



2015

Don't Read in the Closet

Mr Wonderful

Willow Scarlett

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

MR WONDERFUL

By Willow Scarlett

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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MR WONDERFUL

By Willow Scarlett

Photo Description

A tattooed and pierced young man with a shaven head is asleep in a floral bed, cuddling a white bull terrier.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please help me, I am not sure what happened last night. My friends and I went out to celebrate, and I must have overdone it because my memories are a little fuzzy. I know I met a guy, and evidence indicates we had a really good time.

Why am I in bed with this friendly dog, and why did my friend just text me asking how Mr. Wonderful is this morning?

I want this to be the start of something wonderful, after all that I have gone through and all I have achieved; I would really like a man to share it all with.

Thank you, Author, for giving me a story.

Sincerely,

Peggy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, new adult

Tags: flamboyant characters, interracial, men with pets, military men, tattoos, visual arts

Word Count: 32,798

MR WONDERFUL

By Willow Scarlett

Chapter One

There was an ache in my head and a vibrating phone in my hand. There was a blank space in my mind where last night should be. There was a warmth against my chest where someone was tucked under my arm. *Please, please let this mean what I think it means.*

I kept my eyes closed. I held on to the dream: I had drunk myself to confidence and taken someone home, and even now he was sleeping sweetly against my side. *Please, please, let me not be alone anymore.*

My phone vibrated again. I dragged my lids open, sandpapering my eyeballs. I found I was shirtless under a floral comforter and my arm was slung over a warm body. A warm *canine* body.

I didn't own a dog.

Last night must have been *wild*.

"Good morning, pup." The dog opened one eye, but stayed quietly nestled on my chest. It was white with a dark nose and a big sloping head. It was small, but not small-small. Possibly a pit bull? Some kind of terrier?

I unlocked my phone to read a message from my best mate Claudio:

How is Mr Wonderful this morning?

Claud was an affectionate dude, but he'd never called me sweet names before. Still, I replied:

Mr Wonderful is hungover and groggy.

I snuggled into the friendly dog and closed my eyes to get back to napping. But Claud replied immediately:

Aw too bad. He's a catch.

I blinked. Either my straight best mate had suddenly decided to hit on me, or we were talking at odds.

I didn't know where I was, but it definitely wasn't my bedroom. I was lying under a floral comforter, in a cluttered room decorated with framed illustrations of elegant dresses. It could have been a spread from a house and lifestyle magazine, except that it was a pigsty. There was clothing strewn everywhere, and all of it was black.

My jeans and best shirt were flung in a heap by the bed. There was something bright blue and frilly hanging over the bed's rail. It could have been a dress.

Was it possible that I'd gotten drunk enough to go home with a girl?

Last night. Last night. What the hell had happened last night?

My gallery opening! I remembered that. Months of hard work had led up to that one moment. I'd even taken a month off from my landscaping job to focus fully on getting my art up to scratch. A solo show at Riverside Gallery was a dream come true, and last night it had officially come true. And then afterward...?

Drinks with the guys. Blue Wells, Zayne's favorite hipster bar. There were genuine antique wells under the floor, though in New Zealand "antique" meant anything over fifty years old. They were lit by blue lights and covered with glass so you could see into them. I remembered that eerie blue light and the shivering vertigo of standing on the glass.

I'd met someone gorgeous. The kind of gorgeous that stuck in my memory, a guy with a quick, dazzling smile and something... glittery? He'd been at the bar. Or outside the bar. Had I actually met him, or just looked at him and dreamed?

I couldn't remember. I hoped that was a good sign. I hoped drinking to oblivion had meant drinking to self-confidence. Waking up in a strange room with a strange dog had to be a good sign.

I'd never been with a girl, and I wouldn't have been with one last night, no matter how drunk I'd been. I must have gone home with a guy. Maybe I'd gotten lucky. It was about time to have some good luck.

I was waking up and my thoughts were coming more clearly. Claudio's text was rattling around in my aching head. *How is Mr Wonderful this morning?*

There was a memory trying to come to the surface.

A guy. Gorgeous. With a smile that was dizzyingly beautiful, so he'd look at you and you'd feel all warm like a shot of whiskey on a winter night. I'd seen him and I'd forgotten how to breathe.

There was no way I'd ever have the courage to talk to someone that handsome. But what were the odds that I'd hooked up with someone else and forgotten it? *Please, please, let this be Mr Wonderful's bed.*

There was a knock at the door, and I glanced down to check it hadn't woken up the dog. Looking at the dog triggered another memory: I remembered seeing that dog outside Blue Wells. Claudio was taking a smoke and I was standing beside him when I'd spotted a cute dog. I'd stooped to pat the dog, and then I'd looked up to see... a gorgeous guy with that smile and... an apron? Yes. An apron from a novelty shop, bright blue and covered in frills. The same apron that was now draped over bed's rail. Bright blue and embroidered with the words "Mr Wonderful."

The memory slotted into place as the door swung open.

"Morning, sunshine." Mr Wonderful was smiling that dazzling smile and holding a tray of scrambled eggs.

I closed my eyes to bask in the moment of pure joy.

"Here's juice—grapefruit and orange with apple—I blend it myself. There's coffee—French press—and a couple of painkillers. The toast is from homemade bread, my flatmate grows the tomato and the basil and mint for the salsa, and the avocados are from a friend's trees—smaller than you get in shops, but better—and I make the mayonnaise fresh each week. The tofu and spices are from the shop, but it's top-quality stuff and hot out of the pan. Hope you enjoy."

He'd talked without pause as he entered the room, placed the tray on a table beside me and dragged open curtains at the head of the bed. I squinted against the rush of sunlight—the windows seemed to take up the entire wall, and the opposite wall was lined with mirrors. The room was suddenly brilliantly white.

Mr Wonderful clambered into bed and sat up straight. He dragged the duvet up to cover his bare legs, covering his dog in the process.

"Good morning," he said again. "I hope I didn't wake you."

I shook my head but instantly regretted it. *Ouch*. "No, I was awake."

I took the chance to check him out. He looked college age, a little younger than my twenty-two. Lustrous dark skin, short coils of black hair, inky black eyes, and a few days' worth of stubble on a broad, strong face. And a smile that could make me dizzy even when I was sober. *Wow*.

Mr Wonderful was a knock-out, a total ten. I couldn't imagine a better way to celebrate my gallery opening than to go home with this guy.

"Fabulous," he said. "Sit up, I've made breakfast."

I carefully cradled the dozing dog to my chest as I wiggled up the bed, making soft beeps like a car reversing. I ended with my back against the window and the dog still sleeping, so that was a success. I gave it a little pat on its short-haired head.

Mr Wonderful was watching, his mouth pouting open and his expression all goopy. He reached over and cupped my chin. “Dean, you are fucking adorable.”

And then he kissed me.

It was just a peck, over before I could process anything except how soft his lips were. I stared at those lips stretching into a lazy, contented smile and noticed the glitter at each corner—a tiny piece of jewelry at either side of his mouth.

He noticed me staring and pulled his mouth open to show me where the piercings went through, right beside the join of his lips on either side.

“Dahlia,” he said. “Cool, right?” When I nodded, he touched the side of my nose. “I want to get my nose pierced, too. I’d suit it, right?”

“Yeah.” His hand was warm against my cheek while the fingertips brushed my nose ring. I wanted him to kiss me again.

But instead he grabbed the breakfast tray and settled it on his lap. The tray was bright pink and had enamel cupcakes around the outside. For a few moments I was distracted by that outlandish tray and didn’t pay attention to the sumptuous spread on it.

Then Mr Wonderful handed me a glass of water. “I brought painkillers, in case you’ve got a headache.”

“Thank you.” I finally took in the huge plate of food with accompanying double sets of cutlery and pulpy juice. “This looks amazing.”

“Thanks! My aim is to make the whole world vegan through really great meals.” He laughed when he saw my confusion. “Tofu scramble. It’s awesome, trust me. My big weekend treat for when I’ve got a busy day planned.”

He was giving me a significant look. I nodded, then winced. Through the renewed throbbing I tried to remember anything more from last night, any hint of what this man was hinting at. But it was just a blur.

The scramble was good. For a few minutes we ate off the same tray in companionable silence. The gorgeous boy looked at me while we ate, watching my tattooed hands and arms when I moved, and flicking his gaze down to my chest and stomach.

He was wearing a charcoal almost-T-shirt, kinda weird and slouchy but flattering, which looked soft and expensive. I was still shirtless and feeling self-conscious. Not knowing what kind of fun we'd gotten up to last night, I didn't know if I'd stripped for him in the light or in the dark. It could be that he'd only properly seen me dressed to impress in my fancy shirt last night. I hoped he liked what he saw now, in the bright light of day.

"Viv loves you," he said, nodding at where his dog's head peeked above the blanket. "She's out like a Snorlax."

I smiled at the Pokémon reference. He put the breakfast tray on the side table, then nestled back into the pillows beside me. He stroked his dog, then moved his hand to my chest.

"Can't blame her," he said. "I wish I were still all snuggled with you." He followed the outline of feathers tattooed across my chest until he stopped at my pierced nipple. He flicked his tongue out to lick his plush lips before he raised his eyes to mine. "We've got about an hour and a half. So we can do that thing we were talking about last night, if you're still keen."

I was hardly breathing. This was too good to be true. I wanted him so badly. I wanted the tingling electricity that he trailed over my skin.

But it was time to come clean.

"I'm sorry." My tongue felt too large for my mouth, and my voice was croaking. I had to swallow before I could go on. "I don't remember last night."

Chapter Two

He paused with his fingertips still brushing my nipple. “Nothing?”

I shook my head.

“Oh. So you don’t remember... all the fun we got up to?”

“No.”

“You don’t remember how I bent you over my sewing table and nailed you until you screamed my name?” He pinched my nipple, and my back arched involuntarily.

“No.” I swallowed. “I wish I did.”

“Yeah?” His grin was wicked and the jewels through the sides of his mouth sparkled like they were winking at me. Then he darted forward to plant a kiss on my cheek. “Didn’t happen, Dean. We kissed. We came back here and showered—separately—and crashed.”

“Oh.” My relief at not forgetting great sex battled with my disappointment at not having had it.

He sat up, straightening his back and getting all serious and professional. “So you don’t remember me?”

I shook my head, feeling wretched. “Not much, just flashes. I’m sorry.”

I expected him to look disappointed, but his smile just got bigger. “This is awesome. My shot at a second first impression! So, hi. My English name is Bosco. I’m the rock star of the fashion design world, completely radicalizing the way we imagine streetwear. I turn heads. They say you should rest your chin on your hand when you go to my shows, ’cause when my shit struts down the runway your jaw is going to drop.”

He thrust his hand out, and I maneuvered awkwardly to shake without letting go of the dog. “Wow.”

He scrunched his face up and raised a shoulder. “Well, hey, I’m in my third year of a bachelor’s in fashion design. But I’m still a badass designer, and I’m going to be terrifically famous. Same diff, right?”

I nodded. I was feeling out of my depth.

“So, important stuff,” he went on. “This is my place. I’ve got two roomies but they’re vampires—in bands and stuff. They don’t wake up ’til the afternoon. This is Vivienne.” He patted the dog’s snout.

“Hello, Vivienne.”

“She’s named after Westwood.” When I didn’t respond, Bosco’s eyes got huge. “C’mon. Vivienne Westwood? Single-handedly created punk? Well, with McLaren, but Viv was the brains. She’s a genius. I swear, my whole life is inspired by Vivienne Westwood. When I was seven, I told my whole class that I’d get married wearing a pair of her heels.”

I didn’t know anything about fashion. I laughed, though I wasn’t sure if it was a joke or not. “And what are we doing today?”

“Today is Zinefest. Kids buy, sell and swap zines—handmade books. And I’ve got a stall. Last night you were interested in making a zine for your art.”

“I don’t know what a zine is and I don’t know how to make one,” I admitted.

Bosco’s grin got even wider. “I know all about making zines. I’m sort of a zine wunderkind. I promised I’d help you make one for Zinefest. That’s one of the things I said last night when I was trying to seduce you. Come on.”

He hopped out of the bed, giving me a flash of his dark bare legs in a pair of boxers. I was in shock from him saying that *he* had had to try and seduce *me*.

I moved as carefully as I could to extricate myself from under Vivienne’s warm body. But as soon as I reached the side of the bed, she leaped up and jumped to the floor.

“Good girl,” Bosco crooned. To me he said, “She’s not allowed in the bed alone. I’m afraid that if I let her stay in there she’d sleep all day and get depressed. She’s about equal parts lazy and hyperactive. She’s got her own room with access to the backyard but she doesn’t like to be alone. She comes to school with me every day, like our little mascot.”

“Cool. She seems sweet.”

“She is. She’s a great dog.” Bosco was looking around the room, eyes narrowed in concentration.

I clambered over the bed’s high sides, and into the chaos of his room. Clothing was heaped everywhere, an endless lumpy sea of gray and black. Tables were visible like islands, peeking out from under their own burdens of books and threads and art supplies.

“I’m sorry. I know, it’s a pigsty.”

“It’s fine.” I hoped my grin was reassuring—Bosco looked genuinely unhappy.

“I actually lead you to bed in the dark last night. I didn’t want my messy room to ruin my chances for cuddles.”

The idea was nearly laughable, but I didn’t laugh because Bosco still looked so miserable. He was rooting around on a table near a computer, pushing aside stacks of paper and lifting up staplers and rulers and scissors.

“It’s your room. You can have it however you want.”

“This isn’t how I like it. I just try on a lot of outfits, so it would take me ten years to put them all away every time I got changed.” He flashed a rueful grin over his shoulder. Then he leaned over the table to rummage in a pile. “Ha!” He lifted a mug of paintbrushes to grab something beneath, which triggered a landslide of papers onto the floor.

Bending over the table made Bosco’s boxers pull tight. I forgot about the room and the mess, my vision telescoping in on his lean, sleek legs and his pert, round ass. That ass was incredible, like sweet fruit just begging to be picked.

He said we’d only kissed, but I was praying I’d at least copped a feel last night—it was way too beautiful to miss out on.

“This is what we’re going to make.” He turned around, holding up a brochure. I lifted my eyes, but not quickly enough. Bosco caught my gaze, then a wicked smile wrapped around his face. “Were you checking out my ass?”

“Ugh.” My face grew hot. “Yes.”

He grinned and winked, then bent over the table so his back arched and his ass was thrust into the air. The look he gave me over his shoulder was even more lascivious than before.

My cheeks burnt. I didn’t know what to say. Bosco was grinning, still looking at me over his shoulder. “You remember me yet?”

“That part I didn’t forget.”

“Yeah, it’s a good ass, right?” He raked his eyes over my body, then back up to my face. Slowly and deliberately, he ran his pink tongue over his upper lip.

I shivered. I didn’t know where to look or what to do with my hands. So I sat mutely and eye-fucked him. I liked Bosco’s forwardness, especially because

it showed that he knew how gorgeous he was. It was a thrill to have him pose and look back at me with lust.

At least I know he likes what he sees. I glanced down at my body—sleep ruffled and flushed pink, but still I looked okay. It was a year since I'd left the army, but I still trained regularly and my physical job in landscaping meant I wasn't too distant from my old military-issue physique. I'd always thought of my body as a tool, but in the last year or two I'd been steadily trying to think of it as a canvas. I knew I looked good, but I wasn't used to being looked at.

Bosco cupped his package, his eyes all over me. "If you want, we could forget all about Zinefest and just go back to bed...?"

His bed did look warm and inviting. "You said we've got to leave in an hour and a half?"

"Or a little under."

"We'd need longer than that."

I'd meant that I'd want time to get comfortable with his body and learn what he liked. But his eyebrows shot up in surprise and he let out a bark of laughter. "Confident much?"

I coughed. "And, you know, your dog would want to get back in, and then we'd have to kick her out. I couldn't forgive myself."

Bosco's face went all soft and melty. I was glad I loved dogs, because he obviously liked it when I was nice to his dog.

"Sorry," I added.

"It's cool. I offered, right? So, zines it is. This is a zine." He held out the pamphlet he'd unearthed from the table.

My hands were shaking as I took the zine. I was intensely aroused and not at all certain that I'd made the right decision in passing up what might be my only chance with Bosco.

The zine was several pages of paper folded in half and stitched together down the central seam. It looked like standard printer paper, A4 sheets folded in half to make an A5 booklet. The handwritten title took up the whole cover, letters jaggedly crammed together: DO I LOOK LIKE A DICK IN THIS?

Inside were collages, photos of people in suits with things superimposed over their heads: A model with a pig's head and trotters, a model with a rock

for a head, a house for a head, a horse's head, a nikau palm growing from the collar and sleeves of a suit. Everything was black and white, grainy and grungy like they'd been run through a photocopier. Some of the pictures had pen drawings for heads, and there were handwritten notes crammed everywhere.

I was starting to read the notes when Bosco made a *tsking* sound. "You can read later, now's your time to let out your inner creative genius."

I blinked, dragging myself back to the moment. "This looks photocopied, but the paper stock is too high quality."

Bosco looked delighted. "I'm a master of my craft, not a hack! Thanks for noticing. This one is photocopied, it's the proper DIY zine idea, but I want it to feel good in your hands. Zines can be anything you want—comics, collage, diary, poems—kind of like a printed blog. If you're going to make a zine instead of a blog, that means you care about your readers holding your work in their hands, so you want it to feel good."

I nodded. Bosco excavated a desk chair and gestured for me to sit in front of his computer. Like the flick of a switch, his sexual excitement had changed to zine excitement. It was a pity because he looked hot as hell when he got all worked up and talking fast.

"There's paper for you to choose from, and light card for the cover. I've got templates on the computer. You can grab your art from your website and drop it in. It's quick and dirty, but that's what we've got time for."

"Quick and dirty sounds great." The words were already out before I noticed the double entendre.

"Oh, *sweetie*." Bosco was still perched on the table, leering down at me in my desk chair. "Have you got plans this evening?"

I shook my head.

"Or tonight?"

I shook my head.

"You do now. We're staying sober, and you're staying in my bed. Vivienne's not invited."

"Deal," I said thickly.

Once Bosco explained his templates to me, the zine process was straightforward. The difficult part was deciding on which of my pieces to

include and how to order them, and then which paper to print on. It was the same kind of decisions I'd had to make for my show, but on an impossibly tight deadline.

It was the kind of decisions I loved to make. I challenged myself to work as quickly as I could, whipping through my portfolio and organizing art samples with ruthless efficiency. By the time I printed a test copy, my headache had evaporated.

"Hey." Bosco gently rested his hand on my shoulder.

"Oh, hey." I blinked up at him. His face was damp and water droplets speckled his hair. "Why are you wet?"

He chuckled. "Took Viv for a run out back. You didn't even notice me leaving the room, did you?"

I shook my head. "Sorry."

"Damn right you're sorry—I changed my underwear right there and you didn't even look up!" Bosco laughed at my slack mouth and drooping eyelids. "You got all intense when you were working. Do you normally focus that hard?"

"I suppose." I took my test copy out of the printer and handed it to Bosco. "I enjoy putting things in order. Moving one image can change the impression of the whole. I got such a kick out of organizing my solo show and having that big space to tell any kind of story I wanted."

His smile was all soft again. I liked when Bosco's face went all soft and goopy: it was a little boost to my confidence, a little sign that I was doing something right.

"Dean," he said seriously. "You're kinda deep. You know that?"

I hesitated. "I don't know. I don't think so. I don't know anything about philosophy and politics and stuff."

"You've got introspection. You can look at yourself and your habits and recognize patterns. It's something they talk about a lot with my degree, otherwise I wouldn't know jack spit about it. Introspection's a kind of intelligence that gets overlooked, but it's really important." He folded my zine neatly in half, resting it on the table and running a blunt fingernail along the crease.

"I guess with the army and with my work I have a lot of time to think. Not much else to do with my brain."

“That thing you said... I’ve heard artists calling themselves storytellers. A kid in my year was showing his final collection and said his outfits told stories. Our tutor was like, ‘That’s a singlet and a tutu, if it’s a story then it’s an episode of *Sex and the City*’.”

I laughed. “I don’t really watch TV.”

“Not even *Project Runway*?” Bosco faked horror. Then he leaned forward to peck a kiss on my forehead. “But yeah. You know some artists call themselves storytellers?”

“Yeah—I read the Internet.”

“Brill. Hey, do you need to know more artists? I know a whole bunch, I can hook you up. And today is going to be amazing for you, Zinefest is chockablock with artists.”

“Yeah.” I took in every glorious inch of Bosco, springy hair to shapely calves. He was plain gorgeous, except that there was nothing plain about him. He vibrated with joy and life. “I believe today is going to be amazing.”

Bosco was flipping through my zine now. He had it cradled in his hands like a fragile flower, and he was nodding intently while he looked. He glanced up at me and said, “That concentration you’ve got? Totally awesome. Trust me, from a guy with the attention span of a drunk chicken, that kind of focus is a rare skill.”

My belly was tingling with nerves. Seeing my art in Bosco’s hands felt a lot like baring my soul.

He looked up at me, eyes bright and grin huge. “Dean, you’re a genius. Your art is amazing. Look at this!”

“Thank you.” I ducked my head to hide how pleased I was.

But Bosco hadn’t finished. “You’re a genius. Everything I’m seeing is great—your eye, your subject matter, your execution. Even just the layout of this zine is fantastic! Wow, you’re a real artist. This is not what I expected. It’s so much better! You’ve got talent!”

“Thank you.”

“Here.” He passed the pile of pages back to me. “Check it’s how you want it. I’ll get the paper needle in the machine and show you how to sew it together—this is too good to just bind with staples!”

But while he was talking, he was already dropping to his knees beside my chair. With a hand on the table and a hand on the chair back, he angled in for a slow open-mouthed kiss. It was strangely sweet and chaste—even though I was in just a pair of boxers, Bosco didn't touch my skin.

He hovered for a few moments with his lips close to mine. My shoulders and arms were tight, the muscles tensed with the need to pull Bosco against me, to kiss him and not stop kissing. His breathing was quickened like he was feeling it too. Then he whispered, "Can I borrow your boots?"

"Huh?"

"For the fest today. They'll make this outfit."

"Oh. Yeah, sure." It would be weird to be barefoot in public, but whatever. Bosco had kissed me, and was probably going to kiss me again. I could deal with my feet getting dirty.

"I tried them on when I was making breakfast, we have the same shoe size!" His eyes were huge, and he was almost breathless with excitement. "I've got the cutest shoes for you to wear, black canvas high tops with black lace trim. Sounds kinda femme but they're gnarly. Paired with those sexy black stovepipes you wore last night, you'll look like a million bucks!"

"Whatever you think will look good. I trust you, you're the designer." I wanted to sound glib, but I came off like a fanboy. Bosco had shifted from quiet and thoughtful to over-the-top flamboyant in the blink of an eye, and I was reeling from the swift transformation.

But either way, he was friendly. That was about all I wanted from a guy on the morning after.

He was setting up a sewing machine at the table next to mine, his hands moving with lightning confidence. "Oh, honey. Tell me more about how I'm your personal style guru. That's the sexiest dirty talk I've ever heard!"

Chapter Three

I sat in my boxers and printed copies of my little zine, while Bosco flitted around getting dressed and coaxing me to print more “because they’re just too great.” He was the very gay angel on my shoulder telling me I was wonderful, and I couldn’t get enough of it.

His printing set-up was luxurious, so much paper and card to choose from and a high-quality color printer. On a regular day, that would be enough to keep my attention. But somewhere in my attempt to sew straight lines through paper, I woke up from my art reverie and started watching Bosco. He was primping in front of the mirror, leaning in close to do something to his face. I thought he was popping a pimple—his skin was revoltingly flawless, but I didn’t know what else he’d be doing.

Then I recognized the action: he was putting on eye make-up. I’d never had a girlfriend, and my big sister was in the army and didn’t wear make-up, so I had a limited basis of comparison.

He caught me looking. “Cool, huh? Classy and mysterious, a touch of retro screen-starlet flair, and just a little over-the-top. Plus it’s an excuse to be late. You know what they say? ‘Never ask a girl in winged eyeliner why she’s late’. Want some glitter?”

“No thank you.”

“Pity.” He didn’t miss a beat, smiling to himself like I’d said exactly what he’d expected. “I’m completely in favor of boys in make-up, but the minute I offer it around boys freak out like I’m asking them to parade in a drag show. No offense,” he added quickly.

“It’s okay. You look amazing. I’m just... not brave enough, I guess. I don’t know anything about make-up. I’m scared of looking...” I hesitated.

“Like a woman?”

“No! That’s not what I mean. I mean...” I squirmed. Bosco had turned fully to look at me with an expression I couldn’t read. It felt like I was disappointing him by taking a stance on something I’d never even thought about.

He looked great. And the swoops of black eyeliner made his eyes even more striking—still warm like they’d looked in bed this morning, but less friendly and more enchanting. I’d always thought that glitter was tacky, but his definitely grabbed my attention.

If Bosco looked great in his make-up, why didn't I want to try any? "You look really, really good. I guess I've never really thought about make-up before," I said feebly. It felt like a watered-down excuse.

But he smiled and came over to me, placing both hands on my shoulders and leaning down for a tender kiss. "I didn't mean to pressure you into anything."

"You didn't." I licked my lips, feeling where he'd touched me. "I want to think about things that I've never thought about before. I just need a chance to think about it. But I like challenges."

"Oh, honey, you are going to love me. I am *all about* confronting dogma. I will come at your belief system like a steamroller." He was grinning, but as he pulled away his face collapsed into a frown. "Shit, fuck, asslords! I've got glitter on you."

He'd obviously had glitter on his fingers, and it had clung to my shoulders where he'd touched me. He tried to brush it off. I caught his hand to stop him, and for a moment I just held there, stunned by the contrast between our skin. He was so dark, rich warm brown against my cool pinky white. We were so beautiful together that I didn't want him to move.

Then I got my shit together and let him go. "It's fine, leave it."

"You sure?" He frowned, ducking to meet my eyes.

"A minute ago you were telling me I should wear glitter, and now you don't want me to?"

"Well, a minute ago you said you didn't want to wear glitter, and I respect that. Your body, your rules. Even if you look fucking incredible all spangly."

I laughed. The gold glitter actually looked kinda good on me, reflecting the light as pinpricks on my skin and glittering on my forest spirit tattoo. It would probably stick to the inside of my shirt and haunt my sheets and washing machine forever. *A thousand tiny sparkling reminders of Bosco.*

"You've done a great job of decorating yourself, though. Your tattoos are better than glitter." He sucked at the skin on my shoulder, his mouth wet and hot and moving. His hair brushed against my cheek like a cat wanting attention.

"You smell so good." I hadn't even meant to say it, let alone gasp it out like a prayer.

"Conditioner. I don't shampoo much so I save money on that, but I lose out on buying so much conditioner. Though I guess you don't have to bother about

any of that.” He grinned and scrubbed a hand over my head, shaven nearly to the skin. His rough touch on my stubbled scalp sent a sudden bolt of electricity straight to my groin. It was all I could do to bite back a moan.

But Bosco whipped back his hand like I’d burned him. “Oh shit, fuckballs! I’ve got glitter on you again!”

He looked so horrified that I couldn’t help laughing. “It’s okay, really. I like how you swear. What’s a fuckball?”

“You know—balls that you fuck.”

“And asslords?”

“Lords of ass. Clearly.”

I laughed. “That’s cute.”

“Yeah. When I’m famous, everyone will be using my swearwords. You just wait.” He winked.

He went back to his mirror and I went back to my zine. Or at least I tried to. But Bosco getting ready kept distracting me.

“How’s the sewing going?” he asked, when he caught me looking once again.

“Good.” I quickly turned my attention back to the sewing machine. I’d used a sewing machine in home ec when I was about ten, but I couldn’t remember it being this vicious. Bosco’s machine was a charging warhorse, racing down the center of my paper and then trying to take my fingers off. There was a knee pedal which sent a blade whizzing down to cut the threads when I finished each zine. “It’s hard to sew straight.”

“Yeah! Now just tell that to all the jocks who think fashion is an easy A. That’s an industrial machine there, my pride and joy! I make almost all of my clothes on that gem. It takes a while to get used to, but once you’ve got the knack there’s no going back. I always say that my seams are the only thing straight about me.”

I sewed three more zines, then rewarded myself with a peek at Bosco. He was holding up different necklaces, long glittering strings of black beads and brown-gold chains. I watched his hands moving, the long fingers spreading out chains in front of him like a dealer splaying cards. When my gaze continued up to his face, I realized he was grinning at me.

I quickly turned back to my sewing. My cheeks were burning from being caught staring, but also aching from smiling.

I couldn't resist. I was a moth circling Bosco's flame. He was just so beautiful, and there was something hypnotic about him getting ready. His body was perfect, tall and sleek and defined. But I was captivated by more than just his perfect body—I liked the way he kept looking at himself in the mirror. He didn't just pause to check that he looked okay, but stopped to admire himself like he could appreciate his good looks as much as I did. I liked that he liked himself.

He was wearing a black sweater-T-shirt-thing, long-sleeved but thin and fitted close to his lean torso. The collar was like a turtleneck that kept going, all of these folds of fabric that sat around his neck and shoulders like a scarf. He was also wearing a skirt, dark denim with artful rips and tears and a couple of safety pins. It skimmed his hips then fell loosely to a couple of inches above my boots. That skirt accentuated his narrow hips and exaggerated every movement, making him look even more elegant and beautiful.

"You know, I've never been hot for a dude in a skirt before," I said. Bosco tilted his head and looked at me in the mirror, thoughtful and not smiling. The make-up, the jewelry and skirt... It suddenly dawned that I'd been making assumptions. "You're a dude, right? I mean, you identify as a guy?" I cringed. I had enough transgender friends to not be as awkward about that as I just was.

"Pretty much, yeah."

"So male pronouns, or...?"

"Yeah." He came over and knelt in front of me, wrapping his arms around my neck. I was learning that he was kinda touchy, and I liked that a lot. I leaned into him a little, and he smiled so his dahlia piercings glittered. "I'm a boy, but I find a lot of traditional masculinity repulsive. I think pretty much all gender structure is harmful, but I can see how it's affected and defined me. I love girls—not sexually, you know, but most of my friends are girls and I think femininity's cool—but I don't identify as a girl. A lot of the concept of masculinity is gross, but I still love boys and I mostly identify as one. So I'm, like, seventy-five percent boy. Demiboy."

"Okay." I frowned. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure if I understand that."

"It's kind of like... yeah, I'm a boy, but don't go on about it. Call me a boy, call me a girl, I don't really care; just don't invite me to a stag night or a strip club or expect me to laugh at stand-up comedy."

“Wait. Stand-up comedy?”

“Or sitcoms, really. Humor based on making fun of women. All, ‘have you noticed girls always do this, my wife is a bitch for doing this, here’s a funny dating story, bitches be crazy, ha ha,’ over and over, one comedian after another. It makes me want to scream. I mean, if you think girls are so shitty to be with, why don’t you just date a guy?”

“Bosco, if you hate comedians so much, why are you trying to get them into your dating pool?”

He froze for a moment, and then cracked up laughing. He fell forward, collapsing with laughter so his face was smushed into my chest. “See, make fun of me, *that’s* funny!”

I rested my chin on his head, then kissed his hair. It looked so great and it smelled amazing, but it just tasted like hair: Gritty sand in my mouth.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “This isn’t a rant I should have with people around. I should save it for the bathroom mirror. I’m afraid of ruining comedy for you. I had a few friends who started doing comedy and I swear their jokes were all the same and all misogynistic as fuck, like every comedian is given this prepackaged sense of humor and a list of things to joke about. I started noticing how many jokes were about girls, and then I couldn’t stop noticing, and then it’s *all* I could notice. Now I’ve told you, and you’ll start noticing it, and pretty soon your friends will be asking where your sense of humor has gone. It’s like a curse.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever gone to see comedy, so don’t worry.”

“It’s everywhere, though. All of humor is infected. I mean, wow, are we ever surrounded by casual misogyny. I hate to be all aggressive politics on the first date, but if you don’t get where I’m coming from, then you’re not getting at this ass, you know?”

I tried to laugh but mostly just choked. I hadn’t realized this was counted as a date—it had started with me in his bed, and was going to end with me getting clothes on, so that was the opposite of my experience with dating. I loved hearing him talk, and I loved watching his expressive face and hands. I couldn’t keep my eyes off him, and I could hardly keep my hands off him. The idea of dating him was intoxicating—it was almost too much to imagine being around him more than once.

Although I hadn’t realized I was on a date with Bosco, but I really wanted that to be the case. “Be as aggressively political as you want. I like it.”

“Yeah?” He tilted his head until I felt like I was drowning in his grin. Then his hand was on my chest, toying at my nipple piercing. “Fuck, this is hot. Jeez, Dean, you’ve got this wicked body and this sweet ink and you let me rant... Just let me dress you, and I’ll put a ring on your finger.”

I swallowed down the sudden pang of yearning. I hardly knew this man—this *demiman*—but he was funny and gorgeous and seemed to really like me. I loved outspoken guys, and Bosco had all the opinionated, loudmouth charm without the cruelty that seemed to go hand-in-hand with it. He was... Well, he was wonderful.

I’d worked so hard in the past year. I’d sacrificed a lot and made some huge life changes, and I’d finally begun to live the life I wanted for myself. I had everything I wanted in life, except someone wonderful to share it with.

And suddenly, here I was with my dream guy and he was making jokes about marriage.

He was just joking around. I didn’t want him to know how much the comment had affected me, so I circled back to something I knew would make him laugh. “Seriously though, you talk like you want stand-up comedians to date you.”

He laughed, and I glowed. “Not me, gross, no. Can you imagine? He’d hit on the waitress, then say something snarky the moment she turned him down. I’d storm out of a date with a comedian. I just think that anyone who dates women and doesn’t seem to actually *like* women would be better off just not dating them. Imagine if you or I walked around making gay jokes all the time. Not cool, right? But straight guys do it about girls and no one cares.”

The door swung open, and Vivienne trotted inside. She rushed up to sniff Bosco’s side and my legs, pushing her wet nose into the crook of my knee. She was so excited that I laughed, then Bosco started laughing. We both laughed until we were panting nearly as hard as the dog.

“I don’t know.” Bosco sighed. “I feel like I should support stand-up on principle—comedy is one of the only places where black people are respected. Only men, but still: black comedians are listened to. Comedians and hip hop artists.”

“And the president of the United States?”

“Oh, right.” Bosco started laughing again, with his head on my shoulder and his arms around Vivienne’s middle. “He’s an anomaly, not statistically valid.”

He lifted a shoulder. "I don't know. I'm told that making fun of someone who makes fun for a living makes me a shitty person with no sense of humor, but there it is."

"I think your sense of humor is fine."

He groaned and rested his forehead on my chest. "Oh, Dean, keep up those compliments."

I breathed in the bright lavender and green scent of his hair. "You're so beautiful. The most beautiful person I've ever seen."

He looked up at me with his big, dark eyes accentuated by bold flicks of eyeliner. "For the record, I wasn't serious."

I scabbled for something funny to say, but nothing came to mind. "I was serious."

He winked. "I was serious, too. I was just playing it cool." Bosco lifted Vivienne up until her wet nose bumped against mine.

"You're beautiful too," I told her. She lapped at my nose.

"I'm gonna get your stuff out of the dryer. Keep sewing." He kissed my forehead and left the room. Vivienne stayed and begged me to pat her instead of sewing.

Bosco returned with my clothes from last night, crisply folded. "Washed and dry and good to go. I'd have washed your underwear too, but..."

"That's fine. This is amazing. You didn't have to do that."

"Laundry is just one of my many home skills. Let me show off for a while?" He checked his phone and pulled a face. "We've got just enough time for you to have another shower then be fashionably late."

I kept cuddling Vivienne while I looked desperately at the stack of unfinished zines. "I don't want to make you late."

"It's no big."

"I really don't like being late. Maybe you could go ahead, and I'll meet you there?"

Bosco was going through his racks and piles of clothing, grabbing things and tossing them to the side. He stopped, crouched on his knees, and counted off on his fingers. "One, I'm your wheels. Two, you're my hot date. Three, if you get dressed right now, we'll make it there early."

“I can get dressed now. But, there’s still so much sewing to do...”

His grin was wide and sweet. “Let me choose your outfit and I’ll have your zines all stitched up before you’re dressed.”

“Um. Not a skirt? No offense,” I added quickly.

“Not a skirt. Here.” He passed me some clothes from the ground. “They’re clean. Just crumpled.”

“I don’t think your clothes will fit me.”

“I am all about the layers—plenty of my stuff is artfully oversized. Just try these on? I can distract Viv if you need.”

“Thank you.” Vivienne was happily snuffling against my shoulder, so it was a shame to have to let go of her.

I walked in my boxers through Bosco’s plush hallway to his plush bathroom to get changed. Everything was tidy, like Bosco’s mess ended in a sharp line at his door.

I changed into my jeans and his clothes—a tight, black long-sleeve and a drapery singlet. The sneakers with the lace weren’t as feminine as I’d been afraid, and the outfit looked fine. Not alarming, but also nothing to write home about.

Bosco was back in front of his wall of mirrors. He looked me over and winked. “Hey, looking good.”

“Thank you.”

“Here, this is special.” He held up a jacket. “It’s from my first official collection.”

“You want me to wear it if it’s special? You’re sure?”

He laughed. “Yeah. Clothing wants to be worn. And everything I make for myself is one-of-a-kind. But this wasn’t made for me, it’s from my second year final collection. So it’s ‘special’ in that it’s got silver finishings. Most of my collections do. When I make clothing for myself, I use antiqued copper or antiqued bronze. Colors to suit my skin tone, you know. But it’s less marketable than silver accents like this. Try it on?”

The jacket fit okay. I looked in the mirror and laughed. The jacket was heavy, with chunky metal zips and buttons and wide shoulders. “Okay, this is a great jacket. I look good.”

“I told you, I’m a design rock star!” He pulled on a vest that was heavy with antiqued metal and embroidered patches. “So we match.” He handed me a pile of black jewelry.

“You want me to wear this?”

He shrugged. “Yes. But you don’t have to. Just drop it back in that box if you don’t want to wear it. I want you to look good but I’d rather you be comfortable.”

I looked at a chunky ring with a plastic skull on it. “When you said you’d put a ring on my finger, this isn’t what I was expecting.”

He laughed. “Don’t wear it, okay? I just need one last dose of glitter before we’re good to go.”

The glitter this time was black. He sprinkled it in his hair and onto his eyebrows. “Subtle and classy, see? Just the hint of sparkle.” He wiggled his eyebrows around so the glitter caught the light.

“It looks great.” I was starting to feel like I only had one thing to say, but it was true.

Bosco hooked his arm around my neck and pulled me to him. I hadn’t realized how tall he was—he was lean and gave an impression of compactness, something tiny and delicate. But my eyes were only at the level of his chin and I had to tilt my head back to kiss him.

“No lipstick today,” he murmured. He sounded almost proud.

“You normally wear lipstick?”

“I rock a bold lip. But I want to kiss you more than I want to look pretty. C’mon, I’ll get Viv’s leash and you can carry our zine boxes out to the car.”

I was still dealing with the news that I’d made out with someone who wore lipstick. It wasn’t something I’d ever expected for my life. “Okay.”

But Bosco didn’t make a move. “Just one more kiss first?”

“Okay.”

Chapter Four

Zinefest was four lines of school tables in a central city indoor plaza. A couple of cafés were open for the breakfast crowd, but most of the plaza shops were fashion and secondhand stores, which hadn't opened yet.

Most of the stalls were already set up, and a few people were walking down the aisles between the rows to look at the merchandise. I was amazed by the range of zines for sale. I could see comics, poetry chapbooks, full-colored art books, and even photocopies of handwritten journals.

"This is us!" Bosco tied his dog's leash to a table leg and stooped to pat her. "I asked for a table at the end so Viv wouldn't get overwhelmed. Oh, yuss! We're right next to Carol." He waved enthusiastically at the girl behind the next table. "Dean, you want to meet my friends?"

"Sure." I put Bosco's box on the ground and took a deep breath. He'd called this a first date, and I liked that. But it was shaping up to be one of the most intense first dates of my life.

Half an hour later, I had done a circuit of most of the room and was losing track of names. I left Bosco chatting to a girl with bright green hair and went back to Vivienne. She was sitting quietly and letting people pat her. She seemed happy, but she wasn't as affectionate as she'd been at home. Her eyes kept darting around the crowd and over to Bosco. It looked like a territorial instinct, but she was too well trained to bark everyone away.

One of my army buddies had had a pit bull. He'd always talk about how they weren't aggressive dogs, and he'd explain to anyone who would listen about how pit bulls had a bad reputation they didn't deserve. He said they were just incredibly loyal and that could be turned against them if they were trained to violence.

Vivienne looked like his dog, so I figured there was some pit bull in her. "Loyal" sounded right. She looked up at Bosco whenever he talked, even now. She definitely wasn't interested in attacking anyone, just in getting petted as much as possible. Still, I thought she'd probably rather be running around outside than sitting in an echoing plaza.

"It's okay, sweetie," I soothed. "Your Bosco is coming back to give you pats, and I'm right here." She looked up at me with her mouth open. With her sloping head and blunt snout, it looked like she was smiling. "You like people

but not this many people at once, right? Me too. Who knows what to say to all of these people.”

There was a loud burst of laughter, like the audience at a comedy club. I saw Bosco grinning happily, everyone around him laughing at something he’d said. He met my eye and winked.

Vivienne stood up, pointing her nose toward him and panting happily while her tail wagged. I laughed. “Yeah, you and me both, sweetie.”

The boxes I’d carried in were full of zines and little decorations for the table. I took everything out and arranged it nicely. I looked through some of Bosco’s zines to pass the time.

It was another half hour before Bosco was back at the table. “I’m sorry.” He collapsed into his chair. “Gods, this has been good—knowing I have someone back here to look after my stall. I can flit around and meet everyone! There are so many great people here, saying so many interesting things.”

“You don’t need to apologize. That sounds great.”

“I brought you here, then I ditched you. That’s not cool.” His crooked grin made his piercings glitter. “Lucy asked about my current collection—questions about fashion are my kryptonite. I’ll just grab Viv some water, and then—” He stopped talking when he noticed the bowl of water I’d brought from one of the nearby cafés. “Oh, Dean.”

I shifted awkwardly under his adoring gaze.

“It is such a shame you never had a dog. You are to dogs what I am to fashion—a total natural.”

“Anyone would want to look after Vivienne—she’s adorable.”

Bosco studied me carefully. “You know, you were much more talkative last night.”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s not... I don’t know. Like, you told me how you always wanted a dog but couldn’t have one, so you made your friends pretend to be dogs?”

“Oh, shit. I can’t believe I told you that. I swear I don’t treat people like dogs.”

“If you treated me like you treat Viv, I wouldn’t complain.” His head was cocked to one side, and his eyes were squinted with the intensity of attention he was paying me. “But you don’t remember telling me that, do you?”

I shook my head. “I don’t remember what I said last night. I get talkative when I’m drunk, I guess.”

“Not just talkative, but more open. You talked about yourself. And I think you’re really interesting. You’re a cool guy. I’d like to hear more about you.”

I glanced down at the table self-consciously. “Your zines say ‘Bosco Flame’. Is that really your name?”

He was silent for a few long moments. “Yeah.”

“It suits you.” I had watched him getting dressed, and thought of myself as a moth to his flame. The name suited Bosco exactly.

Then he looked at the table and let out a whistle. “Look at this! You’ve got our table all set up. Oh wow, Dean! You did great.”

“I just used the things that were in your box.” Along with stacks of zines, Bosco’s box had been crammed with glitter and bunting and little soft toys, silly string and confetti and plastic flowers and spinning fans. There were Pokémon dolls dressed up in outfits that I was sure Bosco had designed, and dollhouse furniture to fit them. There were even tiny wardrobes filled with more tiny clothes.

I’d laid everything out on the table. It made our stall into a glittering funhouse, but I figured that was what Bosco wanted.

He was smiling indulgently. “These are things from all of my Zinefests over the years. Usually I just have one or two props out.”

“Oh. Should I put these away?” I reached toward the table

Bosco caught my wrist. “My god, no! Never!”

My heart leaped at his touch. I froze, looking down at his hand around my wrist. He’d been all over me this morning, but that had been in a headachy morning haze. It seemed like I’d lost my tolerance to Bosco somewhere in between the drive to Zinefest and seeing him in full-on social butterfly mode.

He let go of me suddenly. “Crap, sorry.”

“Huh?”

“This is too public for me to touch you?”

“Oh, no. Not at all.”

He smirked. “I’m not used to people freezing up like I’ve Tasered them. If you don’t want me touching you in public, I won’t. No big.”

“It’s okay. I’m out.” When Bosco kept smirking at me, one glittering eyebrow raised, I tried to make him laugh. “Have you seen the size of my arms? I’m not scared of anyone.”

He snorted. But when he turned his attention back to the table, he was smiling. “So, I’m going to put some of the extras away—we just want a few of each zine out to give the impression of scarcity, which makes people more likely to buy. Have you ever been into a high-end fashion store? Sometimes they’ll only have one of each garment out on the racks. Totally classy. Makes a shop look like a gallery, I guess. So you won’t mind paying a lot for that garment.” He piled extras of every zine back into the box. Then he picked up one of the Pokémon and stared at it. “Someone put a hat on Pikachu.”

I shuffled my feet and looked away.

“Oh my god.” He grabbed my shoulder and twisted me around so I was staring into his huge surprised eyes. “Did you put a hat on Pikachu?”

“There was a hat right there in the wardrobe.”

Bosco started laughing.

“What? I thought it was Pikachu’s hat. It’s got little holes for the ears and everything.”

“It is Pikachu’s hat.” Bosco held a bejeweled hand in front of his mouth to stifle his laughter.

“What’s so wrong? I thought it was cute.”

“It *is* cute. And *you’re* cute. Like the way you’ve set this table up? Totally cute.”

“It’s all your stuff. It’s your fault if it’s cute.”

“Oh, honey, no! I could never do this. Look what you’ve done: All my kitschy junk in neat little lines like they’re on parade. Look at Meowth there next to the mini plastic azalea and the bouncy french fries! They’re so exact—you could have lined them up with a ruler!”

“Are you taking the piss? We can mess the table up if you want.”

“My god no, I’m being completely serious! I’m in awe of this. Look at all these cute things on their strict march. I love this. In fact...” He pulled out his phone and started snapping photos. “I’ll put these up on my blog, to celebrate winning the ‘Cutest Stall at Zinefest’ award.”

“Is that a thing?”

“No, but it should be.”

People trickled along between the rows. Bosco had a huge smile for each and every person, and he introduced his zines in a running narration like a racing commentator. His zines were all different, a lot of them were made from fabric or different bundles of brightly-colored paper. I liked the look of them—fun and eye-grabbing, like Bosco himself.

But he kept pushing mine onto people and introducing me.

“You’re not used to marketing, are you?” he asked when we were alone.

“Not really. Should I be?”

“You never worked retail or anything?” His grin just got bigger when I shook my head. “Retail’s bollocks. But when you’re working on commission you learn pretty quick what people want to hear, and you get better at spinning stories. That’s all that marketing is. And you’ve got to have it. I used to think it was just completely gross capitalist hokum, and it is, but I also want to share my zines. No one’s going to make money off zines but you want to break even, and that’s the only reason why they’re not all free. And because they’re not all free, I need to give people a reason to give me money. And that’s marketing. Why are you pulling that face?”

“What face?”

For a moment, his lean fingers poked my cheek. “That face, Dean.”

“I think this is my normal face.”

“You don’t look happy.”

The plaza had its original tiles, scuffed and cracked, hippie orange with dark purple flowers in the center. They seemed to amplify sound so the squeak of sneakers and the chatter of voices were all around us. A clatter rose above the drone when someone dropped cutlery at one of the cafés.

I kept my gaze on the overdecorated table and off Bosco’s beautiful and overdecorated face. “I don’t give a shit about marketing,” I admitted. “It’s the first thing you’ve said that I don’t give a shit about.” He was silent a beat. I added, “I’m sorry.”

“No, that’s great. That’s glorious. That’s the real you talking, and don’t apologize for that. I mean, apologize if you’re an asshole about something,

obviously, but that wasn't you being an asshole. Marketing sucks. I agree. But it's a thing that's got to happen to get things sold. You feel like you didn't earn your solo gallery show, and you hate that. I told you last night that I thought you deserved that show, and now I've actually seen your art so I know it for a fact. You're incredibly talented, but you don't know anything about marketing and you don't care about marketing—to the point where you don't even realize how talented you are.”

“What?”

He hooked a leg around mine, catching my shin with my own boot. His arm was around the back of my chair, and he physically twisted the chair around so I was looking at him. “Listen to me, man: you're a genius. Your art is incredible—all handmade in the digital age, it's a bold statement. *You* are a bold statement, because you're completely real. People eat that shit up. But you don't even care. If you talked to people—if you shared yourself with them—then maybe you'd realize how great you are.”

I didn't say anything, and he leaned in closer. “I am so, so glad I met you last night. You gave me the Dean Phillips marketing pitch without even realizing it. You showed me your best side, this supercool person who went through shit and came out as an amazing artist. You let me in, you told me stuff. And the way you're acting now you're sober makes me think that you don't normally share like that. Today you've been like a blank wall. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.”

“You're shy?”

“Not really. I guess I'm just not great with strangers. It takes me a while to get used to people. I don't know what to say at first. But I'm okay once I get to know someone.” It wasn't the first time I'd tried to explain this, and it never sounded quite right.

Bosco touched my chin with the back of his fingers, stroking my scruff of a beard. I'd wanted a beard in the military, and now I worked with a whole job site of people with scruffy little beards. I liked being in a world without regulations on facial hair.

He stroked my sparse excuse for a beard and asked quietly, “How long will it take to get used to me?”

My lips were suddenly a desert. I licked them nervously. “I'm not sure.”

“We’ll have to find out.”

“That sounds great.”

He moved his fingers gently on my face, sweet and tender. “I feel bad.”

“Why?”

“You don’t remember last night, and I do. You told me all of these things that I’m not sure if you normally tell people. It’s like I read your diary.” His fingertips brushed across my lips. “So here’s what I’m thinking. I need to tell you.”

“Isn’t that what you just did?”

He wiggled his hand. It was supposed to be a dismissive gesture, but it was beautiful like the fluttering of a bird’s wing. “It was Viv.”

“What?”

“That you noticed. Last night. I was flaming up the town with some friends and they stopped to have a smoke outside some sad hipster bar. And then you walked out. You would have walked right past me, except you saw Viv. You didn’t even notice me.”

“You were wearing a bright blue apron with frills! That’s eye-catching.”

“Oh asslords, don’t remind me! I missed a mate’s stag do last weekend—I had a big deadline—and he made me wear that tacky thing as punishment.”

“I thought it was cute.”

“Yeah?” He looked halfway between flattered and horrified at my taste. “Well, it was Viv that caught your eye. You started patting her, and then you started talking to me. That’s how it went.”

“I think I remember that much.” I could remember looking up and seeing Bosco’s smile for the first time. Just thinking about it gave me shivers. “I don’t remember what we talked about.”

“Lots of things. You told me about your family—they’re all military—and how your grandfather’s fabulous, and your sister Debbie is really cool.” His voice dropped, and he looked around to make sure no one was listening. “And you told me that you came out, and you quit the army, and you haven’t spoken to your parents since. And—I told you this last night, and it’s important you know it—that I know what that feels like. I get where you’re coming from.”

We had a stream of actual customers, and Bosco switched his charm on for them. Then he turned back to me. “You told me about screen printing. Lots about it, because I was really interested. By ‘was’ I mean ‘am,’ because you made it sound awesome. And I told you way too much about fashion because I love to talk about fashion and you acted interested.”

“I am interested. Because you’re interested. I don’t give a shit about fashion otherwise.”

He scooped up some of his zines and held them out to me, spread like a hand of cards. “You want to learn about me and fashion, here’s a start. I love and live design, and that’s clear in all of my zines, even if they’re not ostensibly about fashion. Yes, I have rehearsed that speech,” he added. “So stop laughing. I do interviews.”

“I can read your interviews anytime. I’m sitting here with you, so I want to hear you talk. Show me the real you.”

For a moment he was silent. Then he blinked. “That’s maybe the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“That’s kinda sad.”

“I love talking about fashion. I’m not kidding.” Bosco put his arm around the back of my chair. “But I think you’re trying to distract me.” He was suddenly very close to me.

“Distract you?”

He cocked an eyebrow. “I’ll show you the real me if you show me the real you.” He leaned close, so his voice was low and dirty and right into my ear. I shivered. “Last night, I told you I liked your boots. You told me you liked my ass.”

“Oh, fuck. I am so, so sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize! My ass is a thing of beauty. It’s a work of art. I know that.”

“I’m apologizing because that’s a gross thing for me to say.”

“It’s just a bar thing to say.” He gave the fluttering bird hand gesture, then winked. “Besides, if you’re shocked by that, wait ’til you hear what you said next.”

“Next?”

He was plastered against my side, his legs draped around mine. His hand landed on my leg and he squeezed when I wasn't expecting it, and I jolted up straight. Bosco laughed, then leaned even closer so I was tucked under his arm. He cupped a hand around my ear. "You offered to fuck me while wearing these boots."

"Oh." I closed my eyes. I was flooded with a mix of emotions, but one was relief that I didn't have to look Bosco in his beautiful face while my thoughts spiraled deliriously downward.

"And I said, maybe I can have a go fucking you while wearing the boots."

"Oh." I swallowed. "Oh, god!"

Bosco let me go and leaned back. I risked opening one eyelid to look at him. He was grinning, proud and delighted. "That's exactly what you said. And that's when I asked you to come home with me."

I choked out, "I'm glad I did."

"Me too. So glad. But we didn't fuck, of course." He raised a finger. "One, I don't have sex when I'm drunk. Judgment is impaired." He raised a second finger. "Two, I don't have sex with anyone who's drunk. Their judgment is impaired. It's way better to sleep it off, see how we feel in the morning. And you said that you'd feel like Zinefest in the morning."

"I said that?"

"You did. You were very excited when I told you about Zinefest. Not as excited as you were about Viv, but still..." He leaned over me to ruffle his dog's white ears. "I said you could sleep on the couch, or you could sleep in my bed if you wanted to cuddle. But we'd be wearing underwear, and if you tried anything I'd kick you straight to the curb. And you said you wanted to cuddle."

"I'm glad I said that." I hummed in contentment. I loved to cuddle. But I was a scary-enough-looking dude that I didn't get many offers. Guys assumed I was a rough-and-ditch kind of lover, and the last time I'd tried to snuggle after sex I'd been laughed at.

I was glad I'd had my best interests in mind last night, but sad that I couldn't remember it. A whole night of cuddling with Bosco sounded like heaven.

"You seemed really happy."

"Yeah. Sorry. I—" I fell silent when Bosco giggled.

“Does it sound like I’m complaining? Last night was perfect.” He dragged the *r* out like a cat’s purr. “You were so happy. You were hugging me like a big drunk sloth and kissing my face. You kept apologizing for being so affectionate, then thanking me for not making fun of you. That was sad. Kinda heartbreaking, really.”

I looked at Vivienne as an excuse to tilt my head away.

“Are you embarrassed?” he asked softly. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s okay. It’s true.”

“It wasn’t sad, it was totally sweet. You were all happy to be in bed with me. Then Viv jumped in, and you were even happier about that. You pretty much dropped me on the floor so you could cuddle my dog. I’m exaggerating,” he added when I started to apologize. “But you were definitely pretty pumped. You kept saying how much you love dogs and how you couldn’t have one growing up.”

“I love dogs,” I agreed.

“And that’s pretty much it. Sorry I can’t give you a word-for-word. We talked for ages. It was an amazing night. And you know what? I’m looking forward to having some of those conversations with you again, when you’ll remember them.”

“I’d like that too,” I agreed. “Especially...”

“About the boots?”

“I was going to say, I want to hear you talk about fashion, if that’s what you love talking about.” When Bosco waggled his eyebrows I added, “But yes. The boots, too.”

Chapter Five

Bosco was like one of those mirrored disco balls—a constant whirl of glitter and excitement. He didn't stop moving and talking and emphatically gesturing, all the way through Zinefest and dinner.

We went to an Asian vegetarian restaurant with “a few of his friends,” which turned out to be half the stallholders. Bosco was the constant center of attention, talking or guiding the conversation, sparkling away and keeping everyone smiling. I was completely in awe of him.

During the table's third round of dumplings, my phone buzzed.

Claudio: You home? I knocked but you didn't answer. Hoping you've eloped and you're not dead in a ditch.

“Something funny on Tumblr?” Bosco asked into my ear. I'd gotten so used to his amplified social voice that his intimate murmur made me shiver.

“It's just my best friend checking up on me.”

“That's sweet.” He looked delighted. “Good friend. Cares about you.”

“Yeah. I guess he's not used to me going home with strange guys.”

He gestured at himself with a fork. “Me? Strange?” There was a dumpling on his fork, and it quivered around, dripping soy sauce. “I'm not a strange guy. I'm an *amazing* guy.”

“I'll tell him that.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Your breath smells like soy sauce, but I still like you breathing it in my face. That is amazing.”

“Hey!” He butted me with his shoulder. “My breath smells great. My breath is amazing. Just wait 'til tomorrow morning. You'll see. Toothpaste dreams of smelling this good.”

I remembered I was spending the night with him. My stomach gave a happy flip, followed by a kick of nerves. I'd be alone with Bosco all night. He was surrounded by adoring fans who he'd be leaving to be alone with me, and I didn't know if I could compete.

Then Bosco smiled at me—not at his adoring friendclub, but just at me. It was that beautiful smile that had bowled me over last night, the one that promised that everything would be okay if I just let myself enjoy him.

So I said, “I can hardly wait.”

“Me neither.”

“I’ll go outside to sit with Vivienne and answer this.” I raised my phone. “Be right back.”

“You can stay here?”

“I don’t want to be that guy on his phone at the party.”

Bosco winked. “Yeah, yeah. You just miss my dog.”

“You’re right. What can I say? Grass and dog-food breath. I love it.”

I rose from the table. Bosco laughed and his smile glittered up at me. I wanted to kiss him good-bye, but I wasn’t confident enough around him.

But as I pushed my chair back in, Bosco caught my hand and raised it to his lips. “See you in a little bit.”

“Yeah.” I left feeling as warm inside as if I’d drunk a gallon of miso soup.

Vivienne was tied in a little covered garden outside the restaurant, with a small fanclub of her own. Two teenagers were petting her while she wriggled around contentedly on her back.

“Is this your dog?” one asked.

“He’s cute,” the other said.

I leaned against the wall. “She is cute, right? Her name is Vivienne. Like the designer.”

“Ooh, Westwood?”

“Yeah.” It seemed like I was the only one who didn’t know anything about fashion.

“She is so cute. What breed?”

I studied Vivienne’s blunt nose. “Pit bull?”

“No way,” the other one said. “Bull terrier.”

“That’s right,” I said, because I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t know the breed of Bosco’s dog.

“How old is she?”

“Two years.” It was a guess. I felt self-conscious with the two looking at me while it dawned on me that I didn’t actually know anything about Vivienne. I scrambled for something that I did know about her. “She’s really friendly. She sleeps in the bed with me and... With us.”

“Your girlfriend?”

“Boyfriend.” I corrected the misgendering out of habit. Then my brain caught up with my mouth, and I glanced back inside in case Bosco would come running out to freak out about me taking things way too seriously on a first date.

But I could see Bosco through the glass door, still entertaining everyone at the table. And the two strangers were smiling at me. “Aww. That’s cute.”

“Yeah. She’s adorable.”

When they were gone, I sent a text to Claudio: *Not in a ditch. Haven’t eloped. Almost, though. Date with Mr Wonderful is at 20 hours and counting.*

Claudio: *You go, girl! Happy?*

Dean: *Very.*

Claudio: *How does Mr Wonderful look in the light of day?*

I glanced over my shoulder. Bosco was standing up, obviously telling a joke. Right when everyone laughed, he looked up and saw me. He smiled and winked.

I looked down at my phone, feeling my cheeks warming.

Dean: *Wonderful.*

I stayed out with Vivienne, scritchng her neck while my head was scratched by the leaves of the stunted tree I was sitting under. I’d grown up with cold and I still liked it, so I enjoyed the chill of the street more than the fug of the restaurant. Plus Vivienne was so friendly that I didn’t want to leave her alone.

“You like being out here, don’t you pup?” I murmured to her. “You like people, but not too many of them. I’m the same.”

I sneaked glances at Bosco, glittering away as the center of attention in his circle of cool friends. He was just so beautiful that I couldn’t get over it. He

was constantly warm and friendly, and even when I was nervous it still felt good to be around him.

I was just shy of a full day in Bosco's company, and I'd enjoyed every minute of it.

I'd told him a lot about me, and I didn't remember it. I knew a lot of his politics, but I didn't even know how long he'd had his dog. I'd slept with Bosco, but I'd never even got his shirt off.

After a while, Vivienne jumped up with her tail wagging. I heard Bosco's warm laugh, and then felt his hand on my shoulder. "Are you okay out here?"

"Yeah. You okay in there?"

"Yeah. Well... No." He dropped onto the dirt beside me. Easy as anything, he slung an arm around my shoulders. "Is this okay?"

I nodded. I rubbed under Vivienne's ears while Bosco patted her back. I asked, "She's a bull terrier?"

"Uh-huh. My little bullie."

"How long have you had her?"

"Just under three years. I got her from the shelter—there was a whole litter of bullie pups that got left there, I wish I had space for them all. You should have seen the guy there, he was freaking out asking me if I'd had other dogs before and what I knew about training. Finally I turned on him like, 'Yeah, a black man after a pit bull, I promise not to train her to fight if you promise to stop being racist'."

"Whoa."

"Yeah, well. It turned out he was just worried because bullies have heaps of energy and they're kind of brats. You need to know what you're doing or they'll walk all over you. He wasn't being racist; he was just looking out for me and the dog. So that was embarrassing."

"Oh, god." I cringed.

"Yeah. It worked out okay though, he gave me the card to his mom's dog obedience school and I took Viv twice a week, so his family got a lot of money out of me." He laughed.

"My mate who had a pit bull told me there are no bad dogs, only bad people."

“It’s true. And there are so many good dogs, but never enough good people.”

I liked how Bosco’s body felt through my unfamiliar layers of clothing. I leaned into him, and Vivienne jumped up into our laps. Bosco had his legs crossed and the skirt pulled up to reveal the dark furry bowl of his knee.

“Why did you pick Vivienne?” I asked. “Were you looking for a bullie?”

“Definitely not. I wanted a lab or retriever, one of those fashionable yuppie dogs that make you look cool when you take them for walks. I mean, the ones that are meant to be really friendly.” He winked. “But then I went into the pound, and there she was. She was this tiny little puppy with a pot belly and this nothing tail that kept wagging around like a Slinky going down the stairs. She was so excited and bounced around everywhere, but she was so quiet. She’s always been quiet. I guess they forgot to put the voice box in when they made her.”

“Cute.”

“Yeah. I tell her that she’s a teddy bear that I’ve cuddled so much that her squeaker is broken.”

“Okay, that is so fucking cute.”

Bosco laughed and took over scratching behind Vivienne’s ears. “As soon as I saw her, I knew. She wasn’t what I expected, but she was the dog for me. And I swear she knew it too. She stopped bouncing and sat up and looked at me.” He lifted one of Vivienne’s flailing legs and kissed her on the back of the paw. “I’d just gotten into law school and told my family I wasn’t going to do it. I needed a friend. And she needed someone to love her. It was perfect.”

“Law?” That was the last career choice I could imagine for Bosco.

“I’ve got a brother and sister studying law. It’s respectable. Another brother in engineering, and the oldest is an architect like Dad. We were all raised to be *respectable*.”

From his tone, he might as well been saying that he’d been raised to be a sacrifice to the local dragon. “I can’t see you as a lawyer.”

He faked a shudder. “It would kill me. I haven’t even got that sweet *Legally Blonde* thing going on, I’d just be rubbish. I would die a slow and agonizing death every day. That’s if they even accepted me once they met me.” He fluttered a hand between his make-up-heavy eyes and his skirt.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“If you’re a guy—mostly—and you wear skirts, that means you’re a transvestite, right?”

He laughed. “Nope. I don’t acknowledge that there should be a gender binary in clothing. So I can’t wear *men’s* clothing or *women’s* clothing. It doesn’t exist. I just wear clothing. *Fabulous* clothing, obviously.”

“But what about people who think skirts are for girls?”

“They’d say I’m a transvestite, but they’d be wrong. It’s all about intent—to be a transvestite you have to deliberately dress in women’s clothing. I don’t believe in women’s clothing, so I can’t decide to wear it. All of my outfits and designs are unisex.”

“Do you think it will catch on and more boys will wear skirts?”

“Hell yeah, as soon as the big labels figure out how to market them. Trust me, give it a decade and all boys will be wearing skirts. It’s another thing to sell to them, and that’s all that matters to the big moneymakers. But us revolutionaries, we talk less about profit and more about gender as a social performance.”

“I’ve never thought about any of that.”

“Don’t sweat it. This is only something I got into once I started studying fashion design. It’s not something I expect my dates to know straight off the bat. Besides, I love to talk about it.”

“Do your parents respect fashion design?”

Bosco shook his head with a hollow laugh. “My mom started answering my phone calls last year, so that’s something.”

“Shit. I’m sorry. That’s rough.”

“Yeah.”

Vivienne was on her back, wiggling so violently that she was dragging herself across the earth by her shoulder blades. Chunks of dirt were sticking to her, stark against her white fur. Bosco rubbed a patch on her chest that made her snuffle in delight. I wondered what that would be like—knowing a dog so well that you knew all the places she liked to be rubbed. It seemed like it would be really nice.

There was music playing inside the restaurant, pop chart toppers from three years ago. It drifted out to where we sat and battled with the bassy dance remixes from the second-story balcony of the club across the street. Bosco's friends were still raucous inside the restaurant, but not as loud as they'd been with Bosco there.

"You know what that feels like, right?" Bosco asked suddenly. I didn't think he was talking about having my tummy rubbed. He looked at me while he kept rubbing his dog. "I miss my family."

"Yeah. I know that feeling." I was still in touch with Debs, but I hadn't heard from my parents in nearly a year. Leaving the army meant leaving them. My granddad had left messages, but I'd deleted them instinctively without listening to them. I didn't want to disappoint any of my family, but it was worse to imagine my grandfather's disappointment.

"I still don't know if it was worth it," Bosco said. "Losing my family is torture, but law would be torture. It's like weighing up evils. Sometimes I think I would have been better off just doing what they wanted from me. If it was just about my career, maybe I could handle it."

"You said it would kill you?"

"Yeah. It would. But I hate being alone. I miss my family. They've got these fucked-up expectations for all of us, and it really screwed with my head. But I know they only want the best for me—they just have a crappy way of showing it."

"I know that feeling," I agreed. "I used to be so angry at my parents. I left Wellington with nothing but a backpack and my anger. I'm still angry, but I get where they were coming from—they were just doing their best. I just wish they hadn't raised us like we were living in a war zone."

"Exactly. My parents are the same. They've got this mindset that is decades old and stuck in backwaters Africa. Like, I need to marry a woman or I'll be stoned to death? I could maybe be a lawyer for their sake, but I'm not going to pretend I'm not a flaming queer. There's nothing I can do about it."

"Shit. Fuck. I'm so sorry." I didn't know whether Bosco was exaggerating or not, but I knew he looked miserable.

"No, I'm sorry. Look at me bringing us down."

"You're not. I mean, I'm the family fuck-up too. I kinda know what you're feeling."

His grin was highlighted by his pinpricks of glitter. “How do you feel about a soy sauce-flavored kiss?”

Kissing Bosco was even nicer with his arm around me and a dog draped over our knees. He tasted like dumplings, and I’d never liked the taste more.

“You get me. I like that,” he said. “It’s the third most attractive thing about you.”

“Third?”

“Yeah. Number two is how you’re so incredibly masculine without actually being very masculine at all. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah. Except I think that about you.” I tapped his hairy leg where it protruded from his denim skirt. “What’s number one?”

He grinned. “You’re just generally hot.”

I kissed him again, because he was generally incredibly hot. “This has been the weirdest first date.”

Bosco was silent for a long while. Then he leaned his chin on my shoulder and asked, “You okay with it getting weirder? I’m exhausted from being Fairy Bosco and I need a break to be totally silent. We can reschedule our sleepover, but I don’t want to. So I’m giving you the choice: I can drop you off at your place, or I can drive the three of us to the park to toss a ball around. But I won’t want to talk. So there it is, and you can choose.”

“Fairy Bosco?”

“You know. Super social. Sparkly. You’ve seen it.” He wiggled a bejeweled hand at his face then toward the restaurant. “The glitter on the outside is totally me. The glitter on the inside takes work. I’m tired out.”

“Completely silent?”

“Completely. We’ll walk in silence back to my car, then ride in silence to the park. We’ll toss a ball around for Viv in silence—there’s lights all along the path so we can see what we’re doing, I’ve done it hundreds of times—then when she’s tired out, we’ll go back to my place. In silence. I’ve got a toothbrush for you and we can take showers and go to sleep—or read in bed if you’re not tired, whatever.” He looked at me sideways and grinned a crooked grin. “I’m not going to lay a hand on you until I feel like talking again, because it would be such a waste to make love in silence.”

I hummed assent. There was something archaic and sweet about the words “make love”; they didn’t seem to have anything to do with the Bosco who’d leaned over his table in the crowded Zinefest arcade and told me he was going to fuck me while wearing my boots.

“Then tomorrow, I’ll make you breakfast!” he said. “I make amazing breakfasts, it’s so good to have someone else to share in my genius. Maybe I’ll be talking again by then, maybe I’ll be talking by the end of tonight—who knows? I just don’t want to be under any pressure either way. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine. Today’s been more talking than I’m used to, anyway.”

“I can imagine that. You talked so much last night, you’ve probably gone over your word quota for the whole week.” He chuckled. Then he lifted Vivienne in his arms and blew a raspberry on her stomach. She wiggled around and panted, her mouth pulled back in that way that looked like a smile. “Heavy girl,” he said, lowering her back onto our knees.

But Vivienne was done with cuddles. She jumped into the little garden beside us and started running circles, sniffing at the stunted trees.

“That’s not asking too much, is it? For you to be silent, and let me be silent?” He bit his plump lower lip. “I know I’m meant to entertain guests and all that, so I feel like it would be better of me to just end the date here and take you home. But I’d still like you around, if you want to be around me. And I’m confident I’ll be back to my charming, entertaining self by tomorrow.”

“It’s fine. You don’t have to overthink it. I want to keep hanging out with you. And, I mean, I have kind of used up my word quota for the whole week already, anyway.”

I loved Bosco’s laugh, sudden and explosive, rich and deep and masculine but free and easy like a child’s. He stood up and brushed the dirt off the back of his skirt, then rearranged the drapery collar of his shirt so it framed his face. “Listen, I was thinking. Is your gallery open on Sundays?”

“It’s not my gallery, and it is open.”

“If you’re not working tomorrow, I thought we might go?” He was almost shy, looking down at his knees then glancing up at me. “I’d love to see your pictures up close. Maybe you could take me on a personal tour?”

I was still new to sharing my art with people, but Bosco was my most eager fan yet. It made me feel fantastic. I loved how hesitant he was about asking: it

was the first time he hadn't realized how fantastic he was making me feel. "I don't have to work until Monday. And I'd like that. That would be great."

Chapter Six

“Fruit for my fruit.” Bosco’s voice—and the bed shifting under his weight—woke me from my reverie. I had been completely absorbed in the velvety feel of Vivienne’s ears and her sleepy snuffles.

I unhooked my arm from around her and sat up against the pillows. “Good morning. Are we talking?”

“Good morning. We are. Thanks for that, by the way. I am a very social person, but I get exhausted from performing like that. Fairy Bosco takes work.” He wrapped an arm lazily around my shoulders and kissed my cheek.

I caught his face and turned him to me for a proper kiss. His stubble was almost long enough to be called a beard, and so soft against my fingers that I regretted having to let him go. I just wanted to keep petting his face. “You feel even better than dog ears.”

“I hope so.” He raised an eyebrow. I noticed there was still glitter in it. He’d washed his face meticulously, but apparently not enough.

“And your breath smells amazing.”

“Told you. I deserve some kind of medal for just magically being this great.” He lifted a breakfast tray onto his lap, and then looked at me sideways. “Okay, so I make this drink with cranberry and mint. It gives me incredibly fresh breath. That’s my secret. Now swear you’re never going to tell anyone.”

“Who do you think I’d tell?”

“Hey, you don’t get this cool without having enemies.” He winked.

Bosco’s breakfast tray was loaded up with fruit, piles of grapes and artfully arranged apple slices and orange segments, pineapple rings and brightly colored chunks of melon. The fruit was heaped up in a glistening display as opulent as a still life.

“Wow, this is amazing,” I said. “You went all-out. Half this stuff isn’t even in season.”

“The glories of hydroponics, imports and an unlimited budget.”

“Wait. When you came in, did you say ‘fruit for my fruit’?”

“Yup. Spend enough time around me and everything gets fruity.”

I glowered at him. “I was queer enough on my own.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.” He deliberately ran his eyes over me. I think it was meant to be a challenge or fake contempt, but his gaze went all heavy and aroused somewhere between my nipple piercing and the black lines of my hawk tattoo.

We ate, and we drank more of Bosco’s amazing homemade juice. “This is so good. Man, you put on a good spread.”

“I take food seriously.”

“And you grow food?” The night before, we’d taken Vivienne out into a yard that was huge by Auckland standards. Bosco had pointed out vegetable gardens.

He shook his head and shuddered dramatically. “Can you imagine these hands all covered in mud? No way. My roommate has a garden.”

“That’s cool. That must be nice.”

He grimaced. “She has compost too. She composts her toenails. And then she puts the compost on the vegetable garden. So basically she grows vegetables from her toenails. I don’t want to eat toenail fruit.”

Bosco looked genuinely disgusted. I laughed until the fruit juice I was drinking went down the wrong tube. Choking, I said, “You know a lot of stuff gets fertilized by manure?”

“Yeah. So?”

I laughed around a mouthful of watermelon. “Manure’s worse than toenails.”

“Ew. No way. Manure’s just poop. Toenails are toenails!”

“You have the most fucked-up standards. If I asked a hundred people, not one of them would say toenails are worse than poop.”

He looked at me steadily with a cocked eyebrow.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I was already against him so it was hard to knock him with my shoulder. I managed with a kind of half-shrug, my bare shoulder against his T-shirt-covered pec. “Come on man, what?”

“Nothing. Just, how many of your hundred people are gay men?”

“What?”

“Just saying. I’d lick your ass for days but I’m not going to lick under your toenails. That’s gross.”

“Holy fuck.” I stared at him as my brain caught up. “My ass is clean. I take care of myself.”

“Exactly. I bet you don’t look after your toenails that well.” He kissed my cheek.

I laughed. “This is so weird. I can’t figure out if I’m turned-on right now or grossed out.”

“Funny, people say that to me a lot.”

I knocked my shoulder into Bosco’s chest again “Ha ha. Not true. You’re great.”

“Tell you what. I’ll take our sleeping beauty out, then you can decide if you’re turned-on or not.” He reached over to pick up Vivienne and haul her out of bed. I made an unconscious noise of disappointment—her body was warm, and I enjoyed her snuffly noises. But one look at Bosco’s ass in his briefs had me instantly glad that I’d be sharing the bed with just him.

As soon as she was on the ground, Vivienne turned into a hyperactive ball of excitement. She reached the door before Bosco and nearly skidded into it before it was open. Bosco looked back at me over his shoulder and said casually, “I’ll be maybe ten minutes. If you wanted to, you know, make sure you’re all clean.”

I laughed, but I also sprinted to the shower the moment the door was closed.

By the time I was out of the shower, I was randy like a billy goat. Horny, but nervous. Bosco was obviously into me, my brain as well as my body. That and over twenty-four hours of foreplay had me raring to go, but also facing all kinds of high expectations. I didn’t know if I could live up to his dreams of me.

I dithered around in his room, posing myself in and on his bed, debating whether to wear underwear or not. But then I heard a bark from outside, and Bosco’s low laugh. I was sure it was the first time I’d heard a sound from Vivienne. I went to the giant windows and looked out at the two of them,

chasing each other around a skeletal tree, nearly tripping over themselves in their excitement.

Bosco flopped down onto his back, holding his hands up in surrender. Vivienne launched herself at him and covered his face in enthusiastic puppy slurps. His content laughter had me smiling, and the knot of nerves in my chest relaxed.

Bosco was amazing—he was wonderful. Even if I totally sucked, I could be sure he wasn't going to make me feel bad about it.

He was fresh-faced when he came into the bedroom, water dripping from the front of his hair. "Good morning again."

"Good morning. You washed off the dog slobber?"

"I washed off the glitter," he said haughtily. "I don't want to rub it all over you; I know you don't like it."

"I'd like anything that you rubbed on me."

He screwed up his face in laughter. "That is so sweet, and so cheesy. C'mere."

But he came to me, climbing into the bed and straight onto my lap. His mouth was all over mine, fierce and rough, while his hands stayed chastely on my shoulders. "You have the cutest little mouth," he murmured. Then he ground his hip, rubbing his ass into my crotch. "And the best cock, I can just feel it."

"Yeah," I gasped. I'd never been any good at dirty talk. All I wanted was Bosco, more Bosco, all Bosco: everything I could get.

"God, your nipple piercing. I love it." His hands roved over my chest, down my sides, across my shoulders. I gasped and clutched at the back of his tee. He latched onto my nipple and bit down, and I arched my back instinctively into him.

I buried my face in his hair, so coarse and sweet-smelling. I'd been calling it black—he was black, and he had black hair, that's what I'd always thought. But with my face smothered in those tight curls, I realized they were anything but black. They were warm browns and cool blues, sooty green and shining purple. His hair was dark but so much richer than any blond I'd seen. His hair was like creosote, wood that had absorbed tar until it was stained with all the dark beauty of nature.

“And your tattoos,” he was saying. “You’re like the perfect blend, fine art meets street style. And these muscles... I could stare at you for hours.” He was working his way over my chest, sucking and biting. I’d imagined what it would be like to have Bosco all over my body, and I’d pictured him playful and sweet. He was playful, but he was strong. He kneaded my shoulders and back with a rough grasp just shy of manhandling. It was the perfect Bosco combination: Sweet and adorable, but undeniably male.

“Look at your skin.” He chuckled, grinning up at me from beneath his dark eyebrows—still glittering, despite his best efforts. “You’re so pink.”

“I’m kinda blushing.”

“Yeah? And is this blushing?” He bit down on my belly then sucked at the bite. It must have been a point in a line of muscle, because it made my abs flex and sent tingling ghost fingers up my ribs. When Bosco pulled away there was a red mark to show where his mouth had been. “Hot. I like marking you. Do you like that?”

“Yeah.” My voice was shaking. I had to swallow, then swallow again. Every muscle in my body was pulling tight, even the ones in my throat. “Hey Bosco, if I tell you something can you promise to not read into it too much?”

“You’re in love with me already?” he asked, his smiling mouth poised at the waistband of my boxers.

“Ugh.” His hands were on my thighs, either side of my erection, and I was having trouble forming coherent thoughts.

My arousal must have made my expression look too serious, because Bosco placed a kiss on my hip bone and said, “Sorry. Inappropriate first date humor.”

The truth of it was, I would have given anything to keep him smiling so adoringly up at me.

“No,” I said. “It’s... Ugh. I’m really good at following orders.”

“Oh my god.” He actually sat up, his eyes wide. They were striking, even without the eyeliner. “Are you telling me you’re a hot submissive hunk of manmeat?”

“I’m not sure.” He was absently rubbing my thighs. I was desperate for him to actually touch my cock, but I was so turned on that it would probably make me pass out. “I don’t think so. I’m just good at following orders.”

“So if I told you to get naked and lie on your side...?”

I didn't hesitate. I flipped onto my side and dragged my boxers down my hips.

"Oh yuss." Bosco sat straight upright and dragged the pretty floral duvet into a ball in his arms so he could watch me.

I aimed for sexy, but messed up when my boxers got caught around my ankles and I nearly kicked Bosco in the face trying to escape.

I froze in embarrassment, but he grinned. "Cool it, cutie! No rush. Here." He pulled off his shirt and threw it to the floor. One more bit of mess... I didn't care; his underwear quickly followed the shirt to the floor.

And then, at last, I got to see his naked body.

Bosco was every bit as gorgeous as I'd expected: slim and dark and fit, with wide ribs and narrow hips. He rested on his knees in front of me, smiling confidently. There were silver rings through his purple-black nipples and faint stretch marks on his sides like wings spreading along his ribs.

I couldn't get my eyes to stay in one place. My gaze raced hungrily over his body as I tried to absorb all of him at once. Hair dusted his chest and grew thickly around his cock. My hands itched to stroke that hair, and my mouth watered to taste that cock. Long and flared and slightly curved, it looked like it would slide perfectly into my throat—or my ass. It was divine, like every part of him.

I stared at his body, entranced. And the whole time he just kept smiling. Shoulders back, breathing steady.

I met his eyes, and Bosco's grin got crooked so his dahlia piercing winked at me. He just said, "I know."

"God," I breathed. "You're beautiful."

"I know," he said again. He chuckled. "You're pretty fucking pretty yourself, Dean."

"Why are you so excited about my nipple piercing if you've got two of your own?"

Bosco looked confused. "Because they're totally hot?" He absentmindedly tugged at the rings through his nipples, and his dick jerked in response.

I had to swallow to keep from choking. "Oh."

I savored the sight of his body for a few more moments. Then I collapsed onto the bed and lay on my side with my knees tucked up. My body looked

good—broad and muscular, not too pale, and I was proud of my tattoos. But I would never have Bosco's level of confidence.

But Bosco touched me like I was the gorgeous one. He ran his hands along my thighs and put his hot, wet mouth straight against my hole.

My body bucked, and I nearly kicked him in the face again. "Whoa!"

He pulled away. "Stop?"

"No. Don't stop! Just, wow. That was direct."

"You want me to go slower?"

"No. This is perfect. It was just a surprise."

He laughed and his breath was warm against my butt. He put his hand back on my thigh and traced the muscles down to my knee, while the other hand toyed across my rim. "I've been thinking about your ass all day. How's that a surprise?"

"It's not. It's great." I groaned as he lapped at me again with his tongue. "It's great!"

He worked at me with his mouth while his hands explored. I let go, just melting into his skilled touch. He tickled the back of my knee then traced my thigh to my ass, then around to my cock. His hand closed around my cock at the same time as his tongue plunged inside me. My body spasmed again, my back arching and my legs twitching. I grabbed instinctively at his hair. "Yes!"

He hummed happily against my ass, and the sound seemed to vibrate through me. I gasped. Then I groaned out loud when he squeezed my dick and started stroking. His reach was hindered because his arm was hooked over my thigh, but his grip was firm and steady. With the other hand, he teased a finger at my hole while he kept licking and sucking.

"Yes!" I wasn't good at dirty talk, I struggled to express the pulsating, tingling joy he was sending through me. "Yes."

He started to stretch me, his fingers moving slowly in my ass while his hand jerked quickly at my dick. I was shivering until my shivers turned into full-body quakes. "Yes! Good."

"You ready for me to fuck you?" he asked.

"Yeah. No. Wait! I want to suck you first."

“Music to my ears, Dean,” he groaned. “I’ll grab you a rubber? I test negative, but you don’t have to take my word on that.”

“It’s okay.”

He kissed my hip then guided me out of the bed. “Come here.”

“Where?” My head was muddled from thrashing around against the pillows.

Bosco went to the sewing machine table and knocked all the fabric and paper off it. He leaned against the table, propping his elbows in the cleared space. His cock jutted out, wet and proud and purple-dark. He looked down at himself and laughed. “Look at that. You’ve got me all worked up.”

He looked so happy and so proud. I wanted to say something to bowl him off his feet. I wanted to enchant him like he had me enchanted. I wanted to know I’d have more chances to be alone and naked with him.

But all I could think to say was, “You have a beautiful cock.” I sank to my knees on a pile of his clothing and took him into my mouth.

“Oh jeez! There you are.” He clutched at my shaven head and scrabbled at my bare shoulders. “A guy who likes to suck cock. My dream come true!”

I’d been right: his dick was perfect for sucking. Thicker than I’d thought, but it fit into my mouth and throat like a treat. He was so warm against my lips, and at the feel of him I was prickled with a surge of emotion. Longing? Desire? Something tinged with sadness. I suddenly felt like I’d never done this enough, and I desperately wanted to do it again. To share this intimacy with a receptive and adoring someone.

Blowjobs had never been my favorite thing, but Bosco was so gorgeous and so responsive that I was loving it. I loved how much he was enjoying it. I licked and sucked at his shaft while he moaned in pleasure, and his fingernails bit into the skin of my shoulders and back. I tried to hold him steady with a hand on his hip, but he writhed and twitched around.

“Oh, fuck,” he groaned. “If you want me to fuck you, right now’s good.”

“Yes, please.” I took one last long lick, then let him slide out of my mouth. A trail of spit clung to my face.

He pulled me up and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, dragging me into a deep kiss. I sucked at his tongue while he licked at the back of my teeth and the roof of my mouth. He was squeezing me so tightly that—between his mouth and the force of his arms—I didn’t think I could breathe.

“Here.” He patted the spot where he’d been leaning. “I told you I’d fuck you on my sewing table. I keep my promises.” His pupils were dilated and his mouth was wet, but he still managed a cocky grin.

I bent over the table while Bosco hurried back to his bed. He returned with lube and a condom.

“I’m negative for everything,” I told him. “So if you want to...”

“I want to.” He lowered himself to his knees behind me and pressed a lube-sticky hand at my entrance. “Oh god, how I want to! But I’ll wear a raincoat until we both get tested again. Better safe than sorry, right?”

“Of course. Until we know for sure.” I liked how that sounded like a future for us.

And then I liked how he stretched me again. I hadn’t bottomed much, so I was glad for the extra care. But Bosco wasn’t just thorough in stretching me, he took it as an excuse to pleasure me more. He curved his fingers inside me to rub my prostate and spread them to stretch me at the same time. “Bend forward.” He guided me onto my elbows on the table and kept massaging my hole. Lube dribbled down my thighs, and precum dribbled from my cock. “Ready?”

“Ready,” I croaked. I was glad for the table, because my legs were quivering under me.

He kissed my shoulder and back, his stubble whispering over my skin. Then slid in slowly. Even though I was ready and it didn’t hurt, it was still an adjustment. I tensed up. Bosco stopped.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “You’re bigger than I thought. I don’t... don’t bottom much.”

“It’s cool.” He leaned over me and kissed my shoulder again, then my neck and along the back of my head; anywhere he could reach. “You’re not the kind of guy who gives the impression that he bottoms much, if you know what I mean.” He ran a hand along my side. It was tacky from the lube, but it still felt good. “It’s totally hot to top someone who looks as toppy as you. I know I’m going to fucking love it when we switch and you nail me to this table.”

“Oh!” I groaned, and shifted my hips. My cock was caught between my body and the table, and I needed friction.

“You’ve got this bably body, you’re so fucking hot. It feels amazing to be inside you. I hope this is as good for you as it is for me.”

Somewhere in his talking and his petting, I'd lost my nerves and relaxed again. "Ready."

"Awesome." He slid in further, until his hips were pressed tight against my ass. I let out a hiss of happiness. Bosco rested one arm on the table and wedged the other underneath me, wrapped around my stomach.

And then he started rocking into me, small thrusts that were hard enough to shift the table under us. He knocked my prostate, and I gasped, my body lifting off the table. He changed angles and kept moving, now hitting my prostate again and again and electrifying me with intense shocks of pleasure.

"Oh god," I groaned. "Yes!" My arms were hurting from the muscle strain and the bite of the table on my elbows, but it was worth it. "Yes! That's it."

"Harder?"

"Yes!"

He lifted my leg so my knee was resting against the table. His dick pushed deeper than ever, and he rocked into me brutally. Our bodies were locked together and his hips thrashed me. Lights were flashing behind my eyes, and my breathing was coarse and ragged. "Yes!"

My shoulders and arms were burning, and my back was bent so sharply that my abs hurt. Bosco managed to grasp my cock, squeezing me while my weight crushed his hand against the table. He was slippery from the lube or my precum, a wet mess that felt wonderful. His slick hand was so warm after the chafing of the table. He pumped me in stilted motions, while all the while he pounded unrelentingly into me.

I was going to cum. I wanted to warn him, but I didn't have any breath. My balls drew up tight. All I could manage was a rasping groan as my orgasm ripped through me. My vision went bright yellow and my body collapsed as my cum spurted in a hot, sticky pool against my belly.

"Holy fuck, yeah," Bosco groaned. He pumped into me a couple more times before pulling out. He helped me lower my leg to the floor, and I rolled over onto my side, needing the table for support.

I watched in sleepy awe as Bosco pulled off his condom and jerked himself with his hand, aiming at the table. Instinctively, I grabbed his cock. He let go, staring down at my pale tattooed fingers on his dark cock. It only took a few pumps of my fist before his body went rigid and he came all over the table and

my sticky mess. His head stayed completely still, his mouth stretched soundlessly open and his eyelids fluttering, while the rest of his body shook and jerked.

“Wow.” He trembled, draping an arm over my sweaty shoulders and dropping his head onto the table. “That was fantastic.”

“I can’t believe you came all over your table.” I was panting for breath.

“Well, it was already messy, so I thought... why not?” He groaned. “Fuck, yeah. I’m going to think about this every time I sew. You know how much better my life is going to be, now that I can think about your hot ass whenever I’m working?” He grabbed a random piece of clothing from the ground and swiped at the mess on the table, then dropped the clothing into it.

I laughed and wrapped an arm around his waist. We were both wet with sweat and spunk. “We need to shower.”

“Yeah. Come to bed first? Cuddle a while.”

“Heaven,” I croaked. “That sounds like heaven.”

Chapter Seven

Riverside Gallery was too cool to have a desk. Instead it had a series of low brick plinths scattered around the space, each hiding something essential: the cash register, the gallery's computer, any books or phones that the staff brought with them.

The gallery was run by a friend of a friend, Carlos. He was standing at one of the plinths when we entered, but quickly stepped away.

"Wow," Bosco breathed. "This is cool. I like all the pizza ovens."

"Huh?" I looked around, then realized what he was talking about. "Those are decorative plinths. They hide modern technology in a classic exterior—Carlos told me. He said they give the space a more spartan atmosphere." It was the first time I'd felt more educated than Bosco. Like I wasn't just showing him my art, I was introducing him to the *world* of art. I remembered something he'd said the day before, and mentioned it to make him feel more comfortable. "Galleries try to look empty to make you want to buy stuff, like a fashion boutique."

Carlos recognized me and waved. "Dean, bro. How's it going? We had great turn-out all yesterday. You're a hit!"

"Thanks. Carlos, this is Bosco Flame. Bosco, Carlos."

"Pleasure," Bosco said. He stepped forward to shake hands. Today he was wearing delectably tight ripped jeans and another drapey top, one that showed off his lean arms. He was wearing about a million black and bronze bracelets and his fingers were heavy with chunky rings. When he shook hands, it was like listening to a percussion section falling over. "Dean's going to show me his art."

"Off you go then, enjoy! Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks, man." I nodded at him. When he was back at his pizza oven and I was alone with Bosco, I said, "I met him through a friend. He said he was always looking for new artists in traditional media, so I showed him some of my stuff on my phone. That's how I got the show—I knew a guy. So don't be impressed about it, it's not really about me."

"Your art is so great though!"

“I know.” I ducked my head, suddenly self-conscious. It was like sexual intimacy had made me so comfortable with him that all of my narcissistic secrets came to the surface. “It’s not that I’m not proud of my art. I work really hard. I’ve been working on my art for years and I’m happy with it. I’m just saying—this gallery show isn’t about my art, it’s about me knowing Carlos.”

Bosco shook his head. “One, nepotism and cronyism are facts of life. Two, unless you’re a total big-name you’ve got to know someone. How else are they going to find you? I mean, it would be one thing if they held a contest and you got ahead by knowing someone. That would be gross. But that’s not what happened. He was looking for artists, and you passed the grade.”

“But I could have been anyone.”

“Naw, come on, don’t pull that crap! This is your lucky break. But you know the thing about lucky breaks? They don’t happen without talent. You could be the cutest or coolest guy in the world—which, P.S., I think you probably are—but that wouldn’t matter if your art was terrible. Your art is great, and Carlos found it. That’s not lucky for you, that’s lucky for Carlos.”

I couldn’t remember the last time someone had given me a pep talk. It was the kind of thing my granddad would have said.

“You wanna know something, Dean? I’ve had three photo shoots in magazines. Small magazines, but still. That’s better than anyone else in my year. My lecturers rave about me.”

“You’re a fashion rock star. We all know that.”

“Listen.” The percussion section fell over as Bosco put his glittering hand on my elbow. “The second two magazines were interested because of the first one. And the first one only knew about me because the photographer was the brother of the bartender from this bar I used to hang at all the time. So there it is. Do you think that makes me any less of a rock star?”

“No.”

“So it’s cool.” He nudged my shoulder. “I’m impressed by your art. And the gallery can go eat a bag of buttered dicks, your art is cooler than this gallery.” When I grimaced, he added, “What, too loud for the Sunday afternoon crowd?”

“Yes.”

Bosco glanced theatrically at the couple browsing a few meters away. “Pissbricks, if those art snobs thought that was too loud, they should have heard you half an hour ago.”

I choked. “Holy fuck.”

Bosco patted my back. His grin was wicked. “I guess you’re not used to me yet, huh?”

“Do you want to talk dirty, or look at the pictures?”

And then his smile got soft and sweet. “I want to look at the pictures.”

“Cool.”

In an undertone he added, “We can dirty talk later.”

My “paintings” are actually prints—screen prints in two to four colors on white. Mostly they feature people in nature surroundings, but a few only feature objects. All of my art has a boldly-shaped print centered on the page and surrounded by white.

“Tell me about your art,” Bosco said. “I’m used to those little descriptions beside paintings at the museum. A personal tour is going to be *way* better.”

“I make a lot of art, and it’s simple. I’ve never been a big fan of super-detailed paintings. They’re cool and all, but that’s not how I enjoy art. I don’t stand there in front of a picture for half an hour looking at all the fiddly little bits. Most of the time I’m seeing something in a book anyway. It’s not like I can stand there in front of the actual painting at full size. And besides, all the fiddly bits in the world don’t mean jack if the overall painting isn’t cool. It’s all about shape and color, the ‘mood’ of a painting—and that’s totally subjective. The moment you look at a picture you know whether you like it or not. And that’s different for each person, the same as with music or TV or anything. So if you want to make people happy, your best chance is to make more pictures—the more you have, the more chance there will be something someone will like.”

“That’s kind of marketing, you know?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Except about happiness, not money? I want people to feel good when they look at my art. I don’t care if I never make a cent.”

Bosco squeezed my hand. “I know. Just... Designer here. I can’t get my mind out of the commercial gutter. Design is like art with a financial agenda.”

I shifted my hand away from his on instinct. I felt bad about it a moment later. It wasn’t that I wasn’t out—I’m totally out. It was just that habits of a lifetime were hard to break, and we were in a conservative space. And Bosco’s

arm made so much damn noise when it moved. I liked the jangly sounds of his bracelets; it was so far from anything I'd ever had in my life. It was almost music. And knowing that that music was Bosco, with his gorgeous smile, made it even more beautiful. But still, it was like a gong clanging and drawing attention to us. I wasn't sure if I was ready for that in front of the post-church gallery crowd.

"It's not just about other people, obviously," I said. "I want to make myself happy. I want to like what I've made. The thing with screen printing is that you won't know what it's going to look like until it's finished. That's cool, but there can be disasters. I like to start with a kind of silhouette, like a guide for the finished picture. Like this." The picture in front of us was a man working with a spade at the base of a nikau palm. Pale green, pale yellow-brown, a dark green and livid purple.

The palm was the focus of the picture, its fern-like branches splayed out with all four colors against the white of the background. The print formed a bell shape with the palm branches as the top curve. The rest of the print was divided into block colors—the brown of the trunk and spade handle, the purple of the worker, the pale green background with dark green tree shapes. There were details overlaid in the other colors or left blank to show the white of the paper, but the branches were the only part of the picture which had all four colors and the white so close together to form complex detail.

"The main shape is like a bell, or a dome formed below the branches," I said. "I start with that big simple shape: A bell. And then everything else is just detail. So I think, if someone looks at this picture they'll see the shape of the bell and the four colors, and that's how they'll decide if they like it or not. It's an instant decision, the moment you see a painting. And you can learn more about it and decide you like it because of that—like Picasso or whatever, no one likes it until they understand what the 'point' of the paintings are and what he was saying with them—but I don't have any big deep meanings and I'm not changing the world or even the art world. I just want to show things that I feel strongly about and see if I can show what I'm feeling. And that's for other people, but it's also for me. I have something in my head and I want to show it on paper, and the more I do that, then the more chance I have of getting it right. So that's why my art is simple."

Bosco was looking at me with the melty smile that he wore when I was cuddling Vivienne. I shrugged, but he just kept on smiling. "It sounds like you're trying to justify something?"

“I am. I know people look at these and they say, ‘my kid could do this, this is like a child’s drawing’. And I quit the military and left my family to work on my art, and I know if they see it they’d say, ‘What was the point of that?’ or ‘This is so basic, you could have done this in your spare time’. Like if it’s not complex then it’s not any good and it doesn’t take any work. But I don’t want to do complex. I want to do this. I like this.”

He squinted as he stepped closer to the painting. “And your screens are lined up well. I mean, that’s not the point of the art, obviously. But that’s technical expertise right there. Maybe it’s not with a paintbrush, but it’s still expertise. Trust me, as someone who sits in front of a sewing machine all day, I know that craft skills are undervalued. You’re a craftsman. And an artist. I can see that.”

“Thank you.” It meant a lot to hear compliments from someone who spent all day making beautiful things.

“How did you get into screen printing?”

“A girl I met in the army. She had family in the printing business and she loved it. She’d talk about it all the time. I’d always liked the print aesthetic of comic books, so I was interested. She talked me through how to do it and I even stayed with her family a couple of times when I was on leave. Most commercial screen printers have automated machinery now, but this was an old business and they did everything by hand, start to finish. That was one of their gimmicks—they’d do wedding invites and art posters, fancy stuff. Old school. Robots are cool, but there’s something special about getting your hands dirty.”

“Wow, Dean, did you realize you were living Forrest Gump? With screen printing instead of shrimp.”

“I never thought of that. You’re right!” I laughed.

He gazed wistfully up at a print. “Screen printing is awesome.”

“I could teach you, if you want.”

“Yeah?”

It was an offhand comment, but as soon as I said it I realized I couldn’t imagine anything more fun or natural. I wanted to see Bosco again. I wanted any excuse to have him in my life. And I wanted to see his lean long-fingered hands working a screen and spatula, or all covered in paint. I was excited imagining his fashion illustrations translated to art prints. “I’d love to teach you.”

“Yay!” He smiled happily, then asked, “So how did you get into art? Why didn’t you just work with your friend?”

“I’ve always been an artist.” I screwed up my face in embarrassment. It made me sound pretentious to say it. Even after all my hard work and my commitment to art—even while actually standing in a gallery filled with my art—saying that made me sound like a cockhead.

But Bosco just said, “Cool.”

He was a self-proclaimed rock star. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt for some of his confidence to rub off on me.

“I used to draw all the time, on any scraps of paper I could find,” I said. “And I’d look at art books in the school library when it wasn’t rugby or soccer or softball season. I loved reading about the Arts and Crafts Movement—this period in the late 1800s where artists just tried to make things simply and well. I think that inspired me a lot. I like the idea of making something with my hands, even if it would be easier to make it with modern technology.”

“You’re part of a movement! That’s so cool. Like how I’m part of the sartorial reinvention. That’s what I call it, but we’ll see what the history books have to say about me and my fashion movement in a hundred years.”

I laughed. If only a small part of Bosco’s confidence rubbed off on me, I would be set for life. “Don’t get excited. I’m about a hundred years too late for a movement.”

“No way! Hipsters could give those Arts and Crafts folk a run for their money.”

“I guess. That’s how I got here in the first place—Carlos wanted new-meets-traditional, which is what the hipster kids are gagging for.”

“Zeitgeist,” he said. It sounded like a sneeze.

We’d walked past a few prints while we talked. Bosco took his time looking at each one. He would stand and look at it, then step closer while his eyes roved over the image like he was scanning it to his memory banks. It was flattering.

“You look at my art so closely, it makes me wish there was more detail.”

“There’s plenty of detail! Are you kidding? There’s so much to look at. The art itself, and the areas where the screens overlap... It’s cool. It’s like veils. Some designers explore with layers of translucent fabrics and it has a similar

effect. It's like superimposed images. Kind of reminds me of photocopying zines, how artifacts get picked up and amplified without you meaning to." He turned to me with eyes wide and adoring. My insides shifted sideways, and I found myself desperately wondering what I would do to keep him looking at me like that. The art was worth doing on its own, but Bosco made it feel even more worthwhile. "There's just so much to look at! Even the texture of the paper showing through the ink and behind the glass. Extraordinary."

"Thanks," I mumbled. "You can do that, when we're screen printing together. You can use semi-opaque paints to do real cool stuff. You could use all grays and black, too, if you want."

His smile could have knocked me off my feet. "You know me so well already!"

Bosco hesitated in front of the next painting. "Tell me about this one?"

It was a military LAV resting in a pile of litter. I'd chosen green, yellow and blue with a light gray; natural colors to make the scene look almost like a field of flowers.

"This is one of the ones that got the most attention on opening night." I didn't remember the afterparty, but I could remember every compliment my art had received. After so long spent wanting a gallery show, any praise was tattooed inside my brain.

"It's definitely old meets new," Bosco said thoughtfully. "The tank looks like it's falling apart, and this rubbish looks old too, but it's not. There's a phone, and a MP3 player, and there's a running sneaker. And is that a gramophone? This is so cool."

"It's not a tank, it's a LAV—Light Armored Vehicle. It doesn't have the tracks around the wheels like a tank. It takes five years for a team to be qualified to drive one."

"Huh. I'd wondered why no one drove tanks in apocalypse movies. There goes my zombie contingency plan. So you can drive one?"

"Hell no. I rode in a truck. I only ever did 'peace keeping', not fighting—I could wield a gun but I never shot anyone. I was never in an active war zone." I looked at Bosco out of the corner of my eye, weighing up my next words. There was a clash of people in my life—everyone I'd grown up around versus everyone I'd met since I got out of the army. Bosco hadn't recoiled when I'd told him that I'd been in the army—not that I remembered, anyway—so I

couldn't be totally sure that he had the same viewpoint as a lot of civilians. "I'm kinda antiwar."

He didn't bat an eyelid. "Everyone's antiwar."

"Not where I come from."

He was grinning when he turned to me. "Wellington? Wellington's antiwar as fuck! There are protests and marches and stuff there all the time. Home of Parliament, home of politics. Wellington's awesome."

"I'm not from Wellington city," I admitted. "I'm from Upper Hutt—Trentham, near the military camp. My whole family is military, going back generations. That's all I've ever known." When Bosco just nodded, I went on. "My dad works on base. He worked in this seven-story building. The first two years he was on the first floor. Then he got a promotion and moved to the second floor. On his next promotion he moved to the third floor. And so on. That's army life: Moving up the ranks. You just move up and up until you die."

I looked down at my hands, soft after a month away from the spade and hammer. "I don't know. I guess my mind is just broken. I never wanted to move up ranks. I never even wanted to be captain of my sports teams. I just wanted to be part of a team. That's one of the things I love about my job now—we're all equals, even the boss works on site with us. And no one bosses us around, we can come and go when we want—it's money out of our pockets, but at least it's our choice."

"That sounds nice."

"It is. I guess art's the only part of my life in which I ever wanted to stand out. And..." I tapped my chest, where the trailing tentacle of a jellyfish was just visible above my collar. "Since I got out, I've been trying to make myself look more like how I feel inside. So that means standing out in a way my family never wanted me to. My dad used to always say that piercings were a way for unattractive people to make themselves less employable."

"Gross." Bosco grimaced and stuck his tongue sideways to wiggle around one of the studs through the side of his mouth. "Your nose piercing is totally hot. Sort of bad-boy chic. Like Lenny Kravitz!"

"Is that something I want?"

"Oh, *honey*. That is something you want!"

"Cool." Bosco was gorgeous, and I was giddy from the way he looked at me and my paintings. So I took his hand and kissed his cheek, fuck the after-church gallery scene. He looked so delighted that I knew I'd made the right choice.

“So,” he said. “This is an antiwar painting?”

“Yes. No. Maybe. I don’t really have deep meanings or anything behind my pictures. They’re just about how I feel. And I feel like I’m trapped between two worlds—I’m not military but I’m not a true civilian either. When I was in the army I had to hide that I was gay, and I had to chip away toward promotions that I didn’t want. But some stuff was good—army boys keep their rooms clean and their shirts ironed, and that’s cool. But it’s also not great because we *had* to. The army has this obsession with neatness. In the barracks, if we were woken by a fire alarm we had to make our beds before leaving. Officers checked, and if the beds weren’t made we weren’t allowed out of the room. That’s fucked up if it was a real fire.”

“It’s fucked up no matter what.” Bosco was nodding ardently. A little wrinkle had appeared between his eyebrows. “That’s just bossiness for the sake of being bossy.”

“The army was a mix of good and bad. It’s not what I wanted for my life, so I had to get out. But I don’t know if I hate it. I’m just glad I never went to war and killed people for something I’m not sure if I believe in. Everything is complex and I don’t know what to think.”

“I hear you.” He paused in front of another painting, but he didn’t seem to be looking at it. “Do you know what ‘third culture’ means?”

“No.”

“I’m Igbo—my parents are from Nigeria—but I’ve only been there twice. Most of my family only exist at the end of a phone line. I have some language and some of the customs and beliefs, but it’s all diluted down by everyone around me. I’m not Nigerian, but I’m not a New Zealander either. Neither one culture or another: third culture. I don’t fit in anywhere. Like with you and the military, I guess.”

“It’s not the same—the military’s not an entire country and culture and history. I don’t have anywhere near as much to deal with.”

Bosco shrugged. “Everyone’s got shit to deal with. Like, my parents are superobsessed with us all doing well at school and getting great jobs. I don’t think that’s a Nigerian thing, I think that’s just them being strict. And I could take it, if they weren’t totally homophobic. Like, I could grin and bear it and be this perfect son and take law, except that I’m queer as fuck and there’s nothing I can do about it. By the time I figured out that I should be trying to hide how

totally gay I am, it was about seven years too late. I think my family could handle it if it was just one thing or the other, but gay *and* a fashion designer? That's a nightmare. My eldest brother sends money because that's a matter of pride. But otherwise I'm lucky that they even talk to me."

"Our parents should meet. They could bond over having failures for sons. Sort-of sons," I corrected quickly.

"Right." Bosco snickered. He winked at me, then looked back at the walls.

I vividly remembered our conversation about missing our family. I knew that, for all his cocky words, he missed them as much as I did mine.

"Hey," he said suddenly. "That's like your tattoo!" He was pointing at a print of a harrier hawk with its wings spread.

"Yeah. My granddad had a hawk tattooed on his chest. That's why I got mine. It's a different design of course, but the same idea."

"That's so sweet. When are you getting it finished?"

I winced. "It was my first tattoo. I started getting it while I was still in the army. But then I made a lot of life changes, and..."

"You don't like it anymore?"

"I do. It's just that I haven't spoken to my granddad in a year. I don't know anymore if he would be proud for me to wear his tattoo."

"Oh. That sucks."

I glanced at Bosco. He looked completely sincere. So I told him, "Granddad was always good to me. No one else understood me like he did. We lived up in the mountains and my parents would drop me off at school but they wouldn't pick me up. I didn't have a car or a bike or anything so every day I'd have to jog back from school or cadets. It was an hour and a half to jog, over four hours to walk. Sometimes in the snow, often in the rain. From the age of ten onwards."

"Okay, *that* sucks."

"I'm not asking for pity." I laughed. "They said it was good training, and it was. I learned what I was capable of. I learned to just do something that I had to do, whether I wanted to or not." That came out much more maudlin than I'd intended. I grimaced.

"Sometimes Granddad would pick me up. Not often. But it was always on the worst days, like he could just tell when I was feeling terrible and all my

strength was gone. He'd pull up beside me and ask if I wanted a turn driving his car—illegal, obviously, and my parents would freak if they found out. It was a secret, something fun between us.”

Bosco knocked gently against my shoulder. “He sounds like a cool dude. And I like that you were a bit of a rebel, even when you were an army brat.”

“Yeah.” I felt warm just from hearing Granddad complimented. “It was only later that I realized he'd been asking me to drive his car so that I wouldn't feel like he was taking pity on me. He helped me, but I still got to feel strong and confident and proud of myself.”

Bosco's smile was all melty again. He said softly, “You should call your granddad. Someone like that could get over a little thing like you being gay.”

“Or leaving the military to draw pictures?”

“I think he'd understand.”

I nodded. I wanted badly for his words to be true, but I didn't think I could handle the pain if they weren't.

Then out of the blue he said, “What time do you finish work tomorrow?”

“Six or so. Earlier if the light's bad.”

“Want to come over?”

“Fuck, yes.” I almost groaned in my happiness.

“Excellent.”

We were moving on in silence when Carlos called out to me. “Dean! Dean! Great news!”

“Yeah?”

“Art Live just put up a review for your show!”

I gaped. Then I explained to Bosco, “Art Live is a big art blog. Probably the biggest in New Zealand. I can't believe this!”

Carlos hurried over with a slim tablet to show me the review. “They said you're one to watch! They say you have great vision and you speak with the people's voice!”

“See?” Bosco dazzled his smile at me. “I told you, you're awesome!”

Chapter Eight

Fashion Design students in their final year had their own “studios”, simple wooden desks separated from each other by plasterboard walls, like office cubicles or bathroom stalls.

I got to be very familiar with Bosco’s studio. It was as messy as his room, until I took over the cleaning and organizing like I’d done with his room. His desk was pressed against a window, which showed a wide grassy courtyard where students ate lunch and Viv ran happily about. Bosco’s desk was right beside the door to the courtyard, and he kept it propped open so Viv could run in and out. She wasn’t technically allowed on campus, but Bosco said he’d been bringing her so long that everyone had forgotten that she was a dog.

It was November, and I’d been dating Bosco for four blissful months. We were an hour away from the runway show, which marked the end of his time at college, as well as the first time he’d be seeing his parents since he’d moved out of home. He’d told them that having his final collection chosen for the show was more important than graduation. His whole family was coming to see it, then take us out for dinner.

I was furiously sewing the last of a set of special zines while Bosco got dressed. The zines were cloth sewn into concertinas without covers, so they could be folded to make any of the pages into the cover. Each double page featured one of the designers from Bosco’s year, their collections simplified into three-color illustrations that Bosco and I printed. We’d made enough to give one to each student and tutor after the show.

“How do I look?”

I’d gotten better at sewing, but I wasn’t good enough that I could stop a row then start again and expect it to be straight. So I had to finish before looking up at Bosco. Then I froze, lost for words.

“How do I look?” he asked again. He was chewing his lip, less confident than I’d ever seen him. “Is this okay?”

“Jesus, Bosco.” I couldn’t manage to say anything more.

Luckily we weren’t alone in the fashion studios. Jono—who majored in knitwear—looked up from the jacket he was fixing to wolf whistle. “Look who’s bringing sexy back!”

Bosco laughed, but he kept his eyes on me. “It’s okay?”

“You look amazing,” I breathed. He was dressed in a tight black top embroidered with curving lines of sequins, and a loose black skirt that flared out in folds to brush the floor. He looked lithe and willowy, the outfit perfectly accentuating his slender body.

“Love the skirt,” Jono crooned.

“It’s not a skirt—it’s a pair of culottes!” Bosco grabbed folds of the fabric and took an exaggerated step to show off how his skirt was actually trousers. “If I need to high-kick anyone tonight, I’m good to go.”

Jono said, “Meeting the parents for the first time? If anyone is getting in a fight, it will be Dean.”

“Dean will be fine!” Bosco swooped down and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. “Anyone would love him. And my parents aren’t that scary.”

I was close to terrified of his parents and what they would think of me. But this night wasn’t about me. I kissed Bosco’s furry cheek and said, “You look amazing. I’m sewing this last one, then I’ll get dressed. You’ve got something great for me to wear?”

“Do you feel like wearing a skirt out of solidarity?”

“I don’t think I’m ready. I’m not that confident yet. Sorry.”

“No big. I’ve already made you an outfit to match mine—an outfit with pants. Super cute and super masc. You’ll *love* it.”

“I’ve seen it,” Jono said. “It’s fabulous. You two are our dream couple. I wish my boyfriend would let me pick his clothes.”

I laughed. “I bet your boyfriend has better natural fashion sense than me.”

“Mmm-hmm, but he doesn’t have your biceps. He can’t draw worth a damn, either.” I’d seen Jono’s fashion illustrations—they were skilful, fluid and efficient. I just hadn’t realized he thought that was an important trait in a man.

But then he nodded at the wrapped framed painting I’d leaned against Bosco’s table. “So, are you going to show us?”

Bosco put down the hand mirror he’d been holding as he glittered his eyebrows. “That ain’t happening. If he wouldn’t show me before he wrapped it, then he’s definitely not showing us now. Trust me, I’ve begged.”

Bosco had asked me to make a painting as a gift for his mom. I'd gone all-out with a portrait of him.

He'd sneaked into my art already. For months I'd believed that he was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and I wanted that to come through in my art. My palette had always been inspired by a bleak view of nature, mostly cool greens and browns and yellows, which would have clashed if they weren't watered down. One blog had described my colors as "reminiscent of autumnal Wellington," and that rang true.

But now Bosco filled my life and filled my paintings. My work was resplendent with the rich, warm brown of his skin and hair and eyes, and the flickering, glittering light and energy that surrounded him. I wanted to draw what was important to me, and increasingly that meant Bosco.

The painting I'd made for his mom was my first attempt at a portrait of him. I'd printed him smiling, standing in front of a still life of his amazing breakfasts: the fruit and the juice and the tofu and the homemade toast and tomato pesto. I'd used more colors than ever before—that meant more screens and more effort, but it was worth it. The result was a colorful jumble, and the best thing I had ever created.

I hoped he would like it. I hoped his mom would like it. But if not, at least I knew I had been true to my vision and I had shown Bosco the way I saw him.

"You'll see it tonight," I told him. To Jono I said, "I'll make a copy for our room and maybe he'll bring it to show you all later." I looked back at the sewing machine long enough to sew one last seam, and then I stood up triumphantly. "Done!"

"Brilliant!" Bosco sashayed over with a box for the zines and garment bags filled with clothing for me.

The outfit he'd made me was gorgeous, of course. He leaned against me as I checked it out in the studio's full-length mirrors. "We look great together."

"We do," I agreed. "You look amazing. Everything you make looks amazing, and everything you wear looks amazing. You look especially amazing when you're not wearing anything."

"Shut it." He nipped jokingly at my head. "You're a sexy fuck, you know. I'm a lucky sorta guy."

Jono and the only other student in the room were over by the sewing machines, out of hearing range. I wrapped my arm around Bosco and breathed

in his heady familiar scent. I couldn't get over the way his outfit exaggerated his lean height. "You look like a tiger, and I look like a pile of bricks next to you."

"Nope, you're all shoulders. You look strong and powerful. Intimidating. That's what my parents will be impressed by." He smoothed the shoulders of my jacket compulsively, flattening out invisible creases.

I caught his hand. "Are you okay?"

He bit his lip, then let out a big sigh as his shoulders slumped. "No. I don't know who to be around my family. I've got to be Fairy Bosco for my friends and the press tonight, but I'm afraid my family will think I'm a campy loser."

"Well, what was it like before you left home? I mean, how did you act then?"

"One, I don't know. Two, obviously I wasn't that amazing because my family aren't exactly begging to see me again. Three, I've changed a whole lot. Queered up, I guess. Oh, fuckballs! My family are all just so perfect and I'm just so..." He wiggled a lean hand.

"You're perfect."

"Mostly frazzled." He grinned wryly, and his mint green dahlia gems flashed. "I don't know what to do to make them happy. I wish I knew. I wish I could design the perfect outfit to win my family over again. What's the point in getting this fucking fashion degree if it won't teach me *that*?"

I took his face in my hands and turned him to me. "You're gorgeous, Bosco Flame. You're even more gorgeous in person than in the mirror."

A little of the tension melted from his shoulders. "You're the best. God, I'm a mess. I'm sorry."

"I get it. I totally get it." I hadn't seen Bosco this stressed about dressing since before I'd taken over the tidying of his room. "Listen to me. You're perfect. Exactly how you are. And if your parents can't see that, they can eat a bag of buttered dicks."

His eyes got huge. "What? Ick! Why would you say that?"

"You said that to me on our first date. It made me feel better."

"Well, honey, it must be all in the way you say it. Because *gross*."

"Are you happy with who you are?"

He hesitated. “Yes.”

“And you’re happy with how your life is?”

He didn’t hesitate this time. “Yes. Very.”

“So there you are. If tonight is terrible, we can feel bad about it. But not forever. You’re still going to be fabulous, whether your parents see that or not.”

He blinked at me in awe. “When did you get so wise?”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think about this. While I was making that painting for your mom, all I thought about was you.”

“That’s sweet.” His smile always disarmed me, especially this close.

“I realized something.” I took a steadying breath and forced myself to keep my eyes on his face. “I’m in love with you.”

His smile got even wider, until it was blinding me, until I had to kiss his mouth just to cover that smile and keep it from taking me over.

“I’m in love with you,” I said again.

“Yeah. Obviously,” he breathed. “You’ve been in love with me for months. Ever since you first saw me in skinny jeans.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know. I’m serious.” He kissed me again, slowly. “I love you too.”

I closed my eyes and let myself bask in his words. I was *in love*. I was *loved*.

There was a yell from over by the sewing machines: “Get a room!”

I laughed and went to move away, but Bosco held me in place. “Fuck Jono, he’s just jealous. Let’s keep making out.”

“We should get to your runway show.”

“I have to tell you something. It’s kinda important and it might change how you feel about me.”

“Okay.”

He swallowed. “My name’s not Bosco.”

“Oh. You mean that’s your English name, and you have a name in Igbo?”

He just kept looking at me in misery.

“What?”

“My English name is actually Terry. Terrence!”

“Okay.” I tried not to laugh.

“My name is *Terrence!*”

The more horrified Bosco looked, the worse I felt about my urge to laugh. “Would you like me to call you Terrence?”

He shuddered. It didn’t look fake. “I want you to never, *ever* use that name again.”

“Then I won’t.” I rested my forehead against his chest, tucked in against his chin where I felt comfortable and safe. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’m Dean Andrew Phillips. That’s three first names.”

“And I’m Terrence. That’s one *worst* name.”

I laughed. “Don’t worry. You will always be Bosco to me.”

“I picked Bosco for myself. It’s after the actor from Hook.” His lips brushed my scalp. “I had the hugest crush on him.”

“Cute.”

“Fuck, you’re *so* supportive!” He kissed my head.

“Yeah. As your supportive boyfriend, it’s my job to tell you that we need to leave *now* or we’ll miss your big night.”

He scrunched his face up. “Roger that.”

Chapter Nine

The runway show was held in an empty shipping warehouse on the waterfront. The venue was already surrounded by people when we arrived, and as we walked from the car I could hear Bosco muttering to himself: “Fashionably late, it’s okay, it’s fashionable, I am a designer and it is okay if I’m late!”

He had Viv’s leash wound around his hand so she would stay close. I shifted my box of zines to one arm and caught his spare hand to calm him. It was warm and soft around the hard edges of his rings. “You’re great.”

“Damn right I am.” He squeezed my hand. “I am a fierce and beautiful warrior!”

I thought he would let go when we got nearer to the venue. But his grip only got tighter as he led us through the crowd. “Oh. Ooh! There we are. Mama!”

One by one, he introduced me to his parents, his three brothers and one sister, and the wives of the two oldest brothers. He introduced me as “Dean, an artist with work in galleries and a good job in landscaping.” It was all I could do to nod and shake hands and smile in the barrage of complex names. Bosco’s family were all so tall; I felt tiny and insignificant in the middle of them. I noticed that they all looked adoringly at Bosco. My fears for him drained away.

As soon as we’d met, we were separated by a second-year student who came to guide Bosco’s family to their seats. They had seats near the runway, but the two of us had to watch from the top of a cramped staircase. Most of the students from Bosco’s graduating class were already up there—apparently it was fashion school convention to seat spectators while making designers stand.

We tied Viv outside and I trailed along in Bosco’s wake as he made his way up the staircase, greeting people with hugs and backslaps and copies of our zine. His main tutor actually burst into tears when he gave her a copy of the zine.

People kept congratulating us on the zine and I diverted the praise onto Bosco—it was all his idea, and he’d done most of the printing, stitching and design himself. “He’s the genius,” I said. “I’m just the manual labor.”

The fashion show was great, and Bosco’s collection was the best. Lots of metal against black, huge shoulders and sharp shapes against big puffy, soft

shapes. It was officially a men's collection, but even the skirts looked masculine enough that I—with my growing eye for fashion—knew they could be sold as unisex. It was Bosco's dream come to life.

I didn't want to be too over-the-top in praising him while we were still squished onto the staircase landing with his whole class. But then the lights dimmed between his collection and the next, and he turned to me with wide eyes and a wide smile. And suddenly I couldn't resist. I wrapped my arms around him and said, "That was great. You're great."

"Thanks. You're not bad yourself."

I squeezed him at the ribs where he'd feel it more.

He laughed. "Seriously. It means so much to have you here. And to have you hanging out with my parents and stuff."

Another collection was on the runway, and we all turned to clap and cheer the designer. Then I leaned into Bosco's ear and said, "I'm proud to be in your life. But what was with introducing me with a job description?"

In profile, I saw him wince. "I'm sorry. That's not the only thing I've ever told my parents about you. I just wanted everyone to approve of you as much as possible, to make your life easier. I don't think of you like that. I promise."

"I know." I let go of him to applaud the next designer—this one I actually knew, because she was often hanging out with Viv when I met Bosco on campus.

When we'd finished clapping, Bosco smiled at me over his shoulder. I put my hands on his waist, and he leaned back into me.

"This is nice," he said quietly.

After the show, I slipped outside to walk Viv. She'd been inside too long, and got frisky as soon as she was out in the chill of the night. She darted to the edge of the quay and then back, again and again. I jogged along behind, holding tightly to the end of her long leash. I was terrified that she would jump into the harbor and I'd have to dive in and save her. Among other things, that would ruin my outfit.

That's where I was when I was found by Bosco's brother. "Dean. Good evening."

"Hey." I stopped to catch my breath, and Viv skidded to a halt and looked up at me in confusion.

“You’ve got her very well trained.”

“Yeah. Well, kinda. I think Bosco put a lot of work into it when she was little, socializing her and stuff. But now she’s a little lovebug, once she knows that you love her then she’ll follow you around forever.”

“Like a puppy.”

“More like a little kid.”

He laughed even though it wasn’t funny. He was smiling, but his eyes were wary like someone trying to be polite about not liking dogs. I thought he was the second eldest of Bosco’s brothers, but I couldn’t remember his name. He was even taller than Bosco, and looked to be in his mid- to late-thirties. I’d learned enough about fashion to tell that his suit was well-tailored and expensive.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ve forgotten your name?”

“Ekwueme. Can you pronounce that?” When I hesitated, he added, “My English name was Charles. I dropped it before I got married. You’re not learning Igbo?”

“I’m sorry. Bosco never suggested it.” It had never even crossed my mind to offer. *Why not?* I felt like a selfish fool.

But Ekwueme didn’t look angry. He smiled indulgently. “Terrence—Bosco—he’s the baby of the family. He’s always been the darling, and he’s always had his way. I suppose he’s very angry at the family?”

I frowned. “Yeah. He’s angry. Because you all stopped talking to him.”

“He is incredibly bright and he had a great future ahead of him, then overnight he throws that away. We were all shocked, if nothing else. Disappointed. But we care about him. That’s why we’re here. That’s why we’re meeting you, even though you’re not what the family wants for him.”

“What?” I stared at him in amazement. “Bosco is *gay*. He’s always going to be gay. That means he’ll date men. And I love him. I think love’s more important than gender, and Bosco would say the exact same thing if you just talked to him.”

“This isn’t about you being a man,” he said loudly. In that moment he sounded like his brother—on the few occasions when I’d seen Bosco so worked up that all of the sweetness dropped out of his voice. “Mama came to terms

with that, and the rest of us—dammit, we were all born here, we’re all Kiwis as much Terrence is. But you’re a total stranger. You’re white, and you look like...”

“Like what?” I was pissed off, but I kept my voice even and my shoulders relaxed. I didn’t want to spook Viv.

I was aware of Ekwueme’s gaze on my tattooed hands. I thought I knew exactly what he’d been thinking: that I was white trash.

He just said, “Our family has a lot of money, and your fiancé doesn’t hide that.”

Fiancé? What the hell? “You’re saying I’m a gold digger?”

“You have to understand—”

“No. I don’t give a shit if you insult me, but you don’t get to insult Bosco. Money is the *least* interesting or attractive thing about him. He’s incredible. If you can’t see that... Well, you don’t know what you’re missing out on.” I dropped to a crouch to pet Viv. “Also, I don’t need money.” I’d never thought about Bosco’s financial state, and I’d definitely never asked for handouts.

“I’m sorry. That was low of me. It’s just that you’ve come out of nowhere. We’ve never met you before, we don’t know anything about you. Bosco’s our baby, and we don’t want him marrying someone unsuitable.”

“You mean someone not rich?” *When had I gotten engaged to Bosco?*

“I mean someone who doesn’t respect Bosco’s culture.”

I settled my arm around Viv’s warm little body. I was feeling the chill wind more than I had a minute ago. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Our parents moved here, but they’d still prefer us to marry girls from our own culture. I did, and Chiemeka did.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not Igbo, and I can’t change that. I’ll do anything to respect Bosco’s culture, but I don’t know what I can do. To be honest, he doesn’t talk about it much. And about being a stranger? That’s why I’m here tonight: so you can get to know me.”

Ekwueme sighed, then dropped into a squat beside me. “Bosco’s not interested in his culture right now. We were all like that when we were his age. When you’re only surrounded by one kind of people, you start to think like they think. But there’s going to come a day when he realizes that he won’t ever fit

into the white world, and he'll want to know about his heritage. We all felt that. And I need to know that you'll be ready when that happens."

"You're saying that I should expect Bosco to wake up one day and decide he doesn't love me anymore because I'm white?"

Hunched down at my level, Ekwueme looked at me face-to-face for the first time. His eyes had none of Bosco's sweet warmth. Suddenly, I missed Bosco intensely and wished I was beside him. This night should be about making him happy, but instead I was spending it talking *about* him.

"You'll need to be prepared for Bosco to want his culture back," Ekwueme said. "You'll need to support him, and encourage him."

"Of course." I knew that Bosco missed his family. I knew how he longed to have their acceptance. I hoped he'd find a place where he felt that he belonged, and I hoped that was with his family. I hadn't put thought into it before but if I had, I would have come to one conclusion: I would support Bosco in anything he wanted to do. "Always."

"And you need to understand that our mother might never fully accept you. It's not going to be easy."

"Okay."

"Gifts might help."

I laughed. But then I wondered if that's what my painting was for, and if it would be good enough.

"Come on, let's find the others," he said. "They'll be wanting to leave for dinner."

At the word "dinner," Viv jumped up in excitement. I laughed. "You can have some too, little girl. I'll get you a doggy bag."

Chapter Ten

Bosco's oldest brother, Chiemeka, picked the restaurant for dinner—a classy Italian place on Parnell Rise with water features, dim lighting, and a lot of candles. I was seated beside Bosco, and I noticed his forehead creased in concentration.

“Everything okay?” I asked under my breath.

He held up the menu. “No vegan options. I could get the vegetarian pizza without cheese, but it says it's for two.”

If that was the worst problem we faced tonight, I would be happy. “I'll share the pizza with you.”

“It's got eggplant. You hate eggplant.”

“I can handle it.”

Bosco looked absurdly delighted. He linked his fingers through mine on top of the table. “Maybe we can get some roast vegetables too?”

I laughed. He looked so happy over nothing. “Sure. Of course.”

My bubble burst when I looked up to see the whole table of family looking at us. His dad asked, “Are you all right?”

“Just choosing our meals,” Bosco said.

His mom crossed her slender arms and leaned forward. “So you two met at college?”

“No.” I glanced down, wondering if it was appropriate to hold hands the first time you met your boyfriend's parents. “I didn't go to college.”

“Dean was in the army for three and a half years. I told you that.” Bosco narrowed his eyes, and his grip tightened on my hand. “We met after the opening for his first solo gallery show.”

“But you plan to go to college?” she asked.

I hesitated. Bosco interrupted, “A solo gallery show is a big deal. Dean sells prints online. He's got fans.” Everyone was looking at me. I wished I were anywhere else. But Bosco squeezed my hand and smiled at me. “Dean actually made you a painting.” He handed me his keys. “Grab it from the car, babe?”

Once I was outside, I didn't want to go back in. I patted Viv and dawdled. I didn't know what I could do to make a good impression, and I believed what Ekwueme had said when he'd told me it wouldn't be easy.

But I had to try. I wanted Bosco in my life and I wanted him to be happy. That meant doing my best to not piss off his family. And it also meant not abandoning him in a restaurant just because I didn't know how to talk to his parents.

I took a deep breath and headed inside, ready for another icy interrogation. But the family seemed happy, sharing platters of bread and fancy dips and nibbles. Bosco looked up at me and grinned.

They finished their conversation about the fashion show, and the table was cleared. Bosco put the parcel on the table in front of his mom. "Dean painted this just for you." I'd wrapped it meticulously, redoing it until it looked great. I'd even added a ribbon and bow.

"Oh, thank you, Dean."

"It's not really a painting," I said quickly. "I mean, it is, but it's done as layers of paint through screens—screen printing—so it's not like an oil painting or something."

"It's better," Bosco said confidently. He took my hand in his again. He was obviously looking out for me, protecting me. Just a few hours ago, he had been the one nervous about being around his family. But they didn't seem to have any problem with him at all, flamboyant clothing and new name and all. I thought his brother had summed it up—they saw Bosco as the baby of the family. They smiled at him indulgently. *I* was the one on trial tonight. But that was okay—that was a relief. Anything that took pressure off Bosco was fine by me.

His mom unwrapped the painting, and her eyes opened wide. "Oh. Oh, my."

Bosco's dad said, "This is something. Quite something." He sounded surprised, but also impressed.

"Let's see?" Bosco stood and craned his neck to try and see the painting. His mom turned the frame around so everyone could see.

There were impressed murmurs from all around the table. Ekwueme nodded congratulations and held out his hand to me. I shook it, even though Bosco gave me a weird look. I could see him wondering what that was about. "Later," I mouthed.

I had been happy with the painting, but I hadn't expected everyone else to be as happy with it. I let out a relieved sigh—maybe I had a chance of being accepted by Bosco's family after all.

I was exhausted by the time we got home.

"Thanks for coming tonight," Bosco said. Then he yawned.

"Of course."

"It will get easier, every time you see my parents."

"Yeah. I hope so."

"I told them to back off. When you were at the car. I told them how important you are to me, and that they didn't need to give you the third degree."

I laughed. "And there I was, thinking I'd managed to impress them."

"You did, you definitely did! Did you see Papa's eyes when he looked at your painting? Wow! I thought he was doing his googly-eyed goldfish impression. They didn't expect you to be so talented."

I scanned Bosco's face. He seemed tired, but relaxed. "Ekwueme gave me a grilling before dinner."

"What?"

I told him about the conversation.

"He asked me if I'm learning Igbo," I finished.

"What the hell? *I* never even learned it. We hardly spoke it at home. I took two years of Spanish at high school, did Ekwueme ask you to learn Spanish, too?"

"He said that you'll want to learn about your culture, and you'll want to go home." I looked to Viv for strength, and she smiled her sloppy dog grin at me. I drew in a breath. "And I want you to know that I'll go with you."

Bosco's smile slipped and his jaw tightened. "Do you know what would happen to me, if I went back? Nigeria's come a long way, but it won't be flying pride flags any time soon. Do you think your white skin would protect you? You'd just draw attention to us—to me. Maybe you can pass as a straight guy, but I can't. I'd be dead in a week."

"Then we won't go back. But I think it's important that you learn about your heritage."

“My fucking *heritage*?” His lips were drawn up in a sneer, and his hands had clenched into fists. “Didn’t you just hear me? I would get *killed* for loving you. That’s all I need to know about my heritage. Nigeria doesn’t want me, so I don’t want Nigeria.”

“I agree, that’s fucked up. But there’s a lot more to your culture than homophobia. You know that. And I know that you know that, because the things that your brother said made sense. I think you do care about your culture.” Out of nowhere, a phrase of my mother’s floated into my mind. It was absurd. I hadn’t thought of it for years. But there it was, the perfect analogy. “Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

Bosco relaxed, sagging forward as the anger drained out of him. “I know. I know.”

I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around him.

He pressed a kiss to my neck and mumbled, “I’m cute when I’m contrite, right?”

“Yeah. Very cute.”

“You want to learn Igbo? We can look into language tutors online or something.”

“Cool.”

“Just do me a favor?” He took my hands, but stepped back and looked me in the eyes. “I need you to practice what you preach. If you’re all about me getting back to my roots, you have to do the same. Talk to your family.”

“Ugh. I guess I set myself up for that.”

“I’m not being a vindictive asshole. I’m saying, if you think family is important for me, you must think it’s important for you, too. You’re an awesome dude. If your family doesn’t accept that, they’re losers who don’t deserve you. But let’s at least give them a chance to prove themselves?”

Bosco was smiling down at me hopefully, and Viv was smiling up at me adoringly. They were the ones who loved and accepted me—they were my true family. *And yet...*

“You miss them,” Bosco prompted.

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. I’m a fierce *genius*.”

It was later—after Viv had gotten her second wind and raced around the backyard until she was tired again—that I asked Bosco the question that had been niggling at me all night.

“Why do your family seem to think that we’re getting married?”

Bosco hesitated. We were in our bedroom, Viv sniffing around the bed and the clothing racks. Bosco was going through his nighttime preparations. “You know what I love about you?”

I sat on the bed and gazed at my boyfriend, hypnotized by him like always. “What do you love about me?”

He arched his back and looked at me over his shoulder. “One, your fantastic ass.”

I snorted, and Bosco winked.

“Two, that arty brain of yours. Three, you never get angry. Ever. About *anything*.”

“Are you buttering me up?”

He slid his boxers down to show the delicate swoop of his hip. “Why would I do that?”

I laughed. “Should I take Viv to her other room, to give you more time to avoid answering my question?”

Bosco squatted and held out his hand, and Viv ran over for pats. “We’ve been together a while. I’m happy. I want my family to get to know you, and I knew they’d give you a better chance if they thought we were engaged. I shouldn’t have lied.”

I got down on my knees beside Bosco and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “You could have at least given me a head’s up.”

He bit his lip. “I can’t imagine anything better than marrying you. I’m sorry. I fucked up?”

I kissed his soft stubbled cheek. “Did you just propose to me?”

“I think so.” He added quickly, “I mean, not right away or anything. Obviously. But one day... That would be great.”

“So we’re engaged. So you didn’t lie to your parents—just got your dates mixed up.”

He laughed so loudly and happily that Viv started hopping up and down on the spot. I thought I knew how she felt—my heart was beating at least as quickly as she was bouncing.

Bosco pressed his forehead against mine, then rubbed his face into mine until our lips were touching. I opened my mouth to suck on his lush lower lip. “You always taste so good. You always smell so good, too.”

Viv was still jumping around silently. She reminded me of something that Bosco had said to me, that very first morning I’d woken up in his bed. “I’ll get you those shoes you want.”

“What shoes?”

“Those Vivienne Westwood shoes you want to wear at your wedding.”

He stepped back, his eyes liquid and huge. “Oh, boy. You’re going to be saving for ages, I want some *fine* heels.”

“Then I’ll save for ages. I’ll get you the best damn shoes you can imagine.”

“Oh honey!” Bosco grabbed my hands and squeezed. “You’re my hero!”

I blinked in surprise. “Really?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “But you know, the Westwood heels are only half of my dream. I’ve got to find the perfect pair of matching kicks for my groom. I will find them for you, and I will buy them for you.”

I laughed. “So that makes you my hero too, is that what you’re saying?”

“I’ll always been your fashion hero, at least.”

“You are my hero,” I told him, not caring how sentimental it sounded.

“Aww.” He lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed the tattoos on my fingers. “What do you say I take our girl to her other room, then I take my boy to bed?”

I closed my eyes to better savor my happiness. “That sounds perfect.”

Chapter Eleven

The next time my granddad left a message on my phone, I listened to it. Bosco had been right—I missed my grandfather. I missed my family. I wanted them back in my life.

If Bosco could heal things with his family, so could I.

Granddad's message was simple and short—he said he was in town and left his phone number. It was the same number he'd had for years.

Figuring that he wouldn't have called if he was angry at me, I returned his message. He was delighted to hear from me, and the conversation grew long. I arranged to meet him when he was in town.

I hesitated about telling Bosco and immediately felt terrible about that. He had always been so great to me, and proud to introduce me to his family.

But there was an ugly part of me that was afraid that Bosco would damage my chances of reconciliation. I loved him, everything about him. But he was the opposite of what my family expected from a man. If it had taken me a while to accept him and all of his femininity, I had no hope for my army-bred family.

But then—when I was getting ready with Bosco and he came at me with his black glitter blush—I suddenly had a moment of such perfect happiness that it froze me still.

“Yuss!” Bosco seized my unmoving shoulder and dabbed glitter on my eyebrows. “Look at this perfect defined line! So strong. You need to flaunt these superb eyebrows.”

“I just realized something.”

“That your brows are *divine*?”

“No. Maybe. I don't know.” I pressed my forehead to his chest, not caring if glitter rubbed off on his shirt. “I realized I'm happy. Things are good. I keep doing things I want and they make me happy.”

“You mean me, right?”

I choked on my laughter. “Yeah. Like how I'm doing you. That makes me happy.” I wrapped my arms around his ribs and said, “I want you to wear anything you want tonight. You can wear a skirt or anything, if that makes you

comfortable. You can be Fairy Bosco or Frazzled Bosco or Sleepy Bosco, whoever you like. Every Bosco is great. And you can be late because you're putting on your eyeliner. I've got your back. You don't need to worry about tonight because I've got your back, no matter what. I love you, and that's enough. I'm happy. Everyone else can just fuck off."

I thought I was prepared. But the moment I walked into the café and saw Granddad, I broke down. I ran to him and wrapped my arms around his tough old shoulders.

"It's so good to see you. It's so good to see you." For the first time in as long as I could remember, I was crying. "I've missed you."

"You wouldn't have to miss me if you just replied to my goddamn messages."

And then I was laughing through my tears because that was my Granddad, through and through.

"Granddad, I want you to meet someone. This is Bosco Flame." I swallowed. "My boyfriend. Fiancé," I corrected.

I could tell it was a surprise for my granddad, but he tried to hide it. He held out his hand. "Bosco. Good afternoon. I'm Peter."

"Hello. I'm honored to meet you."

"Ooh, good manners on this one!" Granddad laughed. "He's a keeper."

My throat was thick with emotion, and I had to swallow it down. Granddad—tactful as always—looked up at the menu board and pretended not to notice.

Over coffee with soy milk, Bosco and I talked about our lives. I told Granddad about my job and the solo gallery show I was preparing for. Bosco talked about the shop he was running with some fellow graduates, to sell their designs and build recognition for their brands.

Granddad was polite and interested, even when I talked about things that I knew he didn't understand, like my growing success in selling art prints online. He didn't even bring up the army. Instead he said, "You gotta do what you gotta do. And you're doing it. You're both doing what you gotta do, and that's all that matters."

When Bosco went to the bathroom, Granddad leaned forward over the table. “I like him.”

“Really?” For all his good qualities, I’d always thought my grandfather was at least borderline racist.

“Oh yes. Flaming queer, of course.”

“So am I, Granddad.”

“I know. Have been since you were a wee lad.” He tapped his sugar spoon on the table thoughtfully. “That boy’s good for you.”

“Because we’re both flaming queers?”

“Because he makes you happy.”

That drove me to silence. I watched my hands playing with my bowl of fries.

“I can tell,” Granddad went on. “You love him. He’s right for you. It’s there in the way you look at him. It was as plain as day from the moment I saw you two together.”

“Thank you.” It was all I could manage.

“That’s how your grandmother used to look at me. I could tell, as soon as she looked at me like that. And I can tell from how he looks at you.”

I looked at my fries, and when I looked back up Bosco had returned.

“Anyone want dessert?” he asked. “There’s fresh fruit.”

“Hippie diet,” Granddad said, but it was under his breath. More loudly he said, “I was just asking Dean about your plans for Christmas this year.”

“My parents don’t celebrate Christian holidays, so I usually do orphan’s Christmas in the park with friends.”

“You can come with Dean, then. Christmas at Trentham.”

“He means my parents’ house,” I said quickly. “Not the army camp.” I turned to my granddad. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? You’re the only member of the family I’ve heard from.”

“Only because you’re too much of a stubborn ass to call your sister or your parents. They’re worried about you. Don’t you roll your eyes at me,” he added. “They are. Call them. Help them understand the fine man you’ve become. Show them that you’ve made a life for yourself, and that you’re not a coward.”

I cleared my throat and looked at Bosco. He smiled and shrugged.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll call Mom to arrange it.”

“Asslords.” Bosco raised his hands theatrically. “I can’t believe it worked to call Dean a coward. This is like a scene from one of those *Back to the Future* movies.”

I laughed, even though I didn’t know if I should be offended or not.

When we were leaving, Bosco held out a hand. “I’m glad to have met you, Peter.”

With a gruff laugh, my grandfather pulled him in to a bear hug. “Call me Granddad. Might as well. We’re family now.”

In the car on the way home, I repeated what Granddad had said about the way I looked at Bosco. He looked delighted. “Of course. It’s like with Viv. I could tell as soon as I looked at her. That’s how I feel about you: You’re the one for me. And you better believe that it shows.”

I rested my hand on top of his on the gearstick. When I took my hand away, it was to pull out my phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“My tattooist. I’ll get my hawk finished for Granddad to see by Christmas.”

We took two weeks off work to drive down to Wellington and stay with my family over Christmas.

“If this is terrible, we can just get out of there,” I told Bosco as I sat at my desk and watched him getting ready for the drive down. “Find somewhere to hole up. Actually, let’s just do that right now. I already know it will be terrible.”

“It won’t be terrible.” Bosco paused with his eyeliner pen in hand, his eyes halfway through the transformation from warm to enchanting. “One, your family are putting us up, so I know they can’t totally eat fried dicks. Two, they raised you, so they can’t be complete assholes. You turned out great.”

I’d been looking through one of my full sketchbooks, idly flipping pages and sipping coffee while my eyes strayed to Bosco. I could never keep my attention on anything except him getting ready.

So I gave up trying.

I went to him and wrapped an arm around his waist, careful to not nudge his eyeliner hand. “I just hope they treat you okay.”

“Hey, I’ve had people treat me crappy before. I can take it. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Me?” I buried my face in the crook of his neck.

“Yeah. I need your parents to be okay, because I’m going to be spending a lot of time with you, so probably a lot of time with them.”

I was looking at my gorgeous boyfriend in the mirror, but I felt like I was watching a montage of all the racist jokes I’d heard my parents make over the years. I cringed. “Well, my sister is okay. She’ll like you.”

“Of course, I’m fabulous.” He finished his eyeliner and turned to me, his smile wide and bewitching. In the mirror behind him, I caught sight of the prints on the wall—he’d moved his fashion illustrations to make room for a framed print I’d made him, the same painting I’d given to his mom. I’d been working on a print to match, a colorful portrait of Viv. I was giving it to him for Christmas, and I could hardly wait—I knew how happy it would make him.

“You are fabulous,” I said. “You’re great. Wonderful.”

Bosco dragged me against him and held me tight. “You really think so?”

“Of course. Always. Exactly the way you are. And whatever happens over the next couple of weeks, I’ve got your back. I’ll support you, no matter what my parents think.”

“At least we’ve got your granddaddy on our side—he’s a tough old coot.”

“Bosco?”

“Yeah?”

I squinted up at him, and took a deep breath. “I’m ready to support you completely.” When he looked confused, I pushed on. “I’m ready to wear a skirt.”

His lips moved as he repeated the words silently. It took him a moment, but then his smile came like the dawning sun. “You want to wear a skirt?”

“For you. One of those cool kinda dark skirts, like you wear. If you want men to wear skirts, then I’ll wear a skirt. To show I’m committed to you. I don’t care if my family make fun of me.”

He was so excited that his shoulders were vibrating up and down. “You don’t have to, if you don’t want to.”

“I want to.”

“Oh, Dean! This is going to be amazing! You’re my hero. You’re my gender-nonconforming, fashion-forward rock star!” Bosco raced to his clothing racks so fast that he skidded and knocked one over. He collapsed to the floor, laughing in a tangle of homemade couture. “Oh, shit! More for you to clean!”

I laughed, caught up in his excitement. “I like cleaning.” I grabbed the nearest rack and tipped it over. Clothes piled like a lumpy blanket all over Bosco.

“Oh jeez, I can’t believe you did that!” He scooped up an armful of jackets and dragged them over his head, then writhed around. “I made you a nice skirt, in case you ever wanted to wear one. It’s military chic and real masc. I’m pretty sure I’m lying on top of it, though. It’s going to be all wrinkled!”

“Wrinkled is fine.” I dropped onto the floor next to him. I had to push three sets of sleeves away to reveal his beautiful, kissable face. “I don’t care what I wear, as long as I get to wear it next to you.”

The door swung open, and Viv came bounding in. With a dog’s unerring sense of how to make as much mess as possible, she dived into the pile of clothes and started strewing them about. I tried to grab her, but she dodged my hand. Her face was stretched in a smile like a laughing hyena.

“If she gets into the habit of messing with my clothes, you’re the one who has to punish her when we train her out of it,” Bosco said. He sat up as clothing streamed off him, a monster rising from the sea.

“We’ll handle it. If we can handle two weeks with my family, we can deal with anything.”

Bosco had a go at imitating my voice. “I don’t care what we have to handle, as long as I get to handle it next to you.”

“Don’t take the piss. I was serious.”

He wiggled through the piles of clothing to press his cheek against mine. “I am, too.”

I tilted my head so I could kiss him.

He hummed in contentment then said, “This is going to be okay. Don’t worry. You’re going to be so totally hot in this skirt I’ve made you.”

I'd been wearing his clothes for nearly six months, and he hadn't steered me wrong yet. I trusted his fashion sense. It was just another facet of his amazing self.

I hoped my parents would be able to see that.

But even if they couldn't, I'd still love him. I wasn't afraid anymore of what other people thought of him, or of me. He might not be the most masculine man, but he was the demiman I loved. We were sharing a great life together.

Everything was wonderful.

The End

Author Bio

Willow Scarlett is a queer romance writer from New Zealand. In early 2015, she quit city life and moved to a ski hut at the foot of Mt. Doom. She now happily lives and writes in a tiny town, which is home to more alpacas than people.

Her greatest joy is in creating holistic romances, bringing characters through friendship and lust to consuming, eye-opening, world-fulfilling love. Her stories often feature punks, rebels and outcasts.

Willow is an avid jogger and cyclist, a neocrust violinist and an enthusiastic fan of horror movies.

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