



FOREVER UNDER A

RAINBOW

POSY ROBERTS

FOREVER UNDER A RAINBOW

“I’m not straight” is how Bridger Jenkins came out. That’s all he’s comfortable claiming at first, even if he’s more than willing to experiment sexually with men to find out what being not straight means in practice. Several horrid dates leave him feeling frustrated, so he retreats to a familiar online gay forum for support. There, he runs across Stone Moore, whose profile says he’s only interested in friendship. After hours of easy conversation, Stone agrees to go on a date.

During their amazing evening together, Bridger shares that he’s new to dating men. This seems to throw Stone off, yet the date ends with a steamy kiss. When Stone later tells Bridger the time isn’t right for them, Bridger is hurt and confused. He realizes he must’ve come off as bi-curious, naïve, and insecure. Bridger knows he needs to feel comfortable in this new skin of his and that he won’t find love until he’s more at ease.

Bridger isn’t thrilled to remain in Stone’s *friend zone* but contents himself with their late night chats and goes out with other men, which both strengthens and disheartens him. His dissatisfying dates reinforce what he already knows: he won’t find anyone else as amazing as Stone. Eventually, he’s bold enough to ask Stone out on another date. Will they date again? Have they found their soul mates, or will they each discover something about the other that causes them to go their separate ways?

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

FOREVER UNDER A RAINBOW

By Posy Roberts

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.

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

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Photo Description

Two men walk hand in hand along a trail. It's obvious one man knows the way through the field of native grasses, and the man who is a half step behind trusts his partner but might be apprehensive about the situation or where he's being led. They appear to be talking in intimate tones. They touch from fingers to forearms as they head toward the horizon.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I just came out to my best friend and she encouraged me to open myself up for love. Not knowing where to begin looking for another guy to meet (I'm not the club-going type) I went online and registered a free online dating profile. A lot of people there only wanted sex, but I was still a virgin and didn't want my first time to be with any random guy. I am a hopeless romantic and was looking for love. I was honest about what I was looking for and had some nice chats, but whenever HE went online, I ignored all other messages. We talked the nights away, getting to know each other and not trying to get in each other's pants. We built a meaningful connection and it wasn't long until we spoke on the phone and decided to meet. Dinner, a walk in the park, stolen glances and accidentally bumping into each other. A perfect date we didn't want to end. When I was home the first thing I did was checking the site and he was waiting for me. I called him, we talked for hours and I knew it was a terrible idea, but I confessed that I might be falling for him. Couldn't stop myself. He said he felt the same way. The happiest moment in my life. We had many great dates, talked about all the important things - the possibility of kids, marriage, being out. Everything seemed perfect and possible. Then we planned our first time, both nervous and exciting and realized we were both exclusive bottoms. I might be a virgin, but I could never see myself being the top. I craved something different, the same thing he wanted and needed. Please give us a HEA, because our love should conquer every obstacle and even though we will never allow a third into our relationship, I love him and need us to find a way to be enough for each other.

Sincerely,

Marc F

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: medical personnel, businessmen/lawyers, friends to lovers, self-acceptance, online dating, sex roles, compromise, coming out, almost perfect for each other

Word Count: 23,181

FOREVER UNDER A RAINBOW

By Posy Roberts

1. Violet

Internet Dating

“Tell me everything! What was it like? Did it hurt much? Did it feel amazing? Was he as hot as his photo?”

I didn't answer right away, and I could see my best friend was about ready to blast off into the stratosphere the longer we walked in silence. I'd met up with a guy I'd been chatting with for the past few weeks and had planned on having sex with the handsome not-quite stranger.

Gina had met up with a guy of her own. She was the queen of online dating and had been trying to pass on her know-how to me. She'd had both great and horrible experiences. This was *all* new to me, and it wasn't going well.

Acquaintances didn't call us Barbie and Ken simply because we were best friends. We were both pegged as superficial lackwits because of our blonde hair and blue eyes. Few took the time to bother getting to know us. It was easier to stick us in boxes and pretend we were shallow and unworthy of intelligent thought or interesting conversation. We were grateful to have each other to understand how it felt to be dismissed out of hand because of a first impression based on an ignorant stereotype.

Now Gina and I were on our way back to our apartment building after our mutually failed meet-ups, and she wanted every detail of my experience because she'd just told me what had happened to her.

“Bridger! You're killing me. Tell me! Was it as good as you expected? Was he a good kisser? What was it like?”

“It was like nothing,” I mumbled. I had a hard time making direct eye contact with her, so I looked at the leaf-covered toes of my boots instead. I focused on the crunching sound our steps made until I knew I had to give her a better answer. “It didn't happen. I couldn't do it.”

“What do you mean? You chickened out *again*?”

Yes, again.

I tried to shove her probing questions away with defensive body posturing, pulling the corduroy collar of my jacket tighter around my neck, but she wouldn't let up. It was tough to admit that I struggled with getting physically

intimate without knowing a person. Men were supposed to be okay with no strings attached sex, but I wasn't. And the guy I'd met that night ended up being a condescending asshole who was probably most at home in front of a mirror kissing his own biceps rather than interacting with human beings.

"Did you even kiss him? Jerk each other off?"

"You see, that's the problem, Gina," I shot back, looking at her. "I don't want to get jerked off like that and come right home. I have a perfectly functioning hand that's served me well for years. I want something more."

"Did you kiss him?"

"He didn't want to. He just went for my belt, and when I tried to lean in for a kiss, he said, 'Not on the mouth.' When I kissed his neck, he made it very obvious there was only one thing he wanted me to kiss."

"Asshole."

"That's *not* where he was directing my head." She slapped me on the arm and snorted. "But yeah." I didn't tell her this was typical so far on my adventures in dating gay men.

I came out only a few months ago, and Gina was the first person I told, naturally. The day after my reveal, she had me on various gay websites—news, chat, forums, blogs—and of course, she suggested a free dating site.

Gina's intervention was her way of getting me out there and acquainted with a whole new culture, and it was like stepping into a radically novel world. The interaction I'd had with the guy tonight was an up-close-and-personal reality check for me. This was nothing like my experience dating women.

I'd always thought I was simply a late bloomer and that eventually cleavage and cloying lash-batting would appeal to me. They never did.

I started dating Anna when we were both seventeen. We'd met at her church-sponsored youth group get-together, the kind used by church leadership to convert insecure teens into a way of life sanctified by God. I was smitten by Anna because we had so many common interests, and eventually, I was blindly swallowed up by her evangelical faith. The things we do for love... and all that jazz.

We had an innocent affair, for the most part, because of her beliefs. She insisted on waiting until she was married to have sex, and I was cool with that. I was in no rush. We got to know each other really well instead, because we

weren't obsessed with losing our virginity. That didn't mean we didn't experiment.

Anna and I eventually drifted apart. She became a missionary after her first year in college, and I easily let go of my newer faith and became an agnostic again. I discovered I hadn't truly believed in Anna's God, but I had believed in Anna.

When other women didn't appeal to me after that, I was confused. I'd dated, but nothing ever felt right. I never connected. Some of the time it was because the women I went out with were more concerned with looking pretty than being interesting or showing their intelligence through good conversation, as if being smart would be an affront to me. Other times it was because they moved way too fast. I was used to a relaxed, slow pace and deep emotional connections.

I confessed all of my confusion about women to Gina after struggling for far too long. I told her I didn't find most women attractive. That apparently got the gears going in her head. One night she jokingly said, "Well, maybe you're bisexual or gay and you never knew it." I didn't respond.

She ended up speaking the truth.

Within a month, I had come out to her. I didn't say "I'm gay" or "I'm bisexual" because I didn't know which I was. I came out by saying, "I'm not straight."

Gina was ready for me to start waving a rainbow flag to tell the world. She was certainly ready to start waving one in support of me. I needed to find out who I was first because I wasn't entirely sure. There would be no rainbow anything for me. Ever. I didn't need to advertise that information, especially when all I really knew was that I wasn't straight. Facing the truth initially terrified me because I didn't really know what being *not straight* meant, in practice.

One night after draining two bottles of wine, I opened a new Word document on my computer and used Gina's dating site knowledge to help sign me up on Grindr and create a profile. She figured getting out and amongst my people would help me feel more comfortable in my skin.

"They're not *my people*."

"What?"

"They're strangers. Friends and family are *my people*. It would be great to find someone who could be though. I'm game."

“All right. Let’s get this profile finished up then.”

I hated the photo she insisted on me using, but she said it would be great because it was an attention grabber. I looked more like a Ken doll than a human being, but add Photoshop elements in there, and it was downright scary. My skin looked like plastic, but she said it looked flawless, which was exactly my point. I was full of flaws, and she was putting an image out there that made it seem like I was perfect, when I was so very far from that. Apparently, the photo appealed because by the next day, I had several hits on my profile.

Learning about online dating had been an adventure all its own, but after spending the summer *dating* gay men, I knew not to expect love. It was all based on the superficial, but Gina had encouraged me to stick with it to see how *not straight* I was and to figure out what I liked in a man.

Hooking up was all it could be called. Most of these guys wanted nothing to do with me. All they wanted was my dick or my ass or photos of them beforehand, which I never provided. If they liked the Ken doll photo, they got the Ken doll anatomy too, until they proved they wanted something more than the Photoshopped façade.

I knew I wasn’t setting myself up for success with that sort of attitude, but I was afraid. I was scared of putting myself out there.

Gina had the sense not to push me any further about my successes, or lack thereof, that autumn night as she unlocked the door to our building. We headed up the stairs in silence, and when we got to our floor, she went to her door, and I went to mine. She fumbled and dropped her keys and then stooped to pick them up.

“Do you want to come over to my place to talk?” I asked.

“Gawd, yes!” She followed me into my apartment and made herself at home, pouring us each a glass of wine.

I brought my iPad over to the couch and sat next to her, logging in to Grindr so she could see the site more easily than on my phone. I found the guy’s profile, the muscle kisser. He was hot—dark hair and sexy, sleepy eyes—and he’d been nice while chatting, not the callous prick he’d ended up being in person.

“I couldn’t go through with it because he didn’t want to know my name. He just wanted me to suck him right there or else go back to his place to fuck.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” she asked with a smirk.

I gave her a look. I didn't understand her nonchalance. Ever since I realized I liked guys, it was as if she expected me to turn into some sort of sex maniac. Maybe she thought I'd been so repressed because of my mistaken heterosexuality that I now needed to break free. I'd never felt repressed at all. If I felt anything different since coming out, it was more nervous because of situations like I'd experienced that night. I didn't know the rules of the game yet.

"What do you think?" I asked her. "How would you feel if some guy didn't give a shit what your name was but wanted to get in your pants?"

"When you put it like that... Yeah, I hate that, but I'm a woman. That's different."

"No, it's not," I said, frustrated that my best friend didn't understand me. "In the three years we've known each other, have you ever heard me mention wanting meaningless sex?"

"You haven't wanted sex at all because you were looking at the wrong gender." She snickered.

I shook my head. "I wasn't looking at the wrong gender. It's not that simple."

"So you figured out you're bisexual?" Finally she was serious, which I needed right then. I was glad she read me correctly.

"Maybe. Probably not. Does it matter?"

"It might matter."

"But more than needing to know that, I want a relationship with someone. I don't want to give it away to any guy or girl who will have me. I'm not going to bend over for just anyone. And I'm certainly not going to bend over for a guy who doesn't even give a shit about my name."

"I know. I mean... I know this about you, but I thought if you got out there and experienced a little hands-on time, you'd be less uptight. You're twenty-three, and you've been with all of three women, if you can even use the word 'with' when all you did was make out with them."

"I've done more than that."

"Barely. So, the guy you met up with tonight...", she said as she pulled the iPad closer. I watched her scan his profile. She clicked around to a few other guys I'd either talked to or met up with.

"I'm seeing a pattern," she said after spending some time reading. "You're talking with some pretty... extreme guys."

"Extreme?"

"Well, look at this guy," she said as she pulled up a profile. It was a guy who had creeped me out, so I'd quit responding to him. "Who says crap like this? 'Looking to creampie your hole,'" she read. "Eww."

"I didn't read that. Maybe he just added it, but I stopped talking to him anyway."

"What does your profile say again? You might be getting these guys because of some innocuous little thing that needs to be deleted."

I clicked through to mine. I hadn't edited it since I'd signed up. I wondered how many guys had contacted me after looking only at my Ken doll photo, never once bothering to read on to find out more about me.

Bottom seeks a lickin'.

"What the hell?" I said, pulling the iPad back to my lap. "I thought I deleted that."

Gina gave me a wide-eyed look.

"Did you...?" I asked.

"No, no! No, I didn't. I remember you wrote that as a joke, but I swear you deleted it before putting it on the site."

I groaned and clicked Edit Profile, waiting as patiently as I could for the page to load.

"No wonder you were getting guys looking for a quick fuck," she said after reading it.

Gina and I spent the next thirty minutes rewriting my profile, sober this time. We both read it carefully several times before hitting Save.

"That explains all the spanking fetish comments I've been getting. And more."

Gina blushed and started giggling. "Seriously? Let me see."

I gave her a reproachful look and shook my head. "I blocked those guys so their past messages disappeared."

"I'm sorry, Bridger. I'm really, really sorry."

“It’s not your fault, but I’m never writing a dating profile while drunk again. Let me tell you....”

Gina laughed and pulled me into a hug. “You’re gonna find somebody. And when they take the time to see inside your heart, they’re going to fall head over heels in love.”

“That’s all I want is to have someone look inside, to the real me, instead of only at the outside.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” Gina yawned and stretched. “Sorry. I’m tired.”

“You should go to bed. We’ll go for coffee in the morning.”

“Okay. Night.”

“Night, sweetie.”

I stood at my door while Gina let herself into her apartment, and I waited until her deadbolt slid into place with a *thunk*. After locking my own door, I went back to my iPad and pulled up my renewed profile. I read it and smiled, feeling it captured my personality and desires a whole lot better than the previous version had.

When I looked at my photo, I knew I had to change it. I found the photo I’d used over on a gay forum I’d been visiting regularly and uploaded it instead. I sat on a park bench in the photo and looked nothing like a Ken doll. Gina had taken this one too, but it was after a day of hiking. My hair was a sweaty mess, I was sunburned across my cheeks and the bridge of my nose, and I looked all sorts of exhausted. What the photo really portrayed to me was that I was relaxed and comfortable in my own skin even when I was grungy from a day of exercise in the woods. I wanted to feel that same level of comfort with a man.

Before going to bed, I headed over to the forum GaySpeak for a quick perusal to see if anything interesting had happened in the last few days. The site covered the entire spectrum of gay life. I’d spent time there over the last months because it was a fairly anonymous way to get answers to many of the questions I was too afraid to ask. I found out I wasn’t the only one who had so many queries, and I also found out I wasn’t the only person to realize he was not straight in his twenties.

I decided to pose a question. *How can I use a dating site to find love instead of just sex?* I gave a small summary of my dating experience so far, and before I’d had a chance to log off, a couple of people had responded. They all said the

same thing: delete my account on Grindr and sign up at a dating site where guys were looking for more than just busting their nut. They gave several suggestions, so I went and explored them all.

Thirty minutes later, I was registered on OkCupid with the new photo and revised bio Gina had helped with. Maybe I'd have better luck now. I deleted Grindr, too.

2. Indigo

Screen Names

I went about my daily life as normally as I could, considering I had attractive men messaging me on a regular basis and wanting to get to know me. There were still a few of the assholes on the new site who only wanted cock shots or more. But now, there were men to have insightful conversations with as well.

After spending my workday listening to patients' complaints about their pain and seeing their pleading looks that begged for me to please take it away rather than asking them to comply with their physical therapy plan, it was nice to go home and relax by chatting online with interesting men. That was how I came across a guy who called himself Rock-Mohs10. I rolled my eyes at his name, thinking of that wrestler-turned-actor "The Rock". Rock-Mohs10 was talking to another guy on GaySpeak about the pain he had in his right heel.

I lurked through his past posts before introducing myself. I said I was a physical therapy assistant and asked Rock-Mohs10 a few questions about his pain. I wasn't a doctor, but it sounded like the start of plantar fasciitis from his description. I told him about a few stretches he could do, suggested he use a tennis ball to massage the bottom of his foot, and then recommended better arch support in his shoes before I recognized I was stepping into a very weird place. This was a gay forum, not a physical therapy forum. I decided to send him a private message.

Bridger: I'm sorry. Didn't mean to butt into your conversation.

Rock-Mohs10: No. Thank you! I'd rather try this stuff out first before I go to a doctor.

Bridger: It's not a quick fix. You're forewarned.

A few days later, Rock-Mohs10 private messaged me and told me his foot was already feeling better because of the tennis ball massage and new shoes. I suggested a few more tricks of the trade before we started talking about ourselves. I noticed he was single and lived in Minneapolis too, so I sent him a link to my profile on OkCupid. I put myself out there, and it paid off. In less than fifteen minutes, we had connected on the dating site. I was disappointed when he went by Rock-Mohs10 there too. I wondered what his real name was.

Rock-Mohs10 was twenty-six, gay, and had been in a long-term relationship, but since the breakup two years ago, he'd been *laying low*. As I continued to read, I saw he was looking for new friends only. No dating options were selected, which was disappointing because he'd been nice from what I'd seen so far. I figured we'd chat, and I'd follow his lead. I looked at his photo, but it was hard to see what he really looked like. He was tall and lean, and it looked like he had brown hair, but his profile said it was red. If it was, it was auburn. The profile also said he had green eyes. I clicked through to another photo. It was a close-up. I saw his beautiful eyes. They were green with some tawny flecks that made them look otherworldly. Freckles dotted his nose and cheeks, and I wondered how much his face would freckle in the sun.

I decided to keep Gina in the dark about him because I didn't want to jinx things before they'd had a chance to begin. He seemed great, but I'd hardly talked to him yet, and Gina had a lot going on in her own life that was taking up most of our conversation time anyway. She had started dating a guy, Tyler, whom I felt was too good to be true. It was as if he'd found her must-have list and made himself into the perfect man for her. He bought her flowers *all* the time. He was trying too hard. However, she didn't see anything suspicious about the way he acted. Every time I was around him, I felt like I was on Red Alert.

She thought I was overreacting, so eventually, I kept my suspicions to myself to keep the peace. With all the extra time she was spending with Tyler, I had more time to kill than ever. I ended up going on OkCupid to check out the new guys who had messaged me and those I'd been matched with. Eventually, I caved and downloaded the app right to my phone.

That's how I ended up being that pathetic guy who stood in line at the grocery store chatting with some stranger I may or may not ever meet. I wanted to make a soul connection, but many of the guys I was coming across still wanted to make only a physical one. Some hid it behind the convincing desire to find a boyfriend. A few seemed genuine, so I decided to meet them once they asked. *I* was too chicken to ask. Rather than meeting at a bar or going out to dinner, I tried to keep it casual by suggesting an alternative. Coffee or lunch during the week made it obvious I wasn't looking for sex à la carte.

On one of those dates, I met a guy I was considering being bold enough to ask out on a second date before we said goodbye. After he finished his last sip of coffee, his mood changed dramatically.

He leaned in and whispered, "I'll have you begging in a matter of minutes. You'll be thrusting that ass to get me as deep as I can go. Come up to my office right now."

"No thanks," I managed to say. I walked out the door and wondered how we went from talking about our favorite vacations to him envisioning bending me over his desk so quickly.

I blocked him on the app.

I ended up blocking a lot of guys and soon wondered why the hell I was doing this at all. I considered a few other dating sites after talking to one of the gay men at my clinic, and he commiserated with me about how frustrating they could be.

It was a tool to get laid. That's all it was.

Of course, you heard of people connecting on these sites, meeting in real life, and falling in love, but that happened next to never.

I decided I'd delete my OkCupid profile at the end of December. It was December fifth when I made that decision, and there was no logic as to why I decided to wait until the end of the month. Hope, I suppose, was the only reason. Hope and Rock-Mohs10.

What a stupid name. But was I one to talk?

Every few days I'd look to see if there was anyone of interest on OkCupid. Most of the time the answer was a resounding no, and I'd end up talking to Rock-Mohs10 some more. I would've liked to get to know him better, but he very much stayed in the friend zone. His foot was healing up nicely, and we started talking about other things in our lives.

He worked in a field that kept him at his computer a lot, but that's all I was able to grasp from what he'd shared about his job. He helped businesses with their business platforms, whatever those were, and it was a high-stress job. He'd originally injured his foot after taking up running to help him combat stress. He'd been training for a marathon, a personal goal he'd set for himself after losing some weight. He sent me a photo of him at his heaviest, and I couldn't help but think he was just as handsome with meat on his bones as he was without it. I told him as much.

Rock-Mohs10: *Stop it, or I'll fall in love with you.*

Bridger: *All it takes is an honest compliment? Are you truly that easy?*

He was silent for a few minutes, and I started to worry I'd crossed a line. I was trying to flirt, not insult him. But our conversations had never gone in this direction before. Strangely, after he showed me some of his vulnerability with that photo, I felt more attracted to him.

I started to type that I was sorry when a new message came through.

Rock-Mohs10: *Easy? Not really. Willing? Maybe.*

Bridger: *Maybe? What does that hinge on?*

Rock-Mohs10: *Knowing your real name might be a good place to start.*

I laughed at the computer screen.

Bridger: *Believe it or not, my real name is Bridger.*

Rock-Mohs10: *Come on. I'm not falling for that.*

Bridger: *It's true. My mom and dad were hippies.*

Rock-Mohs10: *Hippies?*

Bridger: *Yep. The real life thing, from the 70s even.*

Rock-Mohs10: *Sounds like you have older parents. I'm the youngest kid in my family so mine were older than average.*

Bridger: *Me too.*

Rock-Mohs10: *So, back to Bridger?*

Bridger: *Tell me your name first and then I'll tell you the whole story behind my name.*

Rock-Mohs10: *Stone.*

Bridger: *LOL. And you go by Rock-Mohs10? Here I worried that you wanted to be like "The Rock", that Dwayne Johnson guy.*

I hoped I hadn't offended him, but from what I already knew about him, I suspected he'd laugh it off.

Rock-Mohs10: *That's it. I'm changing my screen name!*

Bridger: *Haha. Not so fast. It fits you, Stone. ;-)*

Rock-Mohs10: *Did you miss the Mohs10 part? I'm really Rock-Hard.*

Bridger: *Wow. Your humility is staggering.*

I couldn't keep the smile off my face. It was great we could tease each other. When I saw my reflection in the screen, I realized I was sitting in my apartment alone, grinning like a fool.

Rock-Mohs10: *Back to the story of your name.*

Bridger: *How about I tell you in person? I'll tell you the whole story rather than the watered down, abbreviated version.*

Rock-Mohs10: *Okay. Out of curiosity's sake, what's the watered down version?*

Bridger: *My parents were hippies who liked bridges.*

Rock-Mohs10: *I can't wait to hear the whole story.*

I couldn't wait to tell him. I couldn't wait to meet him either.

We planned to see each other the following weekend. I'd suggested lunch, but because of his marathon training schedule, he needed to meet later. We decided on dinner. I wasn't expecting to ever go to dinner as a first date with a man I met online, yet this was what worked out.

3. Blue

The Date

My palms were sweaty, and I wiped them on my jeans, feeling even more self-conscious because of the denim. The restaurant Stone had suggested was much fancier than I had expected. I felt like I should've been wearing trousers and a tie, if not a suit. He'd sent me a text message saying he was running late because of an accident on the I-35 bridge, so the host had seated me with the promise he'd direct Stone to the table when he arrived.

I ended up ordering a bottle of wine and tentatively sipped at my glass while I waited. I sent a text to Gina—a freak-out text, as we jokingly referred to the texts we sent each other in moments like this.

I'm not sure about this date. What if it goes horribly wrong?

She immediately sent a message back. You're gonna be fine. You're just there to get to know each other better.

She was right. There was no reason to be this nervous, even if she didn't know how invested I was in this guy.

But what if he ends up like all the others? I'm not sure what I'll do because I think I like this one.

Drama King much? It's dinner not a marriage proposal.

A man cleared his throat, and I looked up. He had dark-red wavy hair pushed back off his forehead. He was dressed much like I was, relieving all my dress code worries. He had on dark jeans, a casual button-down shirt, and trendy leather shoes that looked comfortable, not stuffy or formal.

“Bridger Jenkins?”

I stood and held out my hand. “Stone Moore?” He nodded. I smiled as he gave my hand a firm shake that lasted a little longer than normal, and then it softened. His fingers glided over my palm in a way that could only be considered flirtatious. “I'm glad you made it. Was the accident bad?”

He shook his head, and his face turned grim. “It wasn't good. Damn ice. It's slick out there.”

I gestured to the chair next to me rather than the one across the table. “Please, sit. I ordered a bottle of Pinot Noir. Have a glass and relax. I figured a

light- to medium-bodied wine would be good. You said you like reds on your profile.”

My mouth was sprinting because of nerves, yet Stone looked completely at ease. He unfolded his cloth napkin and laid it in his lap as our waitress greeted him and expertly poured him a glass of wine. She topped my glass off as well before she ran through the specials for the night, and then she left us alone.

Stone took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair as if he were either stretching his back or trying to crack it. I gave him a closed-mouth smile and kept any work thoughts out of my head. He was training for a marathon, so he was bound to be sore somewhere, and sitting in a car in standstill traffic certainly wasn't easy on the back. He didn't need me scrutinizing his aching muscles.

“I'm nervous” slipped out of my mouth.

“Me too,” he said. “I don't usually date. Plus, we've gotten along so well online.”

“That's probably why. Online is different than real life,” I said as I reached for my glass. I took a healthy sip before setting it down and finally making more direct eye contact.

His eyes were more gorgeous in person, and they mesmerized me. I scooted my chair in closer to the table, closer to him, and I leaned in.

“How's the training going?” I asked.

“Really good. My friend has been running marathons for years, and I'm following his beginner's training schedule. I think I'll be ready when the day comes. And then I'll probably sleep for a week afterward. I need to do this to prove to myself that I can.”

“Better you than me,” I said with a low laugh. “Running on the elliptical is about as far as I'll go. I'd rather hike on the ground than run on it. Too many joint injuries.”

“I don't love it,” Stone said, and then he gave me a quick flash of his smile. His lips were pale pink next to his fair skin. I allowed my gaze to drift across the freckles on his cheeks and nose. He had a few more than had been captured on the photo he'd posted online. I liked them. They made his enchanting eyes less powerful. They made him seem more down to earth and less... something.

Our waitress returned. My stomach was a little queasy, but I knew most of that was nerves. I'd been ravenous just an hour ago. He ordered shrimp and

pasta, and I decided on the steak. I was glad when the waitress left us again so we could continue talking.

“Now, I need the long, convoluted story about your name,” he said. “You promised.”

“Long and convoluted? I don’t know if I said it would be that.” I feigning affront, which only caused him to laugh.

It was a great laugh, loud and carefree. And deep. His voice rumbled in his chest, and when he spoke again to encourage me to tell the story, I swore I could feel it in my chest too. Who knew that I had a thing for men with deep voices? But I guess I did.

“Well, my parents used to be hippies, but then again, do you ever truly un-hippify?” It was a rhetorical question, and his only answer was a smile, so I continued. “I suppose a lot of people went from hippie to yuppie in the eighties, but not my parents.” I coughed. “So, maybe this *is* the long, convoluted version.” My nerves were turning me into a motor mouth. “Well, one summer Mom and Dad decided they wanted to travel across the country in their old VW van. Dad spent weeks fixing the engine with my older siblings. The youngest, Lotus, was eleven at the time, so even she helped. Or so the story goes.”

“Are you close to your family?”

I nodded, mentally noting to get back to talking about them later and to ask about his family as well. “So the van was drivable, but it wasn’t looking the best on the outside because of hail damage, and this was supposed to be my parents’ last hurrah or maybe a goodbye to their wild youth.”

Stone watched me with great intensity as if he were hanging on to every word I was saying.

“They were in their forties, so my oldest brother jokes that this was their mid-life crisis trip. I think he’s still bitter that he had to spend the summer driving all my other siblings around to baseball practice and swimming lessons, but that’s a whole ’nother story.” I took a sip of wine trying to remember where I got off track. No wonder I never told the extended version of the story. It took forever.

“Hail damage,” Stone said.

“Right. Thanks. Mom and all my siblings ended up painting the van in a rainbow of daisies to cover the hail dents. It was hippie heaven, especially after dad threw a mattress in the back. They were going to drive cross-country, sleep

in the thing, and cook on a camping stove they took along. The only other money they were going to shell out was to stay over in state parks, and of course to buy maps along the way. Their true goal was to drive over as many bridges as possible as they crossed America.”

“Ah!” Stone lit up as he nodded.

“Don’t get ahead of me,” I said as I reached for his hand and patted it. He slipped his fingers between mine and didn’t let go. It felt so natural. I momentarily lost my train of thought as I looked at our joined fingers. I noticed my nervousness had disappeared. I liked how he made me feel as if I’d known him forever. Looking back up, I continued, much more relaxed in my manner of speaking. “They broke down in the middle of the night on a bridge in the middle of nowhere. It spanned a huge gorge, and as you guessed, that’s where I was conceived, they think. Or hope. They almost named me Gorge. I’m glad they didn’t go that direction.”

“Conceived in a VW van that was painted with a rainbow of flowers.” Stone smirked. “No wonder you ended up gay as a daisy.”

I hesitated, not sure how he’d react if I told him I wasn’t entirely comfortable with the designation *gay*. Then I pushed on with my tale. “But that’s just part of it. I was so much younger than my other siblings that I was going to be closer in age to my nieces and nephews than I would be to my youngest sister. Mom and Dad hoped I’d be a bridge between the generations.”

Stone let out a sappy, “Awww,” and I got embarrassed. “Bridging the generation gap.”

“It’s such a pathetically dorky story, and I can’t believe I just went into all of that on our first date.” I covered my face.

“Don’t do that.” He squeezed my fingers, so I looked at him. “I want to see what you look like when you’re feeling shy.”

“How come?”

“You’re beautiful when you get flushed.”

I tried to ignore the overt flirting by redirecting the conversation away from me. “Tell me about your name. Where did Stone come from?”

“I don’t have the interesting backstory you do. My parents wanted a tough name for a boy so I wouldn’t get bullied like my brother Felix did. People made fun of him *because* of his name—Felix the Cat and other asinine things—so

Mom and Dad weren't going to make the same mistake twice. Stone seemed impenetrable to them, which is a joke. 'Dumb as a rock' for starters. When my classmates caught on to the fact that I was gay, I got flack about who I was rather than just my name. At least until my older brothers threatened anyone who bothered me. It was good to have protective siblings."

I nodded in agreement and was about to ask more about his family when the waitress delivered our food. It was with reluctance that I let go of his hand so we could eat.

He fed me a shrimp right from his fingers, and when he mouthed a bite of steak from my fork, my jaw dropped open as I stared at his lips. When I regained enough presence of mind to look in his eyes again, I saw how delighted he was that he had that effect on me. I'd never been more attracted to anyone in my life, let alone that turned on. It was as if some switch had been suddenly flipped inside of me.

"Tell me about your last boyfriend" was his segue from our mutual eye fucking. That doused the flames almost immediately.

I sipped my wine and glanced around the restaurant for several seconds before I was able to look at him again. He looked happy... hopeful.

"I've never had one," I said, and I saw his face fall. It drooped as if I'd delivered a blow to his heart.

"What do you mean?" he asked with such sincerity etched in his brow that I somehow didn't react in a defensive manner at all.

"Uh... my last boyfriend... was... a... girl..."

He looked at me confused. "You mean... are you straight? Curious?"

I immediately shook my head, perhaps a little too vehemently. Then I stupidly added, "No!"

Stone slowly leaned forward and grabbed my hand again. I nearly pulled away because it felt too intimate, but the second I felt the heat from his skin, the last thing I wanted was to let go of him. "Tell me about her?"

"There's not a lot to tell," I heard myself say, and then I shared more than I'd anticipated confessing that night. "She was never *the one*, so I'm a twenty-three-year-old virgin that just realized he was gay or bi or somewhere in the realm of not straight. That's all I really know. I'm not straight, but I've never found the right guy to even... I don't know what I mean except that I've never

met anyone I've wanted to be *with*. I've never met anyone like you." I allowed my forehead to hit the white tablecloth in mortification.

Somehow Stone managed to get the conversation back on track, or at least on a much more comfortable track for the rest of our date. He laughed at all my jokes, even the lame ones, but he made sure to let me know the joke had bombed even if he was able to see something endearing in me when I tried for a punchline I couldn't actually reach.

At the end of the night, we decided to take a quick stroll in the park across from the restaurant, as if both of us were reluctant to say goodbye. We bumped into each other on more than one occasion, and by the tenth or eleventh time, I had a sneaking suspicion this was intentional. At least on my part, it had been. I barely hid my excitement as we walked under a streetlight on our way out of the park and headed toward my car.

He leaned me up against the car's ice-cold surface. He looked at me with those intensely beautiful eyes, and it was almost as if he were sending me secret messages I wasn't sure how to interpret yet. Then he kissed me. When I should've gone right, I went left, and our noses ended up getting all smooshed together for a few seconds before I got my act together.

His lips were soft and smooth, warm even in the chilled winter air. He gave me a slow, damp peck, and I was positive that was all I was going to get. I would've been satisfied because it had been a great kiss despite the non-verbal miscommunication at the start. But then he came back in with a firmer kiss. I felt the scratch of his beard that had grown back since his most recent shave, and the sensation of stubble on my lips lit something up inside of me. I took more control of the kiss and allowed my tongue to drift into his mouth.

Stone moaned, which made me smirk. Then he took a deep breath, wrapped me in his arms, squeezed me tight, and kissed me so intensely I had to fight for my breath. It was his fingers drifting into my hair that brought me out of my oxygen-deprived haze.

Then softer kisses.

The brush of his nose on the tip of mine.

Stone rested his forehead against my own while he caught his breath.

I loved the feel of his breaths washing across my kiss-damp lips and the lemon flavor of his dessert that now lingered on my tongue.

"Good night, Bridge. Drive safely."

“Night,” I managed to say as well as giving him a pathetic wave while he walked away.

It didn't even bug me that he'd shortened my name.

4. Green

Know Thyself

I didn't hear from Stone for a week. Then he traveled over the Christmas holiday to visit his family at a ski resort. He spent most of his time on the slopes and complained to me via text about his awful sunburn. I begged for photos, wondering what his pale skin would look like with some sun, but he refused.

With all the peeling, I look like I have leprosy right now.

Come on. It can't be that bad.

I waited in vain.

When he got back home, he started acting strange.

We'd had a great time at dinner, but he didn't initiate a second date, and any time I suggested something, he already had plans. Or so he said. At first I was confused, but then as I replayed our dinner conversation over and over in my head, I suspected he was leery of my inability to more clearly pin down my recent sexual realizations. I couldn't blame him. It's not as if I presented myself in a great way that night with how I tried to explain my sexuality. I'd been wishy-washy, at best. I seemed ashamed of who I was, at worst. I would've been subtler if I'd arrived for our date with *NEWBIE* printed on my forehead.

But the way he was putting up his virtual hand to keep me at a distance hurt. I was frustrated he so easily found an excuse each time I asked him to do something because I wanted to spend more time with him. We'd had a magical time together—or so I'd thought—and had talked about so many things, including our childhoods, and I'd felt as if we'd made a genuine connection. Then nothing.

I grumbled to Gina about my worries and hurts. She brought movies over one night to distract me, but we didn't watch them despite them flashing right in front of us on my huge television. Instead, I shared with her how I thought I came off during the date: bi-curious, naïve, and insecure.

Before giving up entirely, I texted him. *Breakfast on a Wednesday morning?*

I can't right now, Bridger. This is really bad timing for me.

Okay. I'll stop asking then.

My heart broke a little when he responded with *Thank you*.

I needed to reimagine that evening with him as nothing more than a great date, but it wasn't the only great date I'd ever have. Stone had made it obvious he didn't want more with me than what we were experiencing online, and I didn't want to humiliate myself by pursuing him.

One conclusion that came from my evening with Gina was that I didn't have to stay a newbie. I could still get out there and get to know myself better and try to find a way to be more comfortable in my own skin. From what Stone had shared, he'd been out since high school or possibly even earlier, so his self-knowledge was deeply rooted. He knew what he wanted in a man, and apparently an inexperienced *not straight* guy who didn't fully understand his own sexuality wasn't it, despite how great our evening together had been.

During the coldest part of winter, I started meeting other men I'd been matched with on OkCupid. I tried to analyze how I felt, what I liked, what I hated, and what I hoped would happen again. I wanted to know who I was. On each date, I found out a little more.

Most of the time the dates were filled with innocent flirting that ended up in either a sweet or not-so-sweet kiss at the end of the night. On a couple of the hotter second or third dates with men that seemed like they had true boyfriend potential, I took a risk and went back to their place. We hastily removed our clothes and either jerked or sucked each other. Both men didn't contact me after that, and I did my best not to feel too dejected. I knew that was part of the game before starting to play again. I shouldn't have been surprised.

With each experience my *not straight* status was clarified. Of course, I hadn't been with a woman since this whole sexual awakening, and I felt I had to know.

All it took was one date with an intelligent and beautiful woman whom I had a great time with, but as soon as we kissed, I felt like I was kissing a pet rock. It was probably less exciting than kissing a rock, in fact.

Which simply made me think of Stone. That's who I wanted to be spending time with and dating.

We still chatted whenever we were on OkCupid at the same time, and we'd occasionally text, but neither of us talked about getting together anymore. It was confusing at first, but I did my best to enjoy our conversations. After the

initial uncomfortable awkwardness had worn off, it was easy to see he was a great guy who was now a great friend. On more than one occasion, I let a potential date slip away because Stone and I were lost chatting with each other. I didn't mind.

The conversations we had were varied and interesting, and I felt as if I had so much more in common with him than any of the guys I'd been seeing. It seemed—or felt—as if he were thinking the same thing. But feelings were what got me into this predicament in the first place. That kiss had been perfect, and all the right signals had been sent on our date, but I had to let that go or at least bury the memory so it wouldn't interfere with our friendship.

So we shared news and more information about our lives as well as everyday happenings and funny stories. Then he started talking more about local plays and art shows he'd been to, making recommendations then following up if I'd gone to the event.

I started to suspect he was dating someone because of all of his outings.

Why not me? I wanted to shout.

If we couldn't date, at least we could be friends. I tried to content myself with that. Yet, I wished we could be friends who met in person rather than only online or via text message.

I was pretty sure who I was now, even if I wasn't entirely comfortable in my new skin. Coming out to my parents seemed like something I needed to do, for myself and for them. I wanted them to know about the changes and discoveries I'd recently made. Fresh starts were good, especially in early spring.

Mom and Dad looked nervous as I sat on their couch facing them. Dad fiddled with a worry stone, and I could tell Mom was itching to grab the knitting that sat in a basket beside her chair. She tugged on her long, blonde-grey braid instead.

"I wanted to talk to you about something new in my life. You know how I've never really dated much?"

"Yes," Mom said. Dad scrutinized me and pushed his thick fingers into his grey hair to give himself a quick scratch. I had to get this out there so they didn't have heart attacks from unwarranted stress caused by the anxiety I was creating.

“Well, I figured out I’m not straight.”

“Oh, you’re gay. That’s it?” Mom’s aging face lit up with relief, and she slapped her knees in what looked like delight.

“Not straight,” I corrected in a low voice.

“You scared the bejeezus out of us,” she said over me. “We thought you had cancer or you were going to join the military or something like that. We had no idea it was good news.”

“It’s good news?”

“Compared to what your mother’s mind has conjured up since you called this morning and said you needed to talk to us, this is wonderful news,” Dad said. “So, are you dating someone?”

“I’ve been seeing a few guys recently, but there’s one that I’d like to see more of. He says the timing isn’t right, but we chat all the time. His name is Stone.”

“Tell us all about him,” Mom said as she redirected us into the kitchen. She immediately started pulling food from the fridge, dishing it up on a plate, and microwaving it.

I wasn’t entirely sure why I’d brought up Stone, but my parents knew how my brain worked. I wasn’t the persistent type that went after what he wanted unless it was very important, and years prior, they’d perfected ways to motivate me.

“I like him a lot. We had an amazing date but only one in December. He got weird right afterward. He’s not much of a dater, but we chat about nearly everything under the sun. I’ve gotten mixed messages, and I’m sure I’m sending out some of my own. I’m doing my best to feel satisfied with our friendship.”

“If you like him, you need to go after him,” Dad said. “You need to be more direct and come right on out and ask him. Don’t beat around the bush.”

“That’s right, honey,” Mom said with an over-exaggerated nod. “Some men don’t have a clue about picking up on subtlety. You need to tell him how you feel about him and don’t be shy about it.”

While I ate, I answered all their questions, and they asked a lot. Some were harder to answer than others, especially admitting how Stone and I had met.

They weren't shocked, and they certainly weren't judgmental. They also made me pay attention to how much I liked this guy.

As we talked, they both kept using the word *gay*. I didn't. In fact, I avoided using any label if I could. I didn't understand why I was still so reluctant to take that on, especially after my recent disastrous kiss with a woman. I'd convinced myself the kiss had been bad because we hadn't had sexual chemistry.

Mom left the room to "find something" for me, and Dad took that as his cue to talk to me about the ins and outs of safe anal sex, as if I were a teenager. He made me promise to buy condoms and lube on the way home from their house that day. It was ridiculous, but I figured once a person became a parent they never let that job title go. I didn't mind humoring him as I ate the last few bites of pie Mom had forced on me and sipped at my coffee.

Mom returned with a bag filled with things she insisted I take with me. The blue bag had the yellow equality symbol in the center of it. She told me to wait to look inside until I got home. I hugged and kissed them both, thanking them for the food and the support. I headed to my car.

"We love you just the way you are, gay as can be," Mom said from the front step as she waved. Dad put his arm around her and kissed her cheek.

I loved them just the way they were, too, even if I had no intention of ever using that equality bag in public. When I got home and unpacked it, I saw my mom had probably given me every rainbow item she had in the house. There was a flag, a scarf, some pins, a canvas bag, and a few T-shirts. I shook my head. She was trying to show her support, but I wasn't a walking billboard, and I never would be.

5. Yellow

The Courtship

It had been a hellishly cold winter, unlike anything seen in ages. It seemed as if the entire earth had frozen over, and everyone in Minneapolis wondered if they'd ever see grass growing again. Even a yard full of weeds would've been welcomed.

When I finally saw the robins return in April, I was more than ready for warmer weather. After months of little enjoyable downtime, I needed it. When Gina dumped Tyler, I had to fight to hide my happiness that the guy was gone and my friend was back. We visited all our old haunts and did all our usual things that didn't include dating: grilling together, getting fro-yo for dessert, going to Twins home games, and hiking on local trails.

I'd even stopped going to OkCupid and now only checked the site if I was alerted to a message. I had no energy for dates, at least not the type I'd had in recent months. I was up to dating Stone though, especially after the encouragement I got from my parents. Their advice resonated. If I wanted to go out with him, I had to ask more directly.

But did I still want to? That was the question, wasn't it?

I thought back to how I'd felt in January after being brushed off. It hadn't felt good, but good had come of it. I'd gone out there and found out more about who I was, which I'd needed to do. I felt a hell of a lot more comfortable in my skin than I had in the fall, and all my conversations with Stone were part of that.

Stone and I still talked, but through texts now. That meant our conversations had become somewhat more clipped, and we didn't cover the depth of topics we used to, but instead, we were in contact most days of the week. He found a way to make me feel as if I were part of his daily routine.

What if all his talk of various plays and art shows had been a way to engage me in conversation? I might've been jumping to conclusions, but it could have been an excuse to have something more to talk about or to share an experience. Maybe that would be a good place to start.

I looked online to see if there were any interesting upcoming events, and I saw two comedians I liked who were coming to town. I decided to bite the

bullet and ask Stone if he'd enjoy going with me to either Jim Gaffigan or Lewis Black. I figured it was an easy date to say yes to since there was less expectation of conversation and most certainly no expectation of sex. From what I had gathered about him over the last months, he enjoyed comedy. I didn't know which guy made him laugh more, so I was glad I could give him options.

How about The Magic Flute?

I looked at his text and was surprised. I never would've pegged him as a fan of opera. It was a good surprise.

How about opera and a comedian? If I could go out with him more than once, I was more than up for it.

I'd love to.

After attempting to hash out the details via text, he called me.

"This will be easier by phone."

"You're right," I acquiesced. "We haven't talked since our date, so I didn't want to make *first contact*."

"I'm not the big bad wolf, ya know," he said through a chuckle that sounded forced to my ears.

"I know you're not." I couldn't help but smile. "We haven't had a lot of contact lately, and I didn't want to overstep any boundaries."

"Ah. Is that a considerate way of saying I've been an aloof asshole?"

"Not at all." *Yes*, but I didn't want to say that, at least not right to his face.

"Work has been crazy. My social life has been on fire." He paused, and I hoped he would explain his odd behavior. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Bridger. I kept turning you down because I started seeing someone. You and I had only gone out on one date... It was shitty timing." He cleared his throat.

My gut churned with jealousy, and I could feel my cheeks heating. I took a breath to say something but then stopped. I tried to shake away my anger and dejection and remember the great friendship we'd forged in recent months.

He spoke when I couldn't. "When I went skiing with my family for Christmas, I ran into my ex. We got to talking and... I thought I still loved him despite our past. I'm pretty sure when he saw my new and improved body he thought everything would be perfect now. He promised things would be

different, and I stupidly believed him. I never should've." He sighed, and it sounded self-deprecating. "Anyway, it's been over for a few months, and I needed time to shake it off. I'm sorry for not being one hundred percent honest with you."

There were a thousand words left unspoken.

I'd kept talking to him because he was interesting and funny, not because I was pining after him. Well, mostly. I wasn't going to let my hurt feelings get in the way of us being more than online friends because he wanted to give an ex-boyfriend a second chance. They had history; we only had hopeful potential.

"Thanks for being honest with me. I started to wonder if I'd read more into our evening together than was ever there because of how weird things got."

"Sorry about that. And no, I think we both felt something that night."

"I'm glad that's the case. So... if you're free and open to getting together, if the timing is right now, I'd love to see you again. I've made some... I did some dating of my own, and not one of those guys compared to you. Not even in the same realm."

Why'd I tell him that?

I dropped my head into my palm, and considering the laughter coming through my phone, I had a strong suspicion he'd heard the slapping sound of flesh meeting flesh and knew exactly how embarrassed I was by my admission. Then he got quiet very quickly.

He said in a low voice, "I couldn't get you out of my head either."

"Really?" I sounded as dumbfounded as I felt.

"Yeah, really. I'm glad you asked me to go out with you and never gave up on me, even if I wasn't completely honest until now. I'd love to see you again."

"I think we could be great together."

It seemed I couldn't stop myself from giving my soul away to this guy whether he wanted it or not.

First, we saw Jim Gaffigan, and the next night we attended the opening of *The Magic Flute* at the Minnesota Opera. After both events, we headed to a restaurant and talked until the after-bar crowd filled the place and it got so noisy we could no longer hear each other. When we got home both evenings,

neither of us had had enough. We ended up talking on the phone into the wee hours of the night. I admitted more than I should have, telling him how I'd never felt more at ease with a man before. I thanked him for the amazing dates before letting him go. I'm sure I slept with a smile on my face both nights.

We met for coffee and went out to dinner every few days for nearly the entire month of April, and in May, we went to see Lewis Black together, too. With each date, I found myself falling harder for him. He was as handsome as ever, and I couldn't believe how we never ran out of topics to talk about. It all felt so natural. He'd smile at me in a way that made me feel energized and desired. When we walked around the Chain of Lakes on breezy afternoons and he held my hand, I felt warmth rather than the panic I'd expected from any sort of public display of affection.

"Please, come back to my apartment?" I asked after spending a late-May morning together at The Farmers Market. "I'll whip us up a little lunch."

"All right. I won't say no to food."

We stopped off at the grocery store to pick up a few more ingredients, and before I knew it, we were walking up the stairs to my apartment. He'd never been there before. We were talking passionately about the great cheese we found, which must've alerted Gina to our presence, because she opened her door and greeted us in the hallway.

"Need any help, boys?" she asked in a sassy way.

"Sure." I handed her the bag in my right hand so I could more easily fetch my keys.

"I'm Gina, and you must be Stone."

Stone smiled at her and attempted to shake her hand but was only able to manage a finger shake because of the bags in his hands. "I am. It's good to meet you, Gina. Bridge has told me a lot about you."

"All good, I hope."

"I heard nothing bad."

"Same here."

I stepped into my apartment and took a quick look around to make sure I didn't have dirty laundry thrown over the back of the couch or on the floor. It was clear. Gina led Stone into the kitchen, and they started unpacking the groceries efficiently while they made small talk. I allowed myself to sit back

and watch them. They seemed to like each other, and when Gina excused herself and headed toward the door, she gave me a look showing her approval. One of her eyebrows lifted in a flirty way as she smirked.

“Be safe, boys, and enjoy!” The door clicked shut behind her, and I was somewhat embarrassed to look at Stone again.

“Should I start dicing the onion?” he asked, and I was more than glad to leave Gina’s comments in the dust.

“Sure. I’ll wash the rest of the veggies.”

As we worked together in my kitchen, Stone fed me small pieces of strawberry and cheese. “Stop. I can’t keep eating. You’re filling me up.”

I blushed when my words registered because I *wanted* Stone to fill me in a different way. Then I laughed at the ridiculousness of my thoughts.

“What’s so funny?” Stone asked.

“Nothing. Just... My brain is going places it shouldn’t be going when we’re cooking. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for your thoughts.”

“Dirty thoughts.”

“Ah!” he said as he popped a small piece of cheese into his mouth. He gave me a cheeky, knowing smile as he chewed. “Gina’s words stuck with you too, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Speaking of safe, I was just tested, and everything was negative. When was your last test?”

I couldn’t believe how bold he was about this topic. Online, I was used to being this frank, but not face-to-face.

“I was tested last month, right after we started dating, and I haven’t been with anyone else. We’re dating, right?”

He gave me his big smile and stepped closer, taking over my personal space in such a delightful way. I wrapped my arms around his waist and tugged him in closer. He looked into my eyes and then rubbed the tip of his nose against mine.

“We’re most certainly dating.” His palms rested on my biceps, and I closed my eyes to the warmth of them. He pressed a token kiss to my lips. “Now, tell me about your test results.”

“Everything’s good.” I looked at him as I gave him the news.

“I’m glad.”

“Me too.”

Stone leaned in and gave me a much better kiss then, opening his mouth to me and threading his fingers through my hair. The taste of strawberries, cheese, and Stone was an amazing combination, so I deepened the kiss.

He laughed and slapped me on the ass before pulling away. “We need to finish up, or we’ll waste away.”

“Right. One meal missed and *poof!* We disappear,” I said with some snark.

“You know what I mean. Let’s eat.”

After eating and cleaning up the kitchen, I tugged on Stone’s hand and started leading him... to the bedroom? To the living room? I didn’t know which way to go. I wanted to go to the bedroom.

Stone’s ringing phone stopped me from having to make a decision. He answered as I sat on the couch so he could have a small amount of privacy. He didn’t need me staring at him while he talked. I paged through a magazine and then tossed it aside when I didn’t find anything interesting in it.

“Sorry about that,” he said as he sat beside me after he was done. “Putting out fires at work even when I’m not there.”

“Does that happen a lot?”

“Not really, but the owner of the company is out of the country. All the bigger problems come to me when she’s away.”

“Sounds stressful.”

“It can be, but I enjoy it.” He reached for my hand. “Now, before that call, I think we were headed in a totally different direction than talking about my work. Am I right?”

He didn’t give me a chance to answer, kissing me instead. This wasn’t like one of our usual kisses that I could tell was going to end after a short time. This was more intense. His breathing sped up and so did mine. When he pushed against my shoulder, silently telling me to lie down, I willingly went without a doubt or a moment of hesitation.

This was so much better than anything I’d experienced with anyone else, and I tried to communicate that with my touch. I tentatively explored the

muscles on his back. Then I got braver, squeezing his ass and loving the way he arched into my palms and moaned. He felt wonderful in my arms even if I was nervous. I didn't want to screw this up.

Stone started kissing my neck as he touched my chest through my T-shirt. I wanted more contact, so I reached for my neckline and pulled the shirt over my head. He sat back to give me room, and I suspected to give my chest a slow perusal, considering the way he reached out and touched me.

"You're gorgeous," he said, running his thumbs over my nipples, causing them to respond. My eyes drifted shut as he touched me, but I forced them back open.

"Take your shirt off, too," I whispered. I wanted to see more of his pale skin and to see how much of him was painted with freckles. He complied, and I was thrilled to see he had a patch of red hair in the center of his chest; it was lighter than the hair on his head. I had to touch him, mirroring what he had just done to me, but then I allowed my fingers to drift over the freckles on his shoulders. He must've gotten some sun, but only there. The rest of him was like a carving, pale and smooth.

I pulled him back down to me and kissed him again, taking more of a lead this time. I didn't know where I found the boldness, but I didn't question it. The feel of our naked chests touching was a decadent sensation that had me wanting our pants off, too. I wanted to rut against him, so I unbuckled his belt. Knowing exactly what I desired, he stood, opening his fly and dropping his pants around his ankles.

As he stepped out of them, I asked, "Do you want to go to my bedroom?"

"Yeah."

I nodded, my excitement and nervousness showing through. I refocused by looking down and working on my own pants as I led the way.

I took my underwear off too, even if Stone had chosen to leave his on. I wanted this. I *really* wanted this.

I sat on the edge of my bed and leaned back when Stone came in for another kiss. I was glad he took the initiative. He moved down to suck at my neck and then my nipples. He kissed my stomach, and just when my muscles tensed from his ticklish touch, he sunk to his knees and kissed my thighs.

This was actually happening, but it seemed unreal. I drew myself up to my elbows to watch. He looked at me with those green and tawny eyes and smiled as he kissed up my leg, moving closer to my inner thigh with each kiss.

I was hard as a rock, and pre-come started to slide down my shaft. Stone reached for me and used my natural lube to jerk me off. My head dropped back, and I couldn't contain my gasp of excitement. Then the warm, wet feel of his mouth surrounded me. I let myself get lost in the feel of him.

"Ahhhhh. That feels great."

He moaned, sending scintillating vibrations to all the right spots. I thrust, needing to feel more of his throat around me. He understood my desire and swallowed. That felt unlike anything I had ever experienced.

"So amazing, Stone."

"Scoot up on the bed," he said as he patted my ass. "My knees are killing me." A rag rug over hardwood floors would be painful, so I moved to the middle of the mattress.

Settling between my legs, he lowered his mouth to my cock again. I watched him now, loving the way his lips stretched to accommodate me. He looked and sounded like he was enjoying himself, too, and the way he ran his hands over my torso, groin, legs, and balls made me aware of how lacking all my other sexual experiences had been. This was much more sensual. All encompassing. It wasn't a quick "Get me off!" thing. It felt like *more*.

"I'm close," I warned so he could pull off and jerk me to completion. He didn't. Instead, he looked up at me and kept eye contact while doing amazing new things with his tongue. Then he deep throated me while I came, dragged over the edge of pleasure by the flexing of his muscles.

I panted and felt exhausted despite him doing all the work. He wormed his way up my body with a pleased look on his face and settled his chin on my chest.

"Good?" he asked.

"Far better than good. I feel like you took me to the moon and back."

He laughed. "Did you just make a Savage Garden reference?"

"No. I was actually going for *Guess How Much I Love You*, which suddenly feels like a horrific reference. I doubt any children's author wants to have their book talked about in relation to a blow job."

"I promise I won't tell anyone," he said in a sexier-than-hell whisper as he came in for a kiss that I gladly opened for. I was in a blissful state of exhausted euphoria, but his tongue energized me the more we kissed.

Slowly, I caught my breath, and once I did, I rolled him to his back and kissed down his body, spending a few moments kissing his freckles and sucking at his pale pink nipples. I licked there some more, loving the feel of the hard nipple against my tongue compared to the supple skin around it. His stomach was toned and tight—all that running had paid off. I found myself exploring subtle ridges and valleys I'd never had the opportunity to feel before. Having sex at home with a man, with Stone, was so much better than the quickie sucks and frots I'd experienced with other men. I liked being able to take my time and enjoy his body.

When I got to his groin, I didn't move his dark-blue briefs aside right away. I nosed his cock and balls through the fabric instead and drew in a deep breath, smelling his scent. His pheromones zinged inside me, forcing saliva to pool in my mouth. I had to swallow it away. I'd never reacted to another man's smell this strongly before.

I looked up at Stone and then sat back. "Wow," came out of my mouth, and I didn't want to elaborate when I saw his look of curiosity, so I released his hard cock from the confines of his underwear. It bobbed there for a few beats while I pulled the briefs off completely, and then his hardness hovered above his belly. So hard. Mohs 10, indeed. I could see it move with his pulse. The veins were thick, and I traced them with my tongue.

"Don't tease."

I wasn't, but I wanted to explore all of him. Just to prove him wrong, I took him in as deeply as I could. I was still working on this, so I made up for my lack of technique by using my hand. By the fourth penetration, I felt his pubes tickling my nose. I wanted to get as close as I could. I tried to get deeper yet and ended up gagging myself.

"Slow down, Bridge. No need to overachieve. It feels great already."

I studied his face after that, watching how he responded. When I wanted more of his scent and buried my face in his balls, he laughed at me but then gasped as I licked and sucked at them. He held my hair in his hands, and I followed his lead when he urged me back up to his cock.

He thrust into my mouth then, and I did my best to open up my throat to take him in. Somehow it was easier, and I wondered if that was because he was taking charge. In my previous failed experiments in dating, I'd learned that I liked being bossed around a bit. Having him use my mouth and throat however he wanted made me let go of all of that apprehension about sex I'd carried

around for years. It was as if I was given permission to give in and enjoy it for the first time rather than to try to hold back and stay in control.

I could tell he was close by the way he was breathing and the way his face scrunched up. He was getting more forceful with his hands, too, pulling my hair in an exquisite way.

Stone curled his back and came in my mouth. I swallowed and gently squeezed his cock, making sure I got every drop. I loved this part. I licked him clean and then moved up the bed so I could rest beside him. He kissed my forehead, my nose, and then my lips. Each kiss felt like a thank you, and I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

We readjusted and napped on top of my comforter with his arms around me, covered by a throw blanket. It felt natural to be held by him, and I loved that I was the little spoon.

I was awakened by damp kisses being pressed into the back of my neck, and I thought, *What a spectacular way to wake up. I could get used to this, especially with him.*

I turned to face Stone, and he gave me a sleepy smile and a kiss on the mouth. "I should go. I've taken up your entire day."

"I'm not complaining. Would you like to eat dinner here? We could watch a movie."

He pushed hair back that had fallen across my forehead. "Are you sure? I wouldn't be smothering you, would I?"

I quirked a brow at him. "Where'd that comment come from?"

He shook his head and looked embarrassed. "The past."

"The last word I'd use to describe you is smothering. If I could have you around more often, I would. In fact, can we just skip working and spend all our time together instead?"

He pulled me into a hug and kissed my shoulder. "I don't think that would end well because we both get a lot of satisfaction from our jobs, and we need to be able to buy food. But if you want to spend more time together, I'm game."

I held him close to me until my stomach growled, and then we spent the rest of the day together.

And the night.

We were together a lot after that night, most often at my apartment. He ended up inviting me over to his house one night, and I saw in stark contrast how different our lives were. His place was spacious, immaculate, and it was a *home*, not an apartment. When I slid into his bed, the sheets felt softer than any bedding I'd ever slept on before. The thread count had to be astronomical. I never wanted to leave, though the sheets weren't the reason.

That night Stone climbed on top of me and thrust to his heart's content against my body. While he held our cocks together so we both got maximum pleasure, I let go more. I loved that he took charge, and I showed him my appreciation by making a lot of noise.

After that, we never went further: only frottage, blow jobs, or hand jobs. I wanted him to fuck me, but I wasn't comfortable asking for that. I wanted him to be the one to initiate it even if I was starting to get desperate with the waiting and wanting. Actually, I wanted him to just take me, throw my legs in the air, and have his way with me. I wanted to feel him thrusting inside of me.

I'd experimented with toys at home alone for months, and I knew I was a total bottom. Yeah, I loved having my dick sucked and all that, but I wanted Stone to slide into me and make me submit. Perhaps that's what had always been lacking in my relationships with women; I was expected to take charge. I didn't want to. And I loved the feel of something in my ass. I could jerk myself off any time, but I couldn't satisfy the need to be filled as easily by myself. At least, I didn't want to. I wanted it to be a shared experience. I wanted to share it with Stone.

So I was frustrated we never went further.

Not frustrated enough to ask for it, though.

6. Orange

Missing Pieces

“We should live with each other.”

I couldn't broach the subject of anal sex with Stone, but my brain had no problem blurting out thoughts about us moving in together.

Stupid brain/mouth connection.

We'd been dating for nearly five months. I'd come out to all the important people, but I was still using the *not straight* label. More often, I talked about my boyfriend as a way to out myself. We'd met each other's friends, hobnobbed with everyone in our social circles, been to work parties, and even had a designated drawer for clothes in each other's dressers.

“I love you” had been exchanged at three months. The future had been talked about at four months: we both wanted to get married *to someone*, and kids weren't out of the question. Our friends on both sides thought we were great together, filling in pieces to make one another better, or so several of them had said. Some were jealous of what we had. We had even started blending our social groups.

But five months? That was too soon, wasn't it?

Minus the few months we both dated other people, we had been getting to know each other for nine months. We'd never stopped talking.

“Are you serious?” Stone asked me. “About moving in together?”

I studied his face and saw that he didn't look horrified by the idea. A small smile slipped across his mouth, and his eyes sparkled.

“I didn't mean to blurt it out quite like that, but I've been thinking about it more and more in the last month. What about you?”

“It sounds like something I'd like to do. It would sure make life simpler. I wouldn't be searching for a shirt at my place that's hung up in your closet. I'd get to come home to you every night. I would be able to wake up to your gorgeous face every morning. I think that sounds perfect.”

He pulled me into an embrace I leaned in to. Perhaps my runaway mouth knew better than my brain.

“Maybe I should lose my virginity before we live together.”

He laughed at me. “Haven’t you already? How many times have we made each other come?”

“You know what I mean,” I said as I looked at him with my serious face. Then he nodded.

“Okay, but not tonight, because I’m exhausted and I have to be up early. Tomorrow night. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Saturday night this would happen.

I was nervous all day long. Stone had been called in to the office earlier than expected. Even after all these months together and his patient and varied explanations, I still didn’t understand what he did for his job aside from helping people with their business platforms, but it was much more complex than that.

My mind had been wandering like that for hours, focusing on mundane things and obsessing over them, but then I was ripped back into the reality that I was going to have full-on sex with Stone that night. I hoped I didn’t suck, and even more so, I hoped it didn’t hurt. His dick was bigger than any toy I’d used during masturbation.

I was so nervous I couldn’t eat. I hopped in the shower instead and got ready for him. When he arrived at my place, he showered as well, and then he skipped dinner. He must’ve been nervous too, but I didn’t know why. He’d been doing this man/man sex thing a lot longer than I had. At least he knew firsthand what to expect. And what to do.

Ignoring my damp hair, I lay down on my bed. I was already naked. Earlier, I’d tucked condoms—more than one, just in case—and lube under my pillow for easy access. Stone walked into the room without a stitch of clothing on, and despite my apprehension, my body responded to the sight of him.

He crawled over me as if he couldn’t wait to kiss me. He had to have sensed my fear because he said, “Shhh, relax,” before he kissed me. The kisses lasted a lot longer than usual, too. They were more... passionate, yet almost hesitant. His warm palms roamed over my chest and legs, but he ignored my cock. No pressure was how I took that.

I loved the way he was licking my skin. I relaxed and thrust against his body. Finally, I was going to be able to experience a closeness with Stone that was completely unique to me.

"I can't wait to have you inside me." I sounded desperate, but I *was* desperate for him.

"What?" he said as he reared back. His face was hard to read at first, but then he scrutinized me, his brows furrowing. "I don't top."

"What did you say?"

"I'm not a top. I don't top."

"At all?"

"No." His answer was so definitive. "Exclusive bottom here."

I sat up and hugged my knees. "Me too. I mean... I've been imagining us together for months, but only with me bottoming."

He scooted over and sat. He looked defeated. I felt that way too. Had we finally found something we couldn't work through? Was this the sticking point that would end our relationship?

"So what do we do?" I asked. My stomach clenched, and I was very grateful I hadn't eaten since lunch.

"I don't know. Honestly, I don't. I mean, this is why I ended up breaking up with Garth. He wanted me to top him after two and a half years of me bottoming, and he pushed hard. Too hard. And he wouldn't ever let it go. He said he'd changed when we got back together, but he hadn't. I... I don't know what to say."

I sat there naked on my bed feeling ashamed—rejected, in truth. He didn't want me, at least not like that. Sex was supposed to be a relationship-enhancing experience, but it seemed this was turning into a relationship *ending* one instead. Sex had never been our focus, but this was a shock.

"Considering how much we've shared with each other, how did we not figure this out until now?" I asked.

He grimaced. "I'm not sure except to say that most of our conversations weren't about sex, they went a hell of a lot deeper. Neither of us is exactly sex-obsessed. We talk about more important things. Sex is rarely the first thing on my mind." He shrugged and looked defeated. "And when we first started

chatting on GaySpeak, it was about my foot, for God's sake. I used to boldly share that I was a bottom on dating sites, but it caused more trouble than it was worth. I was sick of talking with men who treated me like an expendable commodity to use then discard, so I removed that from my profile."

"And I wrote versatile on my profile because I didn't know yet. Now I do. I love it when you pin me down and I can submit to you. I don't want to top. The thought of it scares the living crap out of me," I admitted.

"Why does it scare you so much?" he asked as he scooted closer and pushed the hair out of my eyes. He looked at me with such tenderness that it made my heart hurt. I didn't want something like this to come between us, but I didn't know how to work around it either.

"I don't want to hurt you. And I'm not sure I want that sort of responsibility either, to make sure all your needs are met. What if I can't satisfy them? I don't know what to do. I've never had anal sex before or even sex with a woman, so you know I'm going to blow like a teenager if I do manage to get inside you without causing you pain."

Stone looked starry-eyed.

"What's that face about?"

"You *inside* me."

"God. What are we gonna do?"

"Fingers. Toys. Tongues," he suggested with a hopeful half smile.

"Or I could try." I looked down at my limp dick and gave it a few tugs.

"I don't want you to feel pressured to do something you don't want to."

I saw his sincerity. He'd been pressured by his ex, after all.

"I'm scared, but if I never try, how will I know, right? Did you ever try?"

He nodded. "With the first few boyfriends I had. I didn't see what the big deal was about sex until I bottomed. Then I understood better."

He leaned forward and kissed me, and my body started responding again. I could try, even if this wasn't at all how I thought the night would go. Stone didn't have to work too long before I was hard again, so I reached for my supplies and made a move to open the condom wrapper.

He pulled the package from my fingers and set it aside. I took his cue and realized I still had to get him ready. I was a true novice.

I can do this, I mentally encouraged myself. I'd dreamed of these things being done to me enough times, so it wouldn't be too much of a leap to do them to him. Kissing down his chest, I closed my eyes, searching for that kernel of my toppy self that had to be hidden inside somewhere.

I sucked him and mouthed his balls. I smelled him, and as usual, his scent awakened something primal. Like I'd always hoped he'd do to me, I pushed on the backs of his thighs, and he easily curled his spine, exposing his ass. I opened my eyes and looked. If he was going to so freely offer his body, I had to be brave enough to look.

His hole was light pink, just a shade darker than his nipples, and he was totally hairless. I wondered if he'd done that for me or if this was natural. He wasn't a hirsute man. It was possible. I'd never touched or looked at his asshole before.

"Hey," Stone said in a low voice. "Look at me."

I did, and he gave me that beautiful smile. Somehow, I relaxed. I didn't break eye contact as I leaned down and licked him. I hadn't known what to expect at all when it came to rimming, but it wasn't that. He was almost sweet tasting, and the feel of his pucker under my tongue felt familiar, like a kiss. I pulled back, worried I wasn't doing anything right.

"It feels good," he said.

Undaunted, I tried again, this time running my tongue over him in different ways to see what technique he liked best—if you could call my naïve attempts at pleasuring him a technique. I kissed his ass cheeks and his pucker, and then I licked some more, feeling him open up to me. Pressing the tip of my tongue inside him, I wished I was the one getting this treatment, but that didn't stop me from putting all my effort into my attempts to please him and to bring my camouflaged top out of hiding.

The sounds he was making, moans and heavy breaths, made me feel accomplished and happy despite my inexperience. He enjoyed what I was doing, which made me try harder. I was anxious, so I put extra attention into sensations.

I tongue fucked him, sliding in and out and enjoying the silky skin. I focused on his taste and scent. I used my hands to get closer to him, to feel his warm skin, to make him feel loved. Before I was fully cognizant of it, I was trying to get in as far as I could, and I nearly sprained my tongue. I suspected eating would be painful tomorrow.

Stone tapped my arm with the bottle of lube, so I sat up, took it from him, and drizzled a little on my fingers. I'd fingered myself a lot and had been fingered a time or two, but I'd never done this to another man. I took care to watch his face to see if I was messing up, but he seemed to enjoy it as I pumped in and out of him, adding a third finger when I guessed he was ready. I didn't really know if he was, but he didn't object to the extra intrusion. After all, I had to get my cock in his ass, and that was larger than my three fingers combined.

I pulled out and hesitated. He must've read my mind.

"You really don't have to."

"I want to try."

"Okay."

I watched as he put a drop or two of lube on the tip of my dick, and then he rolled a condom down me like it was second nature. He looked in my eyes as if I had made his day. I didn't want to disappoint him. I was nervous as hell, positive I was going to fail. I didn't want to lose this man I'd fallen for because of something as arbitrary as sex *roles*, especially when we had both managed to go this many months without having anal sex and both felt satisfied (for the most part) with everything else we'd done.

I squeezed lube on him and watched it slide down his crack, catching the lowest drop with my cock before sliding up. I played with my head at his entrance, allowing myself a few moments to get used to the sensation. I didn't want to blow in a matter of seconds.

Licking my lips, I gazed at him. I wanted this to happen in a conscious way, not with me feeling sex-drugged. He reached for my hand and threaded our fingers together. Suddenly, I felt more grounded.

I allowed just the head of my cock to slide into him and out again. When I did it a second time, I looked down and watched. I went deeper with each thrust, and Stone squeezed my fingers like his ass squeezed my cock. Retreating, I made sure I wasn't hurting him.

"No, just go a little slower. It's been awhile. Ease in a little at a time. Steady."

He talked to me in his deep voice as I tried to do what he'd asked. It helped. I focused on what he was saying, or at least his tone, and before I knew it, I was all the way inside him. Looking up, he nodded and smiled in a lazy, satisfied way.

I pulled back and gave an experimental thrust and another and another, each time lengthening my stroke. He was tight around me. I focused on moving my hips in a nice rhythmic motion. Out of nowhere, I thought of the salsa dancing lessons Gina had talked me into. She let me quit after five sessions because my hips refused to move like that. I worried they were too stiff now, as well.

“A little harder?” Stone asked, and I tried to satisfy him. He seemed to be enjoying himself. He tugged on our joined fingers, inviting me to bend down. “Suck my nipples,” he begged.

I tried, but I had to stop my thrusting for several seconds until I found my rhythm again. He gripped the sheets at his side, and then he reached for me, kneading my ass with both hands and pulling me deeper. He was showing me what he wanted, and I kissed him with gratitude.

He grunted as I continued to thrust, harder than I ever would've dared do without his encouragement. I felt his feet and legs shifting as he bent his knees. That's when he really started making noise. It was beautiful and so was the way he arched his neck. His lips puffed out with each breath, making them even more kissable. He made a hungry noise.

I must've been stroking right over his prostate. I kissed him again, but he needed the personal space to breathe instead. His head thrashed from side to side as he squeezed my ass so hard I couldn't do anything except press the full length of my cock inside him. I considered how to jack him and keep up the intensity in my hips when his muscles contracted erratically around me while he came. As the spasms dampened and slowed, he reached for me and pulled me into a tender kiss. His entire body was loose now.

“That was perfect. Are you sure you've never done that before?”

“I'm positive.”

He shifted, and my cock slipped out of him. He hissed. I sat back and looked down at myself. So did he. I wasn't hard, and the condom tip hung there empty.

“Didn't you come?”

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“I thought you did.”

“Not even close.”

“And you were afraid of having a teenage moment?”

I laughed in a pathetic way.

“So, what do you want me to do to help?”

I tugged the condom off. Using a towel I'd set on the bed earlier, I wiped off the leftover lube. Stone reached over and stroked me, but that wasn't what I wanted at all.

Instead, I crawled toward my bedside table and found my favorite dildo, the one that hit me in just the right spot. When I handed it to Stone, he looked at it a few seconds and then bit the inside of his cheek. I didn't know what that meant.

“Lie down,” he said. He lubed a finger and started rubbing it on me, easing my body open so I could take the dildo. I tried not to be disappointed that he hadn't used his tongue first. When he hit my prostate, I forgot all about that and used him to find the pleasure I'd always had such a hard time finding on my own.

To have his touch, which was unpredictable compared to my own, was wonderful. He curled his fingers and used a cadence that left me wondering what was coming next. When he lubed up my dildo, I was more than ready.

“I'm gonna fuck you so good,” he said in a growl. I saw a side of Stone I hadn't seen before. Had he been holding back with me? Why? No matter what, I liked it, and so did my cock. I was hard again.

“Yes. Please,” I begged in desperation.

He put the tip in, twisting the dildo left and right. He was getting the lube spread around. Then he pressed the toy into me in a methodical way. He kissed my stomach, then my balls, even taking time to lick and suck them. Then he deep throat me.

But it was the fake cock in my ass that was really getting me off.

Stone sat up and grimaced. “Man, lube tastes horrid. We're buying flavored shit if this is how we're going to have sex from now on.”

I laughed and bent my knees so I could rest the soles of my feet on the bed. He hovered over me and talked in his low voice. Dirty words spilled out. My eyes drifted shut, and I chased the sensation, coming down on the fake cock over and over, pretending it was his. “Take what you want from me,” Stone said, and that's when the pleasure started curling deep inside me. A few more thrusts of the dildo was all it took before I was coming, every muscle in my body getting in on the action.

I didn't need to be sucked or jerked off as much as I needed something in my ass for an amazing orgasm like that. Nothing compared.

So where did that leave us? I couldn't even come when I topped.

This was our watershed moment.

7. Red

Seeking Answers

Stone spent the night with me after our Saturday night of experimental sex and went to put out more fires at work the next day. I got the typical text at eleven in the morning, asking me how my day off was. I responded like always.

But he didn't come over that evening and there wasn't an invitation to come over to his place, even though we usually ate dinner together on Sundays. I tried to reason the coincidence away.

He'd had a long week.

He'd had no real weekend.

He was probably tired.

Gina came over after she supposedly heard anguished music coming from my apartment. I suspected she'd been spying on me through her peephole though. I forgave her when she showed up with key lime pie.

"Text him, stupid," she said after digging out my worries. Apparently, my misery was written all over my face. I also knew to do what she said.

Are we all right after last night's sobering surprise?

I read my message one more time to see if I sounded as pathetic as I felt. Did I sound too needy?

"Send it," Gina said.

"Fine!" I pressed the screen on my phone and waited for that ubiquitous sound signifying an outgoing message. It was off.

"You guys are great together. You love each other. Anyone who's seen you together can see that."

I knew she was trying to make me feel better, but what she said was making it worse.

"Two bottoms in love. How will that work? Neither of us is ever going to get what we want from the other. Do we start inviting tops over to fuck us? Do I watch him get fucked by another man, knowing I can't get off that way and wishing I could so I'd be enough for him?"

She looked at me with sympathy, so I threw a pillow at her face.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

“Okay. No pity. Tough love then.” She cracked her knuckles and then shook out tension from her shoulders. “You could invite some toppy guy over who fucks you both, or you could try again. If it still doesn’t work after a few tries, you get creative with toys. There are a lot of gay men who don’t ever have anal sex, ya know.”

“But am I okay being one of those? I’m not entirely sure what I’m missing because I’ve never had it, but Stone knows. Isn’t that setting us up for failure?”

Gina squinted, looking like she was thinking hard. “I don’t know. But it’s just sex. You guys have never been desperate to jump each other’s bones. You’re not sex maniacs. You held off for ages.”

“I don’t want to hold back anymore. I love the way I feel when I submit to him.” I looked away because I didn’t want to see her reaction to my words.

“How have you submitted to him without him... fucking you?” Her voice was cautious.

“He kissed me first. The way he takes charge. He sometimes holds me in place while he blows me. And I like not knowing what’s coming next. Jerking off or playing with my dildo, I always know what I’m going to do. There are no surprises.”

“But you didn’t know what Stone was going to do, did you?”

“No,” I admitted.

“Sex is only a part of this relationship, and it’s never been your sole focus. You wanted to fall in love and make a connection with someone. You did that. You both did. Don’t let the sex, even if you guys never have any sort of penetrative sex again, get in the way of your love for each other. And yes, I know how much I sound like a romantic dork right now, so don’t even try to tease me.” She slapped my thigh playfully.

I allowed her words to roll around in my head, and then I recalled what Stone had said last night. He said something about how we would have sex “from now on.” That didn’t sound like the end, did it?

Not to me.

His text before bed didn’t sound that way either.

We're more than all right. I missed you today.

Yet I still remained on alert.

Stone was a harried mess because of the stress in his job the next week. I suspected his tension had less to do with work and had a hell of a lot to do with our new revelations. I'm sure his past relationship's end was zooming through his mind. How could it not be?

I didn't know how his relationship with his ex had worked, but avoidance seemed to be Stone's way of dealing with things today. It was mine, too. I hated conflict, outrageous emotions, and the thought that we might actually be at a crossroads, despite Gina's romantic notions of love.

Over the weekend, Stone had to travel for his job. It had been planned for weeks, so I knew he wasn't running away from me. Even so, as I dropped him off at the airport, I felt melancholy when he kissed me goodbye.

When we saw each other the next week, we finally had a serious talk.

"Moving in together might not be the best idea right now," Stone started.

May as well get right to the point, I thought as my chest ached.

"Who knows if we'll work things out in a way where we'll both be happy with the results. What if we don't? We could turn into roommates with a lot of bitter feelings in the way of making a satisfying life. Right?"

I had to agree. He was being logical and most likely speaking from experience, so I nodded.

"Is that all you're going to give me?" he asked. "No commentary? You give me commentary on everything we've ever talked about."

I took a deep breath and palmed the back of my neck, working out the tension in my muscles. I didn't know how to say this without sounding like I was whining. I carefully considered my words for a minute or two without any more pressure from him.

After taking a deep breath, I looked Stone in the eye and tried to put away the defensiveness that was brewing strong right beneath the surface.

"More than anything, I feel unwanted and rejected. Like I'm not worth going outside your comfort zone for."

His face pinched together in an unfamiliar way.

“If I’m going to be with you...” I pushed on. “Well, I was hoping it would be for a long time. But if we’re going to be together, I want to experience *everything* with you. The last thing I want is to crave this so much that I meet up with a stranger just so I can know what it’s like. I’m not asking... Okay, maybe I am asking you, but I’m not going to force you to do anything.” I dropped my head in my hand because this wasn’t coming out right at all. “I’m not sure what I’m trying to say.”

He squeezed my forearm and forced my hand away from my face. “We’ll sort out the semantics later. Just tell me what’s going on inside your head.”

“I don’t want to cheat. I guess it comes down to that. I’m a commitment guy, and I want to be with someone who feels the same way about relationships. I’m afraid if I never get this desire satisfied to be taken and fucked into oblivion, that I’ll feel like I’m missing out. And not just physically. I feel like you don’t want *me*. Like I’m not enough for you. The truth is, I’m not. I’m a bottom, and you want a top. I’m never going to be what you need me to be, and that terrifies me because in every other facet of our lives so far, you are my match. Our sexual desires are the only things that don’t fit together like a Ravensburger puzzle. I want *us* to fit.”

Stone pulled my fingers up to his mouth and kissed them. He closed his eyes and breathed me in. He looked mournful. “I never realized I was hurting you this much. I wasn’t rejecting you, but I can see why you’d feel that way. I’m sorry.” When he looked up at me, he had tears in his eyes.

“I’ll never force you or try to talk you into topping. I couldn’t. But I don’t know where that leaves us,” I admitted.

“Me either.”

We had very little contact for ten days. Nearly a week and a half. We both needed time alone to sort out our thoughts.

It about drove me crazy.

I had no idea how much a part of my life Stone had become until he was suddenly not around at all. I’d become used to talking to him about my day and venting my frustrations and stresses his way. I missed listening to him do the same thing.

I tried talking to Gina. It was different. Somehow best friend status had transferred from Gina to Stone without me even realizing it.

She tried her best to help me come to terms with the possibility that Stone and I would break up. I didn't want to. He knew more about me than anyone ever had. I told him secrets I'd never allowed Gina to know, and he read me so easily.

He made me into a cliché because I was better with him, and I didn't give a shit that I was now a romantic fool.

The rain was coming down hard on day eleven. It was the third weekend in September, hot, humid, and I'd taken a week's vacation from my job. I was either going to go crazy or call Stone to pathetically beg him not to break up with me. After a dissatisfying cup of coffee, I decided to get out of the apartment so I didn't do anything stupid before I had a chance to consider exactly what I was going to say to him. I knew I had to say something.

I packed, then drove. I didn't want to be in the city waiting around for him. I felt claustrophobic. I wanted wide-open spaces, so I headed toward my mom and dad's lake cabin an hour away. Rain beat down on the windshield as I got closer, and the inside of the windows steamed up. I turned on the air conditioning.

I got soaked making my way from the car to the cabin. It smelled musty, so I turned on the fan to get the air moving, and I dried myself off. I read a little, then turned on the television, and almost immediately turned it off when the poor reception made me irrationally pissed. I attempted to write down the things I felt I needed to say to Stone depending on whether we were going to continue or end our relationship. Within five minutes, I had several pieces of crumpled notebook paper surrounding me. What I really wanted to do was go out to the water and take in the view.

Opening the front closet, I dug around for an umbrella so I wouldn't get soaked again. The only one I could find was a large rainbow one. I had no idea why I still had such an issue with this symbol, but I did. I didn't like the assumptions people made when they saw rainbows, mostly because they jumped to conclusions about my sex life. Initially, it had been because I didn't have a sex life, but now, it was because I had a mismatched one.

My stupid sex life. Why are we making such a big deal about this? And why does sex have to be such a major focus?

It was a major focus because of Stone's last relationship and because of my inexperience.

I headed for the shore, opening the colorful umbrella the moment I was outside. The few cool raindrops that hit my bare arms felt good on my skin. The lake was beautiful because of the state of the sky: tempestuous. I looked out over the water and contentedly sighed. Probably the first time I'd sighed in anything other than frustration in days, possibly weeks. My mind drifted to everything that had happened since the night Stone and I found out we were both exclusive bottoms.

I didn't want to break up. I was positive about that, but staying together meant I'd have to take a risk. I'd have to put my heart on the line and be direct like my dad had told me. No more subtlety. Somehow, I'd have to find the man inside me that Stone wanted, the one who knew how to take charge of things. I wanted him to do the same.

I took a step into the water. It was cold, and the shock to my body was exhilarating, so I took a few more. I didn't care that my shoes and jeans were wet. The chill seemed to help give my jumbled thoughts some much-needed clarity. The raindrops started to dissipate, but I was thankful for the umbrella protecting me.

I knew what I needed to do, and no amount of planning would make it better.

Conceived under a rainbow of daisies; becoming a man under a rainbow umbrella. I can do this.

I called Stone. He answered, but his voice sounded wary.

"I love you through and through," I said. My voice cracked, but I swallowed, determined to keep my wits about me. "I love things about you that I've hated when other people did them, like when you laugh so hard that you gasp for breath and snort. You fold towels all wrong, you never hang your coat on a hanger, and you think the best way to organize your movie collection is to throw them all in that huge basket that sits on a shelf. How do you find anything in there? I'll tell you. You've allowed me to come into your life and sort things. You've certainly organized things in *my* life. You made me see who I really am. I don't want this to be a crossroads that separates us like it so easily could. Yes, there's a divide in what we want sexually, but can't this simply be a turning point for us, one that gives us an opportunity to grow closer? Can't we walk down a new road together rather than trying to follow some map that doesn't make sense to either of us?"

Stone swallowed loudly. "I don't want to lose you. You're my soul mate."

“Can we make this work?”

“How?”

“Sex has never been the ultimate with us, so we can continue with what we’ve been doing all along. But when we want to spice things up a little and have those *other* needs met, let’s turn into kinky bastards and play with all sorts of things in the bedroom,” I threw out without thought. “The only thing I need when it comes to sex is to know I’m wanted... craved.”

“You are, Bridge. I want you so badly it hurts sometimes. This last week without you... It almost destroyed me. Mostly, I miss the way you feel in my arms and the way you make my life more enjoyable. I love *you* through and through. Come to my place tonight. I need to hold you while we talk.”

I was there in less than an hour, willing to stay for a week if I was invited.

8. White

Finding Pieces

I was a sweaty mess. Stone had been filling me with a dildo while he sucked me. I was doing the same for him, and there were several occasions where we both lost track of what we were supposed to be doing because of the pleasure we were each experiencing. Neither of us complained.

He moaned around me, and I came. He panted against my groin as I worked to bring him the same ecstasy. It wasn't going to be long.

We'd found a work-around or seven. Much of the time, as we had discovered over the past months, we found we were content with less. We both loved to kiss for eons. We spent most nights cuddled close on the couch or in bed with no urge to get sexual, but then there were times we wanted more. When one or both of us wanted an intense orgasm, toys were our first choice.

We discovered the thrill of trying to give pleasure to each other without removing one item of clothing. Then at other times, we'd crave face-to-face naked intimacy while wanting to be fucked, so we used dildos that had a suction cup on the bottom. Any smooth, hard surface, and we were in business. That didn't happen a lot, but when it did, it was the tender touches and the sense of connectedness that we both truly enjoyed.

"Com—" he almost managed to get out as I swallowed everything he gave me. He laughed then released a contented sigh. I popped into the bathroom and cleaned the toys while he recovered.

I loved the way I could make his body all loose and relaxed afterward. I came back into the room and lay with him. He was the little spoon this time. I wrapped him in my arms and kissed his neck until he practically purred.

We hadn't been insatiable. I made it sound like we were having sex all the time. If anything, I'd say we were in a honeymoon period and had been nearly all winter. But when you're forced to stay inside because of the cold and snow, what better way to spend time? We definitely weren't afraid to try new things.

Like the anal plugs I brought home in the spring. We slid them into each other before we went out for the evening with our friends. That was hot in and of itself and ended with an amazing kissing session that almost made us late.

Gina had chosen a noisy restaurant, much to my delight. No one would hear a thing when I...

I reached into my jacket pocket and turned on the remote control to low. Stone's back straightened so he had perfect posture, and his eyes nearly bugged out of his head. Then he looked at me. If looks could kill but then thank and then caress... Luckily, the rest of our friends were deep in conversation, so they didn't have a clue I had turned on the vibrator in Stone's plug. Only Gina noticed something was out of the ordinary, but after a sharp look from me, she ignored what was happening right in front of her.

I shut off the remote and reached into my other pocket, passing my remote to him so two could play this game. He stared me down. The plug already felt amazing on its own, and I loved that I was out in public with this spectacular little pleasure happening without a soul knowing about it aside from Stone. Then it started buzzing.

I was surprised my eyes didn't roll into the back of my head and that I didn't moan out loud. I wanted to rock to feel the sensations everywhere, but then he turned it off. He could probably read my desires because he gave me a few more seconds of delight before he shut it off again. Then the appetizers arrived.

We were kind to each other, not controlling the devices for too long or so often that we couldn't enjoy the rest of the evening. But we did leave the restaurant with a completely different satiation than our dining companions.

That was the night he fucked me for the first time, too. He pulled my plug out once we got to my place and immediately started licking me. There was little foreplay, or perhaps a whole lot if you considered all of dinner as our foreplay. He was aggressive and horny and dominating. Some of his reaction might've been frustration for messing with him in such a public place, but I loved how he took control. I loved how he felt inside me.

More than anything, I loved how *he* made me feel.

Him.

Stone.

He made me feel loved, appreciated, wanted, needed. None of that had to do with sex, I realized that night as he slept behind me.

"I'm sorry," I told him the next morning while we were both still groggy and waking up. "I thought the plugs would be a fun surprise, something new. Getting you to fuck me wasn't my intention in using them last night."

“I know.”

“I was just trying to think outside the box, to make things more exciting and spontaneous.”

“You mastered spontaneous,” he said through a laugh as he shook his head.

“I’m really sorry.”

“You’re acting as if you violated me.”

“I feel like I coerced you. That’s what I’m worried you’re thinking, at least,” I admitted.

“No,” Stone said as he leaned in and then kissed me. “Not at all. I fucked you because I wanted to. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, but I’ve been waiting for something to spark my desire enough to take charge. I guess I needed batteries.”

I laughed loud and hard. “Well, now we know what works if we want to go there again.”

If we didn’t, I thought I’d be okay with that. Considering ninety-eight percent of the time we were together we were doing anything but having sex, I refused to allow the other two percent to dominate my life.

Even if having him fuck me was one of the most amazing things I’d experienced in my life.

I knew we were well into the serious couple zone when we bought bicycles together. They weren’t the same color, but they were the same style. I insisted on a very different helmet than the one he chose for himself. No need to look like twins.

Then we started training for a marathon together. Me, running. I didn’t run unless it was on an elliptical, remember?

I was obviously smitten.

That was easy to admit, especially to Gina. She heard more than an earful and recognized how new this was for me. I didn’t just love Stone, I was crazy for him. I was willing to risk my knees so I could spend more time with him. Marathon training was time consuming. It was also painful and exhausting. Humiliating too, because I thought I was in shape until I was summarily proven wrong in our very first week of training.

Stone lived for the runner's high. I lived for the moment I could sit down on a comfortable chair after a cool shower. But I loved how he pushed himself to go places he never thought he could. It felt good to do that myself.

We didn't spend every waking moment together, though. Both of us spent time doing individual projects or hung out with our friends, even if we thought about each other constantly while we were apart.

I hoped we never turned into that couple that was so sickeningly sweet that people no longer wanted to hang out with us. So far we'd avoided that sort of feedback.

Yet our lives were merging closer each day.

By the next summer, we had managed to negotiate a comfortable sexual relationship that was no longer in that frenzied honeymoon phase. We'd settled into a relaxed way of being around each other. We still kissed like crazy, but we talked, debated, traveled together, and socialized with our friends much more.

Conversation had always been the cornerstone of our relationship, and it still was. We'd been talking most of the day away as he showed me all around his childhood home. He'd grown up on an idyllic farm that overlooked the Mississippi River Valley. I'd met his parents before, but this was going to be the most time I'd spent with them at once. Stone and I had taken vacation time during the same week, like a married couple did.

"Come on. I want to show you something." He reached for my hand and tugged. I easily followed.

We were walking among tall grasses that felt a lot like natural prairie. I wondered where he was leading me. To an old tractor? To a field? It ended up being a cliff where we could see the river sparkling below.

"It's beautiful," I said. Everywhere I looked were green and gold fields in various stages of maturity. The Mississippi looked like a sparkling field nestled in the valley. I leaned in and kissed Stone's cheek. "Thanks for bringing me here."

"I'm glad you could come. I'm not sure you'll be thanking me tomorrow once all my siblings have taken over the house. You thought twenty questions from my parents was bad. Just you wait for my brothers and sisters. They can be ruthless."

I smiled. "I'll answer a million questions if it means I get to be with you."

He bumped his shoulder against mine and then pulled me in for a hug. "I would too."

"Really?" I withdrew so I could look at him.

"Really."

He clasped my hand, and we walked along the bluff's edge. I glanced at the water every now and then but was satisfied with our silence. I was content with nearly everything I had with Stone.

He cleared his throat in a nervous way, and I stopped so I could watch him. Right away he knew I was on to him, so he started talking. "I know we haven't talked about it for a long time, but I'd really like you to move in with me. I think we're ready. What do you think?"

I answered him with a kiss and then nodded, brushing my nose against his.

The only shitty part about moving in with Stone was that I no longer lived across the hall from Gina. There had been tears the day I moved, but many promises to spend a lot of time together. It wouldn't be as simple as crossing the hall and knocking on her door when I wanted my friend, but I was excited about starting that future with Stone we'd talked about so long ago.

I was in his place by October, right when my lease was up and nearly two years after we'd started talking online. We'd been officially dating nineteen months, which was a lot better than five months when I'd first mentioned living together.

We knew each other better, and I knew myself as a gay man now. I was now willing to put on that label as well as both a rainbow and an equality sticker on my car, thanks to all of Stone's and my parents' patient interventions. It was a great feeling to not shrink away from questions about my sexuality anymore, but to have a definitive answer.

Stone and I took a few weeks to settle into our new life together, but it wasn't difficult, at least not as challenging as everyone around us warned that it would be. There were no ridiculous fights over where furniture went or how I folded towels. They were going to be folded my way, and he had no problem making that concession. It was, again, easy. It felt like we were made for each other.

Yet I held my breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. It had to.

When October easily transitioned into November and then December, I let my guard down. Maybe we really were as good together as all our friends and family had always thought.

I felt blessed. When I saw his dark red hair, the cleft in his chin, and his huge smile, I *knew* I was blessed. It wasn't just a feeling.

It was more.

9. Gold

The Future

It was five years ago when two bottoms fell in love and discovered they were sexually incompatible, at least according to most people's standards. Not ours. We discovered many ways to love on each other, both sexually and non-sexually. We learned to give and take, to put our immediate desires aside for a moment while we satisfied another's.

On the nights Stone held me close, releasing damp breaths against my neck, I felt nothing but love. I rubbed the bottoms of my feet on the top of his until the winter chill was driven away. He'd whisper words of love and comfort into my skin or sing to me until I fell asleep. That wouldn't go away any time soon, or so I hoped.

There were still times when we allowed hands to wander and we'd reach for favorite toys. We tasted each other, sucked each other, and licked our ways into dark and secret places to bring pleasure. He loved to get me begging. I loved to hear him whine.

A cry pierced the dark, and Stone groaned as he rolled off me. "It's your turn."

We had to be a lot quieter these days. Or a lot quicker.

"Fine." I pulled jeans on and made my way into the living room. Our puppy, Gabby, bounded out of her kennel, tail wagging in delight. She lived up to her namesake. "She's playing us," I said loud enough so Stone could hear me.

"Why do you think I said it was your turn?" he asked.

I hooked her up to her leash, took her outside, and waited while she took care of business. She was a pokey one. She was also nocturnal and cried at every little peep.

Rather than putting her back in her kennel, I brought her to bed. She was excited to see Stone and tried to lick all over his face in greeting before she created a nest for herself in the bedding. He somehow managed to stay mostly puppy slobber free.

"We made a real serious commitment now, didn't we?" Stone looked at me, and his eyes gleamed.

I pushed back hair from his forehead and leaned in for a kiss. He opened to me, so I lingered and let myself taste him. “We sure did. Having second thoughts?”

“No. I’m glad we did this. That means I’m guaranteed to have you around for at least... twelve, thirteen more years.” He reached for my hand and touched my ring, spinning it once.

“Or longer. Yep, I think a lot longer.”

We instinctively wove our fingers together until our wedding bands knocked, and I stared into his enchanting eyes. He gave me a look of pure love that made me see I would always be enough for him.

“I’m glad I gave you my heart,” I whispered.

He brushed his nose against my cheek. “It fits so beautifully with mine.”

The End

Author Bio

Posy Roberts writes about real life, particularly men in love who face both mundane and extraordinary circumstances. Her characters have to find a way to make their relationships thrive, even when all hope seems like it is gone. Families are often at the heart of her stories, and she's not afraid of digging into some deep psychological issues where characters are challenged with difficult choices. She lives in the land of 10,000 lakes with her husband and daughter. When Posy isn't writing, she enjoys karaoke, hiking, and singing spontaneously about the mundane, just to make normal seem more interesting.

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