If you go hoping for that, you could be hurt. This has to be about what *you* want. See him or don’t. There’s no right or wrong, but don’t be guilty, or coerced, or bribed into it. And if you do decide to go, I’d go with no expectations of anything from him.”

Chris blinked slowly, and his reply when it came was heavy and fraught with emotion. “Yeah, I know. I’ve been

telling myself that for days. It's just hard not to hope, right? After all this time."

I ran my thumb over the perfect arch of his lips. "As you said to me last night, I'll support you either way. That bastard deserves nothing from you, certainly not an easing of his conscience. You owe him nothing. He stripped your family from you." I huffed disgustedly. "For that alone I want to fucking kill the guy."

A smile tugged at the corner of his lips and he snagged the zip of my leather jacket and pulled me forward, rubbing our noses together. "You are so getting laid tonight."

I leaned forward and kissed him thoroughly, earning us a low whistle from the guys in the car. I turned, surprised to find two of them grinning at us like fools. Then they held up their joined hands and I chuckled. Guess you never knew.

Chris got to his feet and reached down for me to grasp his hand. "Come on, *boyfriend*. Let's go."

I grinned and let him help me up. "Saying it three times makes it true. You can't take it back."

He snorted. "The idea's growing on me."

I laughed. "Hardly a ringing endorsement. Are you sure you can't muster just a tad more enthusiasm?"

He went up on his toes and kissed me again, this time in full view of half the car park. "Is that better?"

I wiggled my hand between us in an effort to hide my shock. "Six out of ten."

His eyes popped. "It's a fucking monumental landmark in my life, honey, worthy of at least a 9.5." He prodded my chest, forcing me to step back. "Unless I'm groping someone in a club for a quick fuck, I don't do public displays of *anything*. You won the fucking lottery buster, and you don't even know it." He huffed and turned on his heels, but I grabbed him around the waist and spun him back into my arms.

He didn't struggle.

Raucous cheers broke from the car and I was reminded we had an audience.

“Oh, I know *exactly* how lucky I am.” I held his gaze so that he couldn’t misunderstand. “I’m in this one hundred percent. I *want* you. You’re scrappy, mouthy, sharp as a tack, and pretty damn wonderful. And we’re good together.”

His brows knotted. “I know. That’s what’s so fucking scary.”

I tucked a lock of hair behind his ears. “I’m scared too.”

“That I’ll change my mind about giving us a try?”

“No.” I shrugged. “About you *not* changing your mind. And about everything that might entail. About falling harder than I already am for you. About falling in . . . love. About not being good enough to keep you. About making a commitment, *any* damn commitment.”

He stared at me, eyes shining. “I thought it was just me.”

I pulled him tight against me. “No, it’s not just you. I spend half my time terrified you won’t want me, and the other half terrified you will and whether I can live up to that. We’ve been dancing around each other for over two years. Let me in and I’ll work damn hard to make sure it won’t ever be just you.”

His hot breath washed over my neck and he reached up and tugged on my beard, then flattened his hand along my jaw. “I’m trying.”

“I know you are.” I leaned back so I could look in his eyes. “You said your uncle taught you to ride a bike?”

His eyes narrowed. “Yes. I got my licence not long after I left home. It was cheap transport. But I haven’t ridden for years.”

“You wanna try the Harley?”

He stared at me. “Me? Ride your Harley? Are you fucking crazy?” His palm lay flat across my forehead. “Are you sick?”

I laughed and handed him his helmet. “I’m not saying I’ll let you loose on it. There’s a quiet country road to the left, back before we hit the highway. You can have your first lesson. Are you game?”

His eyes blew wide with delight, and he slugged me on the arm. “Am I game to have a mountain of raw power between my thighs? Pfft. It’s like you don’t even know me. Get on that bike, mister. And did I mention you were getting laid tonight?” He tugged me toward the bike.

“Once or twice.” I straddled the Harley, and its engine leapt into life between my legs.

The guys in the car cheered.

“Well, you can cancel that idea.” Chris jumped up behind me and shouted in my ear. “I’m gonna fucking ruin you is what I’m gonna do. You won’t be able to walk straight for a week.”

I laughed and reached back to rap my knuckles twice on his helmet. “I’m counting on it.”

“Damn right.” Chris wrapped one arm around my waist and threw his other over my shoulder, pointing out of the carpark. “That-a-way.”

It may not have been the smartest idea to offer to teach Chris to ride the Harley in the middle of nowhere, but the road was sleepy quiet, and what the idea lacked in common sense, it more than made up for in the killer smile that split his face the first time he managed to get a few metres on his own. At the beginning, he could barely hold my baby upright and I spent a lot of time stopping them both from toppling. But Chris already had the basics, and more importantly, he had a healthy respect for the machine’s power. His natural balance kicked in as soon as the Harley was moving, and I knew, given time and practice, he’d nail it. Not to mention, the sight of him riding my girl gave me a world-class hard-on that hadn’t gone unnoticed.

He couldn't stop smiling, or talking, or feeling me up at every opportunity as I took him through the Harley's quirks. And when the lesson was done and we called in for fuel on the ride back, he pushed me into the washroom, locked the door, and I was given a personal masterclass in exactly what an appreciative and animated Chris was capable of. Five minutes with his gorgeous lips around my cock and it was all over.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked through the helmet mic when I indicated and turned into the quiet Meadowbank Street.

"You'll see." I rode almost to the end before parking in front of my little house.

"Is this yours?" He dismounted the Harley, removed his helmet, and studied the little villa with an interested eye.

I set the Harley on its stand and joined him, more than a little nervous. "Yep. Bought and paid for, although the bank owns most of it." I badly wanted him to like it. After all, it was him I pictured on that front porch with me. But having him stand in front of the place, in front of a fantasy future I already pictured in my head, was kind of surreal.

His expression gave nothing away, and when he didn't say anything either, I started to worry. Was it a mistake bringing him there? Would my boring suburban dreams send him running for the hills? Ugh. Of course they would. What was I thinking? I'd fucked up. And I was about to apologise when—

"It's lovely." He almost whispered the words as he strolled along the sidewalk, studying the house from every angle.

I let out the breath I was holding and joined him. "You really think so?"

He turned to me with soft eyes. "I do. It's very you."

I frowned and looked back at the villa. "It is? My brother thinks it's too cutesy for a big guy like me."

Chris slid his hand around my waist, and I slung an arm over his shoulder. And we stood there like that, staring at the house.

“Then he doesn’t know you very well,” he added after a minute. “You’re soft as butter on the inside. And why the hell shouldn’t you have a pretty house? Men are allowed to have pretty things.”

“I know.” I kissed the top of his head. “I have you, after all.”

He looked up at me with flushed cheeks. “Well, I think it’s a great house.” He ignored my comment. “And I can see you playing your guitar on that porch.”

I can see you with me. But what I said was, “That’s the first thing I thought when I saw it. Not sure about the colour though.” We both considered the pale green and white palette.

“No.” Chris pulled a face and tilted his head as he scrutinised the property. “Maybe a soft peach and cream?”

I smiled and pulled him against me. “That’s a great idea. You’re hired.”

“I’m wha—”

“Leon?” The wife of the owner couple waved to us from the front door. “You can bring your boyfriend inside for a look, if you like.”

Shit. I winced and squeezed Chris’s shoulder. “We don’t have to—”

“It’s fine.” He grabbed my hand. “Although I’m beginning to wonder if I have the damn word tattooed on my forehead. Nobody warns you about this.”

I chuckled and led him grumbling up the path to meet the current owners, somewhat surprised when they oohed and aahed and fussed over him like he was their own. He shot me a few helpless panicked looks that I dutifully ignored. It was . . . nice, seeing him fussed over by an affectionate apron-clad septuagenarian. There wasn’t a guy alive who deserved a little tender mothering more than Chris, and I watched with amusement as he was hustled into a chair, handed a napkin, and fed coffee and homemade sponge drops with raspberry jam and cream.

Eventually he relaxed and a soft pink stole into his cheeks along with a quiet smile in his eyes. It was a good look, one I wanted to see a lot more of, and I knew that if we lasted, my own parents would provide all that and more, if only Chris would let them.

An hour later, and enough sponge drops to require me upping my gym attendance, and we were headed back to Flare, a much mellower version of Chris at my back. Me too, and I couldn't have been happier. For a day that had started as a potential shitshow of epic proportions, it had turned out kind of amazing.

That spark of hope that had taken up residence in my gut was flickering madly, and I was almost ready to fan it. Chris had said he was trying, had been surprised that I'd thought he might walk away, and had cared for me after the lunch with my parents in a way I'd never expected. It was damned hard not to get my hopes up. I wanted this. I wanted him. I wanted it all.

I parked out back of Flare, and we hustled up to the flat intent on nefarious deeds. But before we got to the bedroom my phone went off and Jenn's name flashed up on the screen.

"Damn. I should get this." I pulled free of Chris's hand. "Hey, Jenn. What's up?"

Chris ran a playful fingertip down my chest to my hardening dick.

I slapped it away and mouthed, "Behave."

"Can you take Susie for an hour?" Jenn sounded distracted, but my attention was locked on Chris who was slowly stripping his clothes into a pile on the floor, adding an inviting wiggle of his tush for good measure. I shot him a mock glare and headed to the kitchen.

"I have to go pick up Kevin from his rugby after-match out by the airport and Susie's been fussing all day. She'll be a nightmare in the car and your parents are out at golf. I'll pick her up on the way back."

Chris walked past in nothing but a smile, and I groaned.

“Are you okay?” Jenn asked.

“I’m fine.” I rolled my eyes at Chris and pitched a tea towel at his junk. He caught it on the fly and draped it over his head, the idiot. “Yeah, of course I can take her.”

Chris mouthed the word “Susie?” and I nodded. And as Jenn ended the call, Chris sashayed his pert little butt over to his clothes and started dressing.

I shoved the phone in my pocket and pulled him in for a kiss. “And just where do you think you’re going?” There wasn’t anything in the world better than a warm, naked, wriggling Chris pressed hard against me.

He frowned. “You’ve just landed babysitting duty, right?”

I nodded. “So? You don’t have to go. Susie loves you.”

A flicker of nerves crossed his face and the penny dropped. One look at Chris and me all cosy in the flat, and Jenn would know. Five minutes later and every damn person in my family would know as well.

It was a big fucking step for a guy who could barely *say* the word boyfriend without crossing himself.

“Too much?” I ventured.

“I just . . .” And again, Chris hesitated. Then he blew out a sigh and his shoulders relaxed. “Fine, I’ll stay. After all, Rhys and Drew know, and Ty and JJ guessed a while ago.” He paused to let that little nugget about my workmates sink in and I groaned at the realisation. “Hell, even the couple you bought your house off know. So, why not your family as well?”

“I’m sorry.” And I meant it. “You didn’t sign up for this, at least not all in one day.”

He wriggled against me. “Oh, I’m pretty sure I did. But I’m not forgetting about our plans. An hour or so with your adorable niece, and then the adults get to play. Deal?”

I lowered my lips to his. “Got it.” And somehow, I knew it was time. “But in the spirit of full disclosure, there’s something I haven’t told you about Susie, or should I say about me and Susie.”

Chris's expression turned to immediate concern. "She's okay, right?"

"She's fine," I assured him. "But . . . she's not actually my niece."

"She's—" He frowned. "What?"

"Susie's not my niece." I took a deep breath. "She's actually my biological child."

Chris paled and stepped out of my arms. "She's your . . . daughter?"

I shook my head. "She's my biological *child*. She's Jenn and Kevin's *daughter*. I offered to be their sperm donor when they had trouble conceiving. I thought you should know, especially since we're . . . doing what we're doing . . . boyfriends. And if anything happens to them, I'm next in line."

Chris gaped, then shook his head. "Um . . . wow. So you're her guardian? You'll be her parent if they . . . ? And if we . . . then I would . . . ? Shit."

I nodded, slapping myself for not thinking sooner how the very idea might unnerve Chris. He'd been clear he didn't see a family in his future, and I'd ignored it, hoping it would change with time and with . . . well, us. "I'm sorry. I should've said something sooner. I didn't think, because the guardianship thing was only just decided recently. And it's not like anything is likely to happen."

He stiffened. "But it could."

I opened my mouth to brush the very idea aside and then closed it again. No one knew better than I did that shit happened. "Yeah, it could. Anything is possible. And if this is a dealbreaker for you, I'll be really fucking gutted, but . . . she's my biological daughter. She's a big part of my life, and I can't not be there if she—"

"I know." He stepped forward and placed a warm palm to my chest, and I could suddenly breathe again. "And I would never ask you to make that choice. But in the rush of getting to know you and fucking your brains out and vice versa, I'd kind

of forgotten the whole family part of this plan you have for your future.” He gnawed on his lower lips as he studied me. “And I still don’t know how I feel about it.”

“That’s not a no, and I don’t need—”

“Yes, you do.” He kissed me softly. “You were born to be a father and you’ll be so fucking great at it. I just don’t know that I would.”

I ran my thumb over his cheek and spoke softly. “Still, not a no. And I happen to disagree on that. I think you’d be a brilliant dad.”

He flushed brightly and looked away.

“But can we maybe take this one step at a time?” I pressed, kissing his forehead. “Maybe wait until we see if we even work before we have the big family talk?”

His bright green eyes searched my face. “But you want a family. You were clear.”

I smiled and pulled him against me, the cool of his bare skin making me open my jacket around him. “I want *you*. That’s all I know right now. We’ll have the conversation, I promise, but maybe give both of us some time to see where this goes first.”

He was quiet for a few seconds, then he nodded against my chest. “All right. But we *will* talk.”

“Agreed.”

He put his hand over my heart and smiled the softest smile. “Susie’s the angel above your heart, isn’t she?”

I nodded, unable to find the words, and Chris removed his hand and kissed the spot. Then pulled my head down to kiss the damp from my cheeks. “You’re a good man.”

I met his gaze and held it. “So are you.” We stood like that for a moment until the sound of Jenn’s Jeep pulling in at the back of Flare broke the spell. “Do you think you can put some damn clothes on so you don’t scare the nice little toddler?” I gave his bare arse a gentle slap, opened my jacket, and let him step free.

“You say the sweetest things.” He bundled his clothes into a ball and took off for the bedroom, while I headed downstairs to let the girls in.

“Here’s her bag.” Jenn dumped the duffel on the couch. “It’s only for an hour, but sure as hel—eggs—” She grimaced. “—if I don’t bring everything, she’ll ask for something I didn’t pack and then throw a merry fit.”

“You wouldn’t do that, would you?” I tipped Susie onto her side in my arms and blew a raspberry on top of her *Frozen* sweatshirt, then I gave a loud groan and pretended to stumble. “Man oh man, you’re getting heavy.”

She giggled and grabbed my nose. “You’re silly. Do it again.”

I grinned and obliged, and she dissolved into chortles of laughter.

“I think you’d better go check the bedroom,” I told her. “Bo-Bear might have come with me.” I set Susie on the floor and she ran for the bedroom and the stuffed bear I always kept on my bed.

Jenn studied me warily, swinging her key ring on her finger. “So, Mum told us you guys talked.”

Here we go. “We did. It went okay.”

“So she said.” Jenn glanced toward the bedroom. “They’re just worried about you. We all are. Evie nearly flipped her lid when she heard. She’s changed her flights to stay a bit longer this time, and Geoff said he knew we shouldn’t have done it this way. That we should’ve talked with you months ago. He’s right. We’re all sorry that it got to this point.”

I held up my hands. “It’s okay. I’m fine. I told Mum and Dad I’d go to the anniversary dinner after. You don’t have to worry. And Geoff’s already called. *Everyone* has. It’s okay, it really is.”

She didn’t look convinced.

“So, um, what does everyone think about the Gina thing?” I ventured.

Jenn's gaze shot to the sound of Susie's laughter. "Is she okay?"

I shrugged, trying to delay the inevitable. "She's laughing, right? That has to be a win."

Jenn nodded. "True. And it was a shock, about Gina, but I think everyone is okay with it now." Susie's laughter drifted into chatter and Jenn shot me another questioning look.

"Are you sure she's okay?"

Fuck. I sighed and glanced over my shoulder toward the bedroom. "Chris... Kip, is here."

Her eyes almost popped out of her head. "Kip? What on earth—"

"Don't," I warned. "Not now."

Jenn hesitated then zipped her mouth, but her eyes danced with mischief. "Okaaay, but we are so going to talk about this."

There was never any doubt about that.

"Anyhoo—" She grinned wickedly. "—getting back to what I was saying, you really need to come to family dinner next weekend. Kev said he's asked you. It's been too long since you were last there."

My gaze slid away. "I'll think about it."

She rested a hand on my arm. "Well, you know where we are if you change your mind or want to talk."

I covered her hand with mine and changed the subject. "You don't usually do pick-ups after a game. This is unusually wifely of you. I'm impressed."

"Shut up." Jenn rolled her eyes and I guessed Kevin was in deep shit with his wife. "He's tanked, the idiot," she grumbled. "They had a huge win against whatever team they were playing and then over-celebrated. His ride is too pissed to run him home. Or at least that's how Kev's playing it. Men. Bunch of toddlers, all of you."

"Hey," I protested. "I'm at least a teenager."

She looked me over and sighed. “I have eight words for you, brother-in-law. Kentucky Fried Chicken and Wheel of Death rollercoaster.”

“Oh god,” I groaned, the memory alone enough to set my stomach churning.

“I think I should hear this story.” Chris wandered out, looking way too comfortable in the flat, and Jenn’s gaze zeroed in on me.

“We’re playing with Bo-Bear,” Susie announced, her hand tucked securely into Chris’s while Bo-Bear himself was nestled into the crook of Chris’s other arm. “He likes Kip.”

I didn’t blame him. And the sight of Susie and Chris hand in hand almost melted me on the spot. At least until Chris caught my eye with a warning look that clearly said, *don’t make more of this than it is*.

To Jenn, he nodded seriously. “It’s been an honour. The bear has style. Right, kid?” He smiled down at Susie and my niece returned an adoring gaze most other people had to fight for.

And oh god. It was nothing new. Chris had always been good with Susie *and* Jenn. Hell, I’d spent two years supremely jealous of their easy relationship with him when mine was . . . not.

“Well, well, well. Kip.” Jenn looked slyly between us, a huge grin in place. “Fancy you being here. And on a Sunday as well. I almost didn’t believe it when Leon told me.” She was clearly trying not to laugh, and I groaned and shook my head. “I take it my brother-in-law finally got his head out of his ars—butt and asked you out?”

Chris’s lips turned up in a smug little smile and he arched a brow my way.

“Don’t.” I stabbed a finger at him. “The last two years was not just my fault, and you know it. Tell her how many times I tried to—no, you know what, don’t do that. Don’t say another word.”

Chris kept grinning, the little shit.

“How many times you did what?” Jenn looked between us.

“Nothing.” I folded my arms. “Absolutely nothing.”

Jenn sighed and raised her palms. “Nope. Forget I asked. I suspect I don’t want to know the answer. I’m just happy you guys finally saw what everyone else saw.”

I threw her a withering look. “And what was that, dearest sister-in-law?”

She grinned. “That you two couldn’t possibly dislike each other that much without there being something simmering beneath it all. It’s been like watching two planets on an ever-decreasing orbit toward some inevitable collision. You were either going to implode spectacularly or merge into a brilliant star.”

Chris broke into a laugh and I glared at my sister-in-law. “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

She waved me off. “Kevin can wait. This is way more interesting. Besides, he’ll kill me if I don’t get all the details I can before I leave.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fat chance of that, so I suggest you be on your way. The man must be a saint to have you as a wife.”

Jenn laughed. “Well, we all know *that’s* not true.”

“*Goodbye*, Jenn.” I walked to the front door and opened it.

Jenn followed, her smug grin not dimming for a second. At the door she turned and called Susie over. “Gotta kiss for Mummy?”

Susie immediately ran across, tugging Chris behind her. “Mummy going to get Daddy?” she checked.

“Yes, sweetheart. Mummy’s going to get your *wonderful* Daddy,” Jenn answered, rolling her eyes.

“And you’re staying with us.” I ruffled her hair and tried not to stare at the comfortable way she leaned against Chris’s leg. “We’re gonna have lots of fun.”

Jenn popped a kiss onto Susie’s head. “Bye, blossom. Look after your uncle and make sure he’s a good boy.”

“I’m always good.” I stepped back to open the door and accidentally stood on Chris’s foot in the process.

“Ouch.” He grabbed my waist to steady himself.

“Sorry.” And without thinking, I leaned in and kissed his cheek.

Chris flushed and his gaze jerked to Jenn who was staring at us with an expression caught somewhere between surprise and concern.

Shit.

Jenn caught my gaze and held it. “Okay then. That was sweet.” She turned to Chris. “Nice to see you, Kip. Or should I call you Chris?” she asked with barely hidden glee.

Chris shot me a look. “Kip is good.”

She smirked. “I thought so. Then Kip, it is. I’ll look forward to seeing you at one of our legendary Steadman family dinners sometime soon.”

Chris blanched and I fired Jenn a threatening look which she dutifully ignored. “And my work here is done.” She patted me on the cheek. “See you kids in an hour. Behave yourselves in front of the toddler.”

I called out as she headed down the stairs. “I don’t suppose it’ll do any good to ask you to keep this to you and Kev?”

She laughed. “Your chances rate right up with a snowball in hell, sunshine. I’d put my phone on silent if I were you.”

I groaned and closed the door before shooting Chris an apologetic look. “Sorry.”

He shrugged. “Guess there’s no hiding now.” But surprisingly, he didn’t seem too worried. “Come on, Susie, I’m hungry. Uncle Leon must have *something* full of sugar and bad for us to eat, right?”

“Chocolate,” she whispered and dragged him over to the fridge.

I was following to vet their snack choice when a text from Jenn came through. *If you haven’t already, you need to tell*

that boy how you feel. You're not fooling anyone.

And another straight after. *I'm happy for you.*

The woman was scarily smart. She was also right. I wasn't sure how long I could keep my feelings to myself, but at the risk of scaring Chris away, I had to try a little bit longer.

Then another text landed on my phone. *Should I be worried?*

Had I mentioned smart?

I pocketed my phone and prayed the answer to her question was *no*.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kip

I TIPTOED DOWN THE STAIRS FROM THE FLAT, SCHOOLING THE smile from my recently well-fucked face, the image of Leon sprawled boneless across our—*his* bed still fresh in my mind. I'd planned on beating Drew into work, but instead found him sitting in my chair wearing a shit-eating grin.

“You do realise this is *my* office?” I shoved his feet off the top of my desk and jerked my thumb at him. “Out.”

He got lazily to his feet, circling the desk to sit in the chair opposite. “According to my tally, that makes two weeks in the bed of a certain tattoo artist who shall remain nameless,” he announced loftily, steepling his fingers.

“And that’s none of your business,” I growled.

Drew grinned. “Merely an observation, you know, like the weather forecast, only mine seem to be a lot more accurate. Like how I know you’ll be coming down those stairs *again* tomorrow.”

I eyed him up and down, noting the retro houndstooth jacket, black leather vest, and khaki slacks. “Then I suggest you observe your way out of my office to log into the point of sale before I make any of my own observations regarding the state of your future employment. Nice look, by the way.”

He beamed. “The classics never go out of fashion.”

I pulled a face. “Except bell bottoms. They were always a mistake. What the hell was wrong with those people? But before you go, how did the talk with Rhys go?”

“Oh, great.” Drew’s cheeks pinked. “He wants me to choose three of the designs for a more detailed workup. If he likes what he sees, he’ll get samples done. And we came up with a possible label name. FlatR. But with my name attached, not his.”

He looked as happy as I’d ever seen him and I couldn’t help but smile. “Great name. And good for you.” I pulled up

our accounting software, ready to get to work, but Drew was still standing in the doorway, shuffling from foot to foot. I put down my pen and sat back. “Okay, come on, spit it out.”

He sighed. “I just want to say thanks . . . for everything. I know it was you who talked Rhys into taking me on at the start, and now you’ve done this. I—” He swallowed hard. “Well, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate everything you’ve done. You guys saved my life, but especially you. You never once questioned what I was doing. You just believed in me, and then you helped me try and do what I needed to. I can’t thank you enough, especially after my parents . . . well, you know. Anyway, I just wanted you to know how grateful I am.”

I blinked, not sure what the hell to say, because . . . shit. And I wasn’t sure I could speak past the choking lump in my throat anyway. In some ways, teenage Drew had reminded me of myself at that age, and so I’d simply acted on instinct, knowing what it meant to walk away from your family, for whatever reason, and wanting him to have some of the support that hadn’t been there for me.

“Well, I, um . . . thanks,” I finally managed, unable to hold his gaze, which was a first. “But we would’ve been stupid not to grab you while we could. You’re smart and hardworking and you have a natural flair for fashion. You’ve earned your way here, Drew. This was never about charity. And as for the other, I just gave you a little push, that’s all.”

“It was more than that and you know it,” he insisted. “You guys are family to me. Hell, you and Rhys were more parents to me than my own, right from the first day I turned up in your back yard. Advice, support, acceptance, a push in the right direction, a safety net when I needed it. You were there for me when my parents weren’t, and I won’t forget it.”

My heart hammered in my chest as I tried to process his words. *Parents?* “You’re most welcome, but we’re not special. Lots of others would’ve done the same.”

He snorted and shook his head. “But that’s just it. *They* didn’t. *You* guys did. Family is about being there for someone

when they really need it, right? That's when it counts. And you guys did that for me. That's all I'm saying."

I wanted to argue that being family, being a parent, was about so much more than that. But his words resonated so deeply with my own experience that I knew he was right. I didn't care about anything my parents had said or done before everything was blown to pieces. Sometimes they got it right, sometimes they didn't. What mattered was that they weren't there when it really counted, and that changed everything. It erased everything else, and I would never, ever repeat that mistake, be it with a boyfriend, a friend, a workmate, or . . . a kid, like Drew had been, like . . . Susie.

"Oh, and one more thing." Drew watched me from the doorway, a nervous, almost shy smile tugging at his lips.

I arched a brow. "There's more?"

Drew's cheeks flamed and his words came out in a garbled rush. "Gary's taking me to lunch this week. Just thought you might like to know." And then he turned tail and was gone from my office in a puff of smoke and hormonal angst, leaving me to stare at my computer screen, grinning like a loon and wondering what the hell had happened to my life in the space of a few short weeks.

Because Drew had been right about that part too. Apart from a quick trip to my apartment for clean clothes and a bag of toiletries, I'd been all but living with Leon for two weeks—minus the *all but* part. Weekday nights we spent at the flat, the weekends at my apartment. So yeah, there was that.

For two weeks, we'd lunched together every day and cooked together at night. Then we'd watch a movie, talk until midnight, or maybe share a bath if we were at my place. I'd curl up on the couch and listen to Leon play his guitar, and we'd fuck like bunnies in bed. Sometimes, at work, I'd catch myself humming the songs he'd played the night before, and the whole thing was so fucking domestic it made my teeth ache and my heart tingle with something suspiciously like contentment.

I was a walking fucking stereotype and I tried really, really hard to be pissed at that, but somehow, I wasn't. Because through it all, I'd begun to realise something kind of important.

I might actually be . . . happy.

Happy.

A groan broke my lips. The word no longer caught in my throat like a shard of glass but that didn't mean I trusted it. The loved-up couples I'd mocked so furiously for years might actually have a point. *Happy* did indeed appear to be something entirely different from blissfully fucked senseless. Who'd have guessed?

I slumped in my chair and watched Drew open the store for the day. Good for him taking a chance. Whereas me? None of this had been in my life plan. I hadn't seen the inside of a club in so long my favourite barmen were texting their condolences, and most of my so-called friends had stopped texting me at all.

So much for being friends. The ones who hadn't given up on me were cautiously happy, but in a way that said they were hanging around to cushion the inevitable fall when I finally came to my senses. Others danced around my social media with careful comments about missing me and how things weren't the same.

No shit, Sherlock. Tell me about it.

I spent half my Leon-free time planning how I was going to extricate myself from the mess of *us* and the other half counting down the hours until I could lay eyes *and* hands on him again. Because the trouble was, I just fucking liked being with him. There. Stick that in your pipe and smoke it.

I *liked* him. I more than liked him.

And oddly enough, we did fit. Just like Leon kept telling me. But we fit like a cactus in a bowl of water. My prickles to his welcoming gentle hold. No pressure. No filing the sharp points. He took me as I was, adjusting to my temperamental whims and, strangely enough, seeming to enjoy it. And I

added a touch of much-needed unpredictability to Leon's life, or so he said. Personally, I think he just liked the sex. We both worked crazy hours and we didn't give each other beef about it. Leon made sure I ate and slept and all that healthy stuff—herding me from my office when I lost track of time—and I did the same for him.

No one had ever done that for me. No one had ever cared enough. My friends loved me at a distance when I was in a *mood*, leaving me alone until it was safe to approach. Leon simply barreled right on through all those warning bells and held me, letting me snark and rant and rail at whatever injustice happened to be foremost in my mind. Then he'd kiss me, and sometimes more if it was needed, and my world would calm, the battles fading against the one bright spot that was him. And I lived to fight another day.

And every time Leon reminded me how we fit—which was legion—I still laughed like he was crazy, because admitting he was right came with a whole lot of conversation I wasn't quite ready for. Not that Leon was pushing me for any decision about us. He wasn't. Another huge point in his favour.

My phone vibrated on the desk and Leon's sexy face lit up the screen, making me smile. He looked fucked out and happy, as well he should. I'd taken the photo the night after my first Harley lesson. The night I'd watched him playing with Susie, his niece—no, his biological child—and wondered for the first time if maybe I wouldn't be so bad as a parent, after all.

I cleared my throat and answered in my best porn-star voice, “You've reached Dial a Dick. We cater to every need, big or small or uniquely shaped. How can I help?”

Leon's laughter rang in my ear, and I grinned at the welcome sound. He'd been too quiet lately, as the days counted down to Caitlyn's anniversary, the following Wednesday. It was going to be a big day for him. He'd taken Tuesday through Thursday off work, but he'd also stopped talking about it or responding to any of my questions with more than an offhand “I'm fine, it'll be fine.” All of which worried me.

And I had no idea if he wanted anything from *me* on the actual day. I *wanted* to be there for him, was desperate to, but he hadn't asked or even talked about options, and I had no idea what the fuck to do with that. All I knew was that I didn't want to push. I was so crap at this relationship shit.

“Uniquely shaped, huh?” He laughed again and I pictured his grey eyes dancing. “Do I even want to know?”

“Probably not, but we aim to please.”

He snorted. “Something I am forever grateful for. What are you up to?”

I looked around the office. “Sitting in my chair thinking of the excellent breakfast I had this morning.”

He snorted. “My come down your throat in no way constitutes breakfast.”

I gasped in mock horror. “Excuuuse me, I beg to differ. Your come covers all the food groups, particularly anything that was left in my stomach from last night.”

Silence, then, “Oh my god. You did not just say that. And now I won't be able to rid that image from my brain for the rest of the day, thank you very much.”

“You're welcome. Now, how can I help, or have you just rung to interrupt my day?” I grinned at his laughter. Maybe he was feeling better. Maybe he was going to ask me to go with him next Wednesday. Maybe—

“Stay where you are.”

“What? But—”

He hung up and I glared at the phone. Another score for the why-I-shouldn't-have-a-boyfriend side of my list. They were too damn disrespectful. Admittedly, that side of my list was a little short on ideas so I might've been clutching at straws.

Five minutes later and I was eating my disrespectful words, along with an excellent coffee—Leon had recently perfected Alec and Hunter's flash machine—and a couple of cherry compote-topped waffles with lashings of cream.

“Oh my god, these are delicious,” I mumbled around a mouthful, ignoring the covetous looks from my retail assistant. “Aren’t you supposed to be next door by now?”

Leon swiped a dollop of cream from his lips and—nope . . . not going there. “My first client cancelled, so I’m free until ten.”

“And your first thought was to make me waffles? Not to sleep in? I’m impressed.” I shovelled another forkful of waffle into my mouth.

“No, actually.” He shoved his empty plate to the side. “My first thought was to get you upstairs under false pretences and wow you with a new and improved version of the early morning wake-up call you gave *me* this morning.”

I arched a brow. “Personally, I would’ve gone with that option. Although, FYI, there *is* no new and improved version, honey. You can’t upgrade on perfection.”

“True.” Leon pushed his chair back and cradled his coffee. “But you can double or nothing.”

My fork froze halfway to my mouth, and I was pretty sure a cold sweat broke out on my forehead. “Double?” I squeaked.

He grinned and reached across to tip my mouth closed. “Your cock in my mouth and a dildo up your arse.”

I swallowed hard. “Oh, that?” I dropped my fork to my plate with a clatter. “Pfft. Like everyone hasn’t done *that*. It’s so . . . yesterday.” But the croak in my voice gave me away, and after a quick check to make sure the store was empty, I rounded the desk and straddled his lap. “But it has been a while.” I ran a fingertip down his nose. “Maybe we should try it again. Just so you can remind me how boring it is.”

He laughed and cupped my arse. “Excellent idea. But *tonight*.”

I pouted. “Spoilsport. You’re killing me here.”

He brushed noses and said, “I have every faith you’ll survive.” Then he kissed me long and slow, like we had all the time in the world, and with such aching tenderness it made my

nerves sparkle under my skin. And when he was done, he cradled my face, and I floated in those silver-grey eyes.

“Now, don’t freak out.”

I squinted at him. “Words which are absolutely guaranteed to freak me out.”

“Well, don’t.” But his smile was too uncertain to be reassuring. “This is just a heads-up because I’m done pretending.” His thumbs grazed my cheeks and he locked eyes. “I’m in love with you, Chris.” He drew a shaky breath like the admission might cost him everything, and I could hardly blame him for that. “I love every beautiful inch of you, and I figured it was time you knew.”

My stomach swooped and every drop of moisture in my mouth evaporated. *He’s in love with me? In a month? Leon loves me? Who the hell does that?* Disbelief and panic immediately rose to war with the unexpected thrill that thrummed through my body. “Leon, I—”

Leon pinched my lips together with his fingers, shutting me up. “I know you don’t want to hear it. I know you don’t believe it. And I know that right now you’re probably already mentally packing your bags and planning your escape, but I won’t lie about how I feel anymore. I also don’t expect anything from you in return. I just can’t keep pretending this isn’t happening to me, and I won’t.”

I shook my head. The man was crazy. Wonderful, but batshit crazy.

“Please don’t run from the idea.” His words tumbled out like he’d spent hours rehearsing and was determined to get through without interruption. He needn’t have worried. I was still stuck in the gobsmacked stage. “Take all the time you need to think about whether it’s something you can see yourself returning at some point. I don’t need to know today or next week or next month. I just want you to know where I stand. That I’m all in, baby. All the way.” And like he’d suddenly run out of words, he simply stopped and dropped his hands.

Stopped and waited.

For me.

To say something.

Anything.

But all I could do was sit there and stare at him. I gave breathing a go because that was good, right? And while I breathed, I tried to formulate a response; any damn words would've done, but my brain was on total lockdown. And the longer I sat there, the smaller the room grew. Pressing in. Suffocating. And with it, Leon's resolute expression wavered, the nervous hope in his eyes slowly dimming.

Oh god. I was royally screwing up. "Please, don't." I lifted the corners of his downturned mouth into a slightly creepy smile. "I'm not freaking out. I promise." He arched a disbelieving brow and I winced, my cheeks warming. "Okay, so maybe I am, a little. But Jesus, some warning next time, yeah? I've barely mastered the whole boyfriend idea—"

"Mastered is pushing it a bit." He attempted a grin and missed by a mile.

"Yeah, well, okay, so I'm a work in progress. But that's what I mean. You've kind of stunned me, and I don't know what to say right now except, thank you and I'm so fucking flattered. And yes, I know where you stand now. And that's okay too. But I'm not ready to give an answer to any of that, not yet. I just . . ." I trailed off with a sigh and he dropped his head.

Fuck.

"Leon." I tipped his chin up with my fingers until he met my eyes. "I'm not saying no or that I don't want you."

"Aren't you?" He looked so fucking miserable.

"No, I'm not," I said as forcefully as I could. "Listen to me. You have this whole future planned in your head that you've somehow made me a part of, and I love that you've done that, kind of, but *I'm* not clear about . . . *anything*. Not to mention you're at some kind of emotional crossroads with

your family, and there's Caitlyn's anniversary next week, and you're still dealing with your grief—”

“None of that's got anything to do with how I feel about you.” His eyes blazed.

I sighed and took a second to think. “Maybe. Maybe not. But I'm hardly the poster boy for stable emotional health right now, either. And when I think about you, about *us*, it sets off a jumble of emotions like a damn washing machine.” I cupped his cheeks. “But what I *do* know, what I'm sure of, is that you make me feel safe and cared for, something I haven't had in a long time. And Lord knows our chemistry is off the charts. So, this is me *not* walking away. I'm simply saying, I'm not there yet, wherever *there* is, love or not. I don't know and I can't promise, but I'm determined to find out.”

He hesitated, then nodded. “All right. I can work with that.”

Thank god. I lowered my lips to his and put everything I couldn't say and didn't understand into that one kiss, willing him to understand how very much I did care. How much I wanted him. How important he was. And as he opened for me and deepened the kiss, I felt the tension bleed from his body until we were both lost in a swell of emotions and I finally pulled away, breathless, and with my heart thundering in my ears.

“So . . . until tonight then?” He traced my lips with his finger.

I nodded. “Yeah, until tonight.”

He finally smiled worth a damn and my world tipped back on its axis.

And that night, in a bedroom lit by candles, Leon kept his promise and took me apart, slowly and effortlessly, piece by glorious piece, until everything faded into the warm press of his tongue, the heat of his mouth around my cock, and the relentless drive of a shiny pink dildo in my arse. Leon played my body like he'd been born with the music in his blood, until

I surged down his throat on a soft cry and with a heart full of hunger for something I couldn't quite reach.

He swallowed every drop like it was too precious to waste and then licked me clean—my cock, my balls, my taint, right back to my hole where he lingered, slipping his finger in and out like it fascinated him. “So hot.” He breathed the words over the sensitive opening and then kissed it softly.

And he kept on kissing: my balls, my cock, the scars on my thigh, my belly, my nipples, and both shoulders, crawling up my body until he stared down at me like he was trying to see into my soul. And finally, he lowered his mouth to mine, soft and inquisitive at first, then hard and demanding, his tongue sweeping through like he was cleaning house, and I was flinging open every door I had, meeting him stroke for stroke, finding a home I'd never even thought to look for.

Was this love? I had no fucking idea. All I knew was it felt so damn good.

And when he was done, Leon rolled me onto my side facing the wall and wrapped me in those safe arms. His big hot body stretched the length of my back and his knees tucked high behind mine until I was cradled and safe. Then he pressed tender kisses to every scrap of skin he could reach, humming contentedly like I was all he needed in the world.

Me. The idea blew my mind. The responsibility, utterly terrifying.

But that didn't make it feel any less good. Any less right.

Leon went quiet at my back, the gentle stroking of his fingers on my belly the only sign he was awake. One of the larger candles sputtered and died, the room growing heavy in its wake. Heavy and warm and dark and . . . safe.

“I've decided.” I breathed the words softly against my pillow. “I'm going to see James.”

Leon stilled. Then he rolled me onto my back, flicked on the bedside lamp, and perched on one elbow to study me. “Okaaaay.” His tone was understandably wary.

“For *me*.” It had taken me two weeks of flip-flopping around about the idea, but I was sure on that point at least. “I want to tell him what an asshole he is, to his face, before he dies.”

Leon’s mouth twitched like he was fighting a smile. “Well, I guess that’s as good a reason as any.”

“And there’s another.” I locked eyes. “He fucked me over back then, and in some ways he still is . . . with how I am—” My cheeks blazed. “—about you, about us . . . and I won’t fucking have that.” I surprised myself at the venom in my voice. “This thing between us might not work, but I sure as hell won’t have it fail because of *him*. I just won’t. He doesn’t get to take someone else from me. Not again.”

Leon squinted at me, and I didn’t blame him. Even to my own ears I sounded . . . intense, possibly even a little unbalanced. He rubbed his lips together like he was choosing his words carefully. “You don’t want to talk to your old therapist? Get some advice, maybe?”

I’d thought about that myself. It was a valid option. But my conclusion had been, “No. I’m ready for this. Maybe after, if I need to debrief.”

Leon’s unflinching and hard scrutiny was oddly reassuring as I waited for his response. There was no knee-jerk reaction and I’d get an honest answer.

“Okay,” he finally said with a sharp nod of his head. “But I’m driving you.”

I blinked. “What? No, you don’t have to do that. I’ll be fi—”

“I’m going with you.” His tone brooked no argument. “I’ll drive you there and back and wait in the car. I won’t say a word if you don’t want me to, but you are *not* going alone. Is that clear?”

My eyes brimmed and I nodded. “Perfectly.”

“Good.” He kissed me softly. “So, when are we doing this?”

“Saturday, tomorrow. After work? One-ish?”

He nodded. “We’ll take your Mini.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Kip

I KNOCKED ON THE GLASS AND WAVED DREW INSIDE THE office, taking his attention from the half-dozen Saturday shoppers milling around Flare. “Have you seen these?” I pointed to the stack of shirts on my desk, a ripple of dread fluttering in my chest.

“Not yet.” He grabbed a shirt and laid it flat. “Oh, shit.”

“Oh shit is right.” I got on the phone to Rhys, who’d popped next door to chat with the plumber about something he wanted for his new studio, and told him to get his arse back to Flare, pronto.

Two minutes later he flew into the office and I shoved a shirt into his hands. “Take a look.”

He opened it up and paled. “What the hell? Where’s the placket embroidery detail?”

“It’s my fault.” Bile coursed up my throat. “I told her not to fuss with that for the sample because we needed it fast and the embroidery takes time. We just needed to know her work would pass. And you saw it. It was perfect. But I told her exactly what was required with the actual run. Look.” I spun the computer screen for Rhys to see my email. The instructions were clear.

Rhys read and agreed. “Still, we should’ve had her send a finished sample to check both the new material *and* the embroidery ahead of completion. One thing I’ve learned in this industry is never to put your faith in *any* supplier, especially a new one. Check. Check. Check.”

Fuck. “I know and that’s on me.”

“No.” He eyeballed me. “It’s on *both* of us. I didn’t ask for one either.”

“But you shouldn’t have to. That’s what my job is supposed to be about, getting shit right so you don’t have to

worry. I warned you I didn't have the experience. I'll call her now."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Drew discreetly leave the office and close the door. I'd fucked up, and Rhys trying to convince me otherwise wasn't going to change things. This could cost us . . . cost *Rhys* thousands. I slumped in my chair and locked eyes with Rhys as I politely but firmly told the manufacturer exactly what needed to happen if she didn't want her business reputation sullied when it had barely got off the ground.

But that didn't change the fact I should've thought about another sample. And I *would* have if I hadn't been too damn distracted with Leon and letting him tempt me from my office desk when I was working late. Giving in to his care and embrace when I should've been doing my fucking job.

The manufacturer was suitably apologetic and very keen to remedy the situation. By the time I hung up, she'd promised if we couriered them back stat, she and her team would work the weekend to get them done by Tuesday.

I told all this to Rhys, who sighed with relief. "So, we should still be able to make that shipment date," I finished. "I'm so fucking sorry. This is all my fault—"

"Will you stop saying that?" His voice rose, something that happened so rarely I immediately fell silent. "It's not your fault. It's *theirs*. Your email was clear. The designs you sent were clear. *They* screwed up."

"But I took my eye off the ball and . . ." I didn't finish.

Rhys's expression softened and he rested his hands on my shoulders. "I've made worse mistakes."

"But you're allowed to," I protested. "It's *your* business."

"Yes, it is. And as the owner of this business, I'm saying, it's fine. Am I pissed off? Yes. But not at you. Without your smart thinking in tracking down an alternative supplier, we wouldn't have had a chance to rectify the problem *at all*. And now you've solved another. *You*. Not me." A deep frown creased his brow. "I thought we were past all this?"

I grimaced. “Sorry. We are. Kind of. I’m just a bit out of sorts. Go back next door.”

But instead of leaving, Rhys perched on the corner of the desk and eyeballed me. “Okay, out with it. What cactus has made a home in your arse?”

I snorted. “It’s nothing. Really.” *Apart from confronting my arsehole uncle sometime in the next three hours, of course.*

“Riiiiight. And since we’re on the subject of your boyfriend . . .”

“I hadn’t noticed we were,” I said tartly.

“Well, we are now,” he countered silkily. “And can I point out how restrained I’ve been, not giving you shit about you and Leon practically living in each other’s pockets the last two weeks?”

“Oh god,” I grumbled. “You’ve been talking to Drew.”

Rhys arched a brow. “Actually, no, I haven’t. I admit I might’ve tried to bribe him with some cronuts for a few deets, but he refused. That kid’s loyal as shit to you, Kip. Something you should remember.”

I checked through the glass to where Drew was serving a customer and swallowed around the lump in my throat. Rhys was right, again, and I should’ve known better. But I wasn’t used to people having my back.

Rhys sighed. “Is something up between you and Leon? If he’s hurt—”

“It’s not Leon,” I huffed, my eyes still on Drew.

“Good. Then don’t fuck things up. He’s totally nuts for you, you realise that?”

My gaze shot back. “I refuse to answer that. And why would it be me fucking things up? Why not him?”

Rhys grinned but said nothing, the smug bastard.

I waved a dismissive hand. “Whatever.”

“Kip, listen to me.” Rhys leaned forward. “I *know* it’s not him, because that man is so fucking smitten with you he has hearts practically floating around his head. His eyes light up like fireworks whenever you’re around. And *you* have all these soft edges when you’re with him as well, something the rest of us hardly ever get to see. Anyone who can do that to you, honey, is a walking fucking miracle, and I’d be really careful about letting him walk away. You like him a lot even though you’re trying damn hard not to.”

As much as I wanted, I couldn’t unhear the blunt truth in Rhys’s words. “I know,” I groaned. “I know, okay? And I know I’m fucking things up. I’m so damn scared I’ll lose him, Rhys, and at the same time I’m terrified he’ll stay. I don’t want to hurt him, but I really don’t know how to be anything more to someone than a quick, albeit fantastic fuck.”

Rhys snorted. “But you’re already being more for Leon, and you’re not even having to try. Are you guys exclusive?”

I drew a wobbly breath. “Yes. Don’t laugh.”

“Not even a smile. And do you miss hooking up?”

I didn’t even have to think, I just shook my head.

He gave a serious nod. “Then I’d say you have your answer.”

“It’s not that easy,” I grumbled. “He’s got this vision of a future that includes the two of us tucked up all nice and cosy and domestic on the deck of his new house, drinking beer, playing his guitar, and with a kid or ten in the picture.”

“Aha.” Rhys slid off the desk and settled himself in a chair. “And he’s said that’s non-negotiable, has he?”

“Not in those actual words.” I squirmed. “He said he wants *me* and that we can talk about the family thing.”

“How very unreasonable of him.” Rhys swallowed a smile and I flipped him off. “But I take it the idea scares the shit out of you?”

I laughed. “Ya think? The only thing domestic about me is my addiction to *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, which also

counts as several points against me as far as parental suitability is concerned.”

“Rubbish.” Rhys shot me a look. “You’d be a great dad.”

I rolled my eyes at the ridiculous notion, then thought of Susie and sighed. “Yeah, maybe.” I couldn’t fucking believe I’d actually said that, and even Rhys looked surprised. But in truth, I’d been tossing the idea around in my head for two weeks, and to my amazement, I’d found I didn’t exactly hate the idea. At least not if I put Leon in the picture.

“Okay, so what *aren’t* you telling me?” Rhys pressed. “If it’s not Leon, then what the hell is up with you?”

The ulcers on the inside of my cheek grew a little bigger as Rhys waited me out, something he was far too good at. He’d accept my silence with no questions asked, I knew that. But when I thought of what the afternoon held, I figured the day sucked anyway.

“Okay, get yourself comfortable,” I instructed.

He did. And then he listened without interruption as I vomited the whole sorry mess once again. And when Drew passed by the glass, time and time again, clearly checking on me, I figured I’d be telling it again in the near future.

When I was done, Rhys was quiet for a bit, which gave me time to stuff my emotions back into that black sack and sit on it.

And when he finally spoke, it was with a gentleness that almost undid me. “I, of all people, understand just how hard that was for you. And you’ve done your work, which means you don’t need me unloading any suggestions. You know the risks.”

I nodded.

“And I won’t say I didn’t suspect something must’ve happened to you.” His words were careful. “You never talk about your family. You deflect and move on. And your passion for my . . . issues and Alec’s had to come from somewhere. But yes, I get your concerns about the whole domestic and relationship thing. I never saw that in my future either. Never

believed it was possible, not for me. And so I never let myself want it. Much safer that way, right?”

I swallowed hard, not trusting myself to speak.

Rhys took my hand. “People like us. People who have been through the kind of stuff we have for whatever reason, we see the world a little differently. It’s just another thing those fuckers steal from us. We stop trusting the universe, trusting people, trusting that we deserve what other people have, or that we don’t have what it takes to love someone in the same way that others do. That’s not to say a white picket fence is for everyone. And maybe you don’t see a family or a long-term relationship in your future for a whole lot of other reasons. But I’d want to make sure of that before I walked away. I’d be fighting for whatever made me happy, Kip. And if Leon makes you happy, even knowing all those dreams of his that scare you, then that’s at least worth paying attention to.”

I couldn’t do anything but nod.

“Please tell me Leon’s going with you today?”

Another nod.

“Good. Then I’ll keep my phone close in case you need me. How about that old therapist of yours?”

“I’ve got his contact details, just in case. But I figured I’d book an appointment in a week or so, regardless.” I wasn’t stupid. There’d be fallout from the afternoon one way or another. And maybe I’d talk about Leon as well.

Look at me. All grown up and shit.

Rhys nodded his approval and got to his feet. “Well, that’s something, at least.” He got up from the chair and opened his arms. “Now give me one of those godawful hugs you lot seem to love so much.”

I stood and walked into his arms. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He slapped my back and wriggled free, giving a visible shudder. “Ugh. I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to that.” He studied me, as worried as I’d ever seen him. “Two things. One—” He counted off on his fingers. “—the design

problem wasn't your fault. Let it go. You're an excellent manager and I wouldn't swap you for the world. And two, be careful today. Remember who you are and the incredible person you've become. And let Leon be there for you. Let him help you. From experience, I can assure you they don't always get it right, but they don't have to. Having their love and support means every fucking thing in the world." He held my gaze, then kissed me on the cheek and left waving his phone in the air. "I'm here if you need me."

The minute he was gone, I dropped the office blinds and slumped in my chair, glaring at the stack of shirts on my desk. I'd fucked up and nothing Rhys said would convince me otherwise, but maybe it wasn't the end of the world. Maybe he was right. And maybe I could stop making so many assumptions about myself and my future and just let life happen for a change. After all, Rhys had managed to let go a little, and he was an even bigger control freak than me.

But it was too much for today. In an hour or so, I'd be face to face with my uncle for the first time in almost ten years, and not freaking the hell out was going to take every scrap of concentration I had. I hadn't warned James I was coming. I hadn't called to make sure he'd be there or be alone. Mostly because I didn't want him calling in the family cavalry. If there were other cars there, I'd wait them out or try another day, although I wasn't sure my nerves would survive that last one.

If the whole thing imploded, then so be it. At least I'd have an answer, even if it was that James still didn't give a shit. Leon had been right when he'd said this had to be about me. I didn't give a fuck what my uncle said. I wasn't scared of him. I'd done my work and I hadn't been that vulnerable kid in a long, long time. I might still have my issues, but there was nothing left for James to take away.

On the other hand, there were some choice things I needed to say to him, and that was all I wanted out of the visit. The chance to say them. Whether I got the opportunity, who knew? But I was damn well going to try.

Leon

“Breathe, baby.” I rested my hand on Chris’s jiggling knee in an effort to soothe him. He’d been jumping out of his skin ever since I’d arrived at Flare, and we’d been sitting in his Mini—an act of contortion on my part—and parked on the side of the quiet country road outside his uncle’s cottage for over ten minutes, scoping the place out.

This was not the Chris I knew, not by any stretch of the imagination, and I wondered again if this was really a good idea. “You don’t have to do this,” I reminded him. “We can turn around and drive back to your place and have a nice afternoon curled up with a movie.”

Chris turned his laser-focused gaze away from the cottage to face me, his expression one of dogged determination. It made me want to wrap him in cotton wool and tuck him away for safekeeping. But this was his call. My job was to be there for him, to step in if it was needed, and nothing was going to take me from that.

“But that’s where you’re wrong.” He covered my hand with his and squeezed. “I *do* have to do this. It’s been coming a long time. I’m not saying it doesn’t freak me out, but that doesn’t change the fact I need to do it.” He leaned over and pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “But I’m so fucking glad you’re here with me, and when this is over, you’re going to talk to me about what’s happening Wednesday. About Caitlyn’s anniversary. No excuses. I’ve let you get away with going quiet on me this last week, but I’m done with that. You’re scaring me. We can’t make this work between us if we don’t talk.” He gave a dramatic roll of his eyes. “And if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll break your face.”

It felt good to smile. “I’m sorry. It’s not that I don’t want to talk, it’s just that I still don’t know what I really think or want. But you’re right. We need to talk, and we will. I promise.”

He kissed me again and smiled. “I’m holding you to that.” he turned back to the small cottage that sat in an empty yard at

the end of a long driveway and the smile slipped away. The driveway and front of the cottage were clear of any cars, which hopefully boded well for James being alone, but there was no way to see around the back.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come in with you?” I checked.

“No,” Chris answered, not taking his eyes from the cottage. “He won’t talk if you’re there. If it’s only him and me, he might stop lying.”

I wasn’t happy with him going in alone, but at the same time, I knew he was right. I also knew he was doing this with or without me, and if the most he let me do was sit outside in the car and wait, then that’s exactly what I’d do. “Can you try to at least record it?”

His brows dipped.

“This is a big deal, Chris. You’re going to be emotional and angry, and you might not remember what he says. Please.”

He watched me for a moment, then sighed. “Okay, I’ll record it. But I doubt I’m in any physical danger if he’s so sick. He’s on oxygen, remember?”

“I don’t give a fuck about him. It’s you I care about. And it’s not a physical attack I’m worried about. It’s what he might say.” I cupped his cheek and drew Chris close so he would be in no doubt about my next words. “I love you. And no matter what happens in there, I’ll be waiting for you when you’re done. Stay close to the front door, and if that bastard crosses the line with you in *any* way, you get out of there, understand? Or you get me inside. Promise me that.”

His eyes shone brightly, and he nodded. “I promise. And I . . .” He hesitated then swallowed whatever it was he was going to say and kissed me. “I’ll be careful.” He reached for the door handle.

“Nope. If you think I’m staying way the hell down here to just watch you walk into that bastard’s house, you’re crazy. I’m driving you right up to the front door. And I want him to

know someone is waiting outside, so you make sure and tell him, got it?”

“But—”

“No, Chris. This isn’t up for debate.”

His lips tugged up in that cheeky way he had. “I really need to see this bossy side of yours in bed, baby.” He winked. “I’ve been missing out big time.”

“Be careful what you ask for.” I grinned and brushed a floppy cowlick back from his eyes. “In case I haven’t said it enough, I am so fucking proud of you. You’re about to face the asshole who fucked with you and stole your family, and I’m stuck with my head up my arse with a family who support the shit out of me. You might say I’m a little in awe.”

He flushed at the words, but I wasn’t done.

“This last month, you’ve taught me something about courage every day, and what you’re about to do has made me more determined than ever to do better in my own life. I can’t begin to tell you how lucky I feel to be with you. So . . .” I leaned over the handbrake and kissed him softly. “You go and do what you need to, and I’ll be waiting. And when you’re done, we’ll spend the rest of the day doing whatever the hell you want in order to wash him from your brain.”

Chris blinked hard, and then again, and then he launched himself at me for a fierce kiss. “I’m not sure I deserve any of that, but thank you.” He patted my chest, right over my heart. “There are things I need to say to you, as well—” He glanced up the driveway to the cottage. “But not now.”

My heart skipped in my chest but I didn’t ask.

He looked back. “So, how about you get me to that front door like you promised and let’s get this done. There’s an asshole waiting with my name written all over him.”

My gaze travelled to his skinny black jeans, rainbow T-shirt, dog collar, and dark eyeliner. “Well, you’re certainly dressed for the occasion. Not your usual look.”

He smirked. “I raided the drop-in centre’s wardrobe. Couldn’t think of a better way to shove my gay arse in my uncle’s face. It’ll either drive him crazy or give him an attack of the vapours. Too much?” He struck a pose and I laughed.

“Not at all.” I reached across and tugged at the dog collar. “But I’m thinking maybe you should keep this . . . for later.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Kip

“COME INSIDE, CHRISTOPHER.” JAMES CALLED OUT BEFORE I’D even landed the first knock on his door. Gone was the booming voice I remembered, replaced by a frail hoarseness that didn’t at all match his larger-than-life personality. “Took you long enough. Didn’t think I’d notice your Mini at the end of my driveway, did you?”

Fucker. I took a last look over my shoulder to where Leon was watching, then stepped into the small sunny lounge, closed the front door, and looked my uncle square in the eye. “No, James. I just didn’t give a fuck.”

He snorted, then nodded to the window. “You brought a friend?”

“Do you blame me? And how did you know I drove a Mini?”

He grinned. “George told me.”

Damn my brother. And I wondered what else he’d told James.

My uncle watched me for a moment with a smug little smile and then shrugged. “Take a seat.” He motioned to the couch, but I shook my head.

“What I have to say won’t take long.”

James studied me like an insect he found somewhat interesting, and I hoped he wasn’t going to draw things out. I had no idea how long my phone could record for, no doubt something I should’ve checked. But I took the opportunity to study him in return, two men facing off over a past bubbling with secrets and lies.

James looked . . . sick, really sick, and I felt a rush of sympathy that I was instantly pissed about. An oxygen cylinder sat beside his chair, a mask resting in his lap, and dull blue eyes that had lost none of their shrewdness scrutinised me over sallow sharp-boned cheeks that sucked against his teeth.

He'd lost a lot of weight, his athletic frame now gaunt and sharp-angled, and there was a wet, unpleasant quality to his breathing along with the unmistakable odour of decay.

I fought the gush of sadness that welled in me for a life ending too soon. Fought the pity that rose in my chest and the words of sympathy that raced to find voice on my tongue. I swallowed them down and locked the lid on that shit, and instead remembered Leon waiting in the car. Remembered his faith in me. Remembered his words.

"You look good." James eyed me appreciatively, making me cringe.

"Don't you dare," I snapped. "Or I'm leaving right now."

He huffed and shuffled back in his chair, causing his trousers to tighten against pencil-thin legs. "I only meant that you've grown up," he lied.

I huffed. "Whereas *you* look like you could do with a ten-day makeover, just saying."

He stared at me, then gave a sudden bark of laughter. "George said you had a mouth on you. I can see he was right."

My hands clenched at my sides. How dare George tell this man *anything*. I took a breath and loosened my fists. "My brother knows nothing about me. He gave up that right a long time ago."

James sniffed. "Then you don't know George. He's kept an eye on you over the years. Told us all about that fancy job of yours with that designer."

What the hell? My heart raced and I reached for the back of the chair to steady myself. *George kept tabs on me?*

"Didn't know that, did you?" James lifted the mask to his face for a few breaths and lowered it again.

"I haven't come here for a chat and a catch-up." I wasn't playing James' stupid little game. "You get a minute to say whatever it is you think is so important, and then it's my turn."

He waved a hand over himself. "Mine is kind of obvious, I'd have said. I'm dying, Christopher."

I schooled my expression. “So, I hear. But how exactly does that affect *me*? And why should I give a shit after everything you’ve done?”

His eyes narrowed, like I’d maybe surprised him. Then he grunted and slumped back in his chair. “Fair enough. I guess we’re gonna have that talk then. But first, I’ll need your phone on the coffee table. This conversation stays between us.” He smiled at the guilt that was clearly playing over my face. “You think I’m stupid?”

“No. Never that.” But in that moment, I also understood that this meeting had nothing to do with any restitution with my family, which meant the gloves were off on both sides. I stopped the recording on my phone so that James could see, and then slid it onto the table. “This isn’t a deathbed confession followed by a family reunion, I take it?”

“Did you really think it was?” He looked almost amused. “I won’t have my family remembering me like that.”

“They’re my family too, asshole. I was too scared of them finding out about me to tell them what you did. But *you* took them from me anyway. All for nothing.”

“You did that to yourself,” he barked. “How was I to know you wouldn’t say anything? You kneed me in the balls, you little shit.”

“Fuck you.” I reached to grab my phone. “I don’t have to listen to this bullshit—”

“Wait.” James reached out a hand. “I’m . . . sorry, okay? But I can’t give you what you want—”

“Newsflash: I don’t *want* anything from you. I’m here for my own reasons, James, make no mistake about that.”

His eyes widened just enough to let me know I’d surprised him yet again, and it was all I could do not to fist pump the air. But he quickly schooled his expression. “Nothing I say will turn the clock back. It won’t make you any less of a . . . problem for your parents.” He looked me up and down. “And back then, it would only have ruined our family.”

I stared at him, aghast. “And just what the hell do you think it did to *me*? Exactly that, you selfish pervert. At least I know who I am and I’m living my life honestly. You’re just a sad fucker hiding in the closet from your family. *You* kissed *me*, remember? It was *your* words in my ears, telling a kid who didn’t want you anywhere near them how beautiful they were, how much you wanted them. So, are you gay or do you just like teenage boys who can’t fight back?”

James jolted with my words like he’d been slapped, and my heart soared, anger firing through my blood.

I stormed across and stared him down. “What? You don’t think that’s exactly what you are?” I stabbed a finger at his emaciated chest. “A coward and likely a paedophile. I was fifteen, you asshole. But I’m not that kid anymore. I’ve become so much more, and I’m fucking proud of who I am, something you will never, ever be.”

“You know nothing about me,” he blustered.

“I know enough,” I spat, turning my back to put some distance between us so I didn’t throw a fist. “And if you aren’t going to put my family right about what happened, then why the hell did you want me here?”

He fell quiet, his jaw working as he continued to glare at me with those milky eyes. But some of that initial bravado had gone. Pride swelled in my chest. I wasn’t that kid anymore. He hadn’t broken me. And now the fucker knew it.

Finally, he spoke. “Believe it or not, I did actually want to apologise . . . to you, at least.” He held my gaze. “I’m sorry. I was messed up back then. Things haven’t always been easy . . . for me. You were a good kid and I . . . I shouldn’t have tried to kiss you. I just wanted to tell you that before I carked it. Set things right.”

“Easy for you? Set things right?” I huffed in disbelief, the apology sliding off like the self-indulgent gesture it was. James didn’t care about me. This was all about him. “Was I the only one, James?” I asked the question that had been plaguing me for years and his hesitation was all I needed to hear. “Jesus Christ, I wasn’t, was I?”

“No, it was never like that.” There was a desperate edge to his voice. “There were other . . . men, yes. But all . . . legal. I swear.”

I threw my hands up. “And that’s supposed to make me feel better? How old are we talking, James? Sixteen? Seventeen? Were they members of the church? I was your fucking nephew, James, and that didn’t stop you trying to kiss me. Why should I believe anything you say?”

“They were all of age. It’s *you* I’m apologising to. Do I wish it had never happened? Of course I do. I’m sorry I fucked up. I’m sorry you lost your family. I’m sorry for crossing those lines. I’m sorry for all of it.”

The worst of it was, I almost believed him. Almost. Then I remembered Leon describing what a genuine apology *should* have been. No strings. No manipulation. And being accountable.

My voice rose again in anger. “But not sorry enough to tell my family the truth. To actually do something that would make a difference.” Then I remembered what he’d said and suddenly everything made sense. I started backing away, sickened by his presence. “This is about you trying to clear your conscience for wherever it is you think you’re heading when you die, isn’t it? This is about the damn church.” I laughed, suddenly done with him. “Good luck with that, sunshine. I doubt your God is going to see things your way. I hope you rot in hell—”

“Christopher!” I froze at the sound of my mother’s voice, spinning to find her standing in the kitchen doorway, red-faced with anger, my father at her back. “Don’t you dare speak to your uncle like that.” She stormed straight past and headed for James, securing the oxygen mask to his face. “You can see how sick he is.”

My father, silent as ever, made his way to the couch and sat looking at me like I was something the cat dragged in. George followed, coming to a stop just inside the lounge, his gaze nervously skittering across my face. I rolled my eyes,

barely able to stomach seeing his face after learning he'd been discussing my life with James.

And as for James, he never took his eyes from mine as my mother fussed around him. I arched a brow, my gaze sweeping the room, my meaning crystal fucking clear. *Here's your last opportunity, asshole.* But he looked down and tightened the elastic on his mask instead.

I shook my head and stared around the room, taking in my so-called family one by one. And like the sun breaking a heavy cloud, I realised I didn't have a single fuck left to give anymore. I'd said what I came to. I couldn't force James to speak the truth or my family to believe me. And I wasn't even going to try.

I had a good life, a great one. I had friends who cared about me. A boyfriend who loved me. A life I wouldn't swap for anything. And I was done letting these assholes screw with my head and fuck up my future. One look at my messed-up mother fawning over her asshole brother while ignoring her son who she hadn't seen for ten years; my father studying me with contempt; my brother standing silent, as usual; and it hit me like a drowning man coming up for air.

I was done.

I didn't want them or need them in my life.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" The look of patent disgust on my father's face as he clocked my outfit was almost enough to make me smile. I cocked my hip just to piss him off.

"I've said all I need to." I answered curtly, putting as much disdain into my tone as I could manage, to match the look on his face. "I'm leaving. But in case you'd forgotten, it was James who asked to see me, not the other way around. Maybe you should think about that, *Dad.*"

My father huffed his disapproval. "You should have told us you were coming. He's not well enough to cope with your dramatics."

“Oh, he did just fine.” I cast an amused glance James’ way. “Didn’t you, *Uncle*? Anything you want to say while we’re all here?”

I caught George’s frown as he looked between us. *Yes, brother, just fucking think about it.*

“Uncle James?” George ventured in an uncertain tone.

“Christopher, stop it,” my mother interrupted.

I ignored her and focused instead on James’ nervous sweep of the room before his eyes landed back on me, and I warmed at the lick of fear I saw there.

“I guess that’s a no.” I kept my gaze steady on his. “Shame. Not sure the doors of heaven are going to be open for you after this, but there you go. Still, I’m glad I got to let you know what a fucked-up piece of shit you are—”

“That’s enough.” My father lunged forward just as a huge shadow fell across the sunlit floor and stopped him in his tracks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Leon

WITH MY EYES GLUED TO THE GREEN FRONT DOOR OF THE cottage and worried sick about what was happening inside, I missed the crunch of gravel under tyres until it was almost too late. I looked up just in time to see a blue Nissan X-Trail drive around to the back of the house. A man stared at me through the backseat window. George. Which meant the passengers in front were likely Chris's parents.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." I slammed my fist on the steering wheel. The last thing Chris needed was a confrontation with his parents on top of everything else. I fired off a warning text in the vain hope Chris might see it, but the odds weren't good.

I slipped from the Mini and made my way to the front steps, stopping just to the side of the open door, my heart bursting with pride as I heard Chris tearing his uncle a new one. But then his dickhead father tried to shut down the man I loved, and I was through that door with fire up my arse.

It took all of two seconds to read the room. Chris's father moving toward Chris with his arm out. Chris's mother—it couldn't be anyone else with those all-too-familiar green eyes—yelling at her son. George, standing behind Chris, looking panicked and confused. And what had to be Chris's arsehole uncle sitting in a chair with an oxygen mask and a startled look on his face.

I put myself between Chris and his father and eyeballed the man. "You lay one finger on him and I'll rip your arm from its socket, are we clear?"

One look at my face and the fact I had at least seven inches on him, and the man froze in place. I hadn't been kidding.

"Who the hell are you?" He glared up at me.

"Are. We. Clear?" I stared him down.

He held his ground for a couple of seconds before finally dropping his arm and stepping back. "Clear." His expression

dripped disdain as his gaze shuttled between me and Chris. “Now answer *my* question. Who are you?”

Chris stepped alongside and without hesitation said, “He’s my boyfriend, *Dad*. And you’ll show some fucking respect when you talk to him.”

The man’s lip curled as he looked me over. “Or what?”

I stepped closer so he had to look up, way up. “Do you really want to know?” I almost heard the rattle as Chris’s eyes rolled back in his head at my cheap dramatics. Too bad. With my height and size, it didn’t take much for people to believe I was happy to hurt them. Maybe not the arm pull-out thing, but that still left a lot to choose from.

To his credit, Chris’s father held my gaze longer than most, but eventually he went to stand by his wife.

“Thanks.” Chris laid a warm hand on my forearm and I turned to cup his face. “You okay, baby?”

“I’m fine.” Then he shook his head. “Look at you. Fucking badarse shit. I’m bookmarking that, just so you know.”

I barked out a laugh, which was kind of a miracle under the circumstances. Then I turned back to his parents and his uncle who were staring in wide-eyed disbelief. A quick glance over my shoulder confirmed that George hadn’t moved, his lower lip pulled between his teeth, his eyes watchful. But there was no anger in his body, and I was happy to turn my back on him.

“Are you done here?” I checked with Chris.

He looked to his parents for a few moments before answering, “Almost.”

“Right, then.” I squared off in front of the others. “Chris is going to say whatever he needs to and you’re all going to fucking listen. Got it? After that, we’re leaving. But if any one of you try to shut him down, including you—” I glared at the ashen-faced man sitting in the chair staring back at me. “—we’re going to have problems. And believe me when I say, I don’t give a shit how sick you are. As far as I’m concerned, by dying, you’re doing Chris a favour.”

“How dare you talk to him like that.” Chris’s mother stepped forward.

“It would give me the utmost pleasure to tell the two of you exactly what I think of you as parents, but it’s not my place, so shut the hell up and listen to your son. A son you don’t deserve, by the way.” I stepped back to give Chris the floor. “Chris?”

The soft gratitude in his eyes had me swallowing hard and I just wanted to grab his hand and get the fuck out of there. But when he took a breath and slowly faced his family with steel in his eyes, I knew he was doing the right thing.

“You’re so protective of him, so willing to believe *him*, it disgusts me,” Chris started. “And yet, eleven years ago, when I told you what he’d done, neither of you defended me, your fifteen-year-old *son*. Where was your outrage then? You chose your arsehole brother over your own son. And you’re still fucking doing it. What is wrong with you? I even stupidly wondered if it was me? That somehow I hadn’t been a good enough son to earn your loyalty.” His voice fractured and I slid an arm around his waist.

Chris had never mentioned that.

He leaned into my hold and so I left my arm in place, ignoring the looks from his parents, almost daring them to say something. *Anything*. I was itching for an excuse to let loose on someone. It wouldn’t take much.

Chris drew a slow breath and I felt his body calm. This was Chris in control. This was Chris taking back his life. And I couldn’t have loved him more.

“But I’m not that kid anymore,” he said almost serenely. “I know *exactly* where the blame lies. It lies with you, James, for being the arsehole that you are. And with you, *Mum and Dad*, for turning your back on me and allowing this bastard to still show up in my life. For judging me for being gay when your own brother gets his rocks off with other men. *Young men*.”

Chris’s mother gasped. “That’s a lie.”

“Is it?” Chris gave her a hard stare. “Have a good long think, *mother*. And while you’re at it, maybe ask yourself, what if I’m telling the truth? Where else might James find closeted, vulnerable young men? He wouldn’t have to look far.” He sent her a pointed glare and I watched the colour leach from her face.

“Ask him sometime.” Chris nodded to James, who was busy staring at his lap.

Chris’s father turned to his brother-in-law, the first flicker of worry in his eyes. “What’s he talking about?”

James shook his head. “He’s talking rubbish.” But his gaze remained averted and there was an unmistakable tremor in his voice.

I cut a look to George whose ashen face was riveted on his uncle. *Finally*.

“But thanks for inviting me.” Chris offered his uncle the tiniest of shark-like smiles. “I feel so much better. And just so you know, I’m not about to appease your conscience. I don’t need to forgive you or anyone else. All I need to do is state my truth and dismiss you. Anything else I might choose to do is none of your fucking business.”

Holy shit. There were no words. I dropped my arm from around Chris’s waist and grabbed his hand, giving it a squeeze. “Are you done, baby?”

He took a last look at his parents and nodded. “Yeah, I’m done. Take me home.”

I smiled and tipped his chin up with my fingers. “It will be my absolute pleasure.” And I kissed him, not giving a single fuck about his family watching with their mouths hanging open.

We exited the house under a pall of silence, out into the sunshine and the welcome breath of fresh air. Nobody tried to stop us. Nobody said a damn word. It felt like a resurrection of sorts, the promise of something better. I wasn’t exactly sure what was going through Chris’s mind as I opened the

passenger door of the Mini. His hand felt light in mine, like he was floating and I was the only thing tying him to the ground.

“Christopher, wait.”

Chris grimaced before dropping my hand and turning to face his brother. “It’s Kip.”

Kip, not Chris. I preened a little.

“Sorry.” George shot me a nervous look, then turned back to his brother. “Can we . . . talk?”

Exhaustion was carved into every line on Chris’s face as he shook his head. “I’m tired and I’m going home, George.”

George reached out a hand. “I just—”

“He said no,” I growled, moving to brush his hand aside, but Chris nudged me.

“It’s okay.” Then he eyeballed his brother. “Make it quick.”

“I, um . . . I don’t . . .” George fell over his words, looking more flustered by the second. “I think I fucked up. James was lying, wasn’t he?” George glanced over his shoulder to where his parents stood in the window watching. “They’re furious with you. You should’ve heard them when you left. But they’re worried too.”

“I really don’t give a fuck what they think.” Chris stared at the window until his parents moved out of sight. “I thought I just made that clear.”

George grimaced and ran a hand over the back of his neck. “I know. I just . . . well, I don’t know what to think, but I’ve got a ton of questions. I, um . . . I haven’t been part of the church for over a year.”

“What?” Chris studied his brother with confusion in his eyes. Every one of Chris’s family was wed to their damn church. “A year?”

George shrugged and shuffled on his feet. “I never did agree with everything they said.” He cast an apologetic look

my way. “I just kept going after you left out of some stupid kind of loyalty to them.” He tipped his head to the house.

“Shame you didn’t feel any of that loyalty to me.” Chris was relentless, and I didn’t blame him one bit.

George flushed brightly. “I guess I deserve that.”

Chris caught my eye, sighed, and his expression softened as he turned back to his brother. “They fucked us both over, you realise that? They turned us against each other. At seventeen and fifteen, we were both still kids.”

George pulled a face. “Maybe. Can we please talk . . . sometime?”

Chris stared at his brother for a long minute before he answered. “Give me a week and then call. Maybe we can arrange something.”

I smiled to myself. *Good for you. Keep him waiting.*

George gave a quick, grateful smile. “Thanks. And I’m sorry . . . for what happened in there.”

Chris kept his gaze steady on his brother. “Well, I’m not.”

George shot me another nervous glance. “I guess I can understand that. Take care, Chr—” He winced. “*Kip.*” He smiled grimly and headed back to the house.

“Jesus Christ, get me out of here.” Chris flung himself into the Mini’s passenger seat with an exhausted sigh.

I headed to the driver’s side to do precisely as he asked, but less than a kilometre down the country road, Chris instructed me to pull over and get out. I wasn’t about to argue, thinking maybe the day had finally got to him and he was going to be sick, but the minute we were both out, Chris rounded the Mini and launched himself into my arms.

“Holy fucking shit,” he gasped against my chest, like the significance of the last hour was finally sinking in. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

I crushed him against me and kissed his head, my heart catching in my throat. “Don’t thank me, baby. That was all you

in there. Every glorious fucking second of it. You were brilliant.”

He sucked in a shaky breath and pulled back to look at me, his eyes brimming. “I love you, Leon.”

I swear my heart stopped in my chest as his words sank in.

“I love you so damn much.” Tears rolled down his face. “And I’m so fucking sorry it’s taken me this long to get my head out of my arse. But what you did in there . . .” He shook his head. “I can’t even tell you. Just, thank you. And I’m not saying this just because you swooped in on your white horse to plough the road for me—and now I’m mixing my fucking metaphors—I’m saying it because I mean it.”

I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t move. I just stood there gaping like an idiot, my heart exploding in my chest as Chris explained why he loved me. Explained it, for fuck’s sake.

“When I was standing in that room, with you like a fucking rock by my side, and I looked around at my so-called family, it hit me like a freight train. I didn’t need them. I didn’t need their approval. I didn’t even need them to believe me. The only person whose opinion actually mattered was yours, because I love *you*. As crazy as that is after just a month—”

“And two years,” I reminded him.

“And two years.” He slid his arms around my neck and sighed happily. “I’ve been such an idiot and I’m so, so sor—”

“Will you please just shut up.” I pulled him to me, stopping his apology with a single hard kiss. “I don’t need an inventory of reasons. And you’ve got nothing to be sorry about. I’m just so damn happy that you love me. Although maybe you could just say it one more time, because I’m kind of terrified I’m dreaming.”

He snorted and cradled my face, his gaze intent on mine. “I love you, Leon. I *love you*. Good enough?”

I brushed his nose with mine. “For now. But I’m pretty sure I’m gonna need to hear it again, later.”

He grinned. “As many times as you need. But please, can we go home now?”

Home. The word seemed to carry a lot more weight than it had that morning. I slipped my finger under that sexy collar he wore and tugged him back around the Mini.

“Mmm.” He chuckled. “Now don’t you be getting any ideas about attaching a leash to this thing.” He slid into the passenger seat and shot me a saucy wink. “No one tells me what to do.”

I leaned in and planted a kiss on his lips, my hand palming his dick. “Oh, I think you will.” I squeezed. “In fact, I think you’ll be begging for it.”

He sucked in a breath. “How fast can you drive?”

Kip

While Leon pulled into the car park, I studied the art deco lines of my apartment building like I was seeing it for the first time. And maybe I was, because something had changed since I'd left it that morning. *I* had changed. It had been my first real home, a sanctuary, a reminder that I'd survived and was doing okay. And it was still all those things. A month ago, you couldn't have shoe-horned me out of it. But as I kept staring, the scene changed and I saw a tiny villa with a shady veranda and a man playing a guitar.

I'd been quiet the entire drive home and I knew Leon was worried. He'd constantly glanced my way and asked if I was okay, driving me nuts until in the end I pulled his hand into my lap and stroked the back of it to soothe him. His grip remained tight, not releasing even to change gear, and the whole mamma-bear protective thing put a smile on my face. If I hadn't known I was safe with Leon before, that he'd have my back in a tight spot, I sure as shit did after the fiasco of that afternoon.

He switched off the engine and turned in his seat to face me. "You okay, babe?" he asked for the millionth time.

I nodded. "It's crazy how so much can change in a day and yet the world goes on regardless, like your personal dramas haven't just transformed your whole life."

He brought my hand to his lips and pressed a gentle kiss to the palm. "My life as well."

His words drew my gaze to meet his. I freed my hand and threaded my fingers through those strawberry-blond locks, then gently tugged on his beard. "It's like I've pushed a reset button in my brain and I'm not sure what the new configuration is going to look like. It's kind of fucking scary."

He held my palm against his cheek. "You can make it whatever you need to. It's yours to decide. And if you want, I can be there to help. But it's your life, baby."

God, *this* man. “Oh, I want,” I assured him. “It’s about the only thing I *am* sure of. You. And Flare and my friends.” He sighed. “If you’d asked me, I would’ve denied it till my last breath, but I think I always held out hope that one day my family would come around. That I’d get a call saying, ‘We believe you. We love you. Come home.’” My throat thickened and Leon kissed the tears from my cheeks.

“And now?” He watched me carefully.

I shrugged and looked away. “I’m not sure I’d want anything to do with them, even if they did call.” The truth sat lighter in my heart than I’d expected. “I thought that James had taken my family from me.” I turned back to find Leon’s grey eyes shiny with emotion. “But I realised today that losing *them* opened up a space for better people to fill.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Leon cupped my face and I marvelled at the obvious love in his eyes.

“I thought I would never trust someone again, not with my heart, not with my truth, but I was wrong. I thought I didn’t want love, or a family, that those couldn’t be real things in my life. But I was wrong about that as well.” I fisted Leon’s shirt and pulled his big body close enough to kiss. “And I’m really, really looking forward to what else I might’ve been wrong about.”

And then I kissed him, putting every unspoken wish and shy hope that fluttered through my greening heart into it. Wishes and hopes too fragile to stand the light of day, at least not yet, but maybe soon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Leon

I PEERED THROUGH THE DRIZZLE AND READ AND REREAD THE words carved into the stone above the image of my twin sister, the same words carved into my heart for seven years.

A bright light in the world, a beloved daughter
and sister. Where you walked, beauty
followed. You will be missed, always.

I knelt on the wet grass and ran my fingers over the still sharp edges of the letters.

“I think I fucked up,” I told her, resting back on my heels. “Don’t laugh. I’m serious.”

Silence.

“Yep, I really did.” I lifted my face to the gunmetal clouds that filled the sky and dropped the umbrella to the side. Soft rain ran down my face and my eyelids fluttered closed as an image of the two of us as teenagers came to mind. Caitlyn had gone through a stage of wanting to be a hair stylist and so I’d been drafted as her model. She’d wash my long hair and pin it into ridiculous dos. Then she’d take a photo and show all our friends. She could be such an asshole like that.

I grinned and raised my umbrella again.

“So . . . I’ve decided to talk to someone. I know, I know. But I wasn’t ready back then. Besides, you don’t *always* know what’s best for me.” I picked at some grass and threw it at her headstone. “You’re such a fucking know it all.”

I waited until the laughter in my head quieted and then stared for a minute at nothing. At the rain leeching into the sodden dirt. At the African daisy closed tight against the cold. At how the tui feather I’d brought with me hung limp in the tiny vase I’d glued to the footing.

“I’m scared of letting the pain go, sis. Scared that you’ll go with it because it feels like it’s already happening.” I wiped at my eyes. “And I still don’t know if I’m ready. But maybe it’s time I tried.”

I laid my palm over her name like I could somehow pull her through it.

“Please don’t hate me, but some days I can’t even summon your voice or feel you here with me anymore. Parts of you are fading and I hate it. For a while, right at the beginning, I could pretend you were still here, laughing at how we’d call at the same time and be sent to voicemail. That you still knew every word I was going to say before it came out of my mouth. That we’d dream the same dream on the same night, and how we’d laugh about stupid fucking research that said only identical twins could do that kind of shit. What the hell did they know? Or how we knew when each other was hurt. L-like . . . that day . . . your scream in my heart, so fucking loud, and then . . . nothing . . . Jesus, Caitlyn, how do I forget that? I never told a soul. I mean, what the fuck do you say about something like that?”

I swallowed around the choking lump in my throat and stared through the lightening rain.

“Anyway, lately I’ve been wondering whether it’s not actually a matter of you starting to fade, but rather you trying to move on to where you need to go next. That maybe it’s me holding you back. That maybe you’re worried about me. And so I’m here to tell you that I’m gonna be okay. You can leave if you need to.”

I stood and closed my umbrella. “I don’t know what next year will look like, but it will be different, although honestly, a fucking tree?” I blew out a sigh. “I guess it’s not so bad. But it’ll be me who has to look after the damn thing, you know that, right? God knows none of the rest of our family could keep a weed alive.”

A slice of watery sunlight cut across Caitlyn’s grave and I looked up, smiling. “Yeah, yeah, but you’ll have birds shitting on you all day, so that’s something in its favour.”

I took a deep breath. “And there’s one more thing.” I turned and held a hand out for Chris. He smiled and walked across from the tree he’d been sheltering under to take it, threading our fingers together.

I pulled him tight against me. “This is Chris. And if it weren’t for him, I’m not sure I’d be able to do any of this.”

Chris squeezed my hand. “Yes, you would.”

I kissed his cheek. “Maybe. But watching you this last month has taught me that if we want to be happy, we have to try and let go of the pain that holds us back. Not forget it. Not pretend it never happened. But learn from it and move on as best we can, hearts open.” I ran a thumb under his glistening eyes. “You’d love him, Caiti, just like I do.”

Chris pressed a soft kiss on my lips before laying a single white rose on Caitlyn’s grave. Then he kissed his fingertips and touched them to her name. “I’ll look after him, Caitlyn, I promise.” He glanced back with a wicked grin. “And I’ll kick his arse when he needs it.”

I shook my head and laughed. “You’re such a fucker.” I pulled him into my arms and tucked his damp hair behind his ears. “But I love you, so fucking much.”

“Mmm.” He slid his hands around my waist. “Just as well. I love you too.”

We stood wrapped in each other a moment longer, staring at Caitlyn’s grave, until the sun slid behind another cloud and fat droplets of rain splattered on my face.

“Come on.” I took his hand. “Apparently, there’s a tree planting happening with our name on it. Bloody rain.” I gave him a tug toward the Mini.

But Chris didn’t budge. Instead, he smiled and flicked his head toward the opposite end of the line of graves. When I followed his gaze, my knees almost crumbled at the sight of my entire family sheltering under a rainbow of umbrellas about fifty metres away. “How . . . ?” My gaze jerked to Chris and he smiled and drew me close.

“They’ve been here the whole time.” He pulled the collar up around my neck.

“But . . . you did this?” I wiped at my tears.

He shook his head. “No. Did you really think your family would let you go through today on your own? They would’ve camped out here all day if I hadn’t agreed to tell them when you planned to come.” He frowned. “I hope that was okay?”

I cupped his face and kissed him hard. “Perfectly. And thank you.”

His smile broadened. “Good. Then go on. They’re waiting.” He let go of my hand, but I grabbed his back.

“No.” I held those beautiful green eyes. “We do this together, understand? We do it *all* together.”

He stared at me for a moment, then beamed one of his bright smiles and nodded. “Together.”

EPILOGUE

Five months later.

Kip

“OUCH, OUCH, FUCK!” I FIRED A GLARE AT MY BOYFRIEND. “And people actually pay you for this shit?”

He snorted but kept working the shading needle. “I warned you it was a tender spot.”

“No fucking kidding.” I gritted my teeth but couldn’t stop a slight jerk at the next burning sting. “Goddammit!”

He glanced up. “If you keep doing that, you’ll have a wonderful tattoo of the Southern Alps and not the lotus flower you wanted.”

“All right. All right,” I growled. “Fucking grumpy pants.”

He arched a brow and leaned forward to plant a sweet kiss on my lips, sneaky fucker. Like he thought he knew me, or something.

I shot him a withering look. “Pfft. If you think that’s gonna get you any sugar when we get home tonight, you’re sadly mistaken. Stick me with that needle again and the next time you take my arse you’ll have to brush the cobwebs aside.”

Ty’s loud snort of laughter floated over the closed curtain. “I’ll take that bet.”

“I heard that,” I called out. “You just said goodbye to that Stef Hamilton bracelet you’ve had your eye on, *Tyson*. I’ve got a list of customers who’d buy it in a snap.”

The curtain whipped open. “You wouldn’t dare.” Ty glared.

I waggled my eyebrows. “Oh wouldn’t—ouch!” I whacked Leon on the shoulder. “You did that on purpose.”

He pushed back his stool and got to his feet. “Aw, baby, I would never do that to you?” *Total lie*. “But you’re in luck,

we're done for the day. One more session should finish it."

"Thank Christ." I blew out a relieved sigh and sank back onto my pillow. "Stop perving." I waved Ty back into his cubicle.

"As if." He eyed me up and down. "You're way too skinny for my taste."

I scowled at his disappearing back. "No one believes you," I called through the closing curtain.

Ty laughed and I turned back to Leon who was wearing another one of his trademark teddy bear smiles that melted my heart. I was so ridiculously gone over him. "Remind me never to undergo another one of these acts of torture ever again."

Leon grinned but said nothing and we both knew why. It had been my idea and I wouldn't change a thing. We'd spent hours flipping through books and scouring the internet before I finally settled on a lotus flower, a universal symbol of rebirth.

Seemed fitting.

And then Leon had blown my mind by asking if he could get the same flower in a slightly different version to fill the gap on his left shoulder, opposite Caitlyn's tattoo. I'd been stunned . . . and incredibly touched. He'd quickly added *not to worry* and that it wasn't just for me, so he wouldn't regret it if I came to my senses and realised at some point that I could do a lot better than him. It had been said in a joking voice, but I knew there was a part of him that still worried he wasn't enough to keep me, and so I'd shut him up with a kiss before he dug himself a deeper hole. I wasn't going anywhere.

But I understood his caution. This was me we were talking about, and I'd spent most of my life avoiding even a sniff of romantic attachment. It was also something I wanted desperately to change. Leon deserved to be sure that I was all in for the long haul and there wasn't anywhere I'd rather be.

We'd been living together in his tiny villa for over three months, the first two spent mostly wearing overalls and wielding paintbrushes and sandpaper. The hours we weren't in overalls were spent christening every surface inside and

outside the house and one or two in the cobwebbed attic space that we had big plans for.

I'd scarcely survived the full immersion relationship experience and the tidal wave of domestic sap and cutesy names that went with it. Not to mention I couldn't look at myself in the mirror for fear of the blinding smile that was prone to greet me. But I loved Leon with every cell in my body. And I loved this life we were building. Not to mention—*wait for it*—we had a dog . . . and a cat.

Kill me now.

The cat was an unfortunate accident of circumstance. A Maine Coon whose owner—a biker buddy of Leon's—was relocating overseas and needed to find his beloved pet a new home. The two of them caught me at a weak moment, and before I knew it, the largest cat I'd ever laid eyes on was sitting on the passenger seat of my Mini looking ready to eat the dashboard. Barney—*don't even ask*—had since commandeered the entire spare bedroom as his domain while scoffing his weight in gold-dipped kibble, every day. At least it may as well have been dipped in gold, what with the amount it cost us to bloody feed him, something they never mention in the fine print.

The dog, Alfie—Fuck. My. Life.—was Leon's dream from childhood, and so he got to choose which one he wanted at the shelter. And by choose, I really mean that I refused to go with him until he at least had a shortlist. It was either that or he'd have gone with whatever *I* liked. The man was a total pushover as far as I was concerned, which, not gonna lie, was kind of epic.

But, in the spirit of a balanced relationship—did I even just say that—I'd made it my mission to school Leon on the finer art of prioritising a little self-care that didn't revolve around owning my arse and several other very important parts of my anatomy. But he was proving a challenging student. And to my shock and horror, I'd quickly discovered that desire to please apparently went both ways—another thing they never mention in the fine print.

Love, right? Just when you think a long-term relationship is nothing more than getting your end off for the rest of your life with someone you respect and trust, random acts of unconditional selflessness start spewing out of you like last night's fish and you have to reconsider.

When Leon was done cleaning me up, I finally got a look at the almost finished pink flower designed to cover the old scars, and damn, I couldn't speak. It was like turning a page in my life, and my throat thickened, my stupid eyes filling.

Leon quickly took my hand. "Hey there. What's wrong? You know, it's okay if you decide it's not what you want. I can work something diff—"

I grabbed his face and kissed him. "I love it, you idiot. It's so goddamn beautiful. Thank you."

A smile lit up his face. "That's . . . good. I mean, I could've changed it . . . if you really hated it, but . . ."

"Show me yours again." I tugged at Leon's sleeve, and he lifted his shirt over his shoulder to reveal the large purple lotus. Being apparently immune to pain, his was completed by Ty in a lot fewer sessions, and I'd cried stupid fat tears when I'd seen it finished, something Ty was never gonna let me live down. He'd even let me needle a tiny bit of it, and okay, I'd nearly passed out at the thought of making my man bleed, but every time I'd looked at that spot since, something warm flooded my chest. And the last time I'd topped his spectacular arse, I couldn't take my eyes off it.

I told you. Goddamn sappy sap. I'd already handed in my sass card.

My gaze flitted between Leon's flower and my much smaller pink one, and I smiled. "They look great together. I'm gonna have to sit on your face a lot more so they can chat."

Leon almost choked on his tongue and another snort of laughter came from behind the curtains.

"Just as well we're shut," Ty commented drily.

"So, where's my boy?" The front door closed with a bang, and I groaned and whipped the sheet over my junk before

Leon's mother tracked me down.

“For fuck's sake, how does she do that?” I whisper-hissed, then suddenly remembered and added, “Oh God, do you think she heard that?”

“Oops.” Ty laughed and I gave a strangled groan.

Of course, she heard. The woman had bionic ears. “Cover for me while I make a run—”

“There you are!” Michele popped her head through a gap in the curtains.

I managed a weak smile. “Oh, hi, Michele.” I loved the woman, I really and truly did. We'd bonded over shared sarcasm at Caitlyn's anniversary family dinner, and both of Leon's parents treated me like a son—a true gift, since I hadn't heard a word from my own parents since the big confrontation.

But if anyone thought *I* was relentless, Michele Steadman took that to a whole other level, and in a misguided attempt to impress her with my suitability as her son's boyfriend, I'd made the mistake of agreeing to help her choose colours and furnishings for the remodelling of their home. Suffice to say that juggling smiling crocodiles while running through piranha infested waters singing “I Will Survive” wasn't an over-exaggeration of the task at hand.

“What a pleasure to see you today.” I kept the smile going while Leon snorted and set about cleaning his station.

“Closed curtains, Mum, remember?”

She gestured dismissively. “They were cracked. Besides, JJ waved me straight through.”

I glared over her shoulder to where JJ stood at the reception desk wearing a smug grin.

Michele continued, “I popped into Flare first and Rhys said to tell you that the new lot of vests had arrived and that they're bang on.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. The new manufacturer had proved to be a solid supplier, but even though the Christmas shipment had been sent out on time and we'd had a bumper

season, I was still nervous with every order. “Thanks. I’ll check them tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s coming along nicely.” Michele studied my still exposed tattoo and shot me a sly grin. “And you’re right. They do look great together.”

Fuck. My. Life. I groaned loudly, but all Leon did was laugh.

“Anyway . . .” Michele carried on like she hadn’t just embarrassed the shit out of me. The woman was too damn good. “I thought I’d grab Kip’s opinion on these possible colours for the downstairs bedroom before I head to the paint store.”

Leon’s gaze shot up. “Caitlyn’s room?”

She nodded far too casually and with a wary look in her eye that told me this was the real reason she’d dropped by. She wanted to be sure of Leon’s reaction before she went ahead.

“I thought I might turn it into the main guest room.” She held the paint sample out. “It’s bigger than your old room but it could do with some freshening up.”

Leon blinked and glanced my way, and I knew every question and thought running through his head. I kept my expression carefully neutral. He had this. He’d been seeing a therapist ever since the anniversary and he’d come a long way. We spoke about Caitlyn a lot more than he’d done before, each time a little more comfortable, a little more positive.

A month back, I’d asked Leon’s mother for a photograph of the two of them and then had it blown up for Leon’s birthday. It hung behind his guitar stand in our tiny lounge, and I often caught him staring at it while he played. And for all his mockery of the memorial tree planting, he went every week to water and care for the damn thing in those first couple of months until it took root. He still visited regularly.

Leon stared at the paint choices long enough for me to get nervous, but then he finally smiled. “This one.” He tapped the pale lemon sample, the same colour as the dress Caitlyn wore in the photo on our wall.

Michele turned the samples to me but I pushed them away. “I agree with Leon. It’s a great colour for that room.” It could’ve been purple and green for all I cared. If Leon chose it, then that’s what it was going to be.

He shot me a shy smile like he knew exactly what I was doing and I simply grinned.

“Well, that’s settled then.” Michele looked fondly between us. “Don’t forget it’s Sunday lunch at ours.” She waved over her shoulder as she left, and Leon and I shared a pained look.

“She’s going to make us paint the room now, you realise that?” Leon groaned. “She’ll figure it’ll be good therapy.”

I said nothing, which to be honest, I was getting pretty good at. Shocker, I know. But I happened to think it wasn’t a bad idea either. I eased off the tattoo table and reached for my sweatpants.

Leon hurried me up. “Come on, slowpoke. We promised George we’d drop off that old chair of yours on the way home, remember? Why the hell you just didn’t leave it when he took over your lease, I’ll never know.”

I sighed. “Because I didn’t know if I wanted him to have anything of mine back then.” I rolled my eyes. “It’s taken me a minute, all right?”

Leon pulled me into his arms, his big body wrapping around me like it belonged, just as it had from that very first time, if I hadn’t been too much of an idiot to see it.

“I thought you guys were doing better?” he murmured against my hair.

I sighed, thinking of the long conversations that George and I had shared over the last three months since he’d all but cut ties with my parents and moved into my old apartment. The first of those talks had been just a few days after Caitlyn’s anniversary. After that, we began a slow reconnect. I couldn’t deny it felt good to have my brother back, have something of a family again. But forgiveness was a long process and there’d been more than a few tense moments along the way.

“We are doing better,” I admitted, holding him tight. “But it’s not easy to put aside all those years. The pain sneaks up and bites you in the butt when you least expect it. Something he says, some joke, usually, or something about our parents, and suddenly I’m back there again. But I know he’s trying.”

“And so are you.” Leon leaned back so he could see my face. “And you’ll get there, because you both want it.”

“I guess.” I pulled him down for a kiss. “You do realise that I’m still standing here pantless?” I grouched. “It’s extremely unprofessional of you.”

“Is that right?” he whispered against my hair. “I’ll make sure to write up an incident report as soon as we’re done.”

I slipped my arms around his waist and rubbed against him. “You do that. But if you don’t let me go soon, baby, you’re not gonna have enough pages for all the incidents that are about to happen, and they use another word for that. It’s called porn.”

Leon laughed and untangled himself from my arms, leaving me to finally pull up my sweats, being super careful over the fresh tattoo. When I was done, he held out his hand. “Come on, gorgeous. I’ll even let you drive the Merc.”

I beamed. “Wow. You must really be worried I’ll hold out on you tonight.”

Leon had purchased the 1990s four-door classic the previous week, citing the savings it made in chiropractor bills after trying to squeeze into my Mini for months. I’d only driven it once so far, but the old girl was a smooth ride. Although not as smooth as Leon’s Hog, which was still my personal favourite. It had been hell on my finances though. You couldn’t ride a hog without an epic set of leathers, right? It was a fucking law of the universe or something.

“Just get in the car.” Leon threw the keys my way and went to grab his coat and satchel.

As soon as he was gone, JJ quickly handed me the bag I’d stowed under the reception desk, and I was out the front door to the car before Leon got back.

Leon

Chris parked the Merc in our driveway at the front of the villa and switched the engine off.

I shot him a confused look. “Not going around the back?”

He shook his head. “Nah. I thought I might load some of those bricks from the old front path into the trunk after dinner. Then I can drop them at the salvage yard tomorrow.”

We were slowly working our way through the front garden, according to our landscaper’s instructions. The aim was to reduce the maintenance and update the feel. Next on the list was changing the weedy uneven brick path for a simple concrete one.

“I’ll give you a hand,” I told him. “You’re gonna have to watch your tattoo.”

“Thanks.” He grabbed a bag from the back seat and headed for the front door. When we got to the front steps, he turned and pointed to my satchel. “Give me that and take a seat. I’ll bring us a couple of beers.”

“Great idea.” I handed him my bag and sank into one of the two armchairs we’d bought at a second-hand shop in Parnell and had recovered in a weatherproof material.

Alfie flew out the open front door, and after a welcome fit for a returning Antarctic explorer, he bounded into the garden to check the perimeter for any feline intrusion. Only Barney got Alfie’s tick of approval.

Chris and I spent countless hours sitting under the covered veranda. It had a great view of the garden and anyone passing by. We knew all the neighbours—Chris saw to that. He made us do a round of house-knocking introductions the week after he moved in, saying it was better to suss out the bigots early so we could get the voodoo dolls right. But we were in luck. Only one of our neighbours, a single elderly man, had looked taken aback when Chris introduced us as a couple, the rest seemed friendly enough and Chris had followed up the door knock

with a meet-and-greet barbecue two weeks later. The dodgy neighbour had softened when our Maine Coon, Barney, appeared on the scene. He was a big fan of cats, and stroke by big-cat stroke, we were slowly winning him over.

“Here you go.” Chris handed me a beer and my guitar and then collapsed into his chair, with Barney following to sprawl at his feet. And yes. There was very definitely *Chris’s* chair and *my* chair. And you messed with that at your peril.

We clinked bottles.

“Perfect.” I put the guitar to the side and took a long swallow, thinking about how that one word pretty much summed up my life. Just months before, this had been a fantasy of mine, one I wasn’t sure was even possible.

Sitting on our deck, Chris at my side, drinking beer and playing my guitar. Chris and I had talked about a family and he was keen, but we’d agreed to take it slow. Whether the future held a family of our own or not, it didn’t matter. I had Chris, and we had the animals. We also had Susie who’d become a big part of our lives as a couple, overnighting several times a month. It was more than enough.

“Not a bad life, huh?” I studied the man who’d come to mean everything to me.

Chris turned with soft eyes and a shy smile that melted my too-full heart down to my toes. This was *my* Chris. The side few saw. Everyone else got the sass and the quick wit. The charm and the brash honesty. And sure, I got that too. But I also got this. A gentle, vulnerable man with a heart too big to fit into one lifetime. The side he so jealously guarded like it might be his undoing. It was the final brush of gold on top of the best gift ever.

“Yeah, about that.” Chris put his beer on the small table between us and slid off his chair onto his knees beside me.

“What are you—shit.” I almost dropped my beer bottle to the deck, saving it at the last second to fumble it to the table next to his, because fuck, this couldn’t be what it looked like,

could it? Chris couldn't be about to—I couldn't even finish the sentence in my own head.

His eyes found mine and held, his lips tugging up into that sweet smile reserved for me alone. “I need your attention for a minute.”

A laugh came from inside the villa and a familiar voice said, “You *always* need attention.”

Drew?

My gaze shot to the open front door, then back. “Chris?”

“Shut up,” he called out and then a horrified look stole over his face. “Fuck, I didn't mean you.” He cupped my cheek as more laughter leaked through the open door.

I ignored whatever the fuck was going on in my house and focused on Chris. “What are you doing, baby?”

He looked nervous, his free hand jiggling at his side, and he blew out a breath like he was preparing himself. “I think you know what I'm doing,” he said softly, just for me.

And I did. And suddenly nothing mattered except the two of us, and this long fucking journey we'd taken to get to this point. I mouthed the words, “I love you,” and joy flickered in his eyes.

“I love you too.” His gaze never wavered.

I knew he did, that had never been in question these last five months. I just hadn't known if it would be enough to keep him with me. Hoped, but had never let myself believe, knowing he'd need time.

“I didn't want to want you for a long time, Leon.” He took both my hands and kissed them. “I didn't want us, *any* us, *any* relationship.” He paused and his lips turned up in a huge smile. “But that changed. I want you. I want us. I want this, what we've been building together. I want it more than anything, and that's not going to change.”

“I want all that too,” I told him, sinking into those ocean-green eyes.

He snorted. “Just as well. Because you know how I hate sharing my personal shit in front of people?” He shot a glance to the patio doors and I turned to see a bunch of our friends and family staring back at me. Drew and Gary, Rhys and Beck, Alec and Hunter, George, Ty, JJ, Kevin, and even my parents. And I didn’t doubt there were others.

I grinned and squeezed Chris’s hands. “Yeah, I know how much you hate it.”

He sighed. “Good, because I wanted them here to show you just how certain I am about all this. How much I love you. How much I’m. Not. Going. Anywhere.” He pumped my hands as he said it, so fucking earnest.

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “Keep going, baby. I can’t fucking wait.”

“Yeah?” Chris looked suddenly unsure. “Because I can stop now if you don’t want—”

“Don’t you dare.”

He relaxed, but there was a tell-tale shimmer to his eyes. “That’s good news because I’m here to stay. I want to build a life with you.” He dropped one of my hands to pull a wide plain gold band from the pocket of his sweatpants.

I drew a sharp breath and stared at the ring he held out. Exactly how long had he been planning this?

“And so—” The ring shook in his trembling fingers. “I was wondering if maybe you’d like to marry me . . . sometime . . . when it suits? Not right away, of course.” He eyed me. “Unless you want to . . . because I’d be down with that . . . but . . . soon . . . ish?” A blush stole over his face, along with another one of those shy smiles. “Because I’d fucking love that.”

“Yes.” I stood and hauled him off his knees and into my arms. “Yes, of course, I will. I can’t believe you just did that. I love you. Of course I’ll marry you. Oh, baby, come here.”

His legs wrapped around my waist, and I cupped his arse and held him up as he smothered me with kisses before burying his face in my neck. Picking up on all the excitement,

Alfie appeared from the garden, barking and running circles around us. And over Chris's shoulder, through the patio doors, I watched as my mother and father reached for each other while around them everyone cheered and raised their glasses our way.

But all of that faded into the background when Chris pressed his lips against my ear and whispered, "You've got me forever, sweetheart. This is just the beginning."

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAY IS A 2020 LAMBDA LITERARY AWARD FINALIST AND THE WINNER OF ROMANCE WRITERS NEW ZEALAND 2021 ROMANCE BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD FOR HER BOOK, OFF BALANCE.

Jay is a New Zealand author writing MM romance and romantic suspense primarily set in New Zealand. She writes character driven romances with lots of humour, a good dose of reality and a splash of angst. Jay has travelled extensively, lived in many countries, and in a past life she was a critical care nurse and counsellor. She is owned by a huge Maine Coon cat and a gorgeous Cocker Spaniel.

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