

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

**DRAWN  
TOGETHER**

**J.R. Barten**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## DRAWN TOGETHER

**By J.R. Barten**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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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# DRAWN TOGETHER

By J.R. Barten

## Photo Description

Penciled sketch of two men, naked in bed. The blond is thin, lying on his back, legs out straight, head on a pillow. The brunet is straddling the blond, back muscular and slightly arched, left hand on the bed's headboard. The blond's penis is erect and is against the crease of the brunet's buttocks. Blond's left hand rests just above the elbow of the brunet's right arm. They look intensely into each other's eyes.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*This is a sketch a friend did of us in college; our love was so intense and we thought that we had the rest of our lives to be with each other... then "life" happened and suddenly there was no "we" anymore.*

*Dear Author: Romance, romance, romance!!! I would love for you to give me a "love meant to be" story... preferably with little or no kink, lots and lots of hot kisses, and with a "twist" that will make the HEA all the more sweeter!!!*

*This is the feeling that I am hoping for...*

If I could have just one wish,  
I would wish to wake up everyday  
to the sound of your breath on my neck,  
the warmth of your lips on my cheek,  
the touch of your fingers on my skin,  
and the feel of your heart beating with mine...  
Knowing that I could never find that feeling  
with anyone other than you.

*Looking forward to whatever you are inspired to write for me!!!*

*Sincerely,*

*Donna*

P.S. Please no tentacles or 'cest of any kind

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** soulmates, hurt/comfort, college, drag, Republican, Democrat, politics, reunited, tearjerker, death of a secondary character, long-distance relationship

**Word Count:** 30,178

*Acknowledgements*

Thank you to my beta readers, David, Debbie, Lori and especially to Jul and Michael who also edit my run-on sentences, forgotten commas, and wayward punctuation. To Mike, my college bestie and overall amazing guy—thank you for providing the inspiration for Clinton. To the entire group of DRitC volunteers who put more time and energy than I ever realized into making this event a success. And finally, to Donna, your prompt inspired me to take a chance and grab it without looking back. I can never thank you enough.



# **DRAWN TOGETHER**

**By J.R. Barten**

## Chapter One

### *The History of the Drawing*

All I was doing was looking for a pair of shoes. A stupid pair of shoes I needed to go with the outfit I would be wearing later that day. I had searched every possible area of my apartment or so I thought. After tearing the place apart, I went back for a second pass at my bedroom closet and pulled out a box that was stashed behind my luggage. I opened the flaps, peered inside, and there it was—tucked in with a couple of my art books, well-preserved except for two slightly bent corners—the drawing of us from college. The one I used to love so much and couldn't go a day without admiring.

Okay, so the “us” in the hand-drawn picture was now just me and a man I hadn't seen or heard from in three years. A man I thought I'd be spending my life with. A man who made my heart and mind race like no other. As for the drawing, it hadn't seen the light of day since I packed it up along with my dreams of a long, happy life with him.

I resisted the urge to crumple that piece of paper into a ball and rip it to shreds. Someday, years from now when I finally accepted the reality of our breakup, I would regret destroying it. So back into the box it went, fully intact.

“Damn you, Ethan!” I yelled at my friend and artist of the drawing. “And damn you, Clinton!” If I was cursing, I most certainly had to include my ex. He was the one who ultimately broke us. Ethan's only crime was creating such an amazing portrait that it brought back memories I'd rather suppress. Clinton's, on the other hand, included betrayal and the annihilation of our future together.

\*\*\*\*

### *December, Senior Year of College*

“You're looking at that sketch again, aren't you?” My boyfriend glanced at me over his *Ethics in Government* textbook.

I met his eyes and smiled unabashedly. “Busted.” I was supposed to be finishing my paper for art therapy, but I kept getting distracted.

“Garcia, put it away before you totally miss the deadline to submit your paper.” Clinton scolded me lightly and went back to his book. He was right. I was dangerously close to missing the due date my professor had already extended for me.

“I know. It’s just such a beautiful rendering of us. He did an amazing job.” My former roommate and fellow art major, Ethan, definitely had a gift. He captured the likeness of us with stunning accuracy.

“He did,” Clinton said less than enthusiastically and balled his right hand into a fist, one of my boyfriend’s not-so-subtle tells when he had something on his mind.

His words hung in the air along with the slight hum of the dorm-sized refrigerator as it kicked to life. “But...” I prompted.

“But don’t you find it the least bit creepy that your friend is drawing you—us—completely naked and in a compromising position?” Clearly Clinton had been thinking about this. I figured he’d be a bit bothered, but I guess I underestimated just how much.

“First of all, Ethan is *our* friend, not just mine. Second, he draws nudes all the time in his art classes. I like to think of what you call ‘compromising’ as innately beautiful. We are in the throes of passion, making love. If that’s not art, baby, then I don’t know what is. Plus, it’s not as if he’s watched us. I think he did a damn good job when all he had was his imagination to go on.”

“Humph. But he didn’t have to rely solely on his imagination to draw you, did he?”

“Nope,” I agreed without hesitation. “So I’m comfortable in my own skin. What’s wrong with that?”

“Comfortable is an understatement. I’d say you’re borderline exhibitionist, G. And you know how I feel about that.”

Clinton Jefferson and I had been together for about two years. The night we met, he drove me crazy spouting his opinionated Republican crap, and I fell for him hard. I don’t know exactly how it happened, except that I enjoy a good challenge. Clinton was a political science major, like he could do anything else with a name like that, and besides being gorgeous and gay, he was my polar opposite. And I was determined right from the start to make him mine.

Turns out Clinton had a sadistic tendency, too, and was intrigued by my opinionated Democratic crap. His words, of course, not mine. After a month of debating over coffee, online chat, Twitter wars and even FaceTime, he agreed to go out with me. I took him to a rally on campus in support of the teachers union. He grunted and rolled his beautiful blue eyes and mumbled an argument for every point the speaker made, and I laughed and then kissed him during the

applause. We held hands during our walk back through campus, and he invited me up to his room, where we disagreed on everything *but* how perfect our lips felt together.

For as volatile as our conversations typically were, you'd think being together physically would be this aggressive battle of dominance. Not that I'm opposed to getting rough, but it wasn't like that at all with Clinton. It was as if we reserved all that forceful energy for our political discussions, keeping our touches tender. Clinton's kisses took my breath away, and it didn't take long to discover that a lot of other things he did to me had the same effect.

Anyway, the topic of Ethan had always been a bit of a sticking point for us. While my former roommate was very high on the straight spectrum, it hadn't stopped me and him from experimenting a little just to broaden his horizons. Despite how much he liked having his dick sucked, he missed tits and drama too much to make any exceptions. Besides that, we would have never worked; he's almost as much of a raging liberal as I am. Wouldn't that have made life terribly boring?

I'd been very forthright with Clinton about the fact that I had initiated Ethan into the Club of Garcia's Amazing Mouth, of which he was now its VIP member. Because they had both been a benefactor of my blow jobs, there was initially some awkwardness between them. But they had since become friends. I hoped this damned drawing wouldn't change that.

I moved from my desk to the bed and lowered the bulky textbook into Clinton's lap. Leaning forward with my eyes focused intensely on his, I feathered the lightest of kisses on each corner of his mouth. Once I felt him physically relax, I moved my lips over his with more purpose, and the jolts that always reached the tips of my toes whenever we kissed started firing.

"You, Clinton James Jefferson, know that I am entirely yours, that I am totally in love with you, and plan to be with you forever. Just because I'm comfortable being naked around people doesn't mean I want to fuck anyone but you. It's the hippie in me I can't change."

He snickered and rolled his eyes. "Damn parents of yours. Remind me again why I thought it would be a good idea to fall in love with a guy named Garcia Hendrix? Thank goodness your last name is Olson, and your parents didn't change it to Unicorn or Sunshine or something like that."

I grinned at him and pushed the dark hair out of his eyes. It was getting a little long, which I really liked, but I knew that Clinton would soon be trimming

it back to his classic style. “Falling in love with me was inevitable. We were meant to be together, and you know it.”

The hard lines of his sharp cheekbones and strong jaw softened, and his whole face opened into the most intoxicating smile. It reached the very corners of his eyes, and it was an expression he rarely used on anyone but me. “For once, I agree with you. That unruly blond hair and radical mind somehow captured my conservative heart, and even though we shouldn’t make sense together—we do.” His fingertips were gentle on my scruffy cheeks. “I love you... so very much.”

I couldn’t say anymore. It was one of those rare moments he left me speechless. So I just kissed him again, our lips moving together in a well-choreographed dance. I bathed in the softness of his mouth and the tickle of his breath on my lips. I waited for him to increase the pressure, and then we opened to let our tongues explore. No matter how many times we kissed, Clinton’s touch always made my entire body sing with need. I’ve never wanted anyone to consume me like he did. I didn’t care what we did or who topped. As long as I was with him, that’s all that mattered.

We got riled up pretty quickly, and I climbed into his lap. To my disappointment, Clinton broke away from our embrace and rested his head on my chest. “Baby, what’s up?” I whispered right against his ear. I felt him shiver before he responded. At least I knew that he was as aroused as I was.

“Mm, your paper, my test. Both need to have our attention tonight or our future may not play out as we planned.”

“We can be quick,” I begged halfheartedly, because I knew in truth, we really did need to focus on our school responsibilities.

“After this semester is over, we can relax a little. But how we do at the end of our first semester will determine if you get into graduate school and if I get the internship I want.” He had pulled back from me just enough to meet my eyes. Our hands were still intertwined on his lap, and I could feel the hardness in our jeans begging for contact. This man was the reason I had been able to turn a reckless first half of my sophomore year into one where I made the dean’s list. He had been a wonderful influence on me. Don’t worry—there was no chance of me voting red state anytime soon, but he had really helped me become more disciplined with my studies over the last few years. He was a big part of why I even had a chance at getting into the master’s program I wanted.

“Always keeping us on task.” I shook my head in feigned frustration.

“You’d be lost without me.”

It’s kind of true, but I couldn’t let him take all the credit. “I did just fine without you, thank you very much.” I started to raise my voice in protest. “And before you say anything else, I’ve done a lot for you, too. You were so uptight when we met. You had been giving yourself ulcers, or have you conveniently forgotten that? I introduced you to relaxation and fun and—”

“And the liberal gibberish of the misguided left...”

“And how to approach life with a more open mind...”

“And the absence of practicality of the new healthcare law...”

“And the best sex of your life...”

“And...” but Clinton stopped there, and his eyes shined brightly. “It’s true. Making love with you is quite possibly the most incredible experience of my life.” My boyfriend’s usual strident tone modulated with pride and happiness.

“See? I knew we could agree on something.” Releasing my hands from his, I found the back of his neck and pulled him toward me. I kissed him soundly and rocked myself forward so our groins pressed together. His palms quickly found my ass and started kneading and massaging. Shit! He felt so good, and I knew any second now we’d have to call it quits. “We gotta stop,” I groaned and he stilled his hands.

“Yep. Save that for later. But right now you need to finish that paper, and I need to study for my final.” He kissed me sweetly on the forehead and carefully lifted me off of his hips.

“Okay. I’ll expect that raincheck once this night is over.”

“Deal,” he agreed, and I climbed from the bed and went back to my desk. As I was waiting for my laptop to unlock, I grabbed Ethan’s picture of us to admire again.

“Stop looking at the drawing,” Clinton said, without even lifting his gaze from his book.

“Maybe I’ll just put it on my bulletin board. Then I can look at it anytime,” I threatened.

“You are not putting a naked drawing of us on your bulletin board!”

“Fine.” I wasn’t actually going to post it for everyone to see, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Good. Now put it away and get to work.”

“You’re such a prude.”

“And you’re such a show-off.”

I glared at him teasingly and eventually tucked the drawing into a folder on my desk. That was always going to stay close to me. It was such a beautiful piece, and the sheer vulnerability Ethan drew in each of us in that moment left me breathless. Someday I’d frame it. I very much looked forward to waking up in a home Clinton and I shared and seeing that picture of us hanging on our bedroom wall.

“Garcia,” he warned.

I looked over my shoulder at him, and he surprised me with a smile.

“I love you,” he said, and the steadiness in his voice made my heart flutter.

“I love you, too.” I turned back to my laptop and started typing.

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Clinton Jefferson’s political aspirations had never been a secret. He was very open about wanting to intern in Chicago and work for a politician long enough to get the experience needed to run his own campaign. I knew from the beginning of our relationship that I was destined to be the first husband when he became the governor of Illinois. The diva in me actually looked forward to it.

The Jeffersons had a long history of political leadership. Every person within his immediate family and expanding out several generations had some involvement with the Republican Party. It drove me crazy hearing about yet another conservative stance he’d take on an issue I thought would set us back decades as a country. But despite our misaligned views, he never belittled me for my beliefs, and I never criticized him for his. We’d disagree, that’s a given, but we would do so respectfully and intelligently. A lot of times our debates culminated in really incredible sex.

When examining Clinton’s future political career, we always came back to the same question; would people embrace our opposing views enough to trust him as a leader? Would they be afraid that my liberalness would rub off on him? That he’d compromise his stance to please me? Obviously once they got to know him, they would see clearly how dedicated and unwavering he was when it came to his beliefs. The man was a rock. He was open with marriage

equality and immigration but fiscally conservative and antiunion. It would take a lot more than me to lead him politically astray.

As for me, about a year ago, I realized that I wanted to teach. Summers and extended holidays off would be perfect for raising a family—something both Clinton and I wanted badly. We had our life figured out, and every day I looked forward to my future with him more and more.

Don't get me wrong; we were prepared for some twists and turns along the way. We weren't so naïve to believe that everything would just play out in front of us as planned. But we were both adamant about outlining specific goals. Otherwise, how else would we know when we got there?

If it hadn't already happened before it became Clinton's time to run for office, we were prepared to break the traditional mold of a political couple. There was no reason he couldn't be effective in office *and* be married to me—a Democrat and a man. In fact, our passion for shared issues had proven to be incredibly powerful. We were almost solely responsible for the unisex bathrooms that had been created in each building on campus. It required board approval, but Clinton and I had done all the research and lobbying. So, I firmly believed that because of our relationship, Clinton viewed matters differently than most in his political party. He would even admit to that.

To be honest, our friends and family expected us not to last. We bickered all the time, constantly opposed the other's point, and rarely agreed on anything. I laughed at them because I always knew we would last. It was just one of those instincts I had from the very start. Never had I felt more challenged, more heard, or more inspired than when I was with Clinton.

He clearly demonstrated his unwavering support when I decided to change my major exactly one year ago this week. I had always planned to study psychology, go to graduate school, and get my Doctorate in psychiatry, so veering from that path during my junior year presented a few difficulties. I'd had to enroll in summer classes and carry a heavier course load than what was advised for most students. But I was determined to keep our postcollege plans on track, which meant that I needed to graduate in four years, no matter what.

I remembered clearly the day I told Clinton.

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*December, Junior Year of College*

“Baby? What would you say if I told you I wanted to become a teacher?”



We had been snuggling in bed, spooning and staying warm under the covers before getting up for the day. He pulled me closer and asked, “Is it what you truly want?”

It didn’t take me long to answer. “Yes.”

“Then you need to do it, G. I can’t imagine having a career I’m not passionate about, so if you are called to teach, then you need to do it.”

I was slightly shocked at his response and started to present a case against it. “But I’m already two years into my major and have even taken some pre-med classes.”

He laced his fingers with mine and rested them across my stomach. “So. We’ll just have to do some clever rearranging with your schedule to get you into the required courses.”

“I can’t fit all I need for my degree into just two years.”

“They offer classes over the summer, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, problem solved.” He kissed the back of my head like everything was settled. I squirmed a little, making our futon squeak. “I need to take a look at that before it gets worse,” he mumbled to himself. I knew he didn’t say it to change the subject. To Clinton, making the decision was just that simple. However, I wasn’t appeased so easily.

“We’d have less time together. I was looking forward to traveling with you this summer, remember?” Whining was very unbecoming of me, but I couldn’t stop myself. Could making a huge decision like this be so effortless for us to handle? Would we always be able to solve our problems that easily? Would he always be so understanding and accommodating?

He released my hands and tapped me on the hip. “Roll over.”

Reluctantly I shifted, turning away from the wall to face him. God, he looked amazing. His dark hair was standing up every which way, he had more than a five-o’clock shadow, and his cheeks were creased from his pillow. Calling him sexy was a gross understatement.

He tipped my chin up with his hand and held my gaze. I blinked a couple of times and pretended to rub sleep from my eyes, but he never looked away. “Why do I get the feeling you are trying to talk yourself out of this?”

I shrugged. Not a very convincing response.

He tried to fill in the blanks I had left very empty. “I’m going to venture a guess, and you can tell me if I’m close.”

Just then his phone broke the silence, ringing like an old-fashioned alarm clock. We both jumped, and he grabbed it from the nightstand.

“Do you have to get up?”

He quickly turned it off. “No. I just wanted to make sure we didn’t sleep in too late.” Always watching out for us. “So, okay, where was I? Oh, right, I was about to tell you that you shouldn’t worry about change. Our life is great now, but you can’t be afraid to take a risk if it’s something that will make you happy. You happy makes me happy, remember? That’s how a partnership works. Stop stressing about having to take extra classes and needing to work harder to get everything required done in two years when everyone else has had four. I’m not going anywhere.” He kissed away the worry lines on my forehead and the pout that had formed on my lips.

I glanced from him and stole a peek outside. There was a window at the end of the bed, and I hadn’t noticed until now that it was snowing. It was beautiful, and I had never felt more content in my life.

I returned my gaze to his. “I’m not going anywhere either, so I guess I’ll pay a visit to my advisor and the registrar’s office on Monday.”

He nodded and then got a devious look in his eye. “How about we spend the entire weekend in bed together. We can watch movies, order takeout, give massages, nap whenever we want to...”

“Have smoking hot sex every hour...” How typical of me to go right there.

“Every hour?” My virile boyfriend about choked on his words. “I’ve never had a problem getting excited around you, but according to your suggestion, we would be making love twenty-four times within twenty-four hours. That way exceeds our current record, G.”

“And it’s about time we broke that record!” I was only half joking.

Clinton and I were a perfect match sexually. Our instincts about the other were right on. I don’t think more than a day or two went by when we didn’t have some sort of shared intimacy. If either of us would have to travel, we’d settle for phone sex, but it fulfilled our needs for the time being and kept our relationship exciting.

“Shit. Can’t go hourly because I have a volunteer shift tonight. I almost forgot.”

“That’s right. And stopping back here for a quickie every hour might be a bit awkward.”

I chuckled. “True.”

I volunteered as part of our Student Security Patrol. Nine or ten times a month I worked a night shift with one of the security guards. We found that having a fellow student along when there was trouble made the presence of armed guards less intimidating. “Ugh. I’ll have to talk to Michael about my shifts, now that my course load will be heavier.”

“Good point.” He gave me a gentle kiss. “I have to admit, you’ve seemed a bit restless lately. I thought you might be contemplating what you wanted to do with your life.”

“What?” My eyes opened wide. “I didn’t even know until, like, yesterday that I was having second thoughts!”

Clinton just sighed and traced long fingers over the contours of my shoulder. “Oh, G, I didn’t know exactly what was going on but ever since you helped Ethan with that weekend art therapy conference last month, you’ve seemed a little different.”

“You could have told me and saved me a lot of inner turmoil.” I pretended to glare.

“You know you wouldn’t have wanted that,” he said matter-of-factly. It irritated me even more, but that was mostly because it was true. We had always supported each other but agreed not to interfere in the other’s decision-making process. Yes, I knew it impacted him on some level, but my career choice had to be my decision only. And I felt much surer of my new major because I had come to the realization in my own time.

“You’re right.” I had conceded with a smile.

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We ended up celebrating that day exactly as he had proposed. I compromised on the every-hour sex, and we still broke our record.

Making the decision to change majors was one of the best I had ever made. That along with falling head over heels for a future leader of the GOP.

I looked between Ethan’s drawing in the folder and my boyfriend, and I realized once again how lucky I was. Even from a penciled sketch, you could see how happy we were together. The devotion Ethan drew in our expressions

was not contrived to reflect an ardor that wasn't there. Our love was true, and the raw passion between us was palpable.

“Paper, babe.” Clinton’s voice sang lightly into my small dorm room. He wasn’t nagging; he meant well, and I needed his focused influence. Despite how different we were politically, when it came to supporting the other, there was no room for debate. Even if it led to one of us making a mistake. We’d pick ourselves up, learn from it, and move on together, stronger than we were before.

That’s how I thought it would always be.

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## Chapter Two

### *My First Time*

#### *Four Years after College Graduation*

My heels clicked loudly on the hallway floor as I made my way from the dressing room to where Jerome, our director, was standing backstage. Since I couldn't find the shoes I wanted at home, I went with a back-up pair. They weren't as comfortable or as quiet, but I wasn't about to risk dredging up any other old memories I might find lurking in the closet with that drawing.

"We've got a great audience tonight!" he whispered giddily to me. This was the fourth year in a row I'd performed as part of his summer show at the club. During Pride month, Jerome and all the artists donated loads of time to prepare a series of performances that helped raise money for LGBT groups. Even though it took a lot of time to get the show ready, as a teacher with summers free, I had no problem volunteering. Plus, every year I had a blast. Tonight I needed to remind myself of that and hopefully this funk I was wallowing in would go away.

I forced a smile and primped my hair. I was on next. And for the record, Jerome always said we had a "great audience." It was his thing. But I admired his excitement, and all he and his husband, Cal, had done for the gay community. Even though Cal had lost his battle with cancer a couple of years ago, Jerome was still doing just as much. Now he did it all in Cal's memory.

Jerome and I had met in college by total fluke. I had known him peripherally because we were both involved in the theater program, but he was on the acting/directing side and I was behind the scenes designing and building sets. I knew him enough to occasionally say "hi" but nothing more.

We met on a particularly chilly night in January when I was working a volunteer shift. The memory of that introduction was still incredibly vivid.

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#### *January, Junior Year of College*

Michael, the security guard on duty, and I were bored. No one was out causing trouble in the cold, so campus was unusually quiet on a weekend night. I was only volunteering once every month or so with the Student Patrol, since my course load had increased significantly. I typically chose to work a

Saturday, because there was always a lot of activity that made my shift fly by. That night, time was dragging.

Well, it was at first.

It turned out that Jerome had not gotten the memo about it being too cold to cause trouble.

At about midnight, we got called to one of the senior duplexes at the edge of campus. This housing complex was right where the university's property and a fairly affluent neighborhood met. It appealed to upperclassmen because while it was still on campus, close enough to the cafeteria and classes, it was almost off campus, which meant rules were a bit more lax.

The call came from a neighbor across the way, on the adjacent well-to-do side. She made several complaints which included loud music, rowdy behavior, and indecent exposure. When Michael and I knocked on the door to the duplex, Jerome answered and was responsible for the ruckus.

To the neighbor's credit, the loud music was indeed eardrum shattering, even if it was good music. The rowdy behavior had to do with the party punch they were serving. It was strong and it was flowing freely. And I'm pretty positive Jerome did not make sure all of his party attendees were of drinking age. But the indecent exposure, by most standards, which did include campus rules, didn't apply. To the woman across the street, though, the men dressed in drag at Jerome's party were "indecent". According to the sign on the door, the party's theme was "Copacabana," which meant the outfits were on the scanty side. But none were exposing anything but too much chest hair in a bikini top.

I was an out and proud man and had seen plenty of drag before. I wasn't, however, prepared for the dozens of fellow students I'd see wearing fruit headdresses and grass skirts.

"You the party host?" I asked Jerome as he met us at the door.

He flashed a smile framed by plump, candy apple-red lips. "I am. Name's Jerome," he said proudly. Then noticing Michael's security guard uniform and my volunteer patrol jacket, the broad smile disappeared. "Bummer. You're not here to join us, are you?"

"Not exactly," Michael growled from behind me. He was a stickler for following rules, and I could tell from his tone that he was annoyed that Jerome seemed completely oblivious to the numerous infractions he was currently committing.

“It’s not that late is it?” Jerome’s voice trailed off as he moved the rainbow-colored bangles up his left arm to see the watch on his wrist. His easygoing attitude was replaced instantly with one of deep embarrassment. “Oh God, I am so sorry. I-I had no clue it was after midnight.”

Leaving the front door wide open with us still standing outside, Jerome rushed into his living room to the sound system and turned it down. A collective “Awwwww!” was heard throughout the crowd of dancers and drinkers.

“Time to go everyone!” Jerome yelled standing on top of the coffee table. His voice projected easily over everyone. “It’s after midnight. Party’s over. Go home. Trust me when I say that many of you are in need of some serious beauty sleep.”

He said it playfully, but it was fairly accurate. While there may have been a few who worked the dress and heels, most of them had only done a halfhearted job preparing for the party. If they had makeup on, it wasn’t applied well. If they didn’t, well then they needed it. Many of the dresses and bikinis and platforms were ill-fitting. There was a pile of sparkly shoes in the corner by the front door, having been quickly abandoned at first discomfort. I didn’t blame them. I had tried my sister’s high heels on a couple of times, and while they made my calf muscles look great, they pinched my toes and hurt my back. No thank you.

Michael and I stood back as the partygoers, primarily college guys, poured out of the duplex. For the most part, they handled themselves well. They didn’t seem too trashed, although one pretty girl named “Chrome,” who was sparkly silver from head to toe, tried to get a little cozy with Michael. He gave off a very strong “don’t touch” vibe, and she was easily dragged off by a group of friends.

Jerome reappeared when his place was almost empty. “Just a few more,” he commented at the same time his name was yelled from a room farther back in the house.

“What is it?” he shouted back, rolling his eyes.

“It’s Anthony.” A small redhead with hipster glasses came out into the living room. He looked at Michael and me nervously, and I anticipated that his friend Anthony was not holding his liquor very well. He may have even been underage.

“Can he at least stand?” Jerome questioned the ginger.

The guy popped a fingernail into his mouth and started chewing. He shook his head vehemently.

“Well, is he okay?” Jerome was trying hard to get information from the guy.

The redhead came closer to Jerome and in a whisper I almost didn’t hear said, “He’s passed out. I can’t wake him.”

At that moment, I sprang to action. Passing out from drinking was a fairly normal occurrence on a college campus, but usually the person could at least be roused into opening his eyes. The fact that Anthony wasn’t responding at all raised red flags for me.

“Michael, there’s a guy in back who is passed out and he’s unresponsive.” I filled my security partner in knowing he hadn’t heard red’s hushed admission. “We need to check him out.” I stepped into the apartment that still reeked of overly sweet, alcoholic punch.

Jerome perked up considerably. He mustn’t have had that much to drink. Good thing. He quickly led the way to the bathroom tucked behind a severely outdated kitchen.

Campus housing like this place was in high demand. Not because it had modern features and comfortable furniture. Not at all. The places were decorated knowing full well that they would hold many parties within their walls. Anything nice or newer than twenty years old would be destroyed by the second party. The upperclassmen who lived here wanted freedom, not modern, sleek design. The rooms were small, the floor plan choppy, and the walls very gray. We had to weave our way around the staircase, through the kitchen and a back study area to get to the bathroom where Anthony supposedly could not be awakened.

Unfortunately, Jerome’s friend was right to be concerned. Even cold water and some fairly aggressive nudging couldn’t get the guy’s eyes to open even a crack. He was breathing normally and had a strong pulse, so we didn’t consider it an emergency yet.

“Did he have a lot to drink tonight?” I started with our standard battery of questions.

“I don’t think so. I only saw him go back for a refill once.”

“And you are his... friend?”

“I was his date tonight. My name is Rayne. I’m a new transfer here, so I don’t really know anyone. I stuck pretty closely to him just because he’s the only one I knew.”



“Thanks, Rayne. So, you’re pretty sure he only had two glasses of punch over how many hours?”

“Three. We’ve been here since nine. We also came with Anthony’s roommate, Cal. But he left early. Wasn’t having much fun.”

I felt sorry for Rayne the redhead. He was on a first date, depending on Anthony to introduce him around, and he got stuck with the guy passed out drunk.

“I know Cal.” Jerome suddenly re-entered the conversation. “He’s in Directing class with me. I’ve got his number. I’ll give him a call. He might know if his roommate drank a lot before coming here.”

Michael and I both nodded, and Jerome promptly dialed Cal’s cell phone. “Cal? Sorry to wake you. Um, did Anthony drink a lot in your room before you came to my party?” Silence. “Oh, sorry, this is Jerome. From Directing class? Rayne is here with Anthony, who seems to be passed out on my bathroom floor.”

We all watched as Jerome listened. He nodded a couple of times, and then he gasped and covered his mouth with his hand.

“What is it Jerome?” I asked calmly, realizing that he had probably just heard some critical information about his unresponsive party guest.

“Okay Cal. Thanks.” Jerome’s speech was rushed. Then he looked at us. “We need to get him to the hospital. He’s diabetic.”

“Shit!” Rayne came to life and started pacing, running his fingers through neat, red curls. “He mentioned it once, but I don’t know much. I’m so sorry! I’m sure it was all the sugar in that damn punch.”

“That’s exactly what Cal said,” Jerome added.

“Rayne, there’s nothing you can do about it now. We need to get him to the ER right away. He’s probably headed for diabetic shock.” Michael pulled the kit from his bag so he could test Anthony’s glucose level. Pricking his finger, Michael expertly fed the strip to the meter and waited for the results.

Less than ten seconds later, the machine beeped and posted its results. “Damn.” Michael said. The display revealed Anthony’s glucose at 414. Way above what it should be and high enough to put him in serious danger. “Garcia, call 9-1-1. He’s at the point of needing an ambulance. I don’t want to take chances.”

The sirens didn't help Jerome's noise problem at all. His neighbor, who had since stopped watching through her curtains, was now out on her front porch along with several other curious onlookers.

After loading Anthony into the back of the ambulance and sending him off to the hospital, Michael offered to take Rayne back to his dorm. Michael would have to file all of the necessary paperwork and notify Anthony's emergency contact. That was never a pleasant experience to have to call someone's parents this early in the morning and tell them their son had to be rushed to the hospital. I would have to document the incident as well, but that could wait until morning. I was concerned about Jerome, who was looking severely pale and terribly anxious.

"You go ahead with Rayne, Michael. I'm going to stay with Jerome. I think Cal's on his way over, and I'll take them to the hospital if they want." My own car was back near the security office, but it wasn't that far of a walk.

"Fine. I'll see you back at the office." Michael and I were still on duty until six, and just because we had an incident didn't mean we were done for the night.

"Sounds good." I waved to Rayne and went to sit on the couch next to Jerome. "You okay?"

He nodded slightly.

"So, the party looked fun. Were you celebrating something special?" I tried to lighten the conversation. Anthony seemed to be out of the woods. He had opened his eyes and was on the way to coherent by the time they left for the ER.

Jerome blinked quickly and finally met my gaze. The crimson lipstick he had been wearing a short time earlier had completely rubbed off. His eyeliner was smudged and the coconut bikini top he had on when we first arrived was replaced by a worn T-shirt that boldly read "Got dick?" alongside a very crude drawing of the male anatomy.

He saw me smirk after reading his shirt. "Sorry." Then he grinned at me. "We were protesting, actually."

"Really? I don't usually see protests quite like this."

"Well, we were all together to plot our next move. You see, one of the student directors in my class wanted to put a twist on a traditional scene for her final project. She proposed Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to instead be *Romy*

*and Juliet*, altered a little and then played by two women. Professor Patchett said no. It wasn't that he opposed mixing up Shakespeare; it's that he said he didn't feel that two women could do the roles justice. That felt wrong and discriminatory, and from that moment on, a bunch of us vowed to audition for the part of Romeo in drag. We were going to give him a woman in that role one way or another! Tonight was sort of our practice run."

Seemed like a worthy cause to me. "I thought the school—especially the arts programs—were pretty inclusive?" I had never encountered any opposition to LGBT people in my three years there.

"They are," he replied with a sigh. "Apparently Patchett thinks changing up a classic like that is going too far. He's not budging."

At that moment, Cal bounded through the front door. His eyes were red, but otherwise, he looked far too perky for a guy who was sound asleep only moments ago. "Jerome, is he okay?" Cal demanded, staring the party host down.

"Yes, he is. Calm yourself." Jerome quickly recanted when Cal glared at him and bared his teeth. "Sorry, it's just been a crazy night. Anthony's fine. Sit down."

After Jerome and I filled Cal in on his roommate, I offered to take him to the hospital.

"I've got my own car, but thanks. I need to see him and hope his crazy mom isn't there yet. She'll freak out and threaten to pull him from school. He's not even out to her yet." Cal rose from the sofa and pulled his keys from his jeans pocket.

"I'd like to go with you, if that's okay?" Jerome said softly. "It happened here in my house, at my party, and I want to make sure he's all right."

The tight expression on Cal's face finally relaxed. This time, he seemed to really look at Jerome. Cal scanned the man's blackened eyes, his in-your-face T-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. He chuckled. "Sure, except, uh, even though I don't mind the shirt, the hospital staff might. And Anthony's mother definitely will."

"Right!" Jerome's face lit up, and he ran up the stairs. "Be right back."

This really wasn't Jerome's fault, other than having the party, so I needed to make sure Cal understood that. "You know, he knew nothing. Sounds like

Anthony may have mentioned being diabetic in passing, but he did it casually and both Jerome and Rayne had no clue.”

Cal’s attention shifted from the stairs to me. He didn’t say anything at first. “You’re Garcia, right? I know Clinton from class.” I nodded, hoping that would encourage him to continue. “He infuriates me, you know? He doesn’t take care of himself like he should. I told him not to drink the punch tonight. I even offered to get him a beer, but he didn’t listen. No wonder his mom worries as much as she does.” Cal’s voice was gentle and very concerned.

“Do you have feelings for him?” I didn’t know Cal very well, but somehow I knew I was okay to ask that question.

“No. Anthony is like a little brother to me. I love him... but like family. Truthfully, I kind of like our ringleader here.” He blushed and looked back to the stairs to make sure no one overheard.

“Jerome?”

“Uh huh. And I was an ass and left Anthony here tonight. It’s my fault he got sick. I had plans to finally ask Jerome out, but when we got here, he was all dressed up and flirting with everyone. Well, except me. I got pissed and walked home.”

“It’s not your fault,” I reassured him before carefully asking, “So, are you really mad at him?”

“Anthony or Jerome? Anthony, a little. But I’m mostly mad at myself, and I took it out on Jerome. I guess I’ve ruined my chances, haven’t I?” Cal stared at his untied sneakers.

“You haven’t.” We both looked up to see Jerome standing in the middle of the staircase.

“What?” It hadn’t yet registered with Cal that Jerome had heard his confession.

Jerome, now more appropriately dressed in a plaid flannel and jeans, made his way down the last couple of steps and stood right in front of Cal. “Your chances. You haven’t ruined them. If you still want to after all of this, I’d like to go out with you.”

“Really?” It was obvious that Cal’s brain still hadn’t caught on.

“Really.” Jerome smiled. An awkward silence filled a room that not so long ago was knee-deep in partiers and punch glasses. I was clearly the odd man out, and it felt a little weird to watch them navigate their way to a first date.

To ease the tension, I picked up an abandoned bikini top and a pair of heels. “How do they look?” I pretended to model them, expecting both to laugh.

But they didn’t. “Actually, you have great features for drag! Your big eyes and delicate, high cheekbones would look great with a little makeup. And those lips? Yum.” Jerome appraised me openly.

“You have a dancer’s body. I think you’d be graceful in drag,” Cal added, nodding in agreement.

That’s not at all what I expected to hear. “Whatever.” I blew their comments off and quickly dropped the shoes and top. I needed to change the subject before I thought anymore about it. Me in drag was a ridiculous notion. “Cal, would you mind dropping me off at the campus center first? Michael drove and he left to take Rayne home. I can walk, but it is kind of cold.”

“Sure, no problem.” Both Cal and Jerome finally snapped out of their I-can’t-believe-you-like-me-because-I-like-you trance. It was sweet, but I needed to get back to work.

That night in general had been pretty wild. It changed all of us. It was how Jerome and Cal got together, and though their relationship was short by most definitions, it was an epic romance. They were an incredible couple and their love knew no limits. It also prompted Anthony to finally come out to his mom. As a former psychology student, I had suspected Anthony was seeking attention by not taking care of himself as he should. The hospitalization ended up being a catalyst for the two of them to have a real conversation. He didn’t go out again with Rayne, which was too bad, because I thought they were cute together. But I think Rayne was way too freaked out.

I made new friends that frigid January night, and Cal, Jerome, and Anthony and I would come to be very close over the years. It was also the first time I even considered doing drag. Sure I brushed it off then, but I just couldn’t seem to get it out of my mind.

Then one night a couple of weeks later, when I was hanging out with Jerome, we worked in the costume room to gather enough dresses for all the “Romeos” to try out in. After a lot of pressure and my own curiosity getting the best of me, I donned an elegant gown in deep burgundy, which complemented my ivory skin and naturally blond hair. It was the first time I saw myself in a dress. But it wouldn’t be the last.

And damn, Jerome and Cal were right; I looked fucking stunning in drag.

“Okay Garcia... I mean, Gardenia,” Jerome said my stage name with added flair and interrupted my trip down memory lane. “That’s your cue! Break a leg baby!” He clapped excitedly as I made my way from stage right.

The curtain was still up but all the lights were down. I saw my mark on stage, glowing amongst complete darkness. I adored moments like this. Right before a performance. I was nervous, excited, filled with adrenaline, and determined to knock the audience’s socks off.

I walked delicately on the balls of my feet so my four-inch heels didn’t make noise. Once in place, I took a moment to focus, to clear my mind of the past, to silently thank the amazing people in my life, and to hope my performance brought down the house and helped raise a lot of money.

The music started and the spotlight flashed across the audience before settling on me. The recognizable opening bars from the Eurythmics’ song “Sweet Dreams” filled the space, and people started to cheer. I had become pretty well known for my Annie Lennox-ish voice, and I sang the medley live. No lip-syncing here. I was in my element on stage, and I was so happy and proud to be performing.

Even though I had paid dearly for not being willing to give it up.

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## Chapter Three

### *The Best Day Ever*

#### *College Graduation*

“What would you do if I wore a dress underneath my gown?” I teased Clinton playfully. Just like the naked sketch of us had made Clinton feel uncomfortable at first, he wasn’t crazy about me in drag either. But I knew he’d come around. We always supported each other no matter what. So, I was exercising patience, hoping that my repeated talk of the subject would wear him down.

“Don’t you dare, Garcia.” Clinton used my given name, which meant he wasn’t happy. I hadn’t expected him to react so coldly.

*Uh oh.*

I wished I could take it back. It was our graduation day, after all. We had finally made it, and I was not going to allow anything to squelch our happiness. “Baby.” I gently took my boyfriend’s hands, which were fidgeting with his tie, and held them tightly in my own. “I’m not serious. You know I would never do anything to ruin this day. It’s going to be perfect. Your parents are here, my parents are here, both of us are graduating with honors, and all of us are going out to celebrate after. Please don’t worry, my love.”

He looked up from my chest, where he had been staring intently. His mouth finally settled into a smile, and his gaze met mine. “I know, G. I’m sorry. I’m so tense, and I don’t know why. We’ve already done all the hard work. Today is supposed to be easy.”

I breathed a sigh of relief hearing him go back to using his nickname for me. “True. But we’re taking a big step too, bringing our parents together to tell them our plans to marry. I know there’s more than thoughts about graduation going on inside your head.” I lightly tapped his temple, and his grin widened.

“You’re right. I need to relax. We’re together, and as long as we are, we can’t go wrong, right?”

“Right.” I nodded and felt my eyes start to fill. I had told myself that I couldn’t cry until after graduation. But seeing Clinton this nervous and hearing him repeat the words we so often said to each other made me emotional. We were together. Our plans had played out like we had hoped. He was interning in

Chicago, and I was going to Northwestern for graduate school. Life was falling perfectly into place.

“Okay, you better get moving then.” Clinton kissed me tenderly and brushed away the stray tear that had managed to fall. “We need to leave in fifteen.”

“Got it! So—” I said walking back to where I had several shirt/tie combinations laid out on the bed. “—The blue dress or the green dress?” I stared down at the carefully ironed shirts.

“Garcia! That’s not funny!”

“What? You can’t help me choose between a blue or green tie?” I put my hands in the air in protest.

He looked at me with his brow furrowed. “Babe, you said blue *dress* or green *dress*.”

Had I really made that slip? I had never even entertained the idea of going to graduation in drag, but apparently on some level, I had been thinking about it. This was not good. Clinton was already uptight about the day, and then I went and made it worse. Why was I thinking so much about this?

*Get over it!*

“I’m sorry. I meant ‘tie,’ I promise. See, I have several laid out over here. Will you help me choose?” I pleaded with him, hoping my apology would be enough to appease him.

As he walked to where I was standing by our bed, I saw him clench and unclench his fists. His tell. I had seen him do that many times during political debates when he had something to say but wasn’t quite ready to say it. I convinced myself not to worry, that it was nerves about telling our parents and nothing more.

“Do we want to go to Jerome and Cal’s club after dinner?” I tried a different approach as he pointed at the green combination on the bed.

My good friends graduated the year before. They had pooled their money in order to buy a local bar that was recently up for sale. In a matter of two short months, that former working-class establishment, where folks would come to enjoy that adult beverage after work, turned into Judy’s—the first gay bar in the area. They were finally starting to gain a following, and Clinton and I were faithful patrons.



“Maybe.” Noncommittal. At least it wasn’t no, which I actually expected.

“We can see how dinner goes first.” I was willing to compromise. I wanted to kiss him on the lips—to make sure we were okay; to feel him validate our love with an intimate touch that would let me know my slipup was forgiven. But when I saw the disappointment in his expression—that I had caused—I couldn’t do it. “I’m going to finish getting dressed.”

“Good idea.” He nodded, gave me a slight smile, and watched with a critical eye as I put on the green button-down he selected. “You ready for this?” he asked once I finished with my tie.

I forced a smile. *As ready as I’d ever be.*

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“You both look stunning!” Mrs. Jefferson said to us after the ceremony ended and the gowns came off. She hugged her son first and then me. I had met her quite a few times over the years Clinton and I were together, so I was fairly comfortable around her and her husband. “CJ, honey, come look at your son and his boyfriend!”

A tall man with impeccably groomed gray hair looked over at his wife, and then begrudgingly left the conversation he was having with another couple. “Clinton. Garcia. You look very nice.”

Mr. Jefferson, or CJ, as the missus liked to call him, was a man of few emotions. I think I could count on one hand how many times I had seen him smile. He didn’t look grouchy really, just stoic. I always felt he had a lot on his mind that he wasn’t saying. Besides his name, this was something else Clinton shared with his dad.

“Nice, dear?” Mrs. Jefferson scolded him and kissed his cleanly shaven cheek. “I’d say they make quite the gorgeous couple, wouldn’t you?”

“Mm hmm.”

Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson lived in the Indianapolis area right around the corner from where Clinton had grown up. It was an old neighborhood with huge trees and mansions. His grandfather had been a politician, a state senator, and his father was the attorney general. Despite their conservative politics, the entire Jefferson family had come to terms a long time ago with their son being gay. It had never been an issue. He was treated no differently than other men in the family, and I was treated the same as any of their spouses. Expectations of him

to follow in the Jefferson family's political footsteps did not change when he came out.

My parents, like me, were the complete opposite of that. They were hippies of the 60s living in the 90s and had followed Jerry Garcia until he died. In fact, they met at one of his concerts, hence my given name. And just because it wasn't enough to name me after *one* drug-addicted musician, they gave me Hendrix for a middle name, catapulting it to the very top of the "names you should never give your kid" list. I did stand out, though, and eventually came to embrace the legacy of my namesakes.

Clinton always gave me a hard time about it. I think that's why he called me "G." His parents and my parents never caught on to the nickname, though. To them I had always been Garcia. Mr. Jefferson even called me Mr. Olson for a while, but it got confusing when both me and my dad would respond. Finally, after much prompting, he started using my first name.

"Oh Debra!" my mom sang excitedly to Clinton's mom. "They do make a gorgeous couple!" She and my dad gave us suffocating hugs. My parents were very affectionate. When my sister and I were younger, we would be mortified at any sign of PDA. Now that I was older, I appreciated how in touch my parents were with their feelings. Whatever was on their minds, they said. No matter how inappropriate. From them, I learned to love openly and to never take those I cared about for granted. I also learned to follow my heart. Which was what led me to Clinton, this crazy-ass Republican I couldn't help but be deeply in love with.

I reached out for Clinton's hand and tugged him close. He wrapped his arm around my waist, something he never had done with a partner before me. He winked at my parents fondly. They adored him just like I did. "Well, as much as I'd like to stay here and talk about how good-looking the two of us are, we have dinner reservations to make."

"Oh yes!" my dad chimed in. "I'm hungry! That was a long ceremony. I never thought the list of Smiths would end." There were probably no more than ten in our class, but my dad had the attention span of a six-year-old, and he was always hungry. A thin man much like me, he could eat his weight in pastries and never gain a pound. I liked to think my delicate features that Jerome said looked fabulous in a dress came from my dad. My dad was known to wear a skirt or two with his Birkenstock sandals back in the day. I even had pictures to prove it.

“So we’ll meet you there?” Mrs. Jefferson said, taking her husband by the elbow.

“See you there!” My mom turned to us. “You sure you want to drive separately? We have room, and we don’t mind bringing you back here after dinner.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Olson, but I’m happy to drive us. Your hotel is right by the restaurant, so we couldn’t inconvenience you by making you come all the way back to campus.” Clinton thankfully jumped in.

“Claire. Please call me Claire.” And it began again. No matter how badly my mom wanted him to call her by her first name, he couldn’t. He had been trained from birth to always address his elders properly. So, my mom would forever be Mrs. Olson, much to her dismay.

“Come on, dear.” My dad pulled her toward the parking lot outside the arena where graduation had been held. “Let them drive. I’m sure they’d like a little alone time before having to spend the next few hours with their parents.” My dad waggled his eyebrows at me, like we were in on some big secret together. I had to remind myself to be polite and not roll my eyes at him. He was goofy and odd, but I loved him.

I got lucky in the parent department. We never had it all, but we also never wanted for anything. My mom and dad made picnicking in the woods behind our house fun. We’d have Uno contests and the winner would get to choose what kind of ice cream we’d have for dessert. We listened to music in the living room and danced together. We road-tripped and camped in a lot of the same places they visited when they were first dating and following the Jerry Garcia Band. I think my childhood was pretty great. And very different from Clinton’s, that’s for sure.

He told me he spent a lot of time at home with his nanny while his parents attended political events, until he started expressing interest, and then occasionally they’d take him along. His parents were good to him, that much I know, and it was clear they adored him and his accomplishments. But his life was very different from mine. And it did make me wonder if he would want a nanny to care for our kids, so I could focus on being the proper husband at his political events. He had told me he didn’t want that once before when I asked. I hoped he wouldn’t change his mind when children actually came along. I planned on being a very hands-on dad.

“Do you want me to drive?” I asked Clinton as we got closer to his car. I knew he was nervous about our dinner announcements, and I wanted to give him the chance to relax on the way if he wanted.

“No. I would like to drive my newly graduated–with-honors soon-to-be-husband to dinner with our parents. Is that okay?”

His words turned my insides to mush. I loved him more than anything in this world. Our fight from before the ceremony was completely forgotten by now. Any of the tension we felt during finals, the bickering we did as the end of our college careers loomed closer, all disappeared. We had done it together. And as long as we were together, we couldn’t go wrong.

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I was glad we had driven separately. It gave us that much-needed breather after a very eventful meal. Overall, everything went as planned. Both sets of parents knew how serious we were about each other, so describing our desired future together didn’t surprise anyone.

“That went well, didn’t it?” I was the first to break the silence. Clinton was driving with one hand on the wheel and the other clasped tightly in mine on the middle console.

He looked away from the road briefly, and I saw the raw emotion on his face. Unlike me, Clinton was not a man who wore his heart on his sleeve. He was usually very reserved with his feelings, and I was shocked in those rare moments when he’d open up and show vulnerability. Tonight was one of those times. His typically alert features seemed so relaxed, almost blissful. Seeing that unabashed joy in him was a memory I planned to keep in my heart for a very long time.

Don’t get me wrong. Clinton was kind, generous, supportive, and a very loving partner. I knew it by the care he took in helping me work through a complicated assignment, how he rubbed my feet after I’d had a long day, and how his eyes shone with pride and love whenever we touched. His everyday actions told me more about his character than the number of times he held my hand walking on campus or said the words “I love you.” Granted, it would be amazing if he were more into public displays of affection, but I didn’t need him to do that to know how much he cared.

“G? I finally feel content, like life really is coming together for us, just like you said it would. I know I can be uptight, and I’m so sorry for fighting with you this morning. But it means so very much to me that we share the same

dreams for our future, and I feel lost when that is challenged. Tonight, telling our parents that we're moving and will be planning our wedding in a year, it made me happier and prouder than I've ever been in my life."

In that moment, I felt like we were superheroes—strong, powerful, and ready to conquer the world together.

That night, our lovemaking was tender and charged with energy. The outfit I didn't wear to graduation ended up tossed to the floor, very un-Clinton-like behavior, and he had us both undressed within seconds of me locking the dorm room door.

"Are we in a hurry?" I teased as he moved my underwear to my ankles with one firm push. Holding his shoulders, I stepped out of them, being careful not to topple over, since his aggressiveness was making me dizzy.

"We have all the time in the world." He stood and looked me directly in the eyes. His blue irises darkened with a hunger I recognized, and I knew that I was in for a night of pampering and pleasure that probably wouldn't end until the early hours of the morning. *Bring it on.* The last week of finals had been intense, and I was ready to release all my pent-up tension. And I couldn't think of a better way to do that than spending the night getting fucked hard by the love of my life.

"I want you so bad, G." Something else I didn't hear from him all that often. I was usually the desperate, needy one; the regular initiator in our sex life. That night was different. I had surrendered entirely to him numerous times before, but this felt as if he were finally claiming me. Marking me as his and only his. He bit and sucked his way down my neck, to my collarbone, leaving proof of his possession in dark purple that gleamed proudly against my light skin.

"You have me. I'm yours." My words stumbled and caught in my throat. Overcome and overwhelmed with emotion.

"Yes," he asserted with a growl, and then lifted me from my feet and laid me on the bed. "Mine. All mine."

I nodded willingly in agreement and spread myself out for him, extending arms and legs, tilting my chin back and shifting my hips forward so my erection stood at attention. He carefully straddled me, his strong thighs pushing mine back together. He caressed my face with his fingertips, tracing a pattern he knew well. My eyes fluttered closed, and I inhaled the fruity smell of my shampoo in his hair.

"You're out of your shampoo," I mused aloud.

“No.”

“But you used mine. You don’t like my fruity stuff.” I opened my eyes back up to see his sheepish grin. His chest rumbled with quiet laughter against mine.

“I usually don’t. We’ve just been apart lately with finals and graduation, and I missed your smell. So, I’ve been using yours for the last week.”

“Well, Clinton James, are you turning into a sap?”

“Nope,” he warned with a finger to my lips. “Maybe, but that’s just between you and me.”

“It’ll be our secret. But when it comes up during your first mayoral debate, you’re going to have to confess to it,” I teased playfully, but his expression only intensified.

“It’s you, G. You do this to me.”

There he went again, being all romantic and shit. “You say the best fucking things sometimes.”

He winked. “Yep, I know.” His hands found my face once again and mine found the small of his back. We were pressed together head to toe, and I felt every inch of his wonderfully strong chest, his slim hips and hard cock. The brush of his tip against my belly made me moan. I wanted to take him into my mouth, but I knew instinctively that we’d be skipping anything oral this first time around. I knew what he wanted. Because I wanted it too.

He reached under the corner of the pillow under my head and pulled out the bottle of lube. I raised my eyebrows, but he didn’t even acknowledge my surprise. His focus was razor sharp. And within seconds he had a finger in me, taking steps to stretch and prepare, as I wriggled under his confident touch. I was so eager that he could have plunged into me right then, and I would not have complained. But even in his neediest moments Clinton would never do that, even if I begged. He was too thoughtful to not get me ready first.

“Yes, oh God, yes.” I buried my face in his chest as not to wake the neighbors. I had a tendency to get loud, and even though Clinton and I were no secret, I still didn’t want the entire dorm hearing us celebrate our graduation night.

He stroked in and out, the soft pad of his lubed finger tunneling his way to my very core, where I ached for him to fill me. One finger became two, and the added pressure reached my gland and shot pleasure from my toes straight to my dick. “You feel amazing, G.”

“Fuck! So do you! I’m ready,” I pled without embarrassment.

“Not yet,” he chided, slipping a third finger inside and making me buck against him, forcing him even deeper.

“Bastard,” I whispered. I was so turned on and wanted his cock, and because of that, he was going to make me wait. I knew it. He loved taking me to the edge and pulling back, just before I went over. He was a cruel, incredible, fucking intense lover.

“Mm baby, you know I’m always worth the wait.” He punctuated his remark with a bite to my nipple. Now those daggers of lust were spearing me from head to toe. I felt like I was going to break apart if he didn’t let me come soon.

All I could do was yell, and my own voice echoed inside my head as Clinton kissed away my cries. His lips were soft as silk as they moved over mine, and I tasted the sweet bitterness of the dark chocolate torte we had shared for dessert. The languid movement of his mouth betrayed the urgency of his touch. His fingers invaded my channel but it wasn’t enough. “Clinton.” I stilled his hand with mine. “Please.”

“Okay, okay.” I was glad he had recognized my desperation, because I was on the verge of exploding without any external stimulation. Though I didn’t mind if that happened, I wanted him to be inside me first. We were celebrating so much that night; graduation, his internship and my admission to grad school, and our engagement. There was lots to look forward to, and that compounded my already intense emotional state. I needed to be joined with this man in every way possible when I let go.

“Thank you,” I said when he pulled his fingers from me. I immediately missed him, but then was quickly filled once again when he pushed inside.

“Take a breath, baby.”

I hadn’t even realized that I was holding it. I exhaled heavily, pushing against him and making his entry easier. “Yes.” He was fully seated and it felt damn good. “Move.” I didn’t mean to be short with him, but my ability to assemble coherent sentences was severely compromised at that point.

Clinton chuckled, and happiness bubbled up in my chest. He knew me so very well. “I’m getting there,” he cooed lovingly and started his first long pull from my body.

I was okay until he pushed back inside. Tapping near my overly sensitive bundle of nerves, he nudged me closer and closer to my climax. I hoped he wouldn't edge me again now. I just wanted him to make me come.

“Yes, harder.”

And he obeyed. “Do you need to touch yourself?” he asked, but the adoring expression on his face told me he already knew the answer.

“No,” I said, confirming his suspicion. “I just need you to keep fucking me like this until I feel you explode inside me. Then I'll come all over the both of us.”

“Fuck.” His sweetness was replaced by lust. His eyes closed, and his mouth fell open. He grabbed ahold of his bottom lip with his teeth, which I found so damn sexy. He threw his head back, changed the angle of his hips, and nailed my prostate with a sniper's precision.

I yelled something unintelligible, over and over, and started punching my hips up to meet every thrust. Fuck being quiet. Fuck if any of the neighbors had a problem with it. Clinton and I loved each other, and right now, we were on top of the world. And no one was bringing us down.

“I'm so close.” His movements quickened and his rhythm faltered. Smashing his lips to mine, he kissed me hard and fierce, and sucked the scream right out of me. I clawed at the bed and dug my heels into the mattress. I didn't want to move one fraction from this perfect place.

“Me too, baby,” I said, and he opened his eyes. They looked almost black. And they saw into my soul.

“I love you, I love you,” he chanted as he quivered and then went totally rigid. Within seconds I could feel his spreading warmth, and I let my own cum explode from me, coating our chests and shooting onto the comforter.

I floated down from my orgasmic high and rode the waves of pleasure that slowly restored feeling back into my body. I grabbed my dick to help pump out the last bits of cum. Clinton was mouthing my chest, using his tongue to clean up my nipples and the cream that pooled in my belly button.

I was finally able to release my other hand's death grip on the sheets and put it into his thick black locks. Despite his exertion, his hair had remained almost perfectly styled. And while I liked the well-groomed Clinton a lot, I liked when his wild side made an appearance too. That Clinton didn't care about his wavy hair being out of place, he didn't care if his speech wasn't eloquent, and he



didn't clench his fists and hold anything back. That Clinton was uninhibited and completely vulnerable.

"I love you too, baby." My fingers combed through his hair, and I tugged his head back just enough for him to lift his gaze to mine. Clinton's eyes were back to their piercing blue color, and I felt his body relax against mine. I kissed him, needing to prolong the intimacy and make sure he didn't move off of me. Though he was heavier than I was by about thirty pounds, the weight of him was calming, and I needed him to stay right there for a little while longer.

"I'm crushing you." Clinton started to push off from my chest.

"No! No, please," I begged and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, settling his body back onto mine.

We lay there for a long while, listening to the slowing sounds of our breathing and the echoes of other graduation celebrations ringing through the dorm hallway.

"We made it, G." Clinton's lips tickled my chest as he spoke.

"We did, baby. We're together." I kissed the perspiration from his forehead.

"And as long as we're together..."

"We can't go wrong," I finished for him.

That was the best day of my life. Our love had never been stronger and our future never brighter.

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## Chapter Four

### *Introducing Gardenia*

My set started off strong. I was really in the groove tonight. “Sweet Dreams” turned into “Walking on Broken Glass” followed flawlessly by “Why” and “Money Can’t Buy It.” My big finish would include a rousing arrangement of “Take Me to the River,” and I’d close with “I Put a Spell on You” from the ever popular erotic book-turned-feature film.

The gown I chose was almost the same deep burgundy shade of the first dress I tried on back when we were in college. The wig I wore was essentially the same color as my naturally blond hair, except it was much longer and straightened to the middle of my back. With Jerome’s help, I had successfully created the smoky-eyed look, and had executed some exceptional contouring that accentuated my cheekbones. Despite not having my favorite shoes, I looked good. And I felt good too. Drawing be damned. I had moved on.

The audience was alive, and I fed off of all their energy and applause. I danced across the whole stage, pulling off the choreography Jerome and I had worked out and adding some of my own improvised movements. It felt so incredible to be in the moment like that.

The music transitioned into the opening bars of “I Put a Spell on You,” and I sauntered to the edge of the stage for my final number. For the first time I could see out into the crowd. Every seat was full, and everyone’s gaze was focused on me. I sang the first bars and started looking directly at those in the front few rows of chairs. I always found someone to sing to. Someone I could cast under my own spell.

Finding a hottie in the second row, I settled on him momentarily until something pulled my attention to his left. Following the seats in that direction, my gaze landed on each person, catching their eye, still searching for someone to seduce with my song. As I got to the end of the row, I saw a dark head of wavy hair, downcast as if he was staring at the floor. *This is the one*, I thought. I would sing to him until he looked at me. I *would* get him to look at me.

I started in with the haunting chorus, never taking my eyes off the dark haired stranger. *Dammit, I’m much prettier than your fucking shoes.* No matter how much I willed him to look up, he didn’t. *Lift your damn head!* I sang the

final line, pleading with him, confessing that I was his, even if he didn't want me. And as I hung on to the last note, the object of my attention raised his head and finally looked to the stage. Piercing blue eyes stared into mine.

*Clinton.*

And then everything went dark.

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### *Summer after Graduation*

"I'm going to miss you so much." I was already miserable thinking about Clinton going to Chicago without me, so by the time we had packed the last of the boxes in his car, I couldn't even look at him. Every time I did, I thought about waking up to an empty bed, and I'd almost fall apart. I had a major meltdown yesterday when I was with Jerome at the club, so silly me, I thought I got it all out and could say good-bye without becoming a blubbering mess. But even though I knew this change in our plans was the right thing to do, it wasn't making it any easier to send the love of my life off alone.

Clinton circled his car, checking the tires yet again, and then shut the trunk. That act felt so symbolic for what we were about to do, and the sound it made when it slammed closed made my ears ring.

"G, you know I'm going to miss you too. So very much. And we'll see each other whenever we can."

"I suppose." Then I changed my answer. "Yes, sorry, we absolutely will. When you're not busy or in D.C. and I'm not swamped at the club, I'm there."

He came over and stood right in front of me. Not only could I smell the sweet mint on his breath, but I could also feel the heat radiating off of him. It was warm outside, nearly ninety degrees, but how my body felt around him had nothing to do with the temperature. It was how I always felt when he was close. And what I wanted him to do now more than anything was to lift me like a sack of potatoes, throw me over his shoulder, and take me back to our bed. But that had already happened once today, and he was over an hour past his scheduled departure time.

"Baby." He grabbed ahold of my shoulders and pulled me to his chest.

I clutched him desperately. We stayed like that for so long, sweat started to trickle down his neck and onto my shirt. But I wasn't ready to let go yet. I pressed even closer, locked my arms around his waist and inhaled. I'd have to live on the memories of that scent for at least a month.

Until now, Clinton and I had never been apart longer than a week. There was no way Clinton could pass up an opportunity to spend the first two full months of summer working for one of his dad's friends at the Pentagon. Then when Cal, Jerome's husband, started getting sick again, I offered to stay and help with the club. They had just made the investment when Cal was diagnosed with T-cell leukemia. Helping my best friends out instead of sitting alone in an apartment in Chicago was an easy choice for me. Either way I'd be without Clinton, so I might as well be where I could do some good.

I was starting to get really sticky, so I kissed his collarbone through his T-shirt and took a step back. He slid his hands up to frame my face and looked me directly in the eyes. I wanted to look away, run back up to the apartment, and avoid saying good-bye to him entirely, but I couldn't get myself to move. I was transfixed by those beautiful blue eyes I loved so much.

"Good-bye," I whispered, willing the tears not to fall.

"Good-bye for now," he whispered back and kissed me. I wasn't sure if the wetness I felt on my cheeks was from my own tears or his, but either way, it made our lips glide and our tongues taste salty.

"For now," I repeated more to convince myself.

"I'll call when I get there." He nodded his head to me, and when he turned to open the driver's side door, I could see streaks shining on his cheeks. Once he was no longer facing me, he wiped the back of his hand across his face, as if he needed to do it when I wasn't watching him. Feeling my own tears fall in a rush now, I smiled and followed him as he drove down the street and around the corner.

I was about to head back inside, when my cell phone rang. "Hello."

"I miss you already."

"You big sap," I teased. "I miss you already too."

"That's all for now. Talk to you again soon."

"Okay. Be safe. I love you."

"And I love you."

So much for not crying. I didn't even try to hold it in anymore. My nose started to run, so I quickly made my way up the stairs to the place I would be subletting for the summer. I needed a tissue. Why didn't I think to put some in my pocket? Because for some reason I thought I'd be okay. Not so much.

I got to the bathroom, blew my nose and almost didn't hear the sound of my phone ringing again. I lifted it to my ear not even looking at the screen. "Still miss me?"

"Um, I just saw you yesterday."

"Jerome. Hi."

"Wow. Don't you sound thrilled to hear from me."

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Sorry. Clinton just left."

"I thought he was supposed to leave a couple hours ago?"

"He was. Um, it took a little longer than we thought to pack," I fibbed, even though I expected Jerome to see right through my feeble excuse.

"Right," he said skeptically but didn't call me on it.

"So, what's up?"

"I hate to ask this right now, but would you be willing to go into Judy's for a little while? I'm at the doctor's office again with Cal." I could hear Cal's voice in the background along with a few others I imagined belonged to people in the waiting room.

"Is he okay?" I quickly abandoned my own pity party. Clinton and I would only be apart for the summer. Cal was getting sicker by the day, and the particular form of leukemia he had was terribly aggressive. Saying he'd be around next year was optimistic. It put my own misery into perspective.

"He just got really weak again, so they're drawing more blood. The chemo is getting to him. He can't eat and with his anemia, the fatigue is horrible. We'll be here for about an hour, then I'll take him home and head over."

"No problem. I'm there. Anything I should know about tonight?" I wasn't officially scheduled to start working full-time at Judy's until the end of this week, but I had no qualms about accelerating that plan. All I had on my agenda for the next few days was unpacking and pining away for my boyfriend. Sounded exciting, I know.

"Nope. Standard schedule for Fridays. Karaoke all night and two-dollar well drinks until seven. But I should be in before it really picks up."

"Got it. Give Cal a big smooch for me. I'll see you in a few hours." I ended the call and stared at myself in the cracked mirror above the sink. My pale skin was flushed from crying, and my eyes, normally standard hazel, looked more

amber when they were surrounded by puffy redness. Not a good look. And certainly not the way I wanted to make a first impression on my brand-new employees. Granted, I had been at the club so much over the last year helping Jerome that they all knew me, but this time I was going to be one of their bosses. Jerome had hired me as a staff supervisor when Cal started treatment earlier this month.

I splashed cold water on my face and grabbed my toothbrush. No time for wallowing. Jerome and Cal needed me, and with Clinton gone, I needed to keep myself busy.

Judy's was always busy on Friday nights. This was the only official gay club until you got to Chicago, so people came from all over western Illinois and southern Wisconsin to hang out. Karaoke was a big enough draw, but now that it was summer and school was out, they had drag shows twice a week that packed the house.

Jerome had insisted on naming the place after his favorite gay icon: Judy Garland. I teased him endlessly about it. I insisted that calling it RuPaul's would have been less obvious. But the *Wizard of Oz* was his all-time favorite movie, and Ms. Garland was his ultimate leading lady. Cal was completely okay with it and found it cute. He even went as far as to say that he thought Judy herself would approve. She might, but I didn't. But then again, I hadn't just spent thousands of my life savings to buy it either. So, even though I thought it too predictable, Jerome ordered the neon sign done in a yellow brick pattern, and opened his dream club named "There's No Place Like Judy's." Regulars, like me, shortened it to "Judy's."

That night we were constantly busy, and the hours flew by. When Jerome finally made it in, happy hour was over and he was looking haggard and disheveled. That couldn't be good. Clinton had called hours earlier to let me know he had arrived safely. While in Chicago, he would be living in the cottage behind the Albert's house in Old Town. Mr. Albert, his dad's best friend, was the one with the Pentagon job. Once he got to D.C., he'd also be staying with Mr. Albert in his loft.

"Jerome, you should have stayed home. You look awful." Sven, one of the newer bartenders, snorted at my comment.

"Aw, Garcia, you always know how to make a girl feel special." He came to the front of the bar and plopped down heavily.

Grabbing the closest stool, I pulled it up next to him and gave him a hug. "Ha ha. How's Cal?"

“Sleeping now. His white count is low and his spleen is the size of a grapefruit. I don’t even know if these damn treatments are working. He seems worse.” Jerome sounded angry, but I knew that it was his way of dealing with the anguish he felt watching this horrible disease sideline his husband. Until recently, Cal and Jerome shared the club responsibilities equally, true partners in love and business. Once chemo started, this time accompanied by targeted radiation, Cal started taking days off. Now he was home more than he was at the club. I knew Jerome was not only worried about him but he also missed his husband. The doctors had been hopeful, even when they diagnosed the rare, often fatal form of leukemia, because Cal was young and in great shape. That was a year ago, and up until recently, he had been holding strong.

“It hasn’t even been a month yet, Jerome. Give it more time. Lean on me as much as you can. I have no one to go home to, so I’d rather stay occupied here.”

Jerome stood and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “I will. And thanks. You know I was only teasing earlier.”

“Of course.”

“Please, bitch. Get back to work.” Jerome gave me a genuine smile and walked in the direction of the club’s office. “I need to take care of some paperwork. I’ll be out in an hour. Is that okay? Then you can head home.”

“Sounds good. Take as long as you need. I’m here.” I went back behind the bar to help Sven. Soon people would be lining up to get in. We needed to have glasses clean, garnishments out, and the cooler stocked before peak time hit.

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I dragged my tired ass up the two flights of stairs to my temporary home. When everything went down with Clinton working in D.C. and Jerome needing help, I decided to sublet a place for a few months. Lots of students rented these apartments during the school year but then went home over summer break. In order to not lose the apartment for the following year, they’d sign a twelve-month lease even if they weren’t there for three of them. The financially savvy, as well as those whose parents didn’t pay all of their bills, would sublet the place to recoup some of that rent money. As a result, I was able to find a nice studio with air-conditioning and a dishwasher for a reasonable price. Then Clinton would have a place to come back to when he could, and I wouldn’t have to live at my parent’s house, which was forty-five minutes away from the club.

By the time Jerome had gotten everything done, it was almost eleven. I had been there for seven hours, all through happy hour and most of karaoke. I was more than happy to leave when he told me too. I was tired.

I turned on a light, kicked off my shoes, and face-planted on the bed. It still smelled like Clinton.

I had to stop that. No more feeling sorry for myself.

I picked up my phone and texted to see if he was still up. Within seconds Clinton rang through on FaceTime.

“Hi, gorgeous,” I said. “I was hoping you were still up.”

He grinned and stretched. “I’m up but barely. It was an exhausting day.”

“You’re telling me.” I proceeded to give him an update on Cal.

“I know this is hard, but that just proves that we’re doing the right thing. Jerome and Cal really need you there. We’re lucky. Their future is so... uncertain. We know come fall we’ll be together. They don’t.” Clinton voiced exactly what I had been thinking earlier when Jerome called for my help.

“You’re right, baby. We can do this, no sweat! If tonight is any indication, I’m going to be so busy at the club, before I know it, it’ll be August. I’ll have to spend most of my free time recovering. It’s tough work being on my feet all day.”

“My poor G.” Clinton pouted and then broke into a yawn.

“Yeah, yeah. Usually I have this really sexy boy toy of mine around to rub my feet when they’re sore. I might have to find someone else to give me a foot massage.”

He perked up. “Don’t you dare,” he scolded me and gave me the evil eye.

“Ugh. Don’t worry. I only want you to touch my sore feet.”

“Lucky me,” he joked. I had terribly sensitive feet, and he had to balance pressure with my tendency to be ticklish. I was a bit of a challenge when it came to foot rubs.

“You love it.”

“I do.” Clinton was sitting on what looked to be an extremely posh bed. It had tall, oak pillars and a rather flowery comforter. Had we been able to talk earlier in the night, I would have made him give me the official tour. I surmised from how his dad had described it, that the guest house he’d be staying in was



way bigger than where I'd be staying this summer. Although that didn't take much. Tomorrow I'd make him show me around.

"Well, as much as I'd like to keep you talking to me, you look like you're about to crash, and I feel the same way. Can we talk tomorrow?"

"Sure. I miss you." He ran his hands through his hair, setting wavy curls loose from their standard slicked-back place.

"Hmm. What I'd give to do that for you." I groaned, and even though most of my body was tired, a certain region was perking up.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." We stared at each other for a moment, and I watched him try to stifle another yawn. "You need to go to sleep. Thanks for talking to me so late. I love you."

"I love you too." He gave me a drowsy wave and hung up.

I slept in my clothes, physically too tired to get off the bed and mentally too tired to give a shit.

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"We're going to do a special show during Pride this year to raise money for LGBT youth organizations. What do you think?"

It was early on Saturday, and I had been working at the club for a week already. I was tired from the night before, and I hadn't had nearly enough coffee yet. So, when Jerome came at me all excited and shit, I winced.

"You look rough." Cal's voice spoke over the chatter of the rest of the staff.

"Hey you! Are you feeling better?" I went to him and gave him a gentle hug.

"I'm feeling all right."

It was the first time I had seen him in the club since I started working last week. It cheered me up a little. "I'm just tired. After I got off, I stayed up late first talking to Clinton and then to my mom. He leaves for D.C. this coming week, so I held it together when we were on the phone and then called Mom. I complained and cried to her."

"Garcia, I cannot thank you enough for sticking around this summer. I know it's not what you and Clinton had planned but—"

I cut him off. “No more. You are my best friends, you need me, and I’m here. I’d just be lying around watching soaps and eating bonbons while Clinton was gone anyway. Think of it as saving my waistline.”

“Speaking of waistline,” Jerome jumped back in. “I found this dress that you would look amazeballs in. What do you say? Make your debut performing in our Pride show.”

“I’m not sure, Jer.” I had put on a dress several times since the incident in the costume room, but I hadn’t kept it on for long. I’ll admit that I loved the way it felt to have my legs free under there. The first time I hadn’t even tucked. But the second time, Jerome insisted, so I could get the full effect. He supplied the shoes, boobs, and the tape; he borrowed a wig from the theater and used his own makeup to complete the ensemble. Looking in the double mirror that day, there was no denying it; I had features that were meant for drag.

“Before you say no, hear me out.” I nodded for him to continue. I was willing to at least listen to what he had to say. “I know you’ve never performed in front of anyone besides me. Doing that on stage is entirely different from playing around in the costume room at school. But you are good, Garcia. You are gorgeous in a dress. You have slim legs, a small waist, and your voice is really strong. I’m willing to work with you, provide your wardrobe, help with some easy choreography, and anything else you need. I’m just so excited about this fundraising event, and I want it to be successful. I’d love your support.”

“I can think of about twenty other ways I can support you besides donning a dress and heels.”

“I know.” He glanced at Cal.

“Here’s the truth, Garcia. We realize that Clinton isn’t so crazy about you dancing in a slinky dress, but you have something special. We’d really love it if you’d share that talent with others. And there really is no better cause than LGBT youth, right?”

There it was. You could always get me with kids. I loved them, wanted to father them, and would do just about anything for them. Including perform in a dress, wear a stuffed bra, tuck my junk, and sing in front of hundreds of people. It terrified me and excited me at the same time. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

Seeing that beaming smile on Cal’s face was worth any of the humiliation and pain I’d suffer as a result. He was always positive and upbeat through the most debilitating treatments, but his closest friends knew that his smile was

forced. Not this one. This reaction from him was pure, unadulterated joy. And the look on Jerome's face seeing his husband that happy was worth just as much to me. I would do this for the event, to help raise money, and then I'd be done. Clinton wouldn't have a problem with that.

No longer did I need coffee to pick me up. I was on a natural high. It was amazing what doing something nice for a friend did to your own attitude. That day, I was the happiest supervisor around, even after I busted two of the servers fooling around in the men's room and had to send them home. Nothing could kill my mood.

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"You did *what*?" At first Clinton hadn't taken it as well as I thought.

"Honey, it's just for the fundraiser and I'm done. Cal asked, and if he weren't so ill, I wouldn't have done it. And it's for LGBT youth."

"You told me." We weren't on FaceTime that night, so I couldn't see the expression on his face. All I heard was silence. "You think I'm overreacting."

"I think you are." I answered him honestly.

"Promise me it's just for special occasions like this?"

I knew he'd come around. "Promise."

Except that one night turned into two, when Jerome and Cal scheduled a second show. And then it turned into three when the following Saturday night two of the girls called in sick with the flu. I became the reluctant substitute—reluctant only in that I didn't want to admit to Clinton what I was doing and how much I liked doing it. I justified it by saying it'd be for the summer only, to help my best friends, and then off to Chicago I'd go. Good-bye to drag.

I should have known it would never work like that. My ruse came crumbling down the third week in July when Clinton made a surprise trip home.

It was Thursday night, the first show of the week, and one of the main girls was on vacation. I had agreed to do it knowing Thursdays were safe. If I went to Chicago or if Clinton came to me, we'd always do it on Friday. Jerome never asked me to do Saturday unless he was super desperate, even if I didn't have plans, knowing that my boyfriend could decide to drive back at the last minute.

I hated keeping this from Clinton. We had discussed his hang-up with it before, and even though I knew where he was coming from, I still had a hard time with it. He told me he felt that in a way, drag performers were setting back

the gay movement. For so long the only acceptable pairing was a man and a woman. And to avoid making trouble and in some cases, breaking the law, some men would dress as women. Clinton said we fought so hard for same-sex couple recognition, and that's what he wanted in his relationship. He wanted me next to him wearing a matching tux, not a gown, at his inaugural ball.

He was very good at rationalizing, but I feared there was more to it. Why did it have to be one way *or* the other? Truthfully, I had suspected for a while that Clinton had some internalized homophobia he was not willing to admit. I also suspected that those feelings may have been planted, maybe not intentionally, by his family. To them, being gay was okay. To them, being transgendered was not okay. But I didn't want to be a woman; I just enjoyed performing as one. There was a significant difference. Either way, if we were going to survive as a couple, Clinton and his family were going to have to get over their phobias.

But he did come back on a Thursday, and imagine my shock when I went to the front of the house to get Jerome's help with my wig and instead ran into my fiancé.

At first he didn't recognize me. Then those piercing blue eyes of his darkened, and he started clenching his fists. "Garcia?" He wasn't asking me as much as he was challenging me, like he was issuing a dare. I think he expected me to deny it. My heart jumped into my throat, and I thought I might vomit right there on the bar floor.

"Clinton, what are you doing here? I'm so glad to see you." Considering the circumstances, I thought I recovered well. Act like it's no big deal. Then maybe it wouldn't be.

I didn't really think it had much chance of working, but that tiny glimmer of hope was quickly dashed when Jerome came looking for me. "Oh, Gardenia!" I had finally chosen a stage name, and he loved to use it. "I hear you need help with your wig. Girl, you've been doing this for two months now, you should know how to do it without my help."

Jerome stopped at the bar and took a drink of his water before he even realized that Clinton was standing there. When he finally saw him, he stopped midgulp. "Hey, Clinton." I had to give him credit; he did try to sound casual, like it was any other day my fiancé visited me at the club.

Clinton glared at Jerome before fixing his gaze back on me. "Two months? And you have a drag name now? How the hell did this happen and you didn't

tell me? You promised, G.” He reached out to touch me, but when he couldn’t find a place that wasn’t made up or covered in glitter, he dropped his hand. I repelled him. I had broken my promise to him and now he couldn’t even bear to touch me.

“I’m sorry. I meant to tell you.”

“But you didn’t.”

“You’re right. I made a huge mistake, and I’m sorry. Let me change and we can go back to the apartment and talk.”

Jerome cleared his throat from behind me. Shit. He needed me or the show would only have one act tonight. I had committed to performing, and there was no way I could let him down. Or could I?

“If you need to go, go.” Jerome was letting me off the hook. He was a true friend, and I knew he would never make me choose. He knew Clinton would win.

“Thanks, Jer.” I smiled gratefully. “Give me a few minutes, babe, and I’ll be back in my shorts and we can head out, okay?”

Clinton nodded. “And Garcia?” I was already on my way to the dressing room, so I walked back toward him a few steps.

He looked so good standing there, even if he was pissed off. He was wearing a pair of dark denim jeans that were tight in all the right places, and a pair of loafers I hadn’t seen before. He had them on without socks, which I found terribly sexy. And even though I knew I was in for a rough night of hashing this out, I was happy he was here.

“It’s really good to see you,” I said when I stood in front of him again. I waited for him to say the same.

“Please take the makeup off. I know it’ll take you extra time, but I can’t stand to look at you like that.”

Punch in the gut. I was stunned and hurt and speechless. And instead of standing up for myself, I hurried to the dressing room to change back into my man-clothes.

As I started removing accessories, my mind raced. Our relationship was not like this. We encouraged each other; we didn’t belittle and criticize, like Clinton just did to me. He was my fiancé and I loved him, but I felt like I didn’t know *that* Clinton waiting for me by the bar. What had happened to the fiancé

who said we'd support each other no matter what? Where had the man gone who missed me so much he called me every night just to hear my voice? Whoever *that* Clinton was out there, he felt like a stranger to me.

"Can I help with anything?" Jerome appeared in the doorway and crossed his arms.

"No," I replied angrily.

"Garcia, are you going to be okay?"

"I don't know, Jer. I've missed him so damn much, and he's all I thought about when he first left. But working here, performing... I'm having a good time, and I don't know if I want to stop."

"And you're fantastic. One of the best at Judy's."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and I'm not the only one who thinks that."

"So what do I do?" I stopped wiping off lipstick and looked to my best friend for advice.

"I can't tell you that. Only you can decide what you want. And if you are willing to accept the trade-offs of the choice you ultimately make." Jerome came up behind me and kissed the top of my head. "I'll give you a few minutes."

I could continue changing, go back to the apartment with Clinton, and assure him I'd never do drag again. Or I could do the show and piss off my boyfriend. Either way I'd lose something. Go home, and I give up doing what I love and break my promise to my best friend; go on, and I give up a weekend with the fiancé I miss more than anything and break the promise I made to him.

The cruelest part of the situation was that I had no one to blame but myself.

Needless to say, Clinton was a bit shocked when I marched my glittery ass back out and told him I was staying. He could go home and wait for me, and we'd talk after, but I would not shirk the commitment I had made to Jerome. I liked performing, and I was good at it, and he would see that if he gave it a chance.

Clinton's hands stopped clenching, and his shoulders sagged. "Fine. I guess I shouldn't be surprised you won't leave Jerome hanging. I'll go back to the apartment, but I won't wait all night."

“Thank you,” I said to him.

Jerome stared at me wide-eyed as Clinton left the bar alone.

“What did you do, Garcia?”

“I did what I should have done months ago. I told him that I had made a promise to you that I was going to keep and that I liked performing. I asked him to wait for me at home so we could talk after the show.”

“Wow, good for you.”

“Yeah. He seemed a little taken aback at first, but he agreed to wait for me. Honestly, I feel like this is just a small bump in the road. I’ll apologize for lying and tell him I want to continue just through the end of summer, and all will be well.”

“I hope so. I’m happy for you that this came out finally. Not exactly in the best way, but at least now he knows. And thank you for not leaving.” Jerome grabbed the wig I was still holding and started to straighten it out. In the frenzy of the last few minutes, I had whipped the wig around pretty good, and it had gotten messy. There was no way I could wear it in its current state.

“No problem.” I took a seat in a chair, so Jerome could get my wig on properly. I took a deep breath and tried to focus on my set instead of how much I had disappointed my boyfriend. “Now let’s get this show on the road, shall we?”

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## Chapter Five

### *The Beginning of the End*

I didn't make it home too late. Jerome had me go on first so I could leave earlier than usual. I scrubbed myself down meticulously at the club, so I wouldn't bring one speck of glitter home with me. It was going to be tough enough explaining this to him, and I didn't want even one tiny reminder of Gardenia present.

"Baby?" I called out into the darkness.

"Over here." Clinton was sitting upright on the couch. The TV was on, and he had a half-full glass of golden liquid in his hand. I suspected it was whiskey—his drink of choice when he wasn't trying to impress anyone and wanted to feel good fast.

"I see you stopped and got some Jack." I tipped my head to the bottle on the coffee table. There was hardly any gone; no more than what was currently in his glass.

"Yep. But it didn't taste right." He swirled the liquid but didn't take a drink.

"So, does that mean you're ready to talk? I know I owe you an explanation."

"Actually." He paused to set his drink down. "I'm going to go back tonight." He stared at the TV when he said it.

"What? No. Clinton, you're tired. Stay, please. I'll take the couch if you're more comfortable that way." I implored him to look at me. "Clinton?"

He still wouldn't meet my gaze. "I wanted to surprise you with my news. That's why I came back today. I was selected to be a part of this political summit taking place next month. It's during one of the times that you were planning to come to Chicago, and now I'll have to stay in D.C. that week. But I didn't want to miss out on any time together."

"I'm sorry. But we still have the rest of the weekend to celebrate. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks. Out of over eighty people clamoring for this opportunity, they picked me."



“Because you’re brilliant and incredible. They’d be fools not to choose you.”

“But you’re a bit biased.”

“I am. And not ashamed to admit it.”

He glanced at me for only a second and turned away again. This time he focused on his hands, which were now clenching and unclenching in his lap. “I guess what I’m really trying to say, is that I need some time to think.”

My heart about pounded out of my chest. “Think? About what?”

“About this. About us. About why you felt you couldn’t tell me the truth.” Finally, he looked me in the eyes.

“You can think here.” I was grasping at straws. But I didn’t want him to leave when he had just gotten here. Not like this.

“No, I can’t. This has really thrown me for a loop. The last thing I expected to find when I walked into Judy’s was you in a dress.”

“I never wanted you to find out that way. But we need to talk about it, and I don’t think you running away will make things better.”

He let out a heavy sigh. “I think it will for me. I need time to process. It’s too much for me to talk about now. I’ve already made up my mind, so don’t try to get me to change it. It’s only an hour drive which means that I’ll be back before midnight. I’ll take this weekend for myself, and then we can talk when my head’s a bit more sorted, okay?”

Did I have a choice? He was leaving and couldn’t be talked out of it. I nodded, slowly got up from the sofa, and went to the refrigerator in my small kitchen. Grabbing a couple bottles of water and some cheese sticks, I packed them in a plastic bag and met him at the door. “Here,” I set the bag in his hand. “Water and a snack. So you won’t have to stop along the way.”

He closed his hand over mine. “Garcia, I love you. That hasn’t changed.”

I almost cried with relief. “Okay good, because I love you so much. We’ve both been under a lot of stress. Take time this weekend. I know it will be better for us in the long run if we deal with this head on.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you know when I’m there.”

“You better.” I smiled and kissed him lightly on the lips.

He was out the door without another word, and I watched from the window as he got in his car, and drove into the night.

About an hour and a half later, I got a text message letting me know he had arrived safely. I messaged him back and told him I'd talk to him tomorrow. But Friday came and went with no contact at all from Clinton. And for the very first time in the two months we had been apart that summer, he did not call to tell me good night.

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After I finished my last line of "I Put a Spell on You," the lights went down, and there was a moment of stunned silence before the applause started. At first I couldn't move. *Was that really Clinton in the audience, or had I just imagined it?*

No. It was him, and I knew it in my gut. He was here.

"Are you okay, Garcia?" Anthony and the other performers joined me on the dark stage for our final group song and bow.

Once the lights came back up, I'd get another chance to look at him. I could make sure I wasn't seeing things.

"I have to go," I hissed at Anthony, stepped out of my shoes, and ran offstage.

"Garcia!" Jerome yelled as I blew right past him and didn't stop.

"Do the fucking last part without me."

"What the hell—?" Jerome rarely got mad. But this, compromising the show he worked so hard on and did in his husband's memory, would make him very angry. And I didn't care.

My gown was off before I even got to the dressing room. The wig landed on the floor. Earrings, bracelets, necklace, eyelashes, corset, bra... each stacking the pile higher.

Why the fuck was he here now? All of a sudden after three years, he just shows up out of the blue? It was too much, and I collapsed in the chair in front of my dressing table.

I heard the music to the final number start. Cheers from the audience faded and then got louder, like a child playing with the volume button on a radio. Performers were going up for their individual bows. Without me, Anthony would be the last one and would have to remember to gesture to Jerome to get him out on stage.

I should have taken it as a sign today when I pulled that drawing of us out of my closet at home. Otherwise, why had I not seen it in years when I've gone digging in that closet plenty of times? Fuck. I had finally moved on without him. For so long, I had waited for him to come back, convinced he'd change his mind and tell me he couldn't live without me. But that hadn't happened.

"Garcia," Jerome panted as he jogged into the room.

"I'm sorry, but I saw Clinton." I rushed to justify my rude exit.

"I know." His eyes were kind and his smile understanding.

"You do?"

He nodded, and then I saw Clinton step into the doorway. "Hello."

"I'm going to shut the door, so you two can talk." Jerome shuffled backwards and closed the door before I had a chance to protest.

"You were amazing out there."

Was he fucking kidding me? "What are you doing here, Clinton?"

"I came to see the show. Support District Eight, the organization this is raising funds for."

"Okay, that's great. But now tell me what you're doing back here, in my dressing room?"

"G—"

"No. You do not get to call me that anymore. You forfeited that privilege when you couldn't even be bothered to come back for Cal's memorial service." I didn't care that I was half-naked, still tucked and face full of stage makeup. He was the one who came back here uninvited.

"I explained that to you already. I was stuck in D.C."

"Bullshit."

"Believe what you want to believe, but it's the truth."

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### *August after College Graduation*

"He's not doing better, is he, G?" Clinton and I were back to our daily conversations. Though I didn't like to admit it, the night he drove back to Chicago did us some good as a couple. It gave us each time to clear our heads

and to remember what we were working toward. And we compromised. I stayed on the roster at Judy's as a substitute only for the rest of the summer, and he didn't say another derogatory word about it. Then I'd leave Gardenia behind when I moved to Chicago and in with him. Our plan was back on track.

"Unfortunately not. I guess they are at the point of talking about a bone marrow transplant."

"I'm so sorry. Please tell Cal and Jerome that I'm thinking about them."

"You could tell them yourself. I know they'd love to hear from you."

"I'll do that." They had always been my friends primarily, but up until the night he showed up at the club unexpectedly, he had been keeping in touch with them directly. Jerome said that since then, he only got an occasional text message.

"So what's new with you? Have you started packing yet? I have! Although I didn't unpack all that much for the summer anyway."

"Not yet."

"Well you better get going. We can move into our apartment in two weeks."

"About that. What would you say if I told you I wanted to stay in D.C. for the next year?"

Had I heard him right? Then I laughed it off. "Very funny, babe. That only works once."

But Clinton wasn't laughing with me. "I'm serious. The summit I attended had all these incredible LGBT groups from around the country. There's this one headquartered in D.C., and they want me to work for them for the next year. I'd be their political liaison and get to participate in all the meetings they have at the capital. I might even get to meet the president."

"Wow. That sounds amazing." I couldn't get my tone of voice to match the words I was saying. He was changing our plans again. Another year away from each other.

"It is, G. A once in a lifetime opportunity."

"You said the same exact thing about working in D.C. this summer."

"I know."

"You really want to do this, don't you?" I knew he had already made up his mind.

“Yes. But I don’t have to be there until September, so I’ll meet you in Chicago and help you move in. I’ll stay with you for those two weeks until I have to fly out. We can spend lots of quality time together before classes start.” He sounded happy. I should have been, but I was having a hard time with another unexpected change thrown my way.

“Okay. I can hear in your voice how much you want to take this job, so I’m in. Guarantee me we’ll have time together, just us, so I can remind you of what you’ll be missing when you’re away?”

“Absolutely. And for the record, I already know what I’m missing. I love you.”

I smiled so wide my cheeks hurt. “I love you too.”

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Then it was my turn to make a change in our plans.

“Have they found a donor for Cal yet?” Clinton and I were on FaceTime, and I loved it when he sat on his bed and talked to me wearing nothing but his boxer briefs.

“I can’t believe you’re asking me such a serious question when you’re sitting there almost naked, sprawled on the bed looking yummy enough to eat.”

“Yummy?”

I licked my lips. “Yes. As in delicious, mouthwatering, enticing, delectable, scrumptious—”

“Okay! I got it.” He tilted his head back when he laughed, and damn if it didn’t give me the most perfect view of his Adam’s apple and the curly dark hair that started between his collarbones. My fiancé had the most wonderful chest hair. It was just as wavy as the locks on his head and almost as soft. I longed to follow that trail with my fingertips around his dark nipples, over his ribs, and down below his belly button.

“Hello, G?”

I refocused on his face. “Sorry. You’ve got me completely distracted, and I’m about to put my hand to use doing something other than holding this phone.”

“I asked about Cal first.”

“No. You FaceTimed me looking all hot and gorgeous and then expected me to carry on a conversation when all I want to do now is fuck.”

“But we can’t.”

“We can do other stuff. It’s been a while since we watched each other masturbate.” When it came to sex, I didn’t mince words. I have free-loving parents to thank for my total comfort with all related terminology and practices. Clinton, on the other hand, was the one who always romanticized it. To him, we “made love” and “touched ourselves” and “climaxed.” It was simpler for me; we fucked, masturbated, and came. Didn’t make it any less meaningful for me regardless of what name we gave it.

“What are you doing still fully dressed then?” He blushed as he said it, and his eyes took on that familiar shade of midnight blue.

I loved it when he got all toppy. Without any hesitation, I started tearing off my clothes, unable to get naked fast enough. He watched me intently and lowered his hand to palm the growing bulge in his briefs.

“You going to take those off?” I asked as I flopped back onto the bed, propping the phone on the nightstand.

“I’m not quite ready yet.”

“Fucking tease.”

“Yep. And you love it.” I did.

I grabbed the lube from the top drawer and squirted some in my hand. I let it warm a little before taking a hold of my cock.

“You going to wait for me there, G?” He watched me stroke myself and then pulled his own dick from his underwear. It sprang to life once freed and settled into its natural, aroused state, which was high and to the right.

“Fuck. Please touch yourself.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes closing briefly when his fingers wrapped around the base of his cock. “Yes,” he puffed. I shifted my gaze from his hand to his chest, mesmerized by each rise and fall. Every couple of breaths, his movement would stutter, and I knew he was making himself feel really good. I continued to watch, not able to look away from my beautiful boyfriend as he pumped himself close to orgasm. “Baby? You close?”

“Yeah,” I rasped and flicked my wrist around my crown, just like Clinton would do when he touched me. It was so easy to imagine his hand on me instead of my own—or added to my own. “Oh…” I was starting to make more noise, and that was a sure sign I was already on the brink of coming.

“I love hearing you. I want to watch as you make yourself come.”

My eyes must have fallen shut, and when I opened them, he was staring at me, mouth open and hand moving fast at the bottom of the screen. He was clearly on his way too. “And I want to watch you. Can we come together?”

“Yes. Will you tease your hole for me?”

Pleasure pulsed throughout my entire body as I pushed a finger inside. “Oh God.”

“That’s it baby. You look fucking amazing like that.”

“I’m close, God, I’m close.”

“I should be doing that... with my tongue.”

Shit. I hadn’t had that particular image in mind until now. I loved to be rimmed, and each time he did, he’d prove that without a doubt, his tongue was the strongest muscle on his body. “You should be. One week, baby, and you will.”

“Uh huh, oh yes, I’m going to come.” He started playing with his balls using his other hand. His strokes were rhythmic, and I could hear the *schlick schlick* of skin on skin.

I thrust my finger in deeper as I felt my orgasm grow in my belly and start spreading outward. My dick was so hard, it was going to be painful if I didn’t let myself come. “I’m coming, I’m coming...” I lost my voice when I felt the first spurt on my hand.

“Fuck, G...” We lost eye contact when Clinton laid his head back on the bed to cushion the pressure of an orgasm that wracked his entire body with tremors. Then I came full force, groaning loudly as we both milked seed from our swollen cocks.

Breathless and exhausted, I reached for the towel I kept on the nightstand. I cleaned myself up gently, since I was still pretty sensitive, and when I looked back at my boyfriend, he hadn’t moved. “Baby?” I huffed out using the little energy I had left.

“Huh.” Still no movement from him.

“You okay?”

“Uh huh.”

“You’re not very convincing.”

“Gimme a moment.” His speech was slurred and barely audible.

Finally, he sat up and shook his head.

“What?” I chuckled at his disheveled hair and flushed chest.

“We’ve definitely been apart too long because I’ve forgotten how insatiable you are.” He proceeded to clean himself up and pull his briefs back into place around his hips. He hadn’t even bothered to take them off.

“Speaking of being apart...”

“Oh no, Garcia. You are not canceling on me for next week. I’ve been looking forward to this uninterrupted time with you for so long.” His piercing blue eyes didn’t blink.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world, don’t worry. I’m not talking about that.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

“Well, I’ve been doing lots of thinking. You are going to be in D.C., and I’ll be in Chicago alone, when Jerome and Cal could really use my help here—at Judy’s. I could defer my enrollment, and then either January or next fall, start grad school, depending on when Cal goes into remission.”

“They think he’s going to?”

“That’s the hope after the bone marrow transplant.” I waited for Clinton’s response. I ended up waiting for a while.

“Will you keep doing drag while you’re there?” His expression tightened when he asked me.

“That’s what you’re most worried about?” I didn’t expect this to still be such a sensitive issue for him.

“I know that I have no room to talk in terms of adjusting our plans, but at least my change is benefiting my career. What is playing Gardenia doing for you?”

“Clinton, I hate that this keeps coming up. And truthfully, I hadn’t even thought about whether or not I’d continue performing. I probably will, though, stay on and sub when needed. You know this is something I enjoy, and it helps Jerome. When will this stop being such a big deal for you?”

I saw movement at his sides, and I knew without even looking that his hands were clenched. But he didn’t say anything.

“If you have something to say, then say it.” I stared my fiancé down.



“I’m wondering if we’re on the same page anymore. Do we still want the same things in life?”

I pressed my eyes tightly closed and tried to calm my racing thoughts. “This doesn’t change what I want for us.”

“We’ll probably need to push the wedding back.”

“Probably. But with you spending the year in D.C., we’d have to do that anyway.” I sat up and crossed my arms over my chest. Dammit. He should be over this by now, shouldn’t he?

“Fine. It’s clear you’re going to do what you want.”

“Yes, I am.” I’d had enough of this bullshit. He was doing what he wanted to do, and so was I.

“This certainly isn’t how I thought our conversation would end.”

“Yeah, well, the last six months have been full of the unexpected. Why should it change now?”

“I don’t know, Garcia.” He used my full name again. No more than five minutes ago, he had been calling out his pet name for me in ecstasy. “I’ve got to go.”

“Got to or want to?” I asked, but I knew the answer.

“Will you just give me a fucking break, please? You know I don’t like it when you do drag, yet you do it anyway. You promised it would be just for the summer, and now you’re going to keep doing it for the next year. I’m pissed, okay? So, let me sleep on it before I say something I’m going to regret.”

I should have slept on it too. But I didn’t. “Sure, do what you need to do.” I disguised my hurt with sarcasm. “In fact, why don’t you take the next couple of weeks to sleep on it? I wouldn’t want to force you into supporting my decision. No big deal that I’ve gone along with your change in plans without complaining.”

“Garcia,” he warned.

“Clinton, I’ve got to go. I can’t do this anymore, and I’m so tired of this same fight. Maybe in our time apart, we have changed, because I feel like I don’t know who you are anymore. Maybe you’re right that we no longer want the same things.”

“You don’t mean that.” He shook his head and swallowed hard. His fists were clenching and unclenching frantically.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I mean. All I know is that I’m feeling like our unconditional support for each other has become one-sided. And no matter how much I love you, I can’t be with someone who disapproves so strongly of something I want to do.”

“So are you saying you aren’t coming to Chicago next week after all?”

I answered before my brain could catch up. “Yes. Maybe we should take a couple months. Not see each other and not talk. Make sure this is what we both want.”

Clinton stared down at his fists, now in his lap, and replied without looking at me. “Fine. You call me when you’re ready.” And he reached in front of the screen to hit the button to end our conversation.

As his beautiful face disappeared into blackness, reality started to sink in. What the fuck did I just do? I had missed him so terribly this summer, and now I thought a break was best for our relationship? What the hell was I thinking?

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That night we had broken up. I hadn’t spoken to him since before Cal died. Now he was here in my dressing room, over three years later, and I had no idea why.

“You’re the one who wanted a break, Garcia,” he said softly, reminding me of the incredibly rash decision I had made those years back.

“I know. But obviously you chose to stay away, so I guess I did us a favor, huh?” I could not let myself get sucked back in by his sweetness and charm. I had loved this man so fiercely, and he couldn’t love me the same way. His love had come with a condition.

“I got really busy.” He avoided my stare.

“So you said.” I grabbed a cloth and wiped away at my makeup. We were beginning to go round and round all over again, and it wouldn’t get us anywhere, just like it hadn’t three years ago. I shook my head and continued getting cleaned up for the after-party.

“And you started performing all the time.”

“Of course. Then there’s that.”

“You knew how I felt about it.”

“And you knew how I felt. Nothing’s changed with me.”

Those piercing blue eyes filled with tears, and my heart tore in half. I knew it. Why did he even come here if nothing had changed with him either?

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### *January after College Graduation*

It had been five months since my last conversation with Clinton. During the time Cal was expected to go into remission, he only got worse.

“Cal’s in hospice care.” I didn’t even say hello first when he answered his phone.

“I’m so sorry. How’s Jerome doing?”

“Not good. I’m staying at the club all the time now, so he can be at home with Cal. I can’t believe the transplant didn’t work.”

“I know, G, me either.”

Hearing him use my nickname sent me into an emotional spiral, and I started sobbing. I had wanted to call him so many times before, just to hear his voice. But every time I went to dial his number, I would change my mind, too stubborn to admit that I missed him. Now one of my best friends was dying, and I could no longer hold in my grief.

“Shh, shh, baby,” he said tenderly. What I wouldn’t give to be in his arms right now. But those few weeks I suggested we spend apart had turned into months, and we hadn’t seen each other since July. It was the new year now. I hadn’t even seen him over the holidays.

“I miss you so much.” My nose started to run, but I didn’t care and just wiped my face on my sleeve.

“I miss you too.”

“Come back. Please. Take time off so you can see Cal before he dies.”

“I can’t. And you have always been closer to Cal and Jerome than I have.”

My anguish turned to anger. “Really? How can you say shit like that? Your friend is dying. He wants to see you.”

“I told you, I can’t.”

“Well, even if you don’t want to see him, come back for me. I need you.”

He hesitated. “Garcia, it’s not that easy for me to just pick up and leave.”

And then it hit me. Like a fucking sledgehammer. “Are you seeing someone else?”

“Garcia—”

“Answer my damn question, Clinton. It’s not that complicated. Are you seeing someone?”

Silence. He didn’t have to tell me because deep down, I already knew. But he chose to shatter my heart anyway. “Yes.”

“Oh God.” Tears came crashing down, and I sank to the floor. “No, please tell me you’re not. Please tell me you want us to get back together.”

“Things have changed for me.” He said it so matter-of-factly, like he was saying the sky was blue.

“Obviously.” I choked on a sob and sniffled loudly. “Who is he?”

“Garcia, let’s not do this.”

“Tell me.”

“No. That’s not important.”

“It’s fucking important to me! Tell me,” I demanded.

“He’s a friend of my uncle’s. We’ve only seen each other twice.”

“Twice.” I can’t believe he’s seen the guy more than once. “Have you fucked him?”

“That is none of your damn business!” Clinton finally raised his voice.

I crumbled under the weight of his admission. I was gasping for air, trying to comprehend that the man I had planned to marry and spend a lifetime with was seeing someone else. I wasn’t ready to accept that we were over for good.

“Can we at least talk when you come back for Cal’s funeral? It may be in two days or two weeks, but it seems inevitable at this point.”

I heard nothing but the sound of Clinton’s uneven breathing.

“Wait—that’s why you called me. You’ve already talked to Jerome and Cal and told them you weren’t coming back.”

“I just got off the phone with them.”

“You bastard. I wanted this break to bring us back together, not tear us apart! How did you let this happen?”

“It takes two, remember? You pushed me away. Gave me an ultimatum.”

“You wanted to make me give up something I loved just because it made you feel uncomfortable! We always said we’d support each other no matter what!”

“That wasn’t a part of my plan. Our plan. And I’ve thought about it a lot; I’m not okay with it now and won’t be in the future. I think this is best for both of our careers anyway.”

“So that’s what this is really about,” I hissed. I stood up from my place on the floor and started to pace the apartment. “You don’t want to have to explain to your Republican cohorts why your partner wears a dress. Me doing drag would be too hard on your political career.” I didn’t know if I was more pissed off than I was hurt. Either way, this fucking sucked. I kicked the trash can in the kitchen in an attempt to release some of my frustration.

“Are you okay?”

“Don’t fucking pretend to be concerned about me.”

“Garcia, I still care about you. I can’t just turn off my feelings.”

“But I bet New Guy is helping you with that.” And I kicked it again, this time spilling its contents all over the floor. “Your dad must be pleased.”

“My parents love you. Don’t blame this on them. This is me.”

“Yeah, but it was your dad’s brother who set you up with this guy, right? I always knew he thought we were too different. He’s been wanting to find you a nice Log Cabin Republican boy for a long time.”

“Don’t, Garcia. Blame me, I’m doing this.”

“Fine. I can do that. You realize what you’re doing to me? I’m about to lose one of my very best friends and now you’re leaving me too. I fucking hate you.” The tears came again, making my already sensitive skin itch. I scratched at my face, not caring if I left a mark. “It was supposed to be you and me forever, remember? We said as long as we were together...” I needed him to finish for me. If he did, then I’d know there was still hope.

“I have to go.” He couldn’t say it. He was telling me we were over.

“If you go now, I’ll never speak to you again.”

“Please don’t say that.”

“I just did.” *And I won’t take it back.*

That was the moment of truth. We sat in total silence. I wasn’t budging and neither was he. This was really the end.

“Good-bye, Garcia. I’m really sorry about Cal. Please take care of yourself.” The line went dead.

I started shaking all over, and I had to sit down. I somehow made my way to the sofa and dropped my head into my hands. I had set this ball in motion, and it was rolling out of control. Now my carefully planned future had been snatched right out from under me.

I heard Clinton’s voice echoing in my head over and over again. *Good-bye Garcia.*

Except this time it wasn’t good-bye for now. This time, it was good-bye for good.

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## Chapter Six

### *Everything Has Changed*

“Clinton, I don’t know why you felt you needed to come back here, but you’ve done your duty, said hello to the ex, and now you can go. I cannot rehash this with you. I’ve moved on.”

“You have?” He rested his back against the wall and jammed his hands into his pockets.

“Well, I’ve been out on a few dates, and I’m teaching art therapy now. Ethan started a program within the local school district, and I’m working with him.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. I’ve also become a pretty big draw at the club. People even come from Chicago to see me perform.”

“I can see why. You are incredible. You light up when you’re on stage. I had no clue you could sing and dance like that.”

“Thanks. I should probably get going. Since I missed my final bow, I cannot miss the after-party. You know, my fans would never forgive me.” I feigned horror and then gave him my best diva smile. I was attempting to be lighthearted, but my heart still hurt. Seeing him made me realize that I wasn’t as over him as I had thought.

“Don’t go to the party.” All of a sudden, he was leaning on my dressing table, his face only inches from mine.

“I have to.”

“No, you don’t. I asked Jerome.”

“What the fuck, Clinton!” I slammed my fist down on the table, toppling several bottles of makeup and sending a hair brush to the floor.

“Don’t be angry with him. I’m the one who asked if we could talk. Listen, I made some really big mistakes over the years, and I need to make things right with you. Please. We can go out for coffee.”

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s just coffee.”

“But you still hate this part of me. What will talking accomplish? Nothing has changed with you, has it?”

I didn't move away because I wanted to see him close up when he answered me. So, I'd know if he was lying.

“That's not true, G. Everything has changed.”

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Jerome, Cal's sister and parents, and I were by his side when he died. He had been in and out of consciousness for three days before he took his final breath. We had held our own pre-memorial memorial service a week ago at Cal's request. He wanted to hear what we all would be saying about him at his funeral. So, a group of about twenty of us crowded around the hospital bed in Jerome and Cal's living room. There were a few friends from college, but mostly it was family and employees from the club. One by one, we shared with him how much he meant to us. One by one, we recounted memories, funny stories, and lessons we learned from him. One by one, we said our good-byes.

If there was one thing I learned from Cal that day, it was that you should never take time for granted. Because at any moment, life could change, and that happily-ever-after you had planned comes a whole lot sooner than expected. After Clinton and I broke things off, I was a mess—crying every day, moping around, locking myself in my apartment, not going out and not letting anyone in. But seeing Cal as his life slipped away from him, helpless to stop it, put life into perspective for me. I had to move on. I had to live my life, because I only had one, and it could be taken from me in a heartbeat.

So, when our friend—Anthony—started coming to the club on a regular basis, I'd sit with him at the bar after I got off work or finished performing and have a few drinks. Then when he asked me out to dinner, I agreed to go. And I enjoyed myself.

Even though Anthony and I didn't work out in the long run, I had taken my first step toward reclaiming myself. I finally recognized that if Clinton couldn't accept me for all of me, then we shouldn't be together. Many times after our breakup, I regretted my decision to continue doing drag. Many times I thought I should have made the sacrifice in order to be with Clinton. But no matter how much I thought about it, I could never quit entirely. Gardenia was an essential part of me, and I was proud of her *and* Garcia. In my heart, I knew that the right person would have to accept both sides of me, and I was willing to wait for the



perfect man to come along. But I had to keep living my life—because Cal didn't get that chance.

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I was sure I was dreaming, because for a moment there, I thought I had heard him say that things had changed.

“Please, Garcia, one cup of coffee. That’s all I ask. Just hear me out.”

How was this even happening? “Did Jerome know you’d be here?”

He nodded. “I run the Chicago chapter of District Eight.”

“Oh. You’re not in D.C. anymore? Not running for office any time soon?”

“No. But I can tell you all about that over coffee.” I stared into those incredible piercing blue eyes of his and knew I couldn't say no.

“Okay. Give me fifteen and I’ll meet you out front.”

The smile that appeared on Clinton’s face was just like the one he used to give me when we were in college—the one he’d only share with me. It lit up his eyes and softened his chiseled features. Seeing it today still took my breath away. “Thank you,” he whispered. When he got to the doorway, he turned back one more time. “So, you’ll come find me, right?”

“Yes. I will.”

Jerome appeared the second Clinton left. I pretended to be mad at him, because in truth, I didn't really know how I felt about him arranging this reunion with my ex-fiancé behind my back.

“Don’t be mad.” He wasn't apologizing.

“Maybe I should be.”

“Listen, just because you haven't talked to Clinton in three years doesn't mean that I haven't.”

“Really?” I stopped getting changed to stare at him.

“Yes. And I can tell you Garcia, something is different about that man. I mean, he was a good guy before, but now he’s, I don't know, gentler, more compassionate, and he’s not so selfish about his career.”

“I guess I’ll probably hear about it since we’re going for coffee.”

“I had hoped you’d agree to go.”

“You’re not mad I won’t be at the after-party?”

“Nope.”

“You’ll apologize to my adoring fans?”

“Please, bitch. Like they’ll even miss you.”

I laughed and shook my head at him. He was right; I couldn’t be mad at him. “So I’ll call you in the morning?”

“Nun uh. You’ll call me immediately after you two get done with coffee.”

“Yes, sir.” I yanked up my jeans and left them unbuttoned at my hips, so I could give him a hug. “Thank you. Regardless of what happens, I think this will give me some peace.”

“I think so too. You know I love you, girl.”

“Yeah. Right back atcha.”

I scrubbed my face, rinsed my hair, which was completely flattened from sweating under my heavy wig, and slipped on my Judy’s T-shirt. Surveying myself in the mirror, I could still see a little foundation I had missed below my ear. And my hair was damp. But I didn’t care. This was me, and whether or not Clinton was okay with that, didn’t matter.

I slipped on my flip-flops, grabbed my wallet and phone, and turned off the light. I was leaving the room a mess, but I’d come back the next day and clean it up. Jerome would understand.

“Ready to go?” Clinton said as soon as I got out by the bar. The last time I saw him in that very spot was when he first saw me in drag. Funny how we found ourselves there once again.

“Ready.”

“We’ll take my car?”

“That would be great. Jerome picked me up tonight, so mine is at home.” I followed him out of Judy’s, and we walked in silence until he stopped at an old Subaru station wagon. Not the vehicle I expected him to drive.

“This is me,” he said and opened the door for me. How chivalrous. He even waited for me to get in and get my seat belt fastened before he shut the door.

He jogged around to the driver’s side, got in, and started the car. The air-conditioning was on full blast, but because the car had been sitting out in the

heat, we were immediately engulfed in stifling humidity. “Sorry,” he apologized and turned it off. “Beanhouse work for you?”

“Sure.” The Beanhouse was the best local coffee shop in the area. They roasted their beans fresh every day. Plus, they always took out a huge ad in the program for the Pride show at Judy’s every year, so I loved giving them my business. It also was just around the corner from the club. We didn’t even have time to talk before we were there.

“Why don’t you grab us a table, and I’ll get drinks. What would you like?”

“I’ll take a cold-press with vanilla and cream. Thanks.” The Beanhouse wasn’t too crowded, probably because most everyone was still at Judy’s. I easily found a table away from the noise of the espresso machine and sat down.

I had no clue how this would go. Could it be true what Jerome said about Clinton being different? Why else would he suddenly decide to come back here?

“Here you go.” Clinton set our drinks down and sat in the chair closest to me, not the one across from me.

*Just keep an open mind, Garcia.* “What do I owe you for the coffee?”

“Nothing. My treat.”

“Thanks.” I took a sip, and the cool liquid felt good sliding down my throat. “Ah, that tastes fantastic.”

“Does your throat get sore from singing?”

“Not sore, so much, but it gets dry. I usually try to drink hot tea before a performance, but it was too damn humid for that today.”

“I imagine.” Clinton sipped his beverage, which was probably a cup of plain black coffee, unless that too had changed along with everything else in his life. “This is really good. They roast it fresh every day?”

“They do. Best coffee for miles.”

The shop typically had live acoustic music on Saturday nights, but that night there wasn’t any because they knew everyone would be at Judy’s for the show. It was strange to hear the radio on instead. It wasn’t very loud, but for some reason Clinton and I both stopped talking.

“I like that song,” he said once it finished.

“Me too.” Okay. Still had the same taste in music. The next song started, and I was afraid we were going to listen to this one in silence too.

“I’m just going to talk, and at any time you can stop me if you don’t want to hear anymore.”

I watched him relax his right hand from a fist until it lay flat on the table. No clenching. I could barely believe my eyes.

“The year after things ended with us, I didn’t go back to Chicago. I stayed in D.C. and started working for Mr. Albert full-time. I was a workaholic. I was on the fast-track to the political career I always thought I wanted, and it seemed like it was happening fast. I figured since we were over, I’d move back near my parents and become Indiana’s youngest mayor.” He chuckled and took another drink.

“Wow. I can’t say that I’m surprised, though.” I gave him a small but genuine smile. I had always believed he could do anything he set his mind to.

“One of my roles was to interview veterans back from war. We were focused on increasing the resources the government provided for those who just returned, either because their deployment had ended or because of an injury. It was so enlightening to hear from these men and women who had just gotten home after spending the last few years in the desert. It was all they had dreamed about when they were halfway across the world. Except when they got back, they didn’t know what to do with themselves or how to act around civilians. It was incredible, G, hearing their stories and working with them to improve the government’s services for veterans.”

“What a great opportunity for you to really make a difference.” I decided not to make a big deal of the fact that he had called me “G.” He probably didn’t even realize it. Some habits were just harder to break.

“It was. Until they cut the funding to the program.”

“That must have been hard.”

“Hard is an understatement. I was devastated. I put my heart and soul into that program, and then one day, I went into the office and was told I had a new assignment waiting for me. I had to leave all those men and women hanging, no longer able to help them like I said I would.”

“I’m sorry, Clinton.”

“I didn’t realize just how horrible it was until I was watching the news about a month later. The national channel was covering a murder-suicide that had happened in Illinois, just outside of Chicago, in Rockford. Maybe you

heard about it? A man shot his wife, his five-year-old daughter, and then put a gun to his head.”

Where we were was only about thirty-five miles from Rockford, so it had been big news here. “That happened a couple of years ago, right?”

“Yep. Two years ago this month actually.”

“It was all over our local news.”

“I figured it probably was.” He stopped and fiddled nervously with his coffee mug. “That man who killed his family and then himself was one of the vets I had interviewed when he got back from Iraq. The system had completely failed him. He had very few resources and no real support. And granted, the program I was working on wouldn’t have been in place when this happened, but it still hit me hard. We had sent him off to war, expected him to make the ultimate sacrifice for his country, and when he did, we barely even gave him a thank you before sending him home.”

“There’s only so much you could do as one person, Clinton.”

“But that’s just it—all it takes is one person to stand up and challenge the status quo. It only ever starts with one. Think of Martin Luther King and Harvey Milk. So, I made a decision in that moment, to be the one person who did that.”

“That’s admirable. But it also sounds daunting.”

“Oh it was. I researched, lobbied, begged, and pleaded to anyone I could get to listen, but nothing ever came of it. I got so frustrated that I ended up leaving D.C. and taking the job with District Eight in Chicago. I was ready to be done with politics at that point. Who knew I’d love working with kids so much?” He grinned at me. I had always known how good he was with kids. It’s one of the reasons it had been so important to me to have a family with him.

“That explains why you are here for the show, but not really why you came to see me.” I wanted him to cut to the chase. I enjoyed hearing his story, but I was tired after a long, emotional day, and truthfully, being with him was just going to make it harder for me when he left again.

“I’m getting to that, don’t worry. So, as you know, District Eight works with LGBT youth, and a lot of them come to us after they’ve been rejected by their own families. It’s crazy how much higher the homelessness rate is for these kids. It floors me that a parent could disown a kid because he was gay. But it still happens all the time.”

There was only a little left in my glass, so I finished it off and set it aside. That left me with nothing for my hands to do, so I folded them in my lap to keep them from fidgeting. I didn't know where Clinton was going with his story, but for some reason, it was starting to make me nervous.

“Do you want a refill?”

“No. I'm good. No more caffeine for me,” I joked. I was already going to have a hard enough time sleeping after all the events of the night.

“So, one afternoon I was in my office, reading over a grant proposal, when one of my kids knocked at the door. When he came in and sat down across from me, I noticed that his lip was split open, he had a large bruise on his cheek, and his knuckles were bloody. I asked what had happened to him. Andrew—that's his name—told me that his older brother had found him near our shelter. He thought he was there to talk, and so he didn't hesitate to take a walk with him when he asked. They got to a secluded area near an alley, and then his brother started hitting him. Over and over. He told Andrew that their dad had sent him out to find his little “sissy” brother and beat some sense into him.”

“Oh my God, Clinton, that's awful.” I had heard of stories like Andrew's, but this was way worse than I could have imagined.

“What I didn't notice when he first came into my office was what he was wearing. He had on a woman's top, sort of frilly and flowery. He had eye makeup on, probably lipstick too, but by that point I couldn't tell because his lip was so swollen. In one ear, he wore a drop earring, big and sparkly. The other was covered in blood. They had ripped that earring right from his ear, G. His own brother tried to beat the shit out of him because he felt more comfortable in women's clothes. Frankly, I don't even know how he made it out alive, since he said his brother brought a couple friends with him. When I asked him how he got away, he said he used the pepper spray he kept in his bag. He joked and said that a woman had to protect herself. I thought he was in my office because he needed to go to the hospital, but you know what he said when I asked?”

I shook my head.

“He said he didn't need a doctor. What he did need was a new top and earrings, because the ones he had on were all dirty and blood was nearly impossible to get out of rayon.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, wow.”

“So what did you do?”

“I took him to the clinic and then we found a couple new outfits for him at the local thrift store.”

“Andrew’s a brave kid.”

“He is. And I realized then that I had acted just like his brother and father. I wanted you to change who you were because *I* was uncomfortable with it. I was no better than them.”

“No, no, you can’t compare yourself to them. It’s different.”

“Yeah, how?”

“Well, for one thing, you didn’t beat the crap out of me.”

His voice cracked. “G, I’m so sorry. When you needed me most, when Cal was dying, I wasn’t there for you.”

“It was hard, but I’m doing okay now.” That was the truth, and for the first time in a long time, I actually believed myself when I said it.

“Jerome told me. And now I see that.”

“Thanks. So, you’ve said you’re sorry, and I forgive you. You got what you came for then, right?” I started to stand, anticipating his answer and preparing to leave. But I was wrong.

“Partly. What I really came back for was you.”

“I don’t get it.” All I could do was stare at him.

“I came to see if you’d give me another chance. I miss you so damn much. A day doesn’t pass by that I don’t think of you and the big fucking mess I made. I still love you, and I want you back in my life.” His confession tumbled out so quickly I didn’t catch it all.

“I’m sorry. Can you say that again?” I sat back down hard, almost tipping my chair over backwards.

“The last part or the whole thing?”

“Can I get you two anything else? We will be closing in ten minutes, so I wanted to check in.” The brunet who had been running the counter was suddenly at our table. I couldn’t believe it was midnight already.

“No. I’m good. You?” I glanced at Clinton. His eyes were wide open, a partial smile frozen on his face.

“No. I mean, yes, I’m good. No, I don’t need anything else. Thank you.”

“Okay. I’ll clear your dishes then.” He grabbed Clinton’s mug and my glass and headed back to the front of the shop.

Clinton looked at me, his surprise still apparent. “I guess it took me longer than I thought to get to my point. I know it’s late, G, but could we keep talking about this?”

*Hell yes!* I tempered my enthusiasm. “I think that would be a good idea.”

He exhaled heavily. “Good. Is there another place we can go?”

“If you are comfortable with it, we can go back to my apartment.”

“As long as you’re okay with it, then so am I.”

Though I could tell he was still a bit tense, there was also something uncharacteristically mellow about his demeanor. Even his hair was longer and not slicked back so severely. The T-shirt he had on was bright green, and that particular shade made his dark hair look almost black. My stomach fluttered and my palms started to sweat. He was still the most beautiful man I had ever seen.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t have suggested it if I wasn’t.” That was true. But just because it was my idea didn’t mean I wasn’t scared.

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## Chapter Seven

### *We Can't Go Wrong*

The drive back to my apartment was a quiet one. It did feel a bit awkward considering he had basically poured his heart out, and then we got booted from the cafe before I had a chance to respond.

“I’m still in the same building.”

“Really? The same apartment too?” Every once in a while he would shift his gaze from the road and over to me.

“No. Down the hall. The guy I was subletting from that summer came back for the school year. But I got lucky, and there was a one bedroom, plus den, that opened up on the same floor. It’s nothing fancy, but it works for me.”

“I’m glad you didn’t have to move far.”

“Nope. I was really in no shape to go apartment hunting.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize, Clinton. We’re both responsible for what happened. I blamed you at first, but over time, I realized I played an equal part.”

After the turn onto my street, he started slowing down. “Should I find a spot out front?”

“Yes, and I think it should be easy to find one. Most of my neighbors won’t be home for a couple of hours yet.”

“Great.”

Clinton skillfully navigated his station wagon into a small space right outside the front door of my building. Clearly he was used to having to fit his vehicle into any spot he could find, living in a big city where parking was at a premium.

“I’m impressed.”

“I’ve had lots of practice.”

Once we got to my apartment, I wasn’t sure if I should show him around first or if we should just sit down and get back to our conversation. I opted for the latter, since my stomach had been in knots since Clinton confessed that he still loved me. At least I think that was what he said.

“I’m going to grab some water—would you like some?”

“Sure, that would be great.”

After filling two glasses, I led us to my couch. It was the same one he had sat on almost four years ago and told me he needed time to think after busting me in drag at Judy’s. I had had it professionally cleaned since then and added a blue throw and some side tables, but the space pretty much looked the same. I hadn’t spent much money over the years on décor, and observing it through Clinton’s eyes, I had to admit that it looked a bit thrift-store chic.

“Your place is nice.”

“You don’t have to say that. It’s far from what you’re used to, I’m sure.”

“No, it’s not. I live very simply. I don’t live like my parents. Plus, I work for a nonprofit, so I couldn’t afford to anyway.”

“So, your parents are... good?”

“They are. But let’s not talk about my parents right now, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I meant what I said, you know. Before we closed down the coffee shop.”

“I have to say that I’m more than a little confused. You told me you would never be okay with me in drag. Why should I believe that now suddenly you are?”

“Can I show you something?”

“Um, sure.”

Clinton pulled out his cell phone and started pushing buttons. Then he handed his phone to me. When I glanced down at the photo he had displayed, I couldn’t believe my eyes. I was looking at the drawing Ethan had done of us back in college.

“You took a picture of it?” He nodded. “And you kept it all these years?” More nodding. “I thought you didn’t like it.”

“That’s not true. I was more afraid of it than anything.”

“Why?”

“You have always been so comfortable in your body, always confident about how you looked. Back then looking at this drawing made me feel exposed. You saw beauty in it, and I saw my own vulnerability, and I didn’t

like it. Even as an out gay man, I didn't want to be different. I had always planned to follow in the Jefferson footsteps. That meant conforming to a certain extent, and I was okay with that. My life would mirror theirs, except I would marry a man. I'd run for office, have two kids, and buy the house in the suburbs. When you started experimenting with drag, I knew I'd get asked why my partner liked wearing dresses. I didn't understand it myself, and the thought of being singled out like that terrified me."

"And now?"

"Now I'm no longer afraid. I learned some really important lessons from Andrew. I realized that you, like him, are incredibly courageous to live your life openly. I thought it made you less of a man, when in fact, expecting you to give up that part of yourself made *me* less of a man. I learned that it's not about what you wear; it's what's in your heart and mind. I was such a coward, G. I knew that I had to make some changes in my life."

"Like what?"

"Well, I started talking to Jerome again, for one thing. I also sold the condo and the car my parents had purchased for me. The person I thought I wanted to be turned out to be a selfish ass. I was so caught up in social conventions and appearances. I was doing exactly what my parents expected instead following my own passion. I had everything I thought I needed, but I was still unhappy. And I didn't understand why until I met Andrew. He had next to nothing, yet he was one of the happiest people I knew because he was being true to himself. So, I adjusted my priorities; I saved and bought my own place, got my trusty Subaru, and focused on how I could make a real difference instead of just toeing the party line."

I couldn't mask my surprise.

"Don't jump to conclusions now. I may be a bit less conservative than I was, but I'll never consider myself a liberal."

"Thank God for that. Life would be way too boring if we agreed all the time."

I don't think it registered right away what I had said. Then his mouth dropped open. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Now it's my turn to show *you* something." I disappeared into my bedroom and when I came back out, I had Ethan's drawing of us in my hand. "You know I used to look at it every chance I could, so it became too painful to have

around after we broke up. When I moved, I packed it into a box and stuck it in the very back of my bedroom closet. It's been there for three years, and I never came across it until today. Before the show I was trying to find a pair of shoes, and when I pulled out that box, there we were, in all our naked glory." I huffed out a breath. "I almost tore it up."

"Why didn't you?"

"Not sure. I just felt like I would regret it if I did."

"Huh."

"Yeah. And now you're here, with a picture of that same drawing on your phone that you've kept for all these years. It's hard not to see it as more than a coincidence."

"I agree. So, does this mean you're willing to give us another try?" His question was barely audible.

"I'm not giving up Gardenia or performing at Judy's."

He shook his head vigorously. "I wouldn't want you to."

"Please tell me you really mean that, Clinton. I won't compromise who I am."

"I know. I want you, G, exactly as you are."

"I want that too." I reached across the sofa and took his hand. "I've missed you so much."

"God, G, me too. There were days I felt like I was drowning; I couldn't breathe, and I just wanted the pain to go away. I thought I could live without you, and it turns out that I can, but I don't want to. I miss *us*. We belong together. I never stopped loving you."

"Me either," I whispered as Clinton closed the distance between us.

"We still have some things to work through."

"I know. We live an hour apart, for one thing."

He grinned. "Ha! That's nothing. Some days I spend that much time on the train on my way to work."

"I'm serious. I can't do another breakup like the one we went through."

"Now that I've got you in my life again, I don't plan on ever giving you up." Clinton released my hand and raised his fingertips to my face. He gently

traced my eyebrows, my nose, and then my lips—following the pattern he never forgot. “You are so beautiful.”

Though I tried to stop them, a few tears managed to escape. One by one, he wiped them away.

“Can I kiss you, G?” His breath ghosted over my damp cheeks. I wanted nothing more.

“Yes.”

We held each other’s gaze until our noses met. When his lips touched mine, I felt like this was our first kiss all over again. He was so tender, brushing our lips together with the utmost reverence. His fingers carded through my still-damp hair, and he opened his mouth, letting his tongue caress my lips.

It was so sweet, how cautious he was being with me. But we had been apart long enough, and I was ready to make every moment with him count. I fisted my hands in his shirt and pulled him flush against me. I kissed him harder, my tongue invading his mouth to taste him. I pressed my chest to his and wound my arms around his neck, yearning to be even closer. Soon, I was sitting in his lap, our hips rocking together as his mouth found that sweet spot just above my collarbone. He nipped at my sensitive skin, and when I cried out, he sucked harder, leaving his mark.

The last thing I wanted to do was stop, but I needed to catch my breath. I released his mouth and met his darkened stare before resting my temple against his. Our chests heaved together, as we fought to maintain some semblance of control.

He was the first to break the comfortable silence that had fallen between us. “So this is it. It’s you and me again.”

“Mm hmm.”

“It’s not going to be easy.”

“It wouldn’t be any fun if it was.”

“You’re sure?” He pulled away and stared into my eyes, searching for any hint of hesitation.

“I’m sure. I love you, Clinton James Jefferson. I always have and always will.”

“Good, because I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. I love you too, and I don’t want to be without you again. I know things won’t be perfect,

but I don't need perfect, G, I need real. That's what matters most to me. We are a formidable couple. And I still believe that as long as we're together..."

"...as long as we're together," I smiled and repeated after him.

"We can't go wrong." We finished the last line of our favorite mantra at the same time.

I picked up Ethan's sketch and admired it like he had penciled it only yesterday. But we had come so far since then. We were changed men—exposed, real, and irrefutably drawn together. And as long as we were, we couldn't go wrong.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*J.R. Barten feels like she's been researching her career as a writer since she was a teenager. At a neighbor's garage sale in the 1980s, she discovered romance novels and offered the woman a quarter for the entire box. From that time on, she would go to her room claiming she had homework to do, and proceed to read book after book from her stash. She is a hopeless romantic who believes love is love—end of story. Her passion for M/M pairings started with writing fanfiction for TV couples. That kick-started her muse, and soon she was creating her very own characters and stories.*

*J.R., or Jen, as most call her, was born and raised in Iowa and now lives in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. She is grateful for her wife, family and friends, coffee, the two best rescue dogs, and especially for the many authors who give generously of themselves every time they write a story.*

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