

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

SEE YOU SMILE

Dawn Sister

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

SEE YOU SMILE

By Dawn Sister

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

A young man with slightly disheveled, light blond hair sits, balanced precariously on a balcony rail in dappled sunlight. He is wearing only a towel and is looking at and reaching down to something behind him. His chest and stomach are smooth and well-toned. He is slim and not overly muscular. His hair is covering his face hiding his expression, adding an air of mystery. There is a hint of a smile on his lips.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've watched him for weeks. I feel like a creep, I hide behind the plants on my balcony. This young man could be my son. He is always so earnest, careful and alone. Does he not have friends? Why does he seem so introvert? I want to see him smile, I want to see him laugh.

Something isn't right and I want to know it.

Yours, the mature man from the apartment next door

I'd love this to be a May/October romance with a HEA; the young man is deaf. A bit of pain is okay in the beginning but I really want a lot of humor, perhaps also based on the age gap.

Sincerely,

Sunne

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: age gap, disabilities, humorous, over age 40, hurt/comfort, writer, family drama, switch/versatile, widower

Word Count: 73,483

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Thank you, I love you all.

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Chapter One

Stalking is Addictive (and Creepy)

I'm Jake and I'm a creep.

I have to admit it, because that is halfway to recovery right? Like Alcoholics Anonymous: Hi I'm Jake and I'm an alcoholic?

Well okay, not quite what I'm trying to say. I'm not an alcoholic, but I am kind of a new-neighbor-aholic.

Urgh! I think I might be turning into a dirty old man.

I have a new neighbor. He moved in three weeks ago, and I haven't spoken to him yet, but I've seen him. I've watched him. God he's beautiful, can you describe a man as beautiful? This one is. There are just no other words that fit.

He's also a kid, compared to me, that is. He must be at the most, twenty, twenty-one maybe? I'm forty-five and having a midlife crisis.

Since he moved in, I've had three weeks of torture and torment because it's almost painful to watch him, he's so damn perfect. From his light blond, sun-bleached hair to his perfectly tanned toes. He doesn't wear shoes most of the time. His eyes are the color of the sky. Better than that, because when I have caught a glimpse of them, the sky pales in comparison. The sun shines less when he isn't in my direct line of sight, and I am pretty certain he takes all the oxygen from the air because when I see him I can't breathe.

I am a creep of the highest order though, because I am old enough to be his father, and I can't even pluck up the courage to go over there and speak to him. I'd rather watch from my deck, hiding behind my overgrown ivy and ducking every time I get a hint he might look my way.

It's not that I'm shy, or unsociable or anything, it's just that I'm afraid I'll make a fool of myself if I walk up to him and suddenly lose the ability to speak. He takes my breath away, and that hasn't happened in a long time, a very long time.

I need to know more about him. The more I find out the less awkward it will be when I finally pluck up the courage to go over there and speak to him.

“Did you speak to your new neighbor yet?” my sister asks me as she arrives with three bags full of groceries and a new microwave oven.

“Sarah, why do you have a microwave oven with you?” I ask as she struggles up my front steps and dumps it on the porch.

“Jake, why don’t you save the questions for later and give me a hand with this stuff?” she snaps irritably.

She started it by asking me about my new neighbor!

I lean over the railing and glance around the back trying to see if my target has moved from his spot on the beach, on a towel, wearing only shorts and shades, oh my! I bite my lip. I have a choice now: continue stalking him or help my sister.

My sister wins this time. I need a distraction anyway because he’s rolled over onto his stomach and is reading a book with his feet up in the air, crossed at the ankles.

He’s so goddamn cute!

“Jacob!” Sarah calls, and snapping out of my reverie, I pick up the still boxed microwave oven and carry it inside.

Why has she brought a microwave? I have one already. It’s a new one, or at least it was last year, when I blew the last one up because I was distracted as I set the timer to heat up some soup and set it too high. Come to think of it, that one was only about a year old because I blew the one up before it in much the same way the year before.

I am seeing a pattern emerging here.

“You can keep this one in your garage ready as a spare for when you blow up the one you’re using,” Sarah tells me casually, as if you buy microwaves for your brother all the time, because they repeatedly blow them up.

“You automatically assume I’m going to blow the existing one up, Sarah,” I say archly. “You have such faith in my abilities.”

She stretches up to kiss my cheek, no mean feat, since I am six foot four, and she is tiny and I mean, pixie sized.

“Your ability as a writer, sweetie, yes, I have every faith in you because you are brilliant, but in your ability to not burn your house down or blow up an appliance while meeting a deadline? Absolutely not.” She regards me critically. “You are in deadline crisis now aren’t you?” she asks.

Taking in my appearance, she nods. She has her answer just by looking at what I'm wearing: sweats that have not been off my body for three days; at least two week's growth of beard; no shoes and only one sock; a shirt with several days' worth of food stains and a nondescript, crusty bit on the bottom edge, which I try to cover up but only succeed in drawing her attention to it.

"Urgh!" She screws up her nose. "You are such a slob. Go take a shower, Jake, oh my god. When did you last eat? I'll make you a sandwich." She turns me and pushes me towards my bedroom without waiting for me to answer. I could tell her that I'd eaten five minutes before she arrived, but she would make me food anyway.

I take her advice. I need a shower anyway, because neighborhood watch can get you hot under the collar. Who knew?

Three weeks, though, and I know nothing about him. I don't even know his name. In the past, when a new neighbor moved in, mail usually got delivered here by mistake, so I would use that as an excuse to go round and introduce myself, but no such luck this time. The mailman has either learned how to read or the guy doesn't get any mail.

Now that's a sad thought. No mail? I'd die if I didn't get mail. Sometimes it's my only contact with the outside world when I'm writing. Mine are mostly emails, but I get snail mail too. I prefer snail mail actually, because computers don't like me. I can handle word processing and saving and backing up files but once I get beyond the confines of my own hard drive and venture into cyber space things can go horribly wrong. Emails are about as much as I can cope with, and then things can go pear shaped very quickly.

So no mail huh? Or mail, but not much. Come to think of it I haven't even seen the mailman drop anything off at the guy's mail box. Not that I'm watching every minute of the day, even if it seems that I am.

I run my hand through my greasy hair as I turn on the shower. I have to stop calling him "The Guy". He has a name, I'm sure. Most people do. I just need to learn it and not seem too creepy while I'm trying to find out.

Yeah, because watching "The Guy's" every move from behind my curtains, behind my shrubbery on my balcony, or behind the railings of my porch isn't creepy at all. Stepping boldly up to his door, knocking and introducing myself would be so much easier and less likely to get me arrested... except... I've tried that.

Contrary to the picture I paint of myself, I am not a terrible neighbor. The first day the guy arrived I tried to introduce myself. I hadn't seen him at this point. I just noticed there was movement in the usually empty beach house. I walked up to his front porch and knocked on the door but there was no answer. I know he was in.

When I got back home I saw him, large as life, in his kitchen, which I can see from my kitchen window. The light was on, and he was unpacking boxes or something. I guess he ignored the knock because he just wasn't up to receiving visitors, at least not weirdly behaved, much older guys from next door.

I stood for a while, in my dark kitchen so he couldn't see I was watching him. There was a fluid grace to his movements that fascinated me. He had such a serious look on his lovely face, and his eyes were so sad, so lonely. There were tears, I could almost feel them. Watching this sad, desperate figure move about his kitchen, I wanted to cry for him. No one has ever affected me that way before.

I stand under the stream of hot water in my shower and sigh. Cleaning away the mess of my last few days of frantic writing feels almost cathartic. My stomach growls, and I don't actually remember when I ate last, or even what it was. Maybe if I examined my shirt I could probably figure it out.

My hair needs more than one dose of shampoo, it is so greasy. God I must have looked like shit and smelled worse. Probably just as well new neighbors are being elusive and mysterious because who would have even wanted to stand down wind of me, let alone have a conversation with me in this state?

I hate not meeting my deadline, but I always manage to procrastinate until I have no choice but to pull all-nighters or ask for an extension. I have never asked for an extension yet, but I have never had the arrival of a new neighbor coincide with a deadline before.

The house shares a drive with mine and is owned by a family out of state. I think I may have met the owner once in the distant past, but they have an agency take care of the tenants for them. The place usually stands empty out of season and gets rented short term in the summer months.

It is unusual for it to be occupied before May, but it is early April, and I have a new neighbor and the excitement is increased by the fact that last year the house didn't get rented at all.

So far, I know that this neighbor does not get any mail; doesn't answer his door; doesn't sit out on his deck; or on the beach: today is the first time I've

seen him out there unless he is going for a run; and as far as I can deduce, he doesn't have any friends.

Oh, and he surfs. Did I mention he surfs? He. Surfs. He's really good too; so graceful. Could this guy get any hotter?

Okay, I admit I'm attracted to his looks before I even know what his personality is like. Is that shallow? I don't even know if he's gay. I don't even know if he's into older guys. Even if I do get to know him, he probably isn't staying longer than one season. They never do in that particular beach house. The most I can possibly hope for is a fleeting friendship. Summer neighbors come and go. It's the price I pay for living in a beach house all year round rather than finding somewhere where the population is a little more stable.

A fleeting friendship would be better than nothing at all though. The potential is there. Whether it's wise or foolish to even think about pursuing it is up for debate.

I study my newly washed self in the mirror, turning my head from side to side. For forty-five, I don't look too bad. I have laughter lines, I refuse to call them crow's feet, but I don't have any grey hair, well not where it is obvious anyway. My hair is actually light brown when it's clean. I have really dark, brown eyes that are kind of striking, not as striking as certain blue eyes though.

I'm wondering whether I should shave or cultivate the beard that is slowly taking shape. Does having a beard make me look older? Maybe I could shave off the beard and just have a moustache. I hold my hand over my chin and try to imagine what a moustache will look like. I shake my head and dismiss the idea immediately. I don't want this guy next door to think I'm a creep, and having a Tom Selleck moustache, that makes me look like a seventies porn star, is going to give the completely wrong impression.

I decide to keep the entire beard and just give it a little shape. People tend to trust men with beards, they look more approachable. I hope it will make me appear more approachable to a certain new neighbor.

Oh god, I need to stop thinking about him like that. Friendship is all that can happen here, right? He's too young for me. I'm far too old for him.

He's intriguing though, and I am naturally curious. I guess that comes with the territory. Curiosity certainly helps when you are a writer. I like to people watch at the best of times, so watching a neighbor and trying to figure out his story is no different, right?

So, okay, it is a little different, since watching him seems to have taken over my life for the last three weeks. I am developing an unhealthy obsession with his schedule. I even started writing it all down in a notebook, telling myself I was doing research for a new character when in reality I'm just a dirty old man leering after a kid.

I think I'm going crazy.

Chapter Two

A Sister's Advice (And Extreme Mothering)

I enter my kitchen to find that Sarah has not only made me sandwiches but has prepared a salad; taken out one of her delicious frozen meals from my freezer for my dinner; cleared the kitchen counters and cleaned the sink (it was in a bit of a state). I have a sneaking suspicion she may have alphabetized my food cupboard as well.

I eye the plate of sandwiches and salad she has somehow had time to prepare at the same time as everything else. I was only in the shower twenty minutes.

"Are these sandwiches for me?" I call to her since she is somewhere in my house tidying as she goes. She calls back an affirmative. "Sarah, you made enough for three here," I tell her.

"So wrap some up and save them for tomorrow," She calls. "At least you'll eat properly two days in a row."

My sister has this uncontrollable urge to mother me. Mom and Dad retired to Florida two years ago so she feels responsible for me, I guess, now that Mom isn't close enough to come and make sure I eat. And shower.

She re-enters the kitchen and greets me with another kiss and a hum of approval at my much cleaner smelling self.

"Oh that's much better," she exclaims, then gets back to cleaning and tidying and alphabetizing, as I start to eat the sandwiches. "Have you called Mom and Dad lately?" she asks, and I groan as I lean back against a counter. I can't remember when I last spoke to our parents. She groans too. "Jake, you know how much I get it in the neck if you don't call them."

"Why do you get the blame?" I ask her, my mouth full of sandwich. "It's not as if you have any control over what I do."

"Yeah, but the last thing Mom said before they moved was 'look after Jake'. So, when you don't let them know you haven't died in your sleep or wrapped your car around a lamppost Mom calls me. I'm the oldest, therefore, in their head your behavior somehow has something to do with me." Sarah moves through from the kitchen into the living room with another trash bag, adding to it as she goes.

I watch her but don't interfere. It's not as if she does this very often. She's not here every day, just once or twice a month, and I really don't mind that she storms through my house like a human vacuum. She's a compulsively tidy person, which is more than I can say for myself.

She returns with a much fuller trash bag as I am examining the casserole dish she has taken out of the freezer for me.

"I had to take that out to make room for the one I brought you," she tells me. "There are six dinners in the freezer for you, use them please because I am running out of casserole dishes."

I chuckle.

"I will, but contrary to popular belief, I can manage to feed myself," I tell her.

"You eat take out, Jake." She sniffs, holding up the trash bag full, I think, of empty noodle cartons and pizza boxes. "That is not feeding yourself properly and would it hurt you once in a while to actually throw the empties in the trash? Would it?"

"Okay, I admit I'm a slob, sis, but I would have done it eventually." She eyes me dubiously. "When I couldn't see the carpet maybe?" She rolls her eyes and wanders back into the living room with a duster and some furniture spray.

I eat my fill of sandwiches and wrap the rest to put in the refrigerator for later. My sister fusses over me and my family worries about me, but I am forty-five, and I have lived alone for thirteen years now. I can look after myself.

I do feel guilty about not calling Mom and Dad, but they know I have a deadline coming up. They agonized over moving to Florida though. They always planned to retire there. They bought a house there a few years ago, but they delayed and I know one of the reasons for that was me. Thirteen years ago, I lost my partner to cancer, which is why everyone fusses over me so much, but, although it still hurts like hell and I miss Josh like crazy I am kind of moving on.

I was a wreck when it first happened, and all of my family and friends kind of smothered me. I don't take their over protectiveness for granted though. I am grateful for everything they've done to help me get through it. Sarah's mothering is the last remnant of that horrible time, and I guess she just got into a routine she can't bear to break.

I follow her into the living room, but she is now in my study that overlooks the deck and the beach.

There is no way I will let her disturb anything in there though.

“Sarah, don’t move anything on my desk, please?” I call in a slight panic.

She is flicking through the pages of a notebook when I get there and not just any notebook: *The notebook!*

“What’s this then?” she asks lightly, as I have a minor coronary. “Someone’s schedule it looks like, but not yours.” She grins. “There’s no way I could imagine you even being awake at seven in the morning let alone jogging along the beach.”

I snatch the book from her and close it with a snap.

“Sarah, you know better than to go snooping around in my study,” I tell her and she raises her eyebrows.

“Afraid I’ll see something I shouldn’t?” she asks, placing her hands on her hips. “You do know I have read all your books don’t you? Some of them can be a bit gory and graphic.” I roll my eyes and place the telltale notebook back on my desk, hiding it underneath other research notes. “I hardly think an imaginary schedule is anything that would cause me trauma, not like some of the things you’ve written, Jake.” She flicks her eyebrows at me then changes the subject as she looks out across the beach. “Have you met your new neighbor then, you never told me when I asked before?” I push the notebook further beneath the piles of scribbled notes and newspaper cuttings trying desperately not to blush but failing miserably. “Oh!” she giggles, turning to face me. “Can I assume from that blush that you have, and that he is a he and is very nice?”

“He is a he, and I haven’t met him yet, so I have no idea if he is nice or not.” I steal a glance at the beach where he is still actually lying reading in the sun.

He’s tanned, but his skin looks fair. He might burn if he stays out too long. I wonder if he needs someone to rub lotion on his back. I can actually feel my hands itching to do just that, and I am certain he will make my fingers tingle as I touch his skin...

Stop it, Jake, just stop it.

“What are you looking at, Mr. Daydream?” Sarah asks as she joins me at the French doors.

Her eyes fall on the figure lying alone on the beach quietly reading, then her eyes move back to my desk and to the notebook now hidden from view. They widen in realization and I groan inwardly.

“That schedule isn’t an imagined one is it?” she asks, a hint of amusement in her tone but also caution. She sees my embarrassed grimace. “Oh my god, Jake, are you stalking the guy?”

“No!” I tell her indignantly, but I know what it must look like.

“You have his every move written down in your notebook, Jake, what are you doing if you’re not stalking him?” I grimace.

“I was just making notes, Sarah,” I try to explain. “I was hoping to find out a bit about him so I could get to know him before I speak to him.” My sister shakes her head in helpless frustration.

“Jake, most normal people would just go over there and introduce themselves.” I gasp.

“Are you insinuating that I am normal?” I ask her in mock horror. “I have never been so insulted.” She giggles. “Besides I went over there on his first day and he didn’t answer his door.” I manage to look a little dejected. She sighs.

“You are hopeless,” She tells me then turns and leaves my study. “I have to go because Sam has a tournament tonight.” I roll my eyes, my nephew is a black belt in Taekwondo and I’ve been to several of his “tournaments”. As far as I can see they’re an excuse for kids to beat the crap out of each other and parents to compare their kids’ accomplishments in beating the crap out of each other.

As Sarah gathers her stuff ready to leave, she gives me her usual instructions for the coming week, or until she comes by again.

“Call Mom and Dad,” she tells me, and I nod. “Eat the casseroles and stuff I put in your freezer.” I nod again, licking my lips. “And go over and introduce yourself to your neighbor before he gets a restraining order out on you.”

“There’s no guarantee he won’t anyway.” I say, thinking about how young he looks and considering how old I am. Sarah gives me a soft, affectionate look.

“Jacob Reuben, you are a lovely, kind, and generous man. Anyone would be lucky to have you as a friend. I know I am proud to have you as my brother.” She stretches up to kiss my cheek and strokes my beard appreciatively. “Mmm! Nice beard, it suits you.”

She leaves me feeling flushed and happy. She always does. I know she worries about me quite a bit. She thinks I’ve been on my own too long now and

should start looking for someone else. It's not that I don't want to. Josh and I had something special though and that would be hard to replicate. I know every time it is different, but I really don't think there is anyone out there who would even consider taking on a writer who doesn't shower for days on end when he's on a writing streak, or who sits around in sweat pants he's worn until they can walk to the laundry by themselves.

The thought of sharing my life with someone now seems kind of ridiculous. I'm too set in my ways and that part of my life has passed. So why on earth would I suddenly be thinking that way about someone I have only watched from behind my curtains and is probably young enough to be my son?

I have no idea, except for the reasons I quoted: he's beautiful, he's enigmatic and mysterious. There's an air of tragedy about him. He looks so serious and sad all the time. In three weeks, I don't think I've seen him smile. Could I be the one that puts a smile on his face? I think I'd like to be, even if it's just as a friend. He doesn't appear to have any friends, at least he hasn't had any friends over, and he doesn't go anywhere. He has his main groceries delivered, so he answers the door to them but not to casual callers. He spends his time reading in his living room or surfing and running. He's fit, oh boy, is he fit.

So, maybe I should just go over there and introduce myself, or at least put a plan in place to actually meet him.

Chapter Three

Operation: Meet The Neighbor

My plan is quite simple really. This guy next door seems to be a creature of habit. I get up and consult the notes I've made of his schedule over the last three weeks.

It is seven a.m. on Monday morning, and according to my notes so far, he usually goes for a run along the beach about now.

Yep, there he is, in his running shorts and a rather tight running top. He has the biggest set of headphones I've ever seen. What happened to those really discreet earphones you could get? The fashion for massive ones really doesn't make sense, and I am sure they must cause some sort of wind resistance when he's running. He jogs down the decking stairs onto the beach and turns right. Off he goes.

I watch him disappear along the sand. He'll be back in about forty minutes.

I have just enough time for breakfast then. There is no way I'm going to be able to join him in a morning jog. I'm just not that sporty. So meeting him that way is not an option.

Forty minutes later: yep, there he is, leaning against his gatepost and drinking from his bottle of water. He's all hot and sweaty and when he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand the action makes me catch my breath. He disappears up the steps into his house while I spend a few moments recovering. Going out and talking to him now seems a little inconsiderate really, since he probably wants to go have a shower as soon as possible.

I consult my notes again. He will be out again in twenty minutes, showered and changed and still wearing those damn headphones. I don't think I've seen him without them, except he doesn't appear to wear them in the house. It's Monday, so he always goes into town to do some grocery shopping. I've pretty much decided the best way to meet him is to "accidentally" bump into him there, either on the street or in a store.

Twenty minutes later, he is out on his front porch, showered and changed and ready to go. He always catches the bus into town. He doesn't have a car. He always checks he has his key before he shuts his front door. He always checks he has his wallet and checks inside it before he sets off for the bus. He

always seems to be so careful with things like this, like he's not had to do it before: as if he is used to having someone else to remind him.

Why is he here on his own, eh? He looks so young to be anywhere on his own. And if the thought of getting the bus anywhere gives me the heebie jeebies how does it make him feel? If he'll let me, I'll gladly give him a lift into town, since I've decided that Monday just happens to be my day for shopping too. That's a very happy coincidence.

I won't ask if he wants a ride today though because a strange man slowing his car down to ask a guy if he wants a lift? Yeah, he will definitely think I am curb crawling. Best get to know him first before I do that. Ask him for a lift I mean, not curb crawl.

I watch him disappear along the road to the bus stop and then I dive out of the house and into my car.

I park in my usual spot outside the best coffee shop in town and go inside to wait for the bus to arrive. The bus stop is just across the street. That's convenient. I know I've beaten the bus here because I over took it.

I order a coffee and wait.

There he is, getting off the bus and looking around to get his bearings. He always does that, as if checking out where everything is. His movements are always so deliberate and careful.

He squints across at the coffee shop and I duck behind my cup, pretending I'm reading a newspaper I have spread across the counter. Is he coming over? I can't see without lifting my head and making it obvious I am looking at him. He'd be diverting from his routine though, if he stopped for a coffee, because he doesn't usually.

I give it a few minutes then look up. Oh shit, he's gone. I check my notes: nine fifteen, he is usually in the market across the street getting fresh fruit and vegetables. I duck out of the coffee shop thinking I might return with him if I get the opportunity to ask him for a coffee or whatever young people drink these days. Fingers crossed.

In the market, I watch him from behind some stacked crates. He is always a long time in here, checking out the best fruit. He takes so much time choosing a melon I consider asking him which one came second.

While he is sniffing a satsuma with his perfect, slightly freckled nose he frowns, cocks his head to one side and turns to look in my direction.

Shit. I think I ducked out of the way in time. Did I?

Did he sense me watching him or something? What the fuck am I doing?

When I'm brave enough to search for him again he is at the checkout paying for his stuff. The guy at the checkout speaks to him and he smiles in reply, like he always does, but the smile doesn't touch his eyes, it's just a polite response rather than a natural one.

He seems unnerved though, because he turns to look in my direction again, and I actually squeak as I duck behind another stack of crates then grimace as I upset one and have to gather all the apples up in my t shirt as the crate crashes to the floor. Holy crap, he must have heard that.

By the time I've scooped up all the apples and peeked over the top of the crates, he is leaving; rather quickly. Did I spook him? Oh god I hope I didn't. I need to stop this now and rethink my strategy.

Then the guy at the counter calls him back, waving something about in his hand, just as the door begins to close.

"Hey dude, your wallet."

I shoot to a standing position with apples still held in my shirt and watch, suddenly alert, as the guy calls again, but my neighbor just keeps on going, oblivious. He must have his music turned up so loud he hasn't heard.

The checkout guy has a dilemma now, because he is alone in the store. I make a snap decision.

"I'll take it to him," I offer, almost tripping over a crate of bananas in my haste to reach the counter. I dump the rest of the apples I've picked up back into a crate and stretch out my hand for the wallet. Checkout guy recognizes me and smiles.

"Oh, hey Mr. Reuben, that guy left his wallet," he explains, even though he saw me watch the entire thing. He must think I'm crazy, but everyone here thinks I'm a little eccentric anyway. I nod and indicate that he should give the wallet to me.

"He's my new neighbor," I explain. "He moved into the Steele place."

Checkout guy, his name badge reads "Steve", nods in understanding and releases the wallet to my care. I thank him and rush out of the store in hot pursuit and with a sure fire strategy to get talking to this guy without creeping him out.

Outside on the sidewalk I look up and down the street to try to locate him. Where does he normally go now?

I consult my notebook then look left. There he is at the newspaper stand across the street, and he's feeling for his wallet. It's not there! I shout as I cross the street.

"Hey, I have your wallet," I call.

He has his back to me, and those damn headphones are a barrier to normal interaction. I can't see the attraction really, walking about totally cut off from the world around you. I mean, I like listening to music, just not all the time, and definitely not in situations where I might be expected to converse politely with real people.

Kids though, they all seem to feel the need to fill perceived silence with music blasting in their ears. And what is the point of having the damn headphones plugged into your iPod or mp3 player or whatever, when the volume is so high everyone can hear every word being sung anyway?

Do I sound like a grumpy old man? Oh my god, I'm a grumpy old man.

As I cross the street, he has realized his wallet is missing and he looks positively frantic. I don't think I have seen a look of such absolute panic on anyone's face before. His entire body is about to lift off the sidewalk he's in such a state. I wave to gain his attention and call, but he gives me one look and turns away to run in the direction of the Market by crossing the street to avoid me.

Is he serious? What's he doing?

"Hey, I have your wallet here." I call but he doesn't hear me because he still has those damn headphones on.

I'm not fit by any stretch of the imagination, but I manage a burst of energy and catch up with him. The only course of action I have left to gain his attention is to reach out and grab his shoulder before he can move away. He turns with a cry and immediately takes up a defensive position, you know: narrowing his target, having his hands ready to push away or deflect a blow. His reaction shocks me and I hold up my hands in a kind of corny surrender type gesture.

"Hey!" I give a weak laugh. I hold up his wallet in plain sight for him to see. "You left your wallet in the Market." I hold it out to him.

Damn he looks terrified though, his eyes are darting everywhere, checking me out, checking out escape routes, checking out other pedestrians for potential threats. He's so jumpy and defensive it's unbelievable. He reaches out and takes his wallet from me like a timid animal taking an offered treat. Then, just like that timid animal, he takes off before I can even get another word in. He doesn't even thank me.

"You're welcome." I call sarcastically after him, but he doesn't turn because of course he doesn't hear me: head phones! They are probably blasting rap music and vibrating his brain out through his ears, at least the part that controls good manners.

For a few minutes, I stand and wonder what to do next. My first opportunity to talk to him has ended in disaster, since he was so fucking scared of me he looked like he was about to pass out. But come on, I'm not that scary am I? I glance at my reflection in a shop window. I have clean clothes on: jeans not sweats. I showered and trimmed my beard, and I even brushed my hair. It isn't a strange color, which can sometimes be the case. So why did he run away from me?

Something is not right. He is a mystery I need to solve.

I take out my notebook again and see where he might conceivably have run off to. He usually goes to the drugstore right about now, so I try there next.

The town's one and only drugstore is quite large. We have a growing population of retirees here in Oakwood Bay, so the drugstore does a roaring trade in old people drugs and stuff. Things I have not personally felt the need to examine too closely as yet. It recently expanded so it has several aisles of mostly vitamins and other food supplements that oldies seem to take by the bucket load, as well as the regular stuff that drugstores sell.

The first aisle is empty but the second one has my target, standing examining something on a shelf and giving it the same careful consideration he gave the choice of a melon in the Market.

I don't bother calling out to him this time, since the head phones are still firmly in place. I grab a basket to make my presence in the store look legitimate, tip a couple of items into the basket to make it look even more authentic and approach him.

I reach out and touch his shoulder then step back with a cry as he whirls around in much the same way he did on the sidewalk. This time he presses

himself back against the shelves, tipping some things onto the floor in the process.

“What?” he asks, in a pained, scared half to death way that has me spluttering and lost for words.

For a moment, I simply stare at him and his eyes search my face in a way that makes me feel just a little uncomfortable. Apart from the fact that they are perhaps the bluest eyes I have ever seen in my entire life, they are wide and intense and unblinking and I feel like he is staring directly into my soul. No one has ever looked at me so intensely before. I feel naked and exposed.

His eyes move slowly and warily down to my basket and then dart back up to my face. He has a look of abject horror on his face now and with what seems like an involuntary squeak he turns and rushes away from me, leaving his basket and its contents on the floor at my feet.

I stand in the middle of the aisle at a loss as to what to do now. He has run away from me twice in the space of five minutes. Am I really that scary? It's not as if I'm even that much taller than him. Is he just naturally afraid of talking to strangers? I'm really not that strange.

I glance down at my basket and groan, face palming as I realize what he has seen there and what was the possible source of his fright this second time. I do wish I'd checked what I was casually throwing in my basket as I approached him; it's full of several different varieties of colored and flavored condoms and a bottle of self-warming lube. God he must think I'm a pervert or a sex addict or something. No wonder he ran. At twenty-one, I would have run too if some forty plus guy had approached me in a drugstore with a basket full of condoms and lube.

Fucking hell, I've become the guy my parents warned me about when I first came out to them.

Operation “Meet the Neighbor” has been an unmitigated disaster from beginning to end. Now this guy thinks I am a pervert of the highest order, and I still don't even know his name.

I had his wallet in my hand as well. I could have looked inside to find his name. What's the matter with me? I'm losing my touch.

I glance down at his abandoned basket and begin to form another plan. I pick it up and, after replacing the condoms and lube on their correct shelves, I get what I actually need and pay for my stuff and the stuff he left behind. I'll

deliver it to him when I get back. I'll put it on his door step with a note apologizing for being a creepy neighbor.

Feeling much brighter, and with a much better plan in my head I abandon my stalking in favor of getting the rest of my own shopping done and then make my way home to put "plan B" into action.

Chapter Four

Plan B

This seems to be going well so far. I placed all of the stuff he left behind at the drugstore in a basket, along with a bunch of flowers and a note explaining that I am not as scary as I appear and that I am in the house all the rest of the day if he wants to come over for coffee, or something to drink anyway. I added that if he isn't free today that I'm free most days.

Is that too much? Are the flowers too much? Everyone likes flowers right? He's not going to read too much into it is he? I don't want him getting more spooked.

Oh, god, he's opening his door. He's looking down at the basket. He's frowning at it and now he's reading my note.

Shit, he just looked over. I duck behind one of the pillars supporting my front porch. I hope he didn't see me.

Next time I peek, he has gone back inside with the basket of stuff and the flowers.

Mission accomplished. Now I just have to wait for him to come over. The ball's in his court so to speak.

So I wait, and I wait, and I watch from various different locations in my house. He's placed the flowers in a vase, and put them on his kitchen counter, near the window, I can see that much.

Is he actually going to come over then? The suspense is killing me.

From my kitchen window, I can see into his kitchen, but because of the angle and slight height difference in our houses he can't see into mine, and he can't see me watching unless I am standing right at the window, so I don't. I stand a little way back from the sill so I can still see him but he can't see me.

Every time he passes those flowers, he touches them, frowns, bites his lip and glances over at my house. I can see his eyes, troubled and indecisive, and so expressive. I can see the blue from here. He's so damn gorgeous.

I am now on my third cup of coffee and sitting on my deck because the sun is shining and the weather is still unseasonably warm. It's almost evening and

my neighbor still has not made an appearance. My cat has made an appearance though and she has something in her mouth as she jumps up onto my lap.

“Holy shit, Jezebel.” I screech as I realize it is a mouse. I jump up, dumping her off my lap in the process. Oh god the mouse is still moving! “Jezzie, while I accept that you love me enough to bring me your prize catch of the day you have got to understand that humans just don’t eat mice; or bats; or birds; or salamanders,” I inform her as she watches me indignantly. “I’m not taking it off you, Jezzie, go take it somewhere and eat it or whatever you’re going to do with it.” I wave my hands at her. “Just do it out of my sight.”

She gives me a disdainful look, slinks past me and pushes through the railings of my decking. I watch as she casually walks across the garden, over the drive and jumps up onto the decking of my next-door neighbor.

Oh no, she is not going to try to present that mouse to him. He’ll freak out. A strange man handing him his lost wallet caused him to almost have a coronary: a strange cat depositing a half-dead mouse at his feet is going to kill the poor guy for sure.

I watch helplessly though, as my neighbor chooses this very moment to make a rare appearance on his deck. I lean over my railings to try to gain his attention, knowing it is useless shouting because he has his headphones firmly in place and I am now convinced they are actually surgically attached to his ears. I lean further over as I see him sit on his railing and lean down to caress the ears of my disgustingly traitorous cat.

I am slightly distracted by the fact that neighbor guy is wearing only a towel that is sitting precariously on his hips, and the fact that his hair is wet announces that he has just stepped out of the shower. That’s two showers he’s had today, not that I’m counting, but he’s actually had more showers in one day than I’ve had in a week.

So, okay, maybe that’s not a very good reflection on my personal hygiene. I am usually a little cleaner than that.

Back to the problem at hand though, since he is about to discover the prize my cat is trying to show him. I lean further over, trying desperately to catch his eye; further; just a little further, hoping he’ll see me as I wave frantically.

He looks up, and I gasp as his startled eyes meet mine. I give one last frantic wave and the next thing I know I’m flat on my back in the flower bed beneath my deck.

What the fuck just happened?

I lie, slightly stunned and winded, staring up at the sky and at the railing I just fell from then close my eyes again feeling a little queasy. It's a damn good job it isn't that high, plus the fact that my flowerbed is so overgrown with ivy it broke my fall. Things could have been so much worse.

"Are you okay?"

Things are so much worse.

I open my eyes again to look up into the sky blue orbs that belong to the object of over three weeks of fruitless stalking. My neighbor is looking down at me with such concern in those blue eyes I think my heart just melted.

Hell, if I'd known I only had to fall from my balcony to get him to come over I would have saved myself the trouble and just done this sooner. He's even taken off his head phones, although they are still there, just hanging around his neck. He's pulled on some shorts, which was probably wise. He hasn't pulled on a T-shirt though. His chest is exposed, tanned and oh my, there's a six pack and a treasure trail.

Eyes front, Jake. Keep your hands where I can see them. He's too young for you, too young.

He holds out a hand to help me up and I take it, groaning that old man groan that is compulsory when you get past a certain age. It's not as if I find it difficult to get up, it's just one of those things that starts happening after the age of forty: you discover hair in your ears and you groan when you stand.

Once on my feet, a little unsteadily, I brush the dirt, leaves, and sand from my clothes. I do a quick check of everything and think I have escaped injury. I stretch out my hand to my neighbor in a proper greeting.

"I'm Jake, and I'm sorry about my disgusting cat." The guy's eyes widen and he tips his head to one side. He is watching me intently though, and I get the same slightly uncomfortable feeling that his scrutiny caused in the drugstore earlier today.

"The cat is yours?" he asks and I nod, frowning, because there's something about the tone of his voice that isn't quite right. "He was trying to give me a mouse." He informs me in a matter of fact tone that sounds a little hollow to be honest. I grimace at what he's said.

"Yeah, sorry about that. She tried to give the mouse to me but I sent her packing. She must have decided you were her next victim." He smiles, then

bends down to stroke said cat who is shamelessly rubbing and weaving between his legs.

He looks back up and directly at me before speaking again.

“My name’s Cal, by the way,” he says simply, waits for a reply, which he doesn’t get, then turns his attention back to my cat.

I don’t reply because I am processing the way his voice sounds and the way his name is ringing in my ears like a bell.

Cal. His name is Cal. I fell from my decking, and could have broken my neck, but it was worth it to find out his name and to finally be talking to this enigmatic and mysterious young man.

“So, Cal.” I say, as I kneel down to join him in the caress of my now ecstatic cat. She hasn’t had so much attention in a long time. He looks up at me, in that very disconcertingly direct way. “Are you gonna take me up on the offer of coffee? The least I can offer after you were subjected to my cat’s misplaced generosity.” He smiles and nods. “I also have Mountain Dew or Coke if you prefer.” I tell him grimacing inwardly because I’ve suddenly started sounding like my dad. He screws up his perfect nose.

“Ugh! No thanks, coffee is fine.” Well thank god for that because there’s hope for someone who likes coffee. I indicate he should precede me as we walk around to my steps and up onto my deck.

So, I now know his name and his drink preference but nothing else and he is currently sitting out on my deck while I make some fresh coffee. I had enough for two cups in the pot but meeting a new neighbor calls for freshly brewed really.

“So Cal, how are you liking Oakwood Bay so far?” I call through from the kitchen: no answer. I can see him, he’s not so far away he wouldn’t hear that. He is occupied with my cat, but still, he isn’t wearing his headphones so why doesn’t he answer?

He looks up and sees me staring.

“Sorry, what?” he asks, his gaze as intent as ever. I repeat the question as I pour out two coffees and bring them out onto the deck.

“How are you liking Oakwood Bay so far?”

“Oh, it’s good,” he tells me, taking the coffee. “It’s nice, and not too busy.”

“Yeah, it’s quiet mostly,” I agree with him. “The most exciting thing to happen is neighbors falling out of balconies.” He smiles, and gives a silent chuckle.

“Are you okay after that?” he asks. “You never said.” I grimace.

“I think the only thing that is bruised is my pride,” I tell him. “I hope you didn’t get too freaked out by Jezzie’s welcome gift.” Cal laughs again, that silent laugh.

“It’s supposed to be a sign that they accept you as head of their pride.” Cal tells me and I nod.

“Yeah, but I’d prefer it if she brought me a donut or a muffin, you know.” He laughs again in silence.

I am only half-paying attention to this conversation, since the rest of my attention is distracted by the way he watches me so carefully when I speak. He moves his head when I move mine, as if to get a better view and his eyes, oh my god, those eyes. They should be registered as deadly weapons. Does he even know how amazing they are? Does he know the effect they have on others? On me?

“So, I’m really sorry about this morning,” he’s telling me, as I try to pay more attention to his words and not to trying to solve what is driving me crazy about his voice. He runs his fingers awkwardly through his hair, which is also quite distracting. “I kind of got freaked out,” he continues. “You were running at me and I just didn’t expect it, and I’m sorry I never thanked you for returning my wallet.”

I shrug.

“That’s okay, I’m sorry if I scared you. Twice.” I raise my eyebrows and he looks away from me for the first time since this conversation started. I think he’s blushing.

Oh, he is. Oh! I feel all weak inside.

“Meeting you like that was just unexpected that’s all.” Yeah, that and the fact I had a basket full of condoms. “And thanks for bringing my stuff,” he says as he turns back and resumes his close scrutiny of my face, and lips. “Oh, and the flowers, they’re really nice.” I smile.

“That was the least I could do, after freaking you out so badly.” I tip my head to one side now. “Still think I’m scary?” I ask him and he smiles, and it does touch his eyes, and I think it might have just touched my heart, too.

“No, not anymore.” He answers with a slight smirk that shows the hint of some dimples in his cheeks. Oh boy!

What is going on with his voice though?

He sips his coffee and looks out to sea as I ponder the mystery. Come on, Jake, solve it with the clues at hand. This is what you do. You're a crime writer, a master of mystery and sinister plot twists. Gather all the information and make the connections.

It's his voice, the way he speaks, that's the main clue. It's as if his voice isn't sure if it's speaking properly or not, and his lips form every word so carefully as if this is the only way he can be sure he's said the right thing.

Oh my god, of course, it's because he's deaf. Everything fits. And he wears the head phones to hide the fact that he doesn't hear what's being said.

So now, I've solved the mystery I have to ask if I'm right. I reach out and gain his attention by gently touching his arm. He turns and regards me with a slightly startled but also pleasantly surprised expression.

“Cal, can I ask you something?” He nods, intently watching my lips: because he's lip reading, of course.

“I think you just did.” He says with a smirk.

Okay, so being deaf doesn't stop you from being cocky. I smirk back.

“Okay, you know what I mean though.” He nods.

“Ask away!” he tells me.

“Are you deaf by any chance?” His face pales, his breathing quickens, and his eyes flicker past me to the quickest escape route.

“Er, yeah!” he replies breathlessly. “Is that a problem?” I am slightly taken aback by his sudden defensiveness, since why would it ever be a problem?

“No!” I frown, then realize he is still looking past me to his exit. I reach out and touch his arm again and meet his gaze. “No problem at all, Cal, honestly, truly, no problem.”

He looks as if he's about to burst into tears he's so relieved, although part of him doesn't believe me, I can see. Why would he react like this? Why would he want to hide it?

Because he does hide it, that's why he wears the headphones so he can pretend he didn't hear someone because he was listening to music.

“Cal, why do you think it would be a problem me knowing you’re deaf?” I ask, and he relaxes a little as he shrugs, looking away, possibly to hide the fact that his eyes have actually filled with tears.

“Some people have a problem with it,” he tells me. “They think because I can’t hear I can’t look after myself. People treat me differently when they know.” He turns back to me, with a fierce, determined look on his face. “But I don’t need special treatment,” he snaps. “I can look after myself. I can live on my own. I don’t need any help. I don’t need anybody.” He stands and stretches out his shoulders looking quite embarrassed by his sudden outburst. “I’m sorry!” he apologizes, but before I can accept the apology and tell him not to worry about it he has turned away. “Surf’s up,” he muses, in a sudden change of subject. “I just got a new board and I want to try it out before the tide turns.” He turns back to face me. “Thanks for the coffee, and everything else, Jake.” He gives me a soft smile, then he’s gone, down the steps and across the drive to his own house before I can even call after him. Not that calling after him will do any good, because he won’t hear it. I do anyway.

“You’re welcome, Cal!” I call, “Come back anytime.” Because I’ll take whatever time I can get.

I sit back in my lounge with a heavy, contented sigh. Well, I met him. I now know his name, and have solved some of the mystery that is Cal. There are still things to discover about this guy though. With every question answered a million more take their place. I have no idea how old he is, or why he’s here alone, or why he is so defensive about it. He seemed friendly enough, but I have no idea if he wants to be friends or just friendly neighbors. From what I’ve seen so far, I would take anything he has to give, because he’s just lovely.

Chapter Five

A Ride Into Town

It's been almost a week since I finally managed to introduce myself to Cal, however embarrassing the circumstances. He seems to have settled back into his routine with the exception that, if he sees me out on my deck or at my kitchen window, or anywhere, he waves, and smiles a shy little half smile which is completely adorable but leaves me wanting more.

I mean I want more of a smile, not more of him, although I would settle for more of his company, which would give me the opportunity to try to broaden that smile into something that actually looks genuine and not strained.

He's too young to not be smiling and laughing and having fun, but he doesn't appear to do any of those things.

He surfs every day if the waves are good. He runs every morning. The rest of the day, as far as I can see he sits inside and reads, although I have seen him out on his deck more since we met properly. He interacts with Jezzie who seems to be our go between at the minute.

I asked him for coffee a few more times but he refused stating he had other things to do, although I know he doesn't do anything else. We never get past "hello, nice day!" and then he disappears again.

By the time Sunday comes around again, though, I feel that we have enough of a passing acquaintance for the offer of a ride into town for his weekly shopping trip to not seem too creepy.

"Can I give you a ride into town tomorrow?" I ask him when I see him that evening as he runs back up the beach with his surfboard under his arm. "I mean I'm going too, so it's no trouble, and it's quicker than taking the bus."

"I don't mind taking the bus," Cal tells me, his defiant, defensive expression firmly in place.

"I'm sure you don't, but I do." I tell him and he frowns. I lean closer. "I hate taking the bus, Cal, it's full of sweaty bodies with smoker's breath and people spreading flu germs, and I'm driving into town to get groceries for myself, I would feel bad if I didn't offer you a ride." He regards me with narrowed eyes.

"So you're offering me a ride to save yourself from feeling bad?" he asks, and I nod, smiling, because I think he is just about to accept. "So if I accept

then I'll be doing you a favor?" I nod again, a little more enthusiastically this time. I feel like a puppy about to get a treat. I close my mouth to prevent my tongue lolling out.

"So what do you say?" I ask, "Should I pick you up at nine?" He purses his perfect lips and I fight the urge to groan.

"Okay!" he answers with a little half smile. "I'll see you then." And he disappears before I can say anything else.

It's like that every time. I try to strike up a conversation with him and he just cuts it short; not in a rude way, he just makes it clear the conversation is over by turning away so I can't carry on speaking to him.

Maybe there'll be more opportunity to talk tomorrow.

Of course, I never really thought about how difficult it would be to have a conversation with someone who is deaf while I'm driving. We exchange greetings but then the rest of the journey we do in silence. I feel awkward, but is it just me that feels that way? He is used to silence so probably doesn't feel the need to fill it with words.

Filling a silence with words just means you're kind of saying something for the sake of saying something. I guess on a car journey it's just not necessary to make small talk. Except I do want to speak to him. I want to know more about him. I can't ask him in the car though.

"Come for a coffee before we start shopping?" I suggest. Cal regards me with wide eyes that search my face as if he's looking for signs that my offer isn't genuine. Why wouldn't it be genuine? "This is a really great coffee shop." I lean closer to him. "I actually have to say that because it's owned by a friend," I add as an aside. He chuckles silently.

"Okay!" It's the first word he's spoken since he got in the car.

At least, he isn't wearing those damn headphones, but, wait, no such luck, because as soon as we cross the threshold of the coffee shop he takes them out of his messenger bag and places them over his ears. Now, I know for a fact they are not attached to anything, because, without wanting to sound too politically incorrect about this, what would be the point?

He indicates that he will sit by the window and I nod, then pull him back as I don't know what he wants to drink.

"What do you want?" I ask him and his eyes flicker up to the menu board above the counter. He shrugs.

“Just a coffee will be fine, thanks.” He reaches into his wallet. I stop him.

“I’ll get these.” I turn before he can refuse.

I feel him still standing there staring at me for a few seconds before he huffs slightly and goes to find a seat.

I can’t help smirking, because it feels like I’ve just won an argument. The quietest fucking argument I’ve ever had in my life, but it was still there, the defiance in his eyes, as if he was afraid by accepting a drink from me it would seem he couldn’t do it himself. I never thought for one minute he couldn’t, but someone, somewhere down the line obviously has.

At the counter, I meet Lawrence, the owner of the shop and an old friend.

“Hey, Jake, long time no see.” He greets me. I chuckle.

“Yeah, I haven’t seen you since, ooh, at least last Monday.” He chuckles back as I make my order.

“A lot can happen in a week.” He muses and I am thinking the same as I glance over at Cal who is obliviously staring out of the window, his headphones firmly in place over his ears. “You here with that kid?” Lawrence asks, shaking me out of my reverie. I nod. Lawrence continues, “Yeah, bit of a strange one that one. Seen him around town a few times, always wearing those headphones. Kids these days, always listening to music and staring at their phone screens.”

Cal doesn’t appear to have a phone though. I wonder about that as Lawrence continues his semi rant. He isn’t a grumpy old man, he just has a lot to say about everything.

“So, who is he anyway?” Lawrence asks me.

“His name is Cal, and he’s my next door neighbor,” I tell him and Lawrence’s eyebrows rise into his hair line.

“The Steele place?” he asks. “I heard that was standing empty.”

“It did last year, but I guess he’s renting it now.” Lawrence shakes his head and beckons me closer as he places two coffee cups on the counter.

“He ain’t renting it.” He tells me conspiratorially. I frown.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it ain’t rented.” Lawrence begins to pour the steamed milk expertly into one cup as he continues, “My Lou, she knows someone who works for the

Rental Agency that took care of the Steele place, she says it was taken off the rental market earlier this year.” I raise my eyebrows and purse my lips.

“Interesting!” I frown. “So maybe he’s renting it long term?” Lawrence shakes his head.

“Nope, Lou-Anne’s friend said the agency took care of a ton of properties that belonged to the Steele family and a ton of them have been sold recently.” My eyes widen more. “He’s either bought the place or had it bought for him.” Lawrence speculates.

I turn my head to regard Cal who is still staring out of the window. He doesn’t have the air of someone who has just had a property this expensive bought for him. If he has parents who are so generous, why haven’t they been round every five minutes checking he was settling in?

When Josh and I got our first place, we never had a moment to ourselves, both sets of parents checking we were eating, cleaning, sleeping. My mom even walked in on us having sex once. I don’t know who was more embarrassed. Cal has had no visitors in the entire month he’s been here.

“He can’t have bought the place though, he’s just a kid.” I say out loud. Lawrence huffs as he puts the finishing touches to the second coffee. They are a work of art; as usual he’s drawn two beautiful feathered patterns with the steamed milk. “Larry, they look too good to drink.” I take out my phone and take a photo of them. “Perfect!”

He smirks. “You’ve been saying that every time you come in here since you first started coming in here,” he tells me. “You weren’t much older than that kid there when you got your house.”

“Yeah, but we were mortgaged up to our eyes and both working every hour god sent, plus, Josh had a really good job. Cal, as far as I can see, just surfs. Besides, our parents helped us with a deposit when we decided to live together.”

“Oh yeah,” Lawrence says. “I forgot you were a queer.” I give him a narrow-eyed look and we both laugh.

“And I forgot you were an asshole. Give me my coffees.” I take them from the counter and turn away.

“Lou wants to know when you’re coming back over for dinner because we never see you,” he calls, because we are good friends and the queer/asshole thing is a long running joke between us. I shrug.

"I have a deadline," I inform him regretfully and he purses his lips.

"Get you!" he exclaims. "Big famous writer, too busy to spend time with his friends." I make a face at him, because he knows none of that is true. "You have time for coffee with a new neighbor but no time for socializing?" I shrug again and give him a sheepish look.

"I'm building bridges, Larry," I explain. He shakes his head as if he thinks I am a hopeless case.

Maybe I am. Am I making a fool of myself taking the time to get to know this kid? Are people going to see me spending time with him and automatically think I am chasing after him in some sort of mid-life crisis? I don't even know if the guy is gay. Am I interested? I know I've been watching him with my tongue hanging out for the last month, and I do still think he's beautiful, but there's no way the interest would ever be returned.

"We're having a party on Saturday, Jake," Lawrence tells me. "It's Lou-Anne's birthday. Come over and bring your new neighbor." I give Lawrence a look that could probably curdle milk.

"Lawrence, I'm not going to ask him to a party like some kind of date. I didn't mean those kind of bridges." Lawrence shrugs.

"Whatever, bring him anyway. George is home for Spring break, he can hang out with the cool kids while us oldies sit on the deck and grouch about old folk stuff." I laugh at this.

"Speak for yourself," I say as I walk back to Cal with our coffees. "I'll think about it." I call back over my shoulder.

"You'll think about what?" Cal asks me as I sit and I wonder how much of that conversation he actually saw.

I place the coffees on the counter in front of us and hitch up onto the high stool beside his, as he pulls off his headphones just as if he'd been using them properly rather than hiding behind them. I ignore the action, since I think asking him about it this early on in a developing friendship might put a dampener on things, especially when he gets so defensive when I just offer him a lift or a coffee.

"Lawrence, who owns the coffee shop..." I point over to the guy who is now serving someone else. "He and I are good friends. It's his wife's birthday on Saturday and he invited us to the party."

“Us?” Cal splutters, almost choking on his drink. “What do you mean us?” I see a hint of panic in Cal’s eyes, and I groan inwardly. Could he be thinking the same thing that I am? That asking him to a party sounds like I’m asking him on a date?

“I mean, that he’s invited me, and he knows you’re new and his son is home from college so there’ll be some people your age, he just thought...” I hope I’ve backtracked my way out of that.

Cal sighs and looks away.

“I don’t like parties.” He says, and not in a rude, dismissive way, it’s almost wistful. “Too many people, too much noise.” I cock my head to one side and regard him dubiously.

“You know that doesn’t actually make any sense.” I smile as I try to meet his eye and he smirks, not because he saw my words but because he reads my quizzical, confused expression.

“I don’t mean noise, as in hearing noise, I mean too much everything,” he tries to explain. “There’s always just too much going on for me to be able to focus on anything. I can’t follow all the conversations. When my parents threw parties, I usually just hid away in my room or stayed over at a friend’s.”

So, he has parents and he has friends. Where are they now though? He just seems so sad and lonely.

I shrug and try to look nonchalant. I can’t force him to go to a party where he won’t know anyone but me and me only fleetingly. I also don’t think Lawrence and Lou’s party will be a raucous drinking binge with disco balls and loud music either. It will be a couple of friends and Lawrence’s son, who I think is twenty now, will be there with a few of his friends: perfect for Cal to meet some of the people that live here.

“I guess, if you’re not staying here long though.” I watch his reaction carefully. “If you’re just here for a couple of months for the surfing, there’s no point in getting too friendly with the natives.” I make it a passing comment, as if I’m throwing away the words as I sip my coffee.

Cal regards me with narrow eyes as if he knows that I’m fishing for more information. He drains his coffee and stands.

“Thanks for the coffee, Jake and for the ride.” He turns to go and I have to pull him back again because he’s about to leave without arranging the time for going back.

“Do you want to meet for lunch?” I try not to sound too eager or desperate but I don’t want him to just walk away again. He shakes his head. “What about a ride home? I’ll be leaving about four-ish.” He shakes his head again.

“That’s okay, thanks, I’ll just get the bus.” He tells me then really does leave so I can’t call him back to change his mind and I can’t chase after him because what would that look like?

Damn it. What did I do? Was it something I said? Was asking him to a party too much? Did that scare him off? He certainly couldn’t get away from me quick enough.

He doesn’t want a ride home though, and the thought of him on that bus all on his own just eats me up inside. He’s so young, and so vulnerable. Anything could happen to him and there’s no one to look after him. He says he has parents and friends but in a month there’s been no sign of either.

What is his story? And does he really own the Steele place? That place must be worth at least three-quarters of a million, if not more.

The more I learn about him the deeper the mystery gets.

I watch him leave the coffee shop, replacing his headphones as he does. He crosses the street and disappears into the market. Then he’ll get a newspaper at the stand, and then he’ll go to the drugstore.

I rub my face and groan. Why do I know all of this? Because I’ve stalked the poor guy for a month, and now, when I thought I was making progress in getting to know him he closes off again with that fierce determination to be independent, like he needs to prove to someone, I don’t know who, that he can make it on his own.

He obviously has money. That much is apparent, at least for now. So he has no problems there. What else would he have to prove though?

What is your story, Cal?

I frown. I don’t even know his last name. He never told me.

“Your friend left in a hurry.” Lawrence muses as he comes over to clear tables, but really that’s just an excuse to come and talk to me.

“Yeah, he has some stuff to do.” I say, still staring out the window hoping I’ll catch a glimpse of him as he crosses the street.

“Did you ask him about the party?” Lawrence asks. I grimace and screw my eyes shut.

“Yeah!” I croak. “I think he might have thought I was asking him on a date.”

“Oh ho!” Lawrence exclaims and sits in the stool Cal just vacated. He gives me an extremely intense look, “Were you?” I tear my eyes away from the window and regard him with a frown.

“What?” I ask, then I gasp. “No! No I was not, and don’t start getting any ideas, he’s my neighbor, nothing else. Besides he’s too young, I’m too old for him I mean, he wouldn’t be interested, obviously isn’t since he ran a mile when I mentioned the party.”

“Pretty good-looking neighbor though, huh? Slim but well built. Is he fit?” I give a distracted nod, because Cal still hasn’t appeared from the Market yet.

“Yeah, he surfs and runs every day.” I tell him, still staring out of the window.

“Bet there’s a six pack going on underneath that T-shirt as well,” Lawrence comments.

“Oh, yeah, you betcha. A six pack to die for,” I tell him then I widen my eyes and stutter as I try to retract what I just told my friend. Lawrence gives me a smirk as he stands.

“So, just a neighbor, huh?” he says with a chuckle. I scowl.

“How do you always do that?” I ask, because he does, he gets the better of me every time and I can’t hide anything from him.

“I’m just trying to get you to be honest. You like him, so get to know him better. Take your time. If he isn’t gay you’ll find out soon enough and if he is, then he might just ask you out on a date.”

“Since when did you become the relationship expert?” I ask him, also smirking. Lawrence has been married to Lou-Anne for almost twenty-five years. He hasn’t had to think about dating for a long time.

“Hey, I might be off the market but I remember how it was, and don’t forget I have George calling me up every other day asking me how to ask some girl or other out, so it hasn’t changed much in twenty years I assure you.” I sigh and nod.

“I guess,” I say sadly. “Just never really thought I’d ever have to go through it all again.” He stands at my shoulder and places his hand on my arm.

"I know," he mutters gently. "But you have to excuse me if I jump to conclusions when I see you suddenly show an interest in a guy when you've practically lived as a hermit for the last thirteen years."

I regard him with shock. Was I showing that kind of interest in Cal? Was I being that obvious? Is that why Cal ran off? I have no idea.

"Come to our party, with or without your new neighbor." Lawrence urges me, and I nod.

"I will, Larry, I promise."

I decide I need to get on with my own shopping and not think too much about Cal's quick escape and the reasons behind it.

If he really has bought the Steele place then he might just be staying longer than the summer months, so there is plenty of time to get to know him better before blundering in there with both feet in my mouth like I just did.

The rest of my week I'm stuck indoors finishing my manuscript. So I have no real opportunity to speak to Cal about the party again. Not that I think he will change his mind, I just want the opportunity to speak to him that's all.

He doesn't stop waving to me when he sees me about. We pass comments about the weather but that is all. He always disappears before I can strike up a conversation about anything else. I guess he sees I'm busy and doesn't want to get in my way.

I don't mind him getting in my way at all. It's just as well though, because by the time Saturday comes around I have finished my work, sent off the manuscript, and I'm ready to celebrate. Lou-Anne's party is the perfect excuse.

I do try to ask him one more time about the party, but he politely refuses. I'm a little sad that he won't be joining me, but finishing my book means I will have plenty of time to spend on getting to know him next week. So maybe we can do something next weekend. Hopefully, his refusal is simply because he doesn't like parties and not because he doesn't like me.

Chapter Six

Moonlit Serenade

“Why do you think he said no, Lawrence?” I ask, probably for about the fiftieth time that evening, and I see I am now trying my friend’s patience because he heaves a frustrated sigh.

“For god’s sake, Jake,” he tells me, handing me another beer. I have now lost track of how many I have had. “You’ve been talking about this man nonstop since you got here. Why don’t you put us all out of our misery and call the guy?”

“Don’t have his number,” I huff sadly, feeling my shoulders droop and my lip stick out in an exaggerated pout but not being able to prevent it because I am very drunk.

There’s no way I’ll be driving home tonight. I had intended only to stay a few hours and then drive home so I brought my car, which will have to stay here over night while I get a cab home.

A few hours has turned into a late night/early morning drinking session and mostly me talking about Cal like some lovesick teenager.

I’ve seen him briefly every day since Monday but not enough to make me think he wants to be anything more than just acquainted with his much older, creepy neighbor. I think he knows that I’ve been watching him too. Shit.

“You live next door to the guy, Jake, how can you not already have his number?” Lou-Anne pipes up her tone semi-amused. I turn my head, a little slowly because I don’t want the room to start spinning just yet.

“Yeah, okay, Lou-Anne, I know sometimes I’m a little more forward but he’s different and getting his number wouldn’t do any good since he’s deaf, he can’t talk on the phone.” I snort derisively as if this is something they all should have known, but of course, they don’t, because Cal hides it so well with those headphones and he doesn’t speak to anyone unless he absolutely has to.

“He’s deaf?” Lou-Anne asks, not incredulously, although she is giving me a strange look. “He might not be able to talk on the phone, Jake, but have you ever heard of texting?”

I frown. Of course I’ve heard of texting, I just prefer to speak in person. I use my cell phone for calling. I guess texts are useful sometimes, but they’re so

impersonal. I don't do social media at all unless my agent has my arm twisted behind my back. The internet just doesn't like me.

I bet it likes Cal though. I'll bet it rolls over and exposes its belly to Cal. I'd like to roll over and expose my belly to that beautiful, blond, surfer... Oops, who tipped the world on its side?

"Earth to Jacob," Lawrence calls and I snap out of my daydream, as he props me back up to an upright position. "So if you can't call him, go over and talk to him in person. Ask him out." Lawrence suggests and I snort again, feeling myself sway just a little and the room lurches slightly. I mentally command it to stay where it is.

"Larry, how in this universe would it be in any way acceptable for a forty-five year old man to ask out a twenty-one year old? He's the same age as your son," I point out. "Would you be happy if I asked George out?" There is a flicker of the protective parent across Lawrence's face but Lou-Anne answers for both of them.

"George isn't gay and you've known him since he was born so that gives you a whole different perspective on how you see him," she tells me. "This guy next door, you don't actually know how old he is, he could be older, and besides, you can't go placing barriers like age in the way because if you do that where do you draw the line?"

I shrug. The age thing is a barrier though, because Cal is never going to be attracted to me.

"You are a good looking man, Jacob Reuben, and anyone would be flattered to be asked out on a date by you," Lou-Anne tells me, and I huff and dismiss her praise with a drunken, clumsy wave of my hand. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"He could think I'm a pervert and slam the door in my face," I suggest. Lou-Anne shakes her head. "I don't even know if he's gay."

"Was that a barrier when Josh asked you out that first time?" She asks me, and I shake my head, because Josh never saw any barriers, just fences to climb over. He hadn't known if I was gay but he'd asked me out anyway. I hadn't even thought about it really, until his invitation sparked my curiosity, and I accepted.

We were together ten years before he... well, let's not reopen old wounds.

Lou-Anne makes a sympathetic noise in the back of her throat and lays a hand on my arm.

“Josh wouldn’t want you to have been on your own for so long,” she tells me quietly, and I nod sadly.

“I know, but it’s not for the want of trying Lou-Anne,” I whine, but she snorts.

“In thirteen years how many dates have you been on?” she asks, and I shrug.

“I don’t know.” I take another swig of the beer I probably shouldn’t have accepted because I’d had too many two beers ago. “I haven’t been counting.”

“Well I have, Jake, and it’s four.” I stare at her as she holds up what I think must be four fingers but actually looks more like eight or maybe twelve depending on which eye I use. “You say it’s not for the want of trying, Jake. I say you’re living like a hermit and this guy next door has definitely caught your interest. I think you owe it to yourself to at least try to take things further.”

“What if he just wants to be friends?” I ask, wondering if I could actually manage this because being with him in any capacity would be better than not seeing him at all.

“So, then just be friends, and don’t rush it,” she suggests. “Even if he doesn’t want to date you, at least you’ll have a new friend.” She leans forward and whispers, “Plus, you could always accept friendship at first and hope for more later. If he is attracted to you it won’t take long for you to start seeing the signs. You’re a very handsome man though, and there are plenty more fish in the sea if this Cal doesn’t work out.”

I shrug again, at least I think it’s a shrug because I’m not sure my body is still wired to my brain at the moment, and the room I was trying to keep from swirling is now moving in circles around me and increases in speed if I try to stop it. I’m not even going to attempt to stand up. I do have to reply to Lou-Anne’s statement though because I think she just offered to set me up. The last time that happened was a disaster of monumental proportions.

“I don’ need help, thanksh, Lou,” I tell her, holding a hand up in thanksh, er thanks, “I’m getting too old for shtuff like thish anyways.”

“Jake that’s bullshit and you know it,” she tells me, but I think she is laughing, because Lawrence is holding my arm to prevent me from falling over, which I didn’t even know I was doing.

“You’ve had a bit too much to drink, my friend,” he tells me. “Let me give you a ride home.” He helps me to my feet, but since I can’t actually feel my feet it is a little difficult to stand on them.

“No feet, bud.” I tell him as my legs become boneless and I collapse in a heap at his feet. “You have really nice feet though. Can I take yoursh inshtead?” I hug onto his ankles and I hear distant laughter before I feel someone’s hands on my arms hoisting me up.

Lawrence wraps one of my arms around his shoulders and I turn to nuzzle into the skin at the base of his neck.

“Mmmm!” I hum, “You smell really good, Lawrence.” I point out and he snorts.

“Jesus, you’re such a dorky drunk, Jake. I hate to disappoint you but I’m happily married to the wife that’s currently watching you trying to give me a hickey.”

I wrap my other arm around him and hang onto him, clamping my lips onto his skin and making him yelp.

“S’okay, I’m sure Lou-Anne won’t mind.” I turn and flop my head to one side to try to focus on which Lou-Anne I’m supposed to be talking to. “We could even let her watch,” I suggest.

Lou-Anne chuckles and shakes her head.

“Get him out of here before he passes out,” she tells her husband, then she points a finger at me. “And don’t you try anything mister, he’s taken.”

I give her an impish grin and a slow, clumsy wink. She knows I’d never do anything like that, and so does Lawrence, that’s why he’s willing to drive his amorous drunk friend home. I’ll probably be asleep by the time he gets me there anyway.

The moon is really beautiful tonight and I just want to sit and sing to it, but I can’t actually sit. So, I lie, with my back on the porch and my legs dangling over the steps, singing any song I can think of with the word “moon” in it. I can think of quite a few, although I only seem to be able to remember the first couple of lines of each one so I settle on a medley.

I can’t actually remember how I got here. I think I was at a party at Lawrence’s, and he may or may not have given me a ride home. I may or may not have tried his and his wife’s patience by talking constantly about Cal. I may or may not have given my best friend a hickey, but it’s all a little vague right now.

I do remember stumbling up my front steps, trying to get the world to stop spinning. I may or may not have fallen over, but however I got into this position the world is no longer spinning and I feel kind of relaxed and happy.

This is nice: moonlight, music, the world is staying still for now, and my porch, at least I think it's my porch, is really quite comfortable to lie on. There's just one thing missing.

"Jake, what in hell are you doing?" Oh yeah, an angel to share it all with, that's what's missing.

I sit up, at least I attempt to sit up, and gaze into the very blue, angelic eyes of Cal. God he's beautiful. I reach out to touch his face, but it's a little far away for me to actually touch, and a little out of focus. I frown though, because he looks unhappy.

"Oh, angel, don't be sad." I tell him. When his frown deepens to a scowl, I change my tack, "Hi, Cal!" I say with as much enthusiasm as I can muster as the world starts to spin once more. I fall onto my back again, because there the world was cooperating. I'm a little sad, though because I can no longer see Cal's lovely face.

"Jake, it's three in the morning, what are you doing out here?" he asks me as his face comes back into view. I can't tell if he's concerned or if he's amused, there's a mixture of both in those gorgeous eyes.

"I'm singing to the moon, lovely, lovely man." I tell him, as if this is something that should be understood, he should understand it.

"Is that what you were doing?" he asks as he takes a seat beside me on the steps. "I don't think you should be doing it at three in the morning though, especially when you're drunk."

I regard him with one eye closed.

"Pfft!" I snort. "I'm not drunk, I'm just happy." I tell him, and he chuckles.

"Okay, but you still shouldn't be out here, anything could happen to you." I prop myself up on one elbow and poke him in the side, after several attempts because I can't actually tell which one of him is real.

"You're out here," I accuse him. "Hey, since you're here, wanna sing with me?" He snorts again.

"I can't sing, Jake, not really my thing," is his sad reply.

“Oh, sorry!” I hang my head with a pout. Shit, I made him sad, and I don’t want him to be sad, I want him to smile.

His finger hooks beneath my chin and lifts my head so he can see my lips. Mmm! I imagine my lips, on his lips. They look so soft. I close my eyes, what a perfectly lovely dream. I open my eyes again and smile broadly as a beautiful face with amazing bright blue eyes, comes into focus properly, if briefly.

It’s Cal, the man I’ve been watching for so long, but what is he doing out here on my porch?

“Hi, Cal,” I say. “I was just thinking about you. What are you doing out here, you shouldn’t be out on your own so late.” He rolls his eyes.

“I just asked you that.” He says.

“You did?” I frown in confusion, I think I might be a little drunk. “I’m singing,” I announce, trying very hard to pronounce the words properly for him to see what I’m saying.

“Yes!” he nods. “We already established that.” He moves his hands too, which I think might have been a bit of sign language.

I catch one of his hands in mine and pull it open to examine it closely. He has long slender fingers. They’re almost elegant.

“Nice hands,” I say. “I always knew you’d have nice hands.”

He pulls away with a gasp, then stands.

“Come on, let’s get you inside, you can’t stay out here all night,” he attempts to get me to stand up too.

“Why not?” I whine. “It’s lovely out here, the moonlight is incredible, the sky is so clear and the company is amazing.” I meet his eyes and they widen slightly, then he pulls me the rest of the way to standing and leads me, stumbling and tripping to my front door.

“Keys?” he asks and I fumble in my pocket, frowning because the keys won’t cooperate.

“Why don’t you ever smile, Cal?” I ask as I fish around in my pit of a pocket. He lifts my head to look directly at me with another frown.

“What?” he asks in confusion, and I realize he didn’t see what I said. I reach out and touch his cheek and he gasps but doesn’t pull away.

“Smile!” I say. “You don’t ever smile.”

“Y-yes I do,” he tells me, but I shake my head, then steady myself against the doorframe as the action makes me slightly dizzy and the world is once more spinning alarmingly fast.

“No you don’t,” I slur, rubbing my thumb across his bottom lip. “You smile with your mouth, but not...” My hand moves up to touch his eyebrow gently. “Not your eyes.” He seems a little lost for words so I continue, “What makes you smile, Cal?” I ask him, gently drawing my finger down his cheek.

He pulls away from me with a flicker of surprise and perhaps anger in his eyes. Oh god, I am so drunk, I don’t even know what I’m doing. I think I just went one step too far with my next door neighbor. His quick movement put me off balance though. I fall forwards, but he catches me, his arms underneath mine, hoisting me to standing again.

“Oh, my god, you are so wasted, Jake.” Is that a slightly more genuine grin on his face?

“Oh, look at you.” I sigh. “That’s a much better smile. Lights up your face.” I lean close to him and his eyes widen and his breath hitches in his throat. “I’d like to make every part of you smile like that,” I whisper softly.

He gives an incredulous laugh then moves me away from him.

“Keys!” he orders, holding his hand out for them, and I immediately go back to trying to find them.

“They are in here somewhere, Cal,” I tell him. “I just can’t seem to locate them.” I present my stretched open pocket to him and he steps away from me with his hands in the air in surrender.

“Jake,” he exclaims, laughing helplessly, “there is no way I am putting my hand in your pocket.” I shrug, give him a goofy smile and a clumsy wink and fish out my keys.

“Worth a try though,” I tell him, then I groan and turn and lean my forehead against the door frame. “Holy shit, I’m so drunk.”

“Jake!” Cal exclaims in frustration and I realize I have turned away from him again.

“Cal!” I say in the same tone as I turn back. “Please ignore everything I just said, because I am so very drunk, and I am going to be very hung over in the morning and probably won’t remember a thing.”

“Really!” Cal says, sounding dubious and also a little relieved I think.

I try to aim my key towards the key hole but miss.

“Damn, who fitted the extra key hole? I can’t see which hole to put it into.” I huff. Cal chuckles and takes the key from me.

“I sincerely hope that isn’t something you usually have any problem with!” he mumbles, but the door is open and his face is turned from me as he attempts to stop me from falling inside, so I can’t really reply anyway.

My feet refuse to work, so my body is inside but my feet aren’t.

“Come on Jake.” Cal grunts, trying to pull me inside. “Stop messing around. I can’t carry you.”

“It’s an interesting thought though,” I reply, waggling my eyebrows at him.

He chuckles then grabs me before I tip over again because I am standing at a rather stupid angle. He pulls me inside a little too quickly and I over balance.

Suddenly I’m lying on the floor, but something soft broke my fall.

“Nnngh, Jake, gerroff me you great oaf.” Cal grunts.

Oh my god, I’m lying on top of him. How the hell did that happen?

Suddenly I realize I’m lying on top of *him*. Oh, he’s so soft and warm and he smells so good. He’s struggling. Shit!

I tip off him and lie on my back holding my head.

“Shit Cal, I’m sorry, I’m so fucking drunk I don’t know which way is up.” He is going to leave now, because that was one drunken stumble too far.

He shuffles to a sitting position and then I hear something that sends my spirits soaring. He’s laughing: a full on genuine laugh. When I manage to focus on him, he’s wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. His laughter is infectious and a relief when I thought he’d be totally pissed. Soon, I’m wiping tears from my eyes too.

“Where were you to get so drunk, tonight, Jake?” he asks me as he helps me to a standing position then supports me with my arm around his shoulders as we walk into the kitchen.

“I was at that birthday party, remember?” I remind him. “The one you didn’t want to go to.” I don’t hide the extreme disappointment in my tone, and I think I might be pouting. He simply nods his head in understanding, not reacting to anything else.

“Right.” He says, then frowns. “Did you drive home?” He sounds disapproving.

“Pfft, no.” I snort, although I can’t actually remember how I got home, did Lawrence bring me? I seem to recall bending his ear about Cal while we were sitting in his car. Was he driving? “Lawrence drove me I think. I’ll have to get my car tomorrow.” I frown again and give him a curious look. “What are you doing up so late?” I face palm because god that sounds so lame, and I’m not his parent. Cal, however is looking extremely embarrassed, and I don’t really know why.

“I, er, kind of saw you go out,” he says, not meeting my eye. “And when I woke up about twenty minutes ago I noticed your car wasn’t there, so I looked over and saw you just lying on your porch. I didn’t know what you were doing, but I thought I’d better come over and see if you needed any help.”

“Were you watching to see if I got home okay?” I ask, frowning. Because that’s my job, isn’t it? He snorts, but looks away awkwardly.

“No!” he says forcefully. “I just woke up and happened to look out of the window.” I don’t believe him, but I don’t have the brain power left to question him about it. Something is ringing in the back of my head though, like bells.

“I did the same on Monday.” I confess with a shrug, and he looks at me funny, waiting for me to continue as he helps me up onto a stool at my kitchen counter. “When you didn’t want a ride home, I did my shopping then went back to the coffee shop and waited until you got on the bus, then I raced it back here and waited to check you got home safe.”

“You didn’t need to do that.” He looks a little taken aback rather than angry.

“Yes I did.” I reach out and touch his arm. “You’re so young and on your own, I was worried about you.”

“I can look after myself.” He frowns.

“I know that, but everyone needs someone to watch over them.” I nod. “Even the independent ones, in fact, those ones need a guardian angel more than anyone else.”

“Are you thinking of applying for the job, then, Jake?” Cal gives me such a direct look it scares and confuses me, and I turn away because I can’t meet his eye.

There is an awkward silence as I try to process what just happened here. Are we confessing to each other? That can’t be right, we hardly know each other. I

think I might have come on a little strong out on the porch, but he is still here, when he could have just seen me inside and left. I don't want to push it though, and I am far too drunk to do anything else but fall into bed and sleep anyway.

Why did I have to drink so much at Lawrence's? I don't usually get this wasted, but I was celebrating finishing my manuscript then we started talking about old times, and then I got talking about Cal and time and beers just got away from me.

"Oh god, I'm getting too old for this." I groan as I hold my head in my hands. I lift my head up and face Cal as I continue, "I don't do this very often, I feel the need to point out." He raises his eyebrows, "I don't!" I exclaim indignantly. He gets up and walks across my kitchen.

"Do you want me to make you a drink or something?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"Just water, please. Glasses are in the cupboard above the kettle." I grimace. "You don't have to do this." He shrugs as he hands me a glass of water and I thank him. "I used to go out drinking all the time but now, it takes longer to recover from the hangover than it does to get drunk so it's not even worth it unless it's a special occasion."

I groan and hold my head. It's starting to throb now and my stomach is not feeling its best really.

"I think I'm gonna throw up," I announce to the world in general.

"Oh my god," Cal exclaims, "and you think I need someone to look after me?" He stands and helps me up. "Let's get you to the bathroom." I shake my head.

"No! No! I'm fine now, just a wave, it'll pass." He lets go, and I sit back down.

"Holy shit."

"Getting old, Cal," I start to ramble, because I know he is about to say it's time for him to go, but I want him to stay, even though the sensible part of me is screaming at me to let the guy go because it's three in the morning. The drunk part of me wants to hold onto him as long as I can. "I never thought it would ever happen to me, though," I continue.

"Thought what would happen?" he asks.

"Getting old," I repeat. "Fucking sucks," I curse, then apologize and burp and apologize again.

I look up and I see he appears to be trying not to laugh. Well, good, I'll continue then, because he needs to laugh more.

"When I was your age I could do this every night, well not every night, but more often and not have any kind of hangover. Now though, shit, I am gonna regret this when I get up in the morning, if I get up. Have you any idea what it feels like to get old?"

"You are not old, Jake." Cal rolls his eyes and I want to kiss him for that compliment. What a lovely thing to say. What a lovely person to be saying such a lovely thing.

"You wake up one morning and you have hair growing out of your ears, Cal... *hair*," I continue with an incredulous tone of voice. He snorts.

"You are not old enough to have hair in your ears," he assures me, then he looks into my ear before he speaks again. "You don't have any hair in your ears."

"I found one." I sadly hold up a finger. "Just the other day. One, but that's enough. I pulled it out, but it's still there, waiting to grow back, hiding until it knows I'm not watching then pow, it explodes out of my ear like some kinda bear factory mutant trying to set up shop in my earlobe. I'm old, past it, over the hill, past my expiry date, wrinkled and hairy. I'm shrinking," I wail and he giggles out loud. What an amazingly sweet sound.

"No, you're not," he assures me. "You're the same height as you were on Monday."

"Well, maybe I was exaggerating a little, but you just have no idea, Cal, really. When I was your age, what are you twenty, twenty-one?"

"Twenty-one," he replies. I am momentarily thrown by this information. I audibly groan, for many reasons but mainly because I had guessed right. God he's just so beautiful and young, with so much life ahead of him, so many possibilities.

"When I was twenty-one I had all the answers. You'll know how that feels right? Because you're twenty-one right now."

"I don't have all the answers, Jake, I wish I did," he says sadly, suddenly not laughing anymore. "Sometimes I don't even know the question because I didn't hear it."

"Oh that's good, that's funny," I laugh heartily. "You're funny, Cal." I see his serious expression though, and shake my head, immediately ceasing my

laughter. "No, that's not funny. I don't think that's funny at all. It must really suck."

"I get by!" He shrugs.

"But you shouldn't have to get by, Cal, you should be out, enjoying life, having fun, finding someone to make you smile," I tell him. Cal regards me with a curious, unreadable expression on his face.

"I think I already did," he whispers softly.

Oh god, when did that happen? I haven't seen him with anyone. Maybe he met them on Monday. Why did I take my eyes off him for even a second?

"Good." I nod, trying to sound pleased for him. "That's great." It's so not great that it's almost painful, but I can't let him see that. "When did you meet him/her/it." He frowns and bites his lip as he looks at me funny. "Sorry," I grimace, "I can be a little nosy when I'm drunk, even when I'm not drunk, I assumed some things there that I had no right assuming."

"If I was to define who I would be most interested in," he tells me, still with that curious, slightly confused look on his face, "it would be your first assumption: a he."

"Oh, well that's just great," I say with more than a little enthusiasm, then I remember that he's trying to tell me he has met someone he likes and doesn't need me drooling over him. "I mean, not that I'm saying... you know, that we... er... I mean, I'm gay too," I blurt out.

"You make that sound like a confession." He chuckles.

"It's not, it's really not, but I just thought you might like to know that anyway," I'm aware that I'm rambling, but I can't stop myself. "So you know you have an ally, just so you know." God, I am such a fool, such an old, drunk, damn stupid fool.

"I already knew it," Cal says quietly, and I raise my eyebrows.

"You did?"

"Yep, like I already know you're a writer because I've read all of your books."

"You have?" My ears are ringing again, and the world is beginning to spin uncontrollably. I can't really form more than two word answers without danger of throwing up. I know I should be more interested in what he's saying. I just can't even keep my eyes focused.

“You would not believe how excited I was when I realized Jacob Reuben was my next door neighbor.”

I regard him with one eye closed.

“The reality is a bit of an anticlimax, huh?” I ask him, although I can't really be sure that's actually what I said.

“No, it's kind of the opposite actually,” he confesses, his eyes shining, then looks me directly in the eye. “And I can tell you this because I don't suppose you'll remember in the morning,” he tells me, hopefully.

“I don't suppose I will, no.” I shake my head. I don't think my brain has even registered what he's said right now let alone remember in a few hours' time. My eyes close as the world starts spinning again. He helps me stand with a grunt.

“Come on, funny guy, let's get to bed.” He pauses with a gasp. “Er, I mean I'll take you to bed, I mean, I'll help you get to your bedroom.”

“Are you helping me to my room?” I ask, smiling slightly stupidly and showing too much teeth. He smirks, as he helps me along the hall.

“Yes, Jake, I am, except I don't know which one is yours.” We stop outside my room and I pat the door.

“This one,” I tell him brightly.

“Great, so now I'm helping you into your room,” he informs me helpfully. He's such a nice person, so gentle, so strong, so warm to touch; just the right amount of hair on his arms to feel silky and soft. He makes me want to purr.

He deposits me on my bed, on my back and I fall with a startled giggle. I open my eyes to see him having some kind of struggle with his emotions, it's playing across his face, but the emotions are all so tangled and mixed up and my vision is so blurry I can't read what he's thinking. He's so lovely though, so gorgeous.

“You're so beautiful, Cal.” He blushes from his neck to the roots of his hair.

“Thank you,” he replies and I realize I said that out loud.

I sit suddenly to explain what I've just said, but the sudden change of position was a bad idea. I feel my stomach churn and the room spins deliriously fast. I hold up my hand and place my fingers to my lips, swallowing hard and trying to stay upright.

"I'm really gonna throw up this time," I warn him so he has time to run. Instead, he sits down beside me and runs his hand down my back.

"Want me to stay?" he asks. Oh god, yes please, but I shake my head, because that would be a really bad idea.

"No, you'd better go. I already lost ninety-five percent of my dignity, don't let me lose the rest in front of you, please. I'm sure you have no desire to see an old guy shouting to Huey down the toilet bowl." He snorts then stands as I do. He pushes me in the direction of my bathroom and he moves towards my bedroom door.

"Okay I'm going then, but I'll come back tomorrow to see if you're okay." I turn and stumble towards him, then press my door key into the palm of his hand.

"Take my key, because I'll still be in bed, I might even be dead. Old people die in their sleep sometimes." He rolls his eyes.

"Oh my god. Word of advice, Jake, please don't die in your sleep, I would be very unhappy if you did."

He gives me a kiss on the cheek and my reaction time is so slowed by alcohol I missed my chance there, because if I hadn't been so wasted I would have turned my head and caught his lips with mine and we'd have kissed. I wonder how much further it could have gone if I'd done that.

Oh holy shit, I'm screwed, and I'm going to die I feel so crappy: about everything. He's gone and probably won't be back, even though he has my key. He'll probably just post it through my mail slot tomorrow with a restraining order.

I stumble across the floor to my bathroom and make it just in time before I splatter the inside of my toilet bowl. Yeuch!

When I'm done I crawl back into bed and fall into a disturbed, restless sleep filled with confessions of attraction and love and desire and that's just from Cal. I have an overactive, fucking imagination, that's my problem.

Chapter Seven

Hangover!

Urgh!

Why did I think drinking so much last night was such a good idea? I should have been more careful. I should have paced myself. I should have been more responsible.

There're a lot of things I should have done but I didn't. Well, I'm living with the consequences this morning.

Is it morning?

I don't even know, except the sun is shining directly into my brain from somewhere.

Somebody please turn it off!

I can't remember anything about last night after Lawrence brought out the whiskey. After that it's all very sketchy at best. How did I even get home? Did someone give me a ride? I hope they did. I hope to god I didn't drive in this state. Neither Lawrence nor Lou-Anne would have let me, surely.

I reach across the bed and grab my phone. I wince at the cacophony of pain the movement sets off and then again at the brightness of my phone screen.

There is one text from Lawrence:

"We're bringing your car round early because I have to open shop for Lou-Anne. She's a little worse for wear this morning. Hope your head isn't too bad. L."

"Thanks. Just put my keys through the mail slot because I'm dying."

I text back, then throw my phone onto the bed covers without looking at the time.

I cover my head with my pillow to block out the excruciatingly bright sunshine. I have no curtains mainly because no one overlooks me so what would actually be the point, and also so that the first thing I see when I wake up is the incredible view of the beach. It also means the sun has no barrier when it wants to wake me up and it really wants to wake me up today, and make me suffer.

Oh boy am I suffering. My head is pounding, my stomach is churning and my tongue feels like an old, dry leather insole. I don't think I dare risk moving at all right now because either my head will explode or my stomach will.

Maybe I should go back to sleep.

I close my eyes to attempt to forget the fact that I am close to death but they shoot open again when I hear the front door. I hold my breath waiting for the inevitable call from my sister, who is the only other person in the world that has a key to my house.

There is no call.

Who the hell just opened my door then?

I listen some more but there is nothing. Then I remember Lawrence's text; it was probably him putting my car keys through my door, like I asked him to.

I close my eyes again and drift off to sleep.

In a semi dream-like state, I start imagining all sorts of things, mixed with remembering things that happened last night, except I can't tell which are real memories and which are just wishful thinking.

Did I talk to Cal last night? I remember seeing him. I was very close to him at one point, touching his cheek in such an intimate way that it can have been nothing else but a dream. There are other things too that don't seem to be right. Did we talk? Why would we? Why would he even have been up when I got home, it was way after midnight.

Nngh! Stop thinking, Jake, it's causing pain.

Sleep, I need sleep.

When I next wake, it's to the sound of the waves lapping on the beach and birds calling outside my window and I realize the French doors that lead from my bedroom onto the deck have been opened to let in some fresh air. When did I do that?

I feel a little better so I must have slept off most of my hangover. I still feel like shit, but no longer as if I am going to die three times over. The fresh air has definitely helped.

When exactly did I get up and open my French doors though?

Intrigued now, I gingerly move to a sitting position and then, when nothing seems to be pounding, throbbing, or threatening to break, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed.

I am still wearing the shirt and boxers I had on last night, but at some point, after throwing up, I took off my pants.

I don't remember throwing up. I just know I did because my throat feels as if it's been rasped with sandpaper.

I groan. I haven't gotten that drunk in a long, long time. It's just not a great idea when you live on your own: no one to look after you the next day.

My throat is actually very dry, and so is my mouth, painfully so. I could really use a cool glass of... oh... there is a glass of water on my nightstand. When did that appear there?

I pick it up. It is deliciously cool; it has ice in it and a slice of lemon. What. The. Fuck?

Who put this here? It can't have been here long. The ice hasn't even begun to melt.

I sure as hell didn't get it and if Sarah was here she would have made a show of waking me up and making sure I knew how much she disapproved of the state I am in.

I smell it cautiously.

"It isn't poisoned, I promise."

"Holy Shit!" I screech. The voice startles me so much I drop the glass and its contents in my lap. I do a weird little juggling act with the glass and ice cubes as the whole lot is dumped in my lap. I jump up with a yelp because it's damn cold. I turn to the source of the voice, which seemed to come from my deck.

Cal's face is peeking above the back of one of my wicker loungers. His eyes widen when he sees I have spilled my water all over myself and he gasps.

"Oh my god, Jake." He exclaims as he jumps up from the lounge, tipping a protesting Jizzie from his lap. He rushes through my room and out into the hall still speaking, "I am so sorry!" he calls back.

He returns a few moments later with a cloth and starts to soak up the water which I haven't bothered to do myself because I'm still wondering what the hell he's doing here in the first place.

He is soaking up water from my lap now and I stop him, because I am just wearing boxers, wet ones now, that will not be hiding anything.

“Er, thanks, I can manage,” I say, taking the towel from him.

He takes a deep breath and stands, stepping back towards the French doors. Jizzie is by his feet, weaving in and out of his legs. Her name is well earned.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Cal says as I continue to dry myself. “You gave me your key last night and it got past noon and you still weren’t up so I came over. I thought you might need some TLC.” His entire body is hunched and tense and his eyes are wide and wary.

I mean, I’m startled, and more than a little confused as to why he would want to do this but I’m not going to complain if he’s come over to look after me. Wait, I gave him my key?

“When did I give you my key?” I ask him. He bites his lip and I realize my tone is doing nothing to reassure him I’m not angry.

“Last night,” he tells me. “You don’t remember?” I shake my head. “You said you wouldn’t. I never actually met someone who got so drunk they couldn’t remember what they did.”

I’m not sure whether it’s in disapproval or in awe of the fact. I’d prefer the former, since I wouldn’t want to be labelled as a bad role model. He also looks, I don’t know, a little relieved to be honest. What’s that all about?

God this is terrible. I can’t remember a fucking thing. I groan and hold my head. Cal is at my side, his hand on my arm and his blue eyes full of concern.

“Are you alright?” he asks. “Want me to make you some coffee, get you some painkillers?”

What is this? Role reversal day? Cal isn’t supposed to be the one looking after me, not in my version of the universe anyway. I should be looking after him; protecting him; keeping him safe.

Now what am I thinking? Yes, I need some coffee because my brain needs straightening out.

“Coffee, Cal, thank you. That would be fucking amazing.” I fall back onto the bed, because despite the fact it is slightly damp now, I am still completely wrecked.

Lying here on my back looking up at Cal as he regards me almost expectantly triggers a memory in my alcohol fuddled brain. He was here last night, looking down at me in this exact same position.

I frown. I don't remember anything else. My hands cover my face and I groan again. I peek through my fingers and see Cal still staring down at me, as if he's in some sort of trance, except he isn't looking at my face.

"Cal, Coffee!" I bark, snapping him out of his daydream.

"Coming right up," he calls, and bolts through my bedroom into the hall.

I lift my head and glance down at myself. What a fucking state I'm in. Of course, he was staring. I'm lying here in wet boxers. And I still didn't get a drink of water.

I stumble into my bathroom with the now empty glass. I fill it at my sink and drink thirstily, wiping my mouth and filling it again, drinking another half a tumbler before my thirst is quenched.

"Oh, god, that's much better."

Now I dare to look at myself in the mirror. Holy shit I look like fucking death warmed up. What did Cal say? It's past noon? He must think I'm such a slob, or worse: some kind of alcoholic.

I feel bad barking at him like that, but I'm cranky in the morning, I mean afternoon, especially with the mother of all hangovers. And he was staring, and making me feel, I don't know, uncomfortable?

I walk back out into my room and change out of my wet things. I pull on some sweats and a clean T-shirt, strip my bed, because the edge of the sheet is damp, then pad out, yawning and scratching through my bed hair to straighten it out a tad. I want to see how Cal is coping in my kitchen. I'm hoping it is clean and presentable because I'm not the tidiest of guys.

"Hello!" A female voice calls, and I freeze half way along my hall.

This is all I fucking need: my sister. Couldn't she have called first? Maybe she did though, I haven't checked my cell or my voice mail.

Oh shit, she's gonna find Cal in my kitchen and me in my sweats having just got out of bed. What is that going to look like?

"Jake, I brought you some apple muffins," Sarah calls as she approaches the kitchen and I just listen, helpless to stop this inevitable meeting. "I used Mom's recipe. They're still warm if you... oh!"

That's it; she's going to be jumping to all sorts of conclusions now. I should have headed her off but my body just isn't working quick enough to have reached her before she reached Cal. Plus, part of me is curious to see how he

reacts and interacts with someone else other than me without those damn headphones over his ears.

“Who are you?” Sarah is asking as I reach the kitchen door. She sounds amused more than anything.

“Er, hi, I’m Cal,” Cal is saying and I imagine he’s holding out his hand, and giving her the benefit of those baby blues.

“Uhuh!” my sister replies, sounding unaffected. “Mind telling me what you’re doing in my brother’s kitchen, Cal?” she asks.

“I’m erm, making him some coffee?” Cal tells her, making it sound like a question.

“Oh, that’s nice. And where exactly is Jake?” she asks, an edge to her voice that I don’t understand.

“H-he’s in his room, getting dressed.”

Holy fuck, this is not going well. I think I’d better get in there and give some better explanations.

“Hi!” I say as I enter the kitchen trying not to look like I just got out of bed, but I know my hair will be the giveaway: that and the fact my eyes are hanging somewhere around my knees at the minute and probably look like piss holes in the snow.

“Oh, hello!” Sarah says sarcastically as she approaches me and stretches up to kiss me on the cheek. She gives me a significant look, nudging her head ever so slightly towards Cal, then her eyes twinkle and she smirks. “Just got up have we?” she asks.

I ignore her question, opting for checking that Cal is not freaking out because he looks like a rabbit caught in car headlights. I meet his gaze as I step further into the room and raise my eyebrows. Out of sight of my sister, I sign to him “okay?” And his eyes widen then he smiles and nods, signing “yes” almost imperceptibly. This is the extent of my sign language knowledge though.

“Cal, this is my sister, Sarah.” I tell him and he grimaces slightly as I turn to Sarah. “Sarah, this is Cal,”

“Yes,” she says, that twinkle still in her eyes. “I know, we just met.”

“Er, Jake.” Cal calls, and I turn to him. “I think I should probably go.” He looks awkward and tense, but I don’t want him to go.

My eyes are pleading and apologetic but he grimaces and looks past me at my sister. I sigh as I accept the inevitable: that this is another missed chance to get to know him better, and it was such a nice feeling having him here looking after me.

Sarah, at this point, has this smug smirk on her face as she watches Cal and I interact. What is going through her head right now? I probably don't want to know, but I don't want Cal to go without talking to him a little and at least thanking him for being here in the first place.

I take his hand, trying to ignore the electric shock that courses up my arm as I do, and pull him out of the kitchen, through the living room and out to the front door.

"You know you don't have to go, Sarah probably won't stay long." I am whispering because I don't want Sarah to hear but knowing it doesn't matter how loud I say it to him.

Cal shrugs. "That's okay, I should go anyway. I just came to check you were okay after last night." I smile at him and touch his arm in thanks.

"Thank you, that was incredibly nice of you considering I probably acted like an ass." Cal chuckles and his eyes sparkle.

If I didn't feel so crappy I would be able to enjoy the full impact of that lovely, genuine smile he just gave me and that delightful pink blush on his cheeks, but I can't right now so I store it all away for future reference.

"You weren't an ass, Jake, you were kinda funny," he tells me. "You were singing." I raise my eyebrows and grimace.

"Oh god!" I exclaim in embarrassment. He chuckles again.

"Sometimes being deaf is a blessing." He has a wicked twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Hey!" I say archly, feeling myself blush. "And I thought you were a really nice guy as well." He bites his lip but continues to smirk.

"I really should go though." Before he can turn, as he usually does in order to end a conversation, I stop him with a hand on his arm.

"Maybe I'll see you later?" I ask, searching his face, clutching at straws, hoping he'll not read anything creepy into this. "We could get a pizza and watch a movie or something. I think I need to apologize for being a drunken ass even if you don't think I was one."

He smiles, and to my delight, he nods. My stomach should not have as many butterflies in it as it does right now.

"Pizza sounds good," he agrees. "I'll come back later, when you're feeling a little better." I roll my eyes and he smirks then makes his escape almost hastily, probably because he doesn't really want to be any longer in the presence of someone who probably smells like a brewery, or worse.

I watch him disappear down my front steps and across the drive to his house. I know it's cheesy, but in every sappy RomCom I have ever seen the main love interest always glances back at the last minute and smiles. I'm watching to see if he does. Am I a hopeless case? Is he ever going to see me as anything but a friendly neighbor? I doubt it. To him I must seem so old: past it, especially when I look like I do right now.

He reaches the bottom of his own porch steps and stops, turns back and waves, flashing me another of those amazing smiles, then disappears up and into his house.

Well, okay, maybe my heart did kind of miss a beat when that happened, but does it mean anything, really? Can I allow it to mean anything?

It's only when he's actually out of sight that I realize he still has my front door key.

"He's kinda cute," Sarah tells me as I return to the kitchen. I scowl at her because she has an altogether too smug look on her face.

"You scared him off, Sarah." I tell her sullenly. She raises her eyebrows as she hands me a much-needed mug of coffee.

"I scared him off?" she asks. "What about you?" She waves her hands up and down in front of me. "You're the one that looks like the first wave of the zombie apocalypse."

I groan and rub my hand over my face, then take a sip of my coffee, not bothering to hide my pleasure as the liquid soothes my still raw throat.

"Good night, last night?" Sarah asks. I nod. "Get drunk?"

"Very!" I groan.

"Get lucky?" she continues, and I gasp.

"What? No!" I exclaim. "I didn't sleep with Cal if that's what you're implying." She raises her eyebrows in disbelief. "I didn't!" I say hoping that

will be the end of it. "He came by to see how I was because he's a nice guy and a good neighbor." She looks unconvinced.

"Okay, don't get snippy," she tells me. "I was just asking."

"Well don't." I hope my tone warns her to stop digging.

"He's a little young, Jake," she goes on. I slam my mug down on the counter as her casual comment hits a rather raw nerve.

"I didn't sleep with him, Sarah," I yell this time. God if my own sister is feeling the need to point out how young Cal is, what is the rest of the world going to think about my attraction for him? I turn to leave, hiding the wince of pain that shouting caused in my head and my throat.

"Where are you going?" she asks in concern.

"To take a shower," I huff.

"Jake, don't be like that, I'm sorry," she says. I stop and sigh.

"I'm sorry too," I tell her. "Look, Sarah, I'm not the best company today. I'm just gonna go back to bed."

She walks up to me and places her hand on my forehead looking concerned and I feel terrible for snapping at her.

"Can I get you anything, sweetheart?" she asks, and I shake my head.

"No, thanks," I say, a little more graciously and gratefully. "It's just a hangover, it's self-inflicted."

She smiles tenderly and gives me a quick peck on the cheek.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't have someone to look after you though. I don't mind staying."

I shake my head, "I'll be fine, and I think Cal is coming back over later. He still has my key." I frown. Why am I not even freaking out about that? I never felt comfortable enough with a neighbor to give them my key before. Why do I feel so comfortable with him? My head hurts too much to have any theories on this puzzle right now though.

"Okay," Sarah says, with an unreadable expression on her face, breaking my line of thought. "I'll leave you to sleep this off." She fetches her purse from the kitchen counter and turns to leave. "Did you finish your latest manuscript?" she asks. I nod. "Good," she says. "Then you can come over for dinner sometime this week." She gives me a significant look. "It's been a while."

She leaves me before I can object. I suppose I should make an effort. I don't do "going out" very often though. Last night was the first time in a long while. I usually have to have my arm twisted. Sarah can twist like the best of them.

Urgh, my head feels like there's a power tool inside it trying to drill its way out and I feel like I got hit by a bulldozer. I need to sleep this off before Cal comes back because I want to be better company than I am right now. I am never drinking again. Ever!

I stumble back into the kitchen to get some more coffee. I glance at the delicious looking apple muffins that Sarah baked for me but the thought of eating one churns my stomach. I swallow down some painkillers, feeling worse than I did when I first woke up, if that's even possible. I only manage to get as far as the couch in my living room before I collapse there, pulling a blanket over me as I do.

Jezzie jumps up onto my stomach, but I'm too damn tired to shove her off. She starts to get comfortable, kneading the comforter and purring so damn loud it sounds as if the power tool in my head has a twin.

God, I think I'm dying. As I slip into oblivion I wonder who will miss me the most: Jezzie? She'll just find someone else to "own"; Sarah: of course she'll miss me, or will she just miss mothering me? Or Cal: will he miss me? I hardly know him, yet he's managed to carve himself a niche in my heart without even trying. I have this urge to protect him that I've never really had before and I don't understand it.

Whatever is going on though, will have to wait until I sleep this damn hangover off. Things will be clearer when my head is clearer. Either that or I'll be dead so there'll be no worries at all then.

Chapter Eight

Not a Hangover

Not a hangover.

That is the vague thought that passes through my head as I slowly die on my couch.

I am vaguely aware of a woman's voice talking somewhere in the distance: Sarah? I thought she went home.

Someone places a cold cloth on my forehead and tucks a blanket around my shoulders. My head is lifted and a pillow is placed behind it before being gently lowered again. Fingers draw softly down my cheek and I am suddenly very aware that this is not my sister playing nurse.

My sister would never touch me like this and my body would never react the way it just did as I lean into the caress and moan softly.

"Hush, Jake," a calm voice whispers softly.

"Cal?" I croak.

"Yes." Is the simple answer.

"What..." I try to swallow but can't, it hurts so damn much. I try to lift my head, but I can't do that either.

"Lay still, Jake," he tells me, his hand on my forehead. "You have a fever. I don't think you have a hangover, I think you have the flu."

"Or worse!" I groan. "I think I'm dying." To my surprise I don't get sympathy, Cal chuckles.

"Don't be such a worry wart, it's just a virus. Oldies are such hypochondriacs." There is so much in that statement to take offense at but I feel far too crappy to be able to respond. "Do you want me to make you anything to eat?" he asks me.

I open my eyes and see that Cal is sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the couch, level with my head. Even through the grit in my eyes, he's gorgeous. His blue eyes are full of concern, despite his amused reaction to my pessimism. Is that concern for me? What is he doing here though? Then I remember I invited him over for pizza. I groan.

“I don’t know if I can face food right now, Cal,” I tell him, my sore throat making my voice raspy and gravelly. “We might need to take a rain check on that pizza and movie night.” He clicks his tongue and gets up.

“Don’t worry about it, Jake. I’ll heat some soup for you.” He’s gone before I can stop him.

Having any kind of conversation with this guy that is not completely on his terms is going to prove very difficult. When he doesn’t want another opinion or any protest to what he’s doing he just turns his back. He’s either very clever or a pain in the ass. I can’t make up my mind.

As he walks away, I can’t help noticing his deliciously pert ass in those jeans he’s wearing. If he’s a pain in the ass then he’s a fucking sexy one, dammit.

I flop over onto my back and groan. I am too sick to be thinking things like this, it makes my head hurt.

I close my eyes for a second and I must drift off because the next thing I know he’s back, with soup and telling me I should eat it.

He helps me sit and I’m surprised by how weak and shaky I feel. This is stupid, it’s just a virus, like Cal said. I shouldn’t feel so bad.

Cal gives me a cushion to balance the soup bowl on and hands me the spoon.

“What?” I ask as I take it from him. “You’re not going to feed it to me?” I can’t help the snippy tone in my voice, and I wonder if he picks up on things like that.

Watching him purse his lips and fold his arms in front of his chest tells me he does.

“Eat!” he orders me so I do, in a way that I hope says it is under protest since who the hell is he to order me around like this?

It’s chicken soup, and although my stomach wasn’t telling me I was hungry, the smell triggers a rumble. It also triggers memories of childhood when I was sick and my mom would make me her own chicken soup. I can’t help smiling as I swallow the first mouthful despite how much it hurts my throat. I glance up at Cal who is watching me carefully.

“Okay?” he asks, signing it as well. I chuckle.

"It's great, thanks, and you do realize that is the only sign I know, don't you?" I tell him. He smirks.

"Oh, I'm sure we can remedy that, sometime." He bites his lip as if he's said something he shouldn't then looks away as he blushes all over.

It's like he has some kind of new-found confidence but isn't quite confident using it yet. It's kind of adorable that he's sassy one minute: self-doubting and shy the next. I doubt it will last, since the sassiness and cockiness will eventually overpower the shyness. I hope it doesn't too much though, because damn, that blush!

I take another sip of soup, watching him over the rim of the spoon and wondering just how far down the blush goes.

"Now that you're awake and eating, I'm going into town for the usual groceries," Cal tells me and I frown. Something about that sounds wrong but I can't put my finger on it yet. "I'll get yours too if you want. Do you want me to get anything specific?"

I frown even harder, trying to think why he would want to go to the store on a Sunday evening, plus there isn't a bus this late, although I have really no idea how late it is.

"What time is it?" I ask him, still frowning.

"About nine," he says. "I'll have to go soon if I want to catch the next bus."

I freeze and the soup spoon hovers in my hand halfway from the soup bowl to my mouth.

"Tell me again what time it is. It's far too late for you to go to town even if there was a later bus, it's Sunday. There are no buses." He sighs, seemingly in sympathy, and sits on the floor beside me again.

"Jake, it's nine a.m. on Tuesday," he breaks it to me gently. I simply stare at him.

"What?" I ask. "How?"

How the hell can I have lost a day? I don't remember this. What the fuck?

"I came back here Sunday night about six-ish. To see if you still wanted pizza," he tells me. "I knocked but you didn't answer and I still had your key so I let myself in. You were asleep here, but you were so hot, and feverish I knew things weren't right." He looks down at his hands that are clenched in his lap. "I got your phone and texted your sister."

“You did what?” I splutter.

“I was worried!” Cal tells me defensively. “I couldn’t wake you up. You were delirious.” I just stare at him. “She came by. She doesn’t live far away, huh?” I shake my head. “She told me to keep you cool and that if you were still that bad today I was to call a doctor but you cooled down and slept all of yesterday and peacefully last night...”

“You’ve been here two nights?” I ask him incredulously. He nods. “Cal!” I exclaim. What am I supposed to say to that? We hardly know each other but he’s willing to nurse me through a high fever. “I don’t know what to say, thank you.” He smiles.

“You just said it,” he tells me brightly, meeting my gaze briefly, before lowering his eyes with a slight blush as he stands up. “Sarah told me she would come by again this afternoon. You should let her know you’re feeling a little better though, she was worried.”

Well, I might have something to say to my sister for leaving me in the care of a relative stranger, although, she thinks we’re more than that doesn’t she? She thinks we’ve already done the horizontal tango so she’d think it was natural for him to want to look after me.

I guess I would have done the same, and for some reason I want to trust this enigmatic and intriguing young man. He seems to have so many layers to his personality I suspect I am simply scratching the surface at the minute.

“So do you want me to get you anything specific?” he asks.

I take another sip of soup and purse my lips as I think. If he is going to get groceries for both of us, it’s going to be far too much for him to carry on the bus. He could get a cab but I am forming another plan. The execution of which depends on how much I am willing to trust this angelic apparition before me.

“Cal, do you drive?” I ask him. He widens his eyes and nods.

“Yes, I do. I haven’t had a car for about a year, but my license is valid.” He fetches out his wallet and shows me his driver’s license. I only get a flash though, not enough to read it properly.

“You could take my car,” I tell him and he just stares at me. Oh god, am I doing the right thing? “I mean, it would be quicker,” I say quickly, to hide any doubt I’m feeling, “and you’d have too much to carry on the bus, so take my car as long as you’re not gonna carjack it or go joyriding, or do donuts in parking lots or anything else young people do with cars these days.”

Cal rolls his eyes as he stands with his thumbs hooked in his low-slung jeans. He makes me want to bite my lip, bite him, bite anything!

"I wouldn't know the first thing about doing donuts, Jake." He assures me with a chuckle. "And even if I had any friends I wouldn't take them joyriding in your car."

"Great." Although I'm actually thinking it isn't really that great since he just admitted he has no friends. It's actually very sad.

"I can really take your car?" he asks me incredulously, as if he can't quite believe what's being said. I nod.

"Yes, Cal, I just said so didn't I? It's a stick shift, are you okay with that?" He nods, fizzling with so much excitement that I want to laugh. I wave my hand in the direction of my front door. "My keys are, erm..."

"On the table in your entrance hall." Cal finishes for me and I give him a confused look. "I picked them up off the floor when I let myself in on Sunday morning."

Urgh, my head hurts, but yeah, I vaguely remember Lawrence telling me he was dropping my car off and me asking him to put my keys through the mail slot.

Cal disappears then returns with my car keys, waving them with a questioning look on his lovely face. I nod.

"Any special orders?" he asks, as he hands me a couple of painkillers and a glass of water, which I just accept without question. "Or should I just get stuff." I chuckle.

"If by stuff you mean chocolate, cookies and potato-based snacks then yes." I tell him and he smiles.

"You can't live on junk food, Jake."

"I can try!"

He snorts then leaves before I can add to the list.

"I'll get you some flu remedy and some vitamin C as well," he calls back then he's gone.

I hear my car starting in the drive. I grimace as the gears crunch then the engine growls. The engine noise interspersed with gear crunching disappears into the distance, and I wonder for a fleeting moment if I've done the right

thing and if the poor gears will ever be the same. I also wonder if I'll ever see my car again. The thought is very fleeting though, because what would Cal possibly have to gain from stealing my car? And it's not as if I don't know where he lives.

I chuckle as I finish my soup that I didn't even know I needed, then I lie back and wonder about the turn of events that has the neighbor I have been watching for the last month looking after me when I have just spent most of that time feeling protective towards him.

Until I woke this morning, I thought I just had a bad hangover. I guess I'm lucky he was around really. I could have been in trouble if he hadn't been.

Despite the soup and the painkillers he handed me before he left, I am still feeling like shit: gritty eyed, aching joints and a killer headache. I snuggle down into the blanket he has obviously fetched from my bedroom and decide that sleep is the best order of the day.

I go to sleep with mental images of Cal wandering through my house checking everything out. Something about that makes me a little uncomfortable. I hope he didn't look in my study. I hope that damn notebook where I wrote his schedule isn't lying in plain view. Oh shit! Too late to worry about that now, though.

I wake to the sound of my sister's voice, talking to someone else who does not reply verbally, presumably it's Cal. They are in the kitchen and she is ordering whoever it is to sit in her inimitable motherly way. I assume she and Cal must have arrived back here at the same time. I can't imagine who else she would be ordering about like that.

I sit up and then stand gingerly, and make my way to the kitchen holding onto furniture, walls and doorways as I do because I'm a little unsteady on my feet.

The scene there is disturbing to say the least. Cal is sitting at the kitchen counter looking extremely pale and shaken. He has cuts and grazes on his face and what looks like a bruise forming above his left eye. My sister has her arm wrapped around his shoulders and is talking to him quietly, as if she's soothing him and reassuring him. He gives the occasional nod but says nothing in reply. Then she starts using sign language and I roll my eyes, I should have known my sister would know sign language, she's a teacher and she knows everything.

Cal replies in kind, and then gasps as he notices me in the doorway.

“Jake!” he exclaims, and his pale and anxious expression is replaced by something altogether brighter, along with a delightful flush to color his pale cheeks.

He is just lovely, but I can't think about that right now because there is something very wrong. What the hell happened to his face?

Sarah stands and turns to me. She looks somewhat less excited to see me, in fact she looks positively livid. I know her well enough, though, to realize that she is not angry with me but instead, is bursting to have a rant about something.

“Jake!” she exclaims sternly. “What are you doing up?” She walks over and immediately places her hand on my forehead, her gentle tone incongruous with her fuming expression. “How are you feeling sweetie?” she asks and I purse my lips and roll my eyes, meeting Cal's gaze and making him snort weakly at my embarrassment. He still looks shaky though, and I am feeling very concerned about those cuts and bruises.

“I'm feeling a lot better thanks, Sarah,” I tell her, even though I'm not really, I just have something else to focus on. I maneuver around her making a beeline for Cal.

“What's going on?” I ask, my voice barely a croak because my throat is still very sore.

Cal grimaces and looks away biting his lip.

“Sheriff Jefferson is what's going on,” Sarah spits, making sure that Cal can see her too. “That damn Sheriff is an asshole,” She hisses angrily and I see Cal's worried expression change to slight amusement at her choice of description for Oakwood Bay's esteemed but sometimes bombastic lawman. “You're laughing now, Cal, but it wasn't funny at the time.” He shakes his head. He seems to have been struck dumb, the only word he's said so far is my name.

I look from Sarah to Cal then back to Sarah, none the wiser after her outburst.

“Will someone please tell me what's happened?” I ask, as I take the stool next to Cal. He immediately shuffles his stool closer, as if by doing so he feels safer. Not sure I can process this yet, so I try to ignore it, but I am very aware that his knee is now pressed against mine. He takes a deep breath and rubs his hands anxiously along his legs before speaking.

"The Sheriff arrested me!" he tells me, his voice sounding more hollow than it usually does.

"He what?" I splutter. "Why?" Cal shrugs. I'm not sure what to think now, because is he reluctant to tell me because he's done something wrong or is he just embarrassed? Did he get in a fight? It certainly looks like he did.

"He had your car," Sarah explains, her tone sarcastic and acidic. I wait for more of an explanation, bracing myself for the inevitable "*He crashed it*" or "*Someone rear ended him and there was a fight*," but she doesn't add to the statement. I look back and forth between the two of them in disbelief.

"What? That's it?" I ask with a confused frown. "He arrested you for having my car?" Cal nods. "The last time I looked there wasn't a law about letting a friend borrow your car," I say in utter confusion.

"Yes, you know that," Sarah tells me sarcastically, and I am beginning to see the source of her anger now. "Cal knows that, I know that, hell, even Jezzie your cat knows that, but Sheriff Jefferson?" she huffs, throwing her hands in the air before bending to pick up two large grocery bags, which she plonks on the counter next to me. She leaves the room still muttering angrily about asshole Sheriffs, I assume to go get whatever else she and Cal have brought from town.

As she leaves, Cal seems to deflate by my side, as if he was simply holding himself straight to put on a show for Sarah. I immediately place my arm around him and try to ignore the fact that he melts against me as I do.

"Are you okay?" I sign the word too and he nods with a sigh then starts signing as I watch helplessly. "Cal I don't understand," I tell him to his face. He bites his slightly swollen lip, looking shaken and upset. He mimes writing into his palm and I jump up, ignoring a wave of dizziness and fetch him a notebook and pencil from another part of the counter.

He writes.

Can't speak!

"What? You have a sore throat?" I ask, wondering if nursing me over two nights has given him my bugs. He shakes his head. "You can't speak when you're upset?" He nods. I sigh. Oh god, I want to cry for him. "How come the Sheriff arrested you?" I ask, because this is the source of the upset, and I need to know.

He shrugs again and scribbles furiously on the pad.

Thought I was punk, stealing your car. Says he shouted at me to stop but thought I was resisting arrest because I didn't turn around.

I gasp.

"What happened?" I ask. Cal looks even more upset now, and he's shaking a little.

He writes shakily.

Cuffed me. Took me to station, couldn't speak. Sarah came.

He looks exhausted. I just want to wrap him up in a blanket and hold him on my lap except he's almost the same height as me and he'd probably protest. Or would he? He's pressed so close to me now he may as well be sitting on my knee.

I lift my hand to his face and trace along the line of one of the grazes on his cheek. He winces slightly with a soft hiss.

"They hurt you?" I say quietly, watching his face for any signs that he's been roughed up. His mouth is a tight line as he shakes his head.

"No!" he tells me out loud as he hangs his head and scribbles more words on his pad,

This happened during arrest.

He shows me his wrists now and I see they are red and bruised as well.

"You struggled?" I ask him and he bites his lip again, his eyes becoming watery.

Jumped me from behind. Thought I was being attacked.

As he writes the words, I gasp and tighten my grip around his shoulders.

"Fucking hell," I hiss.

I want to ask him more but Sarah returns.

"It was Lawrence that told me about the arrest," Sarah continues the story as she deposits two more big bags of groceries onto the counter, then steps up to Cal and checks his face by cupping his chin and turning it from side to side. "Do you want me to clean those grazes, sweetheart?" she asks him gently.

Cal shakes his head, and I think he is reluctant to move away from me. I think Sarah sees this so she returns to sorting out groceries.

“Lawrence saw what happened?” I ask incredulously. “But he knows Cal, he’s seen us together in the coffee shop.” Sarah nods.

“A lot of people saw but it all happened so fast no one knew who it was that Jefferson arrested. I knew as soon as Lawrence told me because you’d just texted me to tell me you’d lent your car to Cal. I rushed to the Station and walked in on them trying to process him but not getting very far because how the hell was he supposed to communicate when they had him cuffed?” She shakes her head in frustration, and I can see that she is also quite visibly shaken by the entire experience. However, where Cal seems upset and anxious she is quite simply livid. She reaches out and touches Cal gently on the shoulder so he knows she’s speaking to him. “I don’t know which of these are yours and which are Jake’s, sweetie.” She says. He nods and shrugs.

I’ll sort in a bit he writes and places the pad down on the counter before getting up, making a sign across his shoulder and then disappearing from the room.

I look at Sarah for an explanation.

“Bathroom,” she translates helpfully, watching him go.

“Oh. My. God, Sarah,” I gasp when Cal is out of sight. My own woes are forgotten now. Poor Cal, he must have been terrified.

“Oh, Jake.” Sarah takes Cal’s place by my side. “You should have seen the state he was in. He couldn’t speak he was so upset. Lawrence told me what he saw. Cal was walking away from the car and Jefferson shouted at him, but obviously he didn’t respond. Jefferson tried to imply Cal was resisting arrest. Lawrence told me Jefferson just launched at him, tackled him to the ground and had him cuffed and bundled into the patrol car before anyone could even blink. When I got to the station, they were trying to get his name out of him but by then he was in such a state he couldn’t get a word out. I explained he had the car with your permission and that he was deaf and asked politely what the procedure was for suing for wrongful arrest and police brutality and they let him go. Poor kid was beside himself.”

“I can imagine,” I am watching the door for signs of his return.

“Jake.” She places her hand on my arm. “You’re the first person to get anything out of him since it happened. Lawrence, Lou-Anne, and I all tried in the coffee shop but he just clammed up. It’s a good thing I know a little sign language otherwise he’d have been stuck with writing it all down but he couldn’t even do that after it first happened, his hands were shaking so badly.

His face when he saw you just now. I don't think I've ever seen anyone look so relieved."

This information is surprising and troubling at the same time. Why would he be so relieved to see me? I mean we're barely at the beginnings of a friendship for him to be so dependent. Plus he doesn't want to be dependent on anyone, he told me. He wants to prove he can do it all by himself. Maybe he realizes that everyone needs someone. That's fine with me, because the closer I can get to him the better. I'm happy to be his friend, shoulder to cry on, whatever. What happens when he realizes I'm attracted to him though? What then? I guess I'll just have to be good at hiding it because a friend is what he needs right now, not something that could just become complicated.

He returns from the bathroom with slightly red-rimmed eyes. Sarah gives me a significant look and I feign a yawn, which isn't that fake since I am still suffering, I've just had something to distract me.

"I'm done in. I'm going to sit back on the couch, plus we should never get in the way of my sister when she is organizing stuff," I quip and Cal gives a small smile. "Come into the living room out of her way. We can watch a movie or something, huh?" I ask him.

Cal glances over at Sarah and also at the grocery bags that are still unopened.

"Oh, go on and sit down the two of you, before you both fall down." She makes a show of us both being under her feet. "I'll sort all of this. If you end up with each other's groceries I don't suppose it'll be a hardship, will it?" Cal gives her the first real, full smile since they got back from town.

As I guide him through to the living room, I glance back at my sister and smile in thanks. She is amazing, Sarah. I have no idea how she knew Cal was deaf, she only met him for five brief minutes on Sunday, but then I remember it's Tuesday and I guess they had the rest of Sunday and all day yesterday to get acquainted. I dread to think what they talked about.

The thought of my sister blasting into the police station to bust Cal out of jail makes me smile. I bet Sheriff Jefferson never knew what hit him. The mental image of her "asking politely" about police brutality is not going to be one I'll forget easily.

Cal sits beside me on the couch, although not as close as he was sitting at the kitchen counter. I think he realizes that was perhaps a little too close. Not that I was complaining, just... oh well.

“So what do you want to watch?” I ask him and he shrugs.

“What do you like?” he asks, his words slow, as if he is warming his voice up again after having lost it. What must that feel like though? To get so stressed you can't even speak. It must be horrible.

I indicate the shelves containing my extensive DVD collection and his eyes widen. I'm surprised he hasn't noticed before, the fact that two entire walls in my living room are taken up with shelves from floor to ceiling stacked full of DVDs. Or maybe he has and just hasn't felt confident enough to ogle over it yet. I can see him struggling not to get excited now though.

“Take your pick.” I am quite happy to leave the choice up to him.

He stands and walks over to take a look.

“Oh my god, Jake, you have hundreds of old movies.” He turns back to face me with an air of excitement so I have to take this as a compliment rather than a dig at the age of my movie collection. “What do you want to watch?” he asks. I shrug this time.

“I prefer to call them classics, Cal, but just pick anything. You can pretty much guarantee that if it's in my collection I like watching it.”

Cal bites his lip and nods.

“And you don't mind watching with the subtitles?” I just stare at him as if he's grown two heads.

“Why on earth should I mind that?” I ask him. “Have you seen how many foreign language movies I have?” He frowns and looks back at the shelves.

His eyes are darting everywhere with great interest and vainly disguised excitement. I think I may have successfully found a distraction for him, and I didn't have to even get up off my seat.

I sink back into the cushions with a heavy sigh, finally focusing on my own aches and pains that I had put on hold to concentrate on him. Although I think I might have found my perfect distraction too: in the form of the excitement in Cal's blue eyes as he drools over my movie collection.

My head still hurts, but not as much. I still feel like I was hit by a bulldozer but the aches have all dulled a little. My throat is still raspy and raw but that will get better I'm sure.

Cal returns to the couch with two boxes in his hands.

"I can't decide." He shows me both choices. "I haven't seen either. I think they were both released before I was born."

I glance at the titles and he's right. If he's twenty-one then these two movies were released well before he was born. I can't believe he hasn't seen either of them though.

"Your education is seriously lacking, Cal," I comment. "How are you ever going to understand the older generation if you have no idea what influenced us?"

He chuckles. "So you're saying you were influenced by teenage vampires and kids on adventures without their parents?" he asks with a shrug. "That's pretty much what I've been influenced by as well."

"Yeah, but come on, this one has Kiefer Sutherland in it when he was super-hot," I tell him. "Before he started looking like his dad."

"Kiefer Sutherland has a dad?" Cal asks me and I groan, because I know where this is going from the impish tone in his voice. "He must be even older than you." I notice his smirk and I nudge him playfully.

"Asshole," I hiss. "Put the damn DVD into the machine and let's watch it, then you can decide who was the hotter vampire: Kiefer Sutherland or Robert Pattinson."

"Don't forget David Boreanaz," he reminds me. "He was a hot vampire too."

I bite my lip and groan, closing my eyes and picturing the perfection. "Oh god, yes."

He chuckles, out loud, which I've never actually heard him do before, and it makes me smile. It actually lights me up from the inside, makes my heart beat faster than any of the sexy vampires we've just been talking about.

I actually have a great sense of achievement too. Ten minutes ago, this guy was as close to breaking down into a heap of gelatin on my kitchen floor as anyone I've ever seen and now he's laughing and smiling and I did that. I made him laugh, and I made him smile. Well done, Jake. Mission accomplished. Now I just have to hide this growing attraction I have for him before he discovers it and runs for the hills. Although, I can't actually remember when we discussed the big thing we have in common. When did he actually tell me he's gay? When the hell did I tell him?

There are still some big gaps in my memory about Saturday night and I am going to have to ask him just exactly what I said and did.

That can wait though, because discussions while you're watching a classic movie, and concentrating on subtitles is not really possible, plus, discussion becomes rather more impossible when you fall asleep in your host's lap.

Sarah walks in about twenty minutes into the movie with steaming mugs of hot chocolate for us all and some delicious looking doughnuts with chocolate sprinkles. She takes one look at the scene before her though and sighs deeply.

"Oh," she whispers as she places the mugs and doughnuts on the coffee table. "I think I might just go now," she tells me in as hushed a tone as she can, although it's not as if she's going to disturb Cal who is now sleeping peacefully, snoring slightly, with his head on a cushion that is resting on my lap.

I have no idea how he got there, it just happened. My hand is resting on his shoulder though and I think he placed it there. I have my feet up on a footstool and I am close to falling asleep as well. I shrug my shoulders at Sarah's questioning look. She gives me a knowing smile and creeps out so as not to disturb either of us.

I fall asleep listening to Cal's soft snoring, too sick to wonder what the hell is going on.

Chapter Nine

More Stalking (or Old Habits Die Hard)

Two weeks I've been laid up with that virus. Two whole fucking weeks, and if it hadn't been for my amazing, kind, capable and incredibly patient next door neighbor I think I might have gone mad.

He's been here every day since that first morning when I thought all I had was a hangover. He even stayed a few nights, although I suspect his need to stay had nothing to do with how sick I was and everything to do with the fact that our bombastic Sheriff arrested him for no reason. I also suspect my DVD collection was the main draw since I can't imagine spending several hours a day camping out on a couch with a sick, snotty, smelly old guy can have been any fun for him otherwise.

Whatever the reason though, I am very grateful he has been my greatest source of company, amusement and entertainment for the last two weeks. His presence is monumentally more welcome than my motherly older sister. She has currently taken up residence in my kitchen along with Lou-Anne. They've been in there a good hour and a half. I have no idea what they have had to talk about over that time. I think they've started a coven.

"When are the two of you going to actually get up off that sofa?" Sarah asks us as she enters the living room and stands with her hands on her hips taking in the sight with a look of disapproval in her eyes.

"In case you haven't noticed, I've been too sick to move," I say archly, giving Cal a wink and making him smirk.

"I've been looking after him." Cal gives her an innocent look while also managing to have a hint of impishness in his expression that is altogether too distracting.

Sarah huffs loudly.

"The two of you are as bad as each other. You've spent two weeks watching movies like a pair of couch potatoes. You'll grow roots if you stay there much longer. Time you got up off your sick bed and took a shower," she huffs, pointing her finger at me. I scowl, what is she implying? I showered yesterday. "And you..." she points at Cal who sits back a little in the seat looking slightly shocked. "It's a beautiful day, get out there and go surfing with all your buddies

already taking advantage of the waves today.” She turns and leaves us to it with another snort of disapproval.

“I take offense at that,” I announce to the room in general but making sure Cal sees me.

“Yeah?” Cal answers, and I smile at him. “What part was offensive, since most of it was actually true?”

“We haven’t been sitting on this sofa for two solid weeks, no matter what Sarah thinks. You’ve been out surfing a few times and I’ve even managed to change my sweat pants and socks.” Cal chuckles silently, his shoulders shaking.

“Yeah, thank god for small mercies,” he mutters. I huff and throw a cushion at him but miss, despite the fact he is only sitting at the other end of the sofa.

“That was useless,” Cal snorts. “Where did you learn to throw cushions?” he throws it back and hits me square in the face. “That’s how you throw cushions.” He snorts at the indignant expression on my face.

Cal then bites his lip and looks torn as his eyes flicker towards the window that overlooks the beach and then back to me.

Suddenly, I feel monumentally guilty and utterly selfish for keeping him cooped up in here all this time. In two weeks, he’s only been out surfing twice, despite the weather being amazing. I know he didn’t have to be here, and he could have stopped coming after a few days once he knew I wasn’t actually going to die (I’m certain he thought that at first). Sarah is right though, he needs to get out there in the sunshine and fresh air.

He told me he has no friends, but I can only think that’s because he hasn’t been here long enough to make any his own age. He’s not likely to either if he’s here and not out there amongst all the rest of the surfing crowd. They’re all a pretty friendly bunch, it won’t take him long.

Part of me is dying inside as I wonder whether our friendship will continue as intensely as it has once Cal has a wider circle of friends. I know I’ve obsessed about him, and I still do think he is the most exquisitely beautiful creature I’ve ever set eyes on, but I think I have to accept there can’t be anything but friendship between us. I’m sure the thought of us being anything else but friends would reduce him to hysterics anyway. The age gap is too big, despite how well we get on together. And that’s fine with me, because if we’re friends at least I get to spend some time with him. He’ll get bored staying here with me out of some warped sense of loyalty though, and then where will I be?

“Go on!” I urge, hiding my reluctance to push him away. He gives the beach another wistful look. “You know you want to, and I don’t need a nursemaid anymore.” He grins.

“You sure you can manage on your own now, old man?” he asks, using a nickname he’s found for me that just seems to sum up our friendship and draw a line that just can’t be crossed. I purse my lips and narrow my eyes.

“Get outta here whippersnapper,” I snipe and shove him off the sofa with my feet.

He snorts and stands, smoothing down his slightly crumpled T-shirt causing me to have to avert my eyes when the cloth pulls taut over his firm, flat stomach. How the hell have I managed to spend two weeks lounging on this couch with him and not have any kind of reaction, only to feel myself getting hot under the collar when he straightens out his T-shirt? That’s a sure sign that I’m feeling better. I think I need some time to get my thoughts in some kind of order and to concentrate on something other than Cal.

“Should I come back over later?” His expression is almost hopeful, like he really wants me to say yes. Or, is he simply showing friendly concern and I’m letting my imagination read more into it than there is?

I should refuse, but I can’t. I want him to come back over. I know I’m making a rod for my own back and there’ll be heartache later but I need to bask in his sunshine while I can.

“Yeah, okay,” I say brightly. “We can get pizza and watch another movie that’s older than you.” He grins.

“That’ll be just about every one you have in your collection then.” He calls back as he disappears through the door. I shake my head and chuckle.

“Cheeky bastard,” I mutter as I stand and stretch out the kinks in my muscles.

I need to get myself motivated into doing some work but first I need some coffee and that means running the gauntlet of the coven that has gathered in my kitchen.

“Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged out of his pit.” Sarah gets up to give me a kiss on the cheek. “How you feeling, tiger?” she asks me affectionately.

I roll my eyes.

“A lot better thanks.” I give Lou-Anne a wink and she giggles.

"I guess partying hard just isn't for us oldies now huh?" she asks. I grimace.

"I don't think the hangover that mutated into flu has persuaded me to carry on my partying lifestyle, no."

She chuckles.

"Is Cal still here?" Sarah asks as she glances around the door to check if he has really gone.

"No, he's gone surfing, like you suggested," I tell her. "Because you used your Teacher Voice on him and terrorized him into doing as he's told." She wrinkles her nose but ignores my jibe.

"I was beginning to think he'd taken up permanent residence." I shake my head with a sigh.

"No, Sarah, I did not sleep with him."

"I didn't say that," she says archly. She turns to Lou-Anne. "Did I say that?" Lou-Anne shakes her head chuckling.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much though," Lou-Anne quips and I scowl. She's no help at all.

Why are they both so convinced that I've slept with Cal? The only people who don't believe it are me, because I know it didn't happen and Cal who is oblivious to the fact that anyone is thinking this is what our relationship is.

I'm sure if he did have any kind of inkling that people are thinking this about us he wouldn't be over here as often, or even at all.

"He showered here the other day." Sarah nods knowingly at Lou-Anne and they both watch for my reaction.

"So?" I cock one eyebrow archly. "He'd just been surfing."

"He just lives across the drive," Lou-Anne continues with amusement.

What is this anyway, the Spanish Inquisition?

"My shower is as good as any." I shrug. "I really have no problem with him using my shower instead of his."

"Yeah, but he's here all the time, Jake." As if I needed to be told that. "What is going on with you two?"

"We're just friends," I tell her. "He was concerned that I was sick so he stayed to keep me company. That's what friends do. We're just friends." I have no idea why I need to say that twice, except maybe to convince myself as well.

“Yeah, but come on Jake, he’s twenty-one and you’re forty-five,” Sarah pipes up. I meet Lou-Anne’s eyes and she shrugs, because I remember her saying that I shouldn’t let the age gap be a barrier.

“So!” I feel stubborn, sullen and a little defensive now. “There’s no law against intergenerational friendships is there?”

“No.” She’s beginning to sound just as sullen. “Just, be careful,” she says, as if this is only advice she can think to give me. As if this is the only objection she has to my friendship with Cal.

Doesn’t she realize that I have thought up enough arguments myself against pursuing anything but friendship with this guy? I know full well that Lou-Anne will have told my sister everything we talked about at her party that night though. They tell each other everything so they both know I’m attracted to Cal. Well attraction has to go both ways, and he might be gay, but he’s never going to be attracted to me so that’s that.

“Well, ladies, it’s been amazing talking to you both, but if you don’t mind I’ll just get myself some coffee and go get some work done.” I suddenly need some time alone to my morbid, hopeless, unrequited thoughts.

Sarah huffs at me and Lou-Anne shrugs her shoulders. My impression is that they’ve already discussed the situation between Cal and me to the nth degree and have agreed to disagree.

I take my coffee and go to the desk in my study. It has a great view of the beach, so I can check my emails and keep half an eye on the surfers out there enjoying the waves.

I doubt I’ll be able to spot Cal, although I have watched him surf before and he is by far the best out there, so graceful. Maybe I’m biased, I don’t know. I step out onto my deck for a few minutes, shading my eyes from the sun and trying to spot Cal amongst the other surfers all floating on their boards just beyond the breaking waves. I think I see him, but I’m not too sure. The sun reflects in sparkling crystals off the water and I think I see the bright, sun-bleached hair of my neighbor turned friend, but without binoculars I can’t tell for certain and I refuse to get them out because if Sarah catches me I think she’ll have me committed.

With a sigh, I go to sit at my desk but leave the French doors open so I have an unobstructed view of the beach and the surfers.

After about an hour of plowing through and answering my emails, I hear voices from the beach. There’s laughter and shouting and I reckon the surfers

have given up for the day. When I glance out of the window, I see a bunch of them walking back up the beach. Cal is one of them.

Now I'm interested to see what he is like with people closer to his own age. Will he talk to them as animatedly as he does to me? Will he fade into the background like he does when he's in town so he doesn't have to talk to anyone? One thing's for sure, he won't have those headphones to hide behind, not that he's been using them at all while he's been with me.

The group stops just below my decking and are talking. I know I shouldn't watch. I thought I was past this stage of watching him from behind the shrubbery on my deck, but I am far too curious for my own good, so I duck down and peek through a gap in the ivy.

There's about half a dozen of them all laughing and fooling around. They all look about Cal's age and they're all of the same build and physique. None of them hold a candle to Cal of course. He seems to be included in the group, smiling and laughing along at the antics of one of the guys who is currently standing on his hands, balancing from one hand to the other. Cal stands out, his light blond hair and bright blue eyes striking amongst the others who are all slightly darker in coloring and looks.

He also stands out as not laughing quite as hard or smiling quite as easily as the others in the group. There's a delayed reaction from him when the others laugh at a joke and I can see each time that his eyes do not smile, or laugh or twinkle in any way. Not the way they do when he's with me.

I'm so engrossed in watching him interact with the others that I don't notice I am being watched myself.

"What on earth are you doing, Jacob Reuben?" Sarah asks me incredulously. I almost fall over in fright and I hiss at her to shush as she regards me with her hands on her hips, "I thought you'd given up stalking and spying on the poor guy," she hisses as she crouches down beside me and peeks through the ivy to see what I'm watching so covertly.

"I had, I mean, I have," I tell her. "I just wanted to see what he's like with his friends."

"You are so screwed up, Jake, it's unbelievable," Sarah whispers.

"Says the sister who's watching through the ivy with me." I feel the need to point out to her. She's about to retort but I shush her with my fingers over her lips because I want to listen to the conversation below.

"So are you guys all coming to Don's twenty-first tonight?" One guy asks.

Several answer in the affirmative. Cal is making a show of checking his board for marks and scratches so the guy next to him nudges his arm.

“What about you, Cal?” I see Cal frown in confusion. The guy rolls his eyes, “Hey guys, Cal spaced out again.” They all chuckle almost indulgently and Cal smiles good-naturedly.

“What about me what?” he asks, encouraging the guy to tell him what he wants to know.

“Are you coming to Don’s party?” he asks. Cal makes a face and I can see him trying to think of a way to refuse without causing offense or upset. What he doesn’t see are the others all waiting, with great anticipation, to hear his answer.

“I don’t know, Pete,” he says. “Where is it, what time?” he asks.

“It’s at Tropicana’s. Everyone’s getting there about eight thirty,” the guy called Pete tells him.

“Tonight?” he asks. Pete nods, and I can almost see the relief in Cal’s entire being as I realize what he is going to say before he says it. “I have other plans tonight, sorry guys.”

He goes back to examining his board, so he does not see the looks of genuine disappointment on Pete’s and several others’ faces.

Oh my god. He blew off all these potential friends because he is honoring lame plans for pizza and a movie with me. He would rather eat take out with a grouchy old neighbor than go to what could be a great party? I cannot believe that. I do remember him saying he doesn’t like parties though, and the relief was evident when he realized he had a genuine excuse not to go.

I can’t let this happen though. He has to go to that party, but how can I persuade him that going there will be better than hanging out with me, even if I don’t think it will be? This is for his own good though. He needs friends his own age. Plus, a large part of me is thinking he can’t know choosing to be with me will be better if he hasn’t sampled what else is out there, even if that means I might not have the pleasure of his company as often as I’d like. Oh, but what if that means I end up not having his company at all?

Oh god, that would be terrible.

Stuck in my awkward dilemma, I don’t notice Sarah standing and leaning over the deck railings until it’s too late. I feel a panic attack coming on, because what the hell is she doing?

“Hey guys,” she calls down cheerily to the gathered surfers. “Surf good today?”

There are several positive replies. A couple of the guys call her by name, since they probably know her from school. She probably taught most of them at Oakwood Elementary.

“Hi, Sarah!” I hear Cal call to her. “Is Jake busy?” I am sitting on my ass waving my hands at my sister in an attempt to stop her giving away my compromising position.

“Why no, I don’t think so, Cal, he’s just here, hiding behind the ivy.” She tells him matter-of-factly as if this is a perfectly normal activity for me.

I am going to kill her. I am really truly going to commit murder, right after I’ve died of embarrassment.

“Sarah, what the fuck?” I hiss. She ignores me.

“Come on up, Cal.” she calls to him.

“Okay, I’ll just put my board away,” he tells her. Is there a hint of laughter in his tone? He calls good-bye to the other surfers as the group disperses.

Before I can get myself up off my ass I overhear one guy, I think it might be Pete, talking to another as they walk off in the opposite direction to Cal.

“You know I really thought he would come this time since the party’s at Tropicana’s.”

“I wonder why he always refuses,” the other voice is saying. “He seems like an okay dude, and he’s an awesome surfer.”

“Yeah well, maybe next time huh?” Pete says sadly. Anything else he says is lost as they walk out of earshot. He sounded altogether too disappointed to me.

Oh god, what am I going to do about this? They all really wanted Cal to go. Has he used me as an excuse because he doesn’t want to go? Or is he really just being loyal? Either way I feel like a total shit for getting in his way.

“Jacob Reuben.” Sarah hisses as she crouches down beside me, shocking me slightly. “You get yourself off your ass and you think of some way to get that kid to go to that party tonight.” I stare at her helplessly.

“How the hell am I supposed to do that?” I squeak. “If he doesn’t want to go I can’t force him.”

“He blew them off because you made stupid plans for takeout and a movie, which you’ve just spent every night over the last two weeks doing. He needs to broaden his horizons.”

“Oh god, I know that, Sarah. Don’t you think I know that?” I can’t help whining because it hurts to admit that she’s right. She huffs, folding her arms across her chest. There’s a hint of sympathy in her expression though: sympathy and understanding.

“Yes, I do, but I’m warning you, if he doesn’t go to that party tonight I am going to tell him all about your stalking activities. I will get that damn notebook and show him that you wrote down his every move for three weeks.” I gasp, frozen in the act of getting up, hovering between sitting and standing with my jaw falling open in shock. There is no sympathy or understanding, at all, in the threat my sister just made.

“You wouldn’t dare!” I exclaim in horror. She raises her eyebrows.

“Wouldn’t I?” she turns as she hears Cal’s feet on the deck steps. “Hi sweetie,” she calls, her tone changing instantly from threatening and acidic to light and airy. “How was the surf today?” she signs. I scowl at her, because she’s better at signing than me, even though Cal’s been very patiently teaching me, because she just threatened to turn my life upside down, and because I know full well she will carry out that threat if I don’t somehow get Cal to go to that party tonight. She’s a witch.

What can I do though? Feign illness and say I’m not up for pizza and a movie? That’s not going to make him want to go out. It’s just going to make him want to stay with me more than ever if his actions of the last two weeks are anything to judge by.

Holy shit. I’m stuck between a rock and a hard place here. I don’t want to manipulate Cal into going to a party he doesn’t want to go to and may hate, but at the same time if I don’t do my ultimate best to try to get him to go, Sarah is going to expose my scary stalker activities and Cal will probably never speak to me again.

I am totally screwed.

Chapter Ten

Manipulation

Sarah watches us both as Cal steps around her to regard me with a curious expression.

“Hi.” Cal says, almost awkwardly, shuffling his feet and not meeting my eye.

I have no idea why he would be so awkward now unless... Oh my god, has he guessed I was watching him? I am going to kill Sarah for sure now.

“I’m not interrupting you am I?” Cal asks me and I frown.

“Interrupting me how?” I ask, trying to sound innocent. He shrugs.

“I just thought that, now you’re better, you might want to get some work done, and I might be kind of in the way.”

Here’s me thinking I was getting in his way, when he’s been thinking the same thing. Oh!

“You’re not interrupting anything Cal,” I tell him. “I was just going through my emails, but I finished my manuscript three weeks ago, so I’m kind of taking a break.”

“Oh!” he grins. “Well that’s okay then.”

Sarah nudges me slightly and I scowl at her. I’ll get around to the subject of the party in my own time thanks.

“I’m not actually interrupting you, am I?” I ask him and it’s his turn to frown in confusion.

“No, why?” he asks.

“Well...” I grimace slightly, because telling him I know about the party is going to give me away. However, him knowing I was watching him this once will be better than him finding out I’ve been stalking him for weeks. “I overheard a couple of the guys on the beach talking about a party and I just wondered if making plans with me was getting in the way of...”

“Were you watching me from the deck?” Cal interrupts, his hands on his hips, his eyes wide.

“Oops, time for me to go,” Sarah says, then makes a hasty exit trying hard not to giggle, but I hear her snort as she disappears back into the house. She is in so much trouble. So am I, apparently, judging by Cal’s expression.

Oh god, so he knows. I could play this one of two ways. I could deny it and make an excuse about why Sarah thought I was hiding or I could confess everything and then Sarah wouldn’t have any leverage with which to carry out her threat.

As Cal regards me with his intense, blue-eyed stare I find I just can’t lie to him, but how can I tell him the truth? He’ll kick my ass.

“I wasn’t watching you as such!” I grimace as I try to think of a really good reason for being on my hands and knees on the deck and then “accidentally” overhearing his conversation with his surfing buddies.

“What were you doing hiding behind your ivy then?” Cal tips his head to one side and drums his fingers on his hips impatiently. He almost looks like he is enjoying watching me squirm. Cocky little...

“I wasn’t hiding behind my ivy, Cal,” I gasp. “I was, er, fastening my laces and you just happened to be there.” Cal’s eyes wander down to my feet. He frowns then looks up at me again.

“You’re not wearing any shoes,” he observes casually.

I splutter helplessly. He seems to be trying to contain himself. Is it anger or is it amusement? I have no idea. Either way he’s caught me.

“Okay, so maybe I was watching,” I confess, regarding him with a grimace and one eye closed as if that will somehow help him not be angry with me. “But I swear it wasn’t on purpose.”

He appears to be having some sort of struggle with his emotions. Is he trying not to laugh?

“Uhuh!” his voice sounds a little strained. He’s waiting for further explanation though, and I guess I owe it to him.

“So, yeah... erm!” I run my fingers through my hair and feel myself losing the battle to keep my blush of shame under control. “I saw you walking up the beach with those other guys and I was curious.” Cal frowns.

“Curious why?”

I regard him carefully, thinking I could turn the attention back on him now and he’ll hopefully forget I was essentially spying on him.

“You told me you don’t have any friends, but those guys all seemed friendly enough.” He shrugs and looks away sullenly. “Why aren’t you going to that party?” I ask as he turns back to face me. He narrows his eyes and purses his lips.

“I told you before I don’t like parties,” he explains and I nod.

“They all seemed to want you to go though.” I smile encouragingly. “I guess you didn’t see, but when you said you had other plans a couple of your friends looked kinda disappointed.” Cal frowns and regards me as if he really truly cannot believe this.

“They’re not my friends,” he protests. “They’re just guys I know from the beach, I never met up with them anywhere else.”

“Maybe you should,” I suggest, feeling really quite conflicted, because I am encouraging him to go and spend time with other people when a massive part of me, irrational or not, wants to keep him all to myself. I can’t be that selfish though.

Cal shrugs again.

“Parties just aren’t my thing though, Jake, and besides I made plans with you.” He looks into my eyes, and I really can’t read his expression, and I really don’t understand why he would choose to be here when he could be out having fun. “I wouldn’t blow you off for a stupid party I would probably hate anyway.”

“I wouldn’t feel like you were blowing me off,” I assure him. “And you don’t know you’ll hate it until you go.” Cal shakes his head and turns away from me slightly, his posture all defensive and closed.

“I do know that, Jake.” He sounds more than a little upset now. “I told you, I don’t like parties. I don’t like groups. I don’t follow the conversation and I get left behind.” He gives me an intense look. “If you were watching you’d have seen how damn useless I was in that group,” he almost shouts. “I didn’t have a clue what they were laughing at but I laughed anyway. I smiled when they did and laughed when they did, but I had no idea what any of them were saying because none of them looked at me when they were speaking.”

I did see, all of it: his awkwardness and his attempts to cover up that he hadn’t heard what was said. He seems angry about it all, and I don’t know why, because all he has to do is tell people he’s deaf and they’ll compensate for him.

“Why don’t you tell them you’re deaf?” I know he prefers to hide behind those headphones of his and I don’t really know why, but he can’t do that when

he's surfing and they already think he's an incredible surfer. Knowing he's deaf won't affect that surely. He scowls.

"It's none of their business," he huffs. I shrug.

"Then you can't get angry with them for not knowing what to do to include you in the conversation." From his expression, I can tell he has heard this all before.

"It's not their problem though, is it, Jake?" he snaps. "It's mine. I have to adapt to them, I can't expect the entire world to adapt to one person. I just avoid situations like that altogether. It's a hell of a lot easier."

"You never struck me as someone who took the easy path, Cal, although telling them would actually be easier than trying to hide it as if it's something to be ashamed of."

"I'm not ashamed." His eyes flash angrily, his entire body vibrating with fury and defiance.

I fight to stay calm, but I feel my own irritation rising because what he is doing is holding himself back by hiding his deafness. I really don't understand why he would do this.

"Okay, if you're not ashamed tell them you're deaf."

"No!" he shouts. "I just explained to you why I won't. You don't understand!" He turns to leave.

Oh, no you don't, sunshine. You're not ending the conversation this time. I jump past him to the top of the decking steps to prevent him leaving.

"So help me understand, Cal," I urge him gently and I know he saw, even though he's avoiding my gaze. "Tell me why you keep it hidden." He sighs and his shoulders slump. He doesn't try to get past me.

"Because I don't want to be treated any different," he says. "And they will, they'll all see me as a freak, and a novelty."

"No they won't," I tell him gently. He didn't see how they all looked at him, how they hung on his every word when he spoke. He shrugs.

"It always happens when I make new friends. They find out I'm deaf and suddenly I'm the odd one out, the '*special kid*'. They treat me different. They treat me as if I'm stupid."

"Did I ever do that?" I ask him softly. He looks up into my eyes and my heart skips a beat as I drown in those deep blue orbs.

“No!” he smirks slightly. “But you’re different and I didn’t have to tell you, you guessed.” I smile broadly.

“Maybe I am different, but you can’t make a judgment on these guys before you get to know them.” The way they were with him made me suspect they know already anyway, but I don’t point this out to Cal. I look down at my feet and bite my lip before continuing. “The thing is though, you are different, Cal,” I say, poking him in the chest, as he gives me a startled look. “But I mean that in a good way. Not because you’re deaf, but because of all the other awesome things that make you the person that you are.” He looks away with a blush.

Damn that blush, it sets my heart racing. I think I need some serious time away from this guy before I disgrace myself.

“You should go to that party,” I say. He rolls his eyes and groans in frustration, “Those guys really looked as if they wanted you to go, and besides we can do pizza and a movie anytime I really don’t mind.” Anger flashes once more in his eyes and I really don’t know what I said that’s made him angry.

“I said I don’t want to go to the damn party, Jake,” he shouts at me. “If you’re so eager to get rid of me why don’t you go?” He folds his arms and regards me furiously.

I narrow my eyes. I really didn’t want this to turn into a fight, but he is pushing my buttons. I’m not trying to get rid of him, though. I’m trying to help him fit in; make a few friends; spend some time with people other than a guy old enough to be his father that has unsavory thoughts about him. Maybe a little reverse psychology wouldn’t go amiss here.

“Okay,” I say brightly. “I think I will go.” His eyes widen and the anger leaves him to be replaced with surprise.

“What?” he gasps, shocked at my turn around. “B-but you haven’t been invited.” I raise my eyebrows.

“It’s at a nightclub, Cal, I don’t need an invitation.”

“It is?” he frowns but he leans forwards, a spark of interest in his eyes.

“Yes,” I nod. “And Tropicana’s isn’t just any nightclub.” I lean close to him and flick my eyebrows making him laugh in surprise despite his outburst of anger. “It’s a gay nightclub.” He catches his breath.

“A gay nightclub?” he repeats, suddenly more curious.

“Uhuh!” I nod. “But you don’t want to go though, so I guess I’m going on my own, unless...”

“Unless what?” Cal asks breathlessly, his eyes searching mine; no longer angry, sullen or defensive, instead, full of interest and anticipation.

“I was gonna ask you to come with me but if you don’t want...”

“Yes, okay, yes, I’ll come.” Cal blurts out before I can finish the sentence, almost knocking me over with his enthusiasm. “Wow, thanks Jake, I mean really, thanks.”

He bounces around the deck like he’s made of rubber. He reminds me of Tigger and I can’t help laughing, but I’m also a little confused, because that was just a little too easy.

“I think the party starts at eight thirty,” he shouts, as he bounds back across my deck and down the steps. He turns and runs backwards across the drive as he continues to shout up at me. “I’ll come back about then. Wear something nice.” Then he’s gone.

Wear something nice? The cheeky brat! And he’s left now, so I can’t even give a suitable retort.

Wait, did he just manipulate me into asking him out? Is that what just happened here?

Oh holy crap! Does he think we’re going on a date?

No!

He did actually, really want to go to the party and just needed someone to go with him. This isn’t a date, although, I don’t understand why he couldn’t just have asked me. I would have said yes. I don’t think I could ever say no to him. I don’t need to be manipulated, but it did seem as if he had simply been waiting for me to offer to come.

“Where did Cal go in such a hurry?” Sarah asks me as she reappears through my study door. If I know her, she was listening. She taught me everything I know when it comes to stealthy stalking skills.

“He’s gone to get ready for that party,” I tell her.

“You persuaded him to go?” She smiles. “Good.”

“Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to get ready too,” I say. She regards me with wide eyes.

“For what?” she asks innocently. I narrow my eyes. She knows damn well.

“For the party, Sarah, now get outta here, and you too Lou-Anne,” I call through to the kitchen. “I know you’re still here plotting evil deeds with my sister. I swear it’s like the ‘Witches of Eastwick’ in my kitchen.”

Lou-Anne appears in my hall with a wide grin.

“What’s this about you going to a party tonight?” she asks with interest. “Is that Don’s party at Tropicana’s?”

“Er, yeah!” I say, warily. How did she know this? Did Sarah tell her? She grins even wider and claps her hands.

“Great, Larry and I will see you there because we’ve been invited too.”

“Oh!” Well this might not be too bad after all. If Lawrence and Lou-Anne are going, at least I’ll have some company while Cal goes off to do whatever with his new friends. “How come you’ll be there?” I ask.

“We’re Don’s godparents, so he asked us.”

“Oh, he asked us too.” Sarah tells Lou-Anne, as if she’s only just remembered. I gasp, since she might have told me before. “But Sam has another tournament tonight.”

“Great.” I try not to sound too sarcastic when I say it. Did everyone get an invite to this party except me? “I’ll see you there then.” I tell Lou-Anne as I usher both women out of the door because I really need to go and get ready. “Tell Sammy good luck from me,” I tell Sarah.

“Enjoy your date, Jake.” Sarah calls back to me with a slight smirk as she gets into her car.

“Hey!” I shout. “It’s not a date.”

“You just keep telling yourself that,” she tells me and drives off leaving me a little stunned.

Lou-Anne drives off too after giving me a knowing smile and a wink.

Chapter Eleven

Not a date! Not. A. Date!

I am now standing in my bathroom, staring at myself in the mirror while I decide if I need to shave or just keep the beard I've been cultivating. It's kinda grown on me, pardon the pun.

"This is not a date," I tell myself out loud. Despite what Sarah said, this is not a date.

The pounding of my heart and the knot in my stomach tells me different, but I ignore them. You can do that when you're old(er).

Eighty-three is approaching far too quickly for my liking. Cal's parting shot about wearing something nice has ground me down to a shadow of my former self. Much as I sometimes grouch about my sister's mothering and constant presence, she is still my best chance of getting some good advice here.

I call her.

"I have searched through every item of clothing in my closet that could be considered nice and rejected every single one, Sarah," I blurt out as soon as she answers her phone.

"So what do you want me to do about it?" she asks me. *"Why are you so bothered about it if you're insisting that this is not a date?"*

"It isn't a date, but he said wear something nice," I wail. "Everything I have would be considered nice by our mother, which makes everything I own about forty-nine years out of date for Cal. What the hell does a twenty-one-year-old expect his forty-five-year-old 'not date' to wear on their 'not date', Sarah?"

"Jake you're not making sense." She chuckles. She can laugh, she's not stuck in the middle of this impossible situation.

"I don't want to embarrass the guy. It'll be bad enough when we turn up at the club together. People are going to think he's brought his dad." I groan.

"You aren't going to be the only adult there you know, Lawrence and Lou-Anne are going. It's a party, I'm sure there'll be other parents for you to talk to."

"Fucking hell, Sarah, you make it sound like I'm taking him to a kid's party."

"Yeah?" she asks, as if this is exactly what it is.

Oh my god, this is exactly what it is! No, no, no, it isn't. Cal is an adult, the others there will all be adults just a hell of a lot younger than me.

"Sarah will you just help me instead of making me feel like I'm cradle snatching?"

"Really, Jake, you overthink things sometimes. Just pick something that won't stop you getting into a night club. I'm sure he'll be fine with whatever you wear. What did you wear the last time you went to Tropicana's?"

Oh god, when was the last time I was even in a nightclub? I can't even remember. It must have been when Josh was alive. When was the last time I was at Tropicana's though? Oh yeah, I remember with a groan.

"Oh god, Sarah, the last time I went to Tropicana's I wore a florescent orange string vest and girl's hot pants. I think my hair might have been electric blue as well." I hear Sarah's snort and hysterical laugh at this piece of information. What can I say? It was the eighties, the fashion decade everyone would rather forget.

"Somehow I don't think that's what Cal had in mind when he said wear something nice." I chuckle.

"No, I think you're right."

"Although, I would've liked to have seen that outfit, Jake." She sounds like she's taking deep breaths after laughing too much. *"Josh certainly brought out the Gay in you."*

"He certainly did." I laugh. I glance at the clock, which reads ten past eight. "Holy shit, Sarah. I need to pick something now because he'll be here any minute."

"Light green button down shirt and black dress pants." She tells me without hesitation. How the hell does my sister, who doesn't even live here, know that I even own a light green button down shirt?

I stare down at the pile of clothes on my bed and see which one she means.

"Okay, I got it." I pick the shirt up and inspect it for creases. "Shoes?" I ask. She groans.

"Just wear something that isn't sneakers or flip flops. And socks, you'll need socks, preferably ones that match."

“Oh that’s it. I’m not going if I have to wear socks that match.” I’m joking although I might actually have a problem finding a matching pair.

“*Jake!*” She sounds really fed up and impatient now, and I guess even my sister’s patience can be tried sometimes.

“I’m sorry to be such a pain in the ass, sis.” I apologize and she chuckles.

“You’re not a pain in the ass, you’re a great guy. I just wish I was going to be there to see how great you’ll look. Now go out and have fun on your ‘not date’ and don’t worry about stuff so much.”

Sometimes, I don’t get her, because she’s the one that keeps reminding me Cal is so very much younger than me, but right now she just sounds happy that I’m actually getting out of the house.

“Thanks, Sarah, I owe you one. Tell Sammy good luck with beating the crap out of everyone else at that tournament,” I tell her. She clicks her tongue and chuckles as she disconnects the call.

I pull on the shirt and pants and find some decent socks (they almost match) and shoes. I know I overthink things sometimes, but I guess it’s my age and my nature, and it has been quite a while since I did something like this.

I’m not particularly a fan of dancing, or noisy nightclubs, but I never was. It was always Josh that loved that kind of thing and I just got dragged along. No, that sounds like I didn’t enjoy it, because I did. I just haven’t had the heart to go since I lost him.

I have no idea if Cal even likes dancing either. Oh my god, it’s a gay nightclub everybody is going to be dancing. I think I’ll just find Lawrence when we get there and the two of us can retreat into a booth and get quietly drunk while Cal bumps and grinds on the dance floor. I won’t be able to watch that anyway.

“Are you ready old man?” Cal calls from my entrance hall. How could I forget he has a key? “Or do you need more time to get your creaking joints working properly?”

He is pushing his luck. He doesn’t even know if I’m even here for him to insult. For a fleeting moment, I do consider hiding and making him think I’ve ducked out. The moment passes though, because he’s supposed to be the shy, retiring introvert. I’m the outgoing, gregarious, popular extrovert except I’ve been hiding myself away for too long, and I got out of the habit of socializing.

Maybe it's time. Maybe he's the one to bring me out and into the world again.

This is not a date, Jake! Do you think if I keep reminding myself it will eventually sink in?

Cal is not making it very easy to remember though, especially not looking the way he does right now. Thankfully, I have made the right choice of clothing because he also has on a nice button down shirt: a very nice white number with light blue swirly patterns on it that highlight his eyes, as if they ever needed highlighting. He has on dark pants, black the same as me, except he wears them so much better. God he's beautiful. My situation is hopeless.

As our eyes meet he smiles, then checks out what I'm wearing and nods in approval.

"Not bad!" he regards me, pursing his lips. "You'll do."

I'll do? Does he have any idea how long I've agonized over what to wear and all I get is a "You'll do"? I want to be indignant and irritated by his sudden cocky attitude, but I can't help laughing. The laughter helps hide the fact that I think he looks stunning, and I don't think I will be able to take my eyes off him all night.

"Cocky little shit," I mutter and he smirks at me then raises his eyebrows in query.

"Ready to go?" he asks. "I booked us a cab. I did it online. Did you know you could book cabs online?"

I give him a bemused look. I didn't know that, but then I don't do stuff online. I have no idea why he's rambling though.

"I'm ready to go. I just need a couple of things." I go over to my messenger bag and lift the flap.

"You're not taking that with you are you?" he asks, leaning over and trying to get a good view of my face as I search inside for my wallet. He's rather close and I can smell his cologne. He put on cologne? I did too, but, the fact that he did means he is at least thinking this is a special outing.

Of course it's special, he's going to meet up with some new friends, and I'm there as his moral support. Not. A. Fucking. Date.

"I might not have been out to a club for a while, Cal," I tell him archly, as I locate my wallet and phone and put them both in my back pocket, "but I do

know that a messenger bag is not really an acceptable accessory on the dance floor.”

“Okay, okay, don’t have a cow.” He turns towards the door. He spins back around with a slightly anxious frown. “You mean you might actually dance when we get there?” he asks.

Oh yeah, here it comes, the *please don’t do anything to embarrass me* talk. The one you give your parents before a family party; the one they ignore because it’s their job to embarrass you. It’s not my job to embarrass him though, but is he going to be embarrassed by a forty-something guy showing off his moves on the dance floor amongst all the twenty-somethings?

“I-I don’t have to dance,” I say. “I mean, it’s been a while. I really didn’t even consider having any intention of dancing. I’ll probably not know any of the songs anyway.”

“I won’t know them either,” Cal tells me suddenly, as if he is trying to say something that will make me feel more comfortable. Why would he be doing that? Oh yeah, I was stuttering. He looks down at his feet. “I’m not saying it because I think you’ll embarrass me or anything,” he mutters, surprising me that he has understood my underlying concerns so well. “It’s just that, I’m not a very good dancer, and I can only feel the base beat vibrating so sometimes I don’t always end up doing the same thing as everyone else.”

Oh my god, that’s why he asked if I was intending to dance. Not because he thought I’d embarrass him but because he is worried he’ll embarrass me. I lift his chin so he can see me speaking clearly.

“Whatever you feel comfortable with, Cal, that’s what we’ll do,” I assure him. “And any time you want to leave the party you tell me and we will.”

“Yeah but what if you’re having fun?” he asks me, and I frown.

Why does he think I’m going to this party in the first place? I’m not going because I want to. I wasn’t even invited. I’m only there for him.

“I’m not there to have fun, Cal, I’m there because if I didn’t go neither would you.”

Cal blinks in surprise and looks a little taken aback by my words.

“Why would you be so willing to do this for me?” His expression is an unfathomable mix of emotions right now. I get the feeling he hasn’t had this experience recently. Just how long has he been on his own anyway?

“I could ask the same thing about your willingness to keep me company over the last two weeks when I have probably been the worst company ever, spreading my germs and basically being a grouchy couch potato.”

He chuckles and shrugs.

“You have a better DVD collection than me,” he tells me, although he is blushing as he turns and leads the way out of the front door.

Now why would that confession make him blush? He's an intriguing guy. I think this evening is going to be very interesting.

Chapter Twelve

A Night to Remember

Oh my, I'd forgotten how loud this place can be and we're not even inside the actual club yet, we're only in the reception. As soon as we walked through the door our senses were bombarded with color, smell, sound, vibrations running through your very bones. Surprisingly, Cal seems more affected by it than me. The music isn't that loud from up here in the reception area but I can feel the base beat in the soles of my feet since the actual nightclub is beneath us. I glance at him as we approach the reception desk to sign in and he pats his chest.

"I can feel it here." He says with a frown and I chuckle, lifting my foot and pointing to the sole.

"I feel it here!" I tell him. "It kinda tickles." He smiles and seems to relax a little.

The guy sitting at the reception desk seems a little disinterested as he chews gum and doesn't even look up from a list he has spread out on his desk when he asks us for our names.

"Jacob Reuben." I inform him. His eyes flicker up to my face, do a double take and then he holds out his hand, popping his gum as he does.

"ID?" His expression is suddenly interested and coy.

I groan. Why the hell did I give my full name?

"Is that because you think I might look under twenty-one?" I ask hopefully, knowing this is not the reason.

"No." The guy pronounces the word deliberately slowly. "It's because I want to check out if you're really *the* Jacob Reuben, the writer."

This is one of the reasons I don't come out much!

"Would it matter if I wasn't?" I ask, trying not to sound sullen.

"Well." The guy purses his lips and pops his gum again giving me a hungry look which makes me feel kind of dirty actually. It's definitely not having the effect I think he hopes it will have anyway. "If you're *the* Jacob Reuben you can go in, but if you're not, then you're not on the list so you can't."

“He’s *the* Jacob Reuben,” Cal interrupts, obviously having followed the conversation, “And you can let him in whether he is or not, because he’s with me and my name’s on the damn list.”

Both the reception guy and I regard Cal with wide eyes. Cal always seems so introverted, shy and retiring. To have him suddenly become assertive like this has my senses whirling. To emphasize his point he’s taken my hand and is clutching it, his fingers twined with mine, as he leans across the desk.

“And what is your name, firecracker?” The guy turns his attention to Cal with some amusement. Cal seems to suddenly want to hide again as he blushes furiously.

“It’s Cal,” he blurts out abruptly. “Cal Steele.”

Reception guy makes a show of looking down the list as I process everything that just happened. Cal just came out of his shell a little more. I think he’s using my hand as a safety wire though. The fact that he knows his name is on the guest list is another revelation. Well, maybe not so much, because it did seem that when the surfers were discussing the party today on the beach, that Cal had already been invited and they’d just been reminding him. The biggest revelation though, is Cal’s name.

His last name is Steele. I’ve known him almost four weeks and I never discovered his last name until now. The beach house next to mine has always been called “The Steele Place”. Does this mean he owns it or at least his parents own it? I have yet to find out anything about him while I think he knows my entire life story.

All I’ve managed to get out of him is that he’s on his own and that’s how he likes it. I beg to differ, since he spends all his time hanging out at mine, although that might change now that I’m no longer sick and he did admit it is mostly because of my DVD collection anyway. I haven’t dug any deeper than that, since I have a feeling the story is a sad one, and I’ve just not wanted to upset him by prying. I guess he’ll tell me in his own time.

The reception guy checks Cal’s ID carefully before handing it back with a wink. Cal’s twenty-one but he definitely does not look it, to me anyway. I don’t ever remember looking younger than twenty-one. I definitely don’t now.

The guy hands back my ID also with a wink.

“Nice beard,” He purses his lips.

Cal pulls me away, his hand still in mine and I see him give the reception guy a flinty glare before I am dragged to the doorway that leads to the basement

club. I glance back at the reception guy with a smug smirk and a shrug. He's glaring at Cal as if he's taken all the cookies.

"Some guys have all the luck," he huffs, which of course, Cal does not hear but the words burn in my brain.

Who does he mean? Cal? He thinks he's lucky? Or, more likely, he means me. I mean, I'm currently being dragged, by the hand, into the club by the most beautiful creature that ever set foot on this earth. I know what it looks like, and the impression Cal gave was that I was with him even if he didn't mean to give off those vibes. As he leads me through the door, I have this warm feeling of being possessed, like he's marking his territory even though I know it was simply a ruse to get us into the club quicker. I guess he was impatient enough to throw off his shyness and do something he wouldn't normally do.

Inside, we descend a flight of stairs and find ourselves on a balcony overlooking the dance floor and bars. We take a few minutes to adjust to the dark and the noise and the flashing lights as we approach the balcony rail and look out over the scene below.

The noise in here is deafening. There's been an excessive use of dry ice and the smell is pretty acrid. The colors are neon, bright and relentlessly flashing.

I hadn't realized this was a private party, but then I should have guessed since it is midweek, plus if it's the Don I'm thinking of, his parents own about half of Oakwood Bay. You would probably be expected to rent an entire club for your son's twenty first when you have that much money.

As I search around for some familiar faces in the form of Lawrence and Lou-Anne, Cal seems to be retreating behind me and still hasn't let go of my hand. Well, he will eventually so I'm not going to knock it on the head. It feels nice.

"See your friends yet?" I am unable to resist the need to shout over the music despite the fact that it doesn't actually matter and would probably be easier for Cal if I just spoke normally.

Cal grimaces then points down to a group of people standing at the corner of one of the bars. Someone is waving furiously, and I realize it is Pete from the beach, the one that seemed just a little too disappointed that Cal had said he wasn't coming. He now looks far too pleased to see Cal has changed his mind.

With Cal's hand still in mine, I pull him down the stairs.

"Someone looks happy to see us," I observe. To my satisfaction, Cal rolls his eyes. Perhaps Pete isn't his type.

Pete meets us at the bottom of the stairs. Cal drops my hand as if it is burning him and I can't help feeling just a little bereft. I can totally understand why he wouldn't want his friends to see him holding hands with me though.

"Hi!" Pete greets Cal cheerily, hardly giving me a cursory glance. "I thought you said you weren't coming." Cal shrugs and shoots me a slight smirk.

"Yeah, I er, changed my mind," he tells Pete. I return his smirk though.

Changed his mind, my ass! Although, I am still trying to determine who actually manipulated who into coming here tonight.

"Uhuh!" Pete's expression, as he glances at me again, is dismissive and I feel my hackles rise. "Come on," he reaches out and grabs Cal by the hand, "I'll introduce you to everyone. You know most of the guys from the beach anyway."

Cal pulls his hand from Pete's, so the over enthusiastic new friend wraps his arm around Cal's shoulders and guides him towards the group at the end of the bar. Cal ducks out of the hold and turns back to me, beckoning for me to follow.

Come with me, please? He signs. It is the first time he has used sign language to communicate with me properly since he began teaching me.

Why? I ask back, feeling really quite proud of myself that I have actually understood him, and also quite proud that I haven't kicked Pete's scrawny little ass yet.

Do it, J! His fingers flick irritably back to me and his eyes plead beguilingly.

Somehow, that shortening of my name felt very, very personal and intimate, even though it was simply the need for efficiency in signing that made him do it, and the fact that he sounded very demanding. Still, it gave me butterflies in my stomach. What is that all about?

I still think I should leave him to it until Pete turns and gives me a direct and withering look that is clearly telling me to back off. Well, Pete might just be a little disappointed because I am definitely not going to "back off". I might not be Cal's date, but I won't stand by while Pete manhandles him. I already watched Cal shrug him away three times, and Pete still didn't get the message.

I take out my phone and text Cal.

I'll get us a drink and be with you soon. What do you want?

Beer, thanks x.

He texts back almost immediately. Was he hanging over his phone? And what was with the “x” at the end?

I get two beers and walk over to join him. I am way out of my comfort zone here. It is plainly obvious that I am going to be the oldest person in this group. The last time I hung out with twenty-one year olds was when I was actually twenty-one myself and that, to put this all into perspective, was way before any of these kids were even born. How the hell am I going to fit in here without looking like a really grumpy, old has-been? One of them is going to direct me to the “parents’ corner” for sure.

Cal sees me approach, was watching for me in fact. He makes a space for me in the circle, fitting me in between him and the seemingly overfriendly Pete. Cal looks relieved, as if I have just rescued him from a fate worse than death. Pete looks positively livid as he shuffles sullenly out of the way to allow me access.

I hand Cal his drink and he signs *thank you* with such relief etched on his face I know he’s not only referring to the drink. He takes a long swig before turning back to face the group.

“Everyone, this is Jake,” he calls, waving his hands about and then pointing to me.

Everyone in the circle greets me cheerily, some even enthusiastically. Not one of them seems to think that my presence is in any way unusual. Well, I say none of them: Pete doesn’t seem overly keen and continues to give me dirty looks. I take the liberty of ignoring him.

Cal seemed tense when I first joined him, but he’s relaxed now. I’m not sure whether it is the beer or my presence, but I’m glad he’s enjoying himself. I am too, kind of, even if I do find myself answering more than one or two questions about my writing. Apparently, two of my books were on this year’s reading list for the surrounding colleges. I didn’t even know that.

I think, rather than this group seeing my presence as odd, it has suddenly sent Cal’s street cred soaring amongst the stars because he knows me. Well, I guess celebrity status can be good for some things. Most of the time, I just ignore the fact that I am Oakwood Bay’s local celebrity. Everyone who knows me well enough does. That’s the way I like it. I hate being the center of

attention, but I don't mind being wheeled out for the occasional community fair and book signing. Cal is quite welcome to use my celebrity status whenever he wants if it means he gets accepted into the group. I certainly don't ever have any use for it.

I drain my beer and glance at Cal's bottle. His is already empty, although I don't think he's noticed. He's deep in conversation with another guy I recognize from the beach. I guess he's almost on level ground here when it comes to conversation because no one can hear a damn thing above the music anyway. I tap my bottle against Cal's and he turns to smile at me. God those eyes, when I'm caught off guard, just blow me away.

"W-want another?" I ask, having no idea why I'm stuttering, except his eyes are just so incredibly blue.

He nods.

"I'll get these," he says. I glance over at the bar, which is a hell of a lot busier than it was when we first arrived. The entire club is. I shake my head. There's no way I am happy letting Cal wander about here on his own.

"I'll go, I don't mind," I say and I leave before he can protest.

At the bar, it is suddenly a little crowded where I'm standing and it hadn't been when I'd first approached it. The rest of this section of the bar is clear though so I just move.

No sooner have I moved than I'm crowded again. What the...

"Hi there!" A gruff, deep voice greets me and I realize I'm crowded by this one guy who followed me when I moved.

Oh my god. This guy is big enough to be a crowd all by himself, and hairy too. If this guy was any hairier he'd actually be a bear. I mean real live bears have less hair on their faces than this guy. His beard is enormous and long, and he's tall as well as wide. He looks like Gandalf, Dumbledore and Chewbacca had a love child.

"Er, hi!" I say, then, because I don't want to meet his eye, and I can't actually see where his eyes are beneath his bushy eyebrows, I turn back to the bar to try to get the barman's attention.

The Wizard/Wookiee half breed squashes closer to me. What is this guy's story? I know moving will not work because I already did that and he followed.

"You here for the party?" the guy asks in his gruff voice. There's so much hair I can't actually see his mouth.

“Er, yeah I am.” I answer, because it would be impolite not to. “I haven’t been to this club for a long time.”

“Thought I hadn’t seen you around before. It’s usually full of kids these days!” He grunts and I just nod, giving a small, polite laugh.

The barman takes my order, and I wait with growing impatience for him to bring the drinks.

“Did you come on your own?” bear guy asks me, and I can feel the panic rising. Is he coming onto me? His knee just moved closer and pressed against mine. Eww!

I’m sure he’s a nice enough guy, but he’s just not my type. All that hair would give my entire body a beard rash, and how the hell would I even find his mouth to kiss him? I’d need a comb and a couple of barrettes; I’d need a degree in hair dressing just to find the guy’s eyes.

“No, I didn’t come on my own,” I tell him, although I can’t bring myself to tell him I came with someone specific because I don’t know how Cal would react if I was giving everyone the wrong idea. “I’m here with friends.” I point in the general direction of the group that includes Cal.

Hairy guy huffs and shrugs.

“You’re here with a bunch of kids?” he asks disdainfully, then he leans towards me and licks his lips. So, that’s where his mouth is, eww, gross, just gross. I can’t contain a slight shudder. “How about you ditch the kids and we go somewhere more adult?” he suggests, flicking his eyebrows that are so thick they bounce independently of his face. His hand comes up to stroke my own beard and I try to move back but there is someone standing directly behind me now so I can’t. “I like a guy who knows how to grow a beard,” he says seductively.

Oh my god, I’ve had enough of this.

“Yeah?” I ask him, containing my disgust as I reach out and grab a handful of his ample facial construction and give it a firm tug. “I like a beard too, but some people just don’t have a clue when to stop.”

I turn back to the bar and pay for my drinks, ignoring the flash of surprise at my brush off in Hairy Guy’s eyes. His hand grabs my arm though and I look down at it, then up at his face, my eyebrows raised in irritation. I do not like being manhandled.

“Hey, listen, I just thought...” he begins but doesn’t finish as a sun-bleached blond whirlwind jumps between us.

“Jake, what’s taking you so long? Did you have to brew the damn beer?” Cal shouts at me excitedly. His blue eyes are wide and innocent but he flicks his eyebrows and his expression tells me he has jumped in on purpose. He turns to face Sasquatch and grins. “You don’t mind if I steal him away do you?” he flutters his eye lashes and flashes Big Foot his widest grin then doesn’t wait for a reply as he pulls me away leaving the guy spluttering with surprise.

The entire incident is threatening to reduce me to fits of hysterical laughter. This is the second time tonight that Cal has jumped in and laid a claim on me. It’s becoming a habit. Not that I’m complaining but I don’t think he realizes what it looks like to everyone else or what it looks like to me.

I glance back at Hairy Biker, and I think he looks angry that he was just cock blocked by one of “those kids”, or at least his eyebrows seem to be trying to meet his moustache as he frowns, otherwise I wouldn’t know.

“And I thought I was the one that needed rescuing.” Cal snorts, with an adorable roll of his eyes, glancing back at the bar and shuddering slightly. “Eww, gross.”

I chuckle as he pulls me through the ever-increasing crowd in the club. I realize he is pulling me away from his group of friends though. I resist. Has he lost his bearings or something?

He stops with a gasp.

“What’s wrong?” he regards me with feigned innocence. “I didn’t interrupt you in full swing did I?”

I narrow my eyes and click my tongue.

“No, cheeky brat.” I snort. “Thanks for the well-timed interruption though!” He shrugs.

“No problem!” He grins, and then resumes pulling me away from his friends.

“Cal!” I get his attention again, he looks at me irritably. “Where are we going?”

“I found Lou-Anne and Lawrence,” he says. “I thought we’d go sit with them.”

“What about your friends?” He shrugs.

“They all went off to dance and I didn’t really feel like it since it would have put me back in the evil clutches of Pete.” I snort.

“Not your type, huh?” I ask him and he shakes his head.

“Just like Gandalf the Wookiee wasn’t yours.” He points out. I give an involuntary shudder, then we both burst out laughing. “Come on.” Cal grabs my hand again and leads the way. I don’t complain.

We spend another couple of hours and another couple of beers in the pleasant company of Lawrence and Lou-Anne. Cal is far more relaxed here, despite him seeming relaxed in our previous company. I realize why though when his head begins to lean heavily on my shoulder. I nudge him and he lifts his head and looks a little bleary eyed. He stifles a yawn and looks sufficiently embarrassed.

“Am I keeping you up past your bed time?” I ask him with a smirk. He purses his lips.

“Asshole!” he hisses, but his eyes are twinkling.

“Seriously though, are you about ready to go?” He smiles and nods.

“Only if you are,” he tells me. I nod.

“I was just waiting for you.” I turn to the rest of the crowd sitting in the booth. “Guys, we’re heading off now,” I tell them.

There are some groans and complaints that we are ducking out far too early. I think we’re leaving at the right time though because Cal looks tired, and I am kind of wrecked. I have spent the better part of the last three weeks in bed with the flu.

We catch a cab and it drops us off at the end of our shared drive. We stand for a moment between both our houses in slightly awkward silence. It isn’t painfully awkward, but awkward in the way that neither of us wants to end a really great night. If this was a date, I would ask him for coffee, but it isn’t so I hesitate. I’m sure he wouldn’t see me asking him for coffee as any different from any other time he’s spent at my house, but, to me, it feels different and I’m not sure why.

“So did you have fun after all?” I ask him and Cal smiles, chuckles and nods. “You’re not sorry I manipulated you into going?”

His response to this is to blush furiously and look away, and well he might, the manipulative little menace.

"I'm sorry about that," he apologizes. "I really, genuinely didn't want to go until you mentioned going yourself, although I know it looked like I was trying to manipulate you into asking me." He smiles. "I saw your expression change when you first had the idea of going, and I saw the opportunity to get you out of the house instead of moping around feeling sorry for yourself," he tells me, and I gasp.

"I was not moping around," I protest incredulously. He just shrugs as if to say he doesn't believe me and that somehow we are even because we both thought we were manipulating the other.

Cal looks down at his feet and suddenly he snorts, giggling out loud in that sweet, unrestrained way he has when the laughter is really, truly genuine. I don't care what he's laughing at, it's infectious so I join him.

"What?" I ask between giggles. Cal regards me with sparkling eyes.

"That guy with the Gandalf beard," he says. I roll my eyes and laugh harder. "Did you see how long it was?"

"Not only that, Cal, I pulled it so I felt how long it was, eww!" I make a face at the memory and he snorts again.

"Oh my god, I would never have dared do that," he says with awed respect for my brashness. "But it covered his mouth, you couldn't even see it. It's a good job he made a pass at you, I wouldn't have had a clue what he was saying if he'd spoken to me."

"Thanks, I think," I say, still chuckling.

"And kissing him would have been like kissing a door mat. I bet it would scratch like hell," Cal observes, still unable to contain his laughter.

I stroke my own, neatly trimmed beard.

"Speak for yourself," I say. "I'm sure it would feel awesome." Cal eyes me curiously, still grinning.

"I never kissed a guy with a beard before," he tells me.

"Come to think of it, neither have I." I snort. He pushes at my shoulder playfully, and I stumble back a step.

"Hey!" I make a face at him, still rubbing my beard thoughtfully. I should really say goodnight now, since it's late, and I have a lot of things to do

tomorrow. I have some emails to catch up on, and I'm sure my first set of edits will be due soon.

"I'd like to." Cal is saying, looking suddenly very serious, and I frown in confusion, thinking I've probably missed the beginning of that sentence while I was mulling over my to do list.

"I'm sorry, what would you like to do?" I ask him. He's taken a step closer, and alarm bells should be ringing right now, but they're not, because it's Cal stepping closer to me, not some random guy at the bar that looked like a walking carpet. Cal smiles.

"I said I'd like to kiss a guy with a beard." He seems slightly nervous.

"Oh!" I have no idea why he's nervous, but I realize what he meant. "Why didn't you say so at the bar, I could've introduced you to The Wookiee." He snorts.

"Not him, bozo, you." He pokes his finger at my chest, which is suddenly not large enough to contain my wild and erratically beating heart. His gaze is intense.

"Me?" I frown, feeling a little dumbfounded. What's he talking about...

"Ugh!" he growls in frustration, grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me forward.

His lips are on mine before I can take another breath. My eyes are wide and my body is frozen in place. For a moment, we are both motionless: his lips pressing against mine but neither of us are moving. He feels soft and warm and amazing but tense and unsure, and then his tongue runs tentatively along my top lip as his eyes close and my entire body explodes with sensation.

I don't hesitate, I don't think, I simply react. As his lips begin to move so do mine, and with them, the rest of my body is jolted into action. My eyes close as I part my lips and allow his tongue inside my mouth. His arms move up to wrap around my neck, and his fingers bury themselves in my hair. There's a moan that I think comes from me, but I'm not entirely sure, nor do I even care. My hands move to clasp around his face, tipping my head slightly to get a better angle from which to really feel his tongue inside my mouth.

My tongue joins in, and he definitely moans this time. His hold around my neck tightens as I taste the inside of his mouth, feel his lips on mine, soft and pliable, feel his body pressed against mine, firm in all the right places as heat pools around my groin.

He's hard, I can feel the firm heat pushing against my thigh as he presses his leg between mine, and oh my god, so am I, but I don't care because this is Cal. I am kissing Cal, the beautiful, gorgeous, incredibly sexy Cal, and there is no way he doesn't want this because he initiated it.

God, this is amazing. The feel of him, the smell of him, the taste of him just overloads my senses and is everything I dared to imagine it would be. Where the hell did he learn to kiss like this? You know what though? I don't even care. It's like we're surrounded by a bubble of air, and every objection my brain might have come up with to not do this has been extracted and is stuck outside with no way of getting in.

My arms wrap around him now, pulling him, if possible, harder against me as our lips remain locked together, our tongues dancing, tasting and searching. We fit. That's what is making this so amazing, we just fit. I never want it to end, but I guess even something this good has to end sometime.

It doesn't end suddenly, in a fit of panic because one of us has realized we shouldn't be doing this. The bubble is still somehow keeping those objections at bay. It doesn't end abruptly, it simply ends naturally with our lips finally parting, our breaths, held as we kissed, released in a soft susurrus of air across our cheeks, and our eyes slowly opening at the same moment to regard each other with shy smiles and flushed cheeks.

Cal has got to be the most gorgeous creature on the face of the earth as he smiles into my eyes, and I lose myself in his.

Then the bubble bursts.

"Oh my god!" Cal gasps, suddenly pulling away from me, his hand up over his mouth and his blue eyes wide with unreadable emotions. "I... we... I should probably go."

And then he's gone, off up his steps, into his front door and out of sight before I can even register the change in mood.

What the hell just happened? Did we just kiss? Can I even bring myself to believe that actually happened?

My lips are still tingling, and I can still taste him there. My body is shocked through with electricity, and I'm practically sizzling, so I have to believe something happened.

And then he ran away. Well, of course, he did because why the hell would he even want to kiss me? He wanted to know what it was like to kiss a guy with

a beard, not me in particular. I wanted to kiss him though, and he must have realized that. He must have felt my reaction, my total surrender.

I pull at my hair in angst as I wonder what to do next. Should I follow him, try to do some damage control? He caught me off guard, and now the floodgates have opened. Oh god, there's no way he's ever going to want to be friends with me now. One moment of madness has the potential to ruin everything.

What the hell am I going to do?

“Jake?”

I spin around and stare into his wide, frightened eyes. Oh god, he's back but he looks like a scared rabbit. What the hell have you done Jake, you monster?

Suddenly his knees give way, and I instinctively catch him.

“Cal!” I gasp. “What's wrong?” This is not just because we kissed, something else is terribly wrong.

He is pale and shaking as he points a trembling finger towards his house.

“My house!” he gasps and I realize with horror he is crying. “Someone trashed my house.”

Chapter Thirteen

A Night to Forget

Tonight has turned into a night to remember for all the wrong reasons.

One in the morning and Sheriff Jefferson finally left us alone after about a million questions and getting Cal to sort through the mess in his house to see what was missing. It was difficult with flashlights, because whoever did this decided it would be fun to cut all the cables to the junction box as well as everything else.

Strangely enough, it doesn't look like anything has actually been stolen. Well I say that, what I mean is nothing physical was taken. What has been stolen is Cal's self-confidence; his privacy and his belief that home is the safest place to be.

The entire house has been wrecked. Someone broke in and simply smashed, ripped and mangled everything they possibly could. They took a spray can to everything else. I don't think there is a window or piece of furniture left intact or a wall or floor left unmarked. I'm surprised we didn't notice when we first got out of the cab because the spray paint adorns the outside walls as well, but I guess we were thinking about other things: things that will have to take a back burner right now because Cal just doesn't need the complication.

It's far too late and both of us are far too tired to think straight, let alone talk about that kiss. Cal is exhausted, it's all he can do to generate enough energy to lift his feet as I guide him up my front steps and through into my living room.

"Want some hot chocolate or something?" I ask him. He shakes his head.

No thanks, he signs wearily.

He sinks into my sofa, and I watch his dejected, desperately pale figure with concern. He hasn't spoken a word since he discovered his home in tatters. When the Sheriff asked him anything he used sign language or wrote it down. I want to cry for him, but I know that won't do any good because he needs me to be strong.

We haven't even talked about him staying here, although there is really nowhere else he can go. There is no way I would have considered leaving him standing amidst the ruins of his home, so after the cops and forensics had made a sweep and taken what evidence they could find in the dark I helped him sort

through the hell that was his bedroom and gather some personal effects before bringing him over here. There wasn't that much left intact. Whoever has done this had even gone to town on his clothes with what the cops thought might have been some kind of utility knife or box cutter. Even Sheriff Jefferson was surprised and shocked by the level of violence and destruction. I dread to think what might have happened if Cal had actually been in the house. In fact, it's making me feel quite sick.

He managed to find some personal stuff intact that was hidden beneath a fallen dresser otherwise he appears to have lost everything. Who the hell would do something like this? I have no idea. There weren't even any clothes that were salvageable. I'll have to find something of mine for him to sleep in. I'll have to take him shopping for something more tomorrow.

He looks the picture of dejection, but strangely enough, apart from the initial shock, he doesn't appear to be in much of a state of shock now. It's more like inevitability that I sense from him, like he was expecting something like this, and it was only a matter of time. Who goes through life expecting things like this to happen? God, I want to hold him so much, but I know that would be such a very bad idea at this moment in time

The truth is, if I touch him in such an intimate way I'm afraid I won't be able to stop and my lack of self-control is not what he wants or needs right now.

"Should I show you the guest room?" I ask him, for want of anything better to say. He shrugs. I grimace because he's spent almost every day here for the last two and a half weeks, of course he knows where the guest room is. "I don't know about you, but I need to go get changed." I tell him, and he nods. "I'll find you something to get changed into as well. Most of my stuff should fit you."

He's slimmer than me but sweats and T-shirts are pretty flexible.

"Thanks Jake," he says, the first words he's spoken out loud in hours. He meets my eye with his usual intense gaze, his eyes dulled by weariness but still stunning, "Thanks for everything."

"Hey!" I say, as I kneel in front of him and hook my finger beneath his chin. "No problem, really." There's a ghost of a smile on his lips. "No problem at all, and just so you know, you can stay here as long as you need to okay?" He nods, his eyes brimming with unshed tears, which just serves to make the blue even more alluring.

I stand before I lose myself in that sapphire gaze, and leave to fetch him some clothes.

When we return to the living room, changed and looking less disheveled, we both fall thankfully into our now usual positions at either end of my sofa. I thought perhaps I might have lost this one-on-one time after I got better. However, I don't like the fact we are back in this position again because at this moment he has nowhere else to go.

This is a totally shit position to be in. I lean back into the sofa and groan, rubbing my face and running my fingers through my hair in frustration and anger at what has happened. I need a drink.

"I'm getting a whiskey, Cal," I tell him after catching his eye. "I don't know about you, but I think I need something stronger than warm milk."

Cal signs something that I don't quite catch, but his expression tells me his opinion of my drinking habits.

"I promise I won't have a hangover in the morning," I tell him and he shakes his head.

"Not what I said, old man!" he tells me, and I narrow my eyes as he smirks. At least he's smiling and talking now.

"What did you say then?" I ask with a chuckle.

He smirks some more, his dimples beginning to show as he shifts his position to sit a little straighter.

"I said I wasn't going to put your ass to bed this time if you get drunk." He tells me and I feel he's turning a corner after the shock of finding his home completely ruined.

"Yeah well, that's the beauty of living on your own though, Cal," I tell him. "No one to care where the fuck you sleep."

"But last time you were trying to sleep on your front porch," Cal reminds me.

I lean towards him and flash him an impish grin.

"I wasn't sleeping," I tell him. "I was singing, and waiting."

Cal widens his eyes.

"Waiting for what?"

“An angel,” I tell him before jumping up and moving to the door. When I turn around he is regarding me with shock. “Whiskey?”

“I never drank it before,” he says still wide-eyed and flushed.

“Ha!” I point my finger at him. “You’ve never lived.” I disappear from his sight, so I can’t say anything more. Not that I’d be able to because I am shaking inside after what I just told him.

Judging by the look on his face he understood I was talking about him. God, do I even know what I’m doing? We need to talk about what’s going on here, but I know now is not the time or the place. That doesn’t stop me continuing the momentum though. He ran from me after that kiss and I have no idea if it was because he spooked himself or if he thought it was a big mistake. Whatever the reason, we need to talk. I don’t want things to change. Friendship is good for me. Friendship is easier, especially if months down the line he finds someone younger and fitter and better. At least then I can still be his friend.

I return to the sofa with a half-full bottle of Scotch whiskey and two glasses. I place them down on the coffee table and pour a measure into each one as he watches me with interest. I hand him a glass but stop him as he goes to sniff it. He regards me curiously, one eyebrow raised in query.

“You can do this one of two ways,” I begin. He gives me a bemused smile as if he thinks I’m crazy for trying to tell him how to take a drink. “You can sip it, or down it in one.” He screws up his face. “Personally I think other spirits are for downing in one. Whiskey is for sipping. Either way it’s gonna hurt the first time.” I put the glass to my lips, then lower it. “A bit like sex, I guess.” I tell him with a wink then I take a sip.

He snorts and blushes furiously, then sips at the amber liquid in his glass. His eyes almost pop out of his head, and his hand shoots to his mouth as he fights not to choke.

“Jesus, Jake,” he croaks as his eyes water. I obligingly pat his back.

“Told you!” I say with more than a little smugness. “It ain’t called Fire Water for nothing, I’m tellin’ ya!”

He takes another sip with much the same results then places his glass down on the coffee table.

“I think I might pass,” he says with a disgusted grimace.

“Wimp!” I challenge him. He narrows his eyes defiantly, takes the glass back in his hand and downs the lot.

I cannot help my bark of laughter as his face goes bright red, and he splutters.

“What the hell are you trying to do to me?” he squeaks. I pat him on the back again.

“I’m trying to distract you,” I say brightly. “Is it working?”

He regards me with still narrowed eyes before barking out a laugh as well. It’s rare he makes a sound when he’s laughing. I know my job is done when he does. I hold up the bottle with raised eyebrows.

“Another? The second is never as bad as the first.” Cal regards me skeptically but holds his glass up to receive another measure.

I place the bottle on the table and sit back into the cushions of the sofa. Cal takes up the same position at his end of the couch, nursing the whiskey glass on his chest.

“This isn’t gonna stop me!” Cal breaks the silence. I sit up to look at him.

“What do you mean?” I ask with a confused frown. He waves his glass around in the general direction of his house.

“I mean this sick act of vandalism; it’s not going to make me want to go back.”

“Back where?” I ask, realization building slowly in my alcohol slowed brain. “Cal, do you know who might have done this?” Cal shrugs and shakes his head.

“I don’t know who did it, but I do know if certain people found out they would be on my doorstep tomorrow telling me I’m not fit to live on my own, that I’m not capable.”

“But that’s bullshit, Cal. This isn’t your fault,” I gasp, brushing his arm with my hand. “Who do you mean anyway? Your parents?” Cal sits up and shakes his head, holding his glass out for a refill.

I hesitate before giving him one more measure.

“Make that the last one,” I warn him. “This stuff can hit you all at once.” He rolls his eyes but thanks me, sipping from his glass and sinking back into the sofa.

“My parents are dead, Jake,” he tells me quietly, his voice void of emotion. I sit up with a splutter and a gasp.

“What?” This explains why he’s on his own, but it couldn’t be any more tragic. “How? When?” I realize this might just be too much information for him to be expected to share. I shake my head. “God, I’m sorry. I’m too nosy for my own good. Don’t answer if you don’t want to.” Cal shrugs.

“It was a car crash, just over three years ago,” He tells me.

“Shit, Cal.” I feel terrible for him. I knew there was something tragic about him but this is just horrible. “How did you cope, have you been on your own all that time?”

He shakes his head.

“I was seventeen and still at school. I needed a guardian until I was twenty-one, until I could legally inherit everything that my parents left me.” He takes another sip and doesn’t even react this time. I guess I should watch that the two he’s had already don’t catch up with him too suddenly, but I’m far too distracted by his tragic past. “My father’s brother and his wife became my legal guardians, and they were really nice at first, but then they tried to get control of my parents’ estate by controlling me,” Cal tells me and I realize what he is telling me is unfolding into a story of epic proportions. “When they discovered I couldn’t be manipulated so easily, they tried to have me declared mentally incompetent because I’m deaf and because of other stuff as well. That would have meant they could control the estate after I came of age.”

“They were after your money?” I ask, wondering what he could mean by “other stuff”. He nods. “They obviously didn’t succeed.”

“No.” He gives an ironic snort. “The two lawyers employed to sort out all the legal stuff were good friends of my parents. They got wise and made sure my aunt and uncle couldn’t get their hands on any of it.”

“Do you think your uncle and aunt could have had something to do with trashing your house?” I ask incredulously. He shrugs.

“They’re religious nuts, Jake,” Cal explains to me. “I don’t really think they would be capable of doing something so horrible. Breaking the law isn’t their style. Breaking spirits is though.”

“Most people would see having your home trashed as an attempt to break your spirit, Cal,” I point out and he makes a face as he considers what I’ve said. “They could be involved in this.” He shakes his head.

“They haven’t attempted to get in touch with me since I left, even though they know where I am, and while I didn’t expect them to give up so easily, the

worst I expected was for them to come quoting bible passages. They just aren't the kind of people who would do something as drastic as this. It has to be a coincidence." He looks at me hopefully. I shake my head, feeling bad, since I'm about to dash his hopes.

"The truth is, Cal, things like this just don't happen here. I've lived here over twenty years, and I've never heard of anything like this," I tell him. "Oakwood Bay has a very low crime rate. Sheriff Jefferson might be a bombastic pain in the ass but he's good at what he does." Cal nods sadly in understanding.

"Even so, I just can't believe they'd go this far," he says sadly.

"People can do all kinds of unexpected things when money is concerned, Cal." I offer by way of some sort of explanation, although I know it can hardly be any kind of consolation. "Maybe you should tell the Sheriff about your uncle and aunt just to be on the safe side," I suggest. He nods wearily.

"I guess." His head lolls to one side, and I see that the whiskey is catching up to him. I catch him as he sways in his seat. "Whoa!" he gasps with a laugh. "You weren't kidding about it catching up were you?" I chuckle.

"Come on, sunshine," I say with more than a little affection in my tone. "Time for bed, I think."

He lolls his head to the other side so he's looking at me sideways, a relaxed, slightly goofy smile on his face.

"If I have a hangover in the morning it's your turn to play nursemaid," he tells me before he actually passes out on my couch.

Luckily, he's already in sweats and a T-shirt so I don't need to undress him. Just as well really. I throw him over my shoulder and carry him to the guest room where I lay him gently down on the bed. I cover him with the blankets and quilt and make sure he has some water on the nightstand for when he wakes up. I consider leaving some painkillers too, but I decide to wait and see how he feels when he wakes up. He's young, he might not even suffer that badly. I never used to.

I stare down at his peacefully sleeping form, and I'm struck by how very young and vulnerable he does look. He has no one looking out for him, I feel responsible for him somehow. What was I even thinking allowing him to kiss me the way he did? He doesn't need that right now or even ever from me, especially after everything he's just told me about his family. He needs a friend more than anything else.

Whether it's wise or not, I can't help brushing some stray locks of his beautiful, blond curls from his face and leaning down to kiss his perfect forehead.

His hand moves like lightning to cup the back of my neck in such a firm hold I can't move. I'm in complete shock because I'd thought he was totally out for the count. His eyes shoot open wide, and he regards me, not with shock, or anger but with such longing it takes my breath away.

"Don't go," he whispers. My breath leaves my body all at once at the meaning in his words and his expression. But I can't do this, not now, not ever.

"Cal, I can't stay. We need to talk about this," I tell him. He shakes his head.

"No talking," he slurs. "I'll just close my eyes. I won't see what you say."

"Cal, you are drunk, I won't take advantage of you in this state."

"Meaning what?" he asks angrily. "That you think you'd be taking advantage whatever state I was in?" I swallow at the swiftness with which he throws my words back at me. I guess he isn't quite as drunk as he made out. "You think I'm not old enough to know what I want," he accuses; no hint of a slurred word. I shake my head.

"No, I don't think that at all, Cal," I tell him, because I don't. He needs to know that, but he also needs to know he's safe with me. We cannot do this now because when he wakes up in the morning and discovers what's happened he will leave and never come back. "I think you're drunk, and your ability to choose is compromised."

"Not a good enough excuse," he tells me. "You want this as much as I do. I felt that when we kissed, Jake. Don't deny it, and don't forget who it was that actually got me drunk in the first place," he accuses. As he says this, he pulls me over him with surprising strength and determination, and his hips thrust up into mine, which pushes our groins together.

"Oh, god," I gasp, as I feel his cock, warm and hard against mine. "I did not get you drunk to sleep with you." I feel I have to tell him. "That was not my intention at all."

"So, whatever the reasons, it makes no difference." His eyes are intense, pulling me in, forcing me to give in. "We are both adults and we are both capable of making the right decision."

“Is this the right decision though, Cal, really?” I ask him.

“Are you worried I’ll hate you in the morning, is that it?” I sigh, unable to hide the pain as I nod, biting my lip.

“I don’t want to spoil what we have, Cal. I value our friendship too much.” He reaches up to caress my cheek, run his fingers gently through my hair, sending shivers down my spine.

“And so do I,” he assures me so tenderly it is actually physically painful. “But I knew from the very beginning that I wanted more from you, Jake. We’ll still be friends, we’ll always be friends, but I need more, I want more. Please, just kiss me, Jake,” he pleads and pulls me down to crush his lips against mine.

I pull away though. I need to get control of this before it gets out of hand, but his hands are suddenly all over the place. It’s like trying to wrestle a fucking octopus. I don’t want to be rough with him, but he’s strong. I have to use some strength in return as I grab his wrists and pin them above his head.

He gasps and stops moving for a moment, regarding me with wide eyes and heavy breaths. I realize this might not be the best position to be in though when his expression changes to lustful, and his tongue thrusts against his top teeth in a wicked grin. I am directly above him now and somehow one of my legs has fallen between his. Quite slowly and deliberately, he thrusts upwards to rub his groin against my thigh.

I can’t help the groan as he does it. It feels delicious. His cock is so hard, and I can feel the heat of it through the layers of our sweat pants.

“Cal!” I gasp, lowering my head into the crook of his shoulder, my entire body shuddering with need and arousal. I can no longer ignore how hard I am in response to his closeness or how damn good this feels.

“Jake,” he gasps back, his eyes dark with desire. “Stop overthinking this, and kiss me!” he demands.

I lift my head, my eyes wide as they are caught in his sapphire gaze. Oh god. Who am I kidding? I can’t say no to this man. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say no to him. The desire that I’ve felt for him over the last month and a half since I first set eyes on him has built to a crescendo and is now almost too much to bear. The memories of that kiss just hours before is still tingling through my body, and the feelings I’d put to one side when we discovered the state of his house once more come boiling to the surface.

He pulls me down into another lip-crushing kiss, and this time I don't fight against it. Our lips crash together, and our tongues push for dominance, a fight I now know for a fact he will win.

All this time I've been thinking of him as mine, when in reality he has always called the shots, and I'm his, all his. He showed me this in the club when he made sure the reception guy knew we were together. He showed me again when he intervened and cock blocked that bear at the bar. His assertiveness both times had sent my senses whirling, but I'd thought it had simply been his wish to keep me close for moral support. But even before that, during the weeks I was sick and he hovered over me, spending all that time hanging out on my sofa, I now know he was staking his claim even then.

Our lips part and we regard each other breathlessly. There is a triumph in his eyes and I feel my body reacting to his conquest over my objections. I have never felt so dominated in my entire life, but I know I like it. I want this, I want him, and I want him to tell me what he wants. I wait, releasing one of his wrists and caressing his cheek.

With his free hand, he grabs mine and pulls it between us. Without hesitation he pushes it, palm down, onto his groin. He gasps at the contact, and I watch, mesmerized, my hand, my entire arm, tingling as he presses his erection up into my palm.

"Feel that?" he asks me breathlessly. I nod. "That's all for you." He captures my gaze. "Only for you, Jake."

"Cal!" I breathe, unable to take in what he's saying, unable to believe this isn't partly the whiskey in his system talking.

"Shut up and touch me, make me come, just do something, Jake, please!" he keens, thrusting up into my hand.

My fingers close around his shaft through his sweatpants and he gasps and moans and whimpers as he ruts into my fist. He closes his eyes and loses himself to the sensation. Oh god, he's beautiful. Even through the cloth of his pants I can feel the strength of his arousal. I imagine the silkiness of his skin against mine and my hips thrust down against him, my own erection rutting against his thigh.

"God, I want you so much, Jake," he gasps. "So much, you don't even know."

"Cal," I groan, his words sending my senses soaring. How could I not have noticed he felt the same way? I was so hung up on trying to hide my attraction

for him I didn't see what was right in front of me. "I want you," I tell him. "I've wanted you from the moment I set eyes on you the first day you arrived."

He gasps again, his eyes wide. "Jake!" His breathing is erratic as his body tenses. "Oh my god, oh my god." I didn't want to make him come in his pants, but I think it might be too late.

I feel his tempo change as he ruts against my hand. He moves faster, but loses his rhythm as his moans become whines, and then suddenly I feel him pulsing and jerking as his entire body shatters. With a helpless, shuddering cry, he comes, without me even touching his skin, pulsing and soaking the cloth of his sweat pants and leaving me feeling... god, I don't know how I feel, I'm stunned at the swiftness of his orgasm and the sheer ferocity of it.

Before I can register any of it though, he has pulled me down into another blistering kiss. With a strength and a swiftness that takes my fucking breath away, he turns me onto my back so he is on top, straddling my legs. He thrusts his hand inside my pants.

"Your turn," he growls, smiling and covering my face with kisses.

I gasp and cry out as his warm, slender fingers wrap around my cock. I'm painfully hard, and the intensity of just being with him this way has me so close I won't last long.

"Cal," I want to catch my breath, but I know he won't let me. He won't stop because he knows there's a possibility I might call a halt to the whole thing.

Though, the truth is I couldn't, even if all my doubts and misgivings were calling at once. The momentum can't be stopped as his fingers stroke me to orgasm.

I cry out again and thrust up into his palm, fire in my belly: a heat so great it's almost painful.

With one more thrust, I'm coming, and coming, pulsing into his hand and spilling over my stomach. His hand slows, but it doesn't stop as he milks me, making sure he has wrenched everything from me he possibly can until the sensation becomes too much, and I have to stop him with a kiss.

He plants soft, breathless kisses along my jaw line, and I moan with each touch of his soft, warm lips. His bottom lip runs across the shell of my ear, and I shiver.

"You're mine," he whispers softly and possessively in my ear. "No one else's. Not that receptionist's or that bear at the bar, just mine, all mine."

I gasp at the sincerity and determination in his tone. I can't reply with words, I'm struck speechless, so I reply with actions, turning my head and capturing his lips, kissing him with such animalistic ferocity he moans and surrenders, collapsing on top of me like a rag doll.

I push him to one side but keep my lips on his. We're both a little sticky so we need to clean up before anything else: before I can start to process what just happened.

I start to get out of the bed, my lips the last thing to break contact with him. He falls back into the pillows with a groan. I rush to the guest bathroom, grab a couple of hand towels and throw one at him as I start to clean myself off with mine.

"Are you going to leave?" he asks me quietly. I gasp and sit back onto the bed. All of his dominance, confidence and assertiveness has left him, and he looks small and young and uncertain of what will happen next.

"Oh my god, why would you think that?" I ask him, reaching out and touching his lovely face.

I know that whatever I do and say now is going to be very important. This moment is very crucial to the future of our relationship. Whether what we did was advisable or wise is a moot point, we've done it and crossed a line we can't uncross.

His confessions tell me that line would have been crossed eventually anyway. He set that in motion when he kissed me on the drive. He needs to know I feel the same, that I need the same, that I want him just as much.

He leans into my caress, and I moan softly as I lie back down, shuffling out of my pants as I do because they're a little sticky.

His must be a lot sticky so I encourage him to do the same, looking him directly in the eye as I do.

"I'm not going anywhere, Cal," I assure him. "I am staying right here." *Where I belong*, I think, but don't voice.

Wearing just our T-shirts I pull Cal into my arms and lie back into the pillows with his head in the crook of my shoulder. He snuggles against me, one of his legs coming up to rest across mine, one hand feeds up inside my T-shirt, and his fingers play gently with the hairs on my chest.

The sensation of his intimate touch and his body laying the length of mine, his cock, still warm but now flaccid, pressing against my thigh, is almost too

much for me. I can feel myself reacting to the contact. I don't think I can muster up anything more tonight though and neither can he, I'm sure. Circumstances have us both exhausted. I stroke his cheek and his hair softly, lulling him to sleep as I pull the covers over us both.

He lifts his head to look at me.

“Oh my god, we really do need to talk.” His eyes are wide with alarm. I chuckle helplessly, nodding.

“Yes, we do,” I nod, caressing his lips with my thumb. “But not now. Right now we need to sleep.”

He bites his lip and sighs, then nods at the sheer good sense of what I've said. He leans in for a kiss that is soft and tender and achingly beautiful, just like him. He resumes his position draped across me, his hand flat on my chest as if he's holding me in place. I feel his body grow heavier as he falls asleep in my arms, where he belongs.

Chapter Fourteen

A Rude Awakening

I am vaguely aware that Cal has not moved from his position, draped possessively over me, all night. I think I slept, but only lightly, hyperaware of every tiny movement and miniscule change in the rhythm of his breathing. I haven't moved either. Why would I? I am exactly where I want to be. I can't even begin to fathom the intensity of my feelings right now, or the implications of what we've just shared. We are in our own little protective bubble.

The bubble will burst eventually. Then the day promises to be more than a little bit crazy as we try to sort out Cal's house, so I hover between sleep and wakefulness reluctant to disturb Cal or rouse myself.

A loud banging sound jerks me out of my dreamlike state and to a fully woken, sitting position. Cal moves onto his own pillow with a softly protesting moan, oblivious to the noise that has woken me.

For a moment, I am completely disorientated because I'm in the guest room, and therefore, all the normal noises of my house are slightly different. I'm wondering what actually woke me when the banging starts again except it isn't banging, it's knocking, followed by my door bell and another round of knocking.

"Holy shit." I turn and shake Cal awake. "Cal, there's someone at the door, wake up."

Cal sits up looking bleary eyed and disheveled in my T-shirt that is hanging off one shoulder. I'm momentarily distracted by his complete adorableness, but as he blinks at me in confusion I realize he doesn't have a fucking clue why I've just shaken him awake.

He's not even awake enough to focus on anything, so I grab his chin and force him to look directly at me.

"There's someone at the door, Cal," I tell him. "We have to get up." His eyes widen, and he swings his legs around to sit on the edge of the bed then groans and holds his head as if in pain.

That'll be the whiskey after effects kicking in. I'm surprised I'm not suffering as well. I step around to his side and kneel down, touching his knee gently. He looks up at me with pain-filled eyes.

“Hangover?” I ask. He frowns and nods.

“I think. I’ve never had one before,” he tells me, his voice cracked and hoarse. “It feels like my head is gonna explode.” I pat his knee in sympathy as I stand. His eyes follow me, wide and as intense as always.

“First time for everything,” I tell him, handing him the glass of water I got for him last night. “Drink this, and I’ll get you some painkillers when we’re dressed.” He glances down at my bare legs and then at his own and squeaks in shock. He immediately covers himself up as if he has forgotten he was naked from the waist down.

I roll my eyes. There’s no time for any unnecessary shyness especially after what we did last night. He takes the glass of water from me, and I get up and rush to the door.

“I’ll get you some clean clothes,” I tell him, and he nods, regarding me with wide, vulnerable eyes.

God, I want to do wicked things to him right now. I want to lie him back down on the bed and make him cry out my name in pleasure, like he did last night.

There is another, very insistent and irritable sounding knock at the door, which halts my unsavory thoughts. It’s followed by a voice calling through my mail slot.

“Jake, Cal. Are either of you in there?” Oh god, it’s Sheriff Jefferson!

“We’ll be right out Sheriff,” I call as loudly as I can, hoping he’ll hear.

I rush around my bedroom, pulling on a pair of boxers and grabbing clothes for me and for Cal. We can’t go out in public wearing the T-shirts and sweats we just had sex in.

I stop dead in my tracks— Cal and I had sex— or at least the precursor to sex, orgasms in each other’s presence. Oh my god! I can’t think too much about it right now, even though the thrill of the memory is causing electric shocks to course through my entire body. There are other more pressing matters, though— mainly the Sheriff at my door.

Back in the spare room Cal is still sitting on the edge of the bed rubbing his eyes and drinking his water, trying desperately to wake himself up.

“Here!” I thrust a pair of boxers, sweats and a T-shirt into his arms. “Put these on, I hope they fit you.”

I push one leg into my own sweats and almost trip, right myself and use the momentum to get my other leg in, pulling them up and making for the door as I pull on my T-shirt.

“Jake.” Cal sounds somewhat distressed and even a little irritable. I turn, and he’s still not even attempted to unfold the clothes I gave him.

“Get dressed, Cal, what are you waiting for? The Sheriff is here to see you.”

His eyes widen, and he gasps as he sorts through the pile of clothes I gave him. He discards the boxers with a twist of his face and a slightly hysterical chuckle.

“Oh my god!” he exclaims as he pulls on the sweats without underwear. “I hope you only gave me those as a sick joke.”

“Hey,” I snap back. “Next time I’ll let you greet the Sheriff in your birthday suit, or the clothes with the tell-tale, dried up crusty bits on them.” I take umbrage at his dismissal of my underwear. Boxers are perfectly comfortable.

“I’m sorry,” he apologizes. “I’m grateful for the clothes Jake, but plaid, cotton boxers? Really? Who the hell wears plaid cotton boxers nowadays?”

“I do!” I tell him indignantly. “Other people obviously do as well, since they are readily available to buy.” He snorts as he stands, straightening his T-shirt.

I step up to him and pull the front of his shirt so he is pulled against me. He moves, unresisting, with a soft, surprised chuckle.

“Now how the hell am I supposed to concentrate on anything today when I know you’re going commando?” I say, in a deep tone that I know he won’t hear but he will feel.

He shivers, his breath catching in his throat as he smiles and brushes the backs of his fingers across my cheek. His eyes search my face as his other hand slides slowly around my waist and pulls tight, making me gasp.

“Maybe you’re not supposed to concentrate on anything but me!” Cal murmurs, raising his eyebrows in a challenge.

I close the small gap between us and capture his lips in a soft, hopefully reassuring kiss. He moans and deepens it, melting into me and wrapping his arms around my neck, weaving his fingers through my hair and adding his tongue for good measure.

What I intended as a quick, reassuring kiss has turned into a full on, spine liquefying clinch. I pull away because I can still hear the damn knocking even if Cal can't, and I'd rather not answer the door to Sheriff Jefferson with a hard on.

"Sheriff, er, J-Jefferson?" I remind Cal breathlessly. He regards me with wide, innocent eyes.

"Oh yeah!" he says as he smooths down my T-shirt and steps around me, touching his fingertips to his lips in wonder as he precedes me through the door. "Come on, Jake, let's not keep him waiting." He has the smuggest damn look on his face, and I narrow my eyes, because did he just get the better of me again? I swear he looks like the cat that got the cream.

I pass him, pursing my lips and giving him a sideways glance as I do. I pull open the door to finally let our esteemed Sheriff inside. Cal immediately gasps, grasps hold of my shirt and hides behind me. I groan as I remember the Sheriff isn't exactly his favorite person in the world.

"Well, finally," Jefferson blurts out. "What the hell kept you? I was beginning to get worried."

Sheriff Jefferson is a large, some would say overweight; some would say cuddly, middle-aged man. Middle-aged as in he's older than me. He can sometimes be a little abrupt, intimidating and bombastic, but he's a very good and thorough professional, so when he bursts into your house in the state he's in right now you have to think that something is not quite right. He seems more excited than concerned though.

"Sheriff!" I state as his large presence dominates my hall. "Come in, by all means."

"You know I was this far from breaking down your door?" he tells me gruffly. He shows me, with his thumb and forefinger, just how far he was from what seems like very drastic action.

"We were asleep," I tell him as he makes his way to my kitchen, his thumbs stuck into his gun holster.

"So you ain't even got any coffee made yet?" he asks in exasperation. "Come on Jake, my team needs sustenance."

"Your team?" I ask him in confusion glancing quickly at Cal who shrugs, equally perplexed.

“Yeah!” he nods. “Someone was supposed to call ahead to warn ya. I got a whole team together first thing this morning to come and fix this kid’s house up.”

“What?” Cal asks in surprise, forgetting his fear of the over large lawman and stepping out from behind me.

Jefferson turns to him and nods. “Yep, when I spoke to Dave at the hardware store and he heard what had happened, he called just about everyone he knows, and I did the same. That’d be pretty much everyone in town. They all wanted to help. There’s an entire team of people out there waiting for instructions from yours truly to start tidyin’ up and fixing everything that’s broke. You’re a popular guy Cal Steele.”

“Oh my god!” Cal exclaims as he rushes to the door, me directly behind him. I hear the Sheriff’s chuckle as Cal pulls the door open and stands in stunned silence on the porch.

I am also stunned beyond words. Our shared drive and the street in either direction is full of parked cars and trucks and people getting out of them with brushes, and tools and trash bags. They’re all calling to each other as if they’re on an outing, someone has even brought along a gas barbecue and they wave to us cheerily as they carry it through to the beach. How the hell did I not hear any of this? This is completely crazy, but this is Oakwood Bay for you. Everyone gets on with their business until someone really needs some help, and then everyone rallies around and usually treats it as an excuse for a social outing.

“So here we are,” The Sheriff says, sounding really proud of himself for getting this together. “I’m gonna go and see if there’s any more for the forensic team to dig out before everyone gets started with trash sacks and stuff.” He tells Cal, who nods, utterly taken aback by the Sheriff’s and everyone else’s willingness to help him. “I’ll be back in about ten minutes to ask you both a few more questions.” Jefferson winks at us. “I also don’t want to miss out on one of Sarah’s breakfasts.” He chuckles.

He leaves us with bewildered expressions on our faces until my attention is caught by the figure of my sister striding towards my house carrying two large bags of groceries. She’s followed by Lou-Anne and two other women I don’t recognize but who are equally laden with bags.

“Jake. Don’t you ever answer your phone?” She calls as she reaches the bottom of the steps. “And what a surprise to find you both still in your pajamas.” She sounds extremely unsurprised.

“We’re not in our pajamas, Sarah, they’re sweatpants,” I tell her, ignoring the other women’s smirks. I see Cal’s amused expression out of the corner of my eye and hear him chuckle. I nudge him irritably, since he’s standing close enough to be actually in my damn sweat pants himself. He gives an indignant gasp but I ignore him as Sarah seems to be in one of her take over modes. “What are you doing here, Sarah?” I ask her. She snorts and shakes her head.

“All these people have to be fed,” she explains, walking up my porch steps to join us. “I did call ahead but you were obviously, erm, too busy to answer your phone. You don’t mind if we set up shop in your kitchen do you?” I know by her tone she’s only asking out of politeness. She’s going to do it no matter what I say. So I shrug and move out of her way.

“Go ahead!” I huff.

She pushes past me, places her grocery bags on the ground and pulls Cal into a hug, then pulls back to plant an affectionate kiss on his cheek.

“How are you sweetie?” she asks, holding him at arm’s length and rubbing his arms up and down soothingly. Cal gives me a sideways glance that I don’t really understand because there’re ice crystals in those baby blues.

“I’m fine thanks,” he tells her. His tone quite clearly tells me there is more to add to that statement, and I wonder, judging by his expression, if it might be: “*No thanks to Jake.*”

I am getting the distinct impression that I am somehow in the doghouse. I have absolutely no idea why though.

Lou-Anne gives us a wink as she leads the others through my house to the kitchen. Sarah is guiding Cal inside, so I follow with one last glance at the organized chaos outside on my drive.

“When I heard what happened I was shocked to the core, Cal.” Sarah is saying as she gives Cal an almost motherly look: the look she usually reserves for me. Well that’s unexpected. She’s never usually so ready to mother anyone else as relentlessly as she does me. I guess Cal deserves it though. “Everyone in town wanted to come and help in some way,” she continues. “I’ve put together a catering team and there’s a team here from Dave’s Hardware store. Some others have come to just help with the clean-up. Even some of the guys from the party last night are here, nursing hangovers no doubt.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Cal tells her, in a state of shock at the kindness and community spirit that’s at work here. “I just expected to have to do it all myself.”

His statement shocks me. Did he think I wouldn't help him? Sarah smiles at him and urges him to sit on a stool at my kitchen counter.

"We couldn't just sit by and let you struggle through this by yourself, Cal," she assures him softly. "This is what we do here in Oakwood Bay, we help when we can. Have you had breakfast yet?" Sarah asks as us both.

"No," as he answers, Cal shoots me another icy glare, which Sarah does not miss. "We'd just woken up when the Sheriff came."

"Really?" she glances back at me with rapidly bouncing eyebrows. "That's interesting." Those last words were only for me since Cal couldn't see. I avoid her gaze and hope I'm not blushing as hot as I feel I am.

Sarah steps aside and makes way for me, urging me to sit as well.

"There's a hell of a lot to do today," she tells Cal, loud enough for me to hear. "You need a good breakfast to set you up. My brother is a terrible host if he hasn't even fed you yet." The other women in the kitchen all click their tongues.

"That's hardly my fault," I gasp, although the looks Cal's shooting me make me feel he does not exactly agree with this sentiment. "We were both tired, we slept late."

"Right." She gives me another knowing look then turns to her friends and begins to organize.

When Sarah organizes things it's with almost military precision. All Cal and I can do is sit and watch in bemusement. Cal looks more than confused though; he looks pale and wrung out. I lay my hand on his shoulder, but he shrugs it off irritably. He turns to face me, his eyes flashing angrily.

"Hey!" I smile softly, holding my hands up in surrender. I can understand his mood swings. He's got an awful lot of shit to deal with today. He doesn't have to deal with it alone though, I'll be with him. "Everything will be okay," I assure him, trying to let him know he isn't on his own. He narrows his eyes in annoyance.

"How can you say that, Jake?" he hisses at me. "In a minute I have to go out and start picking up the pieces of my home. And as if that isn't enough to deal with, I also feel like shit. I have a hangover, and it's your fault." I sit back and raise my eyebrows in amusement, finally realizing the source of all his icy glances.

“How is it my fault?” I ask him.

“You gave me whiskey,” he accuses. I’m feeling just a little irritated by this, mostly because it is only partly true. I did give him the whiskey.

“You didn’t have to drink it. You’re an adult, Cal,” I remind him, remembering one of our conversations last night, right before we er... hmmm! “Far be it from me to try to tell you what you should and shouldn’t do.” And I think he knows I’m not just referring to the whiskey.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he hisses, but I don’t get a chance to answer because Sarah has seen us.

“What are you two whispering about?” she asks with narrowed eyes.

“Nothing!” we both answer sullenly, at the same time. My sister sees all, unfortunately. She will not have missed the atmosphere that is quickly forming between Cal and me.

Cal shoots me a look that could be used as effective pest control if it was bottled. What can I do though? I would have lavished all the care and attention he deserved on him if my house hadn’t suddenly been invaded by bombastic Sheriffs and my sister’s coven. There isn’t going to be an opportunity to do any kind of serious talking until tonight now. I’m sorry he has a hangover, but is that all he’s pissed off about? I want to ask him if things between us, apart from the hangover, are okay but I’m distracted by someone clearing their throat behind us.

I turn to see Sheriff Jefferson waiting patiently for us to notice him.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll have that word with you both now,” he says.

Cal’s eyes widen, and he shoots me a worried look, shuffling his stool closer. Oh now he needs me! And why does the Sheriff need to speak to both of us?

Jefferson gives me a significant look that I can’t really interpret, but it is full of concern and anxiety that I have never seen from the Sheriff before. Is there something he’s not telling us? I feel anxious now, more so than before.

Jefferson sits on a stool at the opposite side of my counter and Sarah hands him a coffee, before setting down two steaming mugs of coffee in front of me and Cal. Along with the mugs, she hands us both some painkillers.

“I know the signs of a hangover when I see them,” she quips, rubbing Cal’s shoulders and giving him a warm smile.

He downs the painkillers gratefully and then takes a sip of his coffee, closing his eyes and groaning in satisfaction. He opens his eyes again and looks directly at me.

“Sarah knows how to look after me,” he accuses, and I hold out my hands in a helpless shrug as Sarah chuckles.

“I would have made you coffee,” I gasp. I never had the chance since we were woken by the arrival of the entire fucking world and their dog. I’m getting a little pissed off with his mood swings. Luckily, we have the Sheriff to distract us, or we might have had our first argument right there and then.

“Look guys, I know there’s not a lot more you can tell me that you didn’t tell last night,” he says. “But the truth is, this kind of thing,” he waves his hands back in the direction of Cal’s house, “it just doesn’t happen here.” He takes a sip of coffee before continuing. “What we need to understand about this incident,” the Sheriff explains in his most professional tone, “is that this isn’t a simple burglary. That would be bad enough. No.” He shakes his head sadly. “This is a personal attack.” He looks poignantly at both Cal and me. “Nothing was taken as far as we know, so whoever did this had something against you, Cal. They waited until both of you were out because the amount of noise that was surely made would have alerted Jake if he’d been at home.”

I gasp and feel Cal tense up beside me. Despite his anger at my seeming reluctance to take responsibility for his hangover, he has pulled his stool right against mine. I lay my hand on his knee and he takes it, holding it firmly in his.

“You think this was specifically aimed at Cal?” I ask remembering what Cal told me about his relatives last night. It’s looking increasingly more likely that they were involved in some way.

The Sheriff nods and continues.

“So, what I need you to do is to think of anyone that could have a grudge against you, Cal,” the Sheriff says gently. “Anyone who might think they have a reason to do something like this.”

Cal bites his lip and looks at me for advice.

What should I do, J? He signs. I return the look with a nod.

Tell him what you told me. I sign back, urging him to speak. He needs to tell the Sheriff about his uncle and aunt, even if he believes they wouldn’t have gone this far.

“Can I interpret that exchange as there being someone you can think of?” Jefferson asks, and Cal nods.

He gives the Sheriff a brief account of his uncle and aunt and what they had tried to do before he'd come of age. Jefferson takes notes in his notebook and asks Cal for names and addresses.

“Can you think of anyone else?” he asks, and Cal shakes his head looking quite down hearted.

“No!” he says. “But I really don't believe my uncle and aunt could be involved in this.”

“They could have got someone else to do it though,” Jefferson suggests. “If they were intending to scare you.” He now bites his lip and looks indecisive. “Now, I don't want to worry you or unsettle you more than you are already but this isn't the first time someone has tried to cause trouble for you Cal,” he says. We both gasp.

“What do you mean?” I ask incredulously. “What else has happened?” Jefferson looks sufficiently remorseful, and I suddenly realize what he's talking about. Cal does not though. He looks from me to the Sheriff and back again in confusion.

“What?” he asks in frustration.

“When I arrested you, thinking you'd stolen Jake's car,” the Sheriff tells him, “I got an anonymous tip off. The caller also told me they thought you were carrying a gun.” Both Cal and I gasp. That would explain why Jefferson had acted so quickly.

“You think the two incidents are related?” I ask, my arm naturally moving to rest around Cal's shoulders in support at this revelation.

“I can't think it's a coincidence, Jake,” Jefferson tells me. “I got a phone call a few days after that arrest incident, from a lawyer in Michigan.” Cal gasps and looks positively stricken. The address he gave for his uncle and aunt was in Michigan. “He asked me for details of an arrest for car theft because he was building a case against a Calvin John Steele. When I told him there'd been no arrest he seemed very confused, said he'd been told an arrest had been witnessed. When I told him it had all been a misunderstanding he apologized for taking up my time and hung up.”

“They wanted control of my money, that's why I had to leave,” Cal says; his breathing a little fast and his face pale. “They said I wasn't fit to be on my

own, that I needed help. They said I should give it all to them in gratitude for taking me in when my parents died. They even tried to sell some of the properties I would inherit. That was when the other executors got wise and helped me to stop them. I left, but I didn't leave them homeless or anything. I signed the house I grew up in over to them. I can't understand why they wouldn't be happy with that."

"Oh, Cal!" I say, pulling him to me and holding him in my arms. He doesn't resist and melts against me, hiding his face in the sleeve of my T-shirt, trembling slightly. I hate that his trust has been so badly betrayed.

"Would this be a good time for breakfast?" Sarah asks me gently, and I nudge Cal to lift his head.

"Breakfast?" I ask him.

He scowls at me, reminding me that he is still pissed off, and I have somehow to make amends for getting him drunk. He shakes his head at the offer of breakfast.

"Hangover!" he states unhappily. Sheriff Jefferson chuckles.

"I'll have some of that breakfast, Sarah." My sister eyes him up and down, and I know her well enough to see her bite back a retort about the Sheriff's ample waistline.

Cal nudges me then stands up and makes that sign he uses when he's going off to the bathroom. I watch him disappear with concern. He's pissed at me, but that didn't stop him almost sitting on my lap while we were talking to Jefferson.

"Jake, he has to have something to eat, there's a lot to do today." Sarah sounds disapproving. Not entirely sure who her disapproval is aimed at though.

"I know that Sarah, but I can't force the food down him." I try not to sound too irritable.

She places a plate of eggs, bacon, sausage and hash browns down in front of Jefferson who begins to hungrily eat and I realize my stomach is feeling slightly delicate as I watch.

The Sheriff points his fork at me and swallows his mouthful before speaking.

"I'm tellin' you, Jake, you keep an eye on that kid. I'll be doin' the same." I regard him in shock.

“Do you think he’s really in some sort of danger?” I ask, feeling the color drain from my face, and any inclination I might have had towards some sort of food is gone altogether. Jefferson nods.

“I ain’t ever seen such a vicious attack on someone’s property, not in all the years I’ve done this job,” he tells me between forkfuls of hash brown and sausage. “And that phone call I got about your car, someone must have been watching to know what was goin’ on.”

I gasp and nod, because, oh my god, he must be right. Someone saw him get into my car and saw the opportunity to call the Sheriff to cause trouble. They must have known how much it would shake Cal up to have that happen to him. Has someone been watching us all this time?

It’s weird and a little disconcerting to think that someone could have been watching us at the same time I was watching him. Nothing else has happened except for the false arrest and the break in. Was that because I was watching over him? Has my stalking, in some kind of perverted stroke of luck, prevented something else from happening?

Sheriff Jefferson has given me pause for thought and made me feel quite paranoid now. And where is Cal anyway? He hasn’t returned from the bathroom. I get up to go and find him.

“Where are you going?” Sarah asks, indignantly, since she has a plate of breakfast for me. I groan as the sight of it churns my delicate stomach.

“Ugh! I’m going to the bathroom, sorry, Sarah, I can’t face food right now.” It’s not just the hangover that’s now hovering in the background that’s making me feel so queasy, it’s the thought of anything happening to Cal. I need to find him. I am never going to let him out of my sight.

Where did he go? The guest bathroom? I cross the hall and knock on the guest bedroom door. I grunt with frustration because what the hell good will knocking do?

I open the door a crack and peak in. The room is empty, only the crumpled bed sheets to prove we were even there at all. Last night seems such a long time ago. I walk over to the bathroom door and listen before cracking that open as well. It isn’t locked, and I discover that this room is also empty.

Where the hell is Cal?

I try my bedroom and bathroom next, but he’s not there either.

I go back out to the kitchen, and I must look bewildered and slightly panicky because Sarah tells me immediately.

“You just missed him,” she says. “He left with the Sheriff just now.”

I make to follow them but she stops me.

“Oh no, you’ll eat something first, at least.” She firmly presses me into a seat.

“I can’t stay here, Sarah, I have to be out there with him, I promised him, and I know you heard what the Sheriff just said.” She nods.

“I heard, but I think you can rest assured that he is surrounded by people who care about him right now so nothing is going to happen to him,” she assures me gently.

“I care about him,” I state quietly because I do, oh god, I really do. I sit heavily in shock at the realization. Sarah pats my arm.

“I know you do sweetheart,” she tells me with great softness in her tone. She hands me a warm bagel and I take a grateful bite.

Now that I don’t have to watch the Sheriff shoveling food down his gullet, my appetite is back to almost normal. I still have knots in my stomach thinking about what Jefferson said, and about how pissed off Cal is with me right now. Everything’s just spiraling out of control, with no way of making things better anytime soon. Maybe if I took him a peace offering things might be a little better.

“Sarah, can I take one of these bagels for Cal?” I ask her and she hands me one without question.

“You know, whatever you did, Jake, he won’t stay pissed with you forever,” she assures me. “He worships the ground you walk on.” I almost choke on the last mouthful of bagel.

“No he doesn’t!” I exclaim, but she just gives me one of her looks that tells me she knows something I don’t. It’s annoying most of the time, but, right now, I think her words might have stopped my heart.

Does Cal really like me that much? I can’t even begin to believe I could be that lucky, but after all the things he said to me last night, I have to start thinking I might be.

His house is a hive of activity as I enter, stepping over some broken pieces of a hall table and a couple of picture frames. The mess is even worse in the

daylight. What must Cal be going through? He must feel like shit, even without a hangover to contend with he'd be feeling terrible, no wonder he was irritable with me, and his mood swings are completely understandable. I should have been here with him from the very beginning. I need to find him now and make things right between us.

He's busy talking to several people, who are holding brushes and trash bags, when I find him. I don't want to butt in when he's busy organizing the clean-up of what was his life. I approach him when there's a gap in the conversation and thrust the bagel into his hand.

"Sarah says to eat this or she'll hold you down and force feed you," I tell him with a flick of my eyebrows, trying to keep it light. There are several chuckles from the gathered helpers, most of whom know Sarah very well.

Cal gives me a small, half smile, thanks me curtly and turns back to the group without giving me a second glance. Well, I guess that's me dismissed then. I have no idea if that tight little smile means I'm forgiven or not, but there's no opportunity to ask now, he's busy.

I wander over to where a pile of trash bags, brooms, and work gloves have been left. I pull on some gloves and make a start on clearing some of the glass from his broken windows. I'll bide my time and wait for an opportunity to speak to Cal when he's a little less crowded with well-wishers.

Chapter Fifteen

Frustration

Well, frustration doesn't even begin to cover what I'm feeling right now. All day I have tried to catch Cal alone, and all day, I've been thwarted at every turn.

Each time I have tried to catch his eye or steal a moment alone with him someone else got in the way or, more worryingly, he would turn away from me with a flush of his cheeks and find something else more pressing to do.

I am now convinced he is actively avoiding me, no mean feat when we've been in the same house all day. I'm also convinced that he is not just pissed about the hangover. I think he's regretting what we did last night, and now he's just waiting for the right time to tell me it was all a mistake.

I knew this would happen, goddamit. I knew. I should have been stronger. I should have stopped him when he kissed me out on the drive. I should have shown more restraint when he pulled me down onto the bed, but it had felt so good to finally have him in my arms, and he'd been so damn insistent I hadn't been able to say no.

He is currently with his surfing buddies out on his deck. Someone brought along some beer and they're having an impromptu deck party. Everyone else has left. Cal's new friends are a noisy bunch, and they certainly seem to have lifted his spirits, so I really can't complain. It must be a boost to his confidence and self-esteem to have found such a group of loyal friends in such a short time.

I've spent most of the day watching them closely, Sheriff Jefferson's warning to "keep an eye" on him ringing in my head. If Cal is in danger I don't suppose any of his new found buddies will be the culprits though, they all seem to hang on his every word. Guy and girl alike all seem to melt in his wake. They are all very protective of him. He seems to instil that instinct in most people though. He has a delicate, shy and understated way about him that just charms the socks off everyone.

He certainly charmed me.

I was going to go out and join them, since I know most of them were there at the party last night and accepted my presence then. I can hear them currently discussing where Cal is staying tonight though, and I hear some of them

suggest alternative venues. I don't want to wait around to hear the rest, because of course he's going to choose to go and hang out with friends his own age instead of a jealous, grouchy old man like me. He must think I am such an old has been compared to what he could have.

I feel so damn helpless. What can I do though? I can't compete with his younger, fitter, more energetic friends. This was going to happen sooner or later, I'm just surprised it's happened so quickly and after such a promising night. Was it really just the whiskey talking when he said all those amazing things to me? Did he really just use me because I was there and willing?

I feel like such a fool.

Sarah and her team have cleared up, and my kitchen looks like new when I get back to my house. She's left some dinner out for me, enough for two, although I doubt Cal will be joining me any time soon.

I fill a plate with some food and get a beer from the refrigerator. I shut the refrigerator door with my shoulder and drop my plate in shock, since Cal is standing right there in front of me.

"Holy shit, fucking hell, Cal," I gasp.

He has this knack of sneaking up on you unawares. I swear he teleports. As I bend down to pick up the pieces, so does he, helpfully picking up pieces of food and bits of broken crockery.

"I'm getting quite good at doing this without cutting myself." He muses, which serves as a reminder to what he has been doing all day in his home: picking up the broken pieces of his life. We stand together and he hands me the last piece. I turn and dump the lot in the trash.

I turn back to face him and he is watching me with that intense, azure gaze that just has me in bits every time I see it. God, what is he doing to me?

"I'm sorry I scared you... again." He grimaces, and despite my irritation at being scared... again, I can't help the ghost of a half-smile.

"What are you doing here, Cal?" I ask him. He tips his head to one side.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why aren't you on the deck with all of your friends?" They're all still there, I can hear them.

"Not all of my friends are there," he tells me, giving me a significant look. I can't even begin to hope what he means by that.

“Oh?” I raise my eyebrow coolly. I’m feeling petulant about being avoided the entire day. “Who isn’t there? Pete?” I spit the name, making sure he sees my disapproval.

“No!” A momentary flash of confusion crosses his face.

Pete, from the party last night, has been attached to Cal’s damn hip all day. I think he’s going for the award for most supportive friend, although I did note with satisfaction that Cal shrugged Pete’s arm from his shoulders on several occasions throughout the day. I have no idea why I want to be so petty about it now, but I’m hungry, and tired and irritable.

“Pete is over there already,” Cal informs me. I snort derisively.

“Well there you go then, you have everyone you need.” I walk away muttering about perfect Pete. I have my beer but no food because it just got dumped in the trash. Another reason to feel irritable.

“Jake!” he exclaims, since I realize I am not facing him and he can’t see what I’m muttering. He follows me through to the living room where I slump down on my sofa but right in the middle, so he can’t sit at his end as he normally does.

Instead, he stands, with his hands on his hips and regards me with an open mouth and wide eyes.

“What?” I ask him sullenly. “Would you mind moving, because you’re in the way of the TV.” I point the remote at him, but instead of moving he pulls the remote from my hand and throws it across the other end of the room. “Hey!” I shout.

“Speak to me!” he shouts back. “To my face.” He is livid now. “If you are angry with me, tell me, don’t walk away muttering about it because that’s just rude.”

“Oh, you’re giving me a lesson in manners now, are you?” I ask archly, leaning back into my sofa cushions and taking a drink of my beer. “If that’s the case why don’t we discuss the fact that you’ve been avoiding me all day?”

He opens his mouth to speak, but shuts it, although his anger has disappeared, as suddenly as it flared, to be replaced with something that looks like remorse.

“Not much to say for yourself?” I ask him, and he simply stares at me, looking positively stricken now. “Great, now that we have that cleared up maybe you can get out of my way and I can watch some TV, and you can go

back to your friends and Pete.” I emphasize Pete’s name with air quotes, then instantly regret it since I now sound like a jealous lover, and I’m neither of these because I’m not jealous of Pete, I know Cal doesn’t like him, and one night with this man does not make me his lover.

For a few more moments, Cal stands where he is, searching my face but finding only stony, cold sullenness because I’m too damn stubborn for my own good. He gives a slightly more than shaky sigh then turns to leave.

Okay, so maybe I was a little heavy handed there... Well, all right then, more than a little. Am I really going to let him leave, when he obviously came here to see me. I mean I’ve been trying to talk to him all day, desperate to hold him, as he picked up the pieces that was his home. Am I really going to push him away now out of pettiness?

I jump up from the sofa and leap across the room to dive in front of him before he gets through the door. He stops with a sharp gasp. His eyes flash with anger.

“I’m sorry!” I say, trying not to sound desperate.

“Get out of my way, Jake!” he demands, not even acknowledging my apology. Did he miss my words?

“I won’t get out of the way, no! I’m trying to apologize to you, Cal.”

He takes a deep breath then lets it go. His shoulders slump and he hangs his head.

“I’m sorry too. I acted like an ass,” he murmurs softly. When he looks up, his eyes are filled with tears. Oh god, I can resist anything but tears. My heart melts. “I’m sorry I was so pissed with you about the hangover,” he continues with a sniff. “I shouldn’t have been, and I’m sorry I avoided you all day but it was...” he takes a shaky breath, “...it was a self-preservation thing.” He bites his lip to stop it trembling, and I feel the rest of my internal organs melting as well.

I step closer to him and hook my finger beneath his chin, lifting him to face me.

“Self-preservation?” I ask him, wanting him to explain but thinking I probably know already. He swallows hard then nods.

“Avoiding you was the only way I could keep it all together. Every time you looked at me, I knew you wanted to ask if I was okay, hold me, tell me things would work out.” He wipes his hand across his eyes and swallows again. “And

I wanted you to hold me so damn bad.” He sobs. “But I knew if you did that I would break down, and I didn’t want anyone there to see that I couldn’t cope.”

“Oh, my god,” I gasp, reaching up to touch his cheek. Feeling terrible for him and terrible that he felt he couldn’t let me be there for him. “Cal, no one there today would have thought any differently of you if you were upset. It’s your home that got trashed for god’s sake. Anyone else would be a wreck if it happened to them.” He nods, biting his lip.

“But no one else has anything to prove,” he tells me. I lay my hands on his shoulders and stroke down his arms.

“You have absolutely nothing left to prove, Cal.” I am suddenly bursting with pride for this strong-willed and determined young man. “You are twenty-one and living on your own when most kids your age would still be at home or at college living on junk food and parents’ handouts. Plus you are deaf and haven’t once asked for any help or special treatment because of it. You have the respect of the entire town.”

“And what about you?” he asks me, his eyes hooded, his expression hopeful.

I cup his chin in my hand and rub my thumb across his bottom lip.

“I think you’re amazing, sunshine,” I tell him and he smiles so brightly I think I might be blinded.

“Thanks, Jake,” he murmurs, a soft blush coloring his cheeks.

I can’t help myself as I lean in, tilt his chin back just a little and press my lips to his. They are as soft and as warm as they were last night and this morning. He moans quietly and wraps his arms around my neck, burying his fingers in my hair as he passes his tongue along my bottom lip opening my mouth to push inside.

He tastes of fresh mint and beer and he smells of Cal, just Cal.

I feel myself shiver as the sensation overload sends heat to my groin. His tongue brushes against mine, and I’m lost. God, I shouldn’t be doing this, he’s in a vulnerable state, like last night. He doesn’t need this. He needs a friend, and emotional support. My body doesn’t seem to have gotten the memo my brain is sending it though, and the feelings I have for this man are threatening to shut down my conscious thoughts.

Suddenly the kiss heats up ten notches as he pushes me back against the doorframe, pressing his body the full length of mine. Our lips part and we

regard each other breathlessly as his erection presses against mine. I can feel the heat of him through our pants, and all thoughts that this is wrong in any way are blasted from my head.

“You have no idea how much I have been thinking about doing this all day, Jake,” he tells me breathlessly, his mouth pressing urgent wet kisses along my jaw and back to my lips. I give a short, helpless chuckle.

“I think I can guess.” I breathe back between kisses. “I think it’s probably as much as I have tried not to think about it.” He frowns.

“Why would you be trying not to think about it, Jake?” I give him a goofy smile and look down towards my groin and his eyes follow my gaze.

My erection is tenting my sweat pants, which I’ve been wearing all day. He is in much the same position from the looks of it though.

“That is what I’m talking about,” I say and he bites his lip, his eyes shining with vainly hidden delight. “Not the kind of thing that’s acceptable for a forty-five-year-old man to be walking around with, really.” He raises one eyebrow.

“So it’s okay for a twenty-one-year-old?” he asks incredulously. “I’ve been trying to keep this baby down all day.” I snort as he waves his hands over his obvious arousal. “I was even beginning to wish I’d worn those damn boxer shorts because they would have helped keep it hidden a little bit.”

“Ha, see!” I bark as I poke a finger in his face. “Plaid cotton boxers are always a good choice.”

Cal sniggers and grabs my finger before sucking it sensuously into his mouth and causing my breath to catch in my throat.

“Cal!” I hiss as the sensation sends shivers down my spine and turns my bones to liquid. “God you make me feel so good.”

“Good, I want you to feel good,” he tells me, his lips now pressed against my neck, his breath hot on my skin. “Why shouldn’t you feel good, Jake?” He runs his tongue across the shell of my ear, and my knees almost give way as I buck my hips against his. “You make me feel good,” he kisses my jaw, then stops, his lips millimeters away from mine, “So damn good.”

He’s driving me fucking crazy. I grab his arms and push him against the opposite side of the doorframe, crushing my lips to his in a frenzied, passionate kiss. He moans, pulling at my hair with his fingers, his tongue pushing so far inside my mouth I think he’s trying to actually taste my tonsils.

He wraps his arms around my neck and jumps, wrapping his legs around my hips as I push him harder against the wall. My cock pushes up against his and we both gasp. He buries his face into my shoulder, his breaths ragged and urgent. Our cocks are trapped between our bodies as we rut. I grunt at the weight in my arms though.

“Jesus, you’re heavy.”

“Quit whining, Groucho, and take me to bed,” he demands, although the effectiveness is lost when it ends in a strangled whimper as I thrust against him. “Aah, Jake, you have to take me to bed now, or I’m gonna come in my pants again, and if you make me do that again I’ll be very annoyed.” I chuckle.

“Gotta admit, it was pretty damn hot though,” I whisper in a low tone that vibrates through him. I know it does because I feel him shiver with excitement.

“Oh god, you’re so damn sexy, Jake. Bed, now!” he demands. I pull back with a frown.

“What about your friends?” I ask him. He clicks his tongue and rolls his eyes.

“They’re not invited.” He screws up his nose, and I chuckle.

“That’s not what I meant asshole.” I kiss his wrinkled nose as he giggles.

“They’re long gone,” he assures me. I guess I haven’t heard anything for a while. I was just too busy to notice really. “I told them they could stay as long as they wanted, but that I was coming over here to screw my boyfriend and did anyone have any objection to that.”

I laugh out loud.

“You liar, you did not.” He raises his eyebrows.

“Jake, I had to do something to get Pete off my back. He was beginning to get on my nerves.” I throw my head back and laugh helplessly, and he buries his face into my shoulder again, chuckling.

“Do you think they even believed you?” I ask incredulously, lifting his face to see.

“Of course they did,” he tells me. “They all knew about us.” I gasp.

“What?” I frown. “How?” he shrugs.

“Apparently, they all thought we’ve been screwing for weeks.” I gape at him, but he doesn’t seem to be at all bothered by this. I can only think that my

sister has had something to do with this revelation. She is the only one who suspected I'd already slept with Cal. She must have told someone, and that is how rumors begin.

"Doesn't matter, though." Cal kisses me. "It's true now." He smiles. "Or will be as soon as we get to bed." I chuckle and lean in for another kiss. As our tongues dance there is more gasping and rutting. My arms are beginning to get tired though.

"You'll have to walk there, Cal, because I don't think I can carry you all the way."

He huffs, and reluctantly drops his legs to the ground. Without warning, he tackles me, and I yelp as he hooks me over his shoulder in a fireman's lift.

"I can carry you though, old man." He laughs, then takes off at a jog for the bedroom.

All I can do is giggle uncontrollably because I don't think anyone's ever tried to carry me before. Damn he's strong. Something I tend to forget when he sometimes appears so vulnerable and small. He's almost as tall as me though, and he's definitely more fit because of his surfing and running.

We bump through my bedroom door, and he pauses at the bed then throws me down onto the mattress and falls down on top of me before I can catch my breath.

He stops himself with his arms on either side of my head, and for a moment, we regard each other breathlessly.

His eyes are shining, and his pupils so dilated the blue has completely gone. I guess mine are the same since I'm having trouble focusing. My breathing is coming in heavy, quick gasps, which catch when he slowly and deliberately thrusts his hips down onto mine.

His cock pushes alongside mine, and he bites his lip.

"Oh god, Jake," he gasps. "We need to get naked right now."

He jumps up and begins to pull off his clothes. He throws his T-shirt across my room and begins to push his pants down then regards me as I haven't yet made a move. I'm a little stunned to be honest, that I can possibly be so desirable to him. He's undressing in front of me though, and that's another reason to just sit and watch.

"Come on, Jake, what are you waiting for?" he asks. I raise one eyebrow.

"I was just enjoying the show," I say, because I was, oh my, I was very much admiring the view. He actually blushes, and I get a demonstration of just how far down it does go. How can he be blushing after everything we've already done?

"God, Cal, you're so beautiful and sexy, good lord, you're sexy," I gasp.

"So are you Jake." He falls down beside me on the bed, finally shrugging off his sweat pants as I shuffle out of my T-shirt. He hooks a finger beneath the waistband of my pants and pulls them down to reveal my boxers beneath. "You're extremely sexy, but not..." he glances down at the plaid boxers and snorts, "...with these on."

"Cheeky runt," I snap at him as I sit up and shuffle out of my pants and boxers. He snorts again. "I happen to like these boxers so you're going to have to get used to them I'm afraid."

With a surprised gasp, he grabs my shoulders and pushes me down onto my back, straddling me with his strong, firm legs. He leans in close.

"That implies I'll be getting to see quite a lot of those unsexy boxers in the future, Jake. Am I right?" he asks me.

I gasp and regard him with wide eyes. He realizes what he's asked me, and I realize what I've said, probably at the same moment because our eyes meet, and we hold our breaths for a second.

"I'm not a one night stand kind of guy, Cal," I tell him softly, feeling suddenly exposed and vulnerable and a little spooked to be honest. Now's the time for truths though, I think. "I haven't done anything like this in a long time, and I certainly haven't met anyone in a long time that has made me feel anywhere near as good as you make me feel." He seems to be holding his breath, so I continue as quickly as I can to help him start breathing again. "I really don't want this to be a one-time thing. I never did, even when I was thinking it might never happen at all."

Cal leans in for a blistering, heated kiss, and we're naked, and our bodies are crushed together, our cocks knocking against each other causing my eyes to roll into the back of my head it feels so damn amazing.

"Oh my god, Cal," I breathe against the skin of his neck, and I know he can't hear me, but he can feel the heat of my breath and the movement of my lips against his skin.

"I always knew this would happen," Cal tells me as he comes up for air. "Even when I thought you were a creepy guy who stalked younger men in drugstores with baskets full of condoms."

"Holy shit!" I gasp, feeling my face flush with embarrassment as I remember the incident with crystal clarity. "That was completely unintentional, I promise you. I didn't look at what I was putting in my basket I was so busy watching you." I reach up and wrap my fingers around the back of his neck. "I couldn't take my eyes off you even then, you're so damn beautiful, Cal."

Cal sits back on his heels, tracing his fingers down my chest and abdomen before wrapping them slowly around my aching, twitching cock.

I groan, and buck my hips, finding his cock with my hand and doing the same.

"Aah, I hope you kept some of those condoms, Jake," Cal gasps, "because we're going to need some real soon."

"God, yes, I did, I mean..." I chuckle as he raises an eyebrow, "not those particular ones, obviously. I have some in the night stand, and lube."

"I have some too," he tells me, almost like a confession, although he could tell me he had murdered someone right now, and I wouldn't care. He has his hand around my cock.

"I left them in your guest bedroom." My eyes widen.

"You brought some last night?" I ask him. He nods with a grimace.

"Yeah, because I thought I might get lucky."

"At the night club?"

He frowns.

"No, dumb, with you!" he sounds incredulous and I snort.

"Sorry!" I feel a little bit overwhelmed that he was so certain we would finally end up in bed. I was so busy trying to think up reasons we shouldn't be doing it, I didn't see the one massive reason why we should: because we both want it so much we can almost taste it.

He clambers off me and reaches across to my nightstand. I hear him rummage in the drawer and give a satisfied huff as he finds what he's looking for.

“Well supplied.” He observes with approval as he resumes his position across my legs. He holds up the lube and a condom packet, his blue eyes shining, “Now then, who’s going first?”

Well now, that opens up whole new realms of possibilities. He doesn’t mind switching? I might have found my dream man. The thought of him inside me though, thrusting until he comes, hitting that sweet spot and making me scream... hmm, I think I could really go for that right now, my cock certainly thinks it could.

Cal’s eyes widen at the violent twitch my erection just made.

“What the hell were you just thinking about?” he asks me in complete surprise, and I chuckle.

“Put that damn condom on and I’ll show you.”

Cal’s pupils blow wide and dark and his cock twitches alongside mine. He leans down to capture my lips again, and we kiss slowly and sensuously. One of his hands runs down along the inside of my thigh, and I breathe his name softly as he switches from straddling me to kneeling between my legs.

He opens the bottle of lube and dribbles some on his fingers before hitching my leg over his arm so he has better access. This isn’t his first time, this much is clear. He’s done this before, and he’s had a bit of practice.

I gasp as his fingertips rub around my opening before pushing slowly inside with two fingers, opening me up and thrusting further in with each push.

His eyes never leave my face, searching my expression for any sign that I’m not happy, but he won’t find any because I am ecstatically, stupidly happy right now.

“Cal,” I gasp as he widens his fingers inside me, twisting and bending them to search for the small knot of nerves that feels so good.

When my body almost lifts completely off the bed, he pulls out in shock until I grab his hand and try to pull him back inside me.

“Holy crap, don’t stop,” I gasp. “You hit the right spot, Cal, made me see stars.”

“I did?” he asks in wonder. “I never thought it would make you react like that.”

“You sound like you’ve never done this before.” He bites his lip, and regards me with wide eyes.

“Not this.” He confesses, and I gasp. How can he be so good? “I thought about it a lot. I read about it. Am I doing okay?”

I bite my lip and nod.

“Yes.” He hooks his fingers inside me again, and I yelp, “Yeeeeees!” He chuckles. “Shit, Cal, don’t stop there, keep going, fuck me, god, please just fuck me now.”

He laughs out loud and actually squeaks in delight before he positions himself at my entrance. He hitches my legs up, and I help by holding them out of his way until he, *oooh god*, until he, *holy shit*, pushes fully inside me.

Hnngh! It hurts a little, it burns but damn it feels good.

He waits for a few seconds, his breathing ragged. The feel of his full length inside me is incredible, and he looks so incredibly sexy, with his flushed cheeks and parted lips.

“S-so t-tight, Jake,” he hisses softly. “So turned on. I don’t think it’ll take much.”

“I don’t care,” I tell him, letting go of my legs and grabbing his face, pulling him down into an urgent kiss. “Whatever you do is great. God you feel so good.”

He starts to move, pulling out and pushing back in, slowly at first, but then a little faster. He shifts his angle a little, which has me crying out in pleasure as he lights me up from the inside.

“Oh god, Cal, yes,” I whisper tenderly. “Just like that, sunshine, oh god.”

He chuckles but his breath catches as his rhythm begins to falter.

“Jake!” he gasps and I hold his arms. “I’m close, oh shit.”

I fist my own cock in rhythm with his thrusts, he folds his fingers around mine to help, and suddenly, I’m coming, spewing great warm strands of semen across my stomach and our hands. My vision blurs, and I gasp for breath as my body loses control and shudders violently with the force of my orgasm.

He yells out desperately, and his body convulses against mine. I feel him throbbing inside me as he comes.

He gives one last shuddering thrust then collapses, boneless, on top of me, his face buried in my shoulder whispering my name the entire time.

Eventually, and slowly as I hiss at the sensation, he pulls out, catching the condom and knotting it before throwing it somewhere.

“Cal!” I protest with a frown.

“What?” he asks. “I wasn’t going to leave it there,” he promises. “I’ll get it in a minute, or tomorrow maybe.”

I shift him off me with a chuckle and leave the bed to get a towel, retrieving the condom as I go.

Back on the bed, I wipe us both down and lie back into the pillows where Cal joins me, draping his sweat-drenched body across mine in much the same way as he had lain last night.

He plants soft warm kisses along my collarbone and I sigh contentedly stroking his soft hair and then his smooth, muscular arm where it lies across my chest.

“This isn’t a one-time thing, Jake,” he tells me quietly. He doesn’t want me to reply because he doesn’t lift his head, so I listen. “This is a long time thing.”

I tighten my hold on him, and I feel him smile against my chest.

“I know!” I whisper back into his hair, then I pull him so he can see as I repeat: “I know.”

With a soft, contented moan, he lays his head back onto my chest. His fingers trace lines down my chest, toying with the curls at the base of my spent cock. I gasp as his fingertips brush the over sensitive skin and I feel his own cock twitch back into life against my thigh.

Oh god, I’d forgotten how quickly you can recover when you’re twenty-one. I think I might be in for a long night.

Chapter Sixteen

Sunshine

I don't remember having slept so well; especially considering I've spent most of the night making love to Cal.

He is draped possessively across me in the same position as yesterday morning the only difference this morning is that we are in my bed, and hopefully not in danger of any rude awakening.

Everything that could be done to tidy up and secure Cal's house was accomplished yesterday thanks to the hard work of everyone that came to help out. Today we have a break because the windows and doors won't come for about a week at least.

The very thought of waking up with Cal's warm body draped across me like this every morning for a week is threatening to undo me as I lie here. I could quickly get used to this. I really could. I feel claimed, like a prized possession, and I feel so stupidly happy about it it's unreal.

It's the way he does it that fascinates and thrills me. He does it so naturally, without thinking. It's not planned or manipulative it's simply his nature. He doesn't bend me to his will, he simply has to look at me, and I melt at his feet.

My arms wrap around him tightly, and he moans softly as he begins to rouse from what seems to be a deep sleep. I always tagged him as a light sleeper. He always seems so full of energy and alert during the day. I wonder if it's just when he's with me that he sleeps so deeply.

Speaking of energy, he certainly drained mine last night. I'm so bushed now I can't even muster up a physical reaction to his closeness. I suspect he will be the opposite. He'll wake up raring to go. I think I might have to start working out.

Oh god, what if I can't keep up with him though? What if he realizes the age gap means more than just funny looks and assumptions that he's brought his dad with him when we go out? I am twenty-four years older than him, and I know he doesn't care, he told me he thinks it's hot that I know so much more than him, but being older and wiser isn't always an advantage. Being older can be a disadvantage when you need to keep up with Cal.

The warm body in my arms begins to stir, and I stroke my hands gently across his shoulders and down his back and arms, burying my face in his sun-bright hair and taking a deep breath to take in his heady, spicy scent.

I hear him snort, then he lifts his head to look at me, his eyes heavy with sleep but shining brightly.

“Morning!” he croaks. I can’t help the wide, happy smile that spreads across my face. He is just so lovely.

“Good morning, sunshine,” I reply, my voice equally as hoarse, although I’m not really surprised after the amount of times he made me scream last night. I never knew I could make some of the noises he managed to wring from me in the throes of passion. Passion I haven’t felt in a very long time.

“What’s the plan today then, Jake?” Cal asks with an intense frown.

He lifts his head to look at me and wait for my answer.

I lazily brush some of his hair behind his ear and caress his sleep-flushed cheek.

“What do you mean, sunshine?” I ask him with a smile. He leans against my hand with a soft moan.

“Why do you call me that?” he asks curiously.

“Because that’s what you are, Cal,” I tell him. “You’re my sunshine.”

That only begins to cover what I feel though. When I look at him, I see sunshine, and stars and light and energy and such beauty.

“Oh!” He sighs contentedly. “Okay!” He lies back down on my chest. “I think you might be mine too.”

I think my heart is going to beat out of my chest.

He holds onto me as if he is afraid I will move and leave him cold, and I hold him equally as tightly to let him know I’m not going anywhere. He lifts his head again.

“Answer my first question,” he demands gently.

“The plan for today is to do what the hell we want, Cal. Did you have anything to add to that?” He smiles.

“I think I need to go shopping for clothes,” he muses with a grimace, and I nod sadly.

“Yes, you probably do, although I certainly do not mind you borrowing mine.”

He grimaces again. “Oh what?” I prop myself up on my elbows. “My plaid cotton boxer shorts are just too much for you are they?”

He giggles, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

“I prefer boxer briefs.” I hold up my hand to stop him, he pulls it down with a silent snort, and plants a kiss to my palm.

“Okay, stop right there,” I tell him. “I can’t listen to any more talk about underwear or we’ll never get out of bed.”

“I never knew you had such a fetish for boxers, Jake.” Cal giggles.

“Only when there’s a possibility of you wearing them.” I grab his shoulders and push him down into the pillows. He gives a cry of surprise as I do, which turns into a giggle that I just love to hear. “I could listen to that giggle all day, Cal,” I tell him.

“Well you better get used to it, old man, because you’re the only one that makes me giggle like that,” he whispers, pulling me down into a kiss that threatens to send me spiraling out of control again, in a way I would never have thought possible after the amount of times we shared each other last night.

“I thought you wanted to go shopping.” He regards me with one cocked eyebrow as if offering a challenge.

“I do,” he says indignantly.

“Well, I think that might be a good idea, since I think my body will implode if we have sex again.”

Cal rolls his eyes and chuckles. “Come on, then, let’s get showered and go out. We can get breakfast at Lou-Anne’s.”

He disappears into the bathroom for a shower before I can call him out for being so damn bossy. I am a little relieved he didn’t pursue another steamy sex session just yet though, because I really do think I need some time to recover. I actually think I might need a week after the amount of times we fucked each other.

His candid question about what position we both like, has been well and truly answered I think.

An hour later, we are in town, drinking coffee and eating donuts at Lou-Anne’s coffee shop, both sitting in the window booth rather gingerly and

exchanging sparkling knowing glances as we both know why we are sitting so carefully.

Lou-Anne has taken a break and is now helping Cal to plan which store to visit first, and there seems to be an awful lot of giggling seemingly at my expense. I'm sure I hear the word plaid in there at some point.

They are not being very nice! I keep shooting Lou-Anne warning looks and she keeps sticking her tongue out at me.

Mature!

Suddenly, the coffee shop is full of Cal's surfing buddies. It's spring break and they have all decided to meet for coffee before going off surfing. They join us in the window booth, but there is definitely not enough room for them here. Cal gives me an apologetic look as he's swept off to a booth in the corner. I watch him go with a reassuring smile and a nod. I know he's not about to be stolen away from me, I think even Pete has gotten the message that he's off limits.

There seems to be a lot of giggling at my expense from the booth as well, with Cal being the main instigator as far as I can see. I'm sure I can guess what the subject is.

What the hell is wrong with plaid cotton boxer shorts?

Lou-Anne is regarding me with a curious expression on her face.

"What?" I ask, a little more sullenly than I intended because I'm scowling.

"I think it's sweet," she tells me with a wistful look in her eyes. I roll my eyes and sip my coffee, trying not to smirk.

"Oh please!" I snort although I don't bother to hide my smirk.

She chuckles and nudges me along the bench so she can sit beside me instead of opposite.

"So come on, spill the beans," she urges excitedly.

I sniff disdainfully at her unsubtle attempt to get information. "I do not kiss and tell, Lou-Anne." She gives a delighted giggle and nudges me again.

"So you at least kissed then."

"Lou-Anne!" I exclaim, feeling my face flush hot.

"Hush," she soothes me. "I'm just... I'm happy for you. You seem so good together."

“You think so?” I ask with a slightly troubled expression on my face. She regards me curiously.

“You don’t?” I shrug, biting my lip. “Is it still the age gap thing?” she asks me and I nod, indicating the booth where Cal is sitting with his new friends looking more happy and relaxed than I have ever seen him.

“Look at him, Lou-Anne, he’s gorgeous, and so popular. Why would he choose me when he could have anyone and someone closer to his age that could be so much better for him?”

“Oh my god, Jake,” Lou-Anne gasps. “He chose you because he’s completely crazy about you. That much I saw at the party two nights ago.”

“I’m completely crazy about him,” I tell her. She pinches my arm gently as she stands.

“I know!” She chuckles. “Do you want another coffee?”

“Hmm, thanks, Lou,” I hum in approval of her offer.

While she is away getting me another cup I take the opportunity to fall back on my Cal watching habit that I don’t seem to be able to break. The more I get of him the more I think I need. He’s like a drug. Is he really crazy about me?

He looks over and sees me watching. I should look away, but I can’t. It’s like I was waiting for him to see me. Far from being annoyed that I’m stalking him he seems somehow reassured that I’m watching his every move. He smiles shyly but follows it with a jaunty wink, before turning back to his friends. Well that just sums him up completely. That shy smile hides a very different natured young man when we’re alone together. I feel a little thrill to think that I am the only one that sees him when he’s dominating, confident and tenacious when the rest of the world sees him as shy and adorably charming. Oh, he’s that with me as well, but the cockiness is winning over the shyness as I suspected it would. I quite like it actually.

“Excuse me, are you Jacob Reuben, the-the writer?” a voice asks tentatively from behind me and I turn to see a man about my age, a little shorter than me, and with greying hair, standing just at my side looking like a nervous wreck.

“Er, yes I am,” I say, trying not to sigh as I do.

This happens every now and then. I don’t advertise where I live. I like my private life and my author life to be kept separate, but some determined readers do manage to find me. I don’t mind really, since it happens so infrequently as to

never be a nuisance. Even if it happened frequently, I still wouldn't mind. It always fascinates me that anyone would want to come all this way to discuss my work.

"Do you mind if I join you, Mr. Reuben?" the man asks politely, and I smile as I indicate for him to sit.

"Be my guest." I try to sound as friendly as I can and he takes the seat opposite me.

Lou-Anne brings me my coffee and regards the man sitting opposite with a raised eyebrow.

"Can I get you anything?" she asks a little coolly, which surprises me because she's not usually like that with customers.

Is she annoyed he has taken her seat? She knows she's welcome to join me. The man orders a coffee as well and Lou-Anne leaves, with a short, irritable huff of breath, to get it for him. I am a little distracted by her unusual behavior but I remember my manners and turn to the man opposite me.

"Now what can I do for you, erm..." I leave it hanging since the man hasn't introduced himself.

"Oh!" he smiles, regarding me with piercing, blue eyes that do not reflect his smile. His nerves seem to have disappeared as well. There's something about this man that is not quite right. He seems false somehow. He reaches his hand across the table.

"I'm Jackson," he tells me, "Jackson Steele."

The name shocks me into glancing anxiously over the man's shoulder to where Cal is sitting with his friends as I distractedly take the man's offered hand. It can't be a coincidence, this man's name, it can't be.

Chapter Seventeen

A Confrontation

As I shake Jackson Steele's hand, I notice Cal is no longer sitting where he had been in the booth, and his friends have all fallen rather notably silent. They are all pointedly not looking in my direction, drinking their coffees and looking for all as if they are enjoying a quiet morning break. They were before, but now there's nothing natural about the way they are sitting, as if they're all playing a part and they're all very tense and nervous. I have a moment of panic and consider getting up when I feel a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Your coffee, sir." Lou-Anne's stilted, clipped tone shocks me into turning back to face who I am almost certain is Cal's uncle, especially considering the fact that Cal has disappeared.

Where the hell is he? As Lou-Anne places the coffee in front of Steele, she catches my eye and places a paper napkin deliberately but casually in front of me. Her eyes flick significantly down to it and I glance at it as calmly as I can. There's a hastily scribbled note.

Cal's safe, he's hidden in the back of the booth.

I crumple up the napkin and turn my attention back to the man in front of me, feeling relieved that Cal is being protected by his friends but also filled with trepidation because I have no idea what his uncle would want with me. My heart is suddenly beating twice as fast in my chest.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Steele?" I ask, hoping my voice is steadier than the rest of me.

I'm feeling much less friendly and actually a little queasy because this is the man who strikes fear into Cal's eyes just thinking about him. He's the one that has spent the last four years telling Cal he is not capable of living on his own, undermining his confidence, trying to take control of his life, trying to steal his money.

"Actually Mr. Reuben," Steele begins, "I was hoping I could offer you some help or at the very least, some advice."

"Oh?" I tip my head to one side. "What kind of help or advice did you have in mind?"

Steele smiles, there is no emotion in that smile, only ice. It leaves me cold. If this guy played poker, he'd be unstoppable.

I search the man's face for some sort of family resemblance to Cal. The man's eyes are blue, but where Cal's are a warm sapphire, this man's are hard steel with no hint of any kind of laughter hovering in the background. There's no hint or indication that this man even knows how to smile with his eyes.

Steele leans forwards and lowers his voice, as if he is divulging a secret, or trying to be covert.

"You know my nephew." He doesn't ask me, he states it, meaning he already knows. It almost sounds like an accusation, as if it is meant to unsettle me, put me on my guard. I am certainly feeling defensive.

"Perhaps," I say lightly, in full defense mode, giving nothing away. I can play poker too. "I know a lot of people."

Steele narrows his eyes, and there's a flash of anger, but he recovers quickly.

"My nephew is Calvin Steele, or Cal as you've probably been told to call him, and you do know him, Mr. Reuben, you live next door to him." He sits back in his seat in triumph as if he has won a point against me.

I lean back in mine.

"Now, then, Mr. Steele," I raise one eyebrow in disapproval, "you have me at a slight disadvantage, since you seem to know more about me than I know about you." This is not exactly true, but it seems like a good card to play.

"I have my sources." Steele plays, raising me a slimy, false smile that makes me like the man less and less every time I see it. He leans to his side, reaching down into a brief case he has on the floor.

When he sits back up, he places an envelope on the table in front of me. He's raising the stakes and since I have nothing to play at this time I bide my time, giving him as little reaction as I possibly can. He's seen my interest, however mild, in the envelope though. I see another flash of triumph in Steele's eyes, it's his tell, since he thinks he's holding a winning hand, if he was playing poker with me he would have lost by now.

"My wife and I became Calvin's guardians when he was seventeen," Steele explains to me as he taps the envelope possessively like it's his trump card, and he's simply waiting for the right time to play it.

I tip my head, and keep my poker face in place. I don't have a tell.

"His parents died tragically," Steele continues, although this information does not produce any kind of emotion in his expression or tone. "His father was my older brother. Calvin had no other family so he needed to be in the care of an adult until he came of age."

This much I already know, from Cal's perspective. What I'm curious about is the envelope and what that has to do with the story.

"What became increasingly apparent when my wife and I took Calvin on was that he had been most horribly indulged by his parents." Steele continues to tap the envelope making me think he is doing it to keep me distracted. "I didn't get on well with my brother, Mr. Reuben. He had strange ideas about how life should be lived. He was always a reckless boy and young man, and Calvin inherited this reckless, rebellious and stubborn streak."

I want to laugh in this guy's face. Cal? Reckless and rebellious? He's determined, and strong willed, but reckless? I've seen him surf, he's fearless. Is this what Steele means? All the things he sees as negative personality traits, I have only ever seen as positives.

"Calvin was supposed to stay with us until he reached his twenty first birthday, at which time he would legally inherit his parents' estate and be able to live independently. What we discovered was that Cal was completely incapable of living independently. His deafness has only compounded the problem."

"Mr. Steele." I lean forward now, with a deep frown on my face. "I wonder if you can actually be talking about the same Cal." Steele frowns now. "You see, the Cal I know is very capable and doesn't appear to need any help whatsoever to live independently."

Steele's frown disappears, and he pats the envelope again as if it is his life line.

"Oh Mr. Reuben, how wrong you are. You see I know for a fact you've been helping him. Perhaps you may see it as being neighborly when really you haven't been helping his case for independence at all. You were seen bringing him into town. You've been seen taking him out at night. And I also know he has spent several nights sleeping at your house rather than his own. These are all indications that he isn't ready to live alone. My wife and I do not wish him to be an inconvenience to anyone, so I have come to take him home where he belongs."

I sigh and take a breath to speak, then stop, feeling a little baffled by this man's attitude and his interpretation of Cal's and my actions over the last few weeks. Not to mention the fact that this man knows all these things in the first place.

"Mr. Steele," I begin. "I'm a little bit confused." I take another deep breath. "I am very curious to know how you actually found all these things out."

Steele nods in acknowledgement.

"Yes, yes, of course you would be, I can understand that." He takes a breath and a sip of his coffee. "Calvin left us just before his twenty first birthday; about a month before. He went to live with one of the lawyers who is another executor of his parents' will. My wife and I were not very happy, but you know how lawyers are, they twist the law to mean what they want. They got themselves declared Cal's legal guardian saying it was for his protection, and we couldn't do a thing about it. Since then we have been building a case, with the help of a private detective, to get Calvin returned to us."

"But he's twenty-one now," I blurt out, forgetting the game altogether. "You can't make him go anywhere. He doesn't need a legal guardian anymore."

"Oh, but we believe that he does, Mr. Reuben, because of his disability and because of the other problems that prevent him from making sensible decisions about his life and the way he spends his money."

"I don't think there is a court anywhere that would decide those things about Cal." I lean forwards and look Steele directly in the eye. "I know what you're trying to do, Mr. Steele, and I have to tell you that Cal is happy here, he's popular and well-liked. Not once has anyone here thought he needed any extra help nor has he ever asked for any. He's definitely never been in any kind of trouble."

"I beg to differ, Mr. Reuben, I know for a fact he was arrested just three weeks ago, for suspected car theft and for resisting arrest."

"You need to get your facts right then, because he was driving that car with the permission of the owner."

"Oh?" Steele still looks annoyingly smug although his cool, smug exterior is beginning to crack just a little.

"The car was mine," I tell him.

“Really!” Steele leans away from me looking as if he concedes this one point but is searching for the next one to gain.

“And resisting arrest?”

“A misunderstanding on our Sheriff’s behalf. Sheriff Jefferson made a full apology the next day.”

“Mr. Reuben, I can understand why you would be trying to defend Cal. He can be very charming when he wants to be. But the advice I came here to give you was not about Cal, it was aimed at you specifically.”

I frown and the man opens the envelope he’s had his hand so possessively covering and slides out several large photographs which he passes across the table to me.

“I’m a little worried that Cal’s deviances may in some way damage your reputation as a well-renowned author, Mr. Reuben.”

I stare down at the set of four photographs. They’ve been taken with a long distance lens, so the pictures are slightly grainy, having been blown up to a large size. One is of Cal holding out his hand to me as I lie on my back in the ivy below my decking. One is of us talking on my deck; another of us here in the coffee shop and the last, most intrusive of all, is of us kissing two nights ago on our shared drive the night Cal discovered his break in.

“What is this?” I ask Steele, feeling decidedly defiled and very angry that my life and Cal’s has been so intruded upon. “Why do you even have these? How do you even have these?”

Steele smiles his most slimy, smarmy, oily smile yet.

“Oh we have many more, Mr. Reuben, and we will not hesitate to distribute them if you don’t agree to help us in returning Cal to his family.”

All bets are suddenly off. This man is taking things too far. My poker face has gone out of the window. “Are you trying to blackmail me?” I ask, incredulously. Steele shakes his head.

“No!” he gasps, I don’t believe him, I’m not supposed to. “I’m trying to warn you. Your relationship with Cal could seriously damage your career.” He sounds calm, even reasonable, he really does believe what he’s saying will have some sort of effect on me. “I’m sure you don’t want the world to know that you share his homosexual deviances, Mr. Reuben.”

I actually do bark out a laugh this time, loud and unrestrained. This guy is unreal. Who the hell talks this way nowadays? This attitude belongs back in the

dark ages. I lived through a generation of bigotry and prejudice and thought I'd left it all behind. Steele takes my reaction as an expression of helpless shock though.

"I'm sorry to be so heavy handed, but Cal just won't speak to us, and since you seem to know him so well, we thought you would be persuaded to speak on our behalf."

"I'll do no such thing," I spit, sitting up straight. Steele smiles sadly, although I can see a flash of excitement in his eyes, as if he is enjoying this immensely. The smug, slimy, contemptible bastard!

"Then you leave me no choice," he sighs, a look of false regret on his face. "I will be uploading these pictures to every social media site and every author web page where your name is mentioned. Your name will be mud by the end of the day, Mr. Reuben. I'm sure you know how quickly these rumors spread nowadays."

I don't actually, because I have no interest in social media, but that's beside the point. I think he believes he has me over a barrel. I lean forward as much as I can without getting in the man's face. Deliberately and slowly, I slide the photographs back across the table without my eyes leaving his.

"You go right ahead," I tell him, calling his bluff, not that it would make any difference to my career whatsoever. "If you'd done your research properly, Mr. Steele, you'd know that I am not only a very well-respected writer, but also, an openly gay one, who was happily married to another man for ten years until he died thirteen years ago. Your warning and your threat to *out* me, I'm afraid, has come, ooh let's see..." I roll my eyes as if I'm doing some calculations. "...about twenty five years too late. The whole world already knows." Steele's face pales slightly. "So you can take those damn photographs and shove them up your oily, despicable little ass."

He puffs out air through his nose as his metal-cold eyes narrow. He moves to take the photos but I stop him, sliding the one of Cal and I kissing, back towards me.

"Not that one though," I tell him, suddenly knowing exactly what I can do and say for maximum impact. "Because I like that one. Think I might get it framed actually, and give it pride of place in my living room. It's not often you get a record of a first kiss, Mr. Steele, but that kiss was a damn good one, and if you'd be so kind as to give me the name of the photographer I'd like to thank him personally for preserving it in print for us to enjoy forever." I take that

photo back, and he snatches the other ones away in disgust. "Now, where to go from here."

I sit back in my seat with my hands in front of my face, drumming my fingers together thoughtfully. I regard Steele with narrowed eyes as he becomes increasingly less composed.

"I'm sure our Sheriff would be very pleased to know that you were attempting to blackmail me," I inform him casually, enjoying his attempt to hide his squirm. "You do know it is actually a crime don't you? Poor Sheriff Jefferson, he doesn't get much intrigue to deal with around here. I'm also sure he'd be thrilled to know that you had a photographer on hand at the time Cal's house was completely trashed, perhaps he took some photographs of that, or maybe he saw something while he was waiting in hiding for us to appear. I'm sure you could help him a great deal with that investigation as well." I give Steele a significant look, and he does actually manage to look guilty, which confirms our suspicions that he was involved with the break in. I don't think I see any remorse in his eyes. I take out my phone. "I think I might just call the Sheriff right now," I make the comment casual but my actions are decisive.

Steele looks positively stricken now as his eyes dart in panic towards the door.

"That's right, Mr. Steele." I tell him without looking up from my phone. "That's where the door is. I suggest you walk through it now. I suggest you leave town and don't come back. Cal doesn't need you, and if you're in any way worried he won't be looked after, let me assure you I will take very good care of all of his needs." I give him a wicked grin and flick my eyebrows suggestively. "Especially his deviant ones."

Steele stands, recoiling from me, unable to hide his disgust, his expression is livid, his face pale.

"I knew there would be no reasoning with you," he hisses. "Your kind are all the same. I feel sorry for you, Mr. Reuben, and you can tell Calvin he will be hearing from our lawyers very soon. He will be coming back to us. Once he is away from your bad influence, I'm sure he will thank us for saving him from a life of deviance and sin. You can rest assured, I won't be leaving town without him."

I can't help the derisive laugh that escapes my mouth as I also stand, enjoying the fact that I am at least three inches taller than this man, and I feel a sense of satisfaction when I see a flicker of panic in his eyes as he realizes this.

“I think you might have a very long wait then, Mr. Steele, because I don't think he wants to go.”

Steele regards me with narrowed eyes, but his smug, self-satisfied expression is back.

“With all due respect, Mr. Reuben, you are not the best qualified person to answer that question.” Steele sniffs disdainfully. “I would like to ask Calvin that myself.”

I am about to answer when I see a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye. I turn to my side just as Cal steps from behind me.

“Uncle Jackson,” he says, his voice calm, but I can see the tension in his shoulders, the knots in the muscles of his back. I want to reach out to him, but I know this is not the right moment. He already knows I'm right there by his side whatever he is going to say or do, I see that in the look he gives me before he turns back to glare at his uncle.

“Calvin!” Steele sighs, opening his arms in an attempt to seem relieved and welcoming. Cal just stares at the open arms, staying right by my side, until, with an uncomfortable clearing of his throat, Steele lowers his hands. “Calvin it's so good to see you are safe and well, especially after what has happened to you over the last few days.”

Cal narrows his eyes.

“No thanks to you, Uncle Jackson,” he hisses, his body taugth with anger.

Steele affects a look of innocence, but I saw the anger flash in his eyes at Cal's rebuke.

“I have no idea what lies this man here has been feeding you, but your aunt and I have had nothing to do with what has been going on here. This town is not a safe place for you, Calvin. Look what happened to your home.”

“You were there?” Cal asks. “You saw what happened?”

Steele nods sadly.

“So you must have seen how many people came to help me after it happened then,” Cal adds. Steele frowns.

“All with a guilty conscience I think,” he judges. Cal shakes his head.

“The only person here who should have guilt on their conscience is you, Uncle Jackson.” Cal points a finger. “You are the one that's been feeding me

lies, undermining me at every turn and trying to control me so you can control my money.”

“Calvin!” Steele gasps, it’s almost an angry snap, and I do not miss Cal’s imperceptible flinch. I move closer to him, ever so slightly. “You know that’s not true. Your aunt and I only ever had your best interests at heart.” Cal gives a derisive snort.

“The only interests you were ever worried about were your own,” he spits. “You and Aunt Leslie were only ever concerned with how to get around the limits that were set on you when it came to spending *my* money.”

Steele steps forward, and I think I see several bodies dotted about the coffee shop that all move in response, tensing, ready to jump in if we need any help. Cal moves back, his shoulder pressing back against mine. I don’t waver, my body providing a firm solid wall for him to lean on.

“That money should have been mine,” Steele hisses. “I should have had it all.” His fists clench in anger, his eyes are wild with fury. “None of it should have gone to you, you’re an abomination that should never have been born: my brother’s punishment for living his life the way he did.”

Cal gives a strangled gasp, but the noise is lost in the collective gasp from me and everyone else in the coffee shop who can hear since he is now shouting.

I’ve heard enough though. I step forward and place a hand on Steele’s shoulder, turning him before he can argue. Grabbing his arm with my other hand, I frog march him towards the door.

“What do you think you’re doing? Get your filthy hands off me.” Steele’s face is now red with apoplexy.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Steele, but I think you’ve said everything you need to say, and it’s time you left.” He shrugs me away from him when we reach the door, and he makes a show of brushing himself down.

He gives me a dismissive, filthy look then turns his gaze to Cal, who has followed me, providing my back-up this time.

“You’re an abomination Calvin, a product of an abnormal home and deviant parentage. I’ll see you and all your deviant friends burn in hell.”

“I’d rather burn in hell by Jake’s side than spend an eternity in paradise with you, Uncle Jackson. That’s my idea of hell.”

Steele sneers and curls his lip. He raises his fist as if to strike Cal. I feel myself moving to intervene although my brain is on fire as Cal's words echo in my head, *by Jake's side; by Jake's side.*

Steele is poised, ready to throw the first punch when we hear a booming voice.

"I'd think twice about that if I were you, mister." Sheriff Jefferson's tone is unbending, no nonsense, and his presence is as large as ever. His over ample form completely fills the doorway he has just emerged through. I've never wanted to kiss the bombastic, pompous ass so much in my entire life.

Steele lowers his fist and steps away from Cal as if he'd been pulled by some unseen force. Jefferson steps to the side, unblocking the exit.

"Jackson Steele, I believe." Jefferson sneers. Steele gives him an ice-cold glare, "Cat got your tongue?" Jefferson snaps. Steele flinches. "I asked you your name."

"Yes!" Steele hisses sullenly through his teeth.

"SIR!" Jefferson bellows, his face red with rage. "The correct response, Mr. Steele, is: YES SIR!" Steele flinches again and mutters the correct response.

Damned if that wasn't the hottest thing I've ever seen, apart from Cal sprawled out naked on my bed of course.

"It's time you left, Mr. Steele," Jefferson tells him. "I think you'd better make sure you're out of town within the hour, or you might find yourself under arrest."

"On what charge?" Steele sneers. Jefferson grabs the front of his shirt.

"On any charge I damn well want because I'm the law round here." He throws Steele back, releasing his hold. "Now get outta here before I decide to arrest you right now!"

Steele stumbles in his attempt to get out of the door as fast as he can.

Jefferson takes out his radio and speaks briefly to one of his deputies giving a description of Cal's uncle and asking him to make sure he leaves town, then he turns to us, his apparent anger suddenly gone.

"You guys okay?" he asks in a concerned tone. We both nod.

Cal's mouth has fallen open, and I think he had the same response to the Sheriff's handling of his uncle as I did. We exchange amused glances before we

are suddenly surrounded by well-wishers as the entire coffee shop erupts with applause for us and for Jefferson.

“Okay now, that’s enough, everyone settle down. Give the men some space.” Jefferson waves his hands in a calming motion. “Lou-Anne,” he calls, as he ushers Cal and I to an empty booth by the window. “Bring us some o’ those delicious donuts and some of your best coffee. I think we all need a sugar boost.”

Chapter Eighteen

Coffee and Donuts

Jefferson's order of donuts and coffee is welcome, and after the adrenaline rush of confronting Cal's uncle the sugar boost is definitely needed.

I tell Jefferson everything that Steele said to me. He's especially interested in the fact that Steele had employed a private detective to take photographs of us. I show him the photograph I managed to keep. It's an intimate and obvious intrusion of our privacy, but it does show that there was perhaps a witness to what happened to Cal's house. Jefferson asks to keep the print, and I try to ignore Cal's shocked but pleased expression when I ask him to look after it because I'd like it back.

It's a nice picture, a nice memory, despite the circumstances under which it was taken.

"When Uncle Jackson walked through the door I froze," Cal explains his part of the story. "I think the others thought I was having some kind of fit. When I told them who Jackson was they pulled me to the back of the booth where I was hidden from his view."

I make a note to thank Cal's friends for their quick thinking. They've gone now, but they promised to call round to my house later. I rest my hand over Cal's to steady it because, despite his uncle having left, he is still trembling and wide-eyed.

"He's gone now," I assure him. "He won't be back, the Sheriff will make certain of that. You're safe here." He flashes me a grateful smile and leans his head on my shoulder. I glance at the Sheriff for confirmation of what I've said.

Jefferson's mouth is full of donut so he can't reply, but he grunts an affirmative and waves his hands about as he nods enthusiastically. I see Cal's mouth twitch slightly, and he meets my eye with a flicker of mirth in his. I have to look away because Jefferson is providing a very effective distraction from the trauma of the morning and I feel the urge to laugh hysterically myself.

There is a call on Jefferson's radio, and the Sheriff stuffs the last piece of donut in his mouth before standing.

"Gotta take this outside boys." He mumbles, spraying crumbs and causing Cal to cover a snort by coughing. I helpfully pat him on the back feeling my eyes burn with tears of mirth.

Jefferson leaves us to finish our coffee. As soon as the door closes, we're both reduced to snorts of helpless laughter.

"Well now, that's a sight for sore eyes," Lou-Anne tells us, smiling at our hysterics, as she clears Jefferson's mess from the table. "Sheriff Jefferson can be quite entertaining sometimes, when he wants to be and sometimes when he doesn't even realize."

"He sure can," I agree. She leaves us with a wink and goes back behind her counter.

Once she's gone and we're finally alone, I take Cal's hands in mine and meet his earnest, clear gaze.

"Are you okay?" I search his face with concern. He smiles weakly and nods.

"I'm fine," he assures me, although I think that might just be a default response. "What about you? You're the one that had to deal with my uncle, which..." he turns his hand so that he can link his fingers with mine, "I am very grateful for Jake." He looks down, and I feel my heart flicker as he blushes. "I think you might be my hero."

"Huh, you just think?" My eyes search his face, smiling. He gasps and lays his hand on my cheek.

"I mean I know you are, you are, definitely," he splutters, then smiles tenderly as I chuckle at his back stepping. "My hero!" he whispers softly before leaning forward to press his lips to mine.

I pull him to me with a moan, deepening the kiss, not worrying how many people can see us.

Someone clears their throat, and we jump apart.

"Well now," Jefferson is standing regarding us with a twinkle in his eye, "sorry to interrupt but I thought you both oughtta know that one of my deputies followed Jackson Steele out o' town, but the guy hasn't gone far, he's staying at a motel about ten miles from here."

Cal tenses by my side. I squeeze his hand reassuringly.

"It's on the other side of town to you two so he'd have to come through here before he got to you, we'll be looking out for him. I assure you he won't get anywhere near either of you. Once I've brought him in for some questioning, he'll be sent packing for good."

"Thank you, Sheriff," I say gratefully.

“Least I can do for this special guy.” Jefferson leaves us with a wink at Cal and a nod to me.

“I’m not special,” Cal exclaims in surprise once the Sheriff is gone, although his face has flushed adorably pink.

I hold his face in my hands so he definitely does not miss one word I want to say to him.

“Yes you are, Cal,” I tell him with so much passion I feel weak inside. “You are so very special, I’ve always thought so. Don’t let anyone tell you any different, especially not that damn uncle of yours.”

“You heard what he said, though, Jake?” he asks me with a frown, and I nod.

“I can assure you that no one here feels that way. No one here will give any of your uncle’s words a second thought.”

Cal looks relieved but unsettled. I suppose if he’s spent four years being told all that crap by his uncle it’s going to take a while to undo the damage.

“He was okay at first, my uncle,” Cal tells me, as if he’s searching for some kind of positive about the guy, “but he showed his true colors when he realized he couldn’t influence me the way he thought he could. After that he took every opportunity to make sure I knew how he felt about me and my parents.” God his life with that man must have been terrible.

“Didn’t your aunt ever intervene when your uncle started saying those things?” Cal shakes his head.

“She was just as bad,” he says sadly.

“Oh Cal!” I sigh, taking his hand in mine and rubbing my thumb across the back of it. I have no idea how to make this better for him except to do what I’m doing now, since he seems to take comfort from me, and I’m more than happy to give it.

His words from before are still running in a loop in my head:

by Jake’s side; by Jake’s side.

I want to ask him what he meant. He told me last night that this thing between us wasn’t a one-time thing but a long time thing. I know now is not the right time or place to discuss how we feel about each other. It will wait until we get home. I do feel that we have reached a relationship milestone in just a few weeks that it takes some couples a lifetime to even contemplate. Cal, I have

come to realize, is used to getting what he wants, and what he appears to want is me. I very much doubt I will dispute his claim at any time in the near or distant future, but, yes, a long talk is well overdue.

Right now though, I think we need a little bit of normality.

For a little while we sit, leaning into the corner of the booth with Cal's head resting comfortably on my shoulder. Lou-Anne brings us each another coffee, and I think I've lost track of how many we've had now. We only planned to come in for one cup before going to get Cal some new clothes. Something we still have to do I guess.

I nudge him, and he sits up. He looks tired.

"Do you still want to go shopping?" I ask him. He gives me a wry half smile and nods.

"I suppose we'll have to. I need some clothes, although..." he sighs, "I really just want to go home now."

"We can do that," I say brightly. "I have a ton of band T-shirts that have been out of fashion so long they're probably cool again, and there's always my plaid cotton boxers to fall back on." Cal snorts and nudges me.

"Asshole," he gasps. "That settles it, let's go shopping Jake."

He stands and helps me out of the booth. I make that noise that all people over forty make when they stand up, it's compulsory. I'm just glad Cal doesn't hear it.

"Did you just make that old guy noise?" he asks, and when he sees my shocked expression he giggles. "You did didn't you?"

"No!" I protest, then I concede with a smirk. "Maybe." I poke my finger at him. "You have all this to look forward to, whippersnapper."

"What is a whippersnapper anyway?" Cal asks as we walk out of the café, waving to Lou-Anne and several others as we go.

"I have no idea, Cal," I tell him in surprise. "Although it seems to fit you to a tee."

"I prefer the name Sunshine," he admits, a little shyly. I wrap my arm around his shoulders and pull him close.

"Okay, sunshine," I kiss the side of his head, "tell me where you want to go first."

He turns me to face him with his lips pursed.

“I think you keep forgetting I can’t hear you.” He sounds indignant and I gasp because I do, he lip-reads so well.

“I’m sorry.” I apologize, feeling really bad. I brush some of his blond curls behind his ear. The sun is at his back and it shines through his hair like a halo. He’s an angel: he’s my angel. “Forgive me?” I flutter my eyelashes, he chuckles.

“Always,” he murmurs then leans in to kiss me on the cheek.

Suddenly, he gasps sharply, his entire body instantly tense. His hands grab my arms before pushing me to one side with such force I am thrown into the doorway of the coffee shop. I fall to the ground stunned, but then everything slows down as I look up and see why I was pushed.

Cal saw it before I heard it: the car that’s mounted the pavement and is rushing towards us. His quick thinking has pushed me out of the way, but that action hasn’t left him enough time to get out of the way himself.

The car barely misses me but hits him and throws him up into the air like a rag doll. It stops with a screech of brakes and he comes down onto the hood with a sickening thud only to roll off the front as the car crunches into reverse. He lands on the ground in a crumpled heap, and the sunshine is suddenly gone.

The car pulls back, its wheels inches from my feet. My lungs are filled with the acrid smell of burning brakes and exhaust smoke. I screw up my eyes against the sting of the fumes. The engine revs as if it is going to make another run. Cal doesn’t move, he just doesn’t move. I don’t give a thought to my own safety: I move. If that maniac is going to run over Cal again, he’s going to have to go through me first.

I scramble to reach him and throw myself as a shield between the front of the car and Cal. I close my eyes and wait for the inevitable. Whatever the driver was planning to do next is never carried out as several bodies descend on the car from all directions. The driver is dragged out before he can do anything more.

I don’t see who the driver is. I don’t see anything. As I open my eyes, I only see Cal, lying so still I feel my breath leave my body in an anguished cry even though I don’t even recall taking the breath in the first place.

“Cal!” I scramble around on my knees to face him. I think my heart has stopped beating. I see his still body in tunnel vision. The rest of the world is dark and silent.

“God, please, don’t be hurt, please.” I know this is a useless prayer, because how could he not be hurt? I hover over him. I daren’t move him. My hands shake as I try to think what I need to do. My eyes are wet with tears as I rub my hand over my face trying to remember my first aid training.

Pulse. I think: pulse first. Gently, taking sharp, sobbing breaths, I brush his hair away from his throat and press the tips of my fingers to the side of his neck to feel for a pulse. There is one, faint, but beating fast. My hand moves to hover in front of his mouth, and I feel the heat of his breath as I do. He’s breathing. Oh, thank god.

He’s lying on his side with his back to me. I want to pull him into my lap but I know I can’t. He needs to stay where he is but the urge to hold him, protect him, is so overwhelming that when someone else kneels down beside me I throw myself across him like a protective shield.

“Don’t you fucking touch him,” I yell out in panic and alarm, a warning in my tone that says I will defend this man with my life if I have to. It scares me how fierce and how strong the emotions are.

“Jake!” Lou-Anne’s calm voice sounds distant as she lays a quiet hand on my shoulder. “I’ve called the paramedics. They’re on their way.”

I nod. Her voice has grounded me, and other things start to come back into focus. I can hear shouts and yells coming from the other side of the car. Whoever was driving is being held by the people who dragged him out of his seat. I can only assume it must be Steele. Who else would want to do this to my beautiful angel?

I lie protectively across Cal’s prone body so I feel him move and hear him groan as he begins to regain consciousness. Suddenly, the light begins to brighten as the sunshine returns.

“Cal!” I gasp as I press my lips to his rapidly bruising cheek. “Cal, wake up baby, come on, please.” I know he can’t hear me, but he will be able to feel the vibration of my voice, and the warmth of my breath on his skin. He’ll feel the touch of my hands, holding him safe.

His hand moves to grab my arm, and with a weak cry he’s suddenly in my lap, pulling me close, burying his face into my shoulder breathing words of relief he knows I can hear but can’t reply to when he is in this position.

“You’re safe,” he whispers. “I needed you to be safe, I couldn’t let him hurt you, Jake.”

“Oh Cal.” Relief washes over me like a wave over the sand, washing away all the dread I’d felt as I’d seen him hit by the car. It’s a miracle, but he’s okay, bruised and shaken but not badly hurt.

“This isn’t going to stop me though,” he mumbles into my shoulder, and I push him away to regard him with bemusement.

“What?” I ask. He gives me a surprisingly bright, impish grin that is mixed with a determination made of pure steel.

“I’m still going shopping for clothes, there’s no way I am going back home without something more to wear than your damn boxers.”

“Oh my god!” I exclaim, with a slightly hysterical laugh. “You are one determined son of a bitch when you set your mind to something aren’t you?”

He bites his lip and nods, leaning in to press his lips against mine.

“You betcha, Jacob Reuben.” He gives me a jaunty wink, and I feel myself blushing. “I always get what I want.” And I realize with a gasp, as he gives me an extremely possessive once over, that he isn’t just talking about boxer shorts.

Chapter Nineteen

Conclusion

Raucous laughter erupts from my bedroom and the deck outside, and I meet my sister's eye as we sit in the living room talking to Sheriff Jefferson.

Cal is currently holding court in my room, which has somehow become his room, although I suspect he is thinking of it more as "our" room. He has about a dozen visitors in there, either sitting on the bed or lounging about the deck enjoying the late afternoon sunshine, and basically, reassuring themselves that their newest friend is fine after his ordeal this morning.

"Sounds like they're having fun in there," Sarah muses as she stands and begins to clear away empty coffee cups and plates.

"He's a very lucky guy to have so many good friends," Jefferson adds, and I nod to both statements.

Cal is lucky. He never did get any shopping done because any amount of determination was not going to disguise the fact that he had a broken ankle. But I think, with a broken ankle and a few cuts and bruises, he got off easy after such a horrific accident. Except it wasn't an accident at all. His uncle had driven the car at him in a fit of what I can only imagine was complete and utter madness. When I said people did all sorts of strange stuff for money, I hadn't really thought that attempted murder would be one of them.

I'm still reeling from everything that's happened today. I guess Cal is too, but at least he has his friends to help him through it.

Jackson Steele is now behind bars where he belongs, and Cal is safe.

"Steele ain't gonna be causin' any more trouble for that young man o' yours," Jefferson assures me. "I got enough witnesses willin' to say he deliberately drove his car onto the sidewalk. He'll be charged with attempted murder. I doubt there'll be any appeal against it. He can't deny it, we all heard him threaten you both in the coffee shop."

I heave a sigh of relief. Cal's ordeal is over, finally. We will have to face Steele in court sometime in the future, but there's no way he will get off any of the charges being brought against him. Cal won't have to face any of this by himself though. He'll have me, right by his side.

Right by his side is where I want to be right at this minute as I hear another round of laughter coming from my bedroom.

I glance in that direction and sigh. I don't want to interrupt, but they've all been here some time, and Cal should be resting.

"Go in there, and send them all packing," Sarah tells me. "Visiting time is over."

I chuckle.

"I don't want to spoil his fun." There'll be plenty of time to spend with him later. "He needs his friends right now."

"Nonsense!" Sarah scoffs. "He needs you right now, and you need him. Get in there, and thank them all for coming, then ask them all, politely, to get lost."

I snort. "I can't do that, they're his friends, and they did save his life." I remind her. Sarah shrugs her shoulders.

"So they saved him just to wear him out? Get in there. What are you hesitating for?"

I bite my lip. Why am I hesitating? Am I a man or a mouse? And this is my house after all. I shouldn't feel so anxious about asking a bunch of twenty-one year olds to leave my house, except these kids are all friends with my boyfriend, and that is also a scary thought: that I will be included in that circle of friends. Maybe I should be in there with them. Part of me wants to be, but another part still feels completely bewildered by the fact that Cal wants me at all, and that our age gap means nothing to him, or to anyone else for that matter. No one has said anything against us so far, although it is all still early days.

I can imagine if there were to be any objections they would be most likely to come from Cal's friends not understanding, or not approving. The approval of your peers is what you live for when you're that age. Will he be swayed? Somehow I doubt it.

Sarah pulls me to my feet and pushes me towards my room.

"Go on, get rid of them, or I'll go in there and use my teacher voice."

"Holy shit, not the teacher voice." I smirk. "You'll scare the living daylights out of them all."

Sarah clicks her tongue and gives me another push.

I saunter, as casually as I can, to stand in the doorway of my room.

Cal is sitting in the center of the bed. Several girls are sitting around the edge fawning over him and basically being girls. The rest of the group are draped over various pieces of furniture, some of which are not actually designed as seats.

Cal's eyes light up when he sees me, and I feel my heart doing back flips. As soon as my presence is noted, there are several gasps and some furious, guilty shuffling from the gathered group to make it look like they weren't all sitting along my dresser. One of the guys hides the TV remote behind his back and I wonder what they were actually all watching considering the mix of sexes in the room. I hide a smirk, they all have guilty looks on their faces, and it reminds me of when I was that age and caught by a parent watching porn. I only really have eyes for the young man sitting in the center of all this attention though.

"Hi!" Cal calls to me a little breathlessly, his cheeks color ever so slightly, and he looks positively delicious, but he also looks pale and tired and I'm suddenly glad I've come to ask everyone to leave. His deep, blue eyes appeal to me, and I give him a silent nod of acknowledgement. He needs them to leave as well, and was just too polite to tell them to fuck off.

"Okay, everyone." I try my best not to sound like a parent, but I think I might not be succeeding. "I hate to spoil your fun, but doctor's orders were: Cal has to get some rest. That means on his own, without you."

There are several groans of protest, but mostly there is agreement and acknowledgement. One by one, Cal's visitors stand, say their good-byes and leave. Cal and I both thank them for coming, and I thank them all again as I see them out of the door.

These people helped save Cal's life. I'll be forever grateful.

Sheriff Jefferson leaves, after taking one more of Sarah's apple muffins and popping his head around the door to say a crumb-filled farewell to Cal. Then finally, Sarah leaves after giving Cal a tearful hug and making sure he has everything he needs. Yes, Sarah, I can look after him!

Finally, we're alone.

I wander back into the bedroom and lean once more against the doorframe.

"Well now." I flick my eyebrows and he actually blushes as he meets my eye. "Alone at last."

Cal cocks his head to one side and pats the bed beside him.

"It's cold over here without you," he says with an artful smirk, and I chuckle as I push myself away from the doorframe and join him on the bed.

As I sit, I make sure I am facing him. He regards me expectantly. It's like he knows what I'm going to say. His expression is slightly anxious.

"How are you feeling?" I ask. He shrugs.

"A little sore. Tired." He continues to search my face.

"Are you too tired to talk?" I ask softly. He bites his lip and shakes his head, not able to meet my eye.

"I know what you're going to say, that all of this is happening too fast." He sounds quiet and subdued. I sigh. I should have begun better, rather than sounding like a parent about to chastise a child.

He isn't a child by any sense of the word. He's my equal in every way, except age, that is the only thing that separates us.

I shuffle closer to him on the bed and cup his chin in my hand.

"Can I start that over again?" I ask him and he raises one eyebrow.

"I'd actually rather you did." I grin, as I see a glimmer of hope in his lovely eyes.

I lean in and claim his lips; lips so soft they are like velvet, and so warm they send heat through my body like no one else ever has. Not even Josh could make me feel so completely his with one touch of his lips.

Whatever this talk is going to be about, it certainly isn't going to be about things happening too fast. Right now, my body seems to think things aren't happening fast enough.

I pull away from him reluctantly, trying to ignore the butterflies in my stomach, or the stirring in my groin or the disappointed little whimper that escapes from Cal's mouth as I do.

"I don't think this is happening too fast, Cal." I lay my hand gently on his cheek and he leans into the caress, linking his fingers with mine. His eyes search my face in that intense way he has that just drives me crazy with desire. Is it only me that feels that way when he looks like that? "What we need to talk about is why this is happening at all."

Cal tips his head to one side.

"I don't understand Jake." He sounds confused. "Are you saying that you don't think it should be happening, or are you saying you don't understand why?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose, because it's all of those things and none of them. I'm so damn confused I don't know where to start.

"Cal, I'm not saying we shouldn't be together." He sighs with undisguised relief, as if he was simply awaiting my approval. I gaze at him softly and caress his bottom lip with my thumb. "God, why are you even here?" I ask him. "You're so young and beautiful and you have so much going for you, why would you choose me?"

"Jake!" Cal exclaims. "Why do you assume that I don't think all of those things about you?"

"How can you?" I am astounded he would even consider me as young. "You are twenty-one, and I am forty-five."

"So!" He sounds stubborn. "I've already told you that doesn't bother me. I'd have thought after two nights together and after everything I said to you, you would start to see that." I can't help the flush that heats my face, but I continue with my line of thought.

"You might not think this is a problem now, Cal, because you're right, we are both still pretty young and fit, but one day soon, you will be my age now and I will be almost seventy." I am playing a risky hand here, because in this statement I am warning him but also seeing how far he thinks this relationship can go, if it is a relationship at all.

Cal shrugs and straightens the blankets around him.

"So, if you're worried about keeping up with me in the bedroom, by the time I'm forty-five I'll have slowed down to your pace and things will even out."

For a moment, there is a stunned silence from me while he tries desperately not to meet my eye, since he is smirking. I burst out laughing, and he looks up and joins in.

"I'm not stupid Jake." He brushes a lock of my hair from my face so tenderly it's almost painful. "I can do the math, and I know what you were doing just now." I catch my breath as he leans closer to me. "I told you last night this was a long time thing. That includes when you get to be a septuagenarian before I do." I make a face at the thought. He chuckles and runs his fingers down my cheek. "Why don't we cross that bridge when we come to

it huh?" he asks. "I don't know about you, but I just can't rule out finding the love of my life simply because he's twenty-four years older than me. I'm only sorry you had to wait so long for me to reach the right age to come looking for you."

I shake my head and laugh. "Cal, you are one cocky, self-assured son of a bitch, do you know that?" He grins with pride.

"My parents always told me to go for what I want; to never let anything hold me back. Nothing should ever be a barrier; there should only ever be fences to climb."

I gasp and feel tears burn in my eyes. Cal looks concerned.

"What?" he asks me, concerned that his words have somehow upset me. I give a great sob and grab his face with my hands, holding him steady.

"Josh used to say that to me all of the time." Cal sighs and nods. "It's why I became a writer in the first place when he told me to climb that fence."

He lets out a long breath and smiles, nodding.

"I wish I could have met him," he says sadly.

I pull him to me with a soft cry and stroke my hand over his silky soft, sun-bleached hair. I kiss the top of his head then push away to speak to him once more.

"He would have liked you very much," I whisper softly, tracing my thumbs across his cheekbones. "I like you very much." I groan inwardly since this seems a totally inadequate confession after he has just confessed I am the love of his life. I don't know how I can be. His confession has only increased my anxieties.

"Cal, I still don't know why me, when you are so damn gorgeous you could have anyone."

Cal cries out in frustration as he cups my face in his hands. "You have absolutely no idea how amazing you are Jake, do you?" he asks me fervently. "I mean look at you, you are sex on legs. Those dark eyes, they're like melted chocolate. They make me want to eat you up every time I see you and that damn beard." He groans as he strokes it so reverently I feel more of those stirrings in my groin, and I take a shaky breath to calm it all down, oh dear lord. He leans close, brushing his fingertips across my lips. "I wanted you the minute I set eyes on you, but then you started watching me..."

I gasp and pull back from him with a strangled gasp. I jump away from the bed and stand halfway to the door, ready to run if he starts throwing things, because that's what angry people do, they throw things, especially when they can't get up and give chase.

"What?" I feel my eyes widen and my breath quicken. "How?" My heart is pounding in my chest in a fight-or-flight reflex that threatens to have me a gibbering wreck at his knees, begging for forgiveness.

Cal smirks at me as he leans back into the pillows and regards me with an extremely smug expression, but not, I realize, an angry one.

"You think I didn't notice all the times you hid behind your ivy, or stood just beyond my sight in your kitchen, Jake?" He is smiling, but I have no idea why, because he should be frowning, scowling, spitting furiously. He should be kicking my ass for every time he's caught me covertly spying on him. Why isn't he? "I'm deaf not blind," he explains. "And because I'm deaf I see a hell of a lot more than others do, I notice a hell of a lot more."

I regard him with a feeling of dread, because he knew. He knew all along I'd been watching him, and he never said a thing.

"W-why aren't you kicking my ass right now?" My voice is barely a whisper. "Why don't you hate me? Or-or think I'm a creep?"

"Why would I do that?" He looks incredulous. "Don't you see? It was your watching me that kept me safe."

I gasp, because this is what I have thought, but it was only wishful thinking on my part, only a way to justify what I'd done.

Cal pats the bed to urge me to sit once more but I'm too wound up. I begin to pace, my hands in my hair as I begin to ramble.

"I shouldn't have done it I know. I shouldn't have been watching you. I couldn't help it though. God you were so beautiful, and I wanted to get to know you, but you wouldn't answer your door that first day. You were so alone and looked so lonely and sad. You kept inside most of the time, and when you went outside you had those head phones on, and you were so watchful and wary and always so careful."

"Jake!" he shouts at me. "To my face or not at all," he orders, and I stop with a gasp and turn to him. "You're rambling, old man," he says a little more gently. "I need you to say it to my face otherwise there's no point in saying it at all." I give a helpless shrug.

“You know it all anyway.” I feel defeated, hopeless. He’s going to hate me forever, although, without thinking I have flopped back down on the bed. I hang my head in despair. “Why don’t you hate me, Cal?”

“Jake, I don’t hate you, god, how could I ever hate you?” He lifts my chins with his forefinger. “I was the luckiest man alive when I moved next door to you.”

“I-I don’t know how you can think that? You know all about my stalking, you probably even know about the notebook.” He frowns.

“Notebook? What notebook?”

“Oh, holy shit!” I gasp hoarsely, because if he didn’t know about it he does now. I take a breath, intending to add this confession to my other indiscretions.

Cal dismisses the notebook explanation with a shake of his head.

“Whatever, Jake, tell me later, I have something I need to tell you. I need you to listen, and then you can decide whether or not to have a nervous breakdown, okay?” He looks deep into my eyes and I try to meet his gaze but I can’t, I just can’t. I screw my eyes shut and just nod.

“Okay.” I swallow hard, because this is where he tells me he doesn’t want a relationship with a creepy pervert who watched from behind his curtains despite everything else he’s said to the contrary.

“When I first moved here, I knew my uncle and aunt wouldn’t leave me alone for long. I suspected something would happen, and I suspected they were having me watched. I’d suspected I was being watched before I moved here.” I nod, opening my eyes now and meeting his gaze. What he is saying is making sense, the feelings of inevitability I’d sensed from him when his house had been trashed. He’d expected something to happen.

“I thought something would have happened before it did,” Cal continues, “but it didn’t and I know why now. I understand why.”

“Why?” I ask with a frown. Cal grabs my face again and stares deep into my eyes once more.

“Because of you Jake,” he whispers. “Because you were watching me, like a guardian angel. Who was ever going to try anything with my guardian angel watching over me?” I gasp incredulously. He laughs and runs his thumb affectionately along my bottom lip. “When I realized this was the case I started getting bolder. I started going out surfing more, making sure you’d seen me and noted where I was going. I knew I was safe going for a run because you would

see what time I started and would know what time I usually finished. I knew if I wasn't back in time you would have come looking for me."

"Oh, Cal!" I sigh, feeling suddenly weak that he had had so much confidence in my ability to protect him before we had even met.

I dare to touch his cheek, caress it even, and he leans into the caress with a soft moan, holding my hand against his face and kissing my palm.

"I wanted to meet you so badly, and I had a plan, but when you took matters into your own hands I got kind of spooked."

I chuckle at the memory of how scared he'd been when I'd just accosted him in the street the day he'd left his wallet in the market.

"I'd sensed I was being watched in town, but I just didn't know who by. I felt like such a fool running away from you both times, but you genuinely did scare me that second time. I worried I'd got you all wrong when I saw what you had in your basket."

I groan and face palm.

"I am never going to live that down am I?" I ask him and he shakes his head with an impish giggle.

"Never!" His smile and giggle is infectious and I return it, shuffling closer to him and holding his hands in mine as he continues to give me his explanation. "So I thought I'd got you all wrong, but then when you delivered that basket of stuff from the drugstore along with the flowers and an apology I realized I'd got you all right. I was plucking up the courage to come over when you fell off your deck and I had no choice. I had to see if you were okay."

"You were so defensive though," I tell him. "I thought I'd blown it when you just up and left."

Cal shrugs. "I wanted to play it cool. I couldn't let you know I liked you straight away, I was afraid you'd treat me like a kid, tell me it was a crush. I knew it wasn't. Lord knows I dropped enough hints though." I gasp and he giggles. "I knew we were being watched. I had to be careful." I remember the photographs of Cal pulling me to my feet and of him standing on my deck that day. I feel sick knowing he was going through so much stress.

"Cal," I press a kiss to the corner of his lips, "I watched you because you were beautiful, and I wanted so much to get to know you. I watched you because you were so alone, and I wanted to see you smile so damn much."

“You told me that when you got drunk, and I found you singing on your porch.” He presses a kiss to my lips this time, and I feel the sensation tingle down my spine. I grimace at the reminder of my drunken night though.

“I still can't remember everything that happened that night,” I confess. “You are going to have to fill in the blanks.”

“You didn't say anything to be ashamed of,” he assures me, drawing closer to me and cupping his hand around the back of my neck. “You said all the right things, Jake.”

“All the right things for what?” I ask, feeling my breath hitch as his lips brush tantalizingly close to mine again.

“All the right things to make me fall in love with you.”

His breath ghosts across my cheek as his lips close the miniscule gap. His tongue brushes my bottom lip, and I open to him with a sigh. His words send delightful shivers down my spine, and I melt into his touch.

Gently, I lower him down onto the pillows and brush his hair from his face, covering his lips, his cheeks, his jaw with feathery kisses as he whispers my name so softly I think I might be hearing it in my head.

“What did I say to you that was so effective?” I ask him, suddenly curious. “I think I might need to say those things again, just to see the moment for myself.”

Cal chuckles and runs his fingers through my hair.

“You told me you wanted to make every part of me smile.”

“Then that's exactly what I'm going to do right now, Cal,” I tell him, leaning in for another soft tender kiss that I know will soon heat up to blistering. “Because I fell in love with you the morning you arrived, and you brought the sunshine with you, the only thing I needed to make it all perfect was your smile.”

Our lips crush together in earnest now as he pulls me down on top of him, his hands knowing exactly where to touch me for maximum effect. I gasp and moan into his mouth as he feeds his hand up inside my T-shirt to find my sensitive nipples. This is only our third time together, but it's as if we know each other by heart.

He's right to say it was stupid to dismiss the possibility of finding the love of my life just because there was an age difference. If I'd listened to myself, I

might not even be here with him right now telling him I loved him with all my heart.

I pull back from his urgent kisses with a gasp.

“I haven’t told you that yet.” He frowns.

“Told me what?”

“That I love you.” His eyes widen and he smiles, reaching up to pull me back into another blistering kiss that goes straight to my groin without any preamble.

“I don’t need to hear it.” His words are soft breaths in my ear. “I see it with my eyes. I feel it with every inch of my body.”

I feel the reaction in his body, the hardness and heat of his cock against my thigh.

I hesitate though, because he is hurt, he needs to be resting, not grappling with me between the sheets.

“Are you sure you’re up to this?” I ask him, pulling away again and eliciting another frustrated growl from him, although this time he is more amused than irritated.

“It’s my ankle that got broke, Jake, not my dick,” he tells me bluntly. Far from finding his words crass, they’ve turned me on even more. He pulls me back down to continue the kiss, and I feel myself losing the battle once more, not that I was putting up much of a fight, I just don’t want to hurt him. “I’m not asking you to fuck me, Jake, just please, I need you to touch me. I need to touch you. I need to know you’re still here, and this is still real after everything that happened today.”

I bury my face in his shoulder with a sudden gasping sob. “Cal,” I murmur. “My beautiful Cal.”

He pushes me away when he realizes I’m crying. I didn’t even know until I felt the wetness of my tears. But his words called back the terrible moment when I’d seen him fall to a heap on the ground by my feet and thought he was dead.

“I thought I’d lost you.”

He wipes my tears, whispering softly to me, “You haven’t, you won’t ever. I’m here always. I’m yours, Jake, forever yours.” I give a soft cry as I kiss him again.

“And here I thought I belonged to you.” I smirk. He chuckles.

“You do!” His expression says this should be duly understood and noted. “Just as long as you realize that everything will be just fine.”

“Cocky bastard!” I hiss, but I soften the words with a kiss that makes him moan and shudder and tells me that he is at least a little at my mercy. I’m going to enjoy showing him just how much I can make him mine, but just for good measure I add, “Now how about you show me just how much I belong to you.” Cal groans as I suck wet kisses down his neck and over his shoulder, his T-shirt discarded without a second thought.

“Oh god yes, Jake,” he calls out desperately, as I push my hand down into his pants and he throws his head back in pleasure as I wrap long, practiced fingers around his erection. “God,” he hisses, then lifts his head to look at me with those damn gorgeous blue eyes. “Make me smile, Jacob Reuben, make me smile.”

That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do, Cal.

The End

Author Bio

Hi there, I'm Dawn Sister. I live with my family (husband, two kids) on the North East Coast of England, (UK).

I have been writing forever, and I mean forever. I started off on a proper old fashioned typewriter that was missing the letter 'B'.

Nothing ever seemed to sit right in my stories though. Then I watched a film that changed everything: "Brokeback Mountain".

That was just about the saddest film I ever watched. I hate sad endings. I couldn't get it out of my head so I wrote a happy ending for it instead. Then I discovered I wasn't the only one. There's about a million alternative endings for this story, all of them with varying degrees of happy.

So then I tried writing my own stories, not fanfiction, although I write that still too.

So this is me, writing as Dawn Sister. The name is a tribute to my favourite Author: Anne McCaffrey.

I write M/M or Gay Romance. Sometimes it's a bit racy, but mostly it is just cheesy. I hope you like cheesy.

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