

A man with dark hair and a slight beard is leaning against a metal structure, possibly a shower door. He is wearing a white tank top and blue jeans with a dark belt. He has his arms crossed and is looking down and to the left. The background is dark with a warm, yellowish light source, possibly a lamp, visible in the upper left. The overall mood is moody and intimate.

The Lonely Drop

VANESSA NORTH

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THE LONELY DROP

By Vanessa North

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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THE LONELY DROP

By Vanessa North

Photo Description

Two men lie naked in bed. One is on his stomach, with his head out of the frame, the other strokes a hesitant hand down his lover's back.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Ten years ago, I turned him down.

One night stands were his norm, and not because he couldn't have had a relationship if he'd wanted one. He could pretty much have any man he wanted. I walked away because I deserved better.

Now our paths have crossed again. He has the world at his feet. It's a tempting thought to throw away my lifetime of ideals for a single night with him.

Do I still have the strength to walk away?

Do I even want to?

Take the story where you want it to go.

My only request is for a contemporary story with a HEA.

Thank you!

~ Pamela Su ~

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: culinary/bartenders, businessmen, reunited, second chance, long distance, , masturbation, switch/versatile

Word Count: 24,390

Dedication

To Pamela Su

Author's Note

Some events in this story take place during the snowstorm that hit the southeast United States in January 2014. In order to make this work with my story timeline, I took some artistic liberties with details of the storm, including the dates the storm occurred.

Asheville, North Carolina is a special place to me, a place I lived for several years. The Haywood Inn in this story is an amalgam of Asheville hotels, and should not be confused with the very real Haywood Park Hotel downtown. Though the primary settings in the book are fictitious, street names and neighborhoods are based on real places, and reliable sources (AKA Google and Urban Spoon) inform me that Nick's favorite noodle shop is still located on Pack Square.

THE LONELY DROP

By Vanessa North

Prologue

May 2003

Campus was deserted.

All the underclassmen had gone home for the summer, leaving only the few seniors who lived on campus. Mom wouldn't be coming in until the next day for graduation, and I'd finished my final work study shift at the library.

Finished.

Tomorrow, I'd be a college graduate. I felt a pang of nostalgia as I walked toward the dorm where my friend Kevin lived. There was something particularly collegiate-looking about this part of campus, and every time I'd walked through here, I'd felt it like an epiphany. *I'm in college*. Today I felt it like a punch. This was the last time I'd walk over to Kevin's dorm.

Kevin. He was going to grad school in New York—so he could work part time for his dad and learn the business. We'd talked a bit about me going too, living together in the city. I'd been accepted at Columbia, but I couldn't afford it, so I was staying in Massachusetts to get my MBA. I was going to miss him something fierce.

I trudged up the steps to his room on the third floor, finding the door wide open and Kevin sprawled on his couch, staring at the boxes stacked by the door. I knocked and he looked up.

For a moment, he looked like a runaway puppy that just discovered he'd lost his owner. Then he smiled and all was right in my world. I missed him already. He was right in front of me, smile shining like a lighthouse, and I missed him already.

"Dad got me a new cellphone for graduation." He stood up and thrust a piece of paper into my hand. "There's the number. Don't you dare lose it, okay?"

The vehemence in his voice startled me. "I won't." I shoved the paper into my pocket and kicked the door closed behind me. "Wanna order a pizza? One last time?"

He laughed, then shook his head. "I can't believe it. It seems like yesterday—I mean, we really made it."

“Yeah we did.” I grinned at him as he flopped down on the sofa. I moved across the room to the beds. The top bunk had been stripped down, but Kev’s bed still had navy blue sheets on it. I sat down, kicking off my shoes. “So, that’s a no on the pizza?”

“I ate my last three packs of Top Ramen for lunch so I’m not hungry yet, but maybe later. Sorry I already packed up the TV, or we could play video games.”

I shrugged. “S’okay. Want to go out?”

He shook his head. “Why am I sad, Nick?” He looked up at me. “We’re graduating and I’m supposed to be so happy, but mostly I just feel empty inside.”

Ah, shit. I held out my arms, and he moved into them. Some of the other guys on the team would be assholes about it if they saw us hugging like this, call us faggots or whatever. We were both out to the team, but it didn’t make the teasing any easier to take. As of tomorrow, we weren’t on the team anymore, and if I wanted to hug my best friend then I would, and they could all be damned.

Playing soccer in college would have been hell without him. The day I came out to the team, he stood up and told them he was gay too. And from that day on, we were tighter than brothers. He had my back; I had his.

“Are you worried about moving back to New York?” I asked, squeezing him a little tighter before letting him go.

He stretched out on the bed in front of me and shrugged. “It would be easier if I weren’t moving in with my folks.”

“Yeah.” I met his parents freshman year, and still felt like I’d walked into a freezer every time I thought of them.

He rolled onto his side and tugged me down with him. “I’m going to miss you, you know? But maybe I can come out and see you sometimes.”

I nodded, afraid to meet his eyes, afraid he’d see my feelings for him and laugh at my crush. “Definitely.”

“Hey, Nick. Will you look at me?”

I let my eyes travel up the front of his T-shirt to rest on his face. My face flushed with embarrassment, and I started to look away, but stopped when he cupped my chin in his hand.

“What are—?”

When his lips touched mine, my brain switched off. He nudged at my mouth, gently plucking my lips between his own. He drew back a little. “Is that okay?”

Was it? I didn't know. I didn't care. And I couldn't talk. I leaned in and kissed him. He groaned into my mouth and pulled me roughly against his chest. It made me feel weak and flushed at once. It was so different from how he'd touched me before—and he was an affectionate guy, he hugged me often. But this embrace was... *carnal*.

I shoved closer to him, pressed our bodies as tightly together as I could, letting my hands travel over every bit of him I could reach. He seemed to melt against me, his body going soft and responsive—well, except for the one part of him that wasn't soft at all. He nipped at my lips with his teeth, and I ground my dick against his.

I pulled away enough to break the kiss, then dove into the warm, slightly damp skin between his neck and shoulder. This was crazy. I knew he didn't love me. He didn't have boyfriends, he had hookups. But with his hands on my skin and in my hair, and holy fuck, down my pants, it was hard to remember why that mattered.

“What do you like?” he murmured into my ear, his breath tickling. My whole body felt hot, and I realized that the expression “turned on” meant so much more than just being horny. Horny was impersonal. Horny could be solved with my hand. This was anything but. This intense chemistry was Kevin and years of friendship and desire and being there for each other—it was like being lit up from the inside out because it was *us*.

“What do you mean?” I licked at the salty skin of his throat, reveling in it.

“I mean, what do you like?” He pulled back a little to look in my eyes, and I pulled him into another kiss. He ground against me, hard, then pulled away again. “Come on, Nick, I'm not gonna get all judgy. I'm verse, I'll do whatever, but you know—I want to make you happy.” His grin was sweet and a little shy.

I blushed, this time not from arousal, but embarrassment. “I've never...”

His eyes grew wide. “You're a... wait. No, that guy at the club that time—you guys were...”

He trailed off and stared at me. “You're a virgin?”

Fuck. I untangled myself from his arms and legs, wondering how the hell we got so intertwined so quickly. “Yeah.”

He pressed further. “You mean, anal right? You’ve done other stuff? BJs, dry-humping, mutual jerk-offs…”

How much more embarrassing could this get? “This is a mistake.”

I tried to sit up, but he pulled me down. “Wait a minute, Nick. Why? For fuck’s sake, what are you saving yourself for? It’s not like you can get married. I mean, come on.” He laughed, and my flush deepened. Of course he wouldn’t get it; he’s the king of the one night stand.

“Just forget it. Forget all of it.” I shoved away from him, humiliated. I didn’t expect him to understand—he didn’t grow up the way I did—but I certainly didn’t expect him to make fun of me either.

“Aww, come on, Nick, *stay*. I want you to stay tonight.”

Tonight. One night. I could stay there, lose my virginity to the guy I loved, and walk away in the morning knowing he’d never love me back.

No. I couldn’t do it.

“I deserve better.” I said softly. “I want my first time to be about love, not just being comfortable and being scared of the future. I want it to be special.”

I swallowed around a lump forming in my throat. I *had* to get out of there.

“I have to go.” I stood up and straightened my clothes.

I crossed the room to the door, which hell, we hadn’t even *locked*, and as I opened it, I took one last look over my shoulder at him. Confusion and something like pity warred for dominance on his face. I closed the door behind me, and I practically ran to my own room. Hurt, ashamed, and alone, I threw his new cell phone number in the trashcan outside.

Chapter One

November 2013

I'm the master of the multi-task.

At least, when I'm behind the bar, that's true. With the bar phone tucked between my ear and my shoulder, I can pull a perfect draft and nod a friendly hello to the two businessmen walking through the door, all while plotting my bar manager's ex-husband's violent murder. Not that I'd actually kill anyone—I'm a pacifist. Hell, I don't even eat meat. I just wish the guy would stop complicating my life.

"Jenny, I can cover the bar by myself for maybe another half hour, but I need you, or I need to pull someone from upstairs before happy hour gets in full swing. I swear to God, Daniel has the number one spot on my shit list right now."

"I know, I'm sorry. Miriam's on her way to watch the kids. I'll be there as soon as humanly possible."

"This is the third weekend he's forgotten in as many months. When you gonna sue for sole custody since you're pretty much living it already?"

"You gonna give me a raise so I can pay my lawyer for that?" she huffs into the phone. "Sorry, that wasn't fair. Miriam just pulled into the driveway. I'll be there in twenty."

She hangs up without saying goodbye.

I hand the draft off to one of Jenny's regulars, a scrawny red-faced guy in a trucker cap. "Here you go, Jonah." I smile at him, and he gives me a half-hearted grin, but it's clear he'd rather be flirting with Jenny.

I pick up two beer coasters and slide them across the bar to the businessmen, rattling off my greeting and gesturing to the menu above the bar, "Welcome to The Lonely Drop, guys, what can I get—"

I break off in shock as I look up to meet the very stunned gaze of a man I never expected to see in Asheville. He's all wrong here. He's too shiny, too perfect. He's too New York or London. What the hell is he doing *here*?

"Nick?" A rush of emotions slides across his face too fast for me to catalog them all. Surprise, wonder, pain, but then pure, unbridled pleasure. "Oh my God, Nick Hana, it's really you."

“Kevin Dorsey.” After all these years, his name doesn’t hurt to say, but I flinch anyway. He takes my hand like he’s going to shake it and then pulls me into a hug from across the bar. His scent rushes over me, bringing decade-old memories along for the ride. He must still wear the same cologne, because he smells every bit as enticing as he ever did. I resist the urge to bury my face against his neck and breathe it in, remembering all too well the taste of the skin there.

“Shit, Nick, I can’t believe it’s you. Small world, man. God, you look good.” He lets me go and then lets his gaze travel up and down my body, his grin going wider as he takes in my flushed cheeks. He’s one to talk. He’d been tousled-cute at twenty-two, but with his coffee-colored hair cut short and ten years more experience behind his hazel eyes, he’s grown into his looks. He’d been cute, and I’d thought he was gorgeous then. Now? He’s devastating.

“S-so do you,” I stammer. “I—you’re in *Asheville*.”

He laughs. “For a couple of days. Dad’s taking over a company here, and he sent us down to do some of the early transition stuff.”

“Your dad sends you to fire people?” I can’t help the bitterness in my voice, and his smile falters a little.

“Well, it’s part of my job. I’ll be hiring people too.” He looks around the Drop and looks back at me, confusion plain on his face. “And you’re... tending bar?”

I flush red all over, part anger, part embarrassment—and more anger because I have nothing to be embarrassed about. Some of my favorite people on the planet tend bar, and often as not, I do too.

“I own the bar. And the restaurant upstairs.” I turn to his companion, a pretentious-looking ladder-climbing type wearing too much cologne and a suit that’s cut a little too big—more like he’s got a bad tailor than like he lost weight. “Hi, Nick Hana, proprietor. I went to college with Kevin. We played soccer together.”

“I’ll have the IPA.” He glares at me, obviously annoyed I’ve interrupted his opportunity to kiss up to the boss’s son.

“Dom. This is one of my oldest friends, Nick Hana.” Kevin’s voice is cold as he repeats my introduction. The guy—Dom—snaps out of his sulk and reaches out to shake my hand. As soon as I let go, I turn to tap his beer, hoping to hide how flustered I am at seeing Kevin again.

“What for you, Kev?” I call over my shoulder.

“I’ll have the same. You brew on site?”

“We do.” I can’t help it, my chest puffs a little. I’m *proud* of this little brewpub. It’s a good place, a friendly place. I’ve worked hard to make it the kind of place where the hippies and hillbillies, businessmen and retirees all feel welcome. A good beer, a good meal, and good company. I built that. And yeah, I have an MBA and I use it to pull drafts, and I don’t care what anyone, least of all Kevin Dorsey, thinks about that.

I hand them the beers.

“We do brewery tours on the weekends. If you’re still here Saturday, you should come by.”

“We won’t be.” Kevin’s face falls a little, then brightens with one of those smiles that always devastated me. “But next time, I’ll see if I can arrange to stay longer.”

Next time. Kevin Dorsey is going to be in Asheville again. Next time. I try to stamp down the hope unfurling in my heart. No. I don’t want Kevin in my life. I don’t need his flirtatious smiles or his friendly hugs, or the temptation when he turns to me and says something like “Stay. I want you to stay tonight.”

Ten years ago, when I was a shy, still-virgin at twenty-two, it was hard enough to say no to him when he said those words, a warm, turned-on gleam in his eyes. I deserved better than to be a notch in Kevin’s bedpost then, and I still do. Ten years later, with a few serious relationships behind me, I’m more convinced than ever that sex is best when it’s about love.

No, I don’t need a *next time* with Kevin Dorsey.

I notice the heavy plastic coaster next to Dom. “You guys are eating upstairs?”

“Yeah. The girl working the desk at the Haywood Inn recommended it. Small world you would own the one restaurant she gushed about.”

I make a mental note to send Tammy lunch sometime next week. “Well, the lasagna is my mom’s recipe. I remember you liked that, back then.”

The coaster starts blinking and vibrating. Kevin reaches for his wallet, but I wave him off.

“On me tonight. It was nice to see you.”

“Listen, Nick, I’d love to catch up later. How late are you working tonight?”

“I’ll be here until after we close. At midnight.”

He frowns. “Okay, listen, I’ll come downstairs after dinner and leave my cell number. I just... man, it’s good to see you.” The frown turns into one of those brilliant smiles, and it hits me right in the gut. I find myself smiling back. Apparently, any willpower I had around Kevin Dorsey was used up in one fell swoop ten years ago.

“I’d like that.”

Three hours later, Kevin returns to the bar, sans Dom. Jenny and I are moving in practiced tandem behind the bar. She sings along with the music coming over the speakers and tosses her cocktail shaker like she’s the second coming of Tom Cruise in that eighties movie. The mood is light when she taps me on the shoulder and says, “There’s a hottie standing by the bar with his phone number on a napkin. Nice suit, too, he’s probably loaded.” She whispers, “You lucky shit.”

I roll my eyes at her. Jenny’s obsession with rags-to-riches romance novels is legendary. The only thing she’d like more than to believe I was living one would be to be living one herself. “It’s just Kevin,” I tell her. “Old soccer buddy.”

But when I turn and see him there, hands in his pockets and that warm smile on his full lips, I feel like I should be growing Pinocchio’s nose. There’s no such thing as “just Kevin.”

Jenny snorts and pats my shoulder. “Uh-huh.”

“Where’s your colleague?” I ask, placing a coaster in front of him.

“He went back to the hotel, thank God. He’s an insufferable little shit. I can’t begin to tell you how pissed off he was when he realized there was no filet on the menu.” Kevin chuckles, then mimics his smarmy coworker. “Why would you waste a perfectly good per diem on rabbit food?”

I laugh; I can picture it perfectly.

“The meal was outstanding, by the way. I had your mom’s lasagna. It’s even better than I remember.”

“Thanks. I added nutmeg. She’s probably cursing me out for it from beyond the grave.”

His face falls. "Oh shit, Nick."

A lump forms in my throat. Of course, he didn't know. It's not like he'd have seen her obituary in the small hometown paper where it ran. I don't like to visit the raw place inside where I still grieve for her. An only child to a single parent, I'm unmoored now, family-less, and there are no words adequate. The tightness I feel in my chest, it's more than loneliness, it's the isolation at the end of a family line.

"It's been a few years." I say the words as though they'll protect me from my own grief, the way time sometimes does.

"I didn't know. I would have..." he trails off and looks down at his shoes. "I don't know what. I would have come to the funeral. I'm so sorry, man."

"Thanks, that's very kind of you to say."

"Hey, I know we drifted apart after college, but I thought..."

I hold up a hand. "It's been ten years, life happened in the meantime."

"I wish I'd known it was happening to you." He offers another smile. "So, want to tell me more about it?"

"About Mom? No offense, Kev, but I really don't want—"

"About your life. You have this place. You're living in North Carolina. I want to know more."

I pull an IPA for him and set it on the coaster. I pull one for myself and go around the bar to join him. "After Amherst, I got my MBA, same as you. Then Mom started getting sick right about the time I finished school. I had some offers in Boston, but I moved home to Vermont to help take care of her. She was in hospice by the end of that year. After she passed away, I married her nurse. A few months later, I realized I had been insane with grief, and we divorced, amicably. I fled to North Carolina and bought this place. Turned it into a vegetarian brew pub, and here we are."

He stares at me, jaw dropped. "You can't be serious. You got married?"

I manage not to crack a smile, shrugging instead, but the longer he stares, the harder it is to maintain my nonchalance. My lips start to quiver. Before I know it, I'm doubled over laughing, and he's scowling at me.

"You are so full of shit, Nick."

But now he's laughing too.

"I did *not* get married. I just threw that in there to see what you would say. I needed to get out of New England, though, so I wrote a business plan and came here."

"Your mom—" He tries to make a disapproving face.

"Would be laughing just as hard as I am at the expression on your face when I said I got married."

"Yeah, she would." He raises his glass. "To Mama Hana. Thanks for teaching me about pot and falafel. The world is better because you were in it."

We drink to my mom's memory, smiling at each other over our pints.

"How about you?" I ask. "You ever settle down?"

A flash of something raw scuttles across his face before his carefully cultivated, good-natured mask returns. "No. I'm not the settling type. I shot for the moon once, but that crash was pretty hard."

"Still too pretty for monogamy." I roll my eyes at him. "Why am I not surprised?"

"It is what it is," he deadpans. Then he drains the rest of his pint in one swallow. "Listen, I have an early meeting tomorrow." He grimaces, probably remembering my comment earlier about him firing people. "I'm going to go. Here's my number." He hands me the napkin. "And, you know, if you aren't doing anything after you leave here, text me. I'm staying at the Haywood Inn, room 311. I wouldn't mind your company while I'm here. I'll be here until Thursday." He offers a sly smile, puts a hand on my thigh, and leans close. "I've missed you, Nick. I'm glad I got a chance to see you."

He gives my thigh a squeeze, brushes a kiss across my cheek, stands, and drops a few bills on the bar. "Call me if you want. Even if it's after I go back to New York and it's not for anything more than to say hey. Don't be a stranger."

"Kev..." I don't even know what to say to that. Did he just proposition me? And then back track?

"Don't over think it, Nick." He smiles again. "And don't lose my number, okay?"

I look down at the napkin in my hand, suddenly remembering the humiliation that led me to toss a similar scrap of paper in the garbage ten years earlier. "Right. Um, about what you said about company? Are you talking about catching up on old times or...?"

“I’m talking about whatever you want.”

“I’m not going to have sex with you.”

He flinches. “My friendship has never been contingent on whether or not we had sex. I’m sorry if I ever gave you that impression. Call me, don’t, it’s up to you. Like I said, I’m here until Thursday.”

He flashes me one more smile, but this one doesn’t seem to have any heart behind it. Then, he walks out of my bar.

I tuck the napkin into my pocket and return to my work, wondering how he’s the one who propositioned me and I’m the one who feels like an ass.

Yeah, I’m a chickenshit.

I don’t call him. I don’t even copy the number into my phone. I almost throw it away. Twice. The second time, it actually makes it into the garbage can in my little office at the back of the restaurant, but I dig it out and stick it in the safe instead. Out of sight, out of mind, but if I really want it, I know where to find it. Done.

I have a moment of weakness Wednesday night. The Drop is only a ten-minute walk from my house on Montford. I stand on my porch for twenty minutes watching daylight leach from the sky, until it’s too dark to walk. I would feel silly driving over there to get his phone number. I fish my phone out of my pocket and dial the bar.

“Lonely Drop!” Jenny answers. I can hear bar noise in the background, laughter and music and clinking glassware.

“Hey, Jenny. How’s everything going?”

“Hey, Nick! Everything’s fine, baby. Crazy busy. You don’t usually call in on your night off, what’s up?”

“Nothing. I thought I left something in my office. Was going to ask you to get it for me. But it’s not urgent, and you’re busy, so no worries.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, go serve some beer.”

“Night, boss.”

Thursday comes and goes, and on Friday morning, the regret hits me hard. He’s gone, and I’ve missed any chance I had at making a real reconnection with him.

I used to think I got nostalgic over my college years because everyone does, but honestly? I get nostalgic about Kevin more. I miss him. I miss the soccer games, and how he always knew exactly where I'd be on the field for a pass, like he had some sort of Nick-radar. I miss the post-game celebrations and how he'd pull me into his sweaty body for a hug. I miss bringing him to Vermont with me for the holidays because he loved my mom and she fussed over him the way his own mom never seemed to.

I've blown my chance to reconnect and it hurts. It hurts more than I thought it could after ten years. All of ten minutes' conversation overrode ten years of moving on, and my heart aches like it broke yesterday.

Friday night, the bar is too busy for me to think about anything but pulling drafts and mixing drinks, but when I finally lock the door and walk to my car, his phone number is tucked in my pocket.

At home, I undress, tossing my clothes—which stink of beer and bar food—into the hamper, and I lie down on my bed in my boxers. I stare at the number—his handwriting still so familiar. Finally, I dial.

“Hello?”

His voice is rough from sleep. Oh, shit, it's two in the morning. What the hell am I thinking?

“I'm sorry!” I blurt out. “I'll call you tomorrow. Oh God, I'm so sorry, Kevin.”

“Wait, Nick? Wait, don't hang up! Is that you?”

“Yeah, I'm sorry, I forget not everyone keeps barman's hours.”

“S'okay. I don't have to go to work tomorrow. I'm glad you called.” I can hear the smile in his voice. It's true, he's glad. A rush of warmth tingles through me. He's glad.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I was thinking about you all day.”

“Really?”

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I thought you were mad at me.” I play my fingers over the squares of my quilt, feeling weak for admitting it, but also feeling like it's okay, because he's just a disembodied voice on the other end of the phone, not real, standing in front of me and smelling like heaven and ten-year-old memories.

“No, disappointed in myself. I let you think... I let you think I just wanted to hook up with you—and I’m not gonna lie, Nick, I totally would hook up with you. But I really want my old friend back. Can we do that? Be friends again?”

Relief washes over me. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

“Awesome.” The warmth in his voice makes me feel good down to my toes. My cock chubs up a little, and instead of being embarrassed, I enjoy the feeling of being turned on without him knowing.

“What were you thinking about? You said you were thinking about me?”

“About lots of stuff...” He trails off, clears his throat, and then when he starts talking again there’s an almost fake cheerful note to his voice. “Especially how much fun we always used to have on the soccer pitch. You still play?”

“Yeah, I play in a league at the park. My team kinda sucks, but we have fun. You?”

“No, I wish. I travel too much, and Dad thinks...”

I wait for him to finish the sentence. When he doesn’t, I prompt him, “Your dad thinks what?”

“Nothing. It’s not important. You know how he is. Remember when I came out to him?”

God, how could I forget? Kevin came over to my dorm room, shaking, on the verge of tears because his dad was a cold, unfeeling asshole. Mr. Dorsey wasn’t mean, exactly, just careless with his son’s feelings. I’d never felt so helpless as that night Kevin spent in my room, curled up with me on my twin bed. He slept, but I didn’t. I started bringing him home on the holidays after that, because my mom had more than enough parental affection to share.

“Yeah. He any better now?”

“He doesn’t really care about me being gay. That would require him actually caring about me.”

My hand stills on the blanket. I’m shocked to hear him say the words. He never had, when we were in school. I’d always supposed something that unfair was best left unsaid, but there’s a power in acknowledging it.

“He sucks, Kevin,” I whisper.

“Yeah, but that’s old news. Some things never change. Now, at least I have the luxury to think of him more like my boss than my dad, you know?”

“He acts more like your boss than your dad. Why do you work for him again?”

“Because working for him is the best our relationship has ever been.” His sigh is a little sad. “He’s warming up a little lately because Trish—you remember my little sister?—anyway, Trish is having a baby. Maybe he’ll be a better grandfather than he was a father.”

“One can only hope,” I grunt.

“What’s it like, owning a restaurant?” There’s a wistfulness to his voice, more than curiosity, maybe even jealousy.

“It’s terrifying. And wonderful. And stressful. But I love it.”

“Your mom’s influence is all over the menu.”

I smile at that. “Yeah, she’d have loved it. Nutmeg in the lasagna aside.”

“So, are you a full-time vegetarian now? Or do you still sneak bacon sometimes like you did in college?”

“No more bacon. I’ve been a real vegetarian for about six years now. It seemed disrespectful, somehow.”

“To your mom.”

“Yeah. After she died.”

“She was really special, Nick.”

The lump is back in my throat. I nod, then realize he can’t see me, so I say, “Thanks.”

“Is she buried in Vermont?”

“No, she was cremated. I have her ashes here.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I was going to scatter them in the mountains where she taught me to ski, ’cause she loved it there, but I’m not ready yet.”

“Maybe give me a call, when you do? I’d like a chance to say goodbye—even if it’s just over the phone.”

Just over the phone.

Like our slowly rekindling friendship.

“When are you coming back to Asheville?” I hold my breath, waiting for his answer.

“January sometime. I’ll need to interview candidates for the now-vacant management positions. We’ll do the first few rounds over the phone, but I won’t make a final decision until I meet with them in person.”

“Will you call me? Maybe we can have lunch. There’s this fantastic noodle place in Pack Square.”

“Yeah, I’ll call you.” He yawns and I hear it through the phone.

“Hey Kev, get some sleep.”

“Don’t want to hang up yet. I have my buddy back.”

“I’ll still be here tomorrow.”

“You promise?”

“I swear.”

“Don’t swear. Mama Hana hated it when you swore.”

“I promise.”

“Good night, Nick.”

“G’night, Kevin.”

Chapter Two

Thanksgiving morning 2013

I call Kevin right before I open the restaurant for lunch, knowing it will be too crazy later in the day, and somehow, even if I can't say it outright, wanting to express my thankfulness that he's in my life.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Nick!" His voice is full of exuberance when he picks up the phone.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Kevin." I smile, trying to picture him in New York, wondering what his home looks like. "Are you at home?"

"Nah, Mom decided she wanted to go someplace warm, so we're spending the weekend in the Keys. How about you?"

"At the Drop. We've got some Thanksgiving specials planned. My tofurkey is legendary."

He laughs, a low chuckle. "You really serve tofurkey? What about the root vegetable stew your mom used to make?"

"Hey, some people, myself included, like tofurkey. I make the stew too. And butternut squash bisque, onion and goat cheese tarts, pumpkin fritters. The desserts are the best though. The pastry shop across the street sends over the best pecan pie I've ever had, and we make our own pistachio and Bailey's ice cream to go with it."

"Pistachio and Bailey's on pecan pie?" His voice is thick with longing.

"It tastes even better than it sounds. It's like eating an orgasm."

He laughs. "I dunno, I've eaten my share of spunk, and I bet your ice cream is better."

"You know, vegetarians taste better." The flirtatious words pop out before I can stop them.

"Are you offering?"

"Offering what?" I hedge. I opened myself up for this bit of sensual banter, the least I can do is let him say it.

"To let me taste your orgasm?" he teases. I can't stop the visual that pops into my head. Him on his knees, looking up at me with lust-dark hazel eyes while I thrust down his throat.

I bite back a moan.

"I'll make you some ice cream," I offer, my voice only shaking a little bit.

"It'll do." He sighs. "Hey, I gotta go. Thanks for calling, man. It's good to talk to you."

"Yeah, you too. Happy Thanksgiving."

Christmas Eve 2013

I miss the call because Jenny's car broke down. I drive her and her kids to an Ingles parking lot where her ex is supposed to meet her to pick them up. She mutters something about wanting the exchanges to happen somewhere there are security cameras.

"Jesus, Jenny." I stare at her. "And you're letting him take your kids?"

"It's not like he's actually going to show up. And if he does, if he's drunk or stoned, we call the police. I won't let him take them if he's high." She tucks one of her long curls behind her ear. "Who stands up their kids on Christmas?"

I grunt. My own sperm donor had pretty much stood up my entire life, so I didn't really have anything to say to that. I know one thing for sure: I'd rather grow up the way I did, with no dad at all, than have someone volatile like Daniel for a parent.

We wait an hour.

After I drop Jenny and the two crying kids at her house, I drive home, and it's not until I see my cell sitting on the counter that I realize I hadn't had it with me.

Two missed calls. One is Jenny thanking me for waiting with them; the other is Kevin.

"Hey, Nick. Merry Christmas. I... I didn't like thinking about you being alone. For the holiday. Well, at all really, but also for the holiday. Then I realized you probably have a boyfriend or something, and you're celebrating with him. And that's awesome. I hope... I mean, I'd really like to know you're doing okay. Merry Christmas."

I listen to it three times before I text him.

I'm fine, Merry Christmas.

I listen to his message again, smiling at the way his voice turns flat when he mentions a boyfriend.

No boyfriend. Not for a while.

A few minutes later, he texts me.

Tell me you aren't alone.

Alone isn't so bad.

My phone rings. I don't even have to look to know it's him.

"Hi, Kevin. How are you today?"

"Do you want me to fly down there?" His voice is all growly, and I'm ashamed of how much that turns me on.

"What? No." I laugh. "It's not a big deal. It's not like this is my first Christmas alone." That Christmas had sucked. I'm still amazed I didn't go out of my mind.

"Dude! I'm serious. I'll fly down there, we can hang out."

I can't believe he's offering. It's sweet, and thoughtful. And not the kind of thing you do for someone you've barely talked to in ten years.

"Kevin. Stay home, celebrate with your family. Hey, how's Trish?" I change the subject to his sister, hoping for a reprieve.

"She's forty-one weeks pregnant and tired of hearing manger jokes. Don't change the subject."

"I thought pregnancy only lasted..." I start ticking off weeks on my fingers.

"Her due date was last week," he says.

"Well if she's a week past her due date, you should definitely stay in New York. You don't want to miss the birth."

"January sixth," he says abruptly.

"What?"

"I'll be in Asheville January sixth. I'm staying at the Haywood again. I'm staying through the weekend so I can come to your brewery tour on Saturday, and I would really like to take you out to dinner."

"Dinner? Like a date? But you don't date."

He sighs heavily and doesn't speak for a moment. When he does, his voice is so sad I want to take it back.

"I really wish you'd stop basing everything you think about me on the way I behaved in college."

"I don't!" Do I?

"You do. And that's okay for the most part, because we had fun together in college, and I like that you remember me that way. But it kinda stings that you assume I'm still chasing every hot ass that crosses my path."

I want to believe him. I really do. But something niggles in the back of my brain. He's the one who offered a hookup that first night when he showed up at the Drop.

"When was the last time you had a one night stand?"

"When was the last time you did?" he shoots back.

I let my silence speak for itself.

"Fine. November, before I came to Asheville. A guy from my gym. He was hot and we had fun and I don't feel guilty about it."

"I don't think you should feel guilty."

"Spare me. I know you think sex should always be about love—but sometimes it's just about sex. About two hot, sweaty, naked bodies rubbing together because it feels good. It feels good, and I'm not ashamed of enjoying it."

"I'm not trying to make you feel ashamed." I frown into the phone. How did we go from him offering to fly down to keep me company for the holiday to *this*?

"And I'm not trying to make you feel like a puritanical uptight asshole. No, wait, I am."

Ouch. An angry flush heats my face. "It's working," I admit.

"Okay, so maybe we stop with the value judgments about each other's sex lives?"

"Okay." I sigh. "I'm an asshole, I'm sorry."

"I'll call you in January, when I get into town."

“Please do. Kevin, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Forget it. Merry Christmas, Nick.”

“Merry Christmas.”

New Year’s Eve/New Year’s Day 2013/2014

He sends me a selfie and a text from Times Square.

Playing tourist. Kinda fun. Happy New Year, Nick.

The Drop is packed, so I barely have time to text, *You too*, before turning my phone off so it won’t distract me anymore.

When I crawl into bed at three in the morning, I turn it on and find more texts.

Kissing anyone special tonight?

Nick?

Me neither. Thinking about it though.

I shake my head and send a text of my own.

Drop was busy tonight. Only kiss I got was from Jenny.

Late as it is, I don’t expect a text back, but it comes within minutes.

You kissed a girl???

I laugh.

She kissed me.

The phone rings.

“Hey,” I try not to yawn as I answer, rolling onto my belly.

“You just get home?”

“Yeah. What are you doing up at three in the morning?”

“Couldn’t sleep. Was waiting for a text.”

My breath catches a little. So damned unfair of him to flirt with me like this. I don’t know how to respond.

“Nick?” he prods.

“Sorry, I’m exhausted. I have no witty rejoinders.”

He chuckles. “Okay, I can take a hint. I was going to angle for some phone sex, but…”

Oh good grief. “Are you kidding me?”

He laughs outright. “Only a little. I’d totally sex you up over the phone. Do you have to be in love with someone to have phone sex with them? Because I’m okay with being taken advantage of.”

“Well, I’m not.” It would be just as easy to love him now as it was ten years ago. I worry that I’m halfway there already. Just the thought of phone sex with him has me grinding my dick into the mattress.

“No phone sex then.” His voice sounds sad. “That’s cool. It’s good to talk to you anyway.”

“Yeah. I almost didn’t expect to talk to you again after Christmas. I’m sorry I was an asshole.”

“Well, I happen to like assholes, so you’re forgiven.”

It takes me a minute to put the pun together. I half-laugh, half-groan into the phone. “That is the worst joke ever.”

“Hey Nick, what’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“Sex with someone you love. I mean, I’m assuming you aren’t still a virgin—oh, God, tell me you aren’t still a virgin.”

The question takes me by surprise, but not for the reason I would have thought.

“You’ve never been in love?”

“Once. I was in love once.”

Wow. I’d never realized it before, but jealousy *hurts*.

“Well then you know.”

“No, I never slept with him. It was an unrequited thing. Very angsty.”

I try to imagine him pining away for this unknown someone who was stupid enough not to love him. I can’t—the whole situation seems absurd to me, so I answer his question instead. “I’m not a virgin. I loved the guys I’ve been with,

but I don't know that it was ever really in-love-kinda-love, now that I look back. I've had some relationships. It was... good. I loved connecting with someone emotionally and physically at the same time."

"Okay, so I'm trying to picture it... you're a bottom, right?"

I snort. "Um, sometimes. Sure, I like to bottom."

"Okay, I like this picture. Continue. What happened next?"

I laugh out loud then. "Still angling for phone sex?"

"Can't help it, your voice is sexy."

"I need to go to sleep." I yawn.

"Okay. I'll let you go. Happy New Year, Nick."

"Happy New Year, Kev."

It takes me a very long time to fall asleep.

January 6, 2014

Nervous butterflies stirring my guts wake me before dawn. I might see Kevin tonight. I armor my heart with the knowledge he's only here temporarily, that this reunion, however welcome, is not some fairy tale with a happy-ever-after ending. Stupid heart doesn't seem to care.

I head over to the Drop at ten thirty to get the pub ready to open, wondering if he'll stop by. Jenny's kids are still out of school on holiday break, so I handle the lunch crowd by myself, thankful it's busy enough to keep my mind off the impending reunion with Kevin. But when the lunch rush is over, my thoughts go straight to him. Stupid brain.

The text comes at four-thirty.

*At the hotel—gonna take a shower and then check in with work.
Are you at the Drop?*

I almost succeed at not picturing him in the shower. Stupid dick.

Yeah. Come by when you finish up with work. Jenny comes in at six. Dinner?

He doesn't answer for a long time. Finally:

Sorry. Was in the shower. Date dinner???

Your overuse of punctuation is very romantic. Friends dinner.

I can almost hear his put-upon tone when he replies.

*Fine. Friends dinner. I'll meet you at the Drop at 6????! xo, Mr!
Romance!?!*

I can't help it, I laugh.

No, I smell like a brewery. Gonna go home and shower. 7.

I start wiping down the bar and my phone buzzes again.

See you then.

I can't wait. Stupid, stupid heart.

Chapter Three

He's waiting at the bar, wearing dark jeans that are borderline too-tight and a tight black T-shirt. It's a good look for him, drawing the eye to the athletic lines of his chest and shoulders. When he sees me, his face lights up with one of those gorgeous smiles of his.

"Hey." I approach, not sure whether to shake his hand or hug him. I want to kiss him, I realize. The thought terrifies me but refuses to leave my head. The memory of our first desperate kiss in an almost-bare dorm room competes for dominance in my brain with wondering what ten years has done for his technique. I'm so gone.

"Hi." He stands and pulls me into a hug. He's a few inches taller than I am. If I were brave enough, I could fold my head onto his shoulder and breathe in his scent. The hug lingers a little longer than it should, then he lets me go.

"Buy you a drink?" he asks, gesturing at the row of taps and grinning.

"Not here. Come on, let's walk."

We end up at my favorite noodle place, and it's crowded but comfortable for a weekday evening. He charms me over dinner with stories about the travel he does for his dad's company.

"The boss is a jerk, but there are perks."

"Yeah?"

"Went to Paris for a month last year and was wined and dined by sexy French men. I gained ten pounds and a healthy appreciation for dirty talk."

"You speak French?" Why did I not remember that?

"Just enough to get by." He flashes me a shy smile. "It was fun, being a novelty to them. A big dorky American who accidentally says 'fuck me' instead of 'kiss me.' End result was the same though."

"How do you mix up the words for kiss and fuck?"

"It's easier than you think."

I'll have to take his word for it. "So, last time you came to town it was to fire people. And this time you're doing job interviews? How does that work?"

"I already interviewed them by phone, but a face-to-face interview is the final step. We're going to transfer someone from New York to be the general manager, but I need a new sales manager and a new HR manager. Once those two are in place, they'll take over future hiring decisions."

"Hard to imagine you have many employees willing to leave the city to come here."

He shrugs, giving me an odd look. "Asheville has its charms, I'm learning. Besides, it only takes one."

He looks like he's about to say more, but my phone rings. I check the caller ID, and it's the Drop.

"Sorry, I have to take this—Hello?"

"Nick, it's Jenny. I'm sorry to interrupt your date."

"It's not a date, it's dinner with a friend. What's up?"

"Daniel came by the house and he was all drunk and threatening. Miriam called the police, and he took off, but she's scared he's going to come back and try to take the kids. I'm not sure what to do—Miriam's threatening to quit, and I need to go home and calm her down."

"Whoa, slow down, Jenny. Does Miriam have a car?"

The noise she makes sounds affirmative, so I continue, "Give her directions to my place. You all can have a sleepover there. For God's sake Jenny, tomorrow you are going to file for sole custody and a freaking restraining order. I'll go meet her at the house and get them settled, then I'll come take over at the bar. As soon as you leave the Drop, head to my house. Do *not* even think about going to your place alone, okay?"

"Are you sure, Nick? You don't need my drama."

"Jenny, you're the most irreplaceable employee I have, and you're my friend. Yes, I'm sure. And I've already got your drama since it affects the workplace. That's not a judgment, sweetheart—Daniel is his own person, you aren't responsible for his issues. But, let's do what we can to get you out of this situation once and for all, okay?"

"Thank you, Nick." She snuffles into the phone.

"You're welcome. I'll see you soon."

I hang up and turn to Kevin. He's already procured our check from the waiter and paid it.

"I'm sorry, I hate to cut the evening short—" I start to explain, but he holds up a hand.

"No worries. Besides, now I get to see your house."

Miriam and the kids are sitting in Miriam's car in my driveway when we pull in. I wave to the three of them, and they get out and follow me up the steps. Kevin gathers their bags from the trunk and joins us.

Samantha, Jenny's three-year-old daughter, wipes her nose on a sleeve and looks up at Kevin warily as I unlock the door and usher them inside. "Who are you?"

"I'm Kevin. I'm Nick's friend."

"Are you his boyfriend?" Blake, the six year old, asks. "Mom says he dates guys instead of girls."

"Um, no, I'm not his boyfriend." Kevin glances over at me. "But I date guys instead of girls too."

Miriam, a pretty college student who has been watching the kids for Jenny since before she was divorced, herds them into the bathroom to brush their teeth before they can ask any more questions, leaving me standing in my kitchen with Kevin, who is looking around with curiosity.

"Wow, this place is so... oh." I look at his face to see him staring at a set of copper measuring cups sitting on the counter. They'd belonged to my grandmother, then my mother, and now me. They'd been a familiar sight in Mom's kitchen.

"I use them every day." I pick up the tiniest one, the quarter-cup measure, and stroke a finger over the engraved measurement on the side. "It's nice to see something of hers getting everyday use."

"She had me polish them once." He comes and picks up the one-cup measure, mimicking my actions, stroking the engraving with his thumb. "We went to visit for Thanksgiving, remember? I had never washed up after Thanksgiving dinner before."

"That's because you were a spoiled rich brat."

He laughs. "I hated being a spoiled rich brat. Which is such an entitled, shitty thing to say."

He sets the cup down, takes the small one from my hand, and sets it down next to his.

"What are we doing, Nick?" he asks softly, not letting go of my hand. "I know this is going to be cut short tonight, and I understand why, but I need to know what *this* is."

I swallow hard, forcing myself to meet his gaze. He's more vulnerable in this moment than I've ever seen him. "I don't know, Kevin. I thought we were just... friends again."

"That's fine. Just so you know, I wouldn't mind it being more." He runs his hand up my arm, slides it behind my neck. His thumb tracing the line of my throat, he moves in close like he's about to kiss me. "I think about that afternoon in my dorm room, the day before graduation. Do you ever think about that? Our first kiss?"

My eyes drift closed, amplifying the warmth of his hand on the sensitive skin of my neck. Of course I think about that kiss. With him this close, the scent of him in my nose, his touch on my skin, I can almost taste him. When his lips press gently against mine, it takes everything I have to pull my head away.

"Kevin... I can't. You come here, you stay in a hotel for a few days, and you go home. You might sleep with someone while you're here and have a good time—that works for you, and I'm not judging you for it, but I can't be someone's Mr. Right Now."

He closes his eyes and sighs, looking like he's going to reply, but then Blake and Samantha come running into the kitchen and I'm reminded why our evening is being cut short.

"I have to go back to the Drop so Jenny can come over here," I tell him.

"Will you drop me off at my hotel on the way?" he asks, resignation in his voice. "I have an early morning tomorrow."

"Of course."

I show Miriam where to find the guest rooms and the remote for the TV, and we say our goodnights to her and the kids.

Kevin is so silent on the drive to the hotel, if I couldn't smell him, I'd swear I was alone in the car. I pull up in front of the Haywood Inn and turn to say goodbye and apologize again, but stop short when I see the smile on his face.

“Kev?”

He reaches out a hand and brushes a fingertip down the length of my nose, then drops it.

“Call me tomorrow, okay? I’ll come by and have a pint.” he says brightly, and a flush of relief washes over me. I’d been so sure he’d decide he didn’t want to see me again now that *more* was off the table.

“Okay, sounds good. Good luck with the interviews tomorrow. I hope you find someone good.”

He smiles. “Thanks. Me too.”

And then, he’s gone.

Chapter Four

January 7, 2014

Kevin strolls into the Drop right in the middle of happy hour. Jenny, having spent a chunk of her day with her lawyer, is closing the bar, but I need to stay and see her through the post work-day rush. I give Kevin a little nod as he approaches the bar, and he smiles wearily. I pull an IPA for him and set it in front of him as he sits down. When he reaches for his wallet, I wave him off.

“On me. You bought dinner last night, the least I can do is buy my old buddy a beer.”

“Thanks.”

“How’d the interviews go?”

“Good. I think I have my HR manager. Still undecided on the sales manager, but I still have a few more interviews to go through for that position.”

I nod. “Hiring is tough. Any chance of promoting from within?”

“Nah, the sales team is a mess. If their sales had been stronger, they might not have needed to go looking for a buyer. Ugh, I don’t want to talk about work. Please tell me there’s a good gay dance bar somewhere in this town.”

I laugh. “Yeah, but the scene over there won’t get good until about five hours from now.”

“Come with me? It’ll be like old times.”

Old times. Wingmen again. Getting all hot and bothered watching him dance, and then going home alone while he picks someone up. Oh, yeah. *That* sounds fun.

“I don’t really...”

“Oh, you really, really do. Come on, Nick.” He rolls his eyes and starts ticking things off on his fingers. “Dancing. Loud music. Sweaty bodies. Cute twinkles and big hairy bears and flashing lights and boners for days. And if you don’t, you ought to. It’s called fun, and people have it sometimes.”

“I have fun!” I protest.

“Then come have fun with me.” He takes a swallow of his beer, then gives me goddamned puppy-dog eyes. “Please?”

“Fine.” I cross my arms over my chest. “I’ll meet you at the hotel at ten.”

“Yes!” He grins at me. “Just like old times.”

I leave my car in a parking garage near work and walk over to the hotel. It’s a cold night, and I’m grateful for my heavy vintage pea coat to wear over my club clothes. I can look the part as well as the next guy, with my tight jeans, no belt, and tight T-shirt, but tonight I feel like I’m not just looking the part, but playing a part. When I walk into the opulent lobby of the Haywood, Kevin is waiting for me, dressed in his own version of club clothes—black leather pants and a charcoal gray sweater. He looks positively mouth-watering as he crosses the room toward me.

“You look great,” he says, eyeing my jeans. “Are we going to call a cab?”

“Nah, we can walk.” I grin. “It’s cold, but I’m sure nothing like what you’re used to in New York.”

He smiles. “No, it’s really mild here. I like it.”

He follows me out onto the street and falls in step beside me as we head toward the club. We can hear the bass thumping a block away. It sends a little thrill through me. Once upon a time, I’d loved dancing with Kevin. Just hearing the thud of dance music brings back memories of the way he could move, all hips and sensuality. He was right, I really ought to do this more often.

We pay the cover, and I don’t miss the way the bouncer’s gaze travels down the length of Kevin’s body, the appraising way he smiles. I tense up, wanting to stake a claim, but I can’t really do that because he’s not mine.

“You boys have fun.” The bouncer winks at me.

I check my coat, shoving the little ticket in my pocket, and I head for the bar. Kev is already there, and he turns to me with a shot glass in his hand.

“For you, my love.” He presses the shot into my hand. A quick sniff tells me it’s tequila. I raise a brow at him, and he holds up his own glass in a mock salute. I grin and tip mine back.

As the liquid burns a sweet fire down to my belly, I start to sway with the music. I don’t even realize I’m doing it until Kevin takes the glass from my hand and puts it on the bar. He takes my hand and leads me onto the dance floor, pulling me in close to his body, chest to chest, pelvis to pelvis.

I let the beat wash over me as I press in closer, rocking my dick into his in a way I'm only bold enough to do because we're on the dance floor. He slides his hands down my sides, holding me in place.

"...so fucking sexy when you dance, you know that?" He has to practically shout it to be heard over the music. I don't say anything; I close my eyes and *dance*.

His body is hard and hot and he moves with perfect rhythm against me, hips shifting in a sexy roll. When he spins me around and starts to rub against my ass, I moan, throwing one arm over his shoulder and cupping the back of his head. His hair is soft as silk, a little damp. I gather some of it in my fist and I tug.

He smooths a hand down my chest and his lips find the side of my neck just as his fingers pinch over my nipple.

Oh *fuck*. It feels good, really fucking good, tense and sharp at once. I trust him not to go too far in public, so I nuzzle my forehead against the side of his face and let him manhandle me.

Another tug at my nipple sends my brain reeling.

"Oh, God," I whimper, biting my lower lip.

"You should see the look on your face right now," Kevin says. "You look completely lost *and* found. You look like a man should look on the verge of an orgasm. You look fierce and fine and so damned hot. All the guys in this room wish they were dancing with you, and they're jealous because I'm the one holding you. They think I'm going to be fucking you later, and they get hard just thinking about it. About that face you're making, and me causing it. How does that make you feel?"

"Turned on," I admit, though it's really his dirty talk, and not the idea of the others watching us that turns me on.

"Yeah?" His hand slides down from my nipple to brush softly over the front of my jeans, barely a touch, but enough to make me jerk a little in his arms. "Oh, definitely yeah." He presses against my erection and rocks his own into my ass. Then, he spins me around again and pulls my arms back around his neck. "This, Nicholas, is called fun." He says it close to my ear, then kisses the side of my face. "Now, let's go get another shot."

I laugh as he tugs me toward the bar. We each do two more shots and then return to the dance floor. This time, he nods at me and then turns to a freckle-

faced twink wearing eyeliner and no shirt. He runs his hands down the guy's chest, asking a question, and apparently likes the answer he gets, because pretty soon, he's got the twink pressed back to his chest and moving against him just like he had me a few moments before. Kevin crooks a finger to me and I move in, chest to chest with the twink and rest my hand on his hip.

"Nick, this is Caleb," Kevin shouts over the music.

"Hi, Caleb," I shout.

"Hi, Nick." He smiles at me. "I love the way you move."

I leave my hand on his hip, but reach the other over his shoulder and slide it behind Kevin's neck. The three of us writhe together. Caleb's cock rubs against mine as we dance, and it's clear he's getting turned on. Soon, Kevin will make his move, and I'll have to call a cab to get home. I lose the rhythm at the pang of jealousy working through me, knowing it's my own stubborn fault.

Caleb runs a hand down my chest and leans close to my ear. "You guys can fuck me together if you want. You're both hot as hell."

"No thanks, buddy." Kevin somehow orchestrates getting Caleb out from between us. "But thanks for the dance, that was hot."

And then he's leading me back to the bar. After two more shots—how many have I had now?—he parks his ass on a barstool and sends me out to dance by myself so he can watch.

I give him a fucking show. For me, there's nobody else in the place but him. I shake, I shimmy, I gyrate to beat the band, and all the while I can feel his stare, hot and focused on my writhing hips, my legs, my ass. I close my eyes and imagine him getting turned on, letting the heat that washes over me guide my movements.

Caleb comes back, sticks his fingers in my belt loops, and drags me close. "Let's make loverboy jealous," he says in my ear, picking up my rhythm and grinding against me. He's a good dancer, not as good as Kevin, but enthusiastic and sexy. He runs his hands over my body, nips little bites along my jaw. It's exquisite sensual torture, to be touched like this, to touch back, knowing the one I really want is across the room, watching, maybe getting as turned on by watching as I am by knowing he's watching. Caleb doesn't try to kiss me, but he presses his forehead to mine and buries his hands in my hair. "Your man can't take his eyes off you. Lucky bitch."

I look over to Kevin sitting at the bar, and our eyes meet. He gives me a feral grin and comes back to the floor to claim another dance of his own.

I lost count at five shots of tequila, which is a really bad idea, and something I really ought to know better than to do. Or something. The point is, I'm a bartender; I know better. Shit, I can't feel my teeth. This bathroom mirror pep talk is making me feel even stupider than when I walked in. And I felt pretty stupid when I walked in. Letting some random guy do a body shot off your abs in front of the love of your life will do that to you.

God, I'm all... sticky.

"Oh, Jesus, Nick." Kevin walks into the john and takes in my disheveled appearance—or maybe the way I'm leaning my forehead against the mirror. "Okay buddy. Let's go." He pulls one of my arms around his shoulders and sort of hoists me against him.

"We gonna dance some more?" I try to gyrate my hips, but he stops me with a hand on my chest.

"We're going to put you to bed," he grumbles.

Grouchy-ass. I frown at him. "Aren't you having fun?"

"They called last call fifteen minutes ago. It's time to go home." He leads me out the front door, and I'm blasted by the cold air. I shudder all over.

"Shit, you were wearing a coat. Where's your coat check ticket? I'll go get it." He holds out his hand.

"Come find it, loverboy," I taunt, gesturing toward my pocket. "Guess correctly and you win a prize." I shimmy my hips a little, giggling.

"Okay, one, don't call me loverboy. Two, you're never drinking tequila again. Now reach in your pocket and get the ticket out. Please."

"You said we were going to have fun." I pout. "I'm offering you a guilt-free grope. Have at it."

"You're being an ass," he growls. "Get the ticket out."

"Fine." I dig the ticket out of my pocket and thrust it at him. He disappears inside, leaving me shivering on the sidewalk. When he comes back, he drapes my coat gently over my shoulders.

"I had the bartender call us a cab," he tells me, holding my coat closed around my chest. "It should be here any minute. Do you want to stay at the hotel tonight so I can keep an eye on you?"

"So you can seduce me?" I waggle my eyebrows at him.

"So I can make sure you don't choke on your own vomit." He grimaces. "How much did you have to drink?"

"I don't know. Caleb and that bear he went home with each bought me a shot. Plus the ones we did together. And that beer..." I start ticking them off on my fingers, but I keep losing track. A car pulls up next to us, and I realize it's our cab when Kevin bundles me inside.

The cab stinks like tequila. Huh. Actually, maybe that's me. I close my eyes for just a moment but I must have dozed, because Kevin is hauling me out of the cab and into the hotel. I let him lead me to the elevator, then to his room. He strips me down to my boxers and tucks me into the king-sized bed.

I watch sleepily through half-closed eyes as he folds up my clothes and sets them on the desk. He picks up my T-shirt, lifts it to his nose and smells it as he glances over at me. He must think I'm asleep, because he watches me for a minute, a soft smile on his face. I want to ask him what that smile means, but I'm too tongue-tied by tequila and my own timidness to speak up. Finally, he sets my shirt down on top of my jeans and strips out of his own clothes.

He turns off the light and slides into bed behind me.

"Goodnight, Nick," he whispers.

"G'night," I mumble into the pillow. I freeze for a moment, caught out feigning sleep, but then his hand strokes over my back in a soft caress, and sleep catches up with me for real.

Oh. My. God.

The desire to tear my own brain out of my skull is only dampened by the fear of loud noises anywhere near my head.

Like the hotel alarm clock noise screeching away mere inches from me. I pull the pillow over my head, groaning. My mouth tastes like something died inside. Tequila? Oh, fuck me.

A heavy weight leans against my back and the noise, blissfully, stops.

“Sorry, Nick.”

The weight moves away.

“Kevin? Why am I in bed with you?” I clench my ass a little, relieved to not feel any signs of penetration.

He laughs, dropping a hand onto my shoulder and rubbing lightly. “Because you were pretty wasted last night, and I wasn’t going to send you home alone. Do you remember?”

“We went dancing.”

“And drinking. Tequila. Also beer. And God knows what else.”

“Some guy asked if we would fuck him together.”

“You do remember.” Kevin laughs again. “Anyway, yeah.”

“We didn’t...?” I hate not remembering everything.

“Some dance-floor shenanigans, but that’s it.”

Oh thank God.

“Thank you.” I let go of the pillow and roll to my side.

“For what?” He smiles at me and the fuzzy memory of him watching me—watching me what? *Breathe?*—rushes over me.

“For watching over me.”

He runs a hand through my tousled hair. “You’re welcome. Now I gotta get up and go in to the office. Why don’t you get some more sleep? There’s a glass of water and some ibuprofen on the bedside table.”

“I love you.” I roll to my other side and grab the glass. I don’t care if it’s tap water, it’s the sweetest glass I’ve ever had in my life. I take the two brown pills sitting next to it and swallow them with a grimace as Kevin gets up and goes about his morning routine. The shower turns on, and I hear him singing softly.

After a few minutes of listening to the running water, I really, *really* need to pee.

I stare at the bathroom door for minute. Hell, I’ve seen him in the shower before. Hundreds of times after games and practices. He won’t care.

I push open the door to the bathroom and stop dead in my tracks when I see him through the glass enclosure. His back is partially to me, and the way his arm is moving, he could only be doing one thing.

I've never thought of myself as a voyeur, but my mouth goes dry at the sight of him, water flowing over his muscles, his eyes clenched shut and his mouth open in a gasp of lust. A mirroring arousal shoots through my body, a tight ache across my skin. I should turn around, leave, give him his privacy, but to my utter shame, I can't tear my gaze away from him.

He tilts his head so the water hits him in the chest. His broad back hides his hand on his dick, but his arm moves up and down in strong, steady strokes. His ass cheeks flex and release as he rocks forward. He's gorgeous, a beautiful masculine figure lost in sexual abandon, but beyond that, he's my Kevin, the man I loved ten years ago, the man I probably never stopped loving, and the man I will never have—at least not on my terms.

To see him like this feels like a prize I haven't earned. I back slowly out of the room and close the door. Just as it clicks into place, I hear his sharp cry, and I cover my mouth to keep from groaning. I wait a long moment before knocking.

“Hey Kev, comin' in. I gotta pee.”

“Hold on, I'm almost done.” He calls back. I hear the water shut off and then he opens the door, his lower body wrapped in a towel.

“All yours.” He grins at me. I manage a tiny smile as I pass by him, and blush bright red when he starts whistling as he gets dressed.

I'm waiting for my hard-on to subside enough that I can pee, when he calls out, “Do you drink coffee? There's a pot here, but I didn't want to make it just for me.”

“I'll drink a cup,” I call back. Then, to my humiliation, he comes into the bathroom to get water. He glances over to where I stand, red-faced with embarrassment, and gives me a little leer.

“Heh, waking up next to you did the same thing to me.” He winks, then takes his coffee pot out of the bathroom.

I drag my hungover ass in to work in time to open the restaurant for the lunchtime kitchen and serving staff, but immediately go hide out in my office. I can't believe I went out dancing and got drunk enough to black out. I haven't done that since... well, since college. And then this *morning*. Watching Kevin in the shower... What the hell is wrong with me?

At just after noon, the door to my office slams open and Jenny stands in the doorway, glaring at me.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

I blink up at her, wincing. Is she always this loud?

“Britney tells me you haven’t come out of your office since you unlocked the door this morning. I come in three hours early to do the bar purchasing and you have Corey handling the bar alone during the lunch rush. He was so deep in the weeds I thought he was going to cry. Corey. The jock. Cry.”

“Men cry too, sweetheart,” I tell her.

“And there’s one sitting in front of me who’s going to be crying real soon if he doesn’t tell his favorite employee what the hell is going on.”

“Are you always this loud?”

“Are you *hungover*?” Scandalized, she scoots inside the office and shuts the door behind her.

I nod.

“You. *You* are hungover. Wow. And you’re normally so uptight.” She sits down. “What happened?”

“I went dancing. With Kevin. And I did shots. Lots of shots.”

“Did you fuck him?”

“Jenny!” I glare at her.

“Did he fuck you?”

“Not better.”

“Did you, or did you not, have sexual intercourse with that man?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but no, I did *not*. I did wake up in his hotel room though. And...” No, not telling her about the shower. “And I wish we had. Not drunk, because I’d never forgive myself if the only time I ever got to be with him was because I was drunk. I just wish things were different.”

“Oh, baby. How long has it been?” See, this is why I love Jenny. She reads between the lines.

“Ten years—well, probably more like twelve if I’m being honest.”

“You haven’t had sex in twelve years?” Her jaw drops.

“No! I’ve had sex, Jesus, Jenny. I’ve been in love with him for twelve years.” So much for that reading between the lines shit.

“Oh.” Her eyes get really wide. “Does he know?”

“No, and it’s going to stay that way. I have my friend back. Even if it’s temporary, with him living in New York and me living here, we’re hanging out like old times and it’s good. I can’t ruin that.”

“But what if he feels the same way?”

“He doesn’t.”

“How do you know? Has he told you he just wants to be friends? Is he seeing someone else? Is he married?”

“No, not that I know of, and hell no.”

“What do you have to lose?”

“My dignity?”

She scoffs. “There’s no dignity in love, Nick. It’s messy and embarrassing and *fantastic*, but it sure as hell isn’t dignified. What do you have to *lose*?”

“My friend.”

“You have other friends. And honestly, you guys can’t be that close if one little love declaration ruins everything.”

“One little love declaration?”

“Well, I don’t exactly have you pegged as the ‘taking out a billboard in Times Square type.’”

“And anything less than that is ‘little’? There’s no middle ground?”

“I’m not talking literally. Damn, Nick, you really are hung over. It’s a metaphor. The big gesture. I don’t see you as a big gesture guy. You’re the kind of guy who loves quietly. And those guys? They either nut up or die alone.” She crosses her arms over her chest at the end of her speech, clearly pleased with herself.

“Thank you for my daily dose of melodrama.”

“Yeah, whatever. Got the liquor inventory?”

I hand her the printout.

“Nut up or die alone, Nick. I’m just saying.” She stands up and walks out of my office. She returns a few minutes later with a bottle of ibuprofen. “Courtesy of Britney. Now, go help Corey before the boy has an aneurysm.”

“I don’t think aneurysms are caused by tending bar alone for thirty minutes,” I call after her as she disappears down the hallway.

“Yeah, yeah. Help the guy out. By the way, it’s snowing pretty hard already. You might want to consider closing early tonight.”

I look out the window, wincing at the brightness. Sure enough, snow is flying. I pull up the weather app on my phone and see they’re only calling for a couple of inches. We should be fine to stay open.

By two o’clock, the restaurant is deserted and nearby businesses are closing. The TV above the bar is tuned to CNN showing massive shutdowns of roads in Atlanta, which is a few hours south of here. It looks like something out of a post-apocalyptic movie.

“We need to close.” Jenny comes up beside me and gestures at the TV. “I checked in with Miriam and she said the kids are building a snowman, and to take as long as I need here. I can help you close up.”

“I hate the idea of closing for an inch of snow.”

“Nick, you have four wheel drive. Most of your staff doesn’t. Corey’s car is rear wheel drive and he lives up on Sunset. You think he’s going to make it up those hills if it’s icy? And Britney needs to get to campus—she can walk if she needs to, but would *you* walk down Merrimon in a snowstorm?”

She’s right. I send the staff home, and I flip the sign on the door.

That’s when I get the text from Kevin.

Going to try to get a flight out before everything shuts down.

Raincheck on the brewery tour?

It hits me—a wave of physical pain. I’d expected a few more days with him. My waning hangover seems to roar back to life for a moment.

“Shit.” I dig the heel of my hand into the throbbing between my eyes.

“Nick?” Jenny looks up from where she’s wiping down the bar.

“He’s going home to New York.”

“Ah.” She puts the rag down. “Well, he’ll be back.”

“No, I don’t think he will. He’ll have finished up his interviews. Why would he come back?”

She sighs. “Sorry, Nick. At least you can stop pining over him though.”

“Yeah.” I look down at the phone and send one last text.

Travel safe, buddy.

An hour later, the bar is closed and clean and I head home. My phone rings as I’m pulling into my driveway. I half expect it to be one of my employees, stuck and needing a ride, but the caller ID says *Kevin*.

“Kev?”

“Hey, Nick. Bad news, good news, and more bad news. Bad news: looks like I was too late. They cancelled my new flight. Good news, they scheduled me back to my old one.”

I’m not gonna lie. I feel a little thrill at this news. “What’s the other bad news?”

“Can’t get a new hotel room. The Haywood already rebooked my room and everywhere I’ve called has told me they’re booked. I hate to ask—”

“Stay with me.” The words are out before I can stop them. “I’ll come get you at the airport.”

“Are you sure, Nick?”

“Of course. I’m not going to leave you stranded. I’ll call you when I get close.”

Chapter Five

He's waiting just inside the doors when I pull up in front of the airport. He practically runs to my car, tosses his suitcase in the backseat, and lets himself in the passenger side before I can even turn on my hazards.

"Well, hey." I grin at him as I pull out of the pick-up lane.

"Hi. Thank you. Oh my God, thank you, Nick. I hate spending the night in an airport. If you weren't driving, I'd kiss you."

His words stir a sweet little flutter in my belly, but I shrug. "It's not a big deal."

"Shut up. It's a big deal to me. Thank you, for real."

I glance over at him, and he's smiling, a great big grin of appreciation and warmth. I can't help but smile back. "You're welcome."

The house is dark when we pull up—disconcerting, seeing as how I always leave the porch light on when I'm not home.

"Shit," I mutter. "I think I've lost power."

"Do you have a generator? I'll help you hook it up." He gathers his suitcase and follows me inside.

"No generator. I should, just to keep the fridge running, but most of the time... well, most of the time I don't need stuff like that. I don't lose power often enough to make it a priority."

"I hereby volunteer to help you eat the perishables and drink the beer," he says as he follows me upstairs.

I point to the guest bedroom. "You can put your suitcase in there. Ugh, I am *so* not in the mood to drink beer." I scowl at him. "I'm still feeling last night a little bit."

"Sorry, bro." He leers a little bit. "But you sure looked hot, losing all your inhibitions like that."

"I wish you wouldn't do that."

"What?"

"Tell me I'm hot. Stuff like that."

“Oh, here we go again.” He rolls his eyes. “It was just dancing. Your virtue is safe.”

“It’s not about virtue. It’s...” My face flushes hot. “I watched you in the shower this morning.” Shit. Why did I confess that?

“You watched me—oh.” I see it, the moment it registers what I did. He turns a little red, but then tries to shrug it off. The emotions on his face flit between anger and amusement, but never embarrassment. Not like he has anything to be embarrassed about. *I’m* the one who crossed a line.

His voice is quiet. “I know I flirt inappropriately, but that was private.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I feel horrible. I’ll let you get settled in here. I’m so sorry.”

“Apology accepted. But, hey—” He reaches for my arm before I can escape. “Just talk to me for a minute, because I don’t understand, Nick. So you saw me jerking off. So what? I just don’t get it. You’re so uptight about sex, but your mom was a hippie. Free love and all that jazz. I respect your choices but help me understand them.”

“The only thing free love ever got me was an absentee father.”

Oh. Shit. I never meant to say that out loud.

“You know you can’t get pregnant, right?” He smiles a little, but it’s not funny to me. It shaped everything.

“For me, sex has to mean something. It has to be more than... what you said about bodies rubbing together. Because that’s temporary, and I need more. Can’t you understand why I need something—someone—to last?”

“Do you think, if it were you and me, it would be just bodies? Do you really think that, Nick?”

I want to do something to erase the hurt on his face. I look down to where his hand rests on my arm, and I shrug it away. “It wouldn’t be, not for me.” I start to leave, and his hand closes on my arm again, this time jerking back roughly.

“It wouldn’t be for me, either. You’re one of the best friends I ever had. I think we would be amazing together. I wish you’d let me prove it. One night, just give me one night to sho—”

“One night.” Of course. Here I’m thinking it’s possibly *more*, but he’s talking about a one-night stand. A get-it-out-of-our-system fuck. “I can’t...”

“You can’t give me one night?” He pulls me close, so we’re standing face to face, and he leans close enough to feather a kiss across my cheek.

I can’t give you only one, without wanting to give you every one.

I don’t say it, because then it would be out there between us. It would mean everything, and I’d lose this last chance to be with him. Instead, I close my eyes and tilt my head, pulling him into a kiss.

He stills against me, his hand still gripping my forearm. It tightens briefly, then he lets go and his hands are on my face and he’s returning the kiss. It’s hungry, urgent, and our whole bodies get into it. He drops one hand to my waist and tugs me hard against him. I grind my hardening dick into his and fist my hand in his hair. His answering groan comes with a nip of his teeth in my lower lip.

My chest heaves in excitement and anticipation as I push him toward the bed. A creaky old thing, not as comfortable as the king-sized one in my bedroom, but I don’t care, I want him, here, now, before I change my mind.

His hands tangle in my shirt as he pulls it over my head, and I hear fabric ripping. He curses under his breath, but I kiss the word away and attack his buttons.

“God, I hate business attire,” he mutters, trying with trembling hands to help me. *Trembling.*

“Shhh.” I push his hands back, a wave of tenderness sweeping over me. I lift one to my lips and kiss it. “Let me undress you.”

All that urgency turns to sweetness as his hands fall away and he takes a deep breath. I slip each button free, kissing down his chest, through his undershirt, as I make my way lower and lower. When the last one is loose and his shirt falls open, I skim it from his shoulders and let it fall. I peel his undershirt up his body, drinking in the sight of him.

I toss the shirt aside and run my hands up and down his chest, taking everything in by the low light coming in the window. Lean, but no longer athlete-taut. Still beautiful. He’s not the same lithe young man I fell for on the soccer team. His chest is a little broader, his belly a little thicker. His ass is rounder, and hallelujah, it feels great in my hands when I knead it and pull him close again for another kiss.

Our kiss is slow this time, soft and exploring. A nudge here, a teasing foray of tongue there, and then his hands kneading my ass right back.

I pull away from the heaven of his mouth and kiss my way from his chin down his throat, loving the prickle of his stubble against my lips. When I reach his clavicles, I suck gently, bringing a warm red spot to the surface. I brush my finger over it, and then look into his face. Wonder, softness, and oh, the *heat* I see there. The same heat warms my limbs and lifts my cock.

“Time to lose the pants,” I suggest, and his hands fly to his belt buckle.

I follow his lead, dropping my jeans and briefs to the floor.

“Nick, you’re...” He trails off, shaking his head. “I know you don’t want me to say it, but you’re so goddamned hot.”

I chuckle. “I think now is an appropriate time for flirtatious compliments.” I duck my head, blushing. “Thanks.”

He pulls me down with him to the bed, and we’re kissing again. Echoes of our first kiss, almost eleven years ago, wander up to the surface, but I push them back, concentrating on the here, the now, the feel of his cock rubbing against mine, the sounds he makes deep in his throat when that happens. When his head falls back and he growls, I feel like I could combust right there from that noise.

“Stop, Nick.” He pushes my hips away from him a little. “Frottage is wicked fun, but I don’t want to come like that.”

“Are you that close?” I reach between us and grip him in one fist, slowly pumping my hand up and down. He’s not circumcised, and I pull the foreskin up and over the glans, then push it back to expose him again. I could play with that skin for hours and never get bored. I tug at it, twist it gently, slide it up and down, all while he makes the most amazing noises deep in his throat. I watch it sliding in my fist, watch his hips rutting up into the air.

“Fuck.” He throws his head back against the pillow and fists his hands in his hair. “Stop, I want to blow you.”

I drop his dick and flop onto my back. I grin at him and gesture to my own cock. “Be my guest.”

He gets a wicked look in his eye then, and he grabs the pillow and shoves it under my hips, pushing my legs apart as he moves down my body.

“I like an all-access pass.” He grins at me just before he takes my cock into his mouth.

Holy...

He slides his tongue around the head, teasing me with light flicks between sucks. Using his hands to stroke my shaft and play with my balls, he focuses his attention on all the little spots that get me hot—under the head, a flick of tongue. Behind my balls, fingers and a sweet press to the skin of my taint. And then, with a wicked leer, he lets my cock slide from his mouth, pushes my legs over his shoulders, and tilts my ass toward his face.

“Kev!” It’s a half-shout, half-plea as he pulls my cheeks apart and stares at my hole. He leans close, sucking one of my balls into his mouth while he brushes a thumb over my opening. He releases the testicle and pulls back to watch his thumb petting me.

“You’re so sexy, Nick. I like how you let me just spread you open and look my fill. Your cock is gorgeous, but I’d be a stone-cold liar if I said I didn’t want to be inside this ass.” He dips the tip of his thumb inside. It’s dry, no lube, and it burns a bit, but he doesn’t push further. “You want that, babe? I’ll make it so good for you.”

I nod. I do, I want him every way I can have him, if all I get is one night.

“Do you have condoms?” The question seems to come from very far away. Condoms are...

“In my bedroom. Um, we should check the expiration date.” I start to sit up and his thumb slips away, leaving me feeling empty, even though he’d only barely dipped inside.

“I’ll get them. Tell me where.” He pushes me down to the bed.

“Last door at the end of the hall. Next to the bed, in the top drawer. There’s lube there too.”

“Got it. I’ll be right back.”

He disappears out into the darkened hallway, and for a moment, I’m annoyed by the power outage, the dim light growing dimmer as afternoon turns into evening. I want to see him. I hear a muffled curse and sit up, but then he returns, brandishing a bottle of lube and a strip of condoms.

“I tripped over your running shoes.” He smiles sheepishly and tosses the supplies on the bed. Then he’s on top of me, pressing his body full length against mine with a sweet grind as he kisses me until I gasp for air.

He opens the lube bottle and squeezes some into his hand. He holds it there for a minute, letting it warm, then runs a slippery finger around my hole. He

pushes inside, just a little, while adding a little more lube. He opens the condom and rolls it onto his dick. I watch him pour more lube on his hand, then stroke it over the condom, getting ready for me.

“How do you want me?” I ask. It’s a vulnerable thing, acknowledging his lead. He’s straddling me now, so I can’t turn, can’t lift my hips, can’t do anything until he chooses to let me.

“Just like you are.” He moves between my legs and pushes them up toward my chest. “Want to see your face. It’s better like that.” He smiles. “At least, it is when it’s more than just bodies.”

I nod my agreement. I want to see his face too. His cock nudges against me, and I take a deep breath.

“Are you ready?” He presses a bit, and I nod, letting out the breath and pushing against him as he slips just the head inside.

“Oh.” His eyes squeeze shut like he’s in pain, then open wide, wider than I’ve ever seen them. He grips my hips in his hands and pushes forward a little more, watching my face as he slides deeper. I bear down against him, and suddenly he slides freely and we both gasp. His cock feels huge, intractable and nudging deep. It’s almost too much. I struggle to accept it, my whole body tense and my erection flagging.

“Nicholas.” He’s staring at me, that wide-eyed look on his face again, and I shudder. This is Kevin, looking at me with a mix of adoration and ecstasy. *Kevin*. And then he nudges forward again and the tension inside me lets go. My head drops back and I let my legs fall to the side.

“Oh God, Nick.” He draws back, thrusts deep, and then we’re golden. It feels amazing. I grab my cock and tug it to full hardness as he sets a rhythm. I roll my hips into his thrusts, riding the heat and the friction, loving him, and loving this with him.

He leans over me, drops to his elbows and kisses me, rough and sloppy around the shocked gasps he’s drawing from me.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Nick. You feel so good.” He whispers against the side of my face, in my ear, along my chin as he covers it with nips and kisses.

“So do you.”

It’s never been good like this. Never have I felt this exposed, this inside out. I love him. I love him tonight like I’ve loved him for years, and I feel it all over

my skin like a fire, in my dick and balls like a storm, in my heart like a catastrophe.

It's too intense to last long, though I want it to last forever. I feel the orgasm welling up and I try to take my hand away from my cock to prolong it, but he just replaces it with his and gives me the final two tugs to push me over the edge.

I bury my face in his shoulder, shuddering through the shock of it, the intimacy of his adoring gaze on me too much for me to see, knowing it's only for tonight.

"Nick, baby, *Nick*." He groans out my name one last time as he drives deep and shakes. His face is barely visible now in the low light, but what I see is beautiful. All his masks are stripped away in this moment of utter vulnerability, and I don't think I've ever loved him more.

Afterward? He falls asleep. What a cliché. I can't help but smile as I watch his chest rising and falling. He rolls to his belly and snores, and I just watch, running my hand in slow strokes down the length of his spine, admiring the curve of his ass and the firm, tan skin. Not ready to stop touching him, not ready to give him up.

I promised him one night, and I won't try to hold him longer. I want to—but I won't.

"Nick?" He calls into his pillow.

"I'm here." I lie down beside him, wrap my arm around his waist and pull him against me.

"Mmm. That's nice. Nap with me."

"Okay, Kev. Whatever you want."

"Want to wake up next to you."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Good."

But you are, aren't you?

Chapter Six

We wake up around suppertime, when the lights come on and the house roars to life around us.

“Hey,” he says softly, stroking a finger down my face. “No regrets?”

I smile in spite of my fears for what this means for our friendship. “None.”

“Cool.” He leans over and kisses me, just gently at first, then, with a little groan, deeper, rolling his weight onto me and thrusting his semi against my leg. When he draws back, we’re both a little breathless. “You’re gonna get me going again.” He smiles, biting his lip.

“Mmm. That could be fun.” I stretch in his arms, enjoying the press of his body along mine. “But let’s eat supper first, I’m starving. Might as well take advantage of the power while we’ve got it.”

“What would you usually do on a night off?” He asks as we pull on our clothes—he trades his suit for a pair of sweats and a T-shirt from his luggage—and head for the kitchen.

“I usually work until after the happy hour rush, then hang out for a bit to make sure everything is good before I head home. But most nights I stay until close. Very weird to be home during the afternoon.”

“You work every day, don’t you?” Something strange crosses his face. I’m not sure whether it’s revulsion or sadness.

“It’s different when your job is your passion.” I shrug. “It’s not like going into an office every day to make money for someone else.”

I pull out the Dutch oven and a couple of cutting boards. My pantry is unprepared for this storm, but I bet I can throw something together.

“Do you like beets?” I ask, digging through the vegetable drawer. I look over my shoulder to catch him nodding. Okay, vegetarian borscht it is. I grab a head of cabbage and hand it to him. “Knives in the block on the counter. Cut it into half-inch wide strips.”

While he starts slicing cabbage, I peel and chop the beets and a couple of carrots. I slice an onion and set it to browning on the stove.

“Why do you work in the bar rather than the restaurant?” he asks, still slicing cabbage. “You love the cooking stuff, right?”

"I hired a chef to run the restaurant kitchen. The Drop is my baby." I smile, upend my vegetables into the Dutch oven on top of the onions, and reach for the potted herbs on the windowsill. I pick a few stems of dill and start chopping them. "I started the brewery and bar first, then expanded into the restaurant space when it became available. It was always part of the plan, but it happened a little sooner than expected."

"It sounds like a pretty sound operation?"

"Yep. We've done pretty well for ourselves. You can put the cabbage in the pot now." I grab a quart jar of vegetable stock from the fridge and pour it on top of the vegetables in the pot, admiring how the beets turn everything a delicate shade of red. Covering the pot to let it simmer, I grin at him. "It'll be ready in about an hour. Any idea how to pass the time?"

He grins back. "I can think of a thing or two."

"Oh yeah?"

His grin turns into something almost like a leer before it falls away, and he looks serious, even sad, but as quickly as the grin disappeared, it's back, and he takes my hand. "You promised me one night. I hope you didn't think I'd only make you come once. That was too pretty a sight to not have a repeat."

I shudder slightly as he pulls me close enough to kiss, a hot little nibble of lip on lip, a hint of teeth, and then he's rubbing those lips against my throat, my Adam's apple, my ear.

"Fuck," I mutter, letting my head thunk against the cabinets and my eyes close. "I bet you say that to all the guys."

The warm, wet heat of his mouth disappears for a moment, then I feel his hands on either side of my face. My eyes snap open to see his face right *there*, right in front of mine, all soft and genuine. "Nick. You're not 'all the guys'. Nothing that happens between us is like anything I've had before. You promised me a night. Can I get one more promise from you?"

I wince, knowing I'd give him anything he was bold enough to ask for, be it kinky shit outside my comfort zone, or even running out to the nearest Ingles to get him some bacon for breakfast—I wouldn't eat it, but I'd cook it for him every day if he'd just fucking *be here*. "What's that?" The words come out wavery, and I hope he thinks I'm turned on and he doesn't realize how close I am to breaking apart in his hands.

“Teddy Roosevelt says comparison is the thief of joy. Stop stealing our joy. Stop comparing me and you to whatever else either of us has done. One night. Let it be just us.”

“Said,” I whisper.

“What?”

“Teddy Roosevelt is dead. Past tense. Said.” I smile, letting him see I’m only teasing.

“I’m quoting dead politicians in order to get in your pants and you’re correcting my grammar? God, what a pair of tools.” He snickers, but his voice is gruff, his New York accent as strong as I’ve ever heard it when he says, “So, come on. Can I suck your cock or what?”

I’m undone. I pull him close, and this time I’m leading the kiss, trying to make up for bringing my hurt into this moment. I tell him with thumbs easing his jaw wider. I tell him with teeth nipping at his upper lip, my tongue teasing over it. I tell him with my hands dropping down to his chest, then to his waist, settling in to hold his body close to mine. I tell him with every part of me touching him—there has never been anyone in my life who compares to him.

When he pulls his lips from mine and sinks down to his knees, my chest heaves and I’m struggling to catch my breath. He draws my pants down my legs as if he’s unwrapping a gift, and when he smiles up at me, beaming really, it’s like I just gave him the one gift he wanted most.

His tongue steals out to lick at the head of my cock. The flicker of wet heat, a tease, is enough to wrench a groan from me. Then? He goes after me in earnest. He takes me deep, swallowing around me until he gags a little, and it—fuck, it turns me on, knowing he wants me that badly.

“Kev...” I manage that much of his name as he pulls back, then he takes me deep again, and I grunt heavily as I fight the urge to thrust into his mouth.

He pulls off and looks up at me. “What are you waiting for? Let go, Nick.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I mumble. “Use you.”

He grins up at me. “You’re not going to hurt me. And I want to be used.”

Oh. My. God.

He takes me back into his mouth as deep as he can, and I do it, I let go. I thrust gently at first, but at his appreciative noises, I find myself getting rougher

and thrusting deeper. I run my hand through his hair, experiment with gripping it a little in one hand. A strange thrill runs through me, unfamiliar. I knew about making love—how sweet it could be, but I've never realized how heady it is to have someone trust me enough to use him like this. Heat curls up my spine, and I hold his head still as I push into his throat. He doesn't struggle against me, instead he makes this sound, vibrating around my cock. When he cups my balls in one hand and rubs my taint as he pulls away, my knees actually get weak.

"Come on, Nick. Come in my mouth, on my face. Wanna taste it. Wanna see it. Wanna feel it."

His words, his hands, *oh, hell, his mouth*. He's running his tongue up and down my shaft, looking up at me with adoring eyes. When he closes his mouth around the tip of my cock again, I can't hold back anymore. I roar out his name as I come. He swallows the first spurt, then lets the rest hit him in the face, and the sight is so breathtaking, a sharp zing of lust slides through me. I want to do it again and again. This isn't a night of casual sex, this is baring myself to him, every animal piece of me, and trusting him to still like me afterward.

"That was..." Speechless, I tug him up and kiss him again, wiping at the spunk on his face with a kitchen towel, but loving the taste of myself in his mouth. When he starts rubbing against me, I toss the towel aside, reach my hand into his pants and jerk him slowly. He whimpers into my mouth and starts to pull away from the kiss, so I use my other hand in his hair to hold him steady, not letting him hide from the intimacy.

Something about being sated already makes me feel powerful as I ramp up his arousal, drive him crazy with wanting, but backing off when he gets close. He finally wrenches his head away from the kiss and buries his face in my shoulder.

"Want it so bad, Nick," he whines. "Make me come, please."

I speed up my hand and he thrusts into it, making the most amazing noises as he loses himself in the pleasure. He's *loud*, and I don't know how I never realized before how sexy that kind of abandon can be.

His teeth clamp down on my shoulder as his come splashes hot and wet between us. I hold him as he shudders against me, so fierce and beautiful.

When he slumps in my arms, I kiss the side of his face, his chin, his throat. Everywhere I can reach to kiss him, I do.

"So good," I whisper. "That was so good."

He straightens up and smiles, his expression all soft and sweet. “It really was, wasn’t it?”

I nod. “Best ever.”

The smile widens to a grin, not a cocky one, but a bashful one. He’s blushing—I never knew Kevin Dorsey was capable of such a thing. A rush of tenderness works through me and I pull him into another kiss, gentle and loving. When we finally separate, he’s still blushing.

“Shower?” he suggests, gesturing to the mess between us. I nod, pull up my pants, and lead the way.

The next morning, I awake to melting snow and too-bright sunlight streaming through my windows. We’d made love two more times in the night, taking turns topping, and he fell asleep in my bed, the big spoon curled around me. I try to ease out of his embrace without waking him, but no such luck.

“Hey.” He smiles at me, running a hand through my hair. “Where you going?”

“Shower.” I smile back, wondering if he’d mind if I kissed him. I settle for picking up his hand and giving it a squeeze. “Unless you want it first? I’ll start the coffee.”

“Mmmm. I wouldn’t mind staying in bed.” He arches an eyebrow at me.

“I have to get the restaurant ready to open for lunch. I might not have a full staff, so...”

He nods. “Yeah, I get it. Hey, about last night—” He’s cut off by his cell phone ringing on the table next to my bed. I hand it to him, and he frowns at it before answering. I start to stand up, but he tugs me down, holding onto my hand while he talks.

“Hey, Dad. Yeah, I wrapped things up yesterday. I sent the HR paperwork through last night, Carolyn said she’d take care of it... I was planning to come back on Monday... Fine... No, that’s fine. Can you have Carolyn reschedule my flight? I got snowed in at Nick’s place. No, he has nothing to do with why... Dad, he’s my friend. I’m not having this conversation with you. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He hangs up, looking for a moment like he’s about to throw the phone, but instead he sighs heavily and drops it next to him on the bed. “I need to take the

first flight out I can get. Apparently, there's an acquisition on the table in Ohio, and he needs me in New York to run some stupid meeting."

"I see." I don't see. I've never understood his relationship with his dad. And I'm really curious as to how I fit into their conversation.

"It's stupid. He could cancel it. He's just jerking me around."

"Do you need a ride to the airport? I can..."

"No, I don't want to put you out. I'll take a cab."

"Okay." So many questions, but no words to ask them. "So, I'm going to take that shower now."

"Yeah. Hey, I'll get the coffee started." He smiles bleakly at me. "At least we can have breakfast together before I go."

I linger in the shower, trying not to wonder about his conversation with his dad. What was he talking about when he said "I'm not having this conversation with you?" What did I have nothing to do with?

Finally, I go downstairs and join him in the kitchen. He's made coffee and eggs, and drops the toast in the toaster as soon as I walk in.

"Shower's free," I tell him, reaching for the coffee pot.

He shakes his head. "Not gonna shower. Want to smell like you all the way home."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut.

"Um, okay." I scratch the back of my neck and try not to stare at him.

We sit down and eat our eggs in near silence.

"Are eggs vegetarian?" he asks suddenly. "I was surprised to see them in your fridge."

"Lacto-ovo vegetarian, yes."

"That sounds like a pregnancy thing," he snickers.

I shrug. "Ovo means egg. Lacto means milk. Lacto-ovo vegetarians eat eggs and dairy but refrain from consuming meat or fish."

"Got it. And bacon? What about vegetarians who eat bacon?" he teases.

"Confused college boys raised by hippie mothers associating pork with rebellion." I grin. I had never even really liked the bacon, but when your mom teaches you how to roll your own joints? Your options for rebellion are limited.

Silence falls over the table again. Finally, I ask, “So, you had your one night. I don’t suppose…”

He looks up at me as I trail off, his fork paused halfway between his plate and his mouth. Finally, he sets his fork down and prompts, “You don’t suppose what?”

I look away for a moment. What do I really want to ask him? “I don’t suppose you’ll be back in Asheville any time soon?”

He looks down at his plate, then at me. He nudges his eggs around with his toast for a moment and says quietly, “I’d need a pretty good reason. I’ve got my new hires, so…”

Right. His work was a good reason. Not me.

I nod brusquely, stand up, and bring my plate over to the sink. “Well, travel safely, okay?”

“Ah, Nick, don’t—”

“Let’s not drag this out, Kev. It was fun. We were good together. But you’re going back to New York, and I’m here, and it would be silly to make more of it than it was.” I’m not going to admit my feelings for him, no matter what Jenny says about big romantic gestures. I can handle him leaving because he has to, but I can’t handle him rejecting me. At least this way, I can still have the fantasy.

“Nick.” His voice shakes a little on my name, but I turn on the faucet, and he doesn’t say anything more.

When the cab pulls up outside to take him to the airport, I breathe a heavy sigh of relief.

Chapter Seven

“He’s gone back to New York.” Jenny’s voice is almost accusing as she says it, pulling a pint and staring me down in the mirror behind the bar. “And you two...?”

There’s no use denying anything. “It was every bit as awesome as I knew it would be, and now he’s gone, and I feel like shit.” Dammit. How does this woman manage to make me spill my guts all the time? Aside from trucker-cap Jonah, the bar is empty, but I look around guiltily anyway.

She hands the pint to Jonah with a flirtatious smile before focusing her attention on me.

“Did you tell him how you feel?”

“Not exactly.” I squirm under her glare. “I told him it wasn’t just sex for me.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said it wasn’t just sex for him either.”

“And you let him *go*?”

“He didn’t want to stay!” I glare at her. “He said he would need a really good reason even to visit.”

“Those were his exact words? What else did he say?”

“Nothing. He started to explain about how his work is done, but I couldn’t deal, so I called a cab for him.”

“The bartender’s solution to unruly patrons? Not exactly a winning strategy in personal relationships.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, I didn’t treat him like an unruly patron.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She turns her back to me. “What do you think, Jonah?”

Jonah smiles at Jenny like she made his day. He turns to me and says, “It’s like the time the sorority girls from UNCA were getting rowdy. One of them tried to tell you they had a designated driver, but you just piled them into the cab anyway.”

“It is nothing at all like that.”

“Is too.” Jonah laughs his wheezy little laugh. “Dude, I’ve been drinking here for years. Once you’ve decided how you’re going to remove the situation from your bar, you don’t listen to anyone. Remember how their designated driver showed up a half hour later.”

“How was I supposed to know he was really coming?”

“You could have listened.” Jonah gestured with one arm, the other folded across his chest. “That’s the point. You get uncomfortable in a situation, you make up your mind, and you turn off your ears.”

“I do not. I’m an excellent listener.”

Jonah snorts and shakes his head. “Sure you are.”

“I’m a freaking bartender. It’s like a required skill. Jenny, tell him.”

“Oh no, honey. You’re doing a great job not listening to the man all by yourself, thereby proving his point.”

I look back and forth between the two of them, with their smug, self-congratulatory grins.

Fuck, they’re right.

I pull out my phone and fire off a quick text.

Are you still at the airport?

A few moments later, my phone buzzes.

Boarding now. Thanks again for taking me in last night.

Shit. Boarding, which means he’s going to be on the plane, and he won’t be comfortable talking to me about the shit we really need to talk about.

What were you going to say, this morning? Before I cut you off?

I wait for what seems an interminably long time, but he doesn’t answer. I’m not sure whether he’s collecting his thoughts or has turned his phone off. When the answer doesn’t come after an hour spent busying myself around the bar, I figure it probably won’t come any time soon.

The bar actually starts to get busy later in the afternoon—businesses are still closed all around us, but the roads have cleared, so everyone is out getting their drink on. Ain’t no party like a snow day party, I guess.

Just when I think I might have a moment to slip away to check my messages, Jenny’s shitbucket ex, Daniel, shows up. I come around the bar to

stop him before he can even sit down. I gesture to Jenny to stay behind the bar, and Jonah comes and stands at my elbow.

“You need to leave, Daniel.” I make my voice as firm as possible. “You aren’t allowed to come within a certain distance of Jenny and you know it. If you come in my bar and stir shit, I will call the police.”

“She’s taking my kids away, Nick. I want to see my kids.”

“They aren’t here, Daniel.” I look over his shoulder out into the street. “You should talk to your lawyer. There are conditions to your custody. Coming in to the bar isn’t going to do you any favors.” I don’t mention the fact that he’s high as a kite. I don’t want Jenny coming out from behind that bar.

“This is a public place. Maybe I want a beer.” Daniel juts his chin belligerently, pulls the nearest chair out from a table, and sits down next to a pair of young women. “Ladies.” He tips his baseball cap at them.

“I don’t serve people who are already drunk. Please leave.” I turn to Jonah and whisper, “Call the police.”

Jonah nods and crosses to the bar and picks up his phone. He keeps his gaze on me as I turn to Daniel.

“Okay, Daniel. Jonah’s calling the police. You could leave now, before they get here, or they’re going to take you out of here.”

“I’m not leaving.” He crosses his arms over his chest. The two women stand up, shrug apologetically at me, and move to another table.

I decide to try another tack.

“Daniel, do you really think they’re going to let you see your kids if you get a drunk and disorderly ticket? While violating the terms of your restraining order?”

“She can’t keep them from me!” he shouts, slamming his hand down on the table and sending an empty glass crashing to the floor. The shattering noise just seems to anger him further. “For fuck’s sake, she works in a goddamned bar!”

“She makes a decent wage and provides for the kids and while she might spend a lot of time in a bar, unlike you, she does it sober.” Jonah is back at my side, glaring down at Daniel. “Now why don’t you do like Nick said, and get the fuck out of here.”

“Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?”

Oh, fuck.

Daniel jumps to his feet and shoves Jonah hard, and the next thing I know, punches are flying, Jenny is shrieking, and more of my glassware is hitting the floor than I have *ever* lost in one day before. I try to reach in to break up the fight but only end up getting a knee shoved in my groin. *Motherfucker*. An inch higher and he'd have bruised my balls.

Then I hear the blissful sound of sirens. It's surreal, like something out of a movie, cops jumping out of the car and running into my pub. They manage to separate Jonah and Daniel, slapping cuffs on both of them until they can sort out the situation.

It takes hours. I close the pub.

Luckily, some of the patrons had pulled out their phones and recorded video of the whole thing, so the police could see exactly what happened. They said they still had to take both guys in, but Jonah probably wouldn't be charged.

"We'll need you to file a report of the damages." The officer who took my statement was the last to leave.

I nodded. "Insurance company will need that anyway."

"Okay, Mr. Hana. We'll call you if we need to speak to you again." She looked over my shoulder at Jenny. "Young lady, he's going to be locked up tonight, but I have no guarantee about tomorrow. You call us immediately if you see him. You got a safe place to stay?"

Jenny nodded, exhaustion plain on her face.

The officer smiled gently. "You do right by those kids, Jenny. Everyone knows it. Take care of yourself too, okay?"

Jenny's face crumples then, and the officer takes her leave. I pull Jenny into my arms and hold her through the sobs racking her body.

"My hero." She finally straightens up and smiles weakly at me. Her eyes are all red, and she's still shaking a bit.

"Me? Nah. How about Jonah?" I raise an eyebrow at her and she blushes.

"He's sweet, but he drinks a lot and he got in a bar fight." She shrugs. "I don't need that in my life. Nice guy though."

"I can clean up by myself tonight, hon. Why don't you go home and get some rest?"

“Thanks, Nick.” She hugs me again. “I think I will.”

I walk her out to her car, and then return to the bar and start cleaning up broken glass and putting up the bar stools.

Hours later, as I crawl into bed, I remember the text I'd sent Kevin. I pull out my phone and check my messages.

Sorry, phone was off in flight. Don't want to text about it. Call me?

Then, when I didn't answer that one, he sent another about a half hour later.

Nah, nevermind. You were right. I shouldn't make more of it than it was. Bye, Nick.

My veins turn to ice. That sounds awfully final. I had told him *I shouldn't make more of it than it was*. I never said anything about him making anything of it at all, did I? What the fuck had I said? But the morning feels like it was eons ago, and my brain is fuzzy with exhaustion.

Before sleep can overtake me, I send off one more text.

Call me.

He doesn't call.

Not that night. Not the next day. Not that week.

My calls go unanswered.

Two weeks after we were snowed in together, another snowstorm hits. I snap a few photos of the snow and send them to him with a text.

Don't think I'll ever see the white stuff again without thinking of you.

I don't expect an answer, but I'm still disappointed when I don't get one.

On Valentine's Day, the bar is full of singles and the restaurant is full of couples. Jonah is at his customary barstool flirting with Jenny, and I can't help but feel a little wistful as I watch couples walk by on the street outside. Jenny starts laughing loudly, and she gestures me over to see what's so funny.

One of her regulars had given her a box of candy hearts covered with profanity instead of love words. Some of them are funny, some crude, but I

snag a yellow one that says simply "I'm a dick." I take a photo of it and send it to Kevin. I pop it into my mouth, letting the sugar dissolve on my tongue, leaving its chalky flavor behind.

I've taken to texting him at random times. It comforts me, but he never answers, not even to tell me to stop. Maybe it comforts him, too. Or maybe he's blocked my number and hasn't seen any of them. Yeah, that's probably more likely.

A few minutes after I send the candy heart photo, he texts me three words.

No you're not.

It's a small thing. Just three words. But it feels huge. He hasn't blocked my number, and he doesn't think I'm a dick.

A few weeks later, I see a familiar profile across Pack Square, near the noodle shop where we ate on our aborted date. I shout his name and hurry across the street, but he's gone when I get there, and he doesn't appear to be in any of the restaurants or retail shops nearby. Maybe he was a figment of my imagination. Maybe I thought I saw him, just because I wanted to see him.

The last Thursday in March, Jenny is awarded sole custody of Samantha and Blake. Even though she's taken the day off, Jenny brings Miriam and the kids by the restaurant for supper and takes a moment to come downstairs to celebrate with a hug and whispered "thank you" in my ear. When she pulls back from the hug, her eyes widen, and she covers her mouth.

"What? You see a ghost?" I prod her gently.

"He's here. Your guy." She nods her chin, pointing with it over my shoulder.

I turn around and there he is.

Kevin.

He's standing inside the doorway to the Drop, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, not his typical weekday business attire, and he's watching me. For a moment, he looks like a runaway puppy who just discovered he'd lost his owner. Then he smiles and all is right in my world.

"Kevin." I cross the room to him, not sure whether to hug him, shake his hand, throw myself at him? In the end, I stand there, awkward as all get out, and say, "You're in Asheville."

He nods, then looks away. "You got a minute to talk?"

“I can’t. Jenny’s got the night off, and Corey’s not coming in until after his evening classes. But later? Can you stay?”

“I’ve got dinner plans, actually.” He blushes, not meeting my gaze. “But I can come back, after.”

“It’s really good to see you,” I blurt as he turns to leave. He looks up then, meeting my gaze at last, and he grins.

“You too, Nick.”

And then he’s gone.

Chapter Eight

When Kevin returns, it's after midnight and he knocks on the door to be let in. Corey is cleaning up behind the bar, so I gesture for Kevin to follow me to the office.

Once there, I'm not sure where to sit. Behind my desk? Kevin looks around and settles into one of the chairs, and I sit on my desk, facing him.

"So—" we both say at the same time. After some awkward laughing and throat clearing, I gesture for him to go ahead. He shakes his head, and I start.

"Why are you here? Something with work?"

"Yeah, you could say that." He shrugs. "But that's not what I need to talk to you about. Do you like it here? Asheville? Are you happy?"

"Mostly. I mean, I'm *lonely*, Kev. I don't have family, just my employees and my friends from the soccer team. It's not Vermont, but it kind of reminds me of Vermont, without all the memories with Mom."

"Is it home? I mean, would it hurt to move somewhere else?" He's staring at me intently, as if my answer to this is really important.

"Yeah, it's home." I nod, not sure whether I'm convincing him or myself. "Why?"

"Because I need to make a decision. I need to decide whether to take the General Manager position at the company we acquired. It would mean moving to Asheville. It would mean leaving New York. It would mean leaving my father's direct employ. It would mean—"

"Move here? To Asheville?" I try to imagine it. If he lived here, we could... what? Date? Be friends? Soccer buddies again?

"Yeah. So I have a pretty good reason to be here—work. But it's not the only reason. I have a history of making a mess of what I want. And of making more of things than what they are."

My heart thuds in my chest, a hot lump of emotion taking on a visceral, physical sensation inside me.

"Kevin... what exactly are you saying?"

He stands up and paces over to the door, then back toward me. He walks around the office a few times, and then sits down again.

"I love you, Nick. Since forever. I kept trying to say it without saying it, and I wrecked it. I loved you back in school. Remember I told you I had been in love once, and it was an unrequited thing? It was you. You were the guy, you were always *my* guy."

I'm stunned. "You never... all those times..."

He rubs a hand over his face, scrubbing at his eyes. "I know you think I'm a total slut. The only reason my hookups ended up always being one-night stands was because I didn't want them, I wanted you. And by never showing that I could handle commitment, I made you think I wasn't cut out for it. I fucked it up."

"Kevin..." He *loves* me?

"When we started talking again, this winter, it was everything to me. It was the second chance I always wanted, and I pushed you for more than you wanted to give me. I'm an ass. I'm sorry. I wanted to apologize. Because if I take this job, I'd like to have a friend here in town, and I promise it all stops now. I'm not pushing anymore."

"You didn't push me," I whisper.

"What?"

I speak up. "You didn't push me. I wanted you. I've been in love with you for years. Hell, Kevin, the only reason I held out as long as I did was because I thought it was one-sided. I thought if I told you how I felt..."

Nut up or die alone. Jenny's words seem to echo in the office, months after she said them.

"I thought you'd reject me. I was scared to make a big gesture. You didn't ruin it, I did."

"How could you think I would reject *you*? Are you crazy?" He stands up and moves between my knees. I wrap my legs around his waist and pull him closer. The look of tenderness on his face takes my breath away. He strokes a finger down the side of my face, tilts my chin and looks me straight in the eye. "I love you, Nick. I want you. As my friend. As my lover. My boyfriend. Not to scare you, but maybe husband someday. It's not legal here, but it is back home. I want as much of you as you can give me."

My mind is reeling. Did he just say *husband*?

"I want that." I say the words before he can take his back. "I want that. We've wasted a fuckton of time. I want all that, with you, and I want it right fucking now."

His kiss is demanding, claiming. A reunion and a victory celebration both at once. I run my hands up his back and into his hair. I pull him so close, he tumbles forward until I'm flat on my back on my desk, my legs around his waist as he grinds into me.

It's out-of-control hot when he slips his hand up under my shirt, tweaking at my nipples, first one, then the other. I writhe underneath him, trying to get our cocks lined up just right. Crazy, doing this here, when any one of my employees could walk in.

"Does that door have a lock?" he murmurs against my lips.

"Yeah."

His weight disappears off me for a moment, then he's back. He yanks me to my feet and reaches for the button of my jeans. He tugs them down, running his hands over my thighs and ass.

"I want you right here, bent over your desk."

"I don't have condoms." I manage to croak out.

"I have never gone bare with anyone. Ever. And I get tested every year. I got tested three weeks ago, negative. And I haven't been with anyone but you since November. It's totally your choice, Nick, but I'm cool with it."

"Do it. I want this. But use some of that." I nod at a big jug of olive oil on the shelf behind him.

He smiles and reaches for the jug, cracking its seal. "Do I want to know why this is in your office?"

"It was a sample. New supplier. It came with the mail, and I haven't brought it up to the kitchen yet."

"Hmmm. Fortuitous." He turns me around, pushing me forward until my chest hits the desk. I grab the sides and hold on. There's something particularly vulnerable in bending over for someone. Not only letting him have my ass, but offering it to him, trusting him with my body, and with my anticipation, my expectation.

Trusting him like this with words of love between us is a heady thing.

His fingers slide slick over my ass, warm in contrast to the cold wood against my face. His cockhead slips inside me, hard and wet with the oil. I groan at the first tight burst of pain, but then I'm in it with him, pushing back, bearing down, and drawing him inside.

"Fuck." He whispers. "God, being inside you bare is like..." He shudders, not finishing the sentence. "Can I move?"

I nod, pretty sure I'm beyond speech. He starts slowly, just easing in and out of me, letting us both feel the subtle differences. Sex without condoms. A commitment of sorts, between us. A promise. I thrust my hips a little faster, urging him to fuck me harder, faster. He doesn't disappoint. He puts one hand on my shoulder, one on my hips, and he drives into me with every bit of passion and love he'd held back over the years.

"I'm going to come," he says. "Oh fuck, Nick, I'm—" He breaks off in a wordless sound as he starts to shudder and shoot inside my body. I've got my hand on my cock, I'm jerking it as he gets off, but I'm not there yet. As he pulls out of me, his cock slides easily, slick from his come in my body. Then he turns me over and takes my dick in his mouth.

His come-covered cock is sticky against my leg, but I don't care. His come is inside my body, and the thought is more of a turn on than I would have imagined. He probes my ass with a finger while he sucks me, and we both groan when it slides in easily. He strokes deep, feeling for my gland, and when he bumps it, I shudder. It feels so fucking *good*. The visuals in my head, of his come and his finger in my ass, and that look of adoration on his face while he sucks me—it's too much. He reaches up and claps a hand over my mouth as I come, shooting my spunk inside his mouth. He swallows all of me, and I shudder again. His hands and mouth ease away from me, and he straightens our clothes, smoothing mine with gentle hands.

"You're inside me." I draw him into a kiss.

"And you're inside me." He pulls back to say before he opens up to give me a taste. The urgency and demand is gone from our kiss, replaced by something sweet and gentle. Something I'd call love, something I'd never expected from him, but had always craved.

"I gotta go help Corey close." I tuck my head against his shoulder. "Will you stay? Come home with me tonight?"

"Anything you want, babe." His voice rumbles against my ear. "Anything."

Epilogue

November 2014

It's snowing hard as I hang up the phone. I can barely see the entourage coming up the front walk, but I can hear them.

Jenny's kids are chattering and laughing as they burst into the condo. They stomp their feet to clear their boots of the snow, and then they run to the kitchen, shouting about how Uncle Kevin promised them hot cocoa if they made it down the beginner slope without falling.

Jenny and Jonah trail in behind them, holding hands.

"Hey boss." Jenny grins at me. Her eyes are sparkling almost as much as the diamond on her finger. Turns out the only reason Jonah drank so much was because the bar was a convenient place to see Jenny. Once they started dating, he never set foot in the Drop again. Though I was sad to lose a regular customer, seeing Jenny happy more than makes up for it. They follow the kids into the kitchen, Jenny stopping to yank the wedding planning folder out of my hands. "You said you were done. No more planning until it's my turn."

Kevin comes in last, carrying his skis tucked under one arm. He leans them against the wall and comes straight to me. He kisses me with the sort of fierce promise that keeps me up at night sometimes.

"We missed you out there," he says, a little breathless.

"Yeah, I had to make a few last-minute decisions with the caterer. Gawd, that woman can talk. She thinks because I'm a restaurateur—" I make air quotes around the word "—that I want to hear every detail about the food. Seriously, if it's locally sourced and vegetarian, I'm good, right?"

"Right," he agrees, smiling indulgently. "Mom and Dad and Trish and Sean and the baby will be here tomorrow afternoon. Mom and Dad's condo is three doors down from ours."

"Great." I shiver. I've gotten to know his parents better the last few months, but I still find them cold and unapproachable.

"Trish and Sean and the baby are in the one right next to ours."

"Okay, good, they can be a buffer."

“Do you want to do it tonight?” he asks softly.

Scatter Mom's ashes. Say goodbye.

“After the wedding. So she can be with us.”

He smiles. “Anything you want, love.”

We say our vows in the ski lodge a few miles from the sleepy little house where I grew up, surrounded by his family and my friends.

Afterward, he and I take the ski lift up to the top of the mountain, but we don't ski down right away. Instead, we take off our skis, and we say goodbye to my mom, sending her into the morning sunlight, ash on snow. That feeling of being unmoored washes over me again, but Kevin takes my hand, a reminder I'm not alone.

“I'm so glad you came into the Lonely Drop that day,” I whisper to him. “I don't know that I could be here, that I could do this without you.”

“Me too.” He kisses my forehead. He doesn't need to say more. He's my family now, not just because of the rings on our fingers, but because he's made himself my anchor. We hold each other for a long while before I'm ready to go.

When it feels right, we ski down the mountain and into our new life, together.

The End

Recipe for Bailey's and Pistachio Ice Cream

To make the recipe vegan, please substitute full fat coconut milk for the whole milk in the recipe, and instead of using name brand Bailey's Irish Cream, use a vegan homemade version—several recipes are available on the internet.

Ingredients:

2 cups whole milk, divided into 1¾ cups and ¼ cup

½ cup Bailey's Irish Cream

1 cup pistachio butter*

1 cup sugar

2 tablespoons cornstarch

*To make pistachio butter, start with ½ cup water and 1 cup shelled pistachios (if salted, rinse excess salt). Using a food processor or immersion blender, puree until smooth, adding more water as necessary to reach desired consistency—slightly thinner than natural peanut butter. Sweeten to taste.

1. In a mixing bowl, whisk together the ¼ cup milk and the cornstarch until cornstarch dissolves.
2. In a saucepan, combine the rest of the milk with the Bailey's and the sugar and bring to a simmer, stirring constantly.
3. Whisk in the milk and cornstarch mixture, and continue to whisk as it simmers—at least five minutes to cook off the alcohol in the Bailey's. The mixture will thicken some, but will still be fairly liquid.
4. Remove from heat and place in a bowl. Chill in refrigerator until completely cooled—preferably overnight.
5. Once cooled, stir in the pistachio butter until fully blended.
6. Process in your ice cream maker according to manufacturer's instructions, then store in freezer.

Author Bio

Author of over a dozen novels, novellas, and short stories, Vanessa North delights in giving happy-ever-afters to characters who don't think they deserve them. Relentless curiosity led her to take up knitting and run a few marathons "just to see if she could." She started writing for the same reason. Her very patient husband pretends not to notice when her hobbies take over the house. Living and writing in Northwest Georgia, she finds her attempts to keep a quiet home are frequently thwarted by twin boy-children and a very, very large dog.

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