



Tidewater

By Les Joseph

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

TIDEWATER

By Les Joseph

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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Photo Description

Two photos of two men, one black and white and one color. The first picture shows a guy in makeup and a costume, looking at himself in a mirror. The second picture shows a man, shirtless, wearing tight jeans. He's standing with his hands in his pockets, showcasing his impressive physique.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

See me, all beautiful in that first picture? People look at me and they think soft, even weak. They have no idea how bad-ass I truly am. I am tough; only let people see what I want them to see and I don't trust easily. I am a top who cares about his partner.

See that big gorgeous guy? He's sort of in the same boat. People think he's rough and mean, a super top. He's a sweetie really, wants to top from the bottom! He rarely gets to because just like me, people judge on appearance. I want to change that for both of us. He's got some secrets, I think.

Are we enemies turning lovers? Are we best friends who had a falling out and must find our way back? Was it a misunderstanding? If so, be sure there is Groveling involved before that man gets back in my good graces. Bonus point for unique and creative Groveling! Light hearted is appreciated!

Please, no D/s, cheating or serious angst. HEA absolutely required!

Sincerely,

Lucy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: blue collar, established couple, pay check-to-pay check, golf, photography, hurt/comfort

Word Count: 19,915

TIDEWATER

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Chapter 1

Cord

Beeeeeeeeep

Beeeeeeeeep

Beeeeeeeeep

Blares the alarm clock beside the bed at the ungodly hour of five a.m. on a Saturday morning in late March. I groan. It's way too early to hear the worst sound ever. Without opening my eyes, I reach over and slam my hand against the button to make the infernal noise stop.

I roll back and rub the heels of my hands against my gritty eyes. Slowly, I open them and turn to my left. A familiar tangle of dark hair covers a head that's trying to burrow through the pillow. I was exhausted last night. I didn't even hear him come in, and my stomach sinks. It's been days since I've seen him. Last night we were supposed to watch a crappy movie on TV, eat junk food, and cuddle on the couch. I'd been looking forward to it all week, but when I got home from a long, brutal day, I was so tired I couldn't resist stripping out of my work clothes and climbing into bed. As each item of clothing landed in a pile, I told myself I'd only lie down for a minute.

Stretching, I yawn and rub a hand over my stomach. The few extra hours of sleep have done nothing to ease my fatigue. With a resigned sigh, I lean, kiss Brandon's naked shoulder, and get up to take a shower before work. I sort of trip into the hallway, hissing an aggravated "fuck" under my breath when my big toe catches an errant shoe. Craving orange juice, I hit the kitchen, using the fridge light to see by instead of the overhead. Half-asleep, I gulp straight from the carton, sputtering when my eyes catch the bags Brandon left on our tiny kitchen table.

"Son of a bitch," I groan disgustedly, banging my head against the cool door.

Suddenly, chugging half a carton of orange juice isn't the best idea with the sour taste filling my mouth. Only it has nothing to do with the juice and everything to do with me.

"I'm such a fucking asshole," I mutter. The words settle heavily around me, accusatory and bitter.

Squeezing my eyes closed—as if that will stop the disgust and remorse—I breathe deep to try to calm the ever-growing war raging in my stomach. After a quick glance at the clock on the ancient microwave that somehow manages to still work, I grit my teeth and stalk toward the cramped bathroom.

Standing beneath a shower that always takes way too long to warm up, I close my eyes and ponder, for like the millionth time, how the hell I wound up in Tidewater, South Carolina, population less than thirty thousand. Living in an apartment that's barely bigger than a shoebox, and working at a job that's about the last thing I ever would have envisioned for myself is so unbelievable that at times I'm sure it's all a dream. A glance at the shower curtain that's torn in all but four of the holes, and toward the mildew that stubbornly clings to the corner of the bathtub no matter how many hours Brandon has spent on his knees trying to scrub it away, lets me know in no uncertain terms I'm not dreaming. I'm living in my own version of Hell.

The water's finally warmer than tepid, and as I begin to wash, my mind flashes back to a little over a year and a half ago when I saw Brandon West for the first time. His shoulder-length dark hair and caramel-colored skin caught my attention first. Then it was the way his ass filled out a pair of jeans like no one's business. But, it was when our eyes connected that I felt my entire universe shift. From twenty feet away he could see every part of me—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and in a moment, decided I was worth something, everything. When he smiled, my heart raced, my palms started to sweat, and even though I was twenty-one at the time, I'd turned into a damn ten-year-old who just had the prettiest girl, or in my case the cutest boy, in school give me the cupcake with the most sprinkles on it at the class Valentine's Day party. The whole thing took, at most, a handful of seconds, but it was those few seconds that changed the rest of my life.

I think I fell in love with him before he even took his seat.

Somehow, we ended up in the same Contemporary Lit class at Florida Community College in Jacksonville, though it was a course neither of us needed. He always gets a dreamy, faraway smile when he tells me it was fate, while I scoff and say it was a computer glitch, just to see if I can get a rise out of him.

He hasn't talked about fate in a long time. He hasn't smiled that way either. I wonder, not for the first time if he, like me, has moments when he questions where our lives would have taken us if we had never met. It's not like I don't want him to be a part of my life, because Lord knows he makes every day

better just by being in it; but it's hard not to think he might be better off without me. He was supposed to set the world on fire with his photographs, and I was going to make something, *anything*, of myself. All I cared about was getting the hell out of Jacksonville so I could do something big, something important, even if I didn't have the first clue what that was supposed to be. It's funny how things turn out sometimes, and not funny in that *ha ha* kind of way. I'm too chickenshit to ask him if he ever thinks such things, so I pretend to go along with his idea chance decided the best place for us is Tidewater.

I have a hard time seeing it, but I try not to think too much about it.

Dwelling on what ifs is guaranteed to make a shitty day shittier, so I turn the water as hot as it will go and enjoy the two measly minutes I get before it cools off again. Luckily, I'm a pro at the wash, shave, and rinse routine, and I'm already reaching for the knob before the water turns from lukewarm to freezing.

Marginally more awake, I wrap a threadbare towel around my waist and tiptoe back into our room. Brandon, still sound asleep, has exchanged burrowing for sprawling. My dick stirs as I spy smooth chest, most of a naked leg, and a partially exposed cock peeking from the twisted sheets. He's raised his arm up over his eyes, and I know if I lift it, he'll look as tired as I feel. The thought is enough to make me soft. Immediately.

I have to hurry. I can't be late, especially now. I've already been late two times this pay period—once more and I'm getting docked an entire day's wages. I sure as shit can't afford that; we can barely keep our heads above water as it is. The bed dips as I sit and pull on my shoes, the weight of them mirroring the heaviness of my heart. This isn't the life I promised Brandon. This isn't the life I wanted for either of us, but at least we have each other.

"Hey," he says, voice still rough from sleep.

His hand slides up my back, and though I have a shirt on, his touch sets my skin on fire. I can't remember the last time he touched me.

Turning around, I push his hair over his shoulder as our eyes meet. Yep, just as I figured, his are heavy with exhaustion and something inside me cracks, even more than it already has.

"I'm sorry I fell asleep last night," I tell him, clearing my throat to try to rid it of the lump that's formed.

I want to pull him close, kiss him, and feel his soft lips. Do *something* to let him know I don't like what's going on between us anymore than he does, but

I'm not sure he'll let me. The thought settles like an anvil in the middle of my chest. He frowns, confirming my suspicion, and the sour taste from earlier fills my mouth again, so much so I might gag.

"Thanks for bringing me a Fun-Dip," I say, keeping our gazes locked, and giving him a tentative smile.

The corners of his mouth lift in an attempt to smile back, and the weight on my chest lessens a tiny bit. Needing something to make the tension between us go away, I lean forward and kiss him softly on the cheek.

He sighs and whispers, "You're welcome," right before his arms wrap around me.

I barely notice the sheet has fallen away because the feel of his arms leaves me breathless and makes my knees weak. I wrack my brain to remember the last time we hugged, and close my eyes when I can't.

How did things get so bad?

I want to kick my shoes off, climb back into bed with him and hold him for hours and hours, but one glance at the clock and I know I can't.

Brushing my mouth across his for one last quick kiss, I gently say, "I love you, Brandon," ignoring the fact that those words haven't passed my lips in I don't know how long.

Apparently, hearing them for the first time in longer than either of us can remember has the same effect on him, because his chin quivers and he sniffs, his brown eyes turning glassy. "I... I love you, too, Cord," he murmurs, and the words shoot straight to my heart.

I stare at him. The weight of so much left unsaid hangs between us, but I have to go.

"I'll wait up for you," I promise him as I look back from the doorway.

He doesn't say anything, just waits a beat, and then slowly nods his head. I know he's wondering if I'll break my promise, like I've broken so many others.

Chapter 2

Cord

“Cord, shake it, dude. We’re going to have carts stacked up in no time,” Jake hollers as soon as I get out of my beater of a pickup.

I reach across the seat, grab my hat, and pocket my keys after I close the door. Jogging across the parking lot while pulling my hat on, my sneakers slap against the asphalt. Even this early in the morning, just before sunrise, I can tell the day’s going to be a steamy one. Humidity makes the air thick, and my shirt sticks to my back by the time I reach the cart barn. Jake hands me a cup of coffee and hurries inside the building.

“Thanks. I sure as fuck need it this morning,” I tell him as I blow on the scalding hot liquid.

He smirks and waggles his eyebrows, saying, “I figured you could use a little pick me up after your long night with Shutterfly.”

Him using my nickname for Brandon makes me smile, but it’s short lived as I remember what happened last night. His words are like a lance through my heart, and my stomach immediately tries to force the coffee I’ve just swallowed back up my throat.

I don’t say anything and instead turn my head and stare at the bay door.

“Cord?” Jake questions, cautiously, offering sympathy I don’t deserve.

Unable to meet his eyes, I answer in a voice I hardly recognize as my own. “I fell asleep. I didn’t even hear him come home.”

“Aw, damn, man. I’m sorry. You guys don’t have a lot of time to spend with each other. I know how you must feel. That sucks,” he empathizes, and though he means to comfort, it doesn’t work.

I want to rail at him, ask him how he knows how I feel because I know for a fact he doesn’t. He and Amy live in a nice house, in a respectable neighborhood, with their perfect little daughter, while Brandon and I struggle to keep the electricity turned on. Jake was born and raised in Tidewater and has no desire to ever leave. He’s happy and comfortable. Content. Everything I’m not.

Things weren’t supposed to turn out like this for me and Brandon. We had big dreams, of even bigger fortunes, and stuck in this podunk town in the

middle of BFE is not my idea of a happily ever after. Hell, I'd settle for even kind of happy, but we're not even in the same vicinity.

If anyone had asked me yesterday how Brandon and I were doing, I would have said fine, we're doing okay. But ask me today, and I don't have the first clue how to answer. Seeing the bags of goodies—ones we could ill afford but he bought just the same—this morning was like an unwelcome wake-up call.

We're being buried alive, and until this morning I didn't even know it. What's worse? I don't have any idea how to fix it.

It isn't like I woke up this morning and decided I don't love him anymore, because Lord knows I love him more than I thought possible, but he's not happy. I've known for a long time; I've just been too afraid to think what that means for us. We are completely alone, no family anywhere close. My Uncle Marcus and Brandon's barely present father, Archie, are back in Jacksonville. Besides the few friends we've made here—Jake, Amy, Bentley, and Brandon's friends from work—there's no one we can turn to except each other. When we left home, on our way to the bright lights of New York City, where we were sure fame and fortune were waiting with open arms, neither of us figured a blown transmission on a 1996 Buick Regal meant we'd still be in Tidewater a year later. As each day passes, the lights of NYC dim just a bit. I'm afraid we'll wake up one day and they'll be out completely—forever.

Jake doesn't say anything else as we start lining up the carts for the day, and for that I'm grateful.

I know I'm lucky to have a job working at the country club, even though it's entry level and pays minimum wage. When the car broke down, and that's a nice way of saying the piece-of-shit couldn't go any farther, we figured it would take a couple of days, max, to fix the damn thing and then we'd be on our merry way to the Big Apple. Unfortunately, that wasn't in the stars Brandon is so fond of wishing on. The car was toast and we didn't have enough money to buy a new one. Before we left Jacksonville, we'd managed to scrape together what we figured was enough money to live on for a month, after which we'd foolishly assumed we'd both have jobs, and cash wouldn't be an issue.

That's the problem, I've learned over the past few months, with living while looking through the lens of a camera or dreaming about making your mark on the world—reality has a way of kicking your ass. Since we've arrived in Tidewater, our asses have been kicked so much they are black and blue.

Blown transmission.

A slip of a wrench that required a trip to the emergency room and stitches before my meager health insurance kicked in.

Brandon catching the flu which not only resulted in him not working or getting paid for two weeks, but a trip to the well-clinic for an IV and a shot. One we had to pay for out-of-pocket because his health insurance is worse than mine, and his probationary period wasn't up yet.

Security and utility deposits for our shoebox apartment.

His work uniform, my work uniform.

Little things, big things, things that added up to being behind before we were ever ahead.

"You gonna be okay?" Jake asks me when we open the bay doors.

I shrug, dejected, hating not being able to answer him.

"We're having a barbeque next Sunday for Sadie's birthday. Amy wanted to make sure I mentioned it to you guys, so consider yourselves invited." He rubs his hands on his pants before putting on his hat.

I open my mouth to bow out, mostly for the simple fact we can't afford to buy Sadie a present, but then I realize what day it is and I can't help but smile. "Sorry, Jake. Tell Amy thanks for asking but we can't make it."

He starts to argue, I think because he knows why I said no, but when he sees me smile, he does, too. "Oh, it's Brandon's Sunday off, huh? You two are going to spend the day being all artsy-fartsy, taking pictures and writing and talking about deep things while the rest of us miscreants drink beer and eat hot dogs. I'm glad it's you and not me, man. That's all I've gotta say." He winks.

"Well, it's our thing, you know."

I don't expect him to understand how precious our one Sunday a month is, and I don't try to explain. It's the one thing Brandon and I have made a priority, even through all this mess. It started when we first began dating and it's a tradition we've kept up with, the one tangible reminder of the life we still hope to share. It's our way of connecting, of indulging the creative juices we still have, the ones that have to be nurtured and allowed to escape from time to time so they don't shrivel up and disappear. This place will never be considered the art hub of the East Coast, but it doesn't need to be. All we need is a memory stick for Brandon's prized camera, a notebook I can write in, and we're set.

The rest of the day passes the same as all the ones before it. It's long, tedious work. Pull out a golf cart, strap the bag on the back, and make sure the

coolers are loaded. Check the charge on the battery. Pick up the energy bar wrappers, empty water bottles, and crushed beer cans that never fail to get left behind, because God forbid the members walk the four steps to the trash can themselves—then bing, bang, boom, it's time for the next cart. Over and over again. For little old ladies who like to pretend they really don't need the cart to get around and old men who like to think they've still got the skill to keep up with the Tiger Woods wannabes. For guys with too much money, too much free time, and not enough game or the teenagers who think driving a golf cart around a few acres of green grass is the equivalent of racing at Daytona. It's never ending. It's a pain in the ass having to smile and ignore the gossip and the whining and the drunks who talk shit, but I have to do it. I need the job and the paycheck. The extra money Jake and I make helping out the grounds crew after hours helps, but it's not enough. It's never enough.

After a long day, I hop in my truck and head for home, passing Baker's Grocery Store. Try as I might, I can't help sighing. Thinking of Brandon standing at a cash register for eight hours causes my chest to feel that much heavier.

He doesn't belong there, with a smile plastered on his face hour after hour beneath fluorescent lights, swiping toilet paper and ketchup across a scanner. He belongs outside, his camera to his eye as he takes pictures of things only he can see. Our apartment might be only one step above a glorified hovel on the outside, but on the inside, our walls are covered with pictures that could hang in any art gallery in the country.

When I finally make it home, I can't help but take a few minutes and look at his pictures, stopping when I come to my favorite. It goes without saying I love the ones of us, but my favorite is of a beer bottle cap floating in a puddle of water. The water has a rainbow hue due to the motor oil that left a film on the asphalt. The colors are crisp and vivid and sunlight causes the bottle top to shimmer beneath the surface. It's totally incongruous if you think about all the components as separate entities, but in that one moment, when the sun hit the puddle just right, Brandon was there to capture it and create beauty in something anyone else would have passed without a second glance.

Something sparks deep in my chest as I remember how his face lit up with joy the first time I explained my love of that picture. Stripping, I ignore the hamper, and take my second shower, not even cursing the frigid water. As I scrub away the grime of the day, I go over my idea. My stomach twists a little with the fear he might not like it, but decide I don't have anything to lose.

I dress in a pair of faded jeans and a T-shirt from my old high school, and hurry to the kitchen. Honestly, it's little more than a counter, a four-burner stove, a refrigerator, and a sink. I pull out the makings for a simple omelet, and a quick glance at the clock tells me I'm still good on time. It's just a bit past nine. Jake and I put in a twelve-plus hour day, and by the time we closed everything up and I made it home, it was close to eight o'clock. Brandon's shift is from one until ten. Like always, he'll be hungry when he gets home because he normally takes his break from four to five so he can help with the rush of people shopping on their way home from work. I fumble for a second when I realize I can't remember the last time we sat down and ate together. It was last week sometime, though I can't say which day.

I volunteer for every available shift I can get, hoping to finally get our heads above water. I even work inside the clubhouse when they need additional help bussing tables because of some big event going on, which now that it's spring, happens often. It'd be fucking nice to be able to breathe for a change. Between extra shifts and the work Jake and I have drummed up on the side cutting grass, there are too many days over the past two months I've worked twelve, fourteen, sometimes even sixteen hours. Days Brandon and I never talk except when he mumbles good-bye after I give him a kiss before I leave.

We're ships passing in the night. It's no wonder it feels like forever since we've seen each other.

By the time I slide our late dinner onto two mismatched plates and pour us each a glass of orange juice, Brandon's key rattles in the front door and I smile as he tells our neighbor Nancy good-bye. Luckily for us she and Brandon work the same shift and she doesn't mind giving Brandon a ride. I shudder as I wonder what in the hell we'd do if either had their hours changed. The moment Brandon walks through the door, everything but him fades away.

"Cord!" The surprise in his voice makes my enthusiasm wane, but I try not to let it bother me too much.

After all, as much as I hate to admit it, I understand where he's coming from.

"Hey," I say, truly happy to see him.

It's obvious he's tired, and I have no doubt his feet are sore as hell. His back, too, more than likely. My aches and pains melt away as I concentrate on him. It's been way too long.

He sets his messenger bag down on the back of our garage sale couch and faces me. This time he gives me an honest-to-God smile. "What... you... cooked?"

I cringe, embarrassed at how making some eggs and toast can put a smile like that on his face. The fact we've been together a year and a half and he doesn't know I can manage to find my way around the kitchen leaves a sort of hollow thump in my chest.

It's hard not to question what other things we don't know about each other.

Instead of getting lost in my head, I step forward. Stopping when I'm close enough, I reach for his hands, lean against the back of the couch, and pull him between my legs. Thankfully, he comes willingly and that weight lessens a bit more. I run my hands up his arms, taking a moment to appreciate the way the bright red polo shirt with the Baker's emblem embroidered on the front molds to his body. The way his smooth, caramel skin complements the crimson cotton or maybe it's the fact that he's standing between my legs and I can't remember the last time we made love.

"I thought you might be hungry. It's been a long time since we had dinner together and I figured it might be nice to sit and eat, maybe talk a little, catch up. I'm really sorry about falling asleep last night. I know you were looking forward to movie time as much as I was."

He scoots closer and rubs where I want him most, but he's not doing it on purpose. It's a battle to keep from pulling him to me and carrying him to the bedroom, dinner be damned. But I know he's hungry. Needing something more, I rest my head against his chest, and let him run his fingers through my hair for a few minutes.

This, I realize with crystal clarity, is what I've missed. All the little things that have slipped away one after the other. I didn't even notice until they were gone. The connection, the way it feels just to touch him and have him touch me, to feel his body, the way he smells... the way he kisses me... all are reminders of how far apart we've drifted.

"I've missed you, Shutterfly," I whisper, tilting my head up and sliding my hand around his neck, pulling him to me.

Our mouths are hesitant, like we're learning each other again. In no time, we remember. His head tips one way, mine goes the other, and our mouths are in perfect sync. I palm his ass, and when his hard nipples rub against me, I rumble low and wanting, deep in my chest.

“I’ve missed you, too, babe.” He sighs when my lips find their favorite spot, the place where his neck slopes down to his shoulder.

I open my mouth to apologize for a plethora of things, but right as I’m about to speak, his stomach growls—loudly—followed by a self-conscious giggle. We need to talk but he’s hungry and exhausted, and now’s not the time. So, once again all that’s left unsaid gets pushed to the side for another day.

We eat together and it feels good.

We make love after and it feels even better.

We spend the next Sunday taking pictures, writing, reading—talking about everything except what we need to—and it’s the best day in a long time.

Two weeks later, reality comes back with a vengeance. A plain white envelope with nothing but the word “Tenant” scrawled across the front in black marker is taped to our front door. Inside is a notice stating we have two weeks to move out because the building’s been sold. Apparently Tidewater needs another office complex. I’m sure something suitably modern with lots of windows and sharp lines.

Fuck... I stand outside our front door feeling the entire world crashing down on me. *What are we going to do now?*

Chapter 3

Cord

As the golf club whooshes around me, and the loud ping of metal hitting hard plastic fills the air, I finally, fucking *finally*, feel like I can breathe again.

Ball after ball after ball.

Tighten my grip, flex my fingers. Feet placed shoulder width apart, a waggle, another, then—a swing, muscles coiled and working in perfect sync. Torque, explosion, a vibration that moves up my arms and slithers down my back. Finding a groove, the place where I can completely lose myself and let my body work from memory. Memories I've suppressed for a long time, but ones that have clawed their way back to the surface in the midst of the shitstorm that's become my life.

Familiar.

Safe.

Unchanging.

Swing after swing, a perfect, fluid arc. As easy as riding a bike, as breathing, as sex with Brandon used to be. Before this. Before our lives became something neither of us wanted. Time means nothing. Not when the talent, the skill resides inside me, no matter how long it has lain dormant.

Fuck it feels good, even if the clubs are pieces-of-shit I found in the cart barn hidden in the corner and covered in cobwebs.

Golf is golf.

"Dude, where in the hell did you learn to hit a golf ball like that? Every single one of those damned things must've gone at least 275 yards," Jake exclaims with wide eyes.

"More like 300 if the markers are right. I used to be able to do 325 but it's been awhile," I answer with a shrug and get ready to hit another ball. I watch it sail through the air, tracking it like I'm a hawk and it's my breakfast. I smile, sure and confident when it lands just shy of the 300-yard marker—again.

"All right man, spill. No one just picks up a driver and swings like that. I've known you for over a year and you've never once mentioned you could play. What gives?"

I look at Jake. His hat's on backward, arms crossed over his wide chest, biceps bulging beneath the same royal blue polo shirt I'm wearing, as he stares back, waiting. He'll keep waiting, too, until I answer. I don't want to though. I don't want to go back to that place, that time, when I believed anything I dreamed was possible if I wanted it badly enough or tried hard enough. Fuck that. All dreaming ever did was keep me from getting a good night's sleep.

Squaring my shoulders, I set up again and swing, this time scowling when it slices off to the right. *Motherfucker*. Not good. Not good at all.

A chuckle behind me. "Might wanna put the ball back a little more in your stance, Sport." I whip my head around to find the asshole who obviously doesn't know a putter from a sand wedge. *Ball back in my stance, my ass*.

I snort and blow him off. "Yeah, thanks, man. I'll try to remember that." I feel his eyes on me, calculating but intrigued. Concentrating, I grip the driver, squeezing harder than I should, and take a deep breath. Arms back, a twist of my hips, power through the downswing, and contact, right on the sweet spot. I watch, pretty fucking impressed with myself, when it flies straight to the flag and rolls past the 300-yard marker this time.

"Fuck yes, Cord. That's the shit right there," Jake praises with a shake of his head. He looks from me to where the ball landed, and then back again, as if he can't quite believe what he just saw.

He's not the only one.

"Do it again."

I turn. Asshole's now been joined by Dickwad and Jerkoff. Great.

"Why the fuck should I?" I'm getting pissed. Just like that, the breathing I was finally enjoying only a few minutes ago is gone. My chest's tight, my fingers twitch, and my jaw's so stiff my head throbs.

Son of a bitch.

All I wanted was a few goddamn minutes to clear my head, find some motherfucking peace, and go home to Brandon so we can figure out what in the hell we're going to do about finding a place to live.

"I'll bet you fifty bucks you can't hit five balls in a row that far, that straight," Asshole spouts off.

I glare at him, standing there in his too-tight, bleached-white polo shirt. Collar raised, that stupid horse logo embroidered on the left, all navy blue, like

a badge of honor bestowed only on the privileged few. Khaki cargo shorts, golf shoes that probably cost more than my truck—I know for damn sure his golf clubs do. Tan with perfect, gleaming white teeth, not a hair out of place, even after playing eighteen holes of golf, standing between clones that look just like him. Fake and so full of shit I'm surprised it's not oozing out of his ears.

I hate him.

I hate them.

Silently I add up the few tips I got today. It's not even close to the fifty bucks he's betting, but there's no way in Hell I'll ever let him know that. Instead, I smirk, casually lean on my borrowed golf club and challenge, "Make it a hundred and you're on."

He raises his eyebrow, a little stunned by my comeback, but I don't move, giving him nothing, until he scoffs and looks at his friends. "Whatever. Fifty more's not gonna kill me. I'm game if you are, Sport. It's only money, right?"

And he knows, the smug son of a bitch knows I won't back down, even though we all know I don't have the hundred dollars.

Jake tugs on my elbow, and I turn to look at him. "Cord, man, do you know who that is?" he hisses quietly, but there's no disguising the worry in voice.

"Of course I do. Everyone knows who Ian Kennedy is. I'm not a moron, Jake."

"Could have fooled me," he mumbles and gives me a hard look. "Brandon will kick your ass, you know that right?"

"Well, then, I guess I'm just going to have to make sure I don't lose, won't I?" I retort with a shit-ton more confidence than I'm feeling at the moment.

Ian Kennedy. Even his name reeks of pretension. But, contrary to my attempt to blow him off, I'll hand it to the guy—he can play. I've watched him plenty and there's no doubt he's got game. Mine's better. No question about that either, even if today is the first time I've picked up a golf club since Brandon and I left Jacksonville.

"Cord, this is a bad idea. Bad, bad idea. You don't want to get mixed up with Kennedy." Jake tries again to make me see reason but all I can see is the hundred bucks. That's a week's worth of groceries, or part of the security deposit we'll surely need for whatever craptastic place we wind up finding to live in. It's money, easy money, and I need it.

We need it.

“It’s no big deal, Jake. Now, back off, shut the fuck up, and let me do this so we can go home and I can surprise my guy with some Chinese and a six-pack of our favorite beer. Bottles tonight just because I can.”

He hears something in my voice, the desperation I try every day to hide, and simply nods and takes a step back. “Show that fucker what you can do.” He smirks, and I know even though he’s not a hundred percent thrilled with me right now, he has my back.

“So we gonna do this or what?” Ian sneers, looking way too confident for my liking.

“Five balls, 300 yards, straight at the flag coming right up,” I say easily, even though my heart feels like it’s going to beat right out of my chest.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. Uncle Marcus’s voice fills my mind. I can hear him, as clear as if he were standing behind me, whispering in my ear like he used to. *Eye on the ball, Hawk. Take your time, picture where you want the ball to go, and just do it.*

I grip. I waggle. I swing and off the ball goes, exactly where it’s supposed to. One, then two, then three balls soar through the sky. Sweat drips down my back, and pools at the waist of my shorts. My arms are sore, my shoulders, too. I haven’t used some of these muscles in more than eighteen months. The sun’s set; it’s twilight. That time when daylight hangs on with white knuckles while nighttime peels away the fingers of day one by one, getting it to fall away with the sun. The air is moist; a hint of the salt from the ocean not more than fifteen minutes away floats on a gentle breeze. *Wfffft, wfffft, wfffft.* The sprinklers come on, spread throughout the golf course, the water keeping the grass lush and green. After all, the members of Tidewater Country Club pay a pretty penny to belong here. Everything has to look picture perfect. Can’t have any brown spots or God forbid the sand in the bunker off number three’s fairway isn’t raked in the right direction.

Resentment and bitterness churn in my stomach. A sour taste climbs up my throat, but I swallow it down, force it away. I’ll indulge later, much later, when I’m a hundred dollars richer. It might not taste so bad then.

“You’re not done yet, Sport. Two to go. Wanna go double or nothing?” Ian taunts and my blood boils.

No good, son of a bitch, cocksucking motherfucker.

Jake must see something on my face because before I can even open my mouth, he's turned toward Ian and his douchebag sidekicks. "Shut the fuck up and let him finish this shit up. The range closed thirty minutes ago." His voice hard, biting, and I know it's a warning to me every bit as much as a jab at Ian.

Kennedy waves him off, like he's nothing more than an annoying fly, and I square my shoulders. I hit the next two balls without even thinking about it and watch them land right beside the other three. *Hell yes.*

Whatever satisfaction I hoped to gain isn't anywhere to be found when I face Ian. He looks bored as he slaps the money in my hand. "Not bad, Sport."

"It's Cord, not Sport. Cord McKenzie," I snap through gritted teeth.

He stares, his eyes cool and shrewd. "Well, Cord McKenzie, I'll be seeing you around. You can count on it."

He spins and walks off with his friends and doesn't look back once. I glance down at my palm, the five, crisp twenty-dollar bills the best thing I've seen in a long fucking time.

"Let's get the hell out of here." I smile at Jake. "I've got cash in my pocket and a guy to spoil."

As I get in my truck and head for home, I can't help but think that was the easiest hundred dollars I've ever made in my life. And then I wonder, when can I do it again?

Chapter 4

Cord

After a quick search on my phone, I call Fortune Cookie—the only Chinese restaurant in Tidewater—and order dinner. Sweet and sour chicken, pork fried rice, beef and broccoli, and plenty of egg rolls with extra duck sauce because Brandon loves it. By the time I get there, I only have to wait a few minutes. I grin when I see the twenties fan out in my hand as I pull two out to pay for the food, knowing I'll use the change on the beer. It's so fucking nice to have cash in my pocket.

Feeling better than I have in far too long, I carry the food to the liquor store down the street to buy the beer. I stand in front of the case and silently debate between Blue Moon and Sam Adams Summer Ale, neither of which is my favorite. I like my beer darker, heartier, but tonight's about spoiling Brandon so Blue Moon it is. I even stop at the little mom and pop grocery store across the street and grab two oranges. At the last minute, a quart of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey gets tossed in the basket which will use up the tips I got today. My wallet's definitely lighter by the time I make it back to the truck, but I don't care.

He needs this.

We need this.

The drive is no more than fifteen minutes, but I take the opportunity to watch the scenery as I head toward the apartment. I pass the post office, the used car lot where I bought my piece-of-shit truck, and Tidewater's only movie theater on the corner of Washington and Beach. The town is small enough that there are still sidewalks lined with gas lampposts, but big enough to warrant a number of chain restaurants. There's even a Red Lobster. With Myrtle Beach so close and the country club the big draw, the town's an eclectic mix of privilege and those that scrape by. Multi-million dollar mansions line the golf course. Smaller, yet still expensive, houses dot the neighborhoods around it, while the rest of the residents live in modest, older houses just shy of rundown. There are a few areas, like where Amy and Jake live, where there are new subdivisions, but a good portion of the population is blue collar. They work at the club, at the hotels in Myrtle Beach, or at the hospital. Sure, there are lawyers, insurance agents and a host of other "respectable" occupations that make the town work,

but there are just as many like mine and Brandon's, ones that hardly pay enough to make ends meet.

Tidewater's not horrible; for the most part, the people are warm and friendly. It's a place where if you stay long enough, the cashiers at the grocery store will call you by name, and when you walk into Mom's Place, the diner across from the small courthouse, the waitresses know whether to bring you coffee or a soda without having to ask. At Christmastime, the square is decorated with lights and carols play until ten every night. The tree lighting ceremony is the highlight of the season, with the high school band playing, the choir singing, and of course a visit from Santa.

If I didn't want to get the hell out of here so desperately, it might not be a bad place to settle down. Amy and Jake sure seem happy. Myrtle Beach is close enough, and if you want excitement and plenty of things to do, you have your pick. Best of both worlds, at least that's what Jake always says. I can see it I suppose, but I still can't help but wish for the day Brandon and I can leave this place behind. I don't like to think about saying good-bye to Jake and Amy, but we can always Skype or call, and besides, NYC isn't really all that far away.

I can't wait for the day Tidewater's nothing but a speck in my rearview mirror.

Scowling at our front door, I shuffle the bags in my arms so I can put the key in the lock. "Damn bastards," I mutter, kicking the door closed behind me. I take a deep breath and shove all that shit to the back of my mind. One night. I promise myself tomorrow morning we'll start trying to figure things out, but tonight is about us and only us.

As I unload the food and set it on the chipped Formica counter, I ignore the nagging whisper in my ear. The one telling me the second Brandon walks through the front door, he's going to start asking questions. It's enough to make me queasy, but I tell the stupid voice to shut the fuck up and resolutely try to convince myself what he doesn't know won't hurt him. The fact I'm going to lie or, at the very least, obscure the truth, settles heavily in my gut.

It's nothing a few beers, some good food, and even better sex with Brandon won't cure.

Or so I want to believe.

I leave the containers on the counter, put the beer in the fridge, and the ice cream in the freezer before moving to the bedroom. The three twenties I have left get put away in the old wooden box that sits on the corner of my dresser.

Uncle Marcus gave it to me when I was eight years old so I had a place to keep my baseball cards. I've used it to store all my important things ever since. I spy the movie ticket from my first date with Brandon, the ball marker I used when I won the Florida Junior Amateur in high school, and the clipping from the newspaper with my parents' obituaries. Other items catch my eye, but I don't dwell, shutting the lid with a resounding snap that echoes in the room.

There's no time to take a trip down memory lane. The trip wouldn't be all that fun anyway. There sure aren't many good things to remember.

During a quick shower, I try not to think about the questions Brandon will surely ask, and instead focus on how good it will feel to spend some time together, both in and out of bed. My dick gets hard just thinking about Brandon's naked body. I give into the feeling, gripping and tugging on my cock until I come with a loud groan and my hand slaps the dingy tile wall. As I watch the jizz swirl down the drain, I relax bit by bit, feeling a whole hell of a lot better, mostly because I know Brandon will be buried in my ass before the night is through. Sex with Brandon is always hot. It doesn't matter that the rest of our life is a complete clusterfuck—enjoying our time between the sheets has never been an issue. We don't fuck anywhere near as often as we did while we were dating. We were like damned rabbits, going at it every chance we got. Nothing has ever felt as good as Brandon's cock filling my ass, his nails scoring my back, and his strong, bruising grip on my hips as he pounds into me repeatedly while I cry out his name until I'm hoarse.

Like I said, we may not have a pot to piss in, in two weeks we're going to be homeless unless we can come up with something. At least we have each other and the sex is still smoking hot, so it's not a total lost cause.

Yet.

In our room, I pull on a pair of loose basketball shorts, not bothering with boxers or a T-shirt. If I have my way, we'll be naked within an hour of him coming home, so what's the point? The thought I'm using sex as a way to keep him from wanting answers niggles in the back of my mind again, like a pebble in my shoe that's just irritating as fuck, but I steel myself against the guilt. We deserve a night damn it, just one night, to let loose and act like normal early-twenty-somethings who drink and fuck and think we've got the world at our feet.

It's not too much to ask.

By the time I have a blanket spread on the floor in the living room, and every pillow I can find thrown around, I hear the key in the door. I've turned

off most of the lights, turned on the iPod, and lit the candles Brandon bought at the dollar store to make things a little more romantic. It's not much, but it's the best I can manage.

"What the," Brandon mutters as he walks in the darker than normal room and freezes when he sees all I've done. "Cord, what's going on? And is that," he sniffs, inhaling deeply, "Chinese food I smell?"

"It is. I picked up Fortune Cookie on the way home. Go change, and I'll get everything ready. I got some beer, too." I tell him, brushing a quick kiss over his lips, and ignore the stunned look on his face as I make a beeline toward the kitchen.

He's still standing in the same spot when I start spooning the food onto the plates. "Babe, just go change. The food'll get cold if we wait much longer, and I'm starving. I got you extra egg rolls and duck sauce," I say temptingly and add a waggle of my eyebrows.

For just a moment there's a battle in his head. I can tell he really wants to ask me to explain, but then the corners of his mouth lift. He squeaks, smiling big and bright, and I know that whatever residual guilt I'll feel in the morning, and I *will* feel it, is worth it to see that look on his face.

"Don't bother with underwear," I call out as he hurries into our room. "You won't be dressed long enough to need it."

I hear him giggle because, well, our place is smaller than a postage stamp. Christ is it ever gratifying to hear that sound. It feels even better, like maybe I haven't screwed everything up and there might be light at the end of the tunnel.

Chapter 5

Cord

“God, it smells so good in here,” Brandon moans appreciatively as he walks into the living room after a quick shower.

Hair still damp, face scrubbed and flushed, a tank top and a pair of my old shorts—sans underwear, just as I ordered, if the outline of his cock is any indication—and I give serious thought to chucking the whole dinner idea and taking his sexy ass to bed. I can't wait for him to fuck me later. It's been days and I need him.

“Come on. Get your fine self over here and let's eat before the food gets cold. You want a beer with dinner or after?” I ask, motioning for him to sit before handing him a plate and dropping a kiss on top of his head.

He grins at me as he crosses his legs and balances the plate on his lap. I take the opportunity to look at him. Brandon's body is perfect, small, and compact, with finely honed muscles and miles of unmarked skin. His ass is fantastic. Tight and round, the perfect size for my hands, and he has the most sensitive nipples I've ever come across. I swear there are times I can make him come just by biting and sucking on them.

“Eat up. I made sure to get extra duck sauce for your egg rolls. For the life of me I can't figure out why you drown them in that shit.” I chuckle as I walk back to get my own food. “Babe, beer now or later?”

“Later. I need some food in my stomach, otherwise I'll be drunk after only one. Just bring me water, please?”

Making sure to fill the glass to the top with ice first, I fix his water, grab a beer and my food, and somehow manage to carry it all to the living room without spilling or dropping anything. Once I'm situated beside him on the floor, I tip my bottle in his direction and clink it against the edge of his glass. “To us,” I toast.

In the muted glow of the room, with the reflection of the candlelight shining in his eyes, and the heat from his shower still making his cheeks enticingly pink, he's so beautiful it's hard to breathe. I've never thought a man could be beautiful, not until I saw Brandon for the first time, but there's no other word to describe him. His size gives the impression of weak and delicate, but that

couldn't be further from the truth. Brandon is a warrior, fierce and strong, the strongest person I know—man or woman. I swallow, feeling like I need to say something, but the moment passes with the two of us just staring at each other.

“This is really great,” Brandon compliments after we eat for a few minutes.

“I know, right? Chinese, beer, and you, it doesn't get any better than this.” I shovel more rice in my mouth and wash it down with a swig of beer.

The food is perfect, the beer, not so bad, but spending time with him is exactly what I needed. I'm on top of the world, and for the first time in a long time, I'm hopeful maybe, just maybe, we're going to catch a break. I ask him about his day at the store, laughing when he tells me about a little girl who whipped off her diaper and ran around the produce section, saying it was shower time when the misters came on over the vegetables.

“You should have seen Bentley. Oh my God! I thought he was going to hyperventilate.” I grin at the thought of Brandon's very gay friend fluttering around the grocery store trying to get the little girl to put her diaper back on. He laughs along with me, and it's the best thing I've heard in way too long. I vow right then and there we are going to have moments like this more often. We need them; and more than that, we deserve them. *He* deserves them.

We finish our dinner, talking about everything. Not about anything important, just silly, superficial things. He talked to Amy today so he mentions Sadie's latest adventure, and something flares deep in my chest. We've never talked about kids. I guess we've both just assumed we'd get to the point eventually where we'd need to think about it. I shake my head at the thought of the future. The here and now is plenty to worry about. I definitely don't need the added pressure of the unknown, sometime down the road, on top of it.

He clears his throat after he sets the mostly empty plate down on the floor. “Not to be a total downer because we haven't had a meal like that in a while, but, um... where did you get the money for all this? It's not payday until next week, and last I knew we don't have cash stuffed in our mattress or hidden in a coffee can.” He waves around, pointing at the food and the beer in my hand.

Groaning, I pick at the label on the empty bottle. It's not like I didn't expect the question. I'm actually surprised he finished eating before beginning the inquisition. Knowing that thought is unfair doesn't stop me from defensively answering, “Jesus Christ, Brandon. I had a pretty good day today and wound up with extra money in my pocket. Excuse the fuck out of me for wanting to spoil you a little bit. I know sweet and sour chicken, Blue Moon, and Ben and Jerry's

isn't much of anything, but shit, I don't think a simple thank you is too much to ask."

I scramble and grab the dishes, stomping to the kitchen. Every single good thought from just moments before is gone, evaporated like a drop of water in the middle of a red-hot skillet. I angrily scrape the plates into the trash can, cringing at the sound of metal against ceramic. I shuffle to the sink, drop the dishes haphazardly into it, and then lean on the counter, pissed and frazzled and most of all hurt.

One night was all I wanted. *Motherfucker.*

A hand on my back, his warm body pressing close. "I'm sorry. You're right. So, so right. It was a wonderful surprise and I loved it, love it. Honestly. I promise. Thank you for wanting to do something nice for us." His voice is low and gritty, like he's holding back tears, which makes me feel like an asshole. He rests his forehead in the middle of my back. Softly, so softly I can barely make out the words, but there's no way to misunderstand when he says, "I'm scared, Cord."

My head falls forward. Unable to stem the onslaught of emotion those words stir in me, I take a few deep breaths. Raw and vulnerable, I rasp, "I am, too." And I hate that I am, but it helps I'm not alone in feeling this way.

We stand there, neither willing to break the silence. Words that should be said, aren't, and they weigh heavy in the air around us. We need to talk, to plan, and try to find a way out of this mess, but it's not going to happen tonight. I also know if I tell him what I did to get the money, it will open doors I swore I'd never open again, ever. Not that he would be unhappy about the golf part. God knows he'd be on the phone with Uncle Marcus in a damned heartbeat if I told him, but finding out about the asinine bet, even though I won, will do nothing but upset him.

Chapter 6

Brandon

Cord is hiding something.

It's so obvious it's not even worth mentioning, especially not with my dick pressed firmly along the crease of his ass and my hands splayed across his wide chest. I might be small and pretty but that doesn't mean I don't know how to take care of my man; and my man definitely needs me to take care of him tonight. The past few weeks have been hellacious. Constantly walking on eggshells and spending scant, stress-filled minutes together has led us to a place neither of us wants to be.

So for now, thoughts of what we're going to do and how we're going to do it get pushed to the wayside as my fingertips skate over his skin. Cord leans into me, and our anger and hurt and fear melts away with each caress and dip over his hips, his abs.

Cord moans and his head rests heavily against my shoulder. "It feels so good when you touch me, like every inch of my skin is electrified."

"I love touching you," I whisper as I tweak a nipple, then run my palm across the hard, pebbled flesh.

And God do I ever love touching him. Who wouldn't? Unlike me, his body is covered in fine, golden-brown hair. Thanks to being covered with a ball cap all day, the hair on his head is darker, more sand than gold, but the hair on his arms is almost white from all the time he spends out in the sun. He's not a bear, but his legs and arms aren't smooth like mine, and the trail of darker, silky hair from his navel down to his cock is my favorite place to play. Indulging, I drag my fingers through, pressing against his back when he tilts his hips silently begging for more.

"Mmmm, someone seems awfully anxious," I murmur as I kiss across his shoulders. Our height difference doesn't let me quite reach up his neck, but there's time enough for that later.

Now, *now* I'll enjoy all the places I *can* reach. I slip my fingers beneath the waistband of Cord's shorts, chuckling softly when he hisses as I graze his leaking cock with my index finger. Collecting the bead of pre-come leaking from the tip, I use it to coat his cockhead, letting the edge of my fingernail scrape across his slit.

“Fuck, Bran,” Cord pants.

“That comes later, baby. I’m gonna fuck you so good, just wait,” I promise as I wrap my fingers around his stiff shaft and begin tortuously jacking him. Slowly. Letting the pleasure build. He fills my hand, and he pulses beneath my fingers as I grip him hard and slide up from base to crown.

He thrusts his hips in time with each stroke, the moisture dripping allows for the best kind of friction. Over and over again I move up and down, twisting my hand, flexing my fingers, squeezing tight then letting go, with no set rhythm. Just a constant build toward the orgasm I know he’s aching for.

I could be nice and let him come before I fuck him, but I won’t.

I’d rather have him in my mouth, so after a few more pumps of his leaking cock, I stop. Before he can voice the protest I know is on the tip of his tongue, I spin him around and drop to my knees. I shove the waistband of his shorts below his balls, his dick ready and waiting, and I waste no time wrapping my lips around him.

“Bran,” he pants. “That’s just... oh God.”

His moan sounds like it comes all the way from his toes as I swirl my tongue around his shaft. Bobbing my head, I savor the taste of him. Bitter and slightly sweet and salty, the mix makes my mouth water. I love giving head, and Cord has never once complained about my skill. Make no mistake, I love fucking him. Having that body with all its rippling muscles and strength at my mercy is a rush like no other, but kneeling before him with his dick down my throat is on an entirely different level. Knowing I can make him beg, that I can take him right to the brink of release then pull him back over and over until he’s a quivering mass of flesh, until it feels like he’ll explode if he doesn’t come, turns my key like nothing else.

My lips slide up his length until just the tip of his weeping cock is inside my mouth. I pull off completely, flicking at the pooling liquid with my tongue. Looking up, I keep my fingers busy as they stroke and pet. His pupils are huge, his chest heaves as he stares down at me. The lust in his eyes goes straight to my dick and it twitches, my balls heavy between my legs.

“Hmmm,” I hum lazily, nuzzling the crease of his groin. “Should I let you come now or come when I’m buried in your tight ass?” The question is, of course, rhetorical, and I don’t wait for an answer. After all, it’s not his choice, it’s mine. The moan that escapes between his panting breaths tells me he knows it is, too.

I'm sure when people see us together they automatically assume I'm the "girl" in our relationship. Not surprising considering how I look next to him, but Cord loves to be fucked. He's a total slutty bottom. He likes being pushed and manhandled and filled, with fingers, tongue, or dick—it doesn't matter, he loves it all. He craves it all. And all is what I give him. My dick isn't porn star huge, but it gets the job done, and with Cord, it's not about size anyway. It's about giving him what he needs, and I do that well. Very, very well.

"I'm thinking in my mouth first, then we'll move to the bedroom where I can pound you into the mattress."

"Fuck, that's... ahhh," Cord mumbles as I swallow around him once more.

It takes only moments. A hum, a hard suck, and a swirl of my tongue and he's coming, filling my mouth with his release. So much for not letting him come, but he felt too good to stop.

He gasps for breath and his fingers tangle in my hair when he softens and slides out of my mouth. I lick the remaining spend from his shaft and chuckle, somewhat evilly, when he grunts and jerks his hips back.

"Ass," he says with no heat whatsoever.

Grinning wickedly, I stand and grind my hips against his. "I'll be in your ass," I tell him smugly and kiss him, hard. He groans and opens his mouth. I slide my fingers into his damp hair, and devour his mouth until my head starts to swim.

His lips chase mine as he dives in for another kiss once we've caught our breath. This time, it's his tongue dominating mine and I let him. "Jesus, baby. You taste so good." His voice is low and deep, almost a growl, and I tilt my head so he can lick along my neck. When his teeth scrape over my skin and soft whimpers come in almost constant succession, I know it's time to move to the bedroom.

"Oh, the things I'm going to do to you," I purr and grab his hand, dragging him down the hall.

I smirk at him over my shoulder.

Things indeed.

Chapter 7

Brandon

A noise from the street below startles me awake, and a glance at the clock tells me we've been asleep only a few hours. I stretch and smile when muscles that haven't been used in much too long ache in the best possible way. My hand brushes against Cord's back, the skin warm and slightly damp, and I can't help but let my fingers linger. The scent of sweat and sex swirls around us, and though my cock stirs and takes notice, I let the thrum of want continue to build while my mind and fingers wander. I'll take him again, once he has slept longer, but for now, it's enough to lay beside him and listen to him breathe. Nights like this have been way too sparse lately; it's been weeks since we've been able to enjoy one. Questions over Cord's sudden windfall notwithstanding, the night was perfect. Seeing him with a smile on his face instead of the tight lines of worry that are usually present, eased, if only for a short time, the tight knot of worry that's steadily grown day after day. Things have been bad—stressful—but unlike Cord, I'm not worried. Well, not *that* worried. That's not to say there aren't moments I wonder what the hell we're going to do; but with him by my side I know we'll figure something out. There's no other option.

Leaving Jacksonville with him was the smartest, stupidest thing I've ever done. Sure I wanted the future he spoke about. Seeing his eyes sparkle as he went on about New York City, and all the options waiting for us, was addictive and never failed to get my heart pumping and my blood singing. The idea of being where the lights were shiny and the possibilities endless filled me with a fire I'd never had before Cord was in my life.

Growing up an only child—the only gay child—of an alcoholic, bitter father and dead mother was its own version of Hell on Earth. There wasn't abuse, verbal or otherwise. Instead, there was nothing, which was worse. It could be said, and I'm sure a therapist would have a field day with me if given the chance, the reason I'm the way I am—brash, bold, and in your face—is to get the attention I never got from my father. Maybe yes, maybe no, but I don't dwell on it. I live my life on my terms and damn anyone who has a problem with it. Cord never has. From the very beginning, he's been the only one who has ever noticed me, accepted me, just as I am.

Walking into that Contemporary Lit class and seeing him was like hitting a wall going sixty miles an hour. Just that fast my whole world changed. I knew who he was, of course I did; everyone who lived in Jacksonville and had an inkling of current events had heard the name Cord McKenzie. He was a superstar, headed for fame and fortune on the lush green grass of the PGA. Blond, blue-eyed with a smile meant to melt hearts, he was the golden boy. In a place where boys and girls alike had a golf club in their hand from the time they could walk, Cord was at the top of the heap. His talent was talked about everywhere, from the news to the coffee shop.

He hasn't picked up a golf club since we left home a year ago, and I know he misses it. He won't talk about why he won't play any longer, and I don't push. I probably should, but I know whatever the reason, it's painful, and his. Working at Tidewater Country Club has to be the last thing he wants to do. To be that close to something that was such a part of him for so long has to chip away at his soul, but he does it for me, for us. I catch him flexing his fingers, mimicking his grip when he holds the club, usually when he's preoccupied or worried, which has been way too often. The way things have been lately, the distance and the stress is as much my fault as his, though mostly it's just life trying to see if we can take what it dishes out. Life obviously hasn't gotten the message that I'm a badass motherfucker. I might be little and I might look delicate, but it will take a lot more than counting pennies and wondering where we're going to live in fourteen short days, to knock me down.

"Mmmmm," Cord groans as he bends his knees, curling up tight.

He relaxes once more, switching positions to sprawl, facing me, and pulls his pillow against his chest. His almost white eyelashes flutter against his cheeks before he settles back to sleep. A soft sigh escapes as he takes a deep breath, and he looks so peaceful, as if he doesn't have a care in the world. I only wish that were true.

I want to run my fingers through his hair so badly I can almost feel them twitch, so I let myself lift my hand and slip them between the soft strands. His hair is longer now, he's constantly pushing it off his forehead, and it curls behind his ears and just over the collar of his work shirt. I love it. Between the hair, the stubble on his jaw that's more present than not these days, and the way his arms have bulged with muscles he's developed from working outside, it's like he's a whole new Cord, or maybe the Cord he's been trying to find. I doubt he thought he'd find himself working in a cart barn instead of on the golf

course where he was born to be, but I can't help but believe that all of this is part of his journey—our journey.

He makes a sound, something between a moan and a whimper as he nudges into my hand. It's enough to stop my thoughts, and the need I've ignored flares back to life. Without waking him, I gently push on his shoulder until he's flat on his back. Kneeling, I drink him in, taking time to appreciate the hard planes of his body, noting the jut of his hips and the outline of well-developed muscles in his thighs. His legs are covered in soft, curly golden hair, and I love the way it feels against my palms.

"Mmmm, Bran," Cord mumbles, still mostly asleep but conscious enough to feel the touch of my fingertips.

I trail them from knee to groin, watching in fascination as his muscles twitch. His breath catches when I stretch my index finger and rub along the inside of his thigh. He opens his legs wider, and it's all the invitation I need. Lowering my head, I kiss below his belly button and swirl my tongue in the silky hair.

Cord's hands find my shoulders then my hair. He drags them through repeatedly as I make my way up his body. Abs, each nipple, the sensitive skin toward his armpit, I lick and suck and bite it all. Our hips move against each other and our cocks, now hard and slick, rub as well.

"Up. Come here, you're too far away," Cord slurs sleepily.

Kissing a line across his shoulder and up his neck, I find his mouth warm and waiting. He opens, and I delve inside, our hips still moving slowly but steadily. We rock and kiss, and it's so hot and so good, I feel like I could melt right inside of him.

He arches and pulls me close so he can kiss me again. "Brandon, oh God. You feel so good," he sighs.

The air around us is charged, the intimacy of being with him like this palpable. Our breath comes in harsh pants, our fingers seek and press, and our hips grind as our cocks slide and pulse between us. The orgasms that follow are not explosions but gentle pushes over the edge. Warmth spills, coating each of our stomachs, and cools while we try to catch our breath.

"That was so hot," I whisper and kiss Cord, the intensity dimmed but not gone completely.

“Mmmm,” he agrees and then crinkles his nose when I roll off to lay beside him. “And messy.”

I chuckle and grab a handful of tissues from the nightstand. Once we're wiped off enough to not stick to each other, I cuddle against his side and sigh deeply when his arm wraps around me. Falling asleep together is something I've missed terribly.

Suddenly overwhelmed, I shiver.

“What?” Cord murmurs, on the brink of falling asleep.

Snuggling closer, I relax and let the afterglow of the evening lull me to sleep. Right before nodding off, I hear him quietly say, “Everything will be okay, you'll see.”

Smiling because I believe him, I close my eyes and let my dreams pull me under.

Chapter 8

Brandon

A few days after our night of Chinese food and sex, the reprieve from the stress of finding a new place to live is still going strong. I haven't seen much of Cord. He worked last night at the club helping with some kind of event in the dining room. He was gone before I left for work this morning, but the text message I woke up to was a nice surprise. Dirty of course, but nice just the same.

I spend a little time picking up the apartment. It won't be home for much longer but that doesn't mean we have to live like frat boys. Once the dishes are done and the bed is made, I grab my laptop and spend an hour organizing the photos I took last Sunday and run a few through Photoshop to edit. I got some good shots, two or three I'd like to frame and hang in our new place—wherever that winds up being. A tight knot forms at the thought, but I close my eyes and tell myself something will come up. We've made good friends here in Tidewater, and the town really isn't that bad. Sure it's not the thriving metropolis New York City is, but Cord and I can sit at the diner together and not worry about someone spitting in our food, or walk down the street together and not look over our shoulders. We don't flaunt our relationship, and neither of us is huge on PDA anyway, but for the most part, people smile as we pass by and go on about their business.

After a quick sandwich for lunch and a shower, I'm ready when Nancy knocks on the door so we can go to work. The day drags, the only bright spot being Bentley. He's older, probably early forties I'd guess since he refuses to answer when I ask, and so gay he should have glitter falling out of his ass with every step, and rainbows sprouting out of his mouth. He swishes when he walks, trills when he talks, and he's fabulous. He and his partner, Gerald, have been together for over twenty years and are two of the most important reasons why Tidewater isn't such a bad place.

"Doll. What a day, huh?" Bentley sighs dramatically as he drops into a chair beside me. It's our hour for dinner—we always eat together—and today we're the only two in the break room.

Bentley's hands flit as he spreads our food out. Gerald is a chef at one of the country clubs in Myrtle Beach and happily provides his Bentley, and by default,

me, a delicious gourmet dinner every night. I feel a little guilty as I watch Bentley unpack a heavenly smelling chicken and rice dish full of vegetables, a salad, and oh hell yes, chocolate raspberry cheesecake for dessert. Our shared nightly feast is the one indulgence I allow myself, mostly because it doesn't cost me a thing. I love sitting with Bentley and listening to him go on and on about the things Gerald sees in his club. For an hour, it's like an escape from the everyday goings on. I might be content with Cord and where we are, but it doesn't mean I don't want more out of life, for both of us. Hearing Bentley talk about Gerald and the shenanigans in Myrtle Beach is a reminder there is a whole other world out there, one Cord and I have plans to explore and experience.

"So then—" Bentley takes a breath from the story he's telling me to dab his mouth with a napkin. A linen napkin no less. "It's the middle of dinner service, right? There's soft music playing in the background, candles flickering in the hurricane vases, everyone is dressed in their finest, classy you know? Gerald is in the kitchen doing his Bobby Flay thing, when he hears this loud shriek. Think the most annoying sound you've ever heard. Gerald swears it was like cats in heat."

"Jesus," I shudder.

"Mmmhmm," Bentley nods. "Anyway, so the entire dining room goes silent, and the only thing you hear is this she-devil screaming, 'What do you mean you told your mom where I bought my vibrator?'"

I spit out the drink of water I just took. "Holy shit!"

Bentley snickers, and his eyes dance. "Gerald said the guy, who is assumed to be her husband, turned as red as a lobster and looked like he was either going to burst into flames or tears."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, Miss Thing realized she had everyone's attention and flicked her napkin in her lap, cool as can be, and took a drink of her wine and said, 'Well, if she wants pointers on which one is the best, tell her to give me a call. I've tried them all.'"

"Oh my God!"

My phone rings and I answer, still laughing and shaking my head at Bentley. I don't look at the caller ID, so when I hear Amy's unmistakable giggle, I don't have to try to pull it together. Good thing, since I still have tears streaming down my face.

“I am dying to hear what has you sounding like a hyena on nitrous oxide.”

I snort. “Later. What’s up, sweetcheeks?”

Bentley stands and waves me back into my chair when I move to help him clean up our dinner. He points toward his phone, letting me know he’s going outside to call Gerald, and I give Amy my full attention.

“Nothing. It’s just been a few days since we’ve touched base. I miss you.”

She’s an elementary school teacher so our schedules don’t mesh as often as both of us would like, but we make it a point to call at least every few days and send a text or two daily. It would be hard if we didn’t like each other, seeing as how Jake and Cord are joined at the hip, but from the moment we met, we just clicked.

We look ridiculous next to each other. The only thing we have in common is our height. I have long, straight, dark hair, and hers is fire red and so curly and floofy it looks like she stuck her finger in a light socket. My skin is a light caramel color thanks to my mother’s Hispanic heritage, while Amy’s is the color of milk and almost translucent. Where my skin is smooth and unblemished, hers is covered with a smattering of freckles. My eyes are dark brown with thick, dark eyelashes. Hers are the color of candy apple Jolly Ranchers and almost as clear; if she doesn’t have mascara on, sometimes it’s hard to tell she has eyelashes at all. I’m small boned, slight but muscular—her curves make you want to squish her like a teddy bear. Her sense of humor borders on goofy and off-the-wall. Mine is biting and sarcastic. She’s the peanut butter to my chocolate, and I adore her like no other.

I slouch in my chair and tip my head back, smiling because her voice has that effect on me. “I’ve missed you, too. Tell me something good.”

“The picture frames I ordered came in today so I need your sexy ass over here pronto to help me hang all your masterpieces on my walls.”

Snickering, I tease, “You think my ass is sexy? Should Jake be worried?”

She snorts and it’s like a horn honking, but totally her. “Hell yes he should, or he would if I ever saw him.”

“Hmmpf,” I mutter in agreement.

Cord might be working himself to exhaustion so we can afford a new car and a new place to live, but Jake spends almost as much time away from Amy and Sadie. There’s a trip to Disney World in their future if he and Amy can

save enough money and before too much longer, another baby if Amy has her way. Need versus want, the two situations are completely different and most of the time it doesn't bother me. At least I try not to let it.

"Speaking of our men, how about yours, huh?" Amy questions, barreling on before I can ask what she means. "That's some awesome stuff he did, kicking Ian Kennedy's ass on the driving range and making him a hundred dollars poorer. I know that's nothing to him, but still. That dude is a major twatwaffle. He deserves to be taken down a notch or twelve, and I can't think of anyone better to do it than Cord. Why didn't you tell me he was such an amazing golfer?"

"I um... what? Ian Kennedy?" I stammer while my mind races, trying to understand what Amy just said.

"Yeah, Jake couldn't stop talking about it the other night. I guess Ian saw Cord on the driving range hitting balls and bet Cord he couldn't keep hitting his drives as far as he was." She giggles, oblivious to the fact that my breath is coming in short bursts.

I squeeze my phone so tight my fingers turn white. I try to tell myself to give Cord the benefit of the doubt. Maybe Amy is exaggerating as she does sometimes, but the hollow, sick feeling in the pit of my stomach says she's telling the truth.

Cord was gambling. *Jesus.*

Forcing my voice to stay even, I clarify. It's imperative I understand her clearly. "Let me get this straight," I clear my throat before continuing. "Cord accepted a bet from Ian Kennedy and won a hundred dollars by hitting golf balls."

Amy laughs, not catching my icy tone. "Well, yeah. Jake said Cord was going to treat you to Chinese food. Didn't he do that? Oh wait, maybe he's saving it for a surprise. Don't tell him I said anything," she rushes on to say.

"Oh, don't worry. You're safe." *Him? Not so much.*

"Listen, Ames, I gotta go. I have to be back on shift in five minutes and I'm already on Mr. Baker's shit list."

I can't stay on the phone. My hands are shaking and my stomach is in knots.

"Sure thing, honey. Call me soon so we can make plans for you to come over, okay? Talk to you later," she chirps and is gone before I can even say good-bye.

My phone clatters onto the table when it slips from my hands. I close my eyes and clench my fingers into fists so tight, my nails almost break the skin on my palms. Holy shit.

What the hell am I gonna do now?

Chapter 9

Brandon

The rest of my shift passes in a blur. I catch Bentley looking at me with a frown on his face more than a few times but I ignore him, too caught up in my swirling thoughts to try to keep up a good front. I wouldn't be able to do it anyway.

Luckily, Nancy reads my mood and keeps conversation to a minimum on the short drive back to our apartment complex. I stare out the window, seeing nothing, as my mind continues to race a mile a minute. *Cord was gambling.* I understand the words, but I can't wrap my head around the thought. After knowing my history with my father, after listening to me explain the loneliness and fear of growing up with an addict, how he could do this simply baffles me. *How?* I know we need the money. I'm not an idiot, nor am I clueless. Things are dire; I get it. The lure of easy money? I get that, too. But holy fuck, how could he do this knowing what it would do to me when I found out? Just thinking about it turns my stomach and fills my mouth with bile. I knew he was hiding something. I know him too well to be fooled, but in my wildest imagination I never would have picked this. Never. He listened to me rant and cry as I poured my soul out to him, explaining my father and how his gambling addiction destroyed my family.

He promised me, swore as he looked me straight in the eyes, I would never have to worry with him, not about that. I'd heard his stories of bets on the putting green, wagers per hole, and card games in the back room of the club where cash was thrown around like Monopoly money. I knew the temptations were there, but I believed him when he gave me his word.

And he lied.

Nancy slows to stop at a red light, and she clears her throat. "Are you okay, sweetie? You've been quiet ever since your dinner break."

"I'm fine," I answer flatly. She'd have to be an idiot to fall for my pitiful lie.

"Sure you are. If you need to talk, you know where to find me."

She pats my knee, and then gives it a brief squeeze, saying nothing else until we arrive home. Once she turns off the car, neither of us move. The clicking of the cooling engine is the only sound, and I stare up at the window of

our bedroom, dreading having to face Cord. It's the first time a thought like that has ever entered my mind, and I almost lose it right then and there.

"Brandon?"

I grapple with the door handle and clutch the strap of my bag. "I'm fine. See you tomorrow." I bolt from the car and don't look back.

Normally Nancy and I walk up to our floor together, letting the night air work fade the closer we get to our homes. Tonight, each step feels like walking toward an execution. Dramatic, sure, but I'm hurt and angry and confused. I don't want to fight with Cord, but it's inevitable. This just can't be ignored.

Staring at our door, I take a deep breath before getting my key out and letting myself into the apartment.

"Hey, babe," he waves from the couch.

And it hits me like a punch in the gut looking at him—stretched out on the sofa, dressed in loose sweats and a band T-shirt, hair still damp from his shower as if it's just a normal night—that I'm pissed. So pissed.

My bag slips from my shoulder and hits the floor with a loud thump.

"Bran?"

"How could you?"

I don't wait. I don't hint around, instead I charge forward like a gladiator going into battle.

He stands and his eyebrows crawl to his hair at my sharp tone. He tilts his head, his mouth open but no words come out. A tense moment passes. I can tell he's put the pieces together when his jaw snaps shut and he swallows audibly. His shoulders slump, the look on his face is resigned and wary. Silently, I wait for him to speak. I'm so mad I know if I open my mouth, I'll say things I might regret tomorrow. I want to rail and rant and accuse, but still, I wait.

He licks his lips and questions quietly. "Amy?"

Snorting, I nod. "Of course Amy."

"It was only once."

"And that makes it okay? Jesus, Cord." I begin to pace, shaking my head as I try to calm down. "Why?" It's the question eating away at my insides.

The air in the room is thick with unease, and anxiety creeps up my spine. Blood pounds in my temples. My head hurts, my jaw hurts from clenching it so

tightly, and most of all, my heart hurts. It hurts to watch Cord as he shifts from his left to his right, sort of like if he could, he'd make a break for it just to get out of having this discussion.

I ask again, "Why, Cord?" and I don't even try to temper the brittleness of my voice.

He wanders toward the window and faces the glass, back rigid and his voice strained as he speaks. "It was just... I wanted to feel good, you know, just for a few minutes. The money was part of it, but it was more showing him I was good enough. Holding that golf club and watching the ball sail through the air, it was like for just a moment, everything was okay. We weren't about to be homeless. You were happy, I was happy, and things were like they're supposed to be."

"I know none of this is what you want," I try to placate, but he shakes his head to stop me from saying anything else.

"It's not what you want either. I hate that we're stuck in this place, that I've broken promises to you. That you could do better, but I can't let you go. I'm a selfish asshole, Brandon—" and his voice breaks, "I don't deserve you, but I don't want you to leave me. Please don't leave me."

"Cord." His name is a sigh.

"I'm so sorry, Brandon."

From across the room, we stare at each other. The way his hands are clenched. The slight tremble of his lips and the way he can't quite take a deep breath show me how afraid he is. Not just of what's been going on, but of losing me. I'd laugh if I didn't want to break down and cry. This is so much larger than just the gambling, and in that instant, I see it.

God, the things he's given up for me, for us.

"Honey," I say softly, using an endearment that hardly ever graces my lips. I step closer, but stay far enough away so I don't fling myself into his arms and cling to him like a vine. "I understand." He scoffs and shakes his head, disagreeing with me. "But I do," I say more forcefully, because I do understand. "It's not okay, but I get it. Golf is the one thing you do better than anyone. It's a part of you that you've buried for way too long. Of course it's what you'd use to feel like yourself."

"It felt really good," he whispers as if saying it any louder makes it any less true.

Something eases in my chest, something I didn't even realize was there, but now that he's opened this door, I can't let him close it again.

I smile. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

We say nothing for a few moments while we process. Knowing him, he still feels bad, and with me there is definitely a lingering unease over the gambling.

"It was easy for you to get carried away. That scares me, Cord."

He winces and takes a step toward me. "I know. It won't happen again."

I notice he doesn't promise it won't, and I don't push.

Needing to touch him, to make us both feel better, I rush forward and wrap my arms around him. He slumps against me as if he can't bear his weight, and maybe he can't. I know the toll our situation has taken on him. I see it every day.

We hug silently, soaking up the heat of each other and letting it soothe the jagged edges of our frayed emotions. "Do you forgive me?" he hesitantly asks after a few minutes.

I nod against his chest. His heart still thumps a bit erratically as if he's afraid of my answer. I give him the only one I can. "Yes."

Stepping back enough to look at him, I reach up and grab his neck, and pull him toward me. Meeting his lips, I kiss him hungrily, pushing my tongue into his mouth with no thought of being gentle. He moans, and I kiss him deeper, press against him harder, and swallow all of his needy sounds.

"Don't do it again," I warn. Without waiting for his reply, I peck him quickly on the lips. "I'm going to go take a shower."

When I step inside our room, he's already in bed, his back facing me. I drop my towel and crawl into bed, wrapping around him so I can feel his skin against every inch of my naked body. He's tense, so tense, and I squeeze tighter, until he shudders and relaxes, settling against me. Normally he's the big spoon, but tonight, it's my turn to shelter him. We both need it.

I kiss across his shoulder, my lips barely grazing his skin. He shudders again and the sigh is long and shaky, but his muscles are loose and it's a start.

"I love you, you know," I say between feather light kisses and soft nips to the back of his neck.

“I don't know why, but thank fuck you do.”

I bite harder. “Shut up. You made a mistake. The situation we're in right now sucks donkey balls, but we're together and we're smart. We'll figure something out.”

He threads our fingers together where they rest on his chest. It feels so good when his big, strong hands weave with mine, like we're a part of each other.

“You're always so optimistic. I don't how you do it sometimes. It amazes me.”

“I have you. I don't need anything else.”

He gasps and trembles against me. He pulls my arms tighter around him. I know he's uncomfortable with how vulnerable he is right now, how unsure of our future he is, so I let the moment pass without saying anything else. It doesn't take long for his breath to even out. The fight, however brief, took a lot out of him and he doesn't have energy to spare.

His warm skin against mine melts some of the icy ball of fear that clings to my stomach, and I hope that I can trust he won't do this again. I'm not sure what I'd do if he did.

Chapter 10

Brandon

As usual, Cord's gone before I wake the next morning. When I stumble toward the kitchen in search of caffeine, I find my favorite mug waiting by the coffee pot along with a blueberry muffin from the little bakery down the street. It's such a small gesture, but one that puts a smile on my face just the same. Telling myself to let go of the lingering unease about money, Ian Kennedy, and the look of pure desperation on Cord's face last night, I enjoy my morning jolt of java.

The day passes quickly and before I know it, it's time for work. When Nancy knocks on my door precisely at 12:40, I can tell she's surprised by the smile on my face.

"Well, now. That's more like it," she chirps happily.

"Yeah, yeah," I grunt, trying not to give her the satisfaction. "You don't need to take out an advertisement or anything. We had a fight; things are fine now. It's all good."

She snorts, nudging me with her elbow. "Bet the making up was fun."

Not wanting to go there with her, I roll my eyes and ask about her cat, Milo. She goes on and on about the devil cat, talking about it like it's a baby instead of a mass of teeth and claws. The damn thing is the meanest feline I've ever come across. Nancy will be lucky if she doesn't wake up one morning with her face half-eaten off. I've never been a cat lover, but seriously, hers is just plain evil.

Bentley is pleased I'm back to normal, though he pesters to make sure.

Exasperated after the fifth time, I growl. "Bentley, if you ask me one more damned time, I swear I will exchange your lip gloss for lube. And not the flavored kind either."

He gasps and plants both his fists on his tiny hips. "Darling, don't even play like that."

I grin wickedly. "Who says I'm playing? I know where you keep it, too, so watch it. I just might have to stop by your house and bring Gerald those pictures he's been asking me for."

“Hmmp,” he sniffs haughtily. “We’ll see about that.”

I laugh as he stomps away, swishing the whole time.

I fumble with my bag as I walk into the apartment. It takes me a second to realize there’s music playing, candles flickering, and the smell of pepperoni and garlic wafting in the air.

Cord stands by the couch with a bunch of flowers in his hand, looking shy and unsure.

“Five dollar pizza and flowers,” he says softly with a shrug. “They’re not roses but I remember you saying how much you loved these daisies.” Bright pink spots color his cheeks, and the tips of his ears turn red. My heart threatens to burst out of my chest. “I couldn’t remember what they were called but when I told the girl at the flower shop I needed the big kind, she knew what I meant.”

“Cord,” I choke.

“I’m sorry, Brandon. God, I’m so fucking sorry.” His voice shakes. “I know I scared you. I hate that I made you doubt me. I don’t ever want you to feel like that again. You mean everything to me.”

I toss my bag on the couch as I move toward him. Touching the soft petals, I whisper, “Gerbera daisies. I can’t believe you remembered.”

“I remember lots of things.” He must still need reassurance because he begs, “Please say you forgive me.”

“Of course,” I whisper, because really, what else can I do? “I love you.” And this time it’s my voice that wavers. My throat is tight with emotion, and I swallow and close my eyes.

His arms go around me, and he squeezes. A slow song begins to play, the notes soothing and soft. “Dance with me,” he murmurs in my ear, pulling me closer.

I hate fighting with Cord and as I take a calming breath, any remaining tension leaves my body so all I’m left with is a deep, powerful need for him. To feel his body beneath mine, and hear his whimpers and moans as I watch while he comes apart only to be taken again and again.

He nuzzles the side of my neck, and I let him because it feels good and I love it when he does it. His hands knead into the small of my back and his groin

rub my stomach as we continue to sway. I press my nose against his chest, inhaling deeply, the scent of soap and him powerful and so good.

The song ends and another one begins, but we don't stop. His lips are on my neck, behind my ear, along my jaw. I slide my fingers into his hair and twist, my grip so tight it must border on painful. I pull until he looks at me, and our eyes lock.

"No more," I tell him sharply.

With no hesitation he answers, "No more."

I sigh and loosen my grip, letting my thumb ghost over his cheek and across his abused bottom lip. "Kiss me," I order.

"About fucking time," Cord groans before he spins and pins me against the wall. His mouth covers mine and his tongue plunges deep inside. He grabs my face, holding me steady while he presses the entire length of his body against mine.

He's so big and hard, all over. I can hardly think as he steps between my legs, bends his knees for optimal pleasure, and grinds our hips together.

"Oh, God," I breathe, ignoring the heaviness in my balls. Cord's legs must ache from the strain of resting his weight on them, but that thought flees as quickly as it comes because he's still kissing me. The kiss stays slow and sensual, and I savor every rasp of his tongue and every sweep inside my hot mouth.

"Bran," he gulps when breathing becomes a necessity.

Cord doesn't slow his hips as his hands get to work. He pulls my shirt from my pants, immediately sliding his fingers over my flat stomach and up my smooth chest. He thumbs my nipples, and sucks on the skin behind my ear, which never fails to turn me into a whimpering mess. He smiles against my neck. "I love it when you make that sound."

I grunt and tilt my head to give him access to more skin. "Do that again and I promise I'll make it all you want."

Working my hand between us, I go right for the zipper of his pants. It takes a little maneuvering because interrupting Cord while he feasts on my neck isn't anything I want, so I let my fingers do the walking until I'm able to push my hand inside his boxer briefs. My fingers meet a hot, hard cock, and we both groan, the deep sound echoing through the air.

“Fuck, yes. I’ve been thinking about your hands on me all damned day.” He hisses when I circle my fingers around his shaft and squeeze.

I lick up the side of his neck. “You have, huh?”

“Hell yes. I always want your hands on me. More,” he begs.

Hands and arms tangle as we’re divested of our shirts, so that finally, *finally*, we’re skin to skin. He feels so good beneath my fingers, and he rocks his hips with each long, perfect stroke of his length. Not too hard or fast, not too soft or slow, just a steady rhythm designed to drive Cord completely out of his mind.

“Jesus. So good,” he breathes into my mouth right before I twirl our tongues together. I play for a few twists and turns. I can’t get enough of his mouth, his lips, or his tongue. I could spend hours just kissing him. It’s a silent war. Continue as we are? Grinding, touching, and kissing. Or fuck him?

Already ahead of me and making my decision easy, Cord falls to his knees. “I love your hands on me, but I’ve also been busy thinking about swallowing your dick down my throat.”

He frees my cock and licks his lips at the sight. Leaning forward, he slowly runs his tongue around the flared head, dragging it through the bit of pre-come leaking from the slit. He settles on his heels, chuckling at my grunt of displeasure at the loss of his mouth. He jacks me slowly, grinning when I start to thrust my hips.

I slide a hand in his hair, twisting just enough to pull. “Stop teasing and suck me like you mean it. Get me good and hard so I can fuck you.”

Needing no other incentive than that, he opens wide and takes me deep into his throat. He keeps his lips tight around my shaft and lets his tongue trace the vein along the underside as he moves up and down. There is nothing like the hot suction of his mouth, and I throw my head back against the wall and lay my other hand on his cheek. I rub my thumb across Cord’s jaw, the slight stubble catching on my skin, prickling. “God, your mouth,” I tell him.

He looks up. My dick throbs as I take in the sight before me: him kneeling, face flushed, lips shiny and swollen from our rough kisses and being stretched around me. So gorgeous and all mine.

Aching to be inside of him, I thrust my hips, forcing my cock down his throat. He bobs his head a few times and swallows, the bastard knowing that

will push me right to the edge. He's not wrong. "Fuck, fuck," I pant, yanking his hair tighter.

I can't wait any longer. "Up. Now. Get naked. I want that ass."

Pulling Cord to his feet, I whip him around so fast he stumbles as I push him down the hall and toward our bed. When he's close enough, I push once more until he falls face first. I tug and grapple with his jeans, wrenching so hard I probably hurt him, but seeing him spread out on the bed kicks my need into overdrive. I straddle his hips and lean down to breathe hot and heavy into his ear. "I'm gonna fuck you so hard, you won't be able to walk without feeling it for days."

I thrust my hips, letting my leaking cock slide along the cleft of his ass. Cord's ass twitches, the muscles in his back bunch and roll, and I can't stop my fingers from tracing every inch of his skin. Over his broad shoulders, down to his tapered waist, and across the small of his back, I leave nothing untouched.

When the tip of my finger dips into his crease, he jumps and lifts his hips. "Now that's what I'm talking about," I tell him as I lick a line up his spine. "Spread," I order and nudge his legs apart.

Stretching over his back, I fumble on the nightstand until I find the lube.

"Hurry," he pleads and flinches when a cold, slick finger glides between the cheeks of his ass. The sound quickly turns to a moan as I begin to circle his entrance. "Oh, damn that feels so good," he tells me, arching his back, begging with his body for more.

"Does this feel better?" I ask quietly as I press a finger slowly inside.

I tease and massage until the ring of muscle relaxes. I can tell when the burn turns to pleasure because his breath hitches and a moan rumbles from his chest.

"More, Brandon. Please," Cord begs shamelessly.

I add another finger and push in again, gritting my teeth as I watch my fingers disappear into Cord's willing body. So hot. "You good?" I question, knowing he's perfectly fine. Better than fine if the sounds filling the room are any indication.

"So fucking good. Come on, baby, fuck me. I'm ready, and I've wanted this all day."

My aching dick is ready, too, so I move closer, holding my shaft as I pull my fingers free. Rubbing the tip against his hole, I hold my breath. Inch by inch, I slide inside.

Cord pants through the burn, and I wait until the blinding pressure eases and all he's left with is pleasure. For all the raw emotions we've both been dealing with all day, the slow build to this moment is more intense, making everything feel better than it normally does. There really was no other option besides this, right here. Leaving him, not having him, is unacceptable. Losing myself in the feel of his body, I begin to move, the rhythm steady, and the strokes mind-numbingly deep.

"Yeah. That's it, right there." His voice drops, his words become choppy as I hit his gland every single time.

My head tips back. Thighs burning, my jaw aches from clenching it so tightly. My fingers dig into his flesh; but I don't care. In and out, over and over, the slap of my balls against Cord's ass floats in the air in time with every thrust.

Glancing down, I see Cord's hand move, and I reach out, batting it away. "No. You'll come just from me fucking you."

He groans. "Ah hell."

"Come on, fuck back on my cock. Show me what you've got and use those muscles," I taunt as I snap my hips hard, and pound into him.

He smacks the wall, arching his back to change the angle just enough so that I bottom out inside of him. He looks over his shoulder, a hint of a smile on his face. "Kiss me," he says simply, and I see that he needs me closer, as close as I can get.

With one hand on his hip and the other wrapped around his chest, I lean forward, pulling him back against me. Our mouths meet in a wet, sloppy kiss, but it's just what he asked for. Sweat drips down Cord's back and my chest. We slide against each other. Skin against skin, hot and slick, as I keep fucking him, the motion less smooth but still just as hard. I'm close, so close.

"Let me see you come. Give it to me," I urge and pinch one of his nipples, biting his shoulder at the same time.

Cord's hole clenches tightly. "Oh, God damn it," I hiss as sweet, hot fire spreads from my toes all the way up and out of my cock. I come so hard I see white and just when I'm sure I'll pass out from coming harder than I've ever come in my life, he lets go. He stretches an arm up and around my neck, writhing against my chest. The expanse of his neck, the taut muscle is too much to resist so I bite him again and his cock gives one last, half-hearted twitch.

Neither of us moves while we catch our breath. I rest my head on his shoulder and gently caress his chest and hips. I know he has to be sore; I wasn't gentle. The room smells of sweat and sex. My spent cock softens until it slips from Cord's body, and I can't stop the moan when I feel the gush of liquid drip down his thighs.

"Oh fuck, that's so hot," I whisper, trailing a finger through the cooling come.

"And sticky," he chuckles.

I reach for his chin and turn his head so I can kiss him. His body follows so we're facing one another. His hair's a mess, his lips red and swollen, and his smile is very pleased. He looks well-fucked. He looks ravished. He looks happy.

I lean forward and brush my lips lightly across his jaw, then his mouth, kissing him simply because I can.

"Fuck, I love you," I whisper.

"You just love me for my ass," Cord teases. His voice turns serious as he wraps his arms tightly around me. "I'm so damn sorry."

"I know."

I don't tell him it's okay, because it's not, but I forgive him and *we're* okay and that's what's important.

The dreaded cleanup is hurried and once we're both mostly spunk-free, he lies down and pulls me with him, a tangle of arms and legs. It takes no time for muscles to relax, for breathing to become slow and steady, and for fingers to caress and soothe—in hair, along spines, and over asses. Lazy and intimate, sharing the same air, inhaling the scent of our lovemaking, it's only minutes until sleep is right there.

"Sweet dreams," he whispers, barely louder than the blink of an eye.

I snuggle closer, pressing my nose into the hollow of his throat. "Mmmm, they will be."

I don't make it a step into the apartment before I'm dragged inside and flung onto the couch. Cord follows me down, and his grin is so huge it's possible it will split his gorgeous face in two.

“Are you high?”

He snorts and shakes his head, grinning impossibly bigger.

“Did you win the lottery?”

He glares and sniffs.

“Oh, I know, you got that dildo I’ve been wanting.”

His eyes widen and his mouth hangs open.

“Ooops,” I say cheekily.

“Better,” he whispers before kissing me breathless.

“Not that I mind our present position, but what the hell is going on?”

He kisses the tip of my nose, making me go cross-eyed before he pulls back enough to look at me. “Mr. Thompson came to see me in the cart barn today.”

Oh, shit. The head pro.

“And?”

“Well, first I thought I was in trouble, because why else would he be there, right? But it wasn’t that at all.” Cord takes a deep breath, and it’s like a huge weight has been lifted off his shoulders. “Turns out, he overheard Jake and I talking about what was going on with the apartment the other day while we were eating lunch. He has a garage apartment we can rent for the same price we are paying here.”

“Oh my God, Cord.” I suck in a deep breath.

“Tell me about it! I thought I was getting fired or something and the guy offers us a place to live instead. I can’t believe it!”

“Babe,” I sigh and pull him close to hug him tightly.

“I just... this feels like a whole new step for us, Bran. Like maybe things will be better now.”

I kiss the side of his head, not wanting to let go enough to reach his lips. “I knew we’d be okay,” I tell him, a little smugly because I was right.

“As long as I have you, we’ll always be okay.”

The End

Author Bio

Les Joseph lives in Texas with her husband and children. She's been an avid reader ever since she can remember and enjoys erotica, YA, paranormal and everything in between. Basically, she'll give anything a try. Les has always had a passion for writing. It began when she was little and she and her friends would write short stories and plays and it's continued to grow from there. She's finally ready to take the leap and put her words to print.

There have always been stories in her head and multiple characters at a time trying to talk to her, and it's just a matter of which voice is the loudest. She's working on her first novel and hopes to have it ready to print in the very near future.

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