



Baked
FRESH

PORTLAND HEAT

**ANNABETH
ALBERT**

Books by Annabeth Albert

Portland Heat novellas:

Served Hot

Baked Fresh

Delivered Fast

Published by Kensington Publishing Corporation

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PORTLAND HEAT

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This one goes out to the millions of volunteers in soup kitchens, shelters, food banks, and other frontline organizations fighting homelessness in America.

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Chapter 1

“So, what’s your plan this year?” Cliff asked as we unloaded pallets of food for Victory Mission. The stinging December wind whipped through the loading dock, howling against the concrete walls. I had to strain to hear Cliff’s booming voice. “Sky diving? Marathon? How you gonna top last year, Vic?”

“Dunno.” I hefted a box of tomato sauce cans. That’s what everyone wanted to know—how I was going to top last year’s resolution to lose a hundred pounds. Truth was, I was pretty good at resolutions. Four years ago, I’d resolved to go to culinary school. Three years ago, I gave up smoking. And last year I lost 111 pounds. But this year I had a smaller, simpler goal in mind.

“Thought I might try dating.”

“Dating? As in a boyfriend?” Cliff snorted, a dry sound that echoed off the metal loading bay doors. “I’d go with a marathon.”

My stomach churned as I grabbed another box of rolls. I had my own doubts. I was hardly a prize catch. I hadn’t dated anyone in the four years I’d been working for Cliff. Never had a boyfriend beyond the rare threepeat hookup. ’Course, Cliff didn’t know about my hookups, but I hadn’t even had one of those in eight long months. Up until a few months ago, I hadn’t realized what I was missing. Ever since then, this weird, restless longing had plagued me. New Year’s was the perfect excuse to do something about it. Get out there.

“You guys done out here? Whole stack of boxes waiting inside. We don’t have all day.” Robin bustled out onto the dock, bringing a shit-ton of bad mood with him. A far cry from the sunny, talkative guy who made me think crazy thoughts, like that maybe dating wasn’t a terrible idea. He was gone before either Cliff or I could reply.

“What’s up with him?” I asked Cliff once I heard the pantry door shut inside.

“Melissa said Paul broke up with him.” Cliff always found the gossip. The food bank volunteers were like bored high schoolers, passing rumors around their shifts like joints at a party.

“Finally.” I didn’t realize I’d said the word aloud until Cliff laughed.

“Aha! On second thought, I highly approve of your resolution. I’m gonna have to get a bet going with Trish about whether or not you can land your man. Talk about aiming high though, kid.”

“Didn’t say anything about dating Robin,” I mumbled into a sack of rice. The last time Robin was single, I had spent months thinking about him. Wondering if he was out of my league. Knowing he was out of my league but trying to work up the courage to ask him out anyway. Coming to volunteer more often just to be around him. Then Paul swooped in like a star pitcher and sent me back to the minor leagues, where I belonged.

I readjusted my grip on the sack so I wouldn’t accidentally tear the darn thing in two. No, I wasn’t stupid enough to make a resolution to date Robin. I just wanted to get out there. Give myself a chance to maybe meet a nice guy who wouldn’t care about my food issues and my loose skin and my bald-by-choice look.

But now that Cliff had planted the dating-Robin idea in my brain, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Which irked the hell out of me. I’d worked hard to deep-six my crush on him. Finding out he was single was a stupid reason to unearth it. Robin *was* the nice guy of my fantasies. And fucking gorgeous. He was sex walking around in KEENs and hipster T-shirts. He was everything I wanted and everything I wasn’t ever going to have.

I ran into Robin an hour later in the pantry room, where he was doing inventory. The pantry room was where the shelter stored all the supplies needed to provide two meals a day for the ever-increasing numbers of Portland’s homeless.

“Sorry ’bout earlier.” Robin looked up from his clipboard, giving me a sheepish smile. A Robin smile was like sun glinting off the Columbia: it never failed to dazzle me. The pale pink of his lips was a soft contrast to his honey-colored skin. When his wide lips curved, revealing perfect white teeth, my stomach did a happy little flip. The sun had returned.

“No biggie. Heard you’re having a rough day.” I lined up cans of tomato soup, trying hard not to look at him. I didn’t want him to feel uncomfortable. I’d be climbing the metal shelving or hiding behind the stacks of boxes if I were the one being gossiped about.

“Yeah. Sorry. I shouldn’t be taking it out on people here.” He passed me the clipboard so I could log in what I unpacked. While I started logging, he

grabbed a box cutter and opened more of the boxes Cliff and I had unloaded.

“Hey, you’re allowed to be human.” I shot him what I hoped passed for an understanding smile. “And go you for tossing that pompous ass.”

“Actually, it was the other way around.” Robin’s expression was tight, pained.

“Shit. Sorry. Didn’t mean—”

“No. It’s okay.” He waved away my apology. “He *was* stuck up. I think Melissa was relieved when he didn’t show up with me today.”

I nodded, not sure what to say. I didn’t want to trash the dude if Robin still had feelings for him.

“You’re better off without him.” When in doubt, go big on cliché. I fell back on my ma’s old trick.

“Eh. I figure I had it coming. Better now than later, though, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“Anyway, I’m done with boyfriends now. D-O-N-E. Done.” He punctuated his words with jabs of the box cutter into the box he was opening. His actions and words were firm, but the look in his eyes was uncertain.

Having a boyfriend had suited Robin. He’d been all smiles and lightness around Paul the Jerk. Seeing them together had made me start to want someone, too. Someone to share inside jokes with, someone to watch TV with, someone to sneak little touches and dirty looks with in public. Hell, someone to talk to would be enough of a novelty for me. Every now and then I’d get to chatting with a guy online and think maybe we’d hit it off. But then we’d hook up, and as soon as the fucking was over, he’d beat feet to get out of my place. It seemed like the more good-looking the dude, the faster he was on his feet.

But Robin was fucking gorgeous and most days he liked talking to me. We both liked action movies and blues music, and somehow we always ended up gabbing politics, but there was always this easiness to our conversations, like we’d been having them for years and years.

As usual, thinking about Robin and what a great guy he was had me asking my favorite question: what would he be like in bed? He’d probably talk to me there, too. He’d be the type to hang out and talk after the sexing was done. He’d ask about my day and tell me about his, and maybe we’d even talk about making plans and about when we might get together next. I

got hard just thinking about it. I had to distract myself with straightening soup cans.

Bingo. That was what Robin needed. A distraction.

“Hey, you got plans for tomorrow night? Got a New Year’s party to be at?” I asked. Wouldn’t surprise me if he had some fancy shindig to attend. I didn’t know a whole lot about Robin’s life outside of volunteering, but I knew he came from money; his high-end clothes and the Beamer he drove said that.

“Nah. I’ll probably come down here for part of the evening. It’s always crazy here New Year’s.”

“You can do better than that. How about you come out? Some of my buddies are doing a pub crawl. Get out there. Get over what’s-his-face. Party at CC Slaughters’s supposed to be epic.”

“Oh. Uh.” Robin swallowed hard, his hands moving restlessly against the row of oatmeal containers he’d been counting. “Thanks, but parties really aren’t my thing. Don’t drink anymore.”

I fumbled the can I’d been stacking. *Hell.* I’d known him two years now, and for all he liked to run off at the mouth he’d never mentioned it, but still I should have guessed.

“Shit. I’m sorry. I didn’t think. You in recovery?”

“Yeah.” Robin went back to unpacking. The fluorescent lights made his honey-colored skin look sallow—or maybe he was turning green because of what I’d said.

How had I missed the clues? He’d never once mentioned bars—and he’d never once missed a shift. A lot of the most dedicated volunteers at the shelter were former homeless themselves, or recovering addicts seeking to pay back help they’d gotten. While open to all, the shelter had a particular focus on teens and young adults who often slipped through the cracks at the larger organizations. I’d discovered the shelter through a booth at Pride and convinced my boss Cliff to participate; the bakery always had food to donate.

We worked without talking for a few minutes, and while the silence wasn’t exactly uncomfortable, I felt the sting of a blown chance. I shoved the cans a bit harder than I should have and a stack collapsed. *Time to start over.*

It occurred to me—too late *again*—that I’d never really done this. Never asked a guy out. Never liked a guy enough to try. Oh, I knew my way

around an Internet chat room, but real world? Robin was the first “real-life” guy I’d ever felt inspired to ask.

But now I’d blown it and I didn’t know how to fix it. Not to mention my timing was really lousy; I should have waited until Paul was a distant, bitter memory, but I reserved patience for drop lines and sugar flowers, not social conventions.

“How long?” I asked.

“Two years, 363 days.” He winked, a trace of his usual humor shining through. “Best resolution I ever made.”

A fellow resolution keeper. My chest felt warm with empathy for his hard road. My successes were like speed bumps to his Mount Hood of triumph.

“That’s awesome, man. And good on you for coming down here tomorrow.”

“It’ll be a long night.” He shrugged, showing off his surprisingly delicate collarbones, matched by eyes filled with an unexpected fragility.

“I bet.” I wanted to ask if he’d be okay, but we weren’t really that kind of friends. I wasn’t sure I could ask without looking like even more of an ass. But I knew how brutal anniversaries could be.

Later, as I walked out to my beat-up old Civic, I hunkered into my jacket to ward off the chill and told myself to go back to my previous plan. Make a profile on an actual dating site, not one of the quick hookup places. Find some guy, one who wouldn’t be anything like Robin, with his wide smiles and silky brown hair and ...

Fuck it. My hands clenched tight around the door handle. I knew exactly what my resolution was. Come hell or high water, I was going to be Robin Dawson’s rebound guy. And I was going to change his mind about boyfriends.

Chapter 2

Next day I had a plan, but I played it cool, surveying the racks of bread and pastries waiting for their turn in the too-full front cases. As I'd hoped, the oven-room staff had been overzealous again. We were closed New Year's day, so a lot of stuff would have to be marked as day-old or tossed.

"Want me to make a run over to the shelter?" I asked Trish. "I can do it after I deliver the Russo's cake." She was finishing up the groom's cake for the Russo-Smith wedding.

"Didn't you guys take them stuff yesterday?" Trish didn't look up from the chocolate fondant she was positioning over the diamond-shaped cake.

"Oh, he's got good reason to go back," Cliff butted in. He stopped cleaning the middle worktable and smirked.

"Shut your trap," I ribbed him in our usual good-natured way, but I shot him a look that said I could make all sorts of revelations of my own if he didn't shut up. With the Russo-Smith cake finished and safely stowed in the walk-in, I started putting away my decorating tools.

"You still coming out later? James'll be disappointed if you bail." Cliff ran a hand over his thinning hair. James was Cliff's brother—a sweet guy with an even sweeter husband who always tried to include me in their social circle. I was the Delgado family pet as far as Cliff and James were concerned.

"I'll be along." I wanted to check on Robin to make sure he wasn't too down, but I didn't expect him to give me a reason to skip James's annual New Year's Eve pub crawl.

"Speaking of bailing, I've got Blazers tickets next week. Thought Eddie and me would go, but he's got a school thing. You want them?"

"Sure. Both? You don't want the second?"

"Why don't you see what sort of magic you can work, resolution boy." Cliff kept his voice oh-so-light and innocent, like he wasn't matchmaking hard.

Gray-streaked red hair bouncing, Trish laughed like she was in on the joke; she was good at that, picking up on Cliff's signals. She'd pull the whole story out of her husband five minutes after I was gone.

And while I didn't doubt that sixteen-year-old Eddie had better things to do than hang with his old man, Cliff's reasons for offering the tickets were obvious. He was checking up on me, same as I wanted to do for Robin. Cliff knew how hard January sucked for me. Despite my resolution successes, January was filled with soul-sucking loss for me. It was the month I'd lost my dad three years ago. The month I'd landed alone and uncertain at culinary school, missing my old friends from the mortgage industry and not sure why in the hell I'd believed I could turn an unemployment check into a new career.

And last year it was the month I'd lost Manny, my cousin, my best friend, the brother I should have had. Manny had a heart attack the day after Christmas. Died on the operating table on January 7th, thirty-three years old. I'd been at my surgeon's office three days later. First my dad. Then my uncle. Then Manny. I didn't need a crystal ball to tell me the heart disease gene was coming for me next. Letting a surgeon put a band around my stomach was a radical way of dealing with grief, but I'd always been a go-big kind of guy.

I left the bakery without killing Cliff for his meddling and headed out on my delivery route. Two hours later, I arrived at Victory Mission still in my bakery whites. I carried a stack of three large pink bakery boxes and two smaller ones with treats for Robin and Melissa. Melissa was the director of the mission and plenty nice, but honestly, her treat was the decoy. I couldn't waltz in there with a treat just for Robin.

As luck would have it, she and Robin were both in the staff room when I came in. Robin wasn't staff, but he was there so frequently that Melissa often joked about him being employee of the year.

"This is a surprise!" She greeted me with a big gardenia-scented hug. I hugged back gingerly, careful of her pregnant belly. She set the boxes on the metal folding table in the center of the room, lifting the lid off one of the big boxes. "Pastries! And we can sure use these tonight!"

"Here, this one's just for you." I held out one of the smaller boxes.

"Oh, wow!" She opened it to reveal one of our famous oversize cupcakes buried under a ridiculous pile of buttercream icing and topped with one of my sugar flowers. Those were my specialty. I had large ham hands with thick fingers, but give me a piping bag or some spun sugar and I went into a weird zone where everything slowed down and it was just me and the sugar and the quest for perfection.

“The baby’s going to like this.” Melissa patted her round belly. Her smile was worth all the hours I’d put in last night, getting the flowers perfect for the Russo wedding cake and making sure there were extras for the goodies in the display case.

“Brought you something, too.” I held out the other box for Robin. “Stuff can’t last till Friday. Thought you might need a snack. . . .” I was babbling, regretting the gesture even before he opened the box with his elegant, piano-player fingers. I should have just stuffed some cannoli in there.

“Holy crap. This is too pretty to eat.” Robin’s eyes went wide and his smile seemed dipped in glitter dust.

Okay. I lied. Melissa’s appreciation was nothing compared to Robin’s look of awe. His cupcake was a bit of whimsy I’d been experimenting with. Instead of flowers, I’d shaped spun sugar into butterflies, wings airbrushed and gilded with little flecks of blue and gold.

“Better not let it go to waste.” My voice was a bit too gruff, but he was damn well going to eat the chocolate devil’s food cupcake with ganache filling that lay under the butterfly.

“Okay, boss.” He grinned at me, all teeth and sass. “You able to stay for dinner?”

“Sure I can.” I rolled up my sleeves and followed them out to the kitchen. The building had been a factory in its previous life, which meant big spaces but only the bare minimum amenities. Four commercial ranges, each from a different decade, held giant vats of spaghetti.

After we helped the other volunteers get the warming pans filled, Melissa assigned me to the dining room. Food was served cafeteria style, but volunteers staffed the tables, trying to give a more “family” dining experience. Other volunteers circulated among the tables, offering bread baskets and pamphlets about the mission’s services. Most people took the rolls and declined the chitchat, but every now and then I’d get a talky table. Sometimes they’d just want to listen to some little story of mine, like a ruined cake or a memory of my dad’s burned coffee. I wasn’t anywhere near the storyteller Dad had been, but I tried to make things funny and light for my table. Getting people fed, making them laugh—for me it was better than a plate of warm pasta.

Two hours later, the crowd thinned out and I went in search of Robin. I found him sitting on a wooden bench in the entryway with an obviously tweaking teen: disheveled clothing, shaking hands, rambling speech. I

listened as he declined Robin's offers of a meal or a bed upstairs for the night.

"Okay, okay. I'll cut you a deal. How about twenty? I'd blow you for twenty." The kid yanked at his dirty blond hair.

"Zach, you know we can't have you soliciting here." Robin spoke softly. "What you need is some help. How about we get you a plate of food, have one of the staff come talk to you—"

"It's the noodles. They keep crawling."

Robin nodded like Zach was making perfect sense, keeping his voice calm and level as he again offered help. This went on for a few more minutes, until Zach lurched away through the double doors and into the thirty-degree night in only his ratty T-shirt.

I was about to go to Robin when his shoulders slumped, his head coming forward to rest on his hands. His slim shoulders shook.

Oh hell. My throat tightened. My feet refused to cross the chipped concrete floor. Last thing I wanted was to embarrass Robin. I backtracked into the dining room, chased down a glass of tea and a plate of food. When I made it back out, Robin had collected himself. His face was still all blotchy, but he was taking deep breaths and studying the flyers on the cement-block walls.

"Hey, haven't seen you eat yet. Brought you some before it's gone," I said, awkwardly holding out the plate, not wanting to reveal I'd witnessed his breakdown but knowing the truth was all over my face.

"Thanks." His grateful smile made my insides all warm and squishy. I liked watching him eat. Liked knowing it was our rolls that made him smile in pleasure as he took a big bite. He tucked into the food like he was one of the guests—like he hadn't eaten anything else all day.

Me, I couldn't eat most of the stuff anyway. Didn't really bother me if they kept me too busy to join the guests for dinner; if I manned a table, I was stuck picking at lettuce or soggy vegetables most of the time. But Robin was so long and lean; he didn't need to be missing meals. He wasn't much shorter than my six foot two, but where he was a sports car—streamlined muscles, exotic brown eyes, sleek stomach, and a trim, tight ass—I was built more like a Volvo bus. Despite losing the weight, I still had linebacker shoulders and a barrel chest. Sitting next to Robin, I felt old and clunky.

“Sorry about earlier,” Robin said around a mouthful of spaghetti. “Not usually a basket case.” His shrewd eyes didn’t let me pretend ignorance.

“Sounded like you had reason.” I studied the posters on the walls for the various services the center offered: NA and AA meetings, clothing cupboard, referrals to medical care, and support groups. And none of it worth the shiny paper—or the hard-won grants and donations—if the client wouldn’t accept help.

“Zach’s been in before. Never eats. Never stays ... he’s a disaster.”

“And you want to help. I get it.” I patted his slim shoulder. The mission was the sort of place that inspired frequent hugs among volunteers. I’d grown up in a big Italian family of huggers and touching people in sympathy was as natural to me as eating cannoli. But this felt different, a charge zinging down my arm. He didn’t pull away, so I left my hand there, acutely aware of his heat and knotted muscles. Wanted to rub all his tension away, but that so wasn’t happening.

“Just been ... a hell of week. Man, I hate holidays.”

“Word. I loved ’em as a kid, but the last few years, man, they cured me fast.” I didn’t unload all my crap on him, but I got the pain in his eyes. He turned toward me, and for a second I could have sworn he felt the heat between us, felt the strange electricity, might even be leaning into my hand. But then he blinked and shrugged it off, and the moment disintegrated, as fragile as the butterfly on his cupcake.

“I’ve always hated them. Shuttling between my folks ... my brother and I were always in the middle. And now . . .” He shook his head, light catching all the different shades of brown in his shaggy hair. “This week just sucks.”

“You need to get out.”

“Vic, I told you—”

“Not like that. I got Blazers tickets for next week. Got them from Cliff, so they’re likely good seats. You should come with me. Get your mind off your sucky week.” I tried to sound a lot more confident than I felt.

But Robin lifted an eyebrow, seeing right through me as usual. “Are you asking me out?”

“Nah.” I waved the idea away. His skeptical look already told me to let that hope go. “Just a couple of guys. Catching the game. Probably do us both some good.”

“You sure?”

“Sure I’m sure. Cliff doesn’t want the tickets wasted.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said softly. “I don’t want ... don’t want to mislead you. I meant what I said yesterday. I’m done dating.”

“Not much for it myself.” I managed to deliver the half-truth with a straight face. The infrequent hookups I’d had certainly didn’t qualify as dating, and telling Robin my stance had recently changed wouldn’t serve any good purpose.

“Okay. I’ll go. But it’s not a date. I’m gonna pay Cliff for the ticket.”

“Fair enough.”

Didn’t matter if it wasn’t a date. I knew I’d be counting down the hours until next Wednesday.

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Chapter 3

Wednesday afternoon I was a basket of nerves. I'd seen Robin a couple of times that week, casual conversation at the shelter that probably meant nothing to him but had me searching for hidden meaning in every word. I pulled on a Blazers tee as I stripped off my bakery uniform, too pressed for time to shower. Whatever. Wasn't like I was getting lucky that night anyway. Before my surgery I'd been vain, making sure I didn't live up to the sloppy fat guy stereotype by always being freshly showered and wearing nicely tailored clothes when I wasn't at the bakery.

But these days I always seemed to be running to or from the gym, and I'd gone through so many sizes that my bank account screamed at me to slow down my shirt purchasing. Besides, I didn't want Robin thinking I was reading too much into the evening.

We'd agreed to meet outside the Moda Center. He stood near the main entrance in a beat-up leather jacket and one of the close-fitting tees he seemed to live in. I was glad I'd gone with casual.

"Hi!" His broad smile resurrected every hope I'd tried to suppress. He looked around, taking in the red-and-black-clad crowd clogging the gates. "This is cool."

"You ever been to a game?" I asked after we were in the stadium, following the sea of humanity through the concourse.

"Lakers game long time ago with my dad." He made a face, like it wasn't exactly a happy memory. "But this is way cooler than I remember."

"You wanna walk a bit? See the stadium before the game starts?"

"Sure. And we should get food. I know it's crazy, but I've been looking forward to stadium food all day."

"I'll show you all the food vendors. They have Killer Burgers and Fire on the Mountain wings now." I tried to match his enthusiasm, but I knew I failed miserably. Time was I could pack away a half-dozen hot dogs and beers, but now navigating the sea of food vendors felt like walking on marbles. I hated eating out. My stomach was so tetchy that I couldn't handle the grease even if I'd wanted to, and despite all the local food favorites, nongreasy was almost impossible to find.

“Oh hell. I didn’t think.” Robin turned toward me as we stood in line for bratwursts. “You probably can’t have anything, right?”

Damn perceptive bastard. Of course, the whole shelter knew about my surgery. I’d had to miss several shifts, and I wasn’t exactly coy about stuff like that.

“There’s a place over there that’s got a salad. I’ll grab one.” I kept from making a face. I was so damn sick of dry lettuce, but I didn’t want to spoil Robin’s fun. He bounced on the balls of his feet like there was nothing better than overpriced pork on generic white buns. I distracted myself by thinking about Robin’s buns and what I’d like to do to them.

I got the blasted twelve-dollar salad—likely a buck a leaf—and met Robin up at the condiment kiosk, where he was loading his brat with pickles and ketchup.

“You know, I haven’t had the chance to tell you how much I admire your changes,” Robin said, looking at me. I mean *looking* at me, like he hadn’t seen me three minutes prior or weekly for the last two years.

A strange chill crept up my spine, and I couldn’t decide if it was a good or bad sensation.

“It’s not all me. Surgery and all, you know?” I always felt weird taking praise for the weight loss. I suppose the gym time was something I could take pride in, but after all these months it still felt like a damn root canal, something I did because the doc told me it would prevent long-term problems.

“Still. You . . . look good, man. Really.”

“Thanks.” I couldn’t help grinning at the compliment. He probably meant it no different than telling Melissa he liked her dress or whatever, but I still felt the praise all the way to my toes.

I’d eat lettuce for a year if it meant someone like Robin thought I looked good. Truth was, I’d had an easier time attracting male attention before. It was just a matter of knowing the sites that catered to dudes like me. I might have been way heavier than I needed to be, but I was a big, beefy Italian guy with a hairy chest and a bigger-than-average dick. There were always a few guys into the supersize bear thing. Now, though, I was just another thirtysomething guy with a receding hairline and decidedly average body that didn’t translate to great selfies—or much interest on the hookup sites.

Not that I really wanted a hookup anymore. What I wanted was that look from Robin, the one he’d had in line, when it felt like he *noticed* me for the

first time. I wanted this not-a-date to be a date. I wanted a gorgeous guy who wasn't ashamed to be seen with me, wanted to be out with someone like Robin, who made jokes about the starting lineup and kept up a steady conversation during the slow parts of the game.

"Sorry," he said as he leaned forward to better see the third-quarter action. Every time he leaned forward our shoulders brushed.

"No problem." I wasn't sorry at all. Just like our easy conversation, touching him felt almost automatic: high fiving for a basket, clapping him on the shoulder. It was all good.

Sometime deep in the quarter, I noticed our legs kept brushing, too. Glanced over at Robin—and oh, hell, he was glancing back.

Swoosh.

There's a certain energy when a shot is about to get nothing but net, a charged stillness to an arena waiting to explode. Looking into Robin's eyes felt like that, like every cell in my body was waiting for the chance to applaud. Did he feel it, too? This amped up energy arcing between us? I searched his eyes—

"Ring it up! Blazer three-pointer!" the announcer crackled, drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

The moment was gone; whatever shot I'd had for a second there with Robin had gone wild, clanking off the backboard. Didn't get it back in the fourth quarter, as both the game and the connection with Robin seemed to slip away.

But then, with four seconds remaining, Portland drained a three-pointer for a one-point, come-from-behind win. All around us people were high-fiving like they'd been out on the court.

Without thinking, I hugged Robin. A bro hug. Nothing special until our chests collided and . . . whoa. All that weird energy from earlier seemed to gather into a vibrating ball of potential right in the center of my chest. Robin pulled back first, shaking his shaggy head. But not in a don't-touch-me way. More in a what-the-hell-just-happened? way. And I was right there with him on that.

We followed the crowd to the exits. I put a hand on his back to steer him so that we didn't get separated in the crush of people. I'd do the same with any newbie to the Moda Center, but Robin was the only one who made my palm itch to roam. Like the hug, the touch felt charged with meaning.

“Robin?” A familiar, cultured voice cut across the din of the crowd. Damn it. Twenty thousand people and of-freaking-course Paul the Jerk had to be one of them. Even better, he had some blond twink in tow.

Robin stepped out of the flow of traffic so that the four of us were near a shuttered Sizzle Pie—and the screaming, flaming pizza logo pretty much summed up what I felt about the situation.

“I didn’t think you liked basketball, babe,” Paul said to Robin, his tone way more *boyfriend* than *ex*. The twink was draped over Paul’s back in a pose suited for clubbing. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, Vic brought me.” Robin stepped closer to me. “You remember Vic from the mission, right?”

“Oh, yeah. You’re the bread guy.” Paul gave me a dismissive wave of his hand. “Been meaning to call you.” He fixed his gaze on Robin again. “I need to pick up a few things from your place. Left my good cashmere there.”

“Not tonight,” Robin said, all airy. He leaned into me a little. “Doubt I’ll be home.”

Oh, so this is how he wants to play it. I was game. I put a hand on his waist. “How about Robin packs you a box?”

“Whatever. Chad and I have plans for the weekend. I’ll give you a ring.”

Nasty little man. He strode away on a cloud of aftershave and bad vibes.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to put you in the middle of that,” Robin said as soon as they were gone. He didn’t step away from my touch and I kept my hand on his waist, more of that weird potential vibrating between us. People streamed toward the exits, jostling each other, whistling and whooping their way down the long concourse. But standing next to Robin, I felt like we were the only ones in the stadium.

“I don’t mind.” *I really don’t*, I tried to tell him with my eyes. *Use me however you want.*

“You’re too nice.”

I couldn’t tell whether he meant the playing along or my unspoken invitation. “Nah. You don’t know me very well. I’m not that nice a guy. A nice guy wouldn’t be thinking how good Paul would look missing a few teeth.”

Robin laughed. “I’m picturing him with that stupid sweater of his for a leash.”

“Or a noose.”

“You’re stone cold, Vic. Stone cold.”

“Us Degrassis are a bloodthirsty lot.”

He laughed again, but it quickly turned bitter. “God, I hate him. Hate this.” He flopped onto a nearby bench. “I’m sorry—”

“Quit saying sorry for that dick.” I settled myself next to him. A quartet of young guys in Blazers jerseys gave us a disapproving glare. I glared right back with a heavy hint of *I can bench press two of you*, sending them scurrying faster down the corridor.

“I meant sorry for you having to deal with it,” Robin said.

“Hey, I’m just glad you didn’t run into him and his trick by yourself. Want me to come over when he comes to get his crap?”

“What, and glower and look all menacing? Tempting.” His laugh this time was full and hearty.

“I do glower well.” I knocked ankles with him, trying to earn another of those laughs. Hearing him loosen up made my chest expand. I really did do menacing well; adding muscle the last few months and shaving my head only increased my thug look. Pretty boy I wasn’t.

“You’d do that for me? Play the heavy with Paul?”

“Heavy. Bouncer. Jealous pretend boyfriend. Your pick.”

“I’ll think about it. I wish things hadn’t ended so damn ugly. We started so good. He came with me to volunteer. We hung out constantly. And then . . .” He put his hands on his knees as he surveyed the trash-strewn floor. “Things went south and I should have gotten out weeks earlier, but I really wanted to believe, you know?”

“Yeah.” My stomach gave an uncomfortable wobble. I studied the pizza place menu to avoid meeting Robin’s eyes. Really, I didn’t know. If I did ever get a boyfriend, I couldn’t imagine thinking Paul the Jerk was true-freaking-love. But Robin looked so lost and sad, I wanted to offer ... something.

“Wish I could stop replaying the fight in my head.” Robin chewed on his lower lip, distracting me from his sad tone.

“Regrets will eat you alive if you let them. You gotta outrun them. Find something in the now.”

“That’s awfully profound for you, Vic.” Bumping my shoulder, he said it lightly, almost like a compliment. We were sitting closer together now, hips and thighs touching.

“Not the same thing, but when my dad passed, all I could think for weeks was how we argued about midnight mass right before. Probably wasn’t the healthiest, but I took on every special order Cliff threw my way. I worked until I was too tired to hear the fight in my head.”

I’d also buried my grief under a mountain of cheese and pepperoni and polished off more than my share of six-packs in the months after my dad died. But it wouldn’t help Robin to hear how I’d used food and drink as a crutch to make it through.

“Sorry about your dad.” He touched my arm, a low sizzle that went straight to my groin. “Work’s been slow lately with the holidays, but I should work up a new flyer for the mission. Maybe that would work.”

“Sure it would. Hey, you work out?”

“Nah. Play handball with my dad every once in a blue moon, but gyms aren’t my scene.”

Damn. I’d been thinking of offering him a guest pass at my gym. Another chance to see him. But for all I could put in my time on the rower and clang my way through the weight room, no way was I volunteering to get hit in the face with a ball and look like an idiot. Only balls I wanted in my face were the fun kind.

“Still. Just keep looking for distraction.” My whole last year had been about the power of distraction. Work. Gym. Getting out with Cliff and James. Anything to keep places like Sizzle Pie off my speed dial. Anything to keep from the long hours alone in my place.

“Damn. I wish . . .” He trailed off.

“What?” The lost-puppy look was back on his face. I wanted to put my arm around him, and I got the feeling he wouldn’t shove it away. However, the steady stream of drunken Blazers fans hadn’t let up yet, and I didn’t need more looks from little punks. So I settled for patting his knee.

“Wish I hadn’t been lying to Paul. Wish I didn’t have to head home and see him in every freaking room.”

“So don’t.” I glanced at him, trying to figure out what he needed, what I could offer. Something new crackled between our eyes, the potential of earlier giving way to full-on heat zinging along all the spots our bodies touched. “We could get a dr—coffee.”

“Not really in the mood for coffee.” Robin met my eyes, searching. I hoped to hell he saw what he was looking for.

“You wanna come back to my place? Watch a movie?” *Fuck like bunnies?* That I didn’t offer, but I sure as hell thought it. Thought the hell out of what it would be like. All evening it’d felt like we were dancing toward something, like this new ... awareness between us was a half-court shot, hanging in the air, both of us waiting to see if it would sail through the net.

“I don’t date.” That sure as hell wasn’t a no.

A grin busted out on my face. We were surrounded by cement-block walls, but all I could see was the possibility of a yes.

“I heard you. But you need a distraction, yeah? Need to get that bastard out of your head. Why let him have all the fun?”

“Don’t want to use you.”

“Baby, I am all over the idea of you using me to put that cocky bastard from your brain.” I slid closer. What the hell. I put my arm around him. Let the drunken idiots gawk. The area smelled like stale beer and old pizza, but Robin smelled sweet, like cinnamon rolls. “Just come. Watch a movie. You can see about ... other distractions.”

I wasn’t very good at in-person sweet-talking. Wasn’t sure if I was pushing too far into glower and command. Online, I was good at closing the deal, getting someone to come over. But I’d never wanted a yes as much as I wanted Robin’s.

“You’re way too nice, Vic.” Robin shook his head, even as he leaned into my arm.

“I’m really not.” I squeezed his shoulder. If he wasn’t going to pull away, I was going to enjoy this moment, however short it was. Maybe there would be another—

“You live far from here?”

Chapter 4

I lived in South Portland, not far from the bakery, in the neighborhood I grew up in. I liked being able to check on my ma a couple of times a week. We took my car because Robin had taken the MAX to avoid the parking headache of downtown on game night. I tried not to see my old car through his eyes. Admittedly, it was better than it once was—no fast-food wrappers or grease stench, but there was no disguising its last good decade was in the previous century. I'd sold my Explorer and my condo when I went back to culinary school. Now I was back in a more affordable neighborhood.

Like my car, the house's better days were firmly behind it. Luckily, it was dark, so Robin couldn't see the yard that was more weeds and moss than grass. But he couldn't miss the stack of paint cans on the porch or the way the door whined when I opened it. I winced at the noise.

"Sorry. It's kind of a mess."

"It's fine. This all yours?"

"My aunt's. Cousin Manny and I were trying to fix it up to get it on the market before he passed." My neck tightened. Still couldn't explain the arrangement without my gut going all wobbly. Manny had been so gung ho with ideas and plans for the place. Him not being here to help me finish was like a raw scrape I felt every time I picked up a hammer.

"It's nice. They'd be proud."

"Eh." I shrugged off the compliment as I hung up our coats. He was being way too kind. Wasn't much "nice" about an entryway with wallpaper on one side and two different paint colors on the other. But then, Robin knew about Manny. Manny had come with me a time or two to the mission. When he passed, I'd missed volunteering for two weeks. Robin had been the only one not to bug me, asking how I was *feeling*.

I fumbled for the living room light switch, not entirely sure how to play this. With other dudes, they came over and we headed straight for the bedroom, but that wasn't happening with Robin looking around like he was doing a housing inspection.

"This molding original?" he asked, running a hand along the chair rail wainscoting.

“Think so.”

“It would look nice in an aqua color.”

“Think I’ll just stick with white.” And shoot me now if we were gonna stand around playing HGTV. I gestured toward the flat screen over the fireplace. “What kind of movie you feel like? I can stream whatever.”

“Something funny.” He gave me a strange look as he passed me to go sit on the big sectional in the center of the room, like I’d missed a signal.

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I tried to calm the horde of elephants dancing on my chest. *Damn*. What I wouldn’t give for a chat window and a set of emoticons to figure out what the hell Robin wanted. I queued up a list of comedies.

“That one,” we said at the same time as the preview screen showed a Seth Rogen movie about a dude and his impossible mother.

About ten minutes into the movie, Robin scooted closer to me. “So you really meant *movie* when you suggested it, huh?”

My nerve endings hummed, intensely aware of his nearness, of the brush of his hand on my arm, his scent. I couldn’t resist pulling him closer, wrapping my arm around him. “Meant whatever you want.”

“Mmm. You’re cuddly.” He settled in against me with a sigh, stretching his feet out on the sofa. Wasn’t the first time I’d been called cuddly. Usually it felt like a poke in all my soft and doughy parts, a reminder that I wasn’t anyone’s definition of hot. However, I didn’t mind it coming from Robin. Hell, I’d be his pillow for the next month if it meant I got him here like this, head on my shoulder, hand idly stroking my thigh. Felt *right* sitting here like this, like we’d done it a thousand times before, crappy comedy on the screen, him curled up against me.

As the movie got more predictable, I let my hand wander down his arm. For all he said he didn’t work out, he had nice biceps and my favorite kind of forearms—ropy and lean, with broad hands and long fingers.

“And if I want this?” He ran a finger down my chest, making goose bumps break out down my back. He leaned in, licked his lips and ... waited.

Damn. He had the sort of game I loved. He clearly wanted me to make the move, but he wasn’t at all shy about making it known what he wanted. I didn’t play it coy or make him wait. I cupped his face in my hands and closed the distance between us, capturing his lips. Meeting me eagerly, his lips parted and I sank into the kiss. Sank into him. He tasted sweet, like soda and everything else I wasn’t supposed to have—including him. The

subtle heat that had been stoking between us all evening erupted like Cascades wildfires. Our motions quickly turned hungry and needy and nothing like the slow first kiss I'd been plotting. No, this went straight to need-you-or-gonna-die.

Before I knew it, he was straddling me on the couch, our mouths still fused. Kissing him made my pulse speed up even as my muscles turned to buttercream. Too many guys I'd been with had a no-kissing rule. But with Robin, making out felt like a marquee event. And even more than the soft feel of his lips and the rasp of stubble under my palms, I loved the weight of him on my lap. My dick strained at my zipper, all available blood and brain cells pooling where our bodies connected. His dick prodded my stomach, and I pushed up against him.

In response, he turned almost frantic, all lips and teeth. When I sucked on his tongue, he moaned, long and low. For a second I thought he might be about to come like this, but then he took a shuddery breath.

"What . . . what do you like?" he whispered against my jaw.

"Anything," I said and meant it. I nipped at his ear.

"Anything? You . . . uh, bottom?"

That was unexpected, and my stomach flipped like a drunken gymnast. Truth was, most of the time guys and I had already played out a scene or three in chat, and it was understood that I liked topping. Big strapping dude like me—few guys even asked me to bottom, and the ones who did usually had some agenda to make me feel like crap so I'd largely avoided it. I doubted Robin had humiliation in mind.

"Sure, if that's what you want. But it's been a while so . . . slow, you know?" More like five or six years, but whether he had something to prove or I'd misread his preferences, I was game.

"Yeah." His eyes widened, like he hadn't expected me to agree.

Reaching up, I kissed him again, trying to shut down whatever voices he had going on in his head. I tried to tell him with my kiss that I'd take care of him, get him what he needed.

"Bedroom okay?"

"Yeah." He followed me almost shyly down the hall, footsteps so hesitant I thought he might be about to change his mind. I distracted him with more kisses and by tugging his T-shirt over his head. My bedroom was one of the nicest rooms in the house: big king-size bed and silver-painted walls with bedding my mom helped me pick out. But I didn't flip on the light to show

the space off. Much as I wanted to see his golden skin and perfect body, I was content to let the filtered light from the hall hide mine.

Heck, I didn't even like catching sight of my new body in the mirror. It wasn't anything like those magazine before-and-after photo shoots, where the guy looks all tanned and ripped. Sure, I was way more muscular now, but the reality was also a nasty scar from the surgery and the stretch marks and loose skin no one had warned me about.

We shed our clothes between kisses. I kept watching for a flinch or other reaction from Robin, but he seemed wrapped up in the kisses, giving little sighs as each article of clothing hit the rug. I got a little giddy at the familiarity and closeness between us. *So this is what it's like to do it with a friend.* My heart gave a happy thrum. Somehow we landed on the bed, me on top, his erection poking me in the belly. I didn't care who was topping, but I was going to die if I didn't get his dick in my mouth. Sliding down his body, I landed on my knees on the floor, tugging him to the edge of the bed.

His dick was just like the rest of him, long and elegant. I fucking love sucking cock and moaned around his shaft. Fingers petting my scalp, he urged me deeper, and I obliged, milking his cockhead with the back of my throat. He tasted musky and male, with a hint of the sweetness that seemed to cling to his lips and skin. I gobbled him down.

"More," he gasped. His head thrashed against the mattress, fingers clutching the comforter.

My dick throbbed, loving every damn thing about how responsive he was.

Instinctively, I rolled his balls in my palm as I sucked him harder. His harsh moan was more of a bark. Letting my fingers wander back, I rubbed along the tight, smooth skin until I found his hole. Rubbing all around it, I teased more moans out of him, each gasp going straight to my own dick.

"Oh, fuck. Yes." His hips bucked up. I pulled away long enough to fumble in my nightstand for lube, but as soon as I popped it open, he raised up on his elbows.

"Wait." His face twisted, mouth uncertain and eyes cloudy.

"Sorry." My skin heated. I'd fallen into old habits and forgotten how he wanted things to go. I stretched out next to him, running a hand down his tense chest muscles. His heart hammered against his sternum.

"Didn't mean to spook you. Tell me what you need." I lowered my voice, trying for calming.

“Oh, God, I don’t know.” He pulled at his hair. “What I *want* is for you to fuck me.”

“I’d love to.” Kissing his neck, I brushed his hair out of the way.

“But I can’t. I just ... can’t.”

“Okay.” I tried to keep up with the flip-flopping. “You positive?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Cold sweat ran down my neck. I took a deep, steadying breath. That had come up before online, and I’d always run like I was being chased by a rabid dog, but I wasn’t going to run from Robin. Wasn’t going to be stupid either. “We’ll be safe.”

“Wait. That’s not what I meant. I’m positive fucking won’t work. Not HIV positive . . . Oh, God, I am such a mess.” He sat all the way up, hunching forward.

I rubbed a hand down his back. His skin felt cool and the air in the room seemed to bring all the chill of January with it. “Hey, it’s okay.”

“I should be. That’s the thing. I did some really stupid shit when I was high. And the rehab my parents sent me to, they kept telling me over and over how lucky I was I hadn’t caught something. And now I get all paranoid and twisted around.”

I made a soothing noise and kept stroking him. “And now you like to top instead of bottom? That’s cool. Told you, I’m a flexible guy.”

“No. I don’t *prefer* topping. But I’d always been high for fucking before. Always. People kept saying how much better sober sex would be, but either they lied or my body hates fucking sober, and getting fucked has yet to work and it always ends poorly.”

“That why you and Paul ended?”

“Yeah.” He put his head in his hands. “I kept thinking things would get better, that I’d get out of my head enough to enjoy it. But it never happened and he got fed up with lousy sex. Earlier tonight, I’d had the thought things might be different—”

“They can be. He was a bastard.”

“I should probably just go.”

“No.” I kissed all the way down his spine. “I just want to make you feel good. Fucking isn’t on the table, okay? But let me make you feel good.”

“Don’t want to frustrate you. I can ... be persnickety. Take too long.”

“I’m not in any rush.” Seeing him like this, vulnerable and human, made him even more attractive to me. He wasn’t the perfect guy I’d spent two

years building up in my head; he was maybe just as fucked up as me. I stopped worrying so much about what he was thinking of me and started worrying more about how I could make this good for him. Prove him wrong.

“You’re too nice.” His muffled voice was almost mournful. The sound went straight to my chest, lodging behind my breastbone. Feeling protective, I pulled him into my arms.

“You think I’m not getting anything out of this? I’ve got a gorgeous guy naked in my bed and he says it might last all night. That sounds pretty darn amazing. Especially after ... never mind.”

“What?” He raised his head, his face eager, like me having issues would be the best thing in the world.

“You said how you hadn’t done it sober. Well, it’s not the same thing, but my first time postsurgery was a complete bust. Guy left. Said I didn’t look like my pictures. Freaked at the scar. I haven’t tried again since.” I kept my voice light, but it was an effort. Being here naked with Robin was nothing like that first time. After the dude’s wide eyes and abrupt departure, I’d had dreams of being naked in Pioneer Square; felt like everyone could see the scar, like it was a glowing red beacon instead of an angry, pink index-finger-size mark.

“That sucks.” He sounded almost happy. I guessed he was feeling some of what I was, like he didn’t have to be fucked up alone, like he could give me something instead of just taking.

“Yeah. It does.” Taking advantage of his change in mood, I kissed him again. He met me eagerly, licking his way into my mouth. He gave a happy sigh as I stroked his back.

My muscles unwound, my heart beating out a carefree rhythm. Yeah, going slow with him was no hardship at all. Time spun out like a fractal screensaver, kisses seeming endless. I’d be okay if this was all we did. My balls protested the thought, but my soul felt happier than it had been in years, like I’d been an empty cake, waiting for the perfect filling, waiting for my layers to have purpose. Kissing Robin did that—made me feel sure and strong.

Eventually we tumbled back onto the mattress, him on top slowly rocking against me. Even though my body screamed at me to grab his hips, get a hard-and-fast rhythm, and get more of the delicious sensation of our cocks dragging together, I forced myself to match his pace.

“This is so good,” he whispered.

“Yeah, it is. Feels so good.” His warm body blanketed me, smothered my stupid anxieties over my scar and my skin. All that mattered was lighting Robin up, making him feel as terrific as I did.

“You can come. You don’t have to wait.” Voice uncertain, he started to tense up.

“I’m not going anywhere.” I pulled him harder against me, rewarded by a full-body shudder from him. His cock slid next to mine, tip damp and shaft as rock hard as mine. He bucked harder into my body.

“That’s it. You just take what you need.” Wasn’t usually much for dirty talk, but his little gasps and thrusts made me bolder. “Love how your cock feels. Loved it in my mouth, too.”

“Oooh.” He made a strangled sound, thrusts getting more intense.

The room felt as warm as our bodies now, sweat gathering between us. I inhaled the scent of sex and men, and that made my dick pulse. My hands cupped his ass, squeezing and pulling, figuring out what he liked, what made his movements more erratic and his moans louder. Tracing his crack, I hesitated, waiting for him to protest, but he arched up into my touch.

“Yes. That.”

My fingers burrowed into the warm space, rubbing all around his hole. “You want more?”

“Please.” He arched up again. “Finger me. Need it.”

“Can I get them wet?” I used my free hand to reach for the lube.

He hesitated, his movements slowing, then nodded. “Just one, okay?”

“Yeah. You let me know if it’s too much.”

Kissing him, I waited for him to get into it again, rocking us together until I was reduced to counting by threes in my head to keep from coming first. Slowly, I penetrated him, just the tip of my index finger, letting his moans guide me.

“Oh. Oh, man. *Fuck.*” Robin’s eyes were squished shut, his mouth quivering.

My head felt fuzzy and light. It meant something—him letting me in, him trusting me enough to do this. Wiggling deeper, I kissed his neck, licking the straining tendons.

“That’s it, baby. Fuck yourself on my finger. So tight. So good.”

“Yeah.” He arched up into my touch far enough that our cocks lost contact.

Pushing deeper, I thrust up against him. Now this was fucking. For all I'd said fucking wasn't on the table, we were doing a pretty damn good imitation of it, thrusts hard enough I knew my bones would be feeling it tomorrow. The suede of the comforter abraded my calves, but I kept the motion going. Anything to get him closer to the edge.

"More."

Hooking my finger, I rubbed his gland.

"Oh, fuck. I think I'm gonna come." His voice broke.

"Do it." I made encouraging noises. Nonsense words.

Then he was coming, shouting and straining against me. Soon as his slick heat hit my belly, I was a goner, my moans mingling with his.

"Jesus. Fucking. Christ." He pulled away from my finger and rolled off me. "That was—"

"Spectacular," I said happily.

"I was gonna go with fast, but spectacular works, too. Thank you. I didn't think . . ."

"I'm glad."

"God, I feel like rubber." His head dropped to my shoulder. "Okay if I crash here?"

"Of course." I grabbed my T-shirt, mopping up as best I could. He was asleep before I even finished tending to him.

Pride and something else, something much more tender, blossomed in my chest, stretching out like fondant, falling over me. I grinned up at the ceiling. He was the first guy who'd ever asked to stay over. Didn't matter if this was a onetime thing for him, it had meant something for me. Holding him as we both drifted toward sleep made my whole body relax, made my mind wander, made my dreams full of impossible wants.

Chapter 5

Robin was gone when I woke up. Not a surprise and probably just as well. The only breakfast food I had was Kashi and Egg Beaters—stuff that didn't qualify as romantic breakfast fare. Making great use of my expensive culinary education, I microwaved myself some eggs and spinach. As I did my usual five miles at the gym, I told myself not to expect Robin to become a regular thing. I was the rebound guy, not the forever one. But if last night had shown me anything, it was that I was done with sex with strangers. I was done with guys who made me feel terrible after. I wanted sex with friends. Boyfriend sex. Couple sex. I wanted the connection I'd felt looking at Robin, that moment when our breathing had synched, hearts hammering against each other, bodies striving toward the same perfect release.

Even with the disappearing act, Robin had made me feel ... important. Like he needed *me* and not just my dick.

Saturday was blessedly sunny, the rare January day that inspired long walks and sweaters in lieu of coats, the sort of day that tricked Oregonians into thinking spring was around the corner even though weeks of more rain were sure to follow.

I surveyed the Lambert wedding cake. A massive, six-tier affair, it had taken the whole crew to perfect, but the final touches were all me. Forget the weather; today was simply a scramble to keep up.

"You gonna manage the shelter run?" Cliff asked, taking off his apron. I knew he was probably eager to get out, go toss a ball around with Eddie.

"No problem. I can squeeze it in."

Saturday was the day we usually brought day-old baked goods, along with some fresh rolls, to the shelter. Over the last few months, I'd fallen into a routine of going in the middle of the week; funny how the more weight I lost, the more important the shelter became to me. But this week, I'd resisted the urge to put in extra time. I knew I'd really be going to check up on Robin, and being the needy one wasn't going to endear me to him. Better to wait for my usual day. Let Robin decide how he wanted to play things.

When I got to the shelter, Robin wasn't the one working the loading bay. Nice as the volunteer was, my feet itched to go find him. Soon as I was in the building, though, Melissa greeted me with a hug. She happily accepted the cookie I'd put in just for her.

"How much longer you have?" I asked, gesturing at her bump. Three sisters and I still hadn't mastered how to talk to a pregnant lady.

"Two months." She gave me a tight smile. "Still don't know what I'm going to do when the baby comes."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't have anyone lined up to be acting director when I go out on maternity leave." Unlike some of the larger shelters, Victory Mission only had a couple of paid employees. Melissa was director, but most of the daily details were handled by volunteers. "I want Robin to take it, but he keeps saying he'll think about it."

"He'd be a good fit."

"Hey, while you're here, could you talk to him?"

"About that?" My mouth twisted. No way was Robin taking advice from me.

"No. Something else." She glanced around the deserted hallway. In the distance, pots clanged as the Saturday crew got started on the meal.

"What?" Bile rose in my throat. Unable to meet her eyes, I studied a poster advertising a free clinic—cheerful thing, undoubtedly Robin's handiwork. Had she found out about Tuesday? Had Robin been talking about it? Maybe I'd played it wrong staying away.

"That kid he keeps working on—Zach—he OD'd today."

The sour feeling in my stomach intensified and my hands clenched. *Fucking January.*

"Shit. Is he dead?"

"No. But he's in a coma, and Robin's walking around like a zombie. I'm worried he's taking it way too personally. He and you have always talked, so I thought . . ."

"Sure. I'll go find him."

He wasn't in either the dining room or the kitchen. I found him in the storeroom, shelving bags of instant potatoes. Alone. I should have guessed. Robin didn't like to be around people when he was in a mood.

"Hey?"

He didn't look up at my greeting, but the jerk of his head said he'd heard me. "Hey."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry for not calling." Still looking down, his gaze shifted about. He was bluffing, trying to make this about us because somehow that must be easier for him than talking about Zach. His red eyes and shaking hands revealed his true mental state.

"Don't worry about it. It was real fun. But Melissa told me about Zach. What happened is terrible, but it's not your fault—you know that, right?"

"He came in at lunch yesterday looking for me, but I wasn't here. I had a client deadline." Swallowing hard, Robin looked like he might cry any second.

My shoulders tightened, muscles burning with empathy. Seeing him all torn up, ripped up something in me, too. After glancing back at the open door, I took him into my arms. I couldn't *not* hold him.

"Hey, now. You can't go beating yourself up over his bad choices."

"I know that. But . . ." He trailed off, his eyes wide and helpless. I stroked his hair and made what I hoped were soothing noises.

"It's hard. I get it."

"To top it off, Paul came by today. He didn't care about the Zach news."

"Asshole."

"Yeah, well, he wanted to get his things but stopped by here because he says he lost his key."

"Bastard. Change the locks." The hair on the back of my neck went all porcupine. My arms tightened around Robin. I didn't trust Paul. It would be just like him to turn up when Robin least expected it.

"I have to make a request of the super to do that. It makes me all antsy, though, knowing he's hanging around. God, I *hate* this week."

"Sorry." Releasing him, I backed away.

"Wait, Vic. I didn't mean ... Tuesday was the high point." He grinned sheepishly.

"Yeah?" The chattering voices filtering in from the kitchen kept me from kissing him like I wanted.

"Hey, maybe I should take a page from your book. Stop stewing over Paul and Zach. You free tonight?"

"Not until late." I groaned. *Shitty, shitty timing.* "I have to deliver a wedding cake to Lake Oswego as soon as I'm done here."

“Oh. Never mind.” He looked away before I could see whether there was regret in his eyes.

My hands flopped to my sides like limp pasta. My chance with Robin seemed as burned as the smell of that night’s tomato sauce. Didn’t want him finding distraction elsewhere.

“Wait. You wanna come along? It’s at The Foundry. Gorgeous place, but a bit of a drive. I wouldn’t mind company.”

“You need help carrying stuff?”

“Sure. I could use an extra hand.” I didn’t really, but I knew how much Robin liked to be needed. And the company *would* be nice.

“All right. Let me finish up here.”

Twenty minutes later and we were on I-5 headed to Lake Oswego, an upscale suburb full of Whole Foods and Crate & Barrel shoppers and the sort of money that could finance a January wedding for two hundred at one of the area’s more exclusive venues.

“Who the heck gets married in January?” Robin asked as I navigated through the Terwilliger curves to get outside of Portland proper. Saturday traffic was thick, everyone taking advantage of the clear skies.

“Wealthy daughters who want a long honeymoon in Hawaii.” I laughed. “There’s always some reason to get hitched; we keep busy pretty steady until May, when the orders really pile up. I like this season, though, ’cause I’ve got time to make each cake extra special.” I could feel myself turning red. I hadn’t meant to say all that. I surveyed the Airstream trailer in front of us, wishing I could escape my own babble.

“I love that you like what you do.” Robin grinned. “All those flowers would drive me crazy. But taking pictures of them? That I can do. Speaking of, you should tell Cliff to let me do a new logo for you guys. The red and white is kind of . . .”

“Classic. Cliffie’s dad had that logo first. Good luck getting him to change.”

“You ever think about getting your own place? Doing just cakes, maybe? You’re too talented to stay an assistant.”

“What? And give up bread and cookies? No way.” I laughed, liking the chance to talk shop. Robin wasn’t asking nosylike, more curious, and that made my chest feel loose and warm. “No, see, Cliff’s got two kids, and

neither of them wants a thing to do with the bakery. Another year or so and I'll buy into the bakery, then when Cliffie's ready to retire, I'll buy him out."

"Wow. Big plans."

"Yeah, well, not many people know of them. Keep it quiet." Don't know why I shared with Robin. But his compliment made me feel taller, proud of what we were doing at the shop.

"Well, when you become the boss man, you let me do up some nicer materials for you. I could do some real nice wedding brochures and such. And a better logo."

"Will do." My chest and shoulders rose up. I liked the thought of still being friends with him in a few years too much to tell him that I had no plans to change the red and white line drawing logo of a baker holding out a one-tier cake. However, Robin did do pretty work—the midyear appeals letter and brochure he'd designed for the mission were eye-catching and stylish without being pretentious. I'd heard from Melissa that donations had almost doubled. She was right; he would be great at keeping things afloat while she was out.

"How 'bout you? You gonna stay freelance?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. My folks would love to see me take an in-house graphic arts position, but being my own boss is worth it. You'll see." He nodded, like we were some kind of equals. On the same path.

Warm as that thought made me, we weren't the same. Robin was a trust fund baby of some kind; he'd mentioned private school and college before, and no way could he afford to live in the Pearl on a freelancer's sporadic salary if he wasn't getting some kind of help. My dad had worked construction up until he died and wouldn't have known what to do with a 401(k) or mutual fund.

"Melissa says she wants you to think about doing more with the shelter—take over when her baby comes."

"I'll help out whoever she puts in charge, but I'm not a leader." Robin looked out the window. "Tell me more about your house. You really going to sell it?"

Whoa. Quick topic change much? But everything else between us was so easy, I didn't want to ruin it by calling him on not wanting to talk about the shelter. After all, the Zach thing had to be weighing heavily on him.

“My Aunt Mary and Uncle Mauro owned it, but Aunt Mary went to live with my mom after Mauro went. She was battling cancer and the house was too much for her. Now the two of them are happy as clams in Mom’s fifty-five-and-up complex.”

“That’s nice they have each other.”

“Yeah. Manny and I were fixing the house up to put on the market for her. Didn’t want to put it up as is; her and Mauro had remortgaged it enough that we wanted to make sure she got something back.”

“Nice of you guys.”

“Hell of a lot of work, you mean. It’s just what family does.” Family held on to the memories of our childhood, bounding in and out of Mauro and Mary’s front room. Family held on to Manny’s plans. Family held on even as everyone else moved on to lower-maintenance digs. Family held on even when their skill set wasn’t exactly up to the task at hand.

A lump the size of Forest Park grew in my throat, but the more Robin acted like my plans for the house were doable, the more my muscles eased. We talked the rest of the way to The Foundry, Robin wanting to play what if and all full of ideas for the house and bakery. Suggestions came as natural to Robin as breathing did to the rest of us.

“See, now this cake should be in a magazine. Get the bakery into *Portland Monthly* magazine or maybe something more national. . . .” Robin climbed up after me into the back of the truck, inspecting the cake like he was the one who’d ordered it. “I love the lime and silver theme. And look at all that drop-line work. Did you freehand all that yourself?”

“Yep.” I’ll admit it: I puffed up like a proud cat that Robin knew what the fancy icing lines were called and that he appreciated my handiwork. The three-tier cake had white fondant topped with silver drop lines, delicate lime-green flower buds, and silvery green leaves. Our prep guy had filled the layers with lime curd and buttercream.

“Man. Lines like that would make a wicked cool tattoo sleeve.” Robin rolled up his T-shirt sleeve, inspecting his bare biceps. “What do you think?”

“I think any ink on you would be . . . nice.” Damn it. I could feel my ears and cheeks heating again.

“Nice, huh?” Robin winked at me. Heat arced between us, and I hoped like hell he was still thinking of coming back home with me later.

“So you really need help with carrying?” He raised an eyebrow, tilting his head toward the cart I had ready for the cake.

“You can push.”

“I’m flattered, Vic. Really.” He laughed, free and easy and no trace of the stress and worry that had marked his face back at the mission. Didn’t matter that he could see through me. I’d play the fool any day to earn that laugh.

“Wait. I’m not exactly dressed for this.” He looked down at his brown T-shirt.

“Here.” I grabbed Cliff’s spare jacket from the cab. “This’ll be a bit big, but it’ll do.”

“Look at me, all official.” He pulled it on. “Lead the way.”

We wove our way through the great hall, past the reception tables and the linen-and-crystal-set dinner tables. Staff scurried around, taking care of the finishing touches for the candlelight reception. The actual bridal party would be back in the elaborate suites off the great hall.

“*Finally*. We’ve been waiting *hours*. Literally on pins and *needles*.” The wedding planner, a flouncy middle-aged woman named Barbara who spoke entirely in italics, greeted us.

“Sorry.” I tried to look contrite; I know where the butter for my bread comes from, and wedding planners can make or break whether a bride chooses us.

“And who are you?” She turned an appraising eye on Robin, her gaze as sharp as the steak knives at each setting. “New?”

“Very.” He gave her a charming smile, one that seemed to dial back her pissy level a few notches. “Maybe you can give me pointers.”

“I *can*. Let me show you where this *gorgeous* cake is going. Then I’ll get Natalie. She’s back getting her hair done, but she wanted to see the cake.”

Crap. While not unusual, it always made me antsy when the bride wanted to come out to see the cake while I was still there. There’d been a couple of bridezillas who’d wanted me to change something on the spot, which no can do. And if the bride really *did* hate the cake ... well, it was probably best she discover that *after* the ceremony, while liquored up on champagne and surrounded by people saying nice things.

“Don’t worry,” Robin said in a low voice as Barbara walked away. “She’ll love it.”

“Who said I’m worried?” My words felt as false as the “Roman” columns framing the dance floor.

“You’ve got that line on your forehead you get when you’re thinking too hard.”

I didn’t know what exactly to say to that, so I was relieved to see Natalie walking toward us. Her hair and makeup were flawless. Her veil was pinned in place, but the rest of her was wrapped in a giant, fluffy pink robe.

“Oh, it’s darling!” she squealed, clasping her fancy manicured hands under her chin like a little girl. “I can’t wait to taste it.”

“Here.” I retrieved a bakery box from the bottom shelf of the cart. “This has some treats for your first morning as husband and wife, but feel free to raid it now.”

“Oh, you are the sweetest thing!” Without warning, she launched herself at me, catching me in a giant hug, spindly arms twining around my neck. “Thank you! I knew you’d come through.”

“You’re welcome.” I held both of my arms out to my sides. I was afraid to rumple her and not quite sure what to do with so much perfume and lace in my personal space.

“The photographer wants more candids of you getting dressed.” Barbara tapped Natalie on the back. “We don’t want to fall behind.”

“Enjoy your special day.” Robin waved at both of them as they departed. Then, as we wheeled the empty cart back through the lime-and-silver-bedecked room, he let out a deep laugh. “Oh. My. God. Vic, your face when she hugged you . . . epic.”

“What?”

“You’re this big gruff guy, and here this itty-bitty bride turns you into a big teddy bear. Nice touch with the breakfast pastries, by the way. Classy.”

“Yeah, we take care of our brides.” I rubbed my jaw. “Hey, you want to look around before we go back? I want to show you something.”

“Sure.”

We stashed the cart back at the truck and then I led Robin around the main building, past the giant wood deck and down the ironwork stairs to the “garden patio,” which was really just a fancy way of saying “pretty slab of concrete with nice ironwork details.” It being January, there wasn’t much garden happening. The air still had a bit of a bite in it. I shoved my hands in my bakery coat pockets. I should have grabbed my real coat, but us Oregonians like to fly in the face of weather. At least it wasn’t raining; the earlier sun had fled, leaving a dreary sky, twilight already creeping in.

“Oh, wow.” Robin caught sight of the promenade: a long walkway stretching out to become a bridge over the lake, ending in a huge wooden deck, all surrounded by more ironwork. “Can we go out there?”

“Yeah. Summer, they have small ceremonies out here, or sometimes dancing. Pretty, isn’t it?” My steps lightened, my mood as sparkly as the little lights lining the path. This was my favorite part of the venue, and I always managed to sneak down here whenever we had a delivery. Something about the place made me feel sure and certain and insignificant, all in the same moment.

“It sure is. And look at you. Vic, the closet romantic.”

“Me? Romantic?” I waved the idea away. “Hardly.”

Standing in the center of the deck, though, even I could see the romance. In the dusky light, the lake was gorgeous. The lights of houses on the opposite shore were starting to twinkle, the evergreen trees becoming hulking shadows over gray-blue water so still and shiny it was like a sheet of glass. The gorgeous man by my side, looking like I’d handed him a gift by showing him my spot, made me wish for a little Ella Fitzgerald—something sweet and bluesy that we could dance to. Not that I danced much, but something about being with Robin in such a pretty place made me wish I did.

“Cold?” Robin reached out, touching my face. “Man, the wind down here is something.”

“It’s something all right.” I wasn’t looking at the wind or the lake when I said it. I was looking right at him, at his playful eyes and full lips. *He* was something—something that made my heart swell and my toes curl with want.

Reaching out, I pulled him toward me, closing the gap between us. I brushed my lips over his—a little hello, nothing too heavy. But Robin took my dainty, little petit four of a kiss and poured hot fudge all over it, licking his way into my mouth, arms coming around my neck.

My arms knew exactly what to do with Robin, and I crushed him to me. He felt solid, the lean muscles of his back flexing under my hand. He tasted better than any sweet I’d ever had: like pastry cream and coffee and his own exotic spiciness that made me want to lick him all over.

Giving a little sigh, he leaned into me more. The wind whipped around us, catching Robin’s hair and my coat and slapping some much-needed sense into me.

“Can’t do this here.”

“Yeah. I know,” Robin said against my lips before kissing me softly again. “Bad idea.”

“Come home with me.”

“You have to ask?” Robin pressed against me, his hard dick pushing up against mine, even through all the layers of cloth. “Don’t know if I can wait ... I have an idea.”

Grabbing my hand, he dragged me back up the promenade, racing across the patio. As we approached the bakery truck, he pulled up short, tossing me a saucy smile. “You know, you have one big . . . truck.”

“It’s Cliff’s. The bakery’s. Not mine.” God, but Robin made me stupid.

“Size of a camper really.”

“You got a point?” I put my palm against the small of his back. I wanted to hold him, wanted to push him into my big, soft mattress and—

“You want to do something naughty?”

“Like what?” My neck muscles twitched. I had a feeling what he might be proposing. On the one hand, I’d never done anything like this. On the other . . . oh, screw it. I was in.

Chapter 6

The January dusk seemed to flicker with anticipation. There were only a few other vehicles in the back lot, but I suddenly felt department-store-window public.

“Help me put the cart back.” He motioned for me to raise the gate to the back of the truck. He followed me and the cart in, then closed the roller door, casting us into pitch black.

“You know, it occurred to me that you didn’t exactly see me at my best the other night,” he said.

“I don’t know. It was pretty darn amazing to me.”

“Yeah, it was, but I didn’t get to show off my talents.” His breath was a warm pulse against my neck and goose bumps broke out down my back.

The space was narrow, barely enough room for both of us and the empty bakery racks. My eyes still hadn’t adjusted to the dark, so I shut them, just drinking in the weight of him. He reached around, unbuttoning my white coat and slipping his hands under my T-shirt. His stubble rasped a path down my neck and his dick strained against my ass.

“I . . . uh . . . don’t exactly have supplies.” I might have been okay with him fucking me in theory, but not in the reality of the tight confines of the truck.

“Relax. That’s not the talent I meant.” Laughing, he spun me. My back slammed into one of the racks. Without sight, all my other senses intensified. The feel of his fingers on my waist, dipping below the waistband of my chef’s pants, the rasp of my zipper being lowered, the scent of his ginger-and-citrus soap, the silky-yet-coarse feel of his hair under my fingers.

I’d spent two years imagining what his hair would feel like: thick and heavy like rope, but so soft and dense. Of course I’d also spent two years imagining what it would be like to have Robin on his knees for me, my hands tangled in that thick mass of hair, his breath warm on my cock.

“Breathe, Vic.” Robin chuckled, little puffs of air against my heated skin. And then his tongue was there, snaking up and down my shaft, making me crazy, making me wonder when he was going to—

He swallowed me down in one swift motion.

As the warm, moist heat of his mouth took me in, I had to clutch one of the racks for balance. My head slammed into the metal behind me as he worked his tongue all around my cockhead.

“Fuck. Ow.”

“You okay?”

I rubbed my head, testing. His breath was warm against my more-than-willing dick.

“Yeah. But this is a terrible idea.”

“Really?” Robin’s voice was all innocent as he licked me leisurely. “What was it you said to me the other night? Just let me make you feel good, Vic.”

“Ah . . . all right.” My stomach went quivery with each swipe of his talented tongue. I reached behind me, using both hands to hold on to the racks as Robin swallowed me again. I tried to stay perfectly still, tried to let him set the pace.

But Robin kept making these greedy moans around my cock, and it felt like white water was churning through me. He swallowed me deep and wrapped his strong hands around my hips, yanking me closer.

“Yeah?” I experimented with moving my hips on my own, sliding deep and then back again. He moaned hungrily, like he couldn’t wait for me to move again. “You like getting your face fucked?”

“Come on, Vic. Show me what you want.” Robin nodded eagerly.

The motion made his chin graze my balls. Sparks of pleasure /pain lit up my nerve endings, and I had to hiss out a breath. “Oh, yeah.”

His thumbs dug into my hipbones as I started thrusting for real. No way was I lasting long, not with an eager throat like Robin’s. Myself, I was a licker, but much as I liked using my mouth, I didn’t like when guys really unleashed and tried to fuck my face. I liked staying in control, and my gag reflex wasn’t quite robust enough to allow much throat fucking anyway.

Robin, however, didn’t seem troubled by things as mundane as gag reflexes and oxygen. He hummed low around me, and we slipped into a natural rhythm of me fucking deep and him swallowing hard around me before I slid back, letting him get a deep breath.

“So good.” My words got another happy hum from Robin, so I kept talking. “Take it. Just like that.”

God, even his deep inhales did something to me: hearing him gasp and knowing he wanted more, knowing he trusted me to cut off his air, even for an instant. The racks clattered behind me, the bars digging into my palm.

“Gonna come.”

No more talking. I had to bite my lip to keep from crying out as I came down his throat. It felt like I’d been Tasered, muscles collapsing under the force of the orgasm. The shelves groaned in protest as I slumped down.

“Oh, hell.” I uncurled one hand, feeling for his head. “That was ... something.”

“Something, huh?” Robin’s rough voice echoed off the metal walls. The bumpy metal floor had to be killing his knees, but he sounded all blissed out.

“I’m not so good with adjectives.” I laughed. “Fabulous. Good. Amazing. Damn, you’re good at that. Give me a second and I’ll show you—”

“Nah.” Robin cut me off, and I could feel his shrug against my thigh. “That was incredible. Best endorphin rush I’ve had in a long, long time. I kind of want to just ride that wave a bit. Don’t want to ruin that feeling with whether or not I can get off.”

“Hey. I told you. I’m a patient guy—”

“Which is why I can wait for your house. Your bed.”

“All right. Bed it is.” I pulled him up to standing and kissed him. The faint taste of spunk didn’t put me off; instead it turned me on, getting me even more interested in getting him to my bed.

“And I want a coffee drink on the way to your place.” His voice was ragged. I should have felt a bit bad for going rough on him, but he sounded all smug.

“You can have whatever you want as soon as we get out of here.”

“Crap.” He pulled away, and I could feel him turning around, his head moving back and forth. “Are we trapped in here? I didn’t think about it when I pushed you in.”

“No. There’s a latch release on this side, too.”

“My God. Can you imagine needing to pound on the truck until wedding guests helped us out?”

“You can laugh. I’m the one who’d be facing a pissed-off wedding coordinator. Delay to her schedule and all.”

We both collapsed in a fit of laughter, Robin’s deep chuckles working me over like a massage.

We grabbed sandwiches and coffee drinks on the way back to Portland, and Robin came with me while I dropped the truck back behind the bakery and collected my car. Hell of a lot of maneuvering, but Robin didn't complain, seeming game to go along with whatever the night brought. In a fit of hopefulness, I grabbed some breakfast pastries from the store. I parked in my usual spot in the garage out back of my house and brought Robin into the house through the kitchen door.

As we came in, I threw my hat on the hook and my bakery coat in the laundry basket I kept under the row of hooks.

"Jeez, I need a shower," I muttered.

"Excellent idea." Robin clapped his hands together. "Lead the way."

Heck. I'd almost forgotten he was behind me.

"Uh. Okay." My feet did a nervous shuffle.

This was a new one for me. I'd never showered with another guy before. Never really thought about it as sexy until Robin peeled off his shirt right there in my kitchen, his golden skin gleaming. My hands clenched, ready to sponge him down. Yeah. Fuck my reservations. I couldn't wait to get him wet.

I led him to the main bath. Manny and I had put in new tile and painted, but the claw-foot tub was original. Big sucker in theory, but not so much when confronted with the reality of two dudes over six feet.

Any concerns I had fled as Robin skinned out of his jeans. Good lord, he was pretty to look at. Hard, lean muscles, bare chest, but a little trail of brown fuzz started right around his belly and worked its way south. Strong thigh muscles and a dimpled ass. People around the shelter liked to joke that Robin should model or be in the movies, but that ass was made for a porno.

"So how does this work?" Robin hopped in the tub and inspected the faucets. It was one of those old-fashioned things where the switch to flip the water to the shower was hidden. I had to reach around him to pull it, my fingers grazing his warm chest.

Watching the first droplets of water roll down his lean muscles, I licked my lips. I would've been perfectly happy to watch Robin bathe, but apparently I was supposed to join him. I got out of my clothes as quickly as I could, trying not to think what I looked like in the bright overhead light.

There was no hiding behind a darkened room this time; every part I wasn't crazy about was on display. My stomach sucked in and my shoulders rolled back, my neck was all tense, like the right viewing angle might help things. *Fuck*. I knew I was being ridiculous, but I couldn't seem to turn off the spastic bunnies hopping around my too-thick middle. I hopped behind him, hoping he hadn't been looking too hard.

"I like this tattoo." Robin touched my chest. Of course he'd been looking. He was *always* looking.

"Thanks. Getting it redone." My voice was too gruff, but I was a bit tetchy about how the weight loss had fucked with my tats.

"This one's cool, too." He touched the band around my biceps. That one still looked half decent, especially now that I had bigger guns to show it off. "You ever think about getting a neck tat?"

"Nothing visible was allowed when I worked mortgages, but Cliff wouldn't care. Maybe someday. But first I gotta fix the others. Make 'em look decent again." I shifted around, shivering, not sure exactly how this two-guys, one-nozzle thing was supposed to work. Maybe this was one of those things that was a lot sexier on film than reality; reality was cold and slightly cramped.

"What are you talking about? All those NBA guys the other night—you can't even tell what most of their tats are because of how their muscles distort them. It doesn't matter really. Ink on muscles is hot period." Robin's appraising glance warmed me up, made me a little less self-conscious.

My biceps flexed under his roaming fingers. *Muscles*. He saw muscles. I *had* muscles now—firm pecs and defined guns. I resolved to lift a little more next week.

His hand swept over my stomach. It was a soft touch, but I still winced. Six-pack abs were never going to be a reality for me, and no amount of "cuddly" compliments could make me okay with having my stomach touched.

"If ink's so hot, why don't you have any?" I twisted to reach for the soap, dislodging his roving fingers.

"Needles." He shivered. "Hate needles. And honestly, that fear probably kept me alive, so I'm not in a huge hurry to get over it."

I buried my face against his neck, glad he was alive and here with me. He turned, letting the warm spray hit me, too. And then he was kissing me, and I wasn't so cold anymore, and I saw a glimmer of the appeal of this.

We didn't try to get it on in the tub, though. That didn't seem to be the point. Instead, we made out under the warm stream of water, kissing and touching and pressing together. Eventually Robin reached for the soap, lathering me up between more kisses. He washed my chest, his fingers dancing against my scar.

"Does it hurt?" His voice was as soft as his hand.

"Not anymore." Didn't *hurt* precisely, but my stomach lurched. No one other than me and the doctor had touched the scar. I hadn't shown it to anyone save that one bad hookup. But Robin wasn't flinching away in horror. Instead, his eyes were kind and curious.

"Can you . . . feel it?"

"What? The band?"

He nodded. "Sorry. That's rude."

"Nah. It's okay. No, not really. I mean, I'll get a really sick stomach if I eat too much or the wrong stuff."

My fingers drummed against the tile wall. I grabbed shampoo and motioned for him to let me lather up his hair. Not that he needed it, I was just eager to get my hands tangled up in it again. And okay, I was also eager for a change of subject. Talking about what I could and couldn't eat depressed the hell out of me. And nice as his touch was, him petting my scar and washing my saggy stomach gave me weird prickles down my back.

But Robin's hair, slick with shampoo, sliding between my fingers—that was the furthest thing from a downer. Massaging his scalp and neck, I tried to work out some of the tension I felt in his muscles.

"Sometime will you let me watch while you shave your head?" Robin's eyes were closed, his voice all relaxed.

"Eh. Sure." He seemed so comfortable, talking like this might be a regular thing, like he would be happy simply to watch me get ready, like we were a real couple. It was only too easy to picture a morning like that, and I had to look away. Robin was talking just to talk; he didn't know how much I wanted that, and I couldn't let him see.

After he was all rinsed we kissed again, long and slow. And I might not have been willing to let him see my eyes, but I knew it was in my kiss—how much I wanted him, and not only for tonight. Our cocks slipped against each other, but it was a slow, almost accidental slide. Like the rest of him, his cock was long and slender next to my thicker meat. It would have been

easy to wrap a hand around us both, but I liked holding him under the water, my hands still in his hair, his arms around my waist.

“Aaeoo.” Robin pulled away with a grimace as the water went cold.

I fetched us both towels, but instead of handing him his, I toweled off his shoulders and flat stomach. More touching. I wasn’t ever going to get tired of touching him.

He laughed and I looked up, surprised at how young he looked with his hair wet and slicked back. He looked seventeen, not—

“Hey, Robin? How old are you?”

“A bit late to be asking if I’m legal, isn’t it, Vic?” His laugh echoed off the white subway tile walls. “I’m twenty-three.”

“Oh, heck.” My stomach went sour. I’d guessed twenty-seven or so. Not that young. I felt suddenly old and kind of creepy.

“Why? How old are you?” He was laughing again, and the wide grin didn’t make him look any older.

“Thirty-three,” I mumbled at my feet.

“See, not so bad. Paul was thirty-five.”

“Hardly want to be in the same category as him.” The sourness in my gut spread, chasing out all the warm happiness of the shower.

“Oh, come off it. I dig older guys.” He grabbed the towel, rubbing his hair and then shaking his head like a puppy. His hair fell back into more of its usual shag. “Now kiss me again. That was hot in the tub.”

I pulled him to me, but not without a few misgivings. He was so damn young. And Paul was an opportunistic asshole and I so didn’t want to be lumped in the same category as him. But Robin was warm and hard and smelled like my soap, and all reason fled as soon as his lips touched mine.

Robin kissed my neck and jaw in a rather determined fashion, cutting a quick trail down my chest. I grabbed his arm right as he was about to sink to his knees.

“No?” He looked at me through long lashes. “I thought you liked it in the truck.”

“Loved the truck. Your mouth is too fucking talented. But it’s your turn now.”

“We can try fucking,” he said, but he didn’t sound all that confident. He looked young and uncertain. Much as my body was clamoring for the chance to fuck, my brain wanted better for Robin.

“Nope.” I kissed him lightly. “I don’t want something you have to *try*—I want what you *need*.”

“I don’t know what I need. That’s the problem. I know what I want, but my stupid body doesn’t cooperate.”

“What do you mean?” He’d hinted at it before, but I still wasn’t sure what he meant.

“It can take me a really long time to get off. It’s like my neurons don’t understand what to do without a buzz. And sometimes orgasm just doesn’t happen. My brain won’t shut off. I’ve been sober three years and I still haven’t managed to figure it out, and I feel guilty and terrible—”

“Breathe, Robin. It’s okay.” I rubbed his shoulders. “Nothing to feel terrible about.”

“You don’t know what I’ve done, Vic.” He looked at me with big, sad eyes.

“You turned tricks, yeah?”

“How did you guess?” His eyes went wide. “Did Paul tell you?”

My heart squeezed, like a piping bag oozing out sympathy. I wrapped a hand around his neck, pulling him closer. I’d guessed as soon as Robin mentioned sobriety. I’d been around the shelter long enough to know what kids did to survive.

“You were what? Seventeen? Eighteen? On the streets?”

He nodded. “My folks cut me off because they thought it would help if I didn’t have access to their money. But it didn’t. Not until I finally let Melissa talk me into calling home, taking their help to get clean. And in the meantime . . .”

“You did some stuff you’re not proud of. I get it.” I kissed him lightly.

“You really don’t care?” His head tilted to one side, appraising me.

“Why should I? That’s not who you are now.” Possessiveness made a bitter stew in my gut, but empathy kept it from reaching toxic levels. I wouldn’t say I was *thrilled* about the idea, but mainly Robin’s revelation just made me want to hold Robin close, smell his hair, tell him he was safe now.

“Yeah, but don’t you think it’s . . . *ironic* that now I can’t seem to relax enough to fuck when before . . .” He waved his hand dismissively, banging against the sink.

“Paul make you feel bad for that?” I frowned. I wanted to put a serious hurt on everyone from Robin’s past who’d ever used him or hurt him. Paul

would be an excellent starting point.

“God, I shouldn’t love it when you look like you’d like to eat him for breakfast. I really shouldn’t.” Robin’s laugh was a nervous little thing. “But yeah. I told him about my past, thinking it might help him to understand, but it just made things worse. Sex between us was ... problematic.”

“He was the problem.” I said it emphatically, gripping his shoulders tight. “Doesn’t matter what you did in the past. Look, I’ve done all sorts of shit I’m not proud of. But that’s not who I am now. And it’s not who you are either. You deserve to go as slow as you need. Get the time you need. It’s not a fucking race.”

“I love your glower.” Robin kissed me, a quick brush across my lips. “And I’m a mess and you don’t care.”

I care too much. I couldn’t say that, even though my heart felt tight in my chest and my stomach felt all twisty. I really did want to pound Paul for making Robin feel bad about his past. He’d been a kid. A kid under the grip of an illness I’d seen drag too many others down. A kid, all alone and scared. How could I judge that? My knees felt unsteady, unable to support the weight of my heavy heart.

I kissed him back, deepening it, trying to tell him with lips and tongue and heart that all I cared about was that he was safe now. Robin sucked on my tongue, making the same needy sounds he had in the truck, sending heat straight to my dick.

And yeah, my ego perked up a bit, too. I wanted to be the one who made things better for Robin, wanted to be the one who made sex good for him again. There were plenty of areas where I was a fuckup of epic proportions, but maybe I could give him this.

Chapter 7

I tugged Robin toward my room. We lost our towels somewhere along the way.

“Now you’re going to stop looking at some clock,” I said as I pushed him onto the bed. “Or worrying about anything other than feeling good. And we’re not fucking. I don’t want you even thinking about that.”

“You’re serious about waiting, aren’t you?” He reached up and touched my face.

“Damn right.” I nodded. *Waiting*. It was such a beautiful, magical word that meant more shared nights and shared meals and shared kisses.

“I liked the truck,” he whispered. “When you took over. I kept wishing I could see your face. I wanted to see if you were glowering like this. Your scowl is fucking hot.”

“Yeah?”

“Felt like I was flying when you fucked my throat. Like I was high or tripping. It was awesome.” He reached toward my cock, creeping across the black and gray comforter. I batted his hands away.

“Didn’t I say no?” I gave him a real good scowl. “You want me to take charge? Want me to tell you how to get done?”

“Oh, fuck yeah.” His voice was all breath. He reached for my cock again, and I put a little heat in the slap I gave his fingers. I tossed the comforter to the maple footboard with way more force than I needed to, simply to watch his muscles draw up tight, his eyes going wide.

“Then lay on your stomach. Right now.”

He scampered to obey, and it was a beautiful thing, long limbs uncurling as he threw himself down on the bed. Some tension seemed to roll off him. He liked playing like this, and truth be told, I did, too.

My muscles burned, amped up like after a big set at the gym. My pulse raced, ready for the next challenge. I straddled his lower thighs, pinning him in place. He liked my muscles and my scowl and my meanness, and hell if that didn’t make my insides go as gooey and warm as caramel.

“I’m going to lick you all over, and the only thing you get to say about that is, yes, please.”

“Yes, please.” His voice was dusting-sugar soft.

I rubbed my hands down his back and arms, trying to get him even more relaxed. Then I started with his ears. I took my time, outlining the shell of his ear with my tongue, sucking on the lobe, discovering all the little spots behind his ears and neck that made him shiver and moan.

“Oh, my *fuck*.”

“I haven’t even started yet.”

Moving on to his neck, I licked up all the lingering droplets of water. I took little bites along his shoulders. Licking and sucking and biting my way down his back, I traced his spine with my tongue.

He hissed, his whole body rolling.

“Yeah? You like that?” I sucked up a love bite right at the base of his neck, right below where his shirt collar would be. The air in the room was cool, but it made me hot to think about the air licking against his abraded skin.

“That. More of that.”

“What did I tell you?”

“Yes, please.”

I did a whole line of bites down either side of his spine. I fell into the zone I did when decorating a cake, finding a rhythm and going with it, making something beautiful without overthinking it. I simply licked and sucked and nipped and followed my intuition.

“Fuck me.” Robin’s muscles quivered under me.

“Nope.” I bit him a little harder at the base of his spine. “You gonna try and tell me I’m taking too long?”

“God no.”

“Good, because I plan to take my own sweet time when I eat your pretty little ass.” And with that, I licked from the base of his spine all the way down his crack before settling in and attacking his hole.

“Vic.” Robin shamelessly pushed his ass up to meet my mouth.

“Don’t you try to hurry me, boy.” My pulse was as heated as my words. I love rimming. Love driving a guy insane and incoherent with nothing more than my mouth. I like sucking dick, too, but there’s something about the noises a guy makes when he’s getting tongue-fucked—makes me feel Empire State Building tall.

Robin went from moaning to whimpering to a sort of chanting to humping the bed and whining. God, the whines. Low and needy, ending on

a higher squeak, they made my dick leak and my hands tremble.

“Yeah, you fuck my bed, baby. You fuck it hard as you need to. I’m just gonna keep eating this ass.” Spreading him open, I used a hand to tease his balls a bit, rolling them around.

“*Oh, fuck.* Don’t stop. Dontstopdontstop,” he chanted, the bedsprings creaking from his thrashing around.

“Yeah, that’s it. You just let it feel good.”

I had no idea how long I licked and worked him like that. Didn’t matter. I wasn’t stopping till I heard him howl. And howl he did, humping the mattress, arching that ass up into my mouth until I had to grip his waist, hold him down, make him take more of the sensations I was forcing on him. Then he started rubbing and grinding on the bed in little circles, and I knew he was close. I got my index finger nice and slick and worked the tip of it next to my tongue.

That did it. He came on a shout, bucking and trembling all over. I licked him through it, getting the most beautiful whimpers from him, until he was curled up, shuddering. I rubbed him all over, soothing him down. Kissed his shoulders.

My lungs burned and my dick throbbed, desperate for attention. Hell, I’d almost come watching Robin go. I got a hand on myself and pulled Robin closer, wanting his nearness. Nothing more. Just him there.

“You . . . can . . . fuck me.” His voice was hoarse and he didn’t even raise his head.

“Who’s in charge here, baby?” I put the command back in my voice.

“Not me,” he said sleepily, nuzzling into one of my pillows.

“That’s right. And I’m gonna come just like this. Gonna spurt all over your ass.”

“Yeah. Do it.” He sounded more interested now, bumping his hips into mine. “Want to feel you come.”

“Yeah?” I rolled so I was covering him, my dick wedged along his damp crack.

“God, you are so hot.” I kissed his shoulders. “Such a hot boy.”

My heart pounded like my first time on the treadmill, my body feeling just as uncoordinated. My thrusts against him were rude, jerky things with no finesse, but it didn’t take more than three or four good thrusts before I was shouting, too, coming all over his back.

“That was fucking amazing,” I whispered afterward, rolling off him.

“No, that was more amazing than fucking.” He chuckled, moving around so that he was settled in against my side. I grabbed one of the towels, made a futile stab at cleaning us up before giving up and grabbing the comforter from the end of the bed. Pulling it around us, I let myself fall asleep holding him.

“You want brunch?” Robin asked, stretching. My sheets pooled around his waist. He’d stayed the night and hadn’t fled. I counted that as a genuine Sunday miracle. It was well after ten. We’d woken a few hours earlier, but another round of sex had led to a nice sleeping-in. We’d tried sixty-nine, and yeah, I came first, but it wasn’t exactly a great hardship to get to play with Robin’s cock a bit longer. I saw what he meant about sometimes getting all tangled up in his thoughts and not getting there, but I’d simply kissed him until he’d been too breathless to think, then kept playing with him until he’d shot all over our chests. Then we’d drifted back into another sticky sleep.

What I needed even more than food was a shower. Not to mention restaurants were damn problematic for me. I couldn’t handle the huge portion sizes or the grease.

“I brought you some pastries back from the shop. You want those while I shower first?” I rolled toward him, propping myself up with an elbow.

“You did that for me?” He blushed, a pretty pink blooming on his cheeks. The morning sunshine made his hair glow, showing off all the shades between gold and chestnut.

“No biggie. We’ve always got extra stuff.” Sitting up, I waved his question away. Didn’t want him thinking I was getting too attached.

“That was nice of you, but I don’t really like sweets first thing in the morning. But there’s this place on Alberta I like to go for brunch sometimes. They do a vegan buffet—it’s all superhealthy stuff and I think you’d find some stuff you can eat.”

“Really?” I wasn’t sure what shocked me more—that he wanted to go out with me or that he’d thought about what my dietary needs might be.

“Yeah. Come on. It’ll be fun. And we can shower together again.”

I wasn’t half as into that as he was, but I did like him rubbing all over me. Sundays I usually shaved, taking advantage of the extra time to get my

head nice and smooth. Robin watched this like it was a matinee, moving around to get better viewing angles.

“Can I do it sometime?” He leaned against the sink, blocking my light.

“Uh. You have a shaving kink or something?” I’d noticed his chest was extra smooth. If he asked to wax me, all bets were off. What I lacked up top I had in spades on my body, but no way in heck was I letting anyone near me with hot wax. I did have some lines I wouldn’t cross, even to indulge Robin the Curious.

“Nah. I just really dig that look on you. Even more than when you used to wear it really closely cropped, which was hot, too.”

Whoa. Robin had noticed my hair back when I first started volunteering? Back before I’d had the surgery? That did something to my insides—made them all wobbly, like gelatin that hadn’t set up right.

“Don’t go shaving your own head.” I tugged lightly at his wet hair. “Be a shame to waste all this pretty.”

And then we were kissing and touching again, and it was another hour before we made it out the door. The vegan place had nice strong coffee and a bunch of odd dishes. But they were all helpfully labeled: low-fat, organic, gluten-free, no soy, etc. Gotta love the Northwest, where you apologize for sticking gluten and butter in your baked goods.

But I managed to find some low-fat raisin toast and “scrambled” zucchini on the buffet.

“Hey, Vic!” A cute Asian dude called my name. Robby. He was one of the coffee-cart guys who contracted with the bakery for pastries.

Behind me, Robin scooted closer. And stood up taller.

“Who’s your friend?”

I made the introductions. The coffee-cart guy, Robby, laughed at how similar his name was to Robin’s. Robin didn’t laugh. *Jealous.* Robin was jealous. My heart did a little tap dance of petty happiness.

’Course Robin had nothing to worry about. Robby had proved my gaydar was for shit; I’d been dealing with him for a few years now and hadn’t known he was gay. But he introduced his boyfriend, David, a nerdy-looking dude in a polo shirt.

“How nice to meet you!” Robin got a whole lot friendlier as soon as the boyfriend entered the conversation. We all ended up sitting together at one of the long wooden tables that lined the side of the coffee shop.

“How do you like the food?” David asked me.

“Eh . . .” I struggled to find diplomatic words. He and Robby were obviously regulars at the place.

“Bread’s not as good as yours.” Robin patted my knee.

“Few breads are,” Robby said. “You should have Cliff send over some samples. I’m friends with the owner here. He outsources the baked goods.”

“It’s okay,” David said to me in a low tone. “I’d kill for two slices of bacon right now.”

I laughed, and then things were easier, the four of us making small talk and joking.

That was weird. And not weird like the strange food weird. Weird good. Because it was like Robin and I were a real couple on a real date, doubling with friends. Robby and David had an older home, and that got Robin all into amateur-decorator mode. Soon paint swatches were spread on the table and the guys were talking lighting fixtures. I grinned more than I had in years and tried to follow the conversation. I felt weirdly proud of Robin, like he was mine to show off. Like, *Look at how brilliant my boyfriend is. He solved your problems in a snap.* I had a brief flash of introducing Robin to Cliff’s brother James and the rest of my friends. Not at a bar obviously, but I liked the image of him hanging with all of us, of more meals like this. It wasn’t simply the sex—which was out-of-this-world amazing—it was being with Robin, having him as a part of my life. It would be only too easy to get used to this, and I had to remind myself to enjoy it like the rare sweets I allowed myself, not to go thinking this would become my regular fare.

Chapter 8

I was in the middle of decorating a retirement cake when my phone vibrated, but I gave up a few seconds of concentration to glance down at the screen. I didn't need a cheesy ringtone like "You Are the Sunshine of My Life" to know the message was from Robin. Since Sunday we'd kept up a regular stream of text messages.

You need something like this for your foyer. He'd sent a picture of a light wood table.

I wasn't so sure that the still half-done entryway warranted a fancy name, let alone a midcentury modern sideboard, but it made me smile that Robin was thinking about me and my house as he wandered around Southeast Portland's shops on Tuesday morning. His work was slow again, so he was out shopping and taking pictures for future design projects.

A few hours later, another text came in.

Want to come over after work tonight?

My palms started sweating and I had to make myself wait a few minutes before replying. *Sure. Want me to cook?*

He replied almost immediately. *That would be nice but not necessary. Paul wants to get his stuff. You still game for being my pretend boyfriend?*

Ouch. That stung a little, made my shoulders tight and my hands tense around my phone. Made sense that Robin wanted a buffer between him and Paul. And I had been the one to suggest carrying on the ruse. But I'd kinda hoped we were on our way beyond that.

Anytime, I texted back, because the alternative was not seeing Robin, and that would suck way worse than me being a little put out over labels.

I showed up at six with a bag of groceries. I'd showered after work and put on a nice shirt. If Robin wanted a pretend boyfriend for the night, he was going to get a classy one, not me looking like I was just there to fuck. I wouldn't mind showing Paul exactly how a guy like Robin should be treated.

Of course the smarmy bastard beat me there. Probably came earlier than he said just to fuck with Robin. When Robin let me into his tenth-floor studio, Paul was already there, sitting on a red couch next to a small box of

odds and ends: two shirts, a toothbrush, a book, and some other crap. Nothing he couldn't have lived without.

"Sorry I'm late," I greeted Robin with a quick peck on the cheek.

"You brought dinner!" Robin's tone was overly chipper and his smile two sizes too small, but the lingering kiss he gave me was far less fake.

"You staying?" I sent Paul a good long glower. "I only brought two steaks."

"Paul was just leaving, weren't you?" Robin said, not sounding terribly sure. I hated how Paul seemed to zap his confidence. Robin stayed close by my side. I set the groceries down on a nearby stool and put an arm around Robin.

"Robin, you don't have to be nasty." Paul shook his head, like he was scolding a dog. "We could still be friends. I want to *help* you."

"No, you couldn't," I spoke up.

"Babe. Are you really going to let your thug here dictate who you talk to?"

"I don't think we can be friends. Not right now." Robin's hand worried the pocket of his jeans and his eyes stayed on the dark hardwood flooring. "And Vic's not a thug."

"Yeah, I am," I said, keeping my tone overly polite while my eyes attempted to incinerate Paul, sending him a clear don't-fuck-with-me message.

"Fine. Fine. I'm going." Paul stood up, brushing invisible dirt off his perfectly pressed khakis. "But, Robin. Babe. You can do better. Really."

My fists clenched and I stepped toward Paul. It was like I was fifteen again, a hotshot Richie Rich kid looking down on me. *Fuck that noise*. I hadn't put up with that crap then and I wasn't about to start now. That Robin could do better was an undisputed fact. That Paul didn't get to talk to me like that was also an undisputed fact.

"You wanna mess with me? Seriously?" I got up in his face, using the extra fifty pounds and four inches I had on him to look him over like the spineless gym rat he was. All pretty boy and no substance.

Paul swallowed hard, his eyes going to Robin. Robin shrugged, a little smile tugging at his lips.

"I'm out of here." Paul stalked out, but I didn't breathe easy until I heard the ding of the elevator arriving on the floor.

"How was that? That enough scowl for you?" I turned toward Robin.

“Oh, yeah.” Robin’s mouth pursed, like he’d just eaten something supertasty, a satisfied smile tugging at his lips. “You could have kissed me more, though. Little more PDA would have been nice.”

“Yeah?” I kissed him again, this time just for me. He tasted liked soda and the now-familiar taste of himself, the familiarity of it making warmth uncurl in my gut. There was a comfort in knowing his scent and his taste. “Turns you on when I threaten to make a cutlet out of your ex?”

“Is that so wrong?” He laughed. His eyes were full of dirty mischief. “Not like I wanted you to throw a punch or anything. I . . . I didn’t want to feel backed into a corner by him, you know? I didn’t want to agree to his stupid let’s-befriends plan. *He* was the one to end things.”

“You still love him?” I’d wanted to ask that for days.

“Love?” Robin made a dry, bitter sound. “No. I’m pretty sure I was more in love with the idea of a boyfriend than the actual boyfriend. Actually, the more I hang around you, the more I realize what a controlling jerk Paul was.”

“You keep standing your ground with him,” I said, trying not to let on how pleased his admission made me. “Now: Where’s your stove?”

“What are you making us?” He started to look in the grocery bag, but I shooed him away.

“No peeking.” I’d also brought along a little something for after dinner, if things went my way.

“As far as the kitchen, that’s it.” He motioned to the far end of the studio, which held a single short row of cabinets and an island with a cooktop and a breakfast bar.

“I don’t cook much, so I don’t have much in the way of pans and stuff.” After showing me the layout, Robin grabbed a plastic cutting board in the shape of an apple. “What can I do to help?”

“I got this.” I plucked the cutting board from his fingers.

“Can I get you some water? Or soda? I have diet.” Robin got two glasses out before I could decline.

“Water’s fine.” I unwrapped the steaks. “This is a nice place,” I said as I mangled some garlic. Robin’s knives were for shit, but his pans were top of the line. The studio was one long, open space, with the living area on one end, the kitchen on the other, and a bed tucked into an alcove near the kitchen area. A second alcove off the living area held a computer station.

“Eh.” He made a sour face. “It’s through my dad. He’s part of the property management group that owns this building.”

“Ah.” I suddenly wished I’d brought nicer food to cook. Damn; I’d known Robin probably came from money, but there was money and then there was Donald Trump or Lex Luthor money.

“After I got sober I finished up my degree at the Art Institute, then my dad gave me this as a graduation present.”

“Nice dad.” Mine gave me a pat on the back and a pen set when I got my associate degree. Didn’t live to see me graduate culinary school, but my ma gave me a set of nice knives.

Robin watched me roll the steaks. “Oh, wow, that’s fancy.”

“It’s nothing.” I was doing a steak roulade with spinach and cheese. It looked far harder than it was. Ditto the rice pilaf I was planning to plate it with.

“Come on, you have to let me help.” He drummed his fingers on the granite counter. “Salad? Lettuce be your sous chef?” He held up a wilted head of romaine from his fridge.

I laughed, catching him for a kiss. “Fine. You can do salad, but I brought my own greens. And you don’t want to be my sous-chef. Trish is always getting on me for terrorizing the assistants.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“I made one cry by making him redo a birthday cake at midnight. But he misspelled the kid’s name.” I got the rice cooking with a little onion and garlic.

“So, am I like the only one who gets to see your nice side?” Robin peeked around the cooktop.

I thought about that as I seasoned the rice. I was civil to darn near everyone, scary to more than a few, and helpful to people who needed it, but nice? It wasn’t really a word people used with me. But something about Robin made me sweeter, made me want to be the nice guy.

“Is it weird if I say yes?”

“No. It’s sweet.” He leaned in, kissing me on the cheek. “Man, that smells amazing. I can’t ever have you meet my parents. My dad will want to fire poor Posy and hire you to be his personal chef.”

My hand tightened around the stirring spoon. *Meet the parents.* I’d suffered through each of my sister’s parade of boyfriends, but I hadn’t ever been the one to bring a dude home to meet my family. But maybe ...

“You close with your parents?” I asked.

“Eh. My dad’s okay. Things were really strained between us when I was younger. They’re slightly better now.” The twisted look on his face said they still weren’t on great terms.

“My old man couldn’t deal with the gay thing. We fought all the time about my leaving the Church.” A decade’s worth of guilt and doubt lodged under my shoulder blades, throwing me right back to those arguments. I squeezed the lemon for the steak too hard, making juice hit my face.

“My dad took it personally when I came out at fourteen—like I’d chosen to fuck up his life. That was when I started using.”

“I’m sorry.” Such an inadequate expression for such a shitty thing. “I used to hide from mine—stayed in the kitchen with my mom and grandma so he couldn’t go on about me being a pansy or whatever.”

“Year I came out my mom eloped with her masseur. Housekeeper was this German lady who hated me. So no kitchen to hide in.” He smiled wryly. “But it’s ancient history now.”

He looked impossibly young and full of hard-earned wisdom at the same time. Old soul, my nonna would say. My chest tightened. For all my dad had given me a hard time about religion and manhood, he’d been around my whole childhood—full of rules and questions and game playing. My mom too. No one could ever accuse the Degrassi kids of being neglected.

“Yeah. And families do come around. Mine is pretty great now, even if they weren’t at first. My little cousin Lance just came out. Whole family’s been really good to him. Guess I taught them well.”

“To pioneers.” He raised his water glass to me. “And to not being teenagers anymore.”

“Amen.” I threw together a quick vinaigrette for Robin’s salad, using a fancy glass when I couldn’t locate any measuring cups or little bowls.

“Man. You even brought your own vinegar.” Robin smiled up at me. “Didn’t trust my kitchen?”

“I wanted to make my—you—a nice dinner, not play *Chopped*.” I laughed.

“You know how to spoil a guy, Vic.” Robin gave me a sad little smile. I reached across the counter and ruffled his hair.

“You’re fun to spoil. And it’s just steak.”

“Steak. Rice. Real salad dressing. And I spied a bakery box over there. You’d think this was a real date.”

I could have demurred, but instead I decided to swing for the fences. “Why can’t it be?”

“Oh, Vic. That would be a terrible idea.” Robin pushed away from the counter, went to stand by the large picture window.

My chest felt squashed, like the time my little sister jumped off a couch and landed on me, cracking three ribs. My whisk hit the counter with a clatter and I stalked after him.

“Why not? We get on good together. Why not date? See where things go?”

“Because I’m on the rebound. I’m not really in a position for a relationship.” His voice shook.

“But you can’t deny we have fun together. So let me be your rebound guy.” I wrapped my arms around him. He didn’t pull away, instead sinking into me with a gratifying sigh.

“Oh, Vic. You’re almost too sweet.”

“Sweet doesn’t have half the plans I do for after dinner.” I kissed his ear. “Brought something I think might help you. If you’re game.”

“Oh, I’m always game. And that’s what I mean—you really want to help me with my fucked-up sex problems?”

“Rather self-serving of me, but yeah, I do. I’m not entirely convinced that your issue isn’t simply poor taste in dudes, Paul being exhibit A. But yeah, I want to make you feel better about sex. Because you deserve that. Doesn’t matter if it’s me or the next guy. You deserve to feel good about fucking again.”

“Yeah.” Robin sighed and tilted his head to give me better access to his neck. “Vic, the benevolent baker who moonlights as a sex therapist. And rent-a-boyfriend.”

“Hey, the bodyguard thing comes free of charge. I’ll come and look tough for Paul any day.”

“I’m not going to break your heart if we keep doing this? Casual, I mean? The whole rebound thing?”

“Nah. My heart’s way tougher than that.” *I hope.* The organ in question gave a strange little flutter. Below us, the city spread out, buildings and roads and river looking pristine, as much an illusion as my words.

“Good.” He gave me a funny look, like maybe I’d said the wrong thing. “Because I do want to keep doing this.”

He wiggled around until we were face-to-face. “And not just because whatever you’re making smells amazeballs. I . . . I like you, Vic.”

“I like you, too.” And then I had to kiss him because the alternative was to keep looking into his deep brown eyes that saw too much.

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Chapter 9

After dinner Robin loaded his space-age-looking dishwasher while I put away the food. Like a real couple would, splitting the chores without even discussing it, simply falling into a routine. Problem was, I wasn't sure how real couples slid into postdinner sex. I mean, I *could* show Robin what I'd brought, slap it on his little dining table, but that seemed a bit tasteless.

"You want to watch a show?" Robin motioned at the large flat-screen TV set up by his couch. "Or there's probably a game on."

"Game, if you won't be bored."

"Oh, I won't be bored." Robin gave me a look like I was denser than the pound cake I'd brought him. *Oh*. So this was how a date crept toward sex. Robin flipped on the Blazers game and we ended up on his long leather couch. His place had lots of color to it—red couch, blue computer desk, expensive-looking abstract painting by the door, Moroccan bedspread that reminded me of a cake I'd done the summer before.

Robin cuddled right up to me, half in my lap. Now *this* was how to watch a game. Only thing missing was a beer—but a lapful of Robin quickly pushed that thought from my head. The Blazers weren't even up four points before Robin straddled my thighs, grinning down at me.

"Tell me what you brought."

"It's a surprise." I slid my hands under his gray T-shirt, lightly tickling his sides. "And it's all the way over there." I gestured at the kitchen.

"I don't like surprises." He did a fake pout. "It's not poppers, is it? Because I know that doesn't count as a high to some people, but I—"

"Relax, baby. I know better than to bring you anything like that. Brought you a toy."

"Oooh." He started to get off my lap, but I stayed him with firm hands.

"No you don't. Not yet." I leaned up to kiss him. "Wanna make out with you a bit."

We kissed and stroked and cuddled, and pretended to watch the game until Robin was shirtless on my lap, our dicks grinding through the layers of fabric while I licked and nibbled at his flat pink nipples.

“God. You . . . are . . . really good with your mouth.” Robin’s breath came in little huffs.

“Oral fixation.” I raised my head and smiled at him. “It’s why smoking was such a bitch to quit. And why I love sucking dick. Lose your pants.”

“Yes, sir,” he said with a laugh.

My dick throbbed. I stretched an arm out along the back of the couch, liking this control thing. I kept my pants on because there was something extra dirty about him naked and undulating on me and me still fully clothed.

My mouth tingled, and I knew what I wanted next. I got him to raise up on his knees so his cock was level with my mouth. I played, sucking only on the tip until his hips rocked and he cursed softly. Then I swallowed him back. The angle let me take more than I usually could, and I used that to my advantage, rubbing my tongue all over him while he was deep in my mouth.

“Oh. Fuck. Vic.” He freed one hand from the back of the couch to clutch at my head.

Working him until his thighs trembled and he was breathing in a series of broken moans, I released him abruptly with a light slap on his ass.

“You want more?”

“God yes.”

“Go dig in my bag over there. Bring me back what looks interesting to you.” He trotted over to the kitchen, which was a fine sight to watch, his tight ass bouncing and his muscles flexing. Loved how his ass was bare, his leg fuzz not starting till partway down his thighs.

“I’m assuming it’s not the vinegar or lemon?” He dug through the bag. I knew when he found it because his eyes went wide. He held up the box. “Beads?”

“Oh, yeah. I was thinking about how you can take a little of my finger. Thought maybe we could play with those. See how much you can take. Work on getting your muscles to learn to relax.”

“Ass exerciser?” He gave an almost girlish giggle. “I’m game, but I’m not sure if it’ll work. I’ve tried a dildo a few times and I can’t really take it. Stupid—”

“Stop beating yourself up and come here.” I put a little of the command he liked so much in my voice, slapping the couch for emphasis. “And bring the lube I stashed in there, too.”

“Gee, Vic, you really *do* come prepared.”

“Get your ass over here.” I tried laying it on a bit thicker, just to see what he’d do. And his response was gorgeous—eyes going wider, cheeks pinkening, chest expanding as he inhaled. He nodded and scampered over. Oh, yeah. My boy liked to play.

“Now, you get up on me so I can eat your ass.”

“Not sure I can balance . . .” He straddled me again, facing away from me this time.

“You figure out a way, boy, ’cause I’m gonna lick you open.”

He leaned forward, bracing himself on the heavy coffee table, long back muscles and ass displayed like an erotic photo shoot.

I inhaled sharply, taking in the sight. Holding him steady with my hands, I buried my face in his tight cleft, licking my way to his hole. I licked and sucked until he was whining again, those high-pitched noises that told me he was losing his mind.

Good. I was too, my cock about ready to bust out of my pants.

Grabbing the lube, I oiled up the beads, then went back to licking, getting him nice and soft before I worked the first bead in. The toy was a string of graduated black silicon balls, the first no bigger than my pinky and the last about two finger widths around. Not quite as wide as my cock, but enough to provide good stretch. I’d played with a similar toy on my own and had a feeling Robin would really like the sensations it gave.

He took the first bead easily, pushing down, seeking more. Working the second in, I slid my finger in alongside, working the beads up toward his gland. I got the third bead to pop through the tight ring of muscle, but then Robin started panting like a marathon runner, his thighs tightening. I withdrew my finger but left the beads in place.

“Sssh.” I ran my hands up and down his back and sides. “I’ve got you. You’re doing so good. You took three beads, baby.”

“Uhh-nuhh.” He made a low, guttural sound.

A low, warm feeling gathered in my gut. His trust as he worked to follow my commands was like the buzz of a good microbrew.

“Flip around.” I gave him a light slap on the ass and he moaned. When I’d played with beads myself, the shifting around had felt both weird and awesome, and judging by his moans, it was more awesome than odd for Robin.

I went back to sucking his cock, fingering the strand of beads every so often. Not yet pushing more in, just wiggling and letting him get used to the

sensation.

“You want more?”

“Yeah. Wanna try.”

Sucking hard on his tip, I pushed the fourth bead in. This one was wider than my index finger, and Robin panted around it, air hissing from between his teeth.

“You can do it, baby. Just relax those muscles. Think of how good it’s gonna feel.”

“Oh, yeah.” He bore down a little and that did it, the fourth bead popping in until the fifth rested right against his tight little hole. “Oh, *fuck, fuck, fuck.*”

God, his whines were almost enough to make me shoot in my pants. “Gonna give you one more, sweet thing. You can take it.”

“Can’t.” He arched back anyway, leaning into me. With all the windows in his place, it felt even more like he was giving me a show, putting himself on display for me.

“Yeah, you can. Relax for me. Bear down again.”

“Oh. Oh. Oooh.” The fifth bead slid in, and he easily took the sixth and seventh, too. I wiggled the strand while going back to sucking him. He tensed, and for a second I thought he was going to shoot. Sucking harder, I worked my tongue along the sensitive ridge of his foreskin.

“Sorry. Right there. God. Can’t.” He gasped and clawed at his hair.

“Not going anywhere. And you still got two beads to take.” I nudged the next one against his hole. “You can do it. Show me how good you can take this one.”

He whimpered and shook but slowly bore down as I wiggled the bead in, his body seeming to suck it in.

So fucking hot.

I released his hip, freeing my cock before my zipper did permanent damage.

“You wanna try . . .” he whispered.

My dick pulsed in my hand, the tip already damp. Yes, I *wanted* to fuck, wanted to be right where those beads were, wanted to be locked in his tight heat. But more than that, I wanted to do right by Robin, wanted to make him fly.

“You’re thinking too much again.” I licked up his cock. “You’ve got a job to do right here.” I wiggled the strand of beads, making him gasp. “If

you're a good boy, though, I'll let you suck me after."

"Now." His eyes were wide and wild. "Now. I want you to fuck my throat while I've got the beads in."

Oh, hell, that image was so hot I almost shot on the spot.

"One more bead, baby. One more bead and you can have that." I nudged it in. His body was rigid, but gradually he let it in, cursing low.

I rearranged us so that I lay back on the couch and he hovered above me, almost in a sixty-nine position.

"Wanna be able to play with your new toy while you suck me."

I was hoping like hell I didn't shoot first, but as soon as my dick hit that velvet throat I knew I wouldn't last. The contrast of cool couch leather and burning-hot Robin made my head swim. He gripped my hips with long, strong fingers, pulling me deep and moaning around my cock. He pulled at me until I started rocking and thrusting. Holy hell, did Robin ever love to get his face fucked. His whole body shuddered on every deep thrust, throat milking me like a fist.

I wiggled the beads, popping the last few beads out, then gently sliding them back. His sucking grew more frantic, his body arching and straining. I was torn between wanting to watch him and wanting to give in to the pressure building in my balls.

"Oh. Christ. Vic." He pulled back, gasping, his voice sounding like radio static. "So close. Fuck me hard."

I wasn't sure if he meant throat or ass, but I went for both, thrusting my hips as hard as I dared and sliding the toy in and out until I felt his balls lift and his legs tighten around me.

He flat-out screamed around my cock, and as soon as I felt the first wet splash against my chest, I pulled the toy out, knowing it would push even more pleasure through him. Releasing my cock, he panted and shook, and I stroked him through the last of it with my fist. He sank into me, his head on my belly.

I felt as tall as Robin's building, as light as a Macy's parade balloon, Robin's breathing and the pounding in my head the only things tethering me to earth. I brought my wet fist to my cock.

"Hey. Lemme . . ." Robin turned his head so that he sucked the tip while I worked the base. Only took a few strokes before I was coming hard, orgasm pounding through me. We were a sticky, exhausted mess, and

happiness radiated from me. The orgasm didn't wring me out as much as it lit me up, made me feel floaty and light.

"Hey, Vic?"

"Yeah?" I barely lifted my head.

"I think I like dating."

I liked it too, far more than I should. My heart was pounding, but not over the single hottest fuck I'd ever had—which it so was—but because of how I was feeling now. Like fondant that had been pulled too thin. I could rip in two with the wrong tug. Robin made me feel things. I wanted to carry him over to his bed, wrap him in the quilts, cuddle down with him. I'd told him I was strong enough to withstand simply being his rebound fling, but I knew now I'd been lying.

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Chapter 10

“Robin’s not here,” Melissa said when I dropped off a load of rolls on Saturday. I’d been surprised to see her, not Robin, at the loading bay. Last three nights, Robin and I had spent all tangled up in my sheets. He’d been right: dating was a hell of a lot of fun. Having someone to cook for was a nice thing. Having someone to fall asleep with was even better. And waking up to Robin? Well, that was pretty much perfect.

Saturday Robin had headed out to the shelter while I headed in to work to finish up a few cakes. I’d spent most of my morning humming to myself while I decorated a birthday cake and two retirement cakes. And yeah, I’d been counting down the hours until I made the delivery to the shelter.

“He not show?” I tried to keep my voice neutral. I didn’t want to go all overprotective boyfriend when I wasn’t sure how open Robin wanted to be around people at the shelter.

“Oh, Robin was here. It’s that Zach kid.” Her sigh echoed off the metal loading dock and her eyes were red. “Such a sad case. His parents were by earlier. Brought big carafes of coffee with them. Wanted to talk to anyone who knows Zach.”

“They trying to find out who sold him his stash?” My shoulders tightened. I’d be pissed and ready to burn down the city in their shoes. Following Melissa, I carried the cases of rolls back to the stockroom.

“Nah. I think it’s more that they’re reaching out, looking for people to talk to, people to tell them more about how he was living the last few months.” Melissa lined up the boxes of rolls with the other baked goods in the storeroom, then started in on unpacking boxes from a dolly.

“He still in a coma?” My gut churned, a toxic stew of worry for Robin and concern over Zach. I took a box of cans from Melissa and started sliding them onto shelves.

“No. It doesn’t look good.” She paused in her work, gnawing on her lower lip.

“*Shit.* Pardon me.”

“No, it’s okay. Anytime one of our guys gets hurt it’s hard, but it’s really hard when it’s a kid.”

“Was Robin really upset by the parents?”

“Not exactly. He kind of bonded with the mom. He went back with them to the hospital.”

The queasiness in my gut morphed into a tidal wave of worry, bringing with it a vicious need to get to Robin.

“Shit,” I said again. “He’s into this thing too deep.”

“Yeah.” She sighed, sinking down onto a stack of boxes. “Robin was around Zach’s age when he first came around here. Tweaked out of his gourd most of the time, but occasionally I’d get him to eat something. Got him talking a few times. Then Christmas time . . .” She shook her head.

“What?”

“Friend of his named Tim died. OD’d. Kid was younger than him. We were all real worried about Robin.”

“Yeah.” A chill raced up my back. Whenever something like an overdose happened, things could go either way—could scare someone straight or could push him down an even more dangerous path.

“But then a miracle happened: I got Robin to call his mom for the holidays. I’d been working on him for months to call home. Or get him to accept a referral to services. *Anything*. His mom talked him into giving rehab one more go. And he’s made it three years now.” She wiped at her eyes. “But I’m worried he’s taking this Zach thing way too personally. Seeing himself or his friend in Zach’s situation.”

“Crap. Yeah, I’m worried too,” I admitted. “You got the hospital info? I think I might go check on him. Make sure he doesn’t need anything.”

“Yeah. You’re a good friend, Vic.” She smiled at me through misty eyes. “For what it’s worth, you’d be way better for him than Paul ever was.”

“We’re not—”

“Cliff’s got me down for a ten that you guys get together. Don’t go screwing with the betting pool.” Melissa’s smile was a bit too wide, like she was forcing herself to grab for a joke when what she really wanted were more tissues.

Me, I wasn’t too thrilled about being the gossip of the day. Soup, bread, and a side of the when-will-Vic-get-laid betting line. No, thanks. My back stiffened like week-old sourdough. I regretted ever telling Cliff about my resolution.

“Cliff needs to learn to shut his mouth.”

“Oh!” She clapped her hands together, her face brightening like I’d let something slip. “I knew there was something there!”

“Nothing to talk about.” Cliff might be my best friend and my boss, but I was gonna put a serious hurt on him next time I saw him.

“Oh, come on, Vic. I’ve had a sucky week. We all have. Don’t hold out good news.” She made a pleading face that probably won her all sorts of donations and confessions.

“I’ll see.” I straightened a row of cereal that didn’t need it. I really wasn’t one to kiss and tell, and having never had a boyfriend before, fake or otherwise, I didn’t know how to handle all this curiosity. Flattered, I guess, but mainly I wanted to get to Robin. Check in on him. Part of me didn’t want to confide in Melissa because I still couldn’t believe a guy like Robin would want someone like me. He was young and beautiful and kind, while I was old and cranky and decidedly not so beautiful. And it didn’t matter how many orgasms we shared or how many public places we went together, it was a hard feeling to shake.

I got the hospital info from her and headed over after I took the truck back and grabbed a few things from inside the store. I texted Robin on my way over, but he didn’t respond.

I found him in the ICU waiting area, sitting next to a small blond woman with messy hair and red eyes. He spotted me as soon as I entered the seating alcove, an uncertain smile peeking out of his worried face.

“Vic? What are you doing here?” he asked. Robin and the lady both stood up as I approached their section of the waiting room.

“Melissa at the shelter said you were here with Zach’s folks. Wasn’t sure if they’d eaten, so I brought them some food.” I held out the bakery box.

“I’m Tonya, Zach’s mother. Thank you; you’re very kind. His dad’s in with him now, but he’d thank you, too.”

“You good on coffee?” I asked her. “Want something not from the cafeteria?”

“We’re good.” She gave me a weary smile. “Do you know Zach, too?”

“No,” I admitted. “But I’m so sorry he’s hurt.”

“Vic’s my boyfriend.” Robin moved closer to me, which surprised me. “The one I was telling you about?”

Robin was telling strangers about me? I felt more than a little guilty for the flip in my stomach and the lightness in my knees.

“Oh. Of course. The baker. How ... lovely.” Tonya looked away. I didn’t take it personal. Lord only knew what sorts of emotions she was battling, or how the family had handled Zach’s being gay. Or his using. Had they been like Robin’s family and cut him off financially? Emotionally, like so many others?

Tonya seemed to drift off into her own world, going back to sitting on a vinyl bench, fiddling with her hands. All the machines and monitors on the floor emitted a steady beep-beep-blip-blip drone, each noise more lonely than the last. Over at the nurses’ station, a group of blue-clad nurses talked in hushed tones. I felt a swift urge to call my own mother. Tell her I loved her and figure out a way to say thanks that didn’t sound all cheesy. I’d call her as soon as we were done here. Maybe I’d mention Robin. For the first time ever, I had a guy I wanted the family to meet. She was joking just the other week that Trevor and I were the last two Degrassi boys unattached.

“You wanna walk with me?” I asked Robin. “Get you a coffee or a soda?”

“I’m not thirsty, but I’ll walk a bit.” He bent to say something to Tonya, who nodded absently.

The glassed-in patient cubicles surrounded the nurses’ station in a horseshoe shape, but I headed in the opposite direction, down the main corridor.

“The doctors don’t think he’s going to make it,” Robin said as soon as we were out of earshot.

“Oh, man.” I didn’t have words for how much that sucked—for Zach, for his parents, for the world, and for Robin, who looked like a boulder sat on his shoulders, pushing him down, locking his features in a grimace.

“His folks are all alone.” Robin’s voice was strained. “Everyone else gave up on him a long time ago.”

“Real nice of you to come sit with them.”

“I suppose. You don’t have to stay.”

“Hey. If you’re gonna be here, I want to be here, too.” My sour stomach called me a liar. I hated hospitals. Couldn’t wait to get out after my surgery. They reminded me of death; the smell of antiseptic and old coffee in the hall was taking me back to the bitter, ugly days when I lost my dad and Manny. I didn’t *want* to be there, but I *needed* to be there for Robin, to stand witness somehow to the pain I saw in his eyes.

“I’m probably going to go soon.” He chewed on his lower lip. “I’m not sure I’m doing much good.”

We came to a sky bridge with little benches by the glass walls. I tugged him over to one and sat down next to him. There were enough people needing comfort on this floor that I didn’t think twice about wrapping an arm around him.

“I’m sure you’re doing more good than you think, but you want to come back with me? Let me cook you some dinner, relax a little, and then see if you need to come back?”

“Ah. Thanks, Vic, but I’m not feeling up to that.”

“It’s okay that you’re feeling down. You can just veg out on my sofa. Let me cook for you. You shouldn’t be alone.”

“Oh. My. God.” His shoulders stiffened and he scooted away from me. “Melissa got to you, didn’t she? Look, I’m not at risk of relapsing. I’ll go to a freaking meeting tomorrow if it gets people off my case.”

“Hey. Whoa.” I reached for his hand, but he yanked it away. “I don’t think you’re about to relapse. I think you need ... some comfort. Let me take care of you, baby. You can help Zach’s parents more with a good meal and some rest in you.”

“Ah . . . thanks, Vic.” Some of the fight went out of his face and he let me take his hand. “I just really need to be alone. I’ll call you later or something.”

The “or something” made my stomach cramp. “Are . . . are you through with us?”

“What?” He shook his head. “No. I just need some space tonight. Trust me. My mood is too black for me to be good company.”

“You don’t have to be good company,” I said softly. “We don’t have to —”

“Can we just drop it?” Robin’s eyes were bright. “I said I’ll call. Maybe brunch tomorrow?”

“Okay. It’s a date.” I clenched my hands to keep them from shaking, kept them clenched the whole way back to my car. My brain felt clogged, like frustration and worry were making ordinary tasks impossible. Ended up sending my mom a quick text because I wasn’t sure my brain would cooperate for a call—didn’t want to end up unloading all my shit on her. It took me three tries just to unlock my stupid car door. I wanted to trust

Robin, wanted to trust he'd be okay, wanted to trust we'd get through this together.

It was a crappy date for sure. Robin barely picked at his food and the easy conversation of a week ago was gone. We were crammed into one of the long tables, surrounded by young families and weekend hipsters, with no real space for me to touch Robin or talk frankly.

"You going back to the hospital today?" I asked, wishing I could force more food on him. He dragged the same piece of toast around uneaten scrambled tofu.

"Yeah. Probably. They don't have anyone else. At least I can fetch stuff for them. Listen."

My hand moved restlessly at my side. Damn people, penning us in. I wanted to wrap Robin in my arms. Protect him from the oncoming hurt. His kindness was what had attracted me to him to begin with; he was so darn selfless. But it also had the potential to cut him open, leaving him vulnerable and hurting.

"I can come too."

"Nah. You don't need to." He picked up a strawberry, considered it, then set it back down.

"I want—"

"They're not the coolest about the gay thing. That's part of what I was listening to them about. They weren't the most accepting when Zach came out to them. They feel guilty and they're working through it, but I think seeing us together might be hard, especially us happy with each other."

I'd gotten that impression too, and ordinarily I'd say that other people's discomfort with my sexuality was their own damn problem, but grief-racked parents got a little leeway.

"We're happy?" I asked. Robin seemed anything but, with listless eyes that didn't meet mine.

"Zach thing aside, you really have to ask?" He offered me a weary smile. "Maybe I can come over after the hospital?"

"Anytime. Even if it's late. Especially if it's late."

We finished breakfast and walked a bit on Alberta afterward, but it was like there was a spatula between us, shoving us apart, filling us up with unpleasant emotions and uncomfortable silences.

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Chapter 11

Buzz. My phone skittered across the ottoman next to my feet. I grabbed for it.

You up?

It was nearly eleven and I was pretending to watch *The Walking Dead* and pretending like I wasn't being attacked by a horde of worries about Robin.

Yes. Coming over? I replied.

He knocked on the door thirty seconds later.

"That was fast," I said as I let him in.

"Didn't want to wake you." He jammed both hands into his jeans pockets, his shoulders hunkered in his coat, looking young and alone in the half-lit entryway.

"You didn't. You look like crap," I said baldly, rubbing his arms. The damp, chilly night seemed to cling to him. "You eaten?"

"Yeah. With you, remember?"

"That was almost twelve hours ago."

"I think there was a Snickers bar in there somewhere." He shrugged, looking sheepish.

"I'm gonna make you a sandwich."

"You don't have to—"

"I'm going to make you a sandwich," I repeated, using my "mean" voice and a stern look. "And you're going to eat it. And say 'Thank you, Vic.' "

That got a tiny laugh from him. "Thank you, Vic."

I led him back to the kitchen.

"I'm not sure how I'm supposed to eat with you looking like that."

"What?" I said before I looked down and realized I'd answered the door wearing nothing but plaid pajama bottoms. "Oh, hell. Let me grab a shirt."

Cheeks heating, I detoured toward my room, but he stopped me with a hand on my arm.

"I was teasing, Vic. I meant you look good. Distracting." His hand came around to tease the drawstring of the pants. The red plaid pants were too baggy and had ridden low, something Robin exploited with his fingers,

teasing along the waistline. With all the expense of getting new clothes, pajamas had fallen to the bottom of the list.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He looked up at me, a strange, almost tender expression on his face. “You don’t see it, do you?”

“See what?”

“How hot you are?”

“Hot? Me? Nah.” I brushed a kiss across his head. “You know you’re getting laid later regardless of how thick you lay it on, right? I know I’m not good-looking—not like you.”

Robin did laugh, then, a full, rich sound that filled my narrow hallway. “No, Vic, you’re definitely nothing like me.”

“See, I told—”

“You don’t have to look like me to be smokin’. You look like The Rock and Vin Diesel had a love child. I could work out for two years and not be as jacked as you.”

I felt like I’d gobbled a package of Red Hots—that burning rush of sweetness. I looked down at my chest and arms. Yeah, I guess I was getting more ripped than I realized. No more man boobs was nice. But no matter how many hours I put in at the gym, I couldn’t seem to outrun my teenaged self, who’d worn a shirt even while swimming. Hell, even my thirty-year-old self had kept a shirt on for most hookups. It felt weird, Robin’s eyes on me like I was steak and he was waiting for someone to hand him a fork.

“Lemme make you that sandwich.” I headed for the kitchen and got a pan on to preheat before I turned back and around and found him smirking at me. “What?”

“You’re cute.” Instead of grabbing one of the stools at the breakfast bar to watch me cook, he came around to the sink. “It okay if I clean?”

“Sorry.” There were some dishes from my solitary dinner in the sink and some boxes out on the counters. At work, neatness counted, down to the last drip of icing, but at home, living alone, I got a little lax.

“Oh, no, it’s all good.” Robin ran hot water for the dishes and grabbed soap.

“I’ve got a washer.” I pointed to the ancient thing on one side of the sink.

“It’s okay. I want to do them this way. I *need* to clean right now. Need to do something.”

“Yeah. I’ve been there. You want to talk about it?” I had a little bread and a little low-fat cheese and some meat left over from my dinner. I started him a toasted sandwich.

“God no. I want to scrub and scrub and not think about anything. Growing up, we always had a housekeeper. There wasn’t a lot for me to do. But she was nice, from Sweden. And she used to let me work alongside her. I loved it.” His face got dreamy and far away. “Sometimes I just need to get something *done*.”

“I hear that.” I’d been there, in the first terrible days after Manny passed. Drove around Portland for hours, thinking and wondering and hating and raging. Then I’d come back home and desperately want some small task to occupy even a piece of the hurt I carried around.

Robin attacked my dishes with similar vigor, soaping up a pot so hard I feared for the enamel.

“Lord knows I never run out of shit to do around here.” I flipped the sandwich, covertly studying him. Messy hair fell in his eyes and his skin was pale and pasty.

“You really going to sell the place?” He had that HGTV-RENOVATION-SHOW gleam in his eye again, no doubt cataloging all of the kitchen’s vintage charm—and many flaws—from the original cabinets to the ancient appliances.

“That’s the plan. Was never supposed to take me long to get stuff done, but with Manny passing and my surgery, and me not being the best handyman . . .”

“Why not buy it off her yourself? Then you could take your time. Do it right.”

“Nah.” I waved my spatula, dismissing such silliness. “Place like this? It needs a family. People. Not some single dude bumbling around.”

“Families are good.” He looked up from scrubbing the chipped Formica counters. His sad tone made it sound like they were anything but. “You could always give it one, though.”

Shoulders drawing up tight, I paused in pouring soup into a pan. If only it was so easy. *You up for it?* The words were right there, trapped behind a thick tongue that wouldn’t move. No doubt Robin was picturing me and some faceless dude, while I was seeing a future I’d never have, at least not as long as Robin kept insisting that this was only casual.

“Yeah, not happening,” I said, laughing like he’d been joking, like he hadn’t pushed a little sliver of need right into my heart.

“See, I never understood my dad’s obsession with new development. I mean, I know it makes his company a shit-ton of money. But old places like this? They have a soul.”

“Truth.” I wished I had his pretty way with words. Wished his words didn’t unearth feelings in me I didn’t know what to do with. Wished I could make the unhappiness and tension drain away from Robin’s face. But wishes weren’t worth much. I finished cooking the sandwich, plated it. It was hardly gourmet, but it was good, honest comfort food, the best I could do with a limited pantry.

“Here you go.” I motioned him over to the little table in the breakfast nook where I took most of my meals.

“You’re not having anything?”

“Nah. It’s late.” There was a time when that hadn’t stopped me, but those days had long past. I grabbed a chair to keep him company. Watching Robin eat was its own form of nourishment.

“This is amazing.” He licked his lips around a glob of cheese. “You’re such a good cook.”

“It’s just grilled cheese and tomato soup.” My cheeks heated from the compliment.

“Yeah, but it’s *good*. Oh, man, I hadn’t realized how hungry I was.” He devoured the sandwich and drained the soup.

“More?” I’d happily make the man ten meals if it kept that sated look on his face.

“I’m good.” He patted his stomach. “Good, but tired. It’s okay if I crash here, right?”

“You have to ask?” I knew this thing between us was still new, but we’d slipped so easily into near-nightly sleepovers that I’d missed him like crazy the previous night.

“Good.” He gave me a smile that was more sleepy than seductive. “Can I shower?”

“Of course. Take all the time you need. You can even take a bath, if you’d rather.”

I got him a fresh towel—the best, fluffiest one I had. Robin used water for stress relief in the same way I used work as an escape. And if that’s what he needed, I wanted to give him a good escape. I used the dimmer

switch to lower the bathroom lights. “My sister got me these stress-relieving bath crystals for Christmas. No idea what Joanie was thinking, but you can have at them.”

I set them on the tub and turned to find him looking at me oddly. “What?”

“No one’s ever . . . you’re good at taking care of people.” He gave my arm a squeeze on his way toward the tub. “Guy could fall in love with you, almost too easily.”

My hand gripped the sink, almost tight enough to crack it. *Do it. Just do it.* Words, pretty and meaningless, gathered in my mouth, only to be promptly discarded by my brain.

“I’ll . . . uh . . . leave you to your bath. Or shower. Whatever.” *Smooth, Vic, real smooth.* I beat a hasty retreat out of the room.

“You still up?” Robin slid beneath my sheets, smelling vaguely like the ocean.

“Yeah.” *And how.* His naked body slid against mine as he cuddled in.

“Good.” He curved into me, stretching for a kiss.

My hands tangled in his damp hair. His warm mouth was a sexy contrast to his cool skin. While he’d been in the bath, I’d lectured myself that he might not be up for sex and to let him sleep, but all those good intentions fled with the first hot flick of his tongue against mine.

Both of us were on our sides, him rocking against me. Eager to feel his skin against mine, I wiggled out of my PJ bottoms. I honestly didn’t miss fucking; rubbing off like this with Robin was simply too good to feel even a pinch of disappointment. The slide of his cock against mine always sent little shooting stars of pleasure up my spine.

“Vic,” he whimpered, pushing into me.

“I got you, baby,” I whispered. Snaking a hand between us, I wrapped my fist around both of us and started stroking. The intensity of his kisses ramped up, with little whimpers and shudders in between slow, deep kisses. He thrust up into my hand, and his movements felt different tonight. There was a quiet desperation behind them, and I tried to match his intensity, give him what he needed. I cradled him to me and with my lips and hands and cock, I urged him to let go, to let me take care of him, to let himself feel good.

“Oh, fuck, Vic.” His moan echoed off the plaster walls, his body straining toward mine.

“Yeah.” I felt my lower back tighten, my balls tingling. “Come on, do it.”

“Mmm.” A strangled sound escaped from between his gritted teeth. His head tipped back, every muscle tight.

“Yeah, that’s it. So beautiful.” Watching his face sent me over, and I stroked through it, expecting him to come, too, but his body stayed tense. I shifted so that my hand stroked only him, using the slickness to work him off faster.

“I can’t.” His muscles sagged, going limp, but with frustration, not orgasm.

“Yeah, you can.” I kissed him, still working him with my hand.

“God, it’s right there.” He tensed again and I sped up my strokes. “*Hell.*” His curse wasn’t one of pleasure.

“Sssh.” The mellow glow of my orgasm faded, replaced by concern. I smoothed the hair back from his head. Could practically feel his brain cells chugging along. He needed to stop overthinking this. Grabbing his hand, I brought it to his cock, then started kissing my way down his chest. “Show me how you do it.”

“I can’t.” He rolled away. “Just one of those nights when I can tell it’s not happening, no matter how much I’d like it to.”

“I bet you could if I suck you off.” I tried to pull him back, but he resisted my embrace.

“Leave it, Vic.”

“I feel bad—”

“Don’t.” His tone was curt, but he reached for my hand. “Just . . . hold me? I’m too tired.”

My mouth tasted bitter, like I’d grabbed salt instead of the sweet sugar I’d been craving. But one look at his tired face curved against my pillow told me I wasn’t winning this one. I gave in and snuggled up to his back, the way he liked to sleep, with me draped around him. Sometimes we slept the other way, with him using me as a sort of giant body pillow, but most nights we ended up like this.

His breathing softened and he was asleep in seconds. Me, I lay awake a long time, feeling like shit because he hadn’t gotten off and feeling worse at how he seemed to be retreating, skating farther and farther away from my

grasp. And I couldn't stop the sinking feeling that he'd found himself on ice so fragile, I wouldn't be able to yank him back if he fell.

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Chapter 12

I hate redos. Hate everything about them. Hate trying to decide whether to fix or scrap. Hate watching good things fall in the trash because they aren't quite perfect. I cursed as I tossed the heap of mangled fondant and cake that was supposed to be the Caldwell anniversary cake.

"What the heck is with you?" Cliff asked, looking up from the line of cupcakes he was icing. "Boy problems?"

"Nothing I wanna talk about, and nothing I want to hear back around on the gossip loop."

"Oh, come on, man, can't you see that there are a whole lot of people who want to be happy for you?"

Shoulders going rigid, I shook my head. Melissa had said almost the same thing, but I wasn't sure I trusted it. Wasn't sure I trusted me. Wasn't sure I trusted Robin anymore. He hadn't come over Monday night. I knew Robin's unhappiness had little to do with me, but it still felt like my fault that he wouldn't let me in.

I grabbed two fresh vanilla sponge layers off the rack, put them on my station, filled them with buttercream and raspberry jam as per the order sheet, and dirty iced the stack. Just as I started rolling the fondant, Cliff came back over, leaning on my table.

"You know, back when I was running after Trish, I didn't take no for an answer."

"Isn't stalking illegal?" I didn't look up as I carefully draped fondant over the cake.

"I don't mean literally. I mean, I courted her. Didn't let her turn me down."

"Look at you being Mr. Matchmaker." I made a shooing motion with my piping bag.

"I'm just saying, you should woo the boy. Take him—"

"This isn't something dinner at Piazza Italia will fix, man. I don't need to seduce Robin. I just need him to feel better, okay? I need him not to shut me out." *Hell.* My hands clenched, squeezing the piping bag too hard. Hot pink

icing glopped all over the nice white fondant. Hadn't meant to say any of that.

"Knew it. You're in love with that boy." Cliff said this cheerfully, like the revelation wasn't supposed to tear me open, leaving me raw and exposed, like half-baked bread.

"We're just friends with benefits." I scraped the excess icing off the cake and tried to salvage the mess. "And that better not be repeated."

"You can trust me." Cliff held up his hands. "But that's what I mean. Since when do you wait for someone to ask for help? You gonna start waiting for Melissa to call before you run bread over to the mission? Gonna wait for Trish to tell you some cake's too heavy for her? Gonna wait for me to ask before you do the run to Caldwell's tomorrow?"

"This isn't like that ... he doesn't want my help." I looked away, trying not to show how much it killed me. I'd thought I could be Robin's rebound guy, but truth was, I was a damn crappy rebound guy. I didn't want to be Robin's casual, feelgood fuck. I wanted to be his everything. I wanted to get him through the pain of Zach being hurt—and not by waiting on the sidelines.

"Vic." Cliff held out a hand. "Let me fix the cake. It's Tuesday. Robin will be at the shelter. Don't let him shut you out."

"You just want to win your bet."

"No. I want you to win yours."

I headed over to the shelter because Cliff was right: I was a take-action kind of guy. Holing up and waiting for Robin to call me—that wasn't my style. Nothing good would come of letting Robin hide away. Even if he didn't want me, he needed to know he wasn't alone. And yeah, despite what I'd told him, I was worried about him and sobriety. Not quite the same as Robin's issues, but I knew how loss and temptation could get tangled up.

When I missed Manny the most, I could smell pizza and taste microbrew, and the memory of sharing an entire pie together would give me the urge to bury the ache of missing him under something heavy and carb-loaded. And then I'd hit the gym, clanking barbells extra hard until the urge passed. I didn't know what Robin used to beat back temptation. But I wished I did—it didn't have to be me, or involve me. I simply wanted to help ensure he had his weapon of choice.

When I got to the shelter clumps of smokers sat out front like always, but they were talking in hushed tones. An anxious vibe seemed to roll off the building, like the foundation had tilted since I'd been there last. I checked both the dining room and the staff room, but there was no sign of Robin—or Melissa, for that matter.

A few volunteers were in the kitchen, starting the dinner prep, but Robin wasn't among them. They, too, seemed on edge, talking in low voices and looking up at my arrival, then quickly looking away. No shouted greetings or hugs like usual. My heart clattered in my chest, insides all wobbly as I got a very bad feeling.

Please let Robin be okay. I said a quick prayer to the same God I'd fought my dad so passionately over.

I headed through the deserted storeroom, out to the loading bay. When I peeked around the side of the dock, I saw Robin's dark hair.

Thank you. Relief, sure and swift, swept through me, but as I stepped through the door, I saw the rest of him, and rage replaced every last drop of relief. He was sitting on the edge of the dock and Paul was holding him, his arms around him.

No.

My muscles froze, literally seized up, my throat closing, my arms paralyzed.

I knew I should call out. Say something. Keep going forward. Pull the two of them apart. But I couldn't do any of that. The ache in my chest was too big, the pain too large to bear. He'd found his weapon and it wasn't me. Instead, I fled, through the storeroom, through the kitchen, through the hall until I reached the entryway benches and collapsed, my head on my hands.

I wasn't sure how long I stayed like that, but I raised my head at the sound of Robin's voice.

"Vic? What are you doing here? Did you hear?"

"I saw," I said, somehow keeping my voice level.

"You—what?"

"I saw. You and Paul," I said, focusing on dirty footprints on the linoleum, not able to look at his beautiful face. "I get why you'd pick him. It's okay. I want you to be happy. I get—"

"You get *nothing*, Vic." Robin's voice was harsh enough to make me look up. His eyes were Arctic Winter chilly. "Zach is dead. Melissa's with his family right now. *Dead*. And Paul found me—and oh my God, how

could you not speak up if you saw him touching me? Did you stay long enough to see me push him away?”

Relief and shame and grief bundled together, overloading my nerve endings, filling my head with buzzing static.

“No,” I said softly, holding out my hand. “I’m sorry—”

“Sorry? Vic, I wanted *you*. I wanted your arms. Zach is dead—”

“I know, baby, you said. And I’m here now.” I stood up, taking him in my arms, but he jumped back, crossing his arms over his chest.

“What? You think that makes up for not believing in me? For coming here to check up on me? For thinking that I would let Paul—*Vic, why can’t you trust me?*” He put so much pain into the question that it felt like a whip, stinging my skin, making my eyes smart.

“Last few days, you’ve shoved me away. I thought maybe we were through. Figured you didn’t want me anymore.” It felt like coffee grounds clogged my nose and throat. That. That was why I hadn’t sought him out. That was why it had taken a kick from Cliff to get me here. I’d been afraid, pure and simple. I hadn’t wanted to hear him say—

“Well, we’re sure through *now*.” His face was stony, his eyes gone from blue to almost black.

I froze. On the inside and the outside. Like I’d been zapped with a freeze gun from a sci-fi movie, some funky weapon that spat out paralyzing pain. I shook my hands out, forcing my blood to keep circulating, forcing myself not to let him walk away before I could speak.

“Wait.” My voice croaked. “Robin. I’m sorry. I jumped to conclusions when I saw you and Paul, but you’re hurting right now. It’s not a good time to make rash decisions—”

“It’s the perfect time because I can’t do this, Vic. I can’t do the casual thing with you—”

“I don’t want casual. I want you. And I do trust you.” My heart threatened to pump right through my sternum. I leaned on the bench for balance. Should have told him that days ago. Stupid fucking fear again. Been too scared to tell what I really wanted, and now I was about to lose him anyway.

“I don’t believe you,” Robin said flatly. “And I can’t handle *anything* right now. I can’t handle Paul. And I can’t handle you. And I really, really can’t handle that Zach is dead.”

“You don’t have to handle it. Let me—”

“Let you what? Wrap me in cotton? Protect me from myself ? I don’t need that.”

“Let me love you,” I said softly. “Let me hold you. You’re hurting.”

“No. Don’t you see? If things between us keep going, it’s going to hurt, so much more than it does right now, maybe even more than losing Zach. More than losing my friend Tim when we were both on the streets. And I can’t risk that, Vic. I can’t let you in and care about you and then find out you don’t trust me or have my back.”

“That’s not fair.” I let go of the bench, pulling myself back up. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for him. Have his back? I’d fucking carry him on mine. And I’d thought he knew that.

“Fair? Fair? There is *nothing* fair about today. Nothing. And I’m sorry, Vic. I can’t do us. Not right now. I just need some space. Time to think—”

“I can give you space.” It killed me to offer, but I’d give him whatever he needed. Even now, I’d strap him to me, carry him across the city. “Just don’t shut me out. I’m sorry, so sorry about assuming the worst when I saw you with Paul. And I’m so sorry about Zach. And you can have all the space you need to grieve and be mad, just please, *please* don’t shut me out.” My voice fucking broke and I stopped.

I’d never begged.

Not once. Not when the bullies had me cornered as a kid. Not when I lost the job at the mortgage company. Not when I fought with my dad. Not even at the hospital, losing Dad, then Uncle Mauro, then Manny. Never begged the universe for a second chance.

“I’m sorry, Vic.” With that, he turned on his heel and fled through the double doors, out onto the street. I chased after him—I wasn’t making the same mistake twice—but he was nowhere to be seen. Just smoke and blank faces and the lingering sense of loss that pervaded the whole shelter—the sense I hadn’t quite picked up on because I’d been so focused on Robin, so certain that it was about him and me and—

And I was a self-centered bastard. Robin was hurting and he was doing what he always did, pushing away people who wanted to help him. All I wanted was to find the right words for an apology, the right words that would make Robin listen, but I had nothing. I picked up my phone, debating texting him, but I had no idea what to say.

I typed, *Stay safe*, but then deleted it, because that sounded like I didn’t trust him.

Then I typed, *I'm sorry. I don't want to lose you*, but deleted that just as fast. I didn't want to be a needy, stalker boyfriend.

Then I typed the truth: *I love you and I'm sorry*. I knew I wouldn't send that one either, but I stood there and stared at my screen for a long minute. It was the truth.

I loved Robin Dawson. I'd loved him for a year at least. I'd loved him since before I made my New Year's resolution, since before my surgery. Probably loved him since the first day we pulled up to deliver bread and he was on the loading dock, shaggy hair and sunny smile.

My resolution had never been about finding a guy, any guy to try a relationship with. It had been about finding the balls to go after Robin. And I'd lied to myself and said I was okay being his rebound guy, that I was okay being a pit stop for him on the road to something better, when he was *my* destination all along.

I loved him. I loved his kind, generous heart. I loved the way he looked at my falling-down house and saw so much potential, the way he looked at my future and similarly saw a world of possibilities. I loved the way his face looked when he ate something I'd made, and I loved how he felt in my arms. I loved his fragility. I loved that he cared so deeply about things. And yes, he was right, I did want to protect him from the world. Was it so wrong to want to be his safe place? To want to comfort him?

And now I wasn't going to get the chance. My chest ached and my throat burned. Not since the horrible day when we lost Manny had I felt such agony. My whole body felt consumed by grief and I knew one simple very profound truth: I wasn't ever getting over losing Robin.

I thought of all the times I hadn't told my dad or my uncle—bless their cantankerous souls—or Manny what they meant to me. Life was too short for Robin not to know that he was loved—that it didn't matter if he came back to me, if he never spoke to me again. He was loved.

I hit send.

Chapter 13

I didn't really expect Robin to text back, but I kept my phone next to me all Tuesday evening. Came in, set my phone on the counter with the ringer turned all the way up, got my mail. Stack of junk, but the top piece grabbed my attention.

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I held that shiny flyer in my hand for a long time. Carried it and my phone to the couch. I thought about how badly my stomach would ache, how I'd most likely puke if I ate as much as I wanted right then. Thought about beer, and how I *had* puked the last time I'd tried one. I could go straight for hard liquor and a fast drunk, but that felt ... disrespectful to Robin and everything he stood for. If I was wrestling with my demons that night, he must surely have been wrestling ones twenty times larger. And I wanted to believe with every fiber of my soul that he would win. That he would be safe that night, and the next night after that.

I pushed up from the couch, let the flyer flutter to the ground. I marched to my entryway. Surveyed it. Tried to see what Robin saw—the foot-thick crown molding details, the vintage light fixture missing two bulbs, the dusty hardwood floor. I pushed all thoughts of pizza from my head and put all my focus into cleaning that entryway.

I removed all the half-empty paint cans and the trash. Swept it clean. Put new lightbulbs in the fixture. Washed the trim. Next night, I went to Home Depot after work. Rented a steamer and spent the next four hours stripping my entryway of the peeling wallpaper. The next night I primed the walls. I ignored Cliff and Trish when they remarked on the bags under my eyes and my groans when I hefted flour sacks. The labor at home felt good. Right, even. Necessary.

I was piping a wedding cake when my phone rang. I dropped my icing bag and leaped across the room to answer the call.

“What happened to ‘all phones should be on vibrate,’ Vic?” Trish asked, trying to imitate my deeper voice and failing. Yeah, I'd cracked down on a couple of the assistants last year. Ordinarily mine never left vibrate. I hate loud ringers. But this wasn't an ordinary week.

I made a shut-it gesture and picked up the phone. “Hey?”

“Hay is for horses, Victor Degrassi. I raised you better than that.”

“Hello, Ma.” I drew out my syllables.

“You coming for dinner Sunday right?”

Hell. I’d forgotten that Sunday would have been my dad’s sixtieth birthday. Ma wanted to have a family dinner. Seemed kind of morbid to me, but even if he and I had had more than our share of words, I’d still loved him. More to the point, I loved my mom. Wasn’t about to disappoint her, no matter how shitty my week was working out.

“Yes, Ma. I’ll be there. What kind of bread you want?”

“A nice sourdough.” She said this thoughtfully, like she didn’t request a round sourdough for every family meal.

“I’ll do a cake for dessert, too. I’ll see what’s on order for Saturday. Work something in.”

“You’re a good boy, Vic. Something chocolate, maybe? I’m not supposed to say, but Tessa’s got an announcement. Some good news.”

“And her good news has her craving chocolate?”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Ha.”

“You respect your old mother.”

“You’re gonna outlive us all, Ma.” *I hope.* My gut flipped helplessly, knowing how little hope was really worth these days. God knew we didn’t need any more bad news. And Tessa having news should have made me happy—I’d put money on buying booties before the year was out. But instead, it made me think of Melissa and her dilemma regarding her maternity leave and Robin’s reluctance. And thinking about Robin made the burning spread from my shoulders all the way down my back, my muscles going slicing-wire tight.

“And Vic, we’ve got to talk about Mary’s place.”

“What about it?” I paced back and forth in front of my station.

“Spring’s coming. Time to call Cousin Carol’s husband. Get the house on the market.”

“It’s not ready—”

“Mary says she can make do with a low-ball offer. Her expenses are way less here. She just needs not to be worrying about the house. Needs not to have it hanging over her head.”

Her and me both. A deep, sinking feeling gathered in my lower stomach. The house had been hanging over my head ever since Manny passed. I should have been clicking my heels at the chance to be free, but instead I felt a deep weariness, a sense of failure clogging my lungs, almost like I could hear Manny laying into me.

“Yeah. I’ll talk to her Sunday, Ma. Come up with a plan.”

“And Vic—you need to move on, too. We all miss Manny—may he rest in peace—” There was a pause, and I knew she’d just crossed herself. “But you need to get your own life back. Your own place.”

Three days earlier and I would have told her about Robin. Told her how there were good things happening in my life. Told her I wasn’t missing Manny so much these days. Told her how the house didn’t feel so daunting anymore.

But today, missing Robin hurt even more than missing Manny. Made me feel old and cranky. And the thought of letting go of the house, of letting go of all of Manny’s plans to restore his mom’s place, that was its own kind of pain, a burn right below my breastbone.

“Yeah, I hear you, Ma.”

Friday dawned clear and cold. I’d already told Cliff I wouldn’t be in. After the last few years, I knew the drill by heart. I vacuumed out my car, then ironed the one pair of black dress slacks that fit me and a gray dress shirt. Put in my dad’s silver cuff links. Put on the same black and silver tie I’d worn to Manny’s funeral and my dad’s. Then I drove to the shelter and picked up Melissa, who wore a simple black dress with flats.

Next, we drove out to Troutdale to Zach’s memorial service. Much as my heart was breaking for Robin, I wasn’t going solely for him. I was going for Melissa and for everyone who’d tried so hard to save Zach. I was going for his poor parents and the lonely road they walked. I was going because the crowd was likely to be small and because I knew that not even the large crowds at my dad’s and Manny’s funerals had done a damn thing to stop my grief. I was going because Zach mattered.

And yeah, I was going for Robin. Robin, who wouldn’t return my texts. Robin, for whom my love wasn’t enough. Robin, who’d tried harder than anyone to get through to Zach. Robin, who loved deeply and silently.

“I asked Robin if he wanted to ride with us,” Melissa said as I got on I-84.

“What’d he say?” The hairs on my neck stiffened like soldiers ready for incoming bad-news grenades.

“That he’d be fine.” She said *fine* like it had twenty syllables. “He’s been fine all week. I’m pretty sure, fine, okay, yeah, and no are the only words he’s spoken to me in days. I’m worried about him.”

“Me too.” As the city gave way to suburbia, with miles of houses and neighborhoods, my worries mounted.

“I asked him to go to one of the meetings at the center and he just shrugged.”

“Hell. Sorry.”

Melissa laughed bitterly. “After this week I think we’re all entitled to a little cursing. He’s shut you out, too?”

“Yeah.” Bile rose in my throat and my stomach churned with a bitterness no amount of antacids could fix. My worry for Robin was an all-encompassing ache, and my memories of him, of what we were together, of what he was shutting out, seemed way too fragile to share. “You mind if I turn on some music?”

I turned up the radio, tuning it to a bland, easy-listening station. We passed the rest of the drive in near silence.

The funeral home was a long, low-slung, oversize ranch-style building with tasteful arborvitae and manicured walks. An older gentleman in a black suit had us sign the guest book, then ushered us to the small chapel. I’d been right; the crowd was sparse, maybe thirty people, most of whom looked like Zach and his mother. A few people I recognized from the shelter, including a quartet of young guys in ripped jeans and dirty parkas. Robin stood talking with them, looking achingly handsome in a gray suit. He’d put some product in his hair and he looked older. More aloof and regal.

Melissa went over and hugged him, but he held himself stiff as a broom handle. I wished I could be like her and swoop in for a hug, but instead I hung back. The rest of the world probably couldn’t see it, but I could tell how Robin was propping himself up: spine tight, eyes narrow, hands clenched. I could picture him drinking his coffee black, listening to that electronic crap he liked, psyching himself up to be here. The look in his eyes said he wanted to run but didn’t dare.

Melissa and I paid our condolences to Zach's parents. Zach's mother seemed as fragile as one of my sugar flowers, looking decades older than when I'd seen her last. We made our way to the tiny chapel and sat in the same row of folding chairs as Robin, but he didn't once meet my eyes.

The same gentleman who'd been overseeing the guest register gave a short welcome. A high-school friend read a short speech scribbled on a sheet of notebook paper. After the words had been said and more than a few tears shed, the crowd slowly filtered out. Hardly seemed like enough for the magnitude of the loss. Robin went over to Zach's mother, saying something to her in low tones. She waved him away.

"Robin." Melissa stopped him as he walked past. "You okay? You want to get some coffee?"

"Nah. Thanks, though." He shook his head. His eyes locked with mine and I felt something pass between us. It wasn't heat precisely, or even need. Wasn't apology or understanding, but there was this near-palpable awareness. In that instant, I saw all the pain he'd tucked away, all his sadness and longing. I thought he was going to let me in, acknowledge my presence, but then he glanced away.

"There's a meeting tonight at the center," Melissa added. "Maybe you could mention it to Zach's friends over there?"

"Will do."

"And maybe you can come?"

"I'll see." He walked over to the group of guys from the shelter, not looking back at us.

"Okay, I've gone from worried to flat-out panicked," Melissa said as we walked back to my car.

"I'm not worried about him using. You shouldn't be either," I surprised myself by saying. In that split second when Robin had let me see inside him, I had glimpsed a spine of steel. I wasn't worried about Robin using, not like Melissa was. I was worried about how else he might torture himself, because what he was wrestling with seemed larger than grief, larger than Zach and the tremendous hole he'd left behind.

I'd also seen something else in his eyes, something that made it so I wasn't shocked to find his car idling in front of my house when I arrived home after dropping off Melissa at the center.

"I'm still mad at you," he said as he came loping up the broken sidewalk.

"Fair enough," I said cautiously.

“And I’m really, really not fit for company today.”

“Okay.” I unlocked the door, let us both into the house. If Robin noticed the work I’d done on the entry, he didn’t say anything.

“But please don’t send me away.” He said it like sending him away would have been possible for me, like it was possible I could ignore the agony in his eyes. My heart thudded painfully.

“Never.” I reached for him and he came readily, with grasping, greedy hands. He pushed me hard into the wall, kissing me with a desperation I could feel all the way to my bones. His teeth scraped my lip and I tasted blood, but it did nothing to deter my own rising lust. His need was a visceral thing, clawing at me, yanking at my tie and buttons. He was on his knees with my belt undone before I realized what he was after.

“Hey, wait—”

“Don’t say no.” He looked up at me, his eyes huge pools of pain and need.

Never. My stomach muscles tightened. I could turn down the sex easily. But him? That raw hurt rolling off him? Never.

“Bedroom . . .” I barely had the word out before he was swallowing me deep, his hands demanding on my hips. I knew what he wanted and I couldn’t deny either of us, rocking my hips in slow glides.

But he wasn’t satisfied with that by half, yanking on my hips, moaning around my cock.

I fisted my hands in his hair, which made him moan more. I yanked lightly, trying to get some control back, get him to slow down before I came in thirty seconds.

“Oh, fuck, do that again.” He pulled back long enough to look at me with pleading eyes. Yeah, I knew what he wanted.

“You want more? Want me to fuck your throat?”

He nodded. “Go hard.”

“Okay, baby.” I grabbed his hair harder, pulling him down my cock. The slick drag of his tongue made my whole body shudder. “Ready? I’m gonna go deep now.”

He moaned, long and low around my cock, inhaling hard. He trembled under my hands.

Oh, God, I wasn’t gonna last with the way he was so hungry for it. I started fucking him in earnest, pushing forward into the tight heat of his mouth, grabbing his head, holding him there until I felt his throat spasm,

then letting him slide back for a deep gasp before he was scrambling forward again.

“Doing so good. Such a good boy.”

He whimpered around my cock, and it was the sexiest fucking thing ever. I tried to read his gasps and moans and licks to give him what he needed. I pushed deeper, making us both moan. My balls lifted and I felt a warning tremble in my dick.

“Gonna come. You want that?”

“Can . . . you . . . go again?” His voice sounded like it had been through a food processor. “Come now, but go again in a bit?” His eyes were wild and glassy and his words were warm against my dick. I would have promised him damn near anything to get off.

“Oh, yeah, baby. I’ll take care of you after, I promise.” My words sounded rough and slurred, like I’d had three shots of Jack.

“Better.” He dove forward again, swallowing hard around me, stretching so that his lips brushed my pubes. Then his tongue came out, just the tip, just enough to sweep along the top of my balls.

“Oh, fuck.” The angle meant I felt his teeth a bit more, but the novelty of the action made up for the pinch. His tongue retreated and the pressure around my shaft eased. He inhaled big and I went deep. I held him there extra long, feeling the spasm around my cock, feeling the pressure in my balls build again. When he pulled back for a breath, I was ready, hands urging him forward again as I shot down his throat.

It wasn’t wave after wave of release so much as like a pressure valve had been opened. I still had a helluva lot I wanted to do to him, even as euphoria surged through me and rendered me stupid for a few moments. My shirt was unbuttoned, my pants opened and a mess. Robin’s nice pants had paint flakes all over them, and I’d rumbled the shoulders of his dress shirt something awful.

“What would you like, honey?” I touched his hair. He rested his head on my thigh. “A shower first, maybe?”

“I want you to fuck me.” His voice was strained yet firm.

My stomach dropped lower than the basement and I swallowed around the lump of sand in my throat.

Chapter 14

Robin stared up at me, his eyes full of expectant defiance. He also looked turned on as fuck, his lips still swollen, his cheeks all pink, his hard dick outlining his suit pants.

What are you waiting for? My body chugged toward yes, even as my logic said “hold up a minute.”

“I don’t want to hurt you. Not when you’re like this—”

“You always want to know what I need. I need *this*. I need you.” He stood, pulling his shirt off and unbuttoning his pants.

“Okay.” My body won that round but fast, but my mind still had doubts. “But slowly, all right? Maybe we should play more with a toy first?”

“Stop being so nice, Vic. Just stop. Fuck. Me.” He dropped his pants, leaving his clothes in a heap as he strode naked toward my bedroom, giving off a shit-ton of attitude.

“Wait.” I caught his arm at the door to my room. I didn’t have to fake my scowl or the gruffness in my voice. I was pissed that Robin had decided to use me for hate sex, and I was even more pissed at myself that I wasn’t ending this.

“What?” He looked up at me, his voice full of swagger, his eyes full of hurt. That. That was why I wasn’t throwing him out or calling this off. I would cut off my own fingers to spare him pain. Lord knew I’d do whatever he needed—even if it meant hating myself for it later.

“Who’s in charge here?” I glowered at him, the full-on stare down that made idiots like Paul turn tail and run and made Robin hot, but I wasn’t aiming to turn him on just then.

Robin looked like he might be about to protest, then bit his lip. “You are. But I—”

“But nothing. *You* are going to trust me to give it to you, okay?”

“I don’t want to be coddled.” His rebellious stare demanded action from me.

Anger and lust formed a potent cocktail, racing through my veins, making my steps unsteady. Oh, he’d get action all right, but on *my* terms.

“Fine. No special treatment.” I dragged him by the arm over to the bed, pushed him onto it, and stood over him. “But we do this my way. I am *not* going to hurt you. I am not going to let you goad me into hurting you. Understand?”

“Oh, yeah.” He was looking at my mouth. I knew I was frowning mightily down on him, but judging by the sway of his hard dick, that worked for him.

“You can have all the angry, rough sex you want, but you *will* feel good, understand?”

“I don’t want—”

“To feel good. I get it.” I stroked the hair back from his head. “But you will tell me if it hurts too bad or if you need to stop.”

“Goddamn you. Just *do* it already.” His whole body shook.

“Fine.” The word shot out of my mouth like a rocket, as nasty as any I’d ever spoken. I shoved him back on the bed, flipped him so that I was pinning him to the mattress. “This what you want?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“No prep? Just go?” I kept my voice hard and mean and leaned into him.

“Yes.” He shoved his ass up at me.

“Sorry. You’re not in charge.” I pushed him back down. “I am. And I’m going to play with you a while. Not because you like it. Or because it will make you feel good. Or because you deserve it. Nope. I’m going to play with your ass because *I* like it.”

I had never once fucked someone dry and I wasn’t about to start with Robin. I grabbed the lube and a condom from the drawer in my bedside table, set both aside. His whole body was wound tight as a roll of bakery twine. Beneath me, his ass clenched so tight I could bounce quarters off it—yeah, didn’t matter what bravado Robin was spewing forth, he was asking for a serious hurt if I tried to enter him right then, even with lube.

He rolled his head to the side, cursing softly. His mouth twisted, and in that moment, I saw the truth in his eyes. He *wanted* to fail.

He didn’t want rough sex because that turned him on, because a hard, dirty entry got him going. No, he wanted this because he wanted to fail.

He was asking for something he knew he couldn’t do. Maybe he wanted the pain and the begging and the disappointment and the having to stop because somewhere in his subconscious he thought he *deserved* to fail. Perhaps he couldn’t or wouldn’t let himself fail by relapsing, so he thought

he'd come here and fail at sex again. However, I knew Robin, and behind all that was a deeper need—a need not to have to think, to be so overwhelmed with sensation that whatever else was going on in his head would shut off.

That I could do.

“On your knees.”

My tie still dangled from my collar and I pulled it loose before stripping off my shirt.

“You trust me, right?” Without waiting for an answer, I wrapped the tie around Robin's head, blindfolding him.

“Oh, yeah.” Robin's voice sounded breathy and far away. “I've never—”

“Me either, but this is what you need, baby.” I kept my voice firm, knowing that what he needed was me in total control, not me asking him if he was all right with it.

“Okay.” Robin's head fell forward.

I stroked a hand down his back, doing that for several moments until I felt some of his tension ease.

“Only thing you're going to think about is this.” I traced patterns on his back with my tongue, trying to keep him guessing about where my tongue would land next even though we both knew where it was heading. His skin tasted sweet, like cookies, with a hint of salt and something more primal.

Kneading his shoulders and neck with my hands, I bit him. The contrast in sensations got a long moan from him, and I kept that up—rubbing and biting. His back was going to be a mess of hickeys later, but I couldn't say I was sorry about that.

“Fuck me.” He pushed his ass back into me, his feet tangling in the covers.

“Oh, I'm just getting warmed up.” I laughed, a low, dirty sound I'd never made before. I shifted so that his ass fucked nothing but air and he had to guess where I was.

“Fuck. You.”

“Not on the agenda. I'm in charge, sweet thing. Only me.” Capturing his mouth in a kiss, I teased him a little more. Moving around again, I kneaded his ass, watched him shiver as he guessed what was coming. I drew it out, rubbing and tugging his ass cheeks, blowing softly on his hole.

“Oh, God, Vic. Do it.”

“When I’m ready.” I gave his ass a light slap. Then, holding his ass open, I ran my tongue up and down the crack, barely skating over his hole until I felt the muscle quiver. I attacked him, licking and sucking and working him with my mouth until I gradually felt his tight hole soften, let me in. His whines were high-pitched, feral sounds as he rocked back onto my face.

My hands shook as I reached for the lube. Even after rimming him until he was incoherent, he was still so tense. I circled his hole with my lubed-up index finger, putting a little pressure on it until he rocked down to meet it.

“Jesus. So tight.”

“Sorry.”

I slapped his ass again. “No apologizing. Feels good. Gonna feel so good on my cock.”

“Yeah.” The bed squeaking, he rocked his hips, fucking himself on my finger. I lined up a second; with all the fooling around we’d done, I’d never given him more than the one finger because he’d tensed up both times I’d tried to go to two, and I hadn’t wanted to hurt him. But this time, with me biting his shoulders and whispering encouragement, he slowly rocked back on both fingers.

“Yes. That’s it, honey. Take it. Take it so good.”

“Ready. Oh, *God*. So ready.”

I got the condom on and myself slicked up, then positioned myself right at his entrance—

And he immediately went full-body stiff, his shoulders shaking with tension.

My heart squeezed, every bit as tense as his body. I had to resist the urge to tell him we’d stop. *No*. I wasn’t letting him fail and I wasn’t stopping until he’d proven his inner fears false.

“You can do it.” I used my slick finger to tease his hole again. “I’ve got you. Slow, okay?”

Removing my hand, I tried again with my cock, pressing forward, soothing his back with my free hand, making reassuring noises. He rocked his hips tentatively back.

“That’s it. Just take what you can.” My cockhead finally breached his tight ring of muscles, his ass gripping me like a vice. It was just this side of painful how tight he was. Holding myself still took every ounce of concentration I had, but I did it, my thighs burning, my lower back clenching under the strain of waiting.

It was worth waiting to watch Robin's spine undulate, his head stretching toward the ceiling as he arched his back, working himself down my cock by millimeters.

"Vic. Oh, God, Vic. Vic." He whimpered my name over and over as he slid farther back. "I need . . ."

"Yeah, baby. Take whatever you need." I stroked his neck, his sweat-drenched back, his ass, anywhere I could reach.

"Move. Oh, please, move." Sweat rolled down his back and he made little grunting noises as I rocked into him. "Oh, God. Like that. *Please.*"

I thrust more, feeling the tension ebb, the clench of his muscles lessening enough to let me slide back. Slowly, oh so slowly, I built a rhythm. A few times I felt him start to go on edge, but I wrapped an arm around his chest, my hand over his heart, steadying him. Through it all, I kept up a constant stream of praise.

"So good. Can you feel? You're taking my whole cock now. Doing so good."

I wrapped my other hand around his waist, searching for his cock, relieved to find him still rock hard.

"More." He rutted into my fist. "Need more. Harder."

"Mmm." A low hum of pleasure escaped my throat as I picked up speed, choosing an angle that nailed his gland over and over.

Body quaking, he let out a series of low moans. His body kept tightening—not like pain, more like he was thinking about coming but backing off each time he got close.

"You feel so good. Just let it go, Robin. Just feel. No thinking." I held him close to me while I thrust.

"Oh, God, Vic. So close. I want to come. Need to come." His voice was broken, each word punctuated by a deep shudder.

"You can do it, sweetheart. It's right there for you." I sped up my hand on his cock. "Letting me fuck you so nice. Taking it so hard. So fuckin' perfect."

"I can't . . . I can't . . . I can't." His body arched and strained.

"Yes, you can." I soothed him with words and hands and kisses along the back of his neck. I was trying to hold back myself, but the flutter of his muscles, sucking me back on every upstroke, made my heart pound.

"Oh, Jesus. Vic. I need this. Need you. Go hard. Please."

I obliged with deep, pounding thrusts that made the bed shake and him cry out. I stroked him faster, trying to get him to tumble over before I did, but I was fast hurtling to the point of no return.

“Vic. Oh. Jesus.”

The broken, ragged sounds coming from his mouth undid me, made me crazy and unhinged. I felt my orgasm start in my toes, build itself up, need rising higher and higher with each thrust, restraint dropping, until I couldn't hold back any longer. Pounding into him, I came in a furious rush.

“Oh, hell. Sorry.” I dropped kisses all down his spine as I came back to myself.

“It's okay. Don't think I can anyway—”

“You can,” I said firmly.

“I don't need to . . .”

“Shut up,” I told him bluntly as I pulled out. “I'm in charge. I'll tell you what you need.” I flipped him over so that he was on his back now, with my fingers pressing against his hole, finding their way in much easier now. “And what you need is this.”

I dropped my head and swallowed him deep, pressing against his gland with my fingers, working his head with my tongue. I glanced up; the tie had gotten all twisted up in his hair. His eyes were still squished shut, though, with moisture leaking out the sides. He was building toward something, something bigger than just an orgasm, something that was threatening to rip him to pieces.

And I knew instinctively that that's what he needed—he needed me to send him soaring, to force him to accept this release, to see him through to the other side. To not give up on him. He bucked against my hand and mouth. His body tensed, like he was about to shoot, then went slack right as I thought he was about to go.

“Come on, baby. You can do it. It's right there for you.”

“Don't have to . . . We can stop . . .” Tears were rolling down his cheeks now, but his body kept fucking my hand.

“No one's stopping. I'm here just as long as you need. Only thing you need to worry about is fucking my mouth. Fuck my fingers too, honey. Make yourself fly.”

I swallowed his cockhead again, using every trick I knew and some I invented, as my tongue worked the sensitive underside of his shaft. Curving my fingers, I pressed up hard on his spot until he howled.

“Unnh. Vic. Fuckfuckfuck. Vic.” Heels digging into the mattress, hands yanking my sheets loose, whole body arching like a bow, he went off, stream after stream filling my mouth. It was too much to swallow in one go—I had to pull back and work him through the rest of it with my hand, but I kept stroking until he was completely still.

My chest pounded like I’d climbed Mount Hood, and I felt that kind of victorious. Stretching out next to him, I took him in my arms. As soon as his head hit my chest, he started shaking like a baby bird. His face was wet with tears and I rubbed him all over.

“Sssh. It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

“Oh, Vic.” His voice cracked and he trembled in my arms, tears spilling faster. He scrubbed at his eyes. “Crap. I’m sorry. I don’t mean—”

“It’s okay. You’re fine.” I pressed a kiss on the side of his head. “You go on now.”

It seemed like that was it—like his tears had been waiting for permission to fall freely. Sobs wracked his body, and I knew without asking that this was the first he’d cried. Knew it wasn’t about me or the sex—all that was just a conduit, a way for the fountain of grief inside him to find the surface.

My own eyes burned and stung. All I could do was hold him and let him sob it out. Seeing another man weep like this was profoundly humbling; seeing strong, capable Robin reduced to a sobbing mess gutted me. My chest was damp where his face lay and my hand cramped where he was clutching it, but I kept holding on. I held on through his sobs, through his curses, through his sniffles and whimpers as the tears ebbed. Held on tighter as he started to talk.

“Why, Vic? Why? Why doesn’t Zach get a second chance?”

“I don’t know, baby, I really don’t.”

“But I did. Why me?” Robin sat up, scrubbing at his hair.

I had to think on this one; part of me wanted to tell him it was because he was special, because God had other plans for him, because it wasn’t his time. But instead, I went for the truth. “Because you were lucky.”

“I don’t want to be lucky,” he whispered. “It was supposed to be me. I should have died. Me. Not my friend Tim. Not Zach. Me. I should have died.”

“But you didn’t, Robin. And that’s good—”

“There should be a reason, right? A higher purpose why them and not me? And Vic, I’ve spent three years since Tim died, and I still haven’t

found the purpose. I'm not good enough."

"Yes, you are. You're one of the best people I know." I pulled the covers up from the foot of the bed, draped them around his shoulders. His skin felt clammy with tears and cooling sweat.

"Tim was the funniest guy I knew. And so good with animals—he could get alley cats to cuddle up with him. And Zach was an amazing musician. I never knew until his mom told me, but he used to write songs on their piano. They should still be here."

"Yeah, they should." The sting in my eyes intensified. Manny should still be here. And my dad and Uncle Mauro and everyone else taken too young.

"I thought ... I thought maybe Zach was my purpose," he whispered. "I thought if I saved him, if I got him off the streets, that would be a sign that I was on the right path, that I was here for a reason."

"You *are* here for reason—you're here for *you*." *And me*, I silently added. But I knew it would be too much to add that right then. My love for him was a physical ache. I felt each pained breath of his, each tug on his hair, each tear.

"It just *sucks*." He punched one of my pillows.

"Yeah, it does." I took a deep breath—so much emotion coursing through me, it was hard to talk. "It's never fair. Ever. Manny taught high school. He talked about getting his PhD so he could be a principal. Look at me. I bake things. Manny changed people's lives."

"Zach was so young, Vic. So young."

"I know."

"It could have been me." And then he was crying again, softer this time, and I held him tight. He sagged in my arms and I laid him down on the bed, cuddled him against my chest.

After a while he was silent, and I thought he might be sleeping, but his eyes were open while he held on to my arms.

"Sorry." He caught me staring at him.

"No more sorry." I brushed his hair out of his face.

"I should probably go." He didn't make any move to remove himself from my arms, so I squeezed him tighter.

"No. You can go back to hating me later if you need to, but let me love on you a bit right now."

I expected an argument, but instead he yawned. "Okay."

Chapter 15

We napped for a few hours. Well, Robin napped. I mainly watched him sleep. I'd lied, of course. He couldn't go back to hating me. I was going to fight for him with everything I had. Eventually I crept from the bed, started a pot of soup. Got a loaf of bread ready to go with it. Bit of a novelty, baking something at home. But Robin needed some comfort food—a nice pot of minestrone and a baguette would be perfect for this cold, dark day.

Grandma Degrassi used to make this soup whenever someone had a bad cold, but I associated it with being in her kitchen, chopping carrots and green beans for her, picking basil off the plants on her windowsill. Her kitchen was where I went when I wanted to get away from the world. Whenever my dad would start in on his “real-man” lectures, Grandma would slip me another cookie and shake her wooden spoon at my dad. *Not in my kitchen, sonny.*

She'd lived with Aunt Mary and Uncle Mauro in her later years, and this kitchen still felt more like hers than mine. Decades of family meals came from this stove. I stirred in some garlic and wished I had something better than soup to offer Robin's soul.

“That smells amazing.” Robin came to the door in only his boxers. “Sorry for sleeping so long.”

“Don't—”

“Say sorry. I know.” He laughed tentatively, like he was seeing if the sound still worked. “Still. I can't believe I passed out so long.”

“Bet you haven't been sleeping well this week.” I gave him a pointed look.

“Guilty.” He looked around. “Is that smell bread?”

“Yeah. Just plain.” I opened the oven to show him, and his face lit up like I'd revealed a seven-layer chocolate cake.

“Oh, man. The Swedish housekeeper I told you about made the most amazing baguettes. She was nice. She'd give me big pieces with lingonberry jam.” He looked up at me with big, hopeful eyes.

“I might have some marionberry in there.” I motioned at the fridge. “No lingonberries. But I could go to IKEA later. . . .” I stopped as I realized how

ridiculous I sounded.

“Have you always been such a nice person?” Robin grabbed a sponge and started scrubbing down the counter.

“You keep saying I’m nice.” I shook my head. “I’m not. Sophomore year I broke three of Richie Klein’s fingers for calling me a queer. When I was your age, I went to one of the bars with some friends. Three guys started hassling us.”

“You took on all three? In a bar fight?” He paused in wiping the counter, his eyes going wide.

“Only one of them needed stitches, but yeah. I narrowly avoided assault charges. I’m just saying—I’m not nice. I have a temper on me. Day before my dad died, I told him to go to hell. We were arguing about the Church again. I was sick of it. Told him where he could go and left my mom’s. Never saw him again.” My voice got a little raw at the end. Even years later, I could still remember how red his face had been as I walked away, still hear him calling after me.

“Man. That’s rough. But that doesn’t make you mean. I mean, yeah, you have this stare that says *I will steal your soul if you look at me wrong*. But you, my friend, are a *nice* guy.”

I shrugged. I wished he was able to see that *he* was a nice guy, too. The timer for the oven went off, and Robin grabbed two of my pot holders.

“Can I get it?”

“You eaten all week?” I laughed at him. “Yeah. You can get it.”

“Ow. Oooh. Ow.” He tried slicing the hot loaf as soon as he set the pan down.

“Here, pretty boy.” I pushed him onto a stool. “You have to give it a minute.”

“Pretty boy, huh? Is *that* why you’re so nice to me? ’Cause I’m pretty?”

I looked him over, not sure if he was joking or serious or what he might be fishing for.

“You’re fucking gorgeous. And I think you know that.” I ripped him off a hunk of bread and set it on a little plate with some butter and the jam from the fridge. “But if you’re asking me if that’s the only attraction for me, the answer’s no. You’re good people, Robin. Even if you can’t always see that. You’re good people.”

I didn’t have pretty words to tell him how he was the nice guy—far nicer than me. I didn’t have the words for how selfless he was. All I had was my

grandmother's soup and her words for people you wanted to have around.

"It's talking with you." I tried and failed to find some decent words. Grabbed some bowls for soup and the ladle.

"Pardon?"

"The attraction? You being built like a Hollywood A-lister doesn't hurt, but it's how we talked together. Always have. Right from our first shift together. That's the attraction for me. How the talking made me feel." All right, now I just sounded sappy. I sloshed the hot soup onto my hand. "Fuck."

I waved my hand, and Robin captured it, brought it to his mouth. He blew on my finger, then dropped a kiss on the inside of my wrist, right where the soup had landed.

"Vic?"

"Yeah?"

"What if I don't want to keep hating you?"

I sank onto the stool next to him, my knees turned into butter.

"Then don't." I knew my voice sounded too gruff. "Simple as that."

"I was a shit to you." He kissed my hand again.

"You were hurting. Grieving."

"I saw your text," he said softly. "The one from Tuesday."

I couldn't say anything, could only nod helplessly.

"I probably looked at it a hundred times that night."

"Yeah?"

"Looked at it a hundred more in the last few days. I wanted to call you. Wanted to come over. But I . . . I'm a mess."

"You got all fucked up about me not trusting you, but Robin, you gotta trust me, too. Trust me with your black moods and your anger and your sadness."

"You saw what happened today when I unloaded on you."

"That was *good*; you got to let all those feelings out. I want your mess. Bring it on."

He cocked his head to one side, considering. My chest pounded like a drum solo. I didn't have to consider. I knew.

"I'm serious. Bring it. You think you have something that's going to push me away? Bring it. Bring all your mess. I *want* to help you through things. Want to help you clean up things. Want to help you discover there's no mess at all."

“You’re . . . Vic.” He chewed on his poor lower lip something awful. “I could fall in love with you. So fucking easy. Hell, I think maybe I already am—”

“Then do it. Go ahead. Fall in love with me.”

“You’re serious.” He dropped his bread to the table. “I get depressed sometimes—”

“Figured that out already. Not scaring me off.”

“I’m on the rebound.”

“From Paul the Shit? He doesn’t worry me. What, you wanna sleep around more? Get your single sex on?”

“You know I don’t. With you it’s just . . .” He inhaled sharply. “I’ve never had anything like what we share.”

“I know. Me neither. Never been so good.”

“Even with my issues—”

“Baby, the only ‘issue’ ”—I used air quotes—“you have is thinking there’s something wrong with you. I get that you have moods. They don’t scare me away. And we could not fuck for another six months and I’d still be right here.”

“Six months, huh?” He scooted closer to me. “A whole six months of no sex?”

“I was thinking no anal, but sure. No sex. I’d still be here. I’d still want you.”

“So you’re saying it’s safe to let myself fall in love with you.” He seemed to spin the words over in his mouth, test them out.

“I’m saying I love you.” I put my hand over his. “And yeah, it’s safe to fall in love with me.”

“I . . .” Voice cracking, he trailed off. For a second, I thought he might cry again. My throat got tight and my eyes smarted. If he cried, I was a goner. I got off my stool, came around, and wrapped my arms around him. “I want to believe.”

He took a deep breath, his slim ribs expanding, his muscles rippling in a way that made me regret promising I could live without sex.

“Then believe. Believe in us.”

Instead of replying, he leaned up and kissed me. The softest brush of two lips against mine, but there was so much emotion behind it. I kissed him back, deepening it, telling him with my lips and tongue and hands how I

felt. Somehow, we ended up on the floor, and it was a long, long time before we came up for air.

The soup went so cold I had to dump our bowls back in the pot and reheat it.

“What time is it?” Robin asked.

“Five-thirty.” I pointed to the clock on the microwave.

“Okay. NA meeting’s at seven at the center.”

“You’re going to go?”

“Yeah.” He nodded slowly. “Melissa’s right. I . . . I need a meeting after the week I’ve had.”

“You want me to go, too?”

“Nah. I can just call you . . .” He stopped, looking me over like he was trying to decipher a code. “You’re serious about going over to the mission with me, aren’t you? I mean, you didn’t just offer to offer, right?”

“I never offer just to offer.” I ladled up fresh soup.

“I know. It’s one of the things I . . . I love about you. And you’re right. If we’re going to do this thing, I need to stop shutting you out simply because I think I’m going to feel shitty after going to the shelter.”

“Damn straight.” Joy as warm as the soup gathered in my insides. Him deciding not to shut me out felt almost bigger than those three little words. “But, Robin, why go to the center if it’s going to make you feel that bad? There are other NA meetings tonight. We can find one for you. Maybe you should take some time before going back to the shelter.”

“No.” He laughed, a dry, crackly sound. “You’ve told me all about your family over the years. How big and crazy they are?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the shelter is family to me. It frustrates me and infuriates me, and lately, it depresses me, but it’s still family. I don’t want a different meeting. I need to be with my family tonight.”

“Then we’ll both go. And I’ll tell you more about the latest with my crazy family on the way.”

Chapter 16

“You came!” Melissa rushed Robin as soon as we walked into the staff room, her face going soft and open and her arms holding him an extra-long time in a hug. “Can you help me get set up? I’ve got to move some stuff around.”

“Sure,” Robin said.

“Good. I’ll check on cleanup in the kitchen and be along in a minute.”

As we came down the hall, I noticed a kid hanging around the meeting-room door. One of Zach’s friends from the funeral. Same ratty parka and unwashed black hair and scared expression.

“Robin.” I stopped him with a hand on his elbow, nodding in the direction of the kid.

“I should . . .” His shoulders stiffened, like he was holding his breath. “I should go talk to him. Right? Invite him into the meeting?”

“Yeah.” I knew he had to be thinking of Zach and how he’d offered so many times in so many ways. But he needed to get back to the part of himself that could reach out, even when—especially when—it might hurt.

Earlier, Robin had called the shelter his family. Wasn’t until we walked in the door that I realized that’s what it was for me, too: family. As my own family had gotten smaller, as each loss in my life had mounted, the shelter had become more and more important in my life, kept me from shutting myself off, made me take chances on people again.

“I’m going to see if they need help cleaning up in the kitchen,” I said, wanting to give him space. Robin needed to do this on his own.

“Okay.”

I was partly down the hall when I heard him ask, “Todd? You wanna help me get the chairs set up for the meeting?”

I slowed my footsteps, waiting ... waiting ... waiting ...

“Yes,” the boy said softly. “I can do that.”

I skipped the rest of the way to the kitchen.

After the meeting, Robin spent a long time talking with Todd. He and Melissa got him hooked up with a bed for the night and with referrals to services in the morning. The evening breeze had a crisp bite to it on the walk back to my car. Since it was a day for firsts, I chanced reaching for Robin's hand. He looked over at me, a little smile tugging his lips, then nodded. Something warm expanded in my chest.

"No guarantee he'll show in the morning," Robin said as I unlocked the car door for him.

"Nope. But it's a start."

"Yeah. It's a start. Felt good just to have him show." Robin settled back in the passenger seat, looking more at peace than I'd seen him all week.

"Yeah. You did that, you know?"

"Me?" Robin sat up straighter. I took the Hawthorne Street Bridge to get out of Southeast. It was late and the twinkly lights of the city looked friendly, like little promises that tomorrow wouldn't be quite so ugly.

"Yeah. I saw you at the funeral. You were the only one who went over to those kids. Talked to them like they were people. Made them feel welcome. You got him to that meeting." I reached over and squeezed Robin's knee.

"Is that enough?" he asked in a small voice, his eyes on the city whooshing past.

"Is what enough?"

"If I get him there? If I get him and Adam and Skyler there, is that enough?"

"All you had to do was get *you* there. That was enough. That will always be enough." Conviction laced my words, made my voice deeper. My hands tightened on the steering wheel. *Hell*. I wished I wasn't driving. Wished I could hug on him. Make him see what an incredible, courageous success he was every damn day.

"Thanks."

"Melissa's right: no one loves that center as much as you. No one. And that shows in everything you do there. There will be other Zachs, you know. But there will also be other Todds." We wove our way through my neighborhood. A few houses still had Christmas lights up—cheerful middle fingers to the cold reality of January.

"That's what Melissa was telling me. She also said again how much she wants me to take over while she's on maternity leave. Says I should do it to prove something to myself."

“So do it. You’re not overloaded with clients, right?”

“No, time’s not the issue. I’ll be there every day regardless. It’s more ... I don’t think I deserve it. Like I put in the time there because I *have* to, because something inside me will die if I don’t. I don’t do it so that I can get paid eventually, or so I can be in charge. And even if I *was* in charge, who would listen to me?”

“Everyone. Everyone would listen to you,” I said firmly. “People respect you more than you give them credit for. You know every bit as much as Melissa does *and* you know how to connect with the kids.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” He sounded far from convinced as I parked the car. Strange how coming home with him seemed as normal as breathing right now.

“No maybe about it. And see, here is where you get the advantage of having a thug boyfriend. Someone there’s not listening to you? Not respecting you? I’ll make sure they do.” I shut my door extra hard for emphasis.

“You are *not* a thug.” Robin playfully punched my shoulder.

“Oh, you just wait and see what happens if someone disrespects you.” I gave him a fierce scowl, tried to live up to how Robin saw me like an action hero.

His mouth quirked. His eyes seemed caught between amusement and arousal.

Heat flared between us, settled low in my groin. Him digging me acting all mean was something I still hadn’t gotten used to—felt strange, like taking credit for something I saw as a flaw. *Oh. Bingo.*

“You ashamed about the shelter?” I asked as we came in the house. I headed to the front to check my mail.

“Ashamed? Of course not. They do great work—”

“Not that. I mean, do you still beat yourself up because you needed them? You still trying to make up for the help they gave you?”

“No.” He leaned against the living room wall. “Okay, maybe a little. I mean, who wouldn’t be? You seem to be the one person in the world who doesn’t care that I used to be a junkie who lived on the streets and turned tricks for three months. But everyone else? Oh hell yeah. I think they still see me as a guy who needed—who *needs*—the shelter.”

“No, I think *you* still see you like that. Everyone else sees you like the success story you are. You are why the shelter exists. You are the reason

people like Melissa roll out of bed and come to work. You're an inspiration. And that's why you should take the job. Tell your doubts to go fuck themselves; you're not that kid anymore, Robin."

"Hey. What did you do to your foyer?" Leaving the wall, he followed me into the entryway. "This looks amazing. I should have noticed earlier—"

"You were a little busy." I raised my eyebrows, giving him a pointed look. "Stop trying to change the topic. You've been looking for your purpose—the shelter is it. Not saving particular people—the shelter itself. That part that feels like family—that's your purpose."

"You really think I should do this?" He flopped on my couch. Not through with this by half, I followed him over, joined him on the couch.

"No. I don't think you *should* do it, but I think you *need* to do it. I think it will exhaust you and wear you out and put your emotions through the wringer. I think it will challenge how you see yourself, and I think it'll be hard and a hell of an adjustment. I think you need to do it for *you*."

"Okay." He took a deep breath, nodded. He settled in against my side on the couch. "I'll tell Melissa yes, but on one condition."

"Yeah?" I tugged him to me, both of our legs going up on the oversize ottoman in front of the couch.

"I'll give the center job a shot if you tell your Aunt Mary you want the house."

"That's not a condition." I'd told him on the drive over about the call from my mom. "I can't keep the house."

"Because it will be hard and exhausting and put your emotions through a ringer?" Robin said in an imitation of my deeper voice. "*Baby*, I don't think you should buy the house, I think you *need* to buy the house."

"The house needs more people—"

"So give it that." Our gazes met. Held. "You've got friends. Make a place you want to have people over. And you've got me."

"I've got you?" Everything felt warm and fuzzy, like I was wrapped in a blanket of contentment. I had Robin. Nothing else really mattered.

"Yeah. I can't promise to go all badass if the house starts mistreating you, but I'm down with hard work. You keep saying how the house needs someone to love it, but Vic, that's *you*. Look at that foyer. That's love right there."

"Okay. It's a deal." The warm feeling expanded, every muscle and bone feeling *right*, feeling settled for the first time in over a year. I'd been so

focused on what I couldn't give the house that I'd never stopped to think about what it might give me.

Robin pulled me close for a kiss. "I think making love is way better than shaking on a deal."

"Oh, yeah."

And then he was on my lap and we were kissing, and that's what it was, *making love*. We'd had friends sex and casual sex and makeup sex, but for the first time I understood why people called it making love. Always used to think that was such a bs term—like what could you really make out of bodies and sweat and jizz and moaning. But with Robin, I saw the truth. You really could make something.

It was in the way Robin's strong fingers clutched at my shoulders, it was in the way our lips slid together like they had a thousand times before, the way we moaned at the same instant when our bare chests collided. His hands swept over my stomach, brushing by my scar, and for the first time, I didn't flinch; instead, my body arched into the touch, into the love he so freely offered. We made something out of the pile of clothes on the floor, out of the groans and gasps as we tumbled back together onto the cushions, made something out of the rub of bodies, the murmured promises our lips and hands made. Robin's joy when he came ripped through me, too. It was the easiest, fastest I'd ever seen him go over and that right there—the joy that throbbed in my chest—that was what we made. We made joy and comfort and pleasure and love.

* * *

"You made a cake for your dad's birthday?" Robin asked on Sunday morning as he noticed the large bakery box on the counter.

"Yeah. Triple chocolate with a chocolate buttercream. My sister better be pleased."

"Isn't that a bit ... morbid?"

"Eh." I shrugged and grabbed a carton of eggs to make breakfast. "We like cake. And everyone loved my pop. My mom doesn't need a lot of excuse for a Sunday dinner."

"You loved him too?" Robin asked. "I mean, you've said before how he was kind of mean to you—"

“He was my dad. We didn’t see eye to eye on a lot of stuff, mainly the Church. But he was still the same guy who used to give me piggyback rides to bed every night. And no matter what, he had my back. When I was around twelve or thirteen—right when he was always lecturing me about needing to be a real man—this one day, these older kids cornered me in the alley behind our house. Called me a fag and a nelly boy. There were four or five of them and I was ready to fight, but it was gonna get ugly real fast.”

“That’s terrible.”

“But then, all of a sudden, there was this *roar*. And my dad chased them off. Gave them a piece of his mind. Called all their parents. ’Course the next week he was back to lecturing me, but I never doubted that he had my back.”

“I’m sorry he died so young.” Robin put his arms around me.

“Yeah, well, young’s kinda relative this week.” I buried my face in his ocean-scented hair. “He was just starting to come around on the gay thing when he passed. Made his peace with it, he told me. Things were better between us, except for Christmas, when we argued about why I couldn’t just fake it and go to church with them. But he was a good dad. Saw all four of us graduate high school. Saw the girls married.” My voice got a little thick. “So, yeah, I baked the man a cake.”

“I love you, Vic.” Robin kissed my cheek “I really do.”

“You going to see Zach’s parents next week? I thought I might do another batch of soup for them. Maybe a really hearty kale and pumpkin.” My voice shook as hard as my hands. I didn’t know what to do in the face of so much love and trust. Unlike the day before, Robin said it so confidently, so *defiantly* that it made my guts tremble, too.

“What’s wrong?” Robin asked, tightening his arms around me.

“Nothin’. Just when I made that stupid bet with Cliffie, I didn’t really expect you—”

“Hold up. You made a bet with Cliff about *me*?”

Oh, hell. My shoulder blades squeezed together, trying to hold on to the nice moment. But it was too late. Me and my big mouth had ruined things.

“Only a stupid thing. Not a real bet. More of a New Year’s resolution. Over whether or not I could get you to go out with me.”

“Is that all this was, then, a bet? A challenge?” Robin stepped back. His face was stony and closed off. “You landed me, so now what? You collect your fifty or whatever from Cliff and go on with your life?”

“You know it’s not like that. I was into you for you so long. Both Melissa and Cliff could tell. This was more about a . . . push. Something to give me courage to do what I wanted to for two years.”

“Two years. Wait. You were into me before Paul?”

“Oh, yeah.” I nodded. “I mean, I didn’t wish *harm* upon you guys or anything—”

“Don’t lie.” A trace of humor crept back into his voice.

“Okay, I wished harm on *him*, but mainly I wished happy on you. Even if it was with that bastard.”

“Why not speak up sooner? Before Paul, I mean. Like a year ago?” He said it so reasonably, like all I would have had to do was ask.

“Because I hadn’t had my surgery yet.” Frustrated, I slapped the counter behind me.

“Oh.” Robin nodded, considering. Then he crossed back over to me, wound his arms around me. “Vic? You don’t really believe you had to have the surgery to win me? Or a stupid bet, right?”

“Dunno,” I mumbled into his hair. I didn’t want to hear this. I didn’t want to hear that Robin would have said yes to the old me. Didn’t want to hear that I’d put in all those hours at the gym for ... for what? “Why else do you think I did all this work?”

“For you, Vic. You did it for you.”

I took a deep breath, considering. For most of the year, my changes had been for Manny and for my mom—didn’t want her to have to go through the pain of loss like Aunt Mary.

“I didn’t want to die,” I whispered, and Robin held me tighter. I’d spent the whole damn year chasing death—the grief of it, the not wanting to die young, all of it. It had all been about what I lost.

But up until this moment, I hadn’t once thought about what I’d gained. Maybe I hadn’t realized it, but I’d done it for me. Every mile on the treadmill, every breakfast of egg whites, every follow-up appointment with my doctor. Robin was right—it was something I’d done for me.

“I wasn’t ready for you,” I said slowly. Robin might have said yes to the old me—but the old me wouldn’t have had the courage to believe him. “But I think I loved you. Even then.”

“You’re trying to make me cry again.” He poked my stomach. “Stop that. I don’t want to meet your family with red eyes.”

“They’re going to love you. Trust me. I’m more worried they’re going to jump all over you like cocker spaniels at the door.”

“Well, as long as they don’t try to sniff me, we’re all good.”

We really were. Much as I was nervous about talking with Aunt Mary, telling her that I wanted the house, I felt like things in my life were exactly as they were supposed to be, maybe for the first time ever.

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Chapter 17

“That’s your best design ever.” Trish came up behind me, but not even her presence was enough to make me drop my concentration. Everything about this cake had to be perfect. Every drop line needed to be spot on, every butterfly perfectly placed.

“You actually gonna eat a piece of that?” Cliff came up next to Trish. The June sunshine filtering in through the large window wavered a bit.

“You’re in my light.” I didn’t look over at either of them, needing to finish the last few lines.

“Of course he’s going to eat it,” Trish spoke for me. “He wouldn’t make Robin eat it all by himself, now would he?”

“*He* just needs to finish the cake, thank you very much.”

“I don’t know. Mr. Personality here, Robin might just take the cake and go.”

“You’re not helping.” Lines complete, I made a shooing motion with my free hand. Neither of them looked remotely interested in leaving.

“Sweetie.” Trish came over and touched my arm. “Are you seriously worried that he’s going to say no?”

Yes. *Very*. “Course not.” I tweaked the position of a butterfly.

“That boy’s nuts about you,” Cliff said firmly. “You haven’t started a project at your place in the last six months that wasn’t his idea.”

“Don’t I know *that*. Home Depot might as well start taking direct deposit of my check.” Last few weeks, I’d been hitting the gym less because of all the yard work Robin had scheduled. Hours and hours of boulder and moss removal and terracing with plans he’d found online. But another week or two and I’d have the first vegetables from the garden we’d carved out of the rocky hillside.

“You got the welcome-back cake done for Melissa?” I asked Trish.

“Yup. It’s in the walk-in. I stuck a few of the butterflies you discarded on it.” She gestured at my work space, which was littered with butterflies and flowers I hadn’t deemed quite perfect enough for Robin.

Robin thought I was at work on Saturday to finish up a cake for Melissa. Tomorrow afternoon the center would be holding a party to welcome her

back—and to celebrate Robin’s new position as codirector. He’d grown during his time as acting director, found new confidence and showed more inner strength than a lot of people had given him credit for. And when Melissa decided she only wanted to come back part-time after the baby, he’d been first to suggest they share in the running of the center, letting her have more time with the baby and him more time for his graphic design clients on the side.

“All right. I guess this will have to do.” I studied the cake, still not satisfied. The fondant was the blue of Robin’s eyes, the piping a chocolate brown that reminded me of his hair, and the combo gave the cake a hipster vibe not unlike Robin himself. The piping was open lattice work—the sort he was always admiring on my other cakes. I’d gone over-the-top ornate with multiple levels of crisscrossing lines on each of the three small tiers.

“Take it to him already!” Cliff ordered.

“And text me what he says,” Trish called after me.

At home, I fussed, making a nice Dungeness crab salad for dinner with bread from the bakery and the few greens from my garden supplemented with produce Robin had grabbed at the farmers market.

“That looks amazing.” Robin came in the door and hung his keys on the pegboard next to mine. “Are we celebrating with sledgehammers later?”

“You.” I shook my spoon at him. Somewhere, the ghost of Nonna Maria smiled at me, standing there in her kitchen, waving a wooden spoon while talking smack to my boy. “I sign the papers yesterday and you’re already in full-on demo mode.”

“Yup.” He stole a cherry tomato from the salad. The plan was to take down the wall between the kitchen and the dining room before starting the bulk of the kitchen remodel. I hadn’t wanted to actually bash through walls until my name was on the mortgage, all official-like. Aunt Mary had cried when I’d told her I wanted the house. My biggest battle had been forcing her to take a fair price for it. But as of 4:51 yesterday, the house had been mine alone.

But not for long, if I had my way.

“Hey what’s this?” Robin gestured to the box on the breakfast nook table.

“Dessert.” I squeezed my hands to keep them from shaking. “Let me show you.”

“You’re going to eat dessert?”

“Yeah. It’s a special occasion.” I lifted the box off the cake, set it aside.

“Vic. That is stunning.” He walked all the way around the table, crouching down to get a better view, rising to peer over the top. “It’s like a little baby wedding cake!”

“Yeah, see, we do this thing for our brides at the store; sometimes to help them better visualize the full, I’ll do a miniature. Help them see what they’re getting.” Hands sweating, I felt as nervous as one of the chickens Robin had admired at the farmers market.

“And what am I getting?” he said softly, coming to stand in front of me.

“Well, later you’re getting a sledgehammer,” I joked, to prove to myself I could still form words. “And me. You’re getting me. I realized something at the lawyer’s office yesterday. I didn’t like the look of just my signature on all the papers. Doesn’t seem right for this to be just my house.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Nah. When was the last time you went back to your place? Two weeks ago? A month?”

“Maybe three.” He laughed, a nervous, tinkling sound. He reached for my hand and I went willingly. “What are you after here, Vic?”

“I want this to be your home, too—because it already is. And I want to make you a wedding cake. Like this, but bigger. More butterflies. Probably big enough to feed a hundred or so.”

“Can this cake be delivered to The Foundry? Because I think ... if you’re making me a cake that big, I want it delivered there.”

“You mind if my family shows up to help eat it?” My voice, usually so strong and sure, was wavering like a high-wire act gone wrong.

“Sure. We’ll have mostaccioli and dancing for them. Vic?”

“Yeah?”

“This is possibly the most convoluted proposal ever. And I love you. Can you please just ask?”

“Robin?” I gulped hard. “Will you marry me? I know it’s only been six months, but I don’t want to wait to have this be your home for real. To have you be . . . mine.” I looked at the floor, not him, as I finished.

“Vic.” He raised my chin with his hand. “Are you seriously worried I might say no?”

“Thought maybe you’d hate the cake.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s a *real* possibility.” He kissed me full-on on the lips, a loud smack. “Yes. Yes, I will marry you. And I want a New Year’s wedding. We both deserve some good holiday memories this year.”

“Yeah, we do.”

And then there wasn’t a whole lot left of talking as Robin was kissing me and I was trying hard not to cry, and then he was crying, so then I was crying, too, and it was a beautiful mess. A beautiful, glorious mess in a house that was finally a home again.

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If you liked *Baked Fresh*, keep reading for a special sneak preview of the next Portland Heat romance, *Delivered Fast*, coming in May . . . And don't miss *Served Hot*, now available ...

Order up a side of trouble

People's Cup owner Chris O'Neal knows that delivery boy Lance Degrassi is trouble from their first meeting. Never mind that Lance seems to have a knack for getting Chris out of a jam—Chris knows that the much-younger man is the sort of temptation Chris's newly divorced heart can't handle.

College student Lance is ready to turn his supersize crush on Chris into a reality, but the prickly café owner keeps his heart locked up alongside his prizewinning recipes. With his heart—and café—on the line, Chris must decide if Lance is worth the risk.

Chapter 1

The delivery boy had sweet buns. Not to mention prizewinning rolls. He wore a pair of those fancy over-the-ear headphones and shimmied around the white bakery truck, his hips and ass working in time to what was apparently a killer beat. Even the way he climbed into the back of the truck was a choreographed dance. I wasn't usually one to get distracted by eye candy, but that ass . . .

I'd propped open the service door at the rear of my coffee shop about fifteen minutes earlier, hoping to coax a cool breeze into the stuffy storeroom where I'd been working. I leaned against the door frame, appreciating the unexpectedly fine view in the alley.

When the guy emerged from the truck—headphones around his neck, carrying a stack of pink boxes—I pushed away from the door and met him at the edge of the concrete steps. I tried to play it cool, like I hadn't spent the last five minutes perving on his world-class bubble butt.

"You're not Vic," I said as I ushered him into the hallway that led back to the kitchen and storeroom.

“Nope. I’m Lance. Vic’s cousin. I’ll be handling your deliveries from here on out.” His smile—a wide, toothy grin— was almost as adorable as his butt. The only resemblance he had to my usual beefy delivery guy was in the chiseled facial features and light olive skin. He looked like he’d be right at home playing World Cup soccer for Italy with his wide shoulders, lean torso, muscular thighs and legs. And that ass.

Which I was going to stop thinking about right the hell now. He was too young—I could see that even more clearly under the fluorescent lights of my kitchen. Early twenties, if that. His gelled-up black hair fell across his forehead in artfully bleached strands. Too high maintenance for my taste.

“I’m Chris O’Neal. Here, let me help you with those.” Taking part of the stack from him, I showed him the metal racks where I stashed recent deliveries.

“Nice setup you’ve got here.” Lance looked around the cramped but efficient kitchen area.

“Thanks.” Most of The People’s Cup square footage was devoted to the coffee bar and seating area in the front, so I made do in the back with my organization system, which bordered on the obsessive. I’d installed floor-to-ceiling shelving on every wall, including over the cooktop and counters. The center prep table was where most of the action happened, and its broad expanse was covered with the beginnings of several dishes for tomorrow’s Sunday brunch.

“I’ve been here before with friends from PSU—for your Sunday thing. And during the week once or twice to study.”

I made a noncommittal noise. *Great.* A college kid. As if I needed to feel like more of an old, cranky perv.

“Let’s get the rest of the boxes.” I herded him back out to the alley. I was eager to get him and his distracting ass on his way. I had several more hours of staging work ahead of me to prepare for Sunday’s buffet. During the week we were just another coffeehouse, but we were known all over Portland for our Sunday brunch.

“So are you the owner? This all yours?” Lance asked as he got another load of boxes from the truck.

“Yeah. Mine and my partner’s. Business partner.” I fumbled the stack of boxes he handed me. Why had it felt so necessary to make that qualification? Like the kid would be in any way interested in my messed-up business relationship with my stubborn bastard of an ex.

Despite his pretty-boy looks, the kid was probably straight; he had a confident swagger girls his age likely found irresistible.

“I’ve been to your other place, too—the one in Northwest. Did the delivery there earlier. I like this location better.”

“Me too,” I said, my voice drier than gin. “Randy give you any issues?”

Randy had his location; I had mine. Our relationship had turned into something out of a bad chick flick, except there wasn’t any cute ending coming.

“Randy? Nah. It was some girl named Becky, with a nose ring and huge gauges.”

I nodded. That sounded about right for Randy’s taste. And I was *not* going to care whether he was banging her or how long she’d last as an employee. His shitty employee turnover wasn’t my problem. I’d washed my hands of what happened at the 23rd Street store.

“You want a cup of coffee for the road?” I asked before I could stop myself. It was the same courtesy I’d always extended to his cousin and to most of our other delivery people, but somehow my offer felt tinged with more than politeness.

“What do you have on offer today?” His grin was more than a little wicked.

Wouldn’t you like to know? I bit back the flirtatious retort. And what the hell was up with that? I did *not* flirt. Hell, anything other than bitter and grumpy hadn’t been my MO for months now.

“We’ve got a fair trade artisanal Guatemalan roast and a small-batch, single origin Ethiopian Duromina that’s been flying out.”

“I’ll try the Ethiopian. Thanks.”

“Here, follow me to the front and I’ll grab it for you.”

Late Saturday afternoon the front of the house was almost deserted. The coffee bar ran along one side of the high-ceilinged room and seating dominated the rest of the space—long wooden communal tables in the back, a few smaller tables in the middle, and couches up front. Two die-hard regulars worked on laptops in the cushy chairs by the front window, while Brady, the barista, wiped down the coffee bar.

“How’s the leg?” I asked Brady as I cut behind him to the line of carafes with the day’s roasts.

“Hanging in there.” His pained expression called him a liar. He’d had a nasty skateboard wipeout the day before and still had road rash on one side

of his face and his left arm.

“Want me to close?” It’d put me further behind on prep, but I hated seeing Brady in pain.

“Nah.” His shrug made him wince.

“Okay. Just don’t play hero ball. We’re slow. Take a break if you need to.” I pulled a cup of coffee for Lance. Grabbed one for me, too, because I had a long evening ahead. I came around the coffee bar to hand Lance his cup.

“Are you one of those coffee purist guys who’ll laugh if I ask where the creamer is?” Lance asked, accepting the cup.

“It’s against the wall.” I pointed. “And yes. Total coffee purist, but knock yourself out ruining the best cup of joe in town.”

“Ha.” As I watched him ruin the Ethiopian with a huge dose of coconut creamer and four sugar packets, I smirked. His usual drink was probably a blended mocha. “I’d better get the truck back to the bakery.”

“I’ll walk you out.” I followed him back to the kitchen, working double-time not to look at his butt.

Pausing at the service door, Lance gave me that toothy grin, filled with sass and challenge. “Too bad your barista’s hurt. He’s cute. You and him a thing?”

Okay. Not so very straight. I ignored the flip in my stomach and the sudden interest from my dick. This news did not involve me.

“Brady? God, no. I don’t mess with employees.” *Or delivery people.*

Lance’s smile got wider, more feline. *Hell.* I’d fallen right into whatever fishing expedition he’d been on. Couldn’t be about me, though; I was probably a good twelve or fifteen years older than the kid.

“Brady would probably be flattered. He’ll be working the breakfast shift tomorrow. You should come back around with your friends.”

“And you? Will you be around?” His brown eyes glinted with predatory intent. His eyes were the exact color of my favorite roast—earthy and dark, with all sorts of possibilities.

Stomach fluttering, I braced a hand against the prep table. I’d always been drawn to confidence, and this kid had it in spades. “I’m always around. You take care now.”

“Here.” Lance fished in the pocket of his white bakery jacket and came up with a pen and a business card. He scribbled something on it and offered it to me. “In case you need something before next week.”

I took the card. “I’ve already got the bakery’s number.”
“And now you have mine.” He gave me a little wave before leaving.
Lord, that boy was trouble, but I was too old and jaded to get distracted
by a nice ass and full pink lips. I hoped.

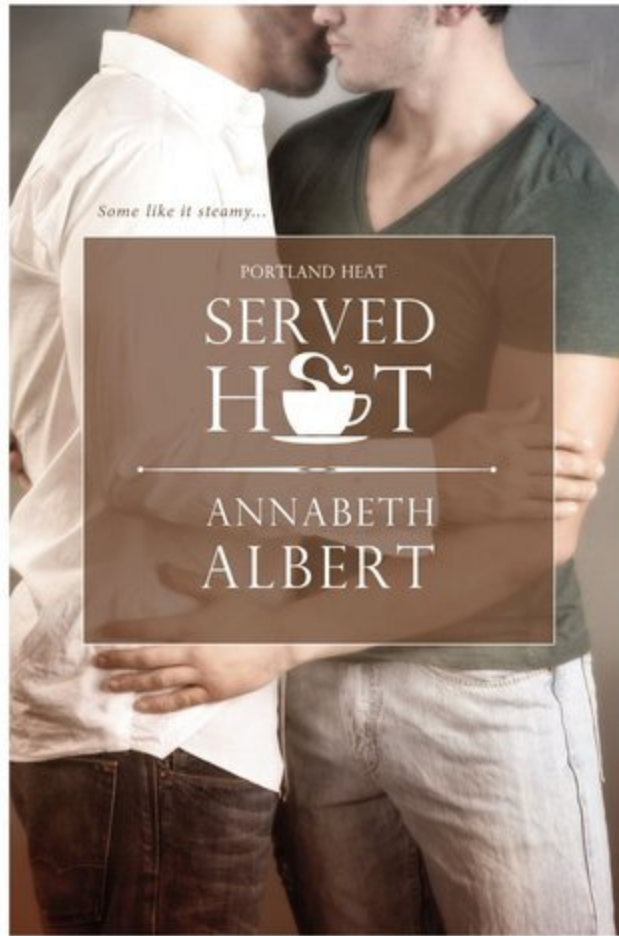
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Annabeth Albert grew up sneaking romance novels under the bedcovers. Now, she devours all subgenres of romance out in the open—no flashlights required! When she's not adding to her keeper shelf, she's a multipublished Pacific Northwest romance writer. Emotionally complex, sexy, and funny stories are her favorites both to read and to write. Annabeth loves finding happy endings for a variety of pairings and is a passionate gay rights supporter. In between searching out dark heroes to redeem, she works a rewarding day job and wrangles two toddlers.

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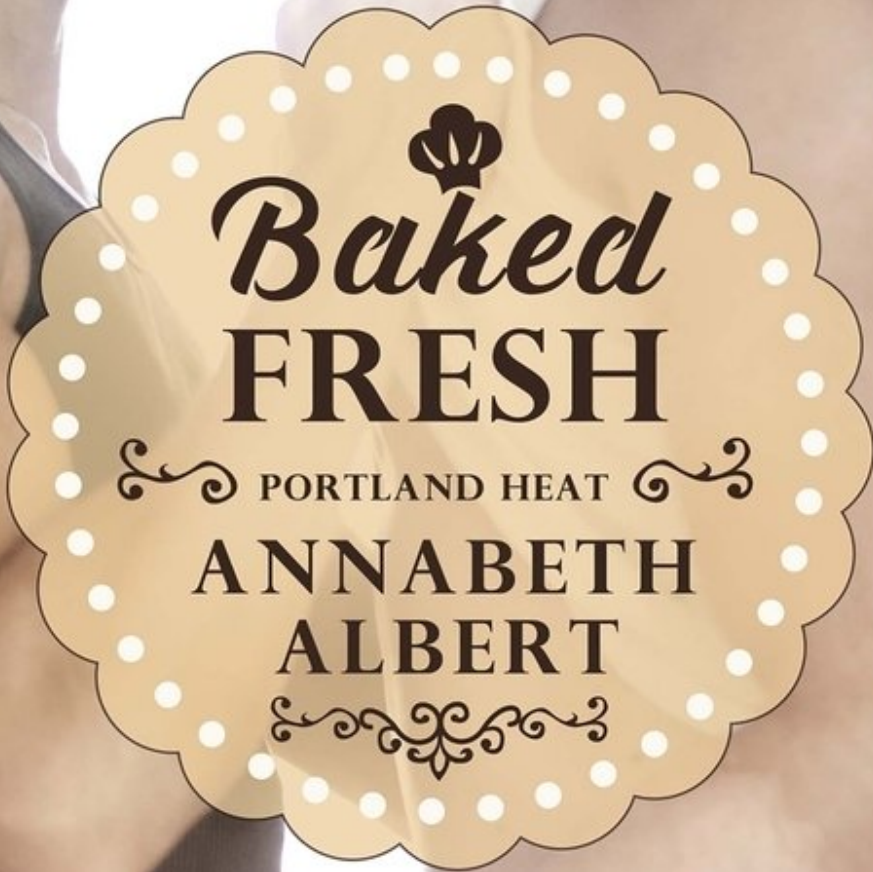
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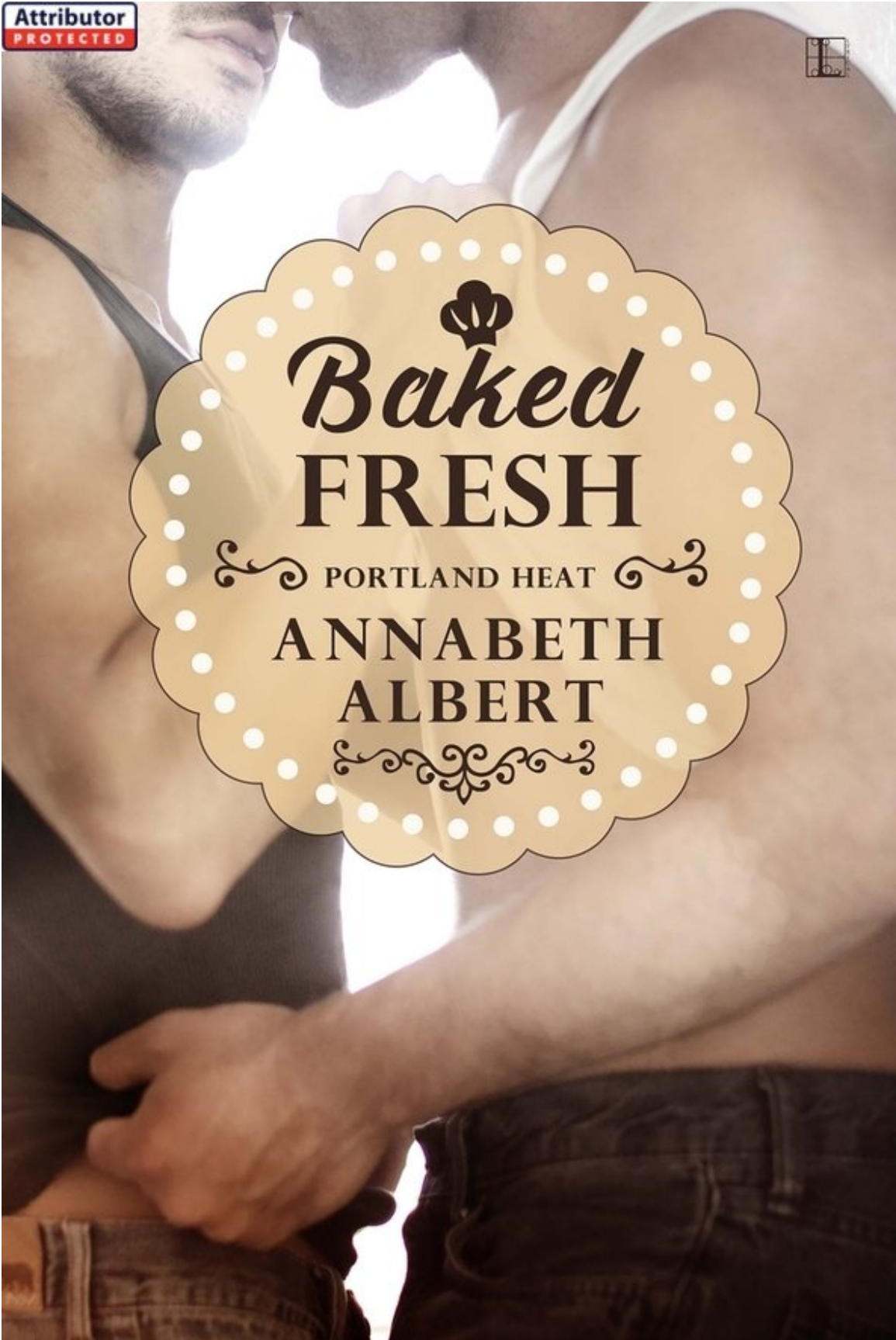
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