



of
Sunlight
and
Stardust

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CONTENTS

Blurb

Prologue

1. Tanner
2. Cole
3. Tanner
4. Cole
5. Tanner
6. Cole
7. Tanner
8. Cole
9. Tanner
10. Cole
11. Tanner
12. Cole
13. Tanner
14. Cole
15. Tanner
16. Cole
17. Tanner
18. Cole
19. Tanner
20. Cole
21. Tanner
22. Cole
23. Tanner
24. Cole
25. Tanner
26. Cole
27. Tanner
28. Cole
29. Tanner
30. Cole
31. Tanner
32. Cole

33. [Tanner](#)

34. [Cole](#)

35. [Tanner](#)

36. [Tanner](#)

37. [Cole](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[THANK YOU for reading Of Sunlight and Stardust!](#)

[About Christina Lee](#)

[OTHER BOOKS BY CHRISTINA LEE](#)

[About Riley Hart](#)

[OTHER BOOKS BY RILEY HART](#)

[An Excerpt from EVER AFTER: A GAY FAIRY TALE](#)

To the unsung heroes of the LGBTQ community who lit the path for those to follow.

To Tom and Charlie.

The beauty of your love lives in all of us.

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BLURB

After the death of his wife, Tanner Rowe takes a step toward making her dream come true and buys the house with the dilapidated barn she'd been inexplicably drawn to in the picturesque Upper Peninsula. But after a year, he still can't get past his grief long enough to make the repairs he'd promised.

Recently out of prison, Cole Lachlan has little to his name. Homeless, broke, and without many options as a felon, Cole heads to Red Bluff with hopes of a second chance. There he meets Tanner, whose loneliness mirrors his own, and soon Cole is trading room and board for rebuilding the burned-out barn on Tanner's property that hasn't been touched in seventy years.

Turns out, the barn holds more secrets than either of them could have imagined. After unearthing a hidden journal from 1948, Cole and Tanner spend their evenings poring over the pages, reading about a young man pining after his best friend. The deeper they delve into this forbidden affair from the past, the more Cole and Tanner's own relationship shifts—from acquaintances to friends...to undeniable attraction.

But as they begin to deal with the newness of falling in love in the wake of Tanner's loss and Cole's past, they also become more determined to unravel the mystery of the young lovers who've captured their hearts, the rumors about the fire, and what really happened that fateful night.

PROLOGUE

Something strange happened today. I shouldn't risk writing it down... If anyone read it... Lord, if anyone read it, I'd be sent away. But it's there in my thoughts, begging to burst free. Maybe by putting the words on paper, I can force it out of my head, out of that place where it won't stop spinning, it won't stop circling my damn fool brain like a mare running laps as the whip comes down on her ass.

Charlie and I were working in the stables like we always do, like we have since the day he moved to town when we were six and I found him, dirty and nosing around on our property. Despite my parents, and his dad, we've been inseparable ever since—best friends, two peas in a damn pod. But this was different.

The air was particularly hot, heavy with wetness. Charlie pulled off his shirt like he's done a million times before, like we've both done a million times before, only this time...I noticed the way his muscles moved when he did. Saw them constrict and twist and turn as he mucked out the stalls, and it made me tremble.

I forced my eyes away, kept forcing them away, but then they'd get drawn back to him again, and again, and again.

A bead of sweat ran down the middle of his back, and I watched it. When he got tired, stopped, and wiped his forehead with his shirt, I watched that too.

It was like I'd finally opened my eyes. Like they'd been sewn shut my whole life, but now I could finally see.

My stomach got real tight, and my pulse sped up.

When he noticed me staring, he smiled, picked up a handful of hay, and threw it at me. It stuck to my sweaty skin, and I jerked my eyes away as though my closest friend could see inside my brain and know I was thinking

thoughts I shouldn't be thinking.

Not when he's male too.

That's deviant, wrong.

Plus, everyone knows that one day I'll marry Paige. She'll be a good wife. I've always known that. She's kind and gentle, carefree and fun. Besides Charlie, she's my best friend in the world. I love Paige, but today I realized something that scares me. As much as I love her, looking at Paige doesn't make me feel the way looking at Charlie does.

TANNER

Tanner looked up at the old house and wished like hell he could burn the motherfucker to the ground.

Not because it was in bad shape or anything like that. It had held up fairly well for how old it was. Weeds filled the yard, of course. It could use a paint job, but that wasn't something he would have to rush. The barn was the worst, most of the roof and the back gone from a long-ago fire.

None of those reasons were why he wanted to torch the damn thing.

No. He wanted to burn it because Emma had loved this house so fucking much. A house she'd never lived in, never seen the inside of, and had no reason to adore.

"I don't know what it is about it, Tan. It's just...every time I look at it, every time we drive by, my heart beats faster and my breathing speeds up. It's meant to be ours."

He'd put it off because he hadn't been ready to leave the city. He was a professor at the local college, and though there had been discussions of him working from home and teaching online, he hadn't made the leap at the time. Emma had been so full of life, a painter, an artist, and she'd wanted Tanner to have more freedom, like she had. He'd put it off, told her they'd buy the house one day...they had time. There would always be time.

But there hadn't been.

And as he'd watched the woman he loved more than life itself, the woman who had more life inside her than anyone he'd ever known, wither away, he'd hated himself more and more for not giving her this one thing she'd wanted.

This house. This land, with the old half-burned-down barn, where she'd paint and he'd brew beer. It really had been a simple dream.

She should have died here.

If he hadn't promised her before she passed that he'd buy it, that he'd live out their dream, he wouldn't have. He'd bought it a year ago, when she died, but it had taken him this long to convince himself to move in, this long to start living the way Emma had wanted for them.

The house reminded him of how he'd failed her. How he hadn't given her something he'd known would make her happy. Emma was so damn easy to make happy. She'd loved to smile and laugh. She found joy in everything. She didn't ask for much. Why hadn't he given her this?

Goddamn it. Tanner shook his head, tried to ignore the tightness in his chest that squeezed so fiercely, he had to gasp to catch his breath.

The pain was still so fucking fresh, an open wound that refused to heal, just continued to fester.

She was all he'd had. She was always all he'd had, and now she was gone.

He wished he'd been able to go with her.

"Jesus Christ, Tan," he said to himself. He was losing his fucking mind. He needed to get his shit together. Needed to get this done for her before he thought about anything else.

He walked up the old porch steps and unlocked the door. A plume of dust blew in his face as he stepped inside.

He was surprised at how well the house had been preserved.

Directly in front of the door was a large staircase. Emma had wondered if the house had one. She'd only seen the home from the outside. Jesus, how could she have wanted a home so badly when she'd only seen it from the outside?

That was just like her, though. She loved adventure, trying new things. She would have purchased the damn thing without ever stepping foot inside if Tanner had been willing.

"Surprises are fun," she'd shrug and say.

She'd always loved surprises.

Tanner made his way through each room downstairs—kitchen, pantry, back porch, laundry room, bathroom, dining room, living room, before following the stairs to the second level. There were three bedrooms there and two bathrooms. Because he needed all that space just for himself. It would have been different with Emma's laughter filling the rooms.

Tanner finished his tour of the house. He needed some furniture, but the thought of going out and looking for something made his head spin. He'd

kept all of his and Emma's things in their house back home.

They'd come to Red Bluff, Michigan, every summer. She'd loved the charm of the town, situated on Lake Michigan, and the entire Upper Peninsula, really, with its quaint shops, vintage lighthouses, and other "hidden treasures," as she'd called them. One of her favorites was the small waterfall near the fishing spot they loved. And each and every time, the house would be a topic of conversation. Now, here he was, taking up residence in it...moving to this small town that held so many memories he could choke on them...only doing it alone, the way he had been before Emma and the way he would always be after her.

COLE

Cole Lachlan's eyes flew open at the soft honking of the trumpeter swans calling to each other across the lake. It was a sound he'd come to associate with Red Bluff. He loved how graceful they looked with their white feathers and black bills.

He was a light sleeper, most likely the result of the constant clatter of voices, chains, and batons that kept him awake for nearly four years. But now that he had served his time and walked out of prison free and clear, it was amazing how far removed he felt from that life. He stood up and stretched, then rolled up his pack. He walked to the water's edge and crouched to splash the cool liquid on his face. He'd bathed yesterday in a hidden section near the waterfall and let his clothes dry in the sun, but today he'd woken too late not to be detected by anyone.

As he stood up, there was a twinge in his leg from sleeping on the hard ground one too many nights, though it wasn't much different from the stiff prison mattress. But he'd saved the money he had left by not caving in and renting a cheap room at the hotel up the road.

He reached for his pack and dug out the beef jerky he'd hoarded for the leaner times. What he wouldn't do for a hot cup of coffee. Maybe he'd find one on his walk into town. There had to be someone who would offer a guy down on his luck a job. *Yeah right.* He let the bitter thought settle in his mind.

After release, he'd followed the instructions in his grandfather's letter. The man was all he'd had, had raised him after his mother left when he was sixteen. He even visited him a few times in lockup, love shining in his eyes beneath the subtle layer of disappointment that he was a convicted felon.

He'd been so angry after his mother left—she later died of a heroin overdose—that he lived his life in a fog, not really concerned with how others spent their time or how it might directly affect his life until it was too late. His prior juvenile offense didn't help his case either; he'd found that out the hard

way. “*Should’ve gotten your record expunged,*” his defense attorney had told him on the day of his sentencing.

Once he walked out of prison and got to the right address, the older man—a good friend of his grandfather’s—led him out to the garage, anxiety lines visible around his eyes as he cast glances over his shoulder to the back entrance of the house. He should’ve known then the instant wariness that would come with a felony record. Hidden in the corner of the garage was a knapsack packed with non-perishable food and a coffee can filled with three hundred bucks. Beneath the cash were his grandfather’s dog tags from time served in Korea, and he nearly broke down again like that night in prison when he was told he’d passed.

The first thing he did was kiss the cool metal before winding the silver chain around his neck; he was so damned grateful for his help. He stuck the letter in the knapsack, shook the friend’s hand, and walked away to start a new life. No attachments, no one to call in time of crisis. He hadn’t stayed in contact with anyone except his grandfather.

He quickly learned that a few hundred bucks wasn’t all that much and people weren’t at all impressed that you had served your full sentence. Didn’t even have to report to a parole officer, so he was a free bird with no place to perch. He now understood why the prison recidivism rate was so high, and he’d admit he almost stole a loaf of bread in plain sight just to be locked in the slammer again. At least in prison he knew where he stood. There was a routine, despite the dullness of passing days and the fear of never seeing the sky again.

But as he glanced at the fluffy blue clouds above the picturesque town, he vowed right then to make it somehow. To make some sort of life for himself. No matter how difficult it got.

After weeks of barely staying afloat while searching for work in the drab town of Lucasville, he’d decided to move on to something better. Too afraid to hitchhike, he’d jumped on a bus that would take him closest to Red Bluff, the pretty town he’d visited once on a fishing trip with an old friend. He’d walked the rest of the way to conserve his cash, hoping luck would soon be on his side.

He heard rustling as a couple of fishermen walked through the brush with their poles slung over their shoulders. They gave him the once-over as they walked by, and he breathed a sigh of relief that they didn’t seem alarmed by his presence.

Another week, though, and he’d have to move on—no way did he want to be seen as a vagrant, or worse, a man fresh out of prison.

As he limped through the forest and back onto Fern Road, he spotted the burned-out barn in the distance and again wondered what might've happened to it. He felt a strange twinge in his chest, but he couldn't explain why. Maybe because the barn seemed to hold secrets, sort of like the large house beside it that seemed empty. He'd briefly considered hiding out on the property and would definitely consider it when the rain clouds moved in. His gaze swung to the bright blue sky again, and he figured he was safe for another day.

When he came upon the donut shop near the center of town, he caved at the smell of fresh coffee. As he sipped the black liquid gratefully and took a bite of the warm glazed donut, the woman behind the counter smiled in his direction.

"You know of anybody hiring in Red Bluff?"

She glanced up at the ceiling as if considering his question. He hoped word hadn't spread already from the application he filled out yesterday at the hardware store. He almost didn't check the felon box, except it was required by law.

"Not sure? Maybe ask at the bait-and-tackle shop around the corner."

"Appreciate it," he said as he made his way toward the door. Then he turned back around. "Mind if I ask what happened to that barn I keep on passing by?"

"The one on Magnolia Drive?" she asked absently as she restocked the donut display. "Apparently a family lived there after WWII, and they ran a small farm with some horses, cows, and chickens." She paused and leaned toward him conspiratorially. "Rumor has it, it was deliberately set on fire. Don't know much more than that."

A shiver traced his spine, and Cole gripped his dog tags, something he did that always brought him comfort. *Damn. Arson. Imagine that. Guess every town has its secrets.*

Unfortunately, the tackle shop wasn't hiring either, but he acted unaffected as he studied the row of bait, a memory taking hold from when he was a teen. He and his friend Jeremy would sneak away to a remote fishing hole behind an abandoned warehouse, where no one would discover them, and they would roll around in the tall grass, kissing and touching. Then they'd fish, build a fire, and cook that day's catch. He could still recall the taste of the tender filet as well as Jeremy's swollen lips.

His mouth watering, he thought of ways he could possibly create such a meal. Maybe at night when all the fishermen had left, he could jury-rig some sort of contraption, maybe from a long branch. His eyes focused in on the nets

and fishing line sold alongside the lures. He rustled in his pocket and pulled out the change from the donut shop, trying to decide whether it would be worth the investment.

He could feel the owner eyeing him, and afraid he might seem suspicious, he pushed his money back in his pocket and scooted down a different aisle. But the man followed.

He decided he should probably leave the store, when the guy closed in on him.

“Can’t help noticing your limp.”

“Yes, sir,” he muttered, hoping the scrutiny wouldn’t extend much further. He certainly wasn’t at his best right now. Hadn’t been for a few years, truth be told. But he also couldn’t tell him the truth—that his kneecap got broken by an arrogant prison guard and that he’d been made to lie on his cot in pain until it healed all funny. He’d be run out of town for sure with that story. So he went with a lie that came easily to him. “An old injury.”

A look of surprise registered on the man’s face as he spotted the dog tags around his neck. “Did you serve?”

Time, yeah, he thought. But that wasn’t what he meant. Over his shoulder he spotted the American flag hanging above the store window.

“I come from a *family* of veterans, sir.” That wasn’t too far from the truth. Apparently, the father he never knew had also enlisted, but went AWOL before basic training. And he didn’t specifically include himself in that answer, even though it could be inferred. “My grandfather served two tours as a code breaker.”

His intuition had been correct because something like admiration flitted through the man’s eyes. Maybe his luck was about to change; not that he was in the habit of omitting the truth, but Christ, he sure could use a break. His grandfather always said his generation carried more sentiment for war heroes than the younger set. He suspected the only reason he didn’t encourage his grandson to enlist was because of the meager veteran benefits that kept him on a barely sufficient income most of his life.

“You know, we sell used fishing poles,” the man said. “Rent them too.”

“That right?” Cole asked, looking into his eyes, hoping he didn’t spot any pity. Cole hated being pitied most of all. Even in a medium-security correctional facility, he always worked for his keep and never accepted handouts, only fair trades.

The man motioned for Cole to follow him to the counter. He stepped

behind it and reached for a couple of poles that had been stored there.

“How much you rent them for?” Cole asked, figuring that might be the best course of action. Maybe he’d catch enough to last him all week.

The man looked him up and down as if remembering how he’d fumbled around with the change in his pocket. “I’ll tell you what...”

“No, sir,” he replied, cutting him off at the pass. “I don’t want any handouts.”

The owner nodded. “Got it. All right, then. I’ll rent it to you for a dollar a day, and I’ll throw in a line and one lure.”

Cole knew there was no way in creation they rented out their equipment for a dollar. But he wanted so badly to take the offer. His fingers found the dog tags again. He fished them over his head and set them on the counter. Besides, he owed him for the little white lie. “For collateral.”

TANNER

Tanner glanced over the aisle, continuing to watch the exchange in front of him. He was eavesdropping. He typically didn't care enough to pay attention to things like that. But something about the man had caught Tanner's attention from the start—the limp, his faded clothes, the bag he carried. There was something in the way he moved, in the slump of his shoulders, like he carried the weight of the world on them, and it had caught Tanner's eye because he figured he looked the same. Strangely, he saw himself in that man.

"I can't take this," Bobby, the store owner, said. He set the tags back in the man's hand.

"Then I can't rent your equipment."

Tanner's brows furrowed. There wasn't a part of him that didn't understand where the man was coming from. He wasn't the type to take handouts either. He'd grown up without a family—in and out of foster care. He'd always been able to take care of himself. He'd never let himself lean on anyone...until Emma. He slammed the door on those thoughts before they had the chance to pull him under.

"A fishing pole and a lure is a whole lot different than a set of dog tags. I'll get the equipment and be right back," Bobby told him as he turned for the back room. The heavy gait of the man followed him. It wasn't a very pronounced limp, but his footsteps were slightly heavier because of it.

Not my business. Why should I care? He looked down, trying to decide what to purchase.

"There's no need. I thank you for your offer, but I won't be able to accept it," the man with the limp said.

Tanner looked up again. Why in the fuck was he so interested in their conversation?

The guy took his tags back, then turned Tanner's way. Their eyes locked

and...something strange slammed into Tanner, a foreign feeling he didn't recognize at first...and then he did. A ghost of jealousy. It was ridiculous to be jealous of the man's freedom, but he was. If it hadn't been for Emma, for the house, he would likely be just like him. Would have been a whole lot easier to get lost in the world like he wanted if he didn't need to try and fulfill promises to his dead wife.

"Promise me, Tan. Promise me you won't close yourself off. That you'll buy the house, make our dreams come true. That you'll be happy."

Goddamn it. The memories never stopped. He couldn't be happy, but he damn sure would do the rest of it. And he would find a way to help this man because that's what Emma would do.

The man stopped, looked at Tanner too, like maybe he could see what Tanner was thinking, knew Tanner had been watching them, but then he just kept going, walked right out of the store.

Tanner set the lures back down and headed toward the door.

"Hey," he called when he stepped outside.

The man turned, his brows pulled together in confusion.

"I got some extra equipment if you want to—"

"I won't make a deal with you either. I don't need pity. I don't take handouts."

"It's not a handout," Tanner replied. "I would do the same. I...get it."

"Then you know I won't take the equipment unless we can trade something, and I ain't got much."

Frustrated, Tanner rubbed a hand over his face. What in the fuck was he doing? If the guy didn't want help, that was his problem.

The guy didn't move right away, just looked at Tanner, cocked his head slightly as though trying to figure something out. What Tanner saw reflected there almost made him stumble backward.

Loneliness.

Of course he was lonely, but it was a familiar kind of lonely. The kind that weighed you down, that twined itself in your muscles, in your bones, in everything you did. Tanner recognized it because he felt it too.

"I'll keep them safe," he found himself saying. He would protect them, then give them back to the guy. No harm, no foul.

"You'll be here to exchange?"

“Yep.” He’d have to take his ass back down there, but what did it matter? He hated being at home anyway.

The man dropped the tags in Tanner’s hand. “Appreciate it.”

Tanner nodded instead of replying. He closed his hand over the tags. “That’s my truck. Take my license plate down so you know I’ll come back.”

“You will,” he replied. It was crazy for the guy to trust Tanner. He couldn’t understand why he would. But then, it wasn’t as if they had any monetary value.

“What’s your name?” Tanner asked.

“Cole Lachlan.”

“Tanner Rowe,” he replied. Strangely, he felt close to Emma in that moment. Like he was making her happy, channeling her in some way. She would have made friends with Cole quickly. Anytime she saw someone in need she reached out, tried to save them. It was who she was.

Tanner plucked the equipment from the back of his truck and handed it over.

“When will you be back?” Cole asked.

“Three o’clock.”

Did he have a place to stay?

“I’ll see you then,” Cole replied, and then he was gone. Tanner watched him go.

At 2:55 they met there. They exchanged fishing equipment for the tags, and Tanner said, “I’ll be back tomorrow morning, if you’re around.”

Cole nodded, and again, Tanner watched him go.

The next day he came back, and they again exchanged the dog tags for the fishing pole.

Tanner knew he should do more—figure out if Cole had a job, a place to stay, but he didn’t. He just made the exchange, fishing poles for dog tags, a third day too.

The fourth day, Tanner decided not to go back. He didn’t know what changed, but what was he going to do? Make trips to the store he didn’t need to make every day for the rest of his life? “Not my problem,” he mumbled to himself.

It was early. The sun hadn’t even risen yet when Tanner got into the

shower. As always, the pipes were loud, making a clunky noise.

Old houses, old noises, Emma would say.

Tanner got dressed in his favorite pair of jeans and a tee. His stomach tumbled as he looked at the basket on the kitchen counter, the one Mrs. Anderson, one of the older women in town, had brought him, apologizing for the loss of his wife. A year later and he still hated those words.

He tossed his fishing equipment into his truck and went to his favorite fishing spot.

He parked, then weeded his way through the trees until the lake was in front of him.

As he walked toward the water, he heard a rustling noise, looked over, and saw Cole trying to push to his feet. He winced, like maybe his leg hurt, slowed down, and their eyes locked again. He saw the shame there, the embarrassment, so Tanner just nodded, set up his chair, and pretended he didn't notice Cole had been sleeping outside.

"I like this time of day—right after the sun comes up," he mused as he sat down. It had been one of Emma's favorite times of day as well.

"I do too. Nothing like the quiet of dawn."

"I have the extra pole," Tanner said after a moment. This was his spot, where he came to be alone. He nearly laughed at the thought. He was always alone now. And he didn't take his statement back, waited to see how Cole would reply.

"Thank you," he answered, and then...they fished. Hardly spoke the whole damn day, but it was a comfortable silence.

They were out there for hours when Cole said, "It wasn't always like this."

He didn't have to ask what Cole meant—he was talking about being homeless, traveling maybe? "Didn't figure it was."

"Life can throw you curveballs. Sometimes you're just going through the motions, not paying close enough attention, and then your whole damn world is blown apart."

Cole's words hit Tanner like a punch to the chest. He got it. Christ, did he ever get it. "Yeah...yeah, I know." Silence. It wasn't the comfortable kind anymore. "What are you going to do?" he found himself asking.

"Survive. I always do. Good with my hands. Should be able to find some work."

Again, the words found their way to Tanner's chest. He understood that too. He'd always found a way to survive. It was what he was doing now.

He felt like he should give Cole something of himself, since he was sharing, but Tanner didn't know what to give. He couldn't give Emma. Instead, he said, "I should go."

"Okay," Cole replied.

He loaded up in silence. Tanner wasn't quite sure what was wrong with him—why he'd needed to go, why he felt a strange kinship to Cole. He didn't want to feel anything—not even friendship. Not anymore.

He went home and sat in the quiet house. Made dinner for himself. Thought.

"Survive. I always do. Good with my hands. Should be able to find some work."

You know what you should do, Emma's voice whispered quietly in his brain. He shook his head, hoping her words would go away. *Come on, Tan. You know you're going to do it. You always bluster and moan and groan before you do the right thing.*

How many times had she said things like that to him? Too many to count. She'd been right then, and the memory in his head was right now too.

Tanner grumbled as he put his shoes on. Grumbled as he drove. It was dusk when he got back to the fishing spot, not even sure if Cole would still be there.

He took the worn path through the trees, then cursed himself when there was no one there. Just as he turned to head to his truck, Cole came back from wherever he'd been, looked up, saw him.

"Got a barn," Tanner said. "Half of it is burned down, but there's part of it that's safe...closed in. You can stay."

"I—"

"I know," Tanner replied, knowing Cole was going to refuse, that there would have to be some kind of tit for tat. "I got work for you too—stuff I can't bring myself to do for my own reasons. You said you're good with your hands. You do some work for me, and you can stay."

The silence stretched on until finally Cole nodded. "Okay."

They walked to the truck together, Tanner both regretting his offer and thankful he made it.

COLE

Cole was pretty certain this man would've never given him a place to lay his head at night if he knew Cole was fresh out of prison. Except there was definitely something about the man that Cole wanted to latch on to. Kindness, compassion, the same qualities his grandfather had possessed. He couldn't believe he'd offered to trade his grandfather's dog tags, his most prized possession, but somehow he knew in his gut that Tanner would keep them safe.

It was the same intuition that made him agree to get in the passenger side of the man's truck and head toward the house he'd thought sat empty. Tanner didn't even have to tell him that was where they were headed; he'd known before Tanner made the offer, like some sort of *déjà vu*. Just as he had that thought, something that felt like cold fingers pressed against his neck, making him shiver. He threw a glance toward Tanner, wondering if he'd felt it too.

He scrubbed his hand over his face. Was he dreaming up spirits now? But that wasn't quite right either. Maybe it was *he* who was the ghost. A ghost of his former self.

"Have you been getting around on foot?" He noticed how Tanner's fingers gripped the steering wheel as if the idea bothered him.

"A bus from Lucasville when I couldn't find work there. Didn't want to hitch a ride and take any chances."

"That must've sucked." Tanner threw him a hesitant sidelong glance, knowing enough not to stare at his leg. "I could always..."

"No, sir, you won't." Cole gripped his bag. "Like I said, I like to earn my keep."

"Fair enough." Tanner sighed. "And no need to call me sir."

"Sorry," Cole muttered, his neck heating. "A habit my grandfather taught me."

The asshole guards, too.

“Your grandfather?” Tanner’s eyes swung to Cole’s throat. “Not from the military?”

He could feel his cheeks dotting red as his pulse battered hard in his ears. He searched for what to say. Fuck, now he’d be seen not only as a felon, but a liar.

“It’s okay,” Tanner said even as his eyes grew wary. “That explains the vintage dog tags. So, you share your grandfather’s name?”

Fuck, Tanner already had his number, and he wasn’t sure being caught in more lies was the wisest choice. “That’s right. I was named after my grandfather, and I’m glad because...” *After my momma left, I wanted to be connected to him.* “...he was everything to me.”

So much so that he got his dog-tag details tattooed on his arm in his memory. He didn’t dare bring them to prison with him, which was why his grandfather had stashed them.

“That’s nice,” Tanner replied with a far-off look in his eyes, as if Cole had jogged some memory.

As they pulled up to the large farmhouse, Tanner stifled a yawn, and Cole once again noticed the bags beneath his eyes. He was an attractive man with short, dark hair and clean-shaven jaw, but he certainly looked like he hadn’t slept in days. They definitely had that in common. *Though I’d kill for a proper shave.* Just went to show that it didn’t matter if your bed was the hard ground or a comfortable mattress, your mind could keep you up regardless.

As they exited the truck, Cole looked around the sprawling property that was sorely in need of attention. Overgrown grass, flower beds invaded by weeds. All it needed was some care, and it could be amazing. Something like envy squeezed his chest. He’d never own something like this, but if he did, he’d certainly hold on to it for all it was worth.

Make it feel like a home. Cole had only ever felt that with his grandfather, and they were dirt poor. Logically, he knew home was more a feeling than an actual structure, but it sure would be nice to feel settled someplace for a change.

He shook away those thoughts before some sort of unwarranted hope bloomed.

“You live here alone?” Cole asked as he glanced at the steps leading up to the large front porch and at the empty hooks hanging from the ceiling that might’ve once anchored a swing. He could almost picture himself and his

grandfather swinging on it, glasses of old-school lemonade in hand, instead of the cramped one-bedroom rental from his childhood.

When he didn't get an answer, he looked back at Tanner. His hand was jammed in his front pocket, his shoe toeing at the ground, and something had shuttered closed in his eyes.

He knew that look all too well.

"Long story?" Cole supplied.

"Something like that," Tanner replied in a tight voice. "But yeah, it's just me. Let me show you the barn."

He took off toward the path beside the house that led to the hollowed-out structure, and the closer he got, the louder his heart pounded in his ears.

His feet faltered on the rocky terrain, and he paused to steady himself as well as his racing pulse. Fuck, what in the hell was wrong with him?

Tanner had turned to wait for him as his unsteady gait became more pronounced.

"Not a military wound, I know that much now," Tanner remarked, looking down at his leg. "Is it a new injury? Do you need any—"

"No, sir," Cole bit out, unable to stop the formality from slipping from his mouth. "Injured it a couple years ago."

"Long story?" Tanner replied with a hint of a smirk, and Cole nodded.

"Guess we're quite a pair," Tanner muttered as he pulled open the rusted barn door and reached for a flashlight hanging just inside on a hook. "Only been in here once, and this has come in handy."

As he swung the light around the space, Cole's pulse evened out, and he realized how ridiculous he was being. It was simply a barn that had once housed animals. What had the lady at the donut shop said? A couple of horses, she thought, and maybe some chickens. As the light bounced toward the far end, he noticed the blackened walls. Obviously charred from the fire, which had created a gaping hole not only in the roof, but one entire side of the structure.

He swallowed roughly. "When you bought the place, did they tell you what happened to it?"

"Just know there was a fire in the 1940s and some horses died," he replied, his gaze swinging back to him.

As they moved through the space together with the light as their guide, he

noticed an old cot in the corner of the room where a ranch hand might've slept.

"You believe in ghosts?" Tanner asked him absently. He studied the blackened wall as the flashlight wavered unsteadily in his trembling fingers. "Heard some kids riding by on their bikes the other night, daring each other to get closer."

"Nah." He squared his shoulders, refusing to get caught up in some silly superstition. He did the same shit as a kid. "But I do believe that whoever owned this place originally would want it restored to its former glory."

A small smile lined Tanner's lips, the first he'd seen from the man, and he felt tendrils of heat fill some of the lonely places in his chest. "And you'd be willing to do that?"

He'd done all sorts of jobs as a young adult, from construction to plumbing to car maintenance—and he was pretty good at most of it. His grandfather undoubtedly liked him tagging along on jobs.

He didn't want to appear overeager, but he couldn't squash the roots of optimism planting a shallow garden, because suddenly he wanted to repair this barn more than anything. It would at least give him a sense of purpose. Routine. Pride. Something he desperately needed.

"I can certainly give it my best shot," he replied, matching his smile.

Tanner reached out his hand. "Then you've got yourself a job and a place to lay your head at night."

TANNER

They shook hands, and then Cole looked at him a moment, looked too deeply, like he was trying to see something Tanner didn't want him to see. They both had their secrets, that was for sure, and he turned away quickly, not wanting to allow a glimpse into his pain. It felt too...vulnerable, and Tanner couldn't allow himself to be vulnerable again.

"You can follow me in if you want. I'll get you some bedding, show you where the bathroom is, that kind of thing."

He glanced back to see Cole nod before running a hand over his dark beard. Goose bumps spread across Tanner's arm, which was damn strange. He couldn't even say why it had happened.

Tanner didn't look back again as they made their way across the overgrown grass to the house. Emma would be devastated if she saw the state of the property, that Tanner hadn't done a damn thing to it yet, but this had been her project, her love. How in the hell was he supposed to do it without her?

He led Cole to the side door off the kitchen. It was closer to the barn than the front door was. He opened it, clicked the switch, and signaled for Cole to go inside. What in the world was he doing? Part of him couldn't believe he was giving this man a place to stay, access to his home, but then, nothing he could do to Tanner could hurt him more than he already hurt, so who gave a shit?

Tanner pointed down the small hallway. "There's a full bath right here if you need it. I'll put some towels down here for you."

Another nod from Cole.

"I have to go upstairs for the bedding. You're free to look around, or whatever."

"You don't have to. I have my sleeping bag. I wouldn't refuse a hot

shower if it's not too much trouble, though."

Tanner looked at the bag Cole carried. It had definitely seen better days and could use a wash. He figured the sleeping bag probably did too. "It's no trouble. We can put that in the washer, if you'd like. You can borrow some for tonight and then have your own back in the morning." He could tell Cole was proud, that he'd want to take as little as possible from Tanner, so despite his offer for bedding, he'd be lucky if Cole used it one night.

"That'll do," he replied.

"I'll be right back." Tanner left Cole in the kitchen as he went upstairs. He wondered what Cole thought of him, of the house. There was one couch, a table, and a lamp in the living room. No television, the only one being in his room, no photos or paintings on the walls. No life or personality at all. The place didn't look lived in because it wasn't. It was occupied, but Tanner didn't *live* in the house. He didn't do much living at all anymore. Besides, there was work that could be done inside too; might as well do that before personalizing it...not that he'd done anything for weeks.

The only real sign of who Tanner was sat in his office—his desk and computer where he did his work.

He had only one extra set of bedsheets for his own queen-size bed, and he used the spare when he washed his. Christ, he was a mess. He was almost embarrassed to take them down to Cole. Once he plucked them both from the closet, as well as a towel, washcloth, and new bar of soap, he went for the stairs.

Shit. Shampoo. He was bad at this.

Tanner only had his own bottles, which he grabbed before heading downstairs again. Cole was in the living room, and he was standing by the stairs.

"Here you go." Tanner handed everything over.

"You been here long?" Cole asked.

"A month." Five weeks to be exact. It had been thirteen months since he lost Em.

Cole's eyes browsed the downstairs, and Tanner knew what he must be thinking—that this house, this land, were wasted on someone like him—and Tanner wouldn't argue with him. He'd be right.

He also knew that someone who slept in any random place he could find to lay his head couldn't understand. He'd likely give anything for what Tanner had.

“I think I’ll go take that shower now,” Cole said, and this time, it was Tanner’s turn to nod.

He heard the water turn on. Tanner grabbed a beer from the fridge and sat waiting at the table. Christ, what was he doing? He had a strange man in his home, in his shower, who was about to use his washing machine, before going to sleep in his barn.

Emma would have let him stay in the house. She would have opened her home to him.

Tanner stood at the window, looking out over the darkening property. He took a swallow of his beer, waited. Less than ten minutes later he heard the shower turn off. He figured, given Cole’s life, he was used to taking quick showers.

He emerged, his dark hair wet around his ears. Again, he rubbed a hand over his beard, his other arm full. Tanner watched him, was curious about him, his story, and then Cole asked, “The washing machine?”

Oh yeah. He was losing his mind. He showed Cole the laundry room, which was down the hallway from the bathroom. Cole’s cheeks turned rosy red as he dumped out the meager contents of his pack, so Tanner glanced away to give him privacy. He offered him a plastic grocery bag to store his extra clothes, wallet, and some beef jerky he thought he’d noticed at a quick glance, until his stuff was dry.

He started the laundry, and then they made their way back to the kitchen. “The barn is one of the big things on the list. It’ll need to be cleaned out. The back has to be rebuilt. I don’t know much about that myself, but seems the roof too.” Tanner had put off calling a construction company for an estimate, and his lack of knowledge was one of the reasons he’d always thought Emma’s dream for them was silly.

“Likely so,” Cole replied. Which was something he wasn’t sure Cole could do on his own.

“What are you looking to do with it? Eventually.”

The question made his insides freeze up. If he spoke the truth, he’d have to tell Cole about Emma. “Just a barn, I guess. No real plans,” he lied, not in a place where he felt ready to share his and Emma’s dream.

Cole nodded as if he understood there was more to it. “Long story?”

“Yeah.” They sure had a lot of those.

“The land is a mess too. Bought a riding mower; there’s a couple

overgrown gardens, things like that. Eventually, I'd like to get it all cleaned up. There's not a shortage of things to do." Things he was supposed to do with Emma.

He could see the questions in Cole's eyes; he was probably wondering why Tanner cared about the barn and the property but not about fully furnishing the house.

"Sounds good. There's not much I can't do."

Tanner's eyes automatically shot down to his knee.

"Even with a bum leg. I'll earn my keep."

"And a wage."

"No. I... The room and board is plenty—"

"Okay," Tanner replied, knowing the man wouldn't budge.

Cole pulled his dog tags from under his shirt and over his head.

"I think we're going to go back and forth with saying no. I can't take those."

"Please. I need you to. Just hold them until the job is done."

Tanner paused, thought...understood. He took the dog tags and held them tight in his fist. "Just like before, I'll take care of them."

"Thank you. I'll get started first thing tomorrow."

Without another word, Cole was gone. It wasn't until later that night that Tanner realized he hadn't offered him food or anything to drink. He was shit at this.

COLE

As Cole blinked his eyes open, he felt the cool morning breeze drifting through the open side of the barn. He could've sworn he faintly heard the trumpeter swans from the lake. He pictured the elegant female honking across the water to keep her little ones in line.

He sat up and tested his back. The cot—which he'd slid away from the corner so he had a view of the bright moon and stars—wasn't half-bad, considering it was the most decent night of sleep he'd gotten in a long while. Even in prison he'd practically slept with one eye open. But in the shelter of the barn, he felt safer, calmer, like he could finally let his guard down and give in to the stillness of the dark.

Except for the strange dream that had woken him up sometime in the early dawn hours. It was as if there were dozens of voices speaking all at once from just outside the barn doors. But when he'd limped from his cot to check, there was nothing but darkness, so he lay back down and stared at the crescent moon through the burned-out roof until he fell into a restful sleep.

Cole threw on the only other set of jeans and shirt he'd brought, glad he'd agreed to let Tanner launder his clothes and backpack last night. They'd be fresh from the dryer this morning, and he'd feel even better than after that shower last night. It'd been days, even years since he'd felt that free. He wasn't on a time limit, and there was hot water in abundance. It even made his knee feel looser.

He glanced around the barn in the daylight for the first time. As the sun filtered through the hollowed-out roof, he realized he had quite a job on his hands. Though he certainly didn't shy away from hard work. His grandfather had taught him plenty of things over the years, and he was now grateful he'd worked on more than a handful of construction sites where walls and roofs had to be reconstructed.

If only he hadn't decided to take that job at Fischer's Garage—he was no

good at being a mechanic's apprentice anyway. Not to mention the fact that some illegal shit was going down right under his nose and he made the decision to look the other way. His stomach constricted as he thought about how disappointed his grandfather had been when he showed up at the police station to bail him out with money he barely had.

He reached for his dog tags, then remembered he had given them to Tanner in good faith. A calmness settled over him. Tanner was a good man; he could feel it. He'd keep them safe.

He pushed open the barn door and took in the breezy morning. He figured he'd round up any shovels and brooms he could find in the shed, knowing that Tanner might not have much. But maybe the previous owner left something. He was studying the overgrown weeds in the flower beds, thinking of a course of action to help Tanner, when he smelled something wonderful drifting from the kitchen window. When his stomach growled in response, he realized he hadn't eaten in hours. He turned back to dig out the beef jerky from his pack when he remembered that all his possessions were inside the house.

Heat colored his cheeks that Tanner had seen the previous night what little belongings he actually had. Why it mattered, he didn't know. Except that pride had always been his downfall. Being a felon with nothing to call his own was definitely emasculating. Not that Tanner knew any of that.

Before he could do something stupid like walk away from this prime opportunity, Tanner appeared on the porch with a steaming cup of coffee he extended in his direction. He was barefoot, his jeans hugging his lean hips in all the right ways, and Cole felt his mouth go dry at the sight of the handsome man. He averted his gaze before he lost his job, or worse, for gawking. No telling how Tanner would feel about Cole's preferences. His grandfather never knew, unless he'd guessed before Cole was hauled off to the slammer. And even though prisoners hooking up was nothing new, it was mostly to fulfill a need. At least that was what plenty of the men told themselves.

"You must be starving," Tanner said, and winced. "Want some breakfast?"

He immediately noticed the guilt swimming in his eyes—for what, he didn't know; maybe that he hadn't offered sooner—and it told him what kind of person he was. He'd be lying if he didn't admit he was mighty curious about a man who bought a property badly in need of repairs when he didn't know the first thing to do with it.

"It's okay. You don't have—"

"Please," Tanner said with pleading eyes. "Besides, room and board

should come with meals. I might be shit at handywork, but I know how to make a good meal or two.”

“If you’re sure,” Cole replied, and Tanner met him halfway with the mug. When he took a sip, he nearly sighed with relief from the dark, earthy flavor he’d missed so much.

After he followed Tanner inside, he quickly used the bathroom to take a leak and wash up and then followed the aroma to the large kitchen.

His mouth watered as he watched Tanner lay out a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. It’d been so long since he’d enjoyed such a breakfast, he thought he must’ve died and gone to heaven.

When his eyes began to mist, he quickly swiped at them with his forearm, embarrassed he was getting choked up over some eggs. But he couldn’t help being grateful.

“Have a seat,” Tanner directed as he placed down their plates and forks. He followed his new boss’s lead, sliding into the seat across from him, closest to the window. The table was wooden and sturdy with a set of four chairs that looked to be brand new. That along with the one couch, coffee table, and lamp in the other room was all the furniture he’d spotted in the house. Of course, he wasn’t certain about the upstairs. For all he knew, his bedroom could be completely decked out. He trembled at the thought of sleeping on a real bed someday.

He sipped his coffee between bites, trying to pace himself when all he wanted was to dig in with his fingers and stuff his mouth full of food. Instead, he worked on savoring the breakfast as if it might be his last while Tanner studied him curiously.

Before he got any more probing questions or overstayed his welcome, he took one last bite of his toast and slid back his chair. “There’s work to be done.”

He stood up with his plate and cup and headed to the sink.

“You don’t have to rush off...” Tanner began, then shook his head. “Listen, Cole. I... Thank you...for helping me out.”

Cole gripped the edge of the counter as he noted the sorrow in Tanner’s eyes before they hardened into what looked like resolve. “Nah, you’re the one who deserves the thanks. You offered me a job and a place to sleep at night.”

They stared each other down until the air filled with too much tension. There was so much Cole could say or ask, but it was probably best to keep it all battened down. They had an agreement, plain and simple. Best to keep

treating it as a temporary job and nothing more. He could make friends later. Right now, he barely had a good leg to stand on.

“All right, then,” Tanner said with a firm nod.

Cole tipped his chin and limped out the door.

TANNER

Tanner caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning from his computer, he looked out the window, toward the barn. Cole was there; he was always there, working. He added a wheelbarrow full of materials to the back of Tanner's truck to take to the dump.

His computer forgotten, Tanner watched for a moment as Cole leaned against the vehicle, taking a long pull of the water he'd left there. It was rare for Tanner to see him taking a break, even just a few minutes. He either did it inside the barn where Tanner couldn't see him, or the man was a machine. Tanner had to admit he was probably the hardest worker he'd ever seen.

Cole pulled his shirt off then and wiped his face with it. Shit. He hadn't even thought to offer the man extra towels. It had been a week that he'd been there, a week that he'd been in the sun and hot weather, and the only towel he used was in the bathroom.

He tossed the shirt over his shoulder, then turned around, pushing the wheelbarrow back toward the barn. As he stopped to pick something up, his back twisted, and Tanner noticed the way Cole's muscles moved just as a dull ache hit him low in the gut. As quickly as it happened, it was gone. Tanner shoved away from the window, his desk chair rolling across the hardwood floor.

His hands were trembling. Tanner shook them out, and just like the ache, it was gone.

His body had been doing all sorts of strange things lately. It was probably a combination of lack of sleep and grief. It didn't matter how much time had passed, he couldn't seem to get out of it.

Leaving his current project open on his computer, he got up. He had work he needed to do, but his head wasn't in it. He'd already spent days this way. Typically, it wasn't hard for him to concentrate. His work was one of the only

things that kept his mind off the loneliness that had taken root inside him. It was temporary, of course, but he needed those rare moments to breathe.

Tanner went down to the kitchen. It was lunchtime, and he figured Cole must be hungry, because he knew he was. They hadn't eaten together other than that first time. It was too much, too personal, he thought, for both of them, but they had started another routine.

Tanner pulled turkey, cheese, and everything else he would need for sandwiches from the fridge. It didn't take him long to throw together two subs and salads. He made Cole's plate before fixing a large glass of iced tea. He carried Cole's food and drink outside, set them on the porch railing, and waited until Cole exited the barn again, pushing another full wheelbarrow.

Their eyes caught across the distance like they did three times a day, for each meal. Cole waved a hand in thanks, and Tanner went back inside.

It was all he could manage, most days, but that soft voice that tried to counter the loneliness was there too, the one telling him he missed company, missed people.

"You're too good a man to be alone. Promise me you won't close yourself off to the world." The memory of one of his final conversations with Emma ghosted through him. *"Don't walk away from our friends. Or not find new ones. I can't handle the thought of you being alone."*

She'd known him well because Tanner did exactly what she'd known he would—isolated himself.

Once inside, he went to the kitchen window and saw Cole walking toward the house, toward his lunch, before Tanner went to the table and ate his own. Alone.

It was a few hours later when Tanner heard Cole at the door. He always knocked, even though Tanner told him he was welcome to use the bathroom or the kitchen anytime he needed.

He made his way back downstairs. Cole had a shirt on now, a different one than what he'd used earlier to wipe the sweat from his body. "There are extra towels under the sink now. You're welcome to use them outside of your shower."

Cole nodded in what looked to be understanding. "The truck is full. Took care of some other stuff too, but I figured we might want to take the load so we have her empty for tomorrow."

We. It was a strange concept after the past year.

"Yeah, okay. I'll grab my stuff." Tanner slipped on a pair of tennis shoes

and met Cole outside. They were quiet on their way to the dump, quiet as they emptied the truck together. Quiet as they drove home.

“I think I’m done for today. I might grab a quick shower, if you don’t mind,” Cole said.

“Yeah, of course. I’ll do the same before dinner.”

This time when Tanner cooked, he set the food on the table in the kitchen. They ate together, again in silence, but at least he wasn’t alone.

COLE

It was disconcerting how Tanner watched him, Cole realized as he loaded the truck with scrap lumber from the barn and wiped his brow with his shirt. Not that it meant anything other than the man was checking up on him. Or perhaps curious how he was coming along with the barn. But there was another part of him that wondered other things too—about how isolated Tanner seemed, and how sometimes when Cole worked with his shirt off, he could feel Tanner’s gaze on him, even through the second-floor window, where his office was located.

Not that Cole was anything to look at. He was certainly fit from working out in prison, if on the thin side from having too few opportunities to eat. There was little else to do in his cellblock besides read a shit ton, partake in the classes offered, or get up to bull crap he wanted no part of. His sentence had been short in comparison to the lifers, so he’d kept his nose clean and that worked to his advantage.

But there were definitely times he’d wanted to act out, to scream and strike anything or anyone in close-enough range about being trapped behind concrete and steel bars. And then there were the endless nights when he was left to deal with his thoughts, the loneliness punching a hole in his chest. Twice he’d let himself be manhandled and fucked against the shower wall because it had been too damn long and anyone’s hands on him were better than nothing.

Might explain what was happening to him now, how his imagination was getting the best of him where his boss was concerned. Besides, Tanner was an attractive man. His smooth jawline made him look younger, but his eyes told a different story. Beneath the melancholy, there was a world of experience in those midnight-blue orbs.

Cole glanced toward the house and stiffened when he spotted Tanner through the kitchen window, at the sink. Their gazes clashed, then Tanner’s

flitted away. Cole briefly considered that Tanner might only be curious about his tattoos, most of which he'd gotten in prison. A pirate ship, dog tags to honor his grandfather, some flowers and fish to represent nature because he'd missed being outside and getting his hands dirty.

Sliding his shirt over his head, he noticed the sun was high in the sky, which meant it was noontime and no doubt Tanner would be preparing lunch for him. It was something he looked forward to, not only because he was being fed, but because it was a kind gesture and an actual glimpse of the only human being he'd seen in days, even if he did always disappear upstairs straight after.

He felt like they were two shadows barely crossing paths, and truth be told, the loneliness was killing him. He watched as Tanner headed to the railing outside and placed his plate down—normally a sandwich and some chips or a side salad.

He quickly strode up the porch steps before Tanner could withdraw again. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he replied and then hesitated before reaching for the screen-door handle.

"You know, I think I just might believe in ghosts," Cole said expectantly, and Tanner froze. "Or maybe it's simply signs and coincidences. Who knows."

Tanner twisted around to look at him, his eyebrows knit together. "Huh?"

"You asked me that question the first night I was here," he replied, and Tanner nodded, awareness dawning on his face. "I...well, if it's true, I hope my grandfather is with me. I didn't get to see him before he passed, and I can, like, feel him sometimes."

"Sorry for your loss," Tanner said in a hesitant voice. "That part of your *long story*?"

"Definitely, and I...I don't know what happens when people die, but I sure hope they can still be with you somehow." He took a deep breath, compelled to continue. "I read somewhere that we're all made of sunlight and stardust. So maybe, whenever you look at the sky, from morning till nightfall, you're connecting with them in some small way."

Cole nearly fled to the barn, embarrassed at his admission, even though the idea of it, the beauty of it, always made his chest ache. It was from a book about the wonders of the universe he'd checked out of the prison library from sheer curiosity. Of course, the sun was essentially also a star, but the way the

author had worded the passage made him somehow feel at peace.

When he glanced in Tanner's direction, he had a faraway look in his eyes as if he were caught up in some thought or memory.

"Well, um, thanks again for the food. It's mighty good. Have you always enjoyed cooking?" He shook his head, his neck heating up. "None of my business."

He turned to bolt down the stairs and escape to the cot to have his lunch in private. Now that the barn was clear from most of the debris, it wasn't half-bad being in there.

"No, please, it's okay..." Tanner called out, and Cole teetered on the last step. "I...well, my late wife liked to cook too, so we took turns in the kitchen."

"Oh, I'm..." Cole's chest thumped a hard beat, not only because Tanner was actually sharing something, but because he'd lost somebody too. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"S'okay," he replied, and Cole watched as his gaze scanned the property, as if he was drumming up the courage for more words. "Her name was Emma, and this...this was *her* dream."

Cole swallowed thickly just as Tanner's cell phone buzzed in his pocket. He fished it out and looked at the screen. "Sorry, I gotta take this," he mumbled and then strode back into the house without a backward glance.

Cole took his plate to the barn, keeping the doors wide open to allow the light to filter in from both sides as he gulped down the tasty roast-beef-and-cheddar sandwich. He felt a bit lighter that he'd finally shared something with the man who was now his employer. It made his gut stir that Tanner was able to confess something too. Now it all made a bit more sense—how Tanner seemed to grapple with what to do with this place, why he barely had any furniture, and certainly why he didn't know the first thing about manual labor.

Seemed they were both trying to honor people in their lives.

Cole stood from his cot and stared at the large space he'd cleared out that morning. All the barn needed was a good sweeping, and he could probably start on framing the wall tomorrow and then the edge of the roof next, as long as Tanner helped him get supplies. The job would go way faster with help, but it wasn't like he was on a schedule or had anywhere to be. Besides, he liked the routine of waking up and knowing exactly what he'd be doing every day, instead of scrounging for food and a place to sleep.

At some point he planned to walk back into town to get some personal

items, like his own soap and shampoo, so he didn't have to borrow Tanner's again. He absently reached for the broom and began sweeping the floor at the far end of the barn, considering how much money he had left in his pack. Maybe he could throw in some shaving cream and a razor to get his beard under control.

The edges of the broom's bristles caught against a floorboard, and he glanced down, startled.

He tugged the broom away and tried again, but the bristles caught, same as before. Inspecting more closely, he noticed a board was coming loose. His gaze swept over the rest of the floor, wondering if there were other pieces of wood that would need to be nailed down.

He sank to the floor, careful not to strain his kneecap as he dug his fingers into the crease in the floorboard to see how loose it was. When he was able to pull it up easily, he mentally put a hammer and nails on his list, along with a level and a ladder for the frame. So far, Tanner's toolshed was sorely lacking.

A gleam of silver caught his eye as he pushed the board back in place.

Sliding it out again, he noticed a rectangular tin can. He glanced through the barn door toward the house, thinking he should alert Tanner, but his curiosity got the best of him. He lifted it out and swept the dirt aside. The lid had a vintage ad for pipe tobacco like you might've seen in the '40s and '50s. His grandfather had been an avid fan of cigars and pipes, and he remembered seeing something similar in his house as a kid.

His initial thought was that somebody had stashed money inside, and he'd be lying if the idea of stuffing it in his pocket and taking off with it didn't cross his mind. Maybe it could help him get a jump start in a different town. But he immediately regretted the notion. He might've been desperate, but he wasn't a thief, no matter what his record showed. Sure, he'd made some grave mistakes as a young adult, but he certainly didn't want to end up back in the slammer. And for some strange reason, he also didn't want to disappoint Tanner. The man had been kind to him, and it would be pretty crummy to leave him in a bind, not after he'd seen the raw vulnerability in his eyes earlier. Besides, Tanner was holding his grandfather's dog tags for safekeeping. His stomach jolted at the idea of failing him again.

His fingers slid along the rusted edge of the can, and it popped open with some effort. When no money was found, he was relieved. All that was inside the container was a vintage ballpoint pen and a tattered notebook.

Holy shit, it was some sort of journal, he realized as he read the front cover.

Property of Tom Crawford. Confidential.

He knew he should call for Tanner, but he couldn't help flipping open to the first page and scanning the short entry.

Something strange happened today...

Cole shivered as goose bumps lined his skin.

Charlie and I were working in the stables like we always do... The air was particularly hot, heavy with wetness...

A feeling he couldn't exactly describe gripped his chest in a tight fist as he read about Tom being attracted to his best friend, Charlie. He sank down to the wooden floor, his knees finally giving out from crouching so long. The air whooshed from his lungs as his hazy dreams from the other night danced before his vision.

Loud shouting outside the barn.

Shallow, quiet breaths inside...hearts galloping.

Strange, he hadn't remembered that last part until now.

Could the story he'd been told about the barn be true? Might the journal possibly tell how it was eventually set on fire? He wiped the sweat from his brow with his forearm.

No fucking way. The page after the first entry was blank, so he flipped to the next out of sheer curiosity. The passage he read made his breath catch and his heart race.

EVER SINCE A COUPLE WEEKS BACK WHEN THAT FEELING HAD COME OVER ME from seeing Charlie shirtless, I almost can't stop looking at him, getting my fill every time we are alone in the barn, baling hay. And when the farm manager, Kasper, walks inside to check our progress, I snap back to reality. Sometimes I even hear Charlie chuckle.

It's like he knows. Knows I'm looking at him, and he isn't even sickened by it. Doesn't punch my lights out. He'd flex his muscles and look back at me with a gleam in his eyes, making some kind of joke like he always does. Which might be worse.

My entire body would flush and I'd look away, sometimes have to walk outside because the front of my trousers would get tight.

It felt like I was coming down with something. Like I had an illness I couldn't shake every time I laid eyes on him.

And I hope the fever, or whatever this is, will break soon because what is happening is wrong. Vile. My thoughts and my body's reaction to my best friend are a sin.

Besides the fact that I'm cheating on Paige. Even if I never laid a hand on Charlie, I wanted to with every fiber of my being. Sometimes my hands would shake if our fingers brushed while trading rakes or throwing bales on the truck.

Paige is a good woman and doesn't deserve someone like me.

But Charlie... He is strong and braver than me, always has been. And lately, I've been thinking he's beautiful. Which is wrong. Men aren't beautiful or pretty. They are handsome and tough and solid.

Charlie is all those things too. He even told his good-for-nothing father he wasn't ready to marry anyone, not now and maybe not ever. He's stubborn, even skips church sometimes on Sundays and disputes what the Bible says on pretty much everything. Charlie grumbled that he wasn't a kid anymore and could use his brain to figure stuff out.

Last Sunday, while our parents were at church, he tempted me to take off into the woods with him. For an adventure, he'd said. We walked along the lake in our bare feet, skipped rocks, and watched a trumpeter swan commandeer her ducklings across the water.

Afterward I lied to my mother as I helped her wheel my father back home. I told her I wasn't feeling well, and I hid out in my room the rest of the afternoon, wishing I could live on my own someday. Figure out my own dreams. I felt guilty even having the thought because I knew I needed to help any way I could around here, especially after my father's stroke.

But farming isn't something I love, not like Charlie, who is so good with the animals. Sometimes I wish he'd stroke my neck and look at me as affectionately as he does his favorite horse, Mirabelle, when he feeds her carrots.

The daydreaming about Charlie was manageable because it was all done in my head. But what happened next crossed the line. Alone in my room that Sunday afternoon, I reached beneath the front of my trousers, and for the first time, touched myself while thinking about my best friend—of Charlie's strong jawline, his black hair that matches his deep eyes, the lopsided grin when he's up to no good... When I spilled all over my hand, a torrent of guilt assailed me that I had done something so wicked. I stayed away the whole next morning too because I couldn't face him, not after the sin had come so easily.

TANNER

Every so often, Tanner found his eyes drawn back to the window. With the exception of a small lunch break, Cole didn't stop working. He might not know much about building a barn, but the things Cole was doing now he *could* help with. There was no reason he couldn't clean or haul debris to the truck. He didn't for a couple of reasons. First, this was what he'd hired Cole to do. It might have only been a short amount of time, but Tanner knew Cole well enough to know he wouldn't feel as if he was earning his keep if Tanner helped too much. But also, even though he'd promised Emma he'd follow her dream for them, part of him resented it because it hadn't been his dream, it had been hers. They were supposed to do it together, and now she was gone and he was here, with a man he didn't know, trying to make it happen.

Those thoughts made him an asshole, he was pretty sure, but they were true.

He was lonely, Christ, he was lonely. He'd almost asked Cole to share lunch with him earlier, but his phone had rung instead. He didn't know why he kept himself from talking much with Cole. He was an interesting man, and obviously well read. He had a pride about him that Tanner respected. It intrigued him. They had common ground, so why was he resisting? Their arrangement was temporary and a working relationship. It wasn't as if any harm could come from it. It would give him someone to talk to until Cole was on his way.

That's the man I know, Emma's voice whispered in his head. He was beginning to worry he was going crazy. He heard her more often than was probably healthy. Not just memories either, but moments like this one, where it was almost as if she was talking to him. Logically, he realized it was just that he knew Emma, knew what she would say and how she would feel, but it was also concerning.

Tanner continued working until he reached a good stopping point, then went downstairs.

He was craving spaghetti and meatballs, which usually wasn't one of his favorite meals. Since he had ground beef in the fridge, he washed his hands and started dinner. He sautéed the meatballs while he got the sauce going. An hour later he had the meal ready, complete with a salad. He went to pluck a plate from the cabinet to fix some up for Cole, then paused.

What's it going to hurt, Tan?

He closed his eyes, pursed his lips because a part of him wanted to answer Emma. It would make him feel closer to her. But he didn't. *Goddamn it.* He put the plate away and made his way outside.

Cole was standing by the truck, with his shirt off. Beads of sweat rolled down his sun-kissed skin, over the tattoos on his arms. Did they mean anything? He found himself wondering. He didn't have any himself. Wasn't sure what he would get if he ever decided to get one.

Tanner's eyes darted away when Cole turned around to look at him. He figured that was silly and glanced back to see Cole's brows pulled together.

"If you're hungry, dinner's done."

He saw Cole's eyes lower to his hands since he usually carried the plate out.

"It's hot as hell. Figured you could eat in the kitchen with me, if you'd like."

Again, he averted his gaze, this time looking toward the barn. Did Cole not want to share a meal with him? Would he prefer to eat alone in a half-burned barn?

"You don't have to if you don't want, of course. I just thought—"

"No, no," Cole interrupted. He had a slightly raspy voice that was unique to him. "It's not that. It'd be nice to eat inside, enjoy the cool house. But I don't want to take advantage of your hospitality."

"You're not," Tanner replied. Really, what in the hell had he done for Cole? He wasn't very hospitable at all. He was paying him for work.

"Okay," Cole replied. "Let me get my things. And I should shower first. I'm awfully sweaty."

Tanner nodded. "I'll be inside." They went their separate ways. Once Tanner was in the house, he turned the heat on the sauce to low to keep it warm. He pulled plates from the cabinet, set them on the table, then felt weird

about it, so he put them back. They could grab their own to make their plates when they ate.

He fiddled around until he heard Cole at the kitchen door. He knocked gently and then opened the door. Tanner leaned against the counter with his arms crossed, and Cole said, “You don’t have to wait for me to eat.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m not real hungry yet anyway.” Which was a lie. He was starving, but he also wanted to *talk*, needed to talk, and eating before Cole would defeat the purpose, wouldn’t it?

Cole gave him another nod. He also always looked at him like he was seeing more than Tanner showed, or was looking for more, if that made sense. It was as if Tanner was a puzzle Cole wanted to figure out, and part of him wanted that because he missed having someone in his life. The other part wanted to slam the door on him because it had hurt so damn bad to lose Emma. But again, this was different. This was just someone to talk to, someone to work with. It wasn’t as if he and Cole would ever be close, or as if Cole leaving would feel like losing Emma had. Nothing could feel like that.

When he realized they were standing there staring at each other like a couple of weirdos, Tanner turned toward the cabinet and grabbed a glass. There were footsteps behind him, and then the sound of the bathroom door closing.

Again, Cole’s shower was quick. He wondered if the man liked quick showers or if he did it because he felt he had to. It was just a few minutes later when he came out in nothing but a pair of jeans and socks with a hole in the toe. His dark hair was wet, shaggy, and hanging over his forehead.

“I don’t have any other clean shirts. Would it be alright if I did laundry again?” There was a tightness to Cole’s voice that told Tanner he hadn’t wanted to ask.

“You don’t have to ask. You can use it anytime you want, and I might have a few old shirts if you want—”

“No,” Cole cut him off. “I can’t do that.”

“Actually you can.” Shock slammed into Tanner’s chest and Cole’s brows pulled together as if neither of them could believe he’d said that. Tanner knew he sure as shit couldn’t. He hadn’t pushed for much of anything since Emma’s death, just sort of let life go on without him, but he noticed there were quite a few things he pushed with Cole—the fishing pole, room and board, meals, this.

“I’ll have to do something for them.”

Christ, he was stubborn, but Tanner respected him for it.

Because you aren't? Emma's voice asked him.

"Okay, you can do dishes after dinner."

"One household chore for a shirt," Cole replied. Even though Tanner didn't need Cole to help him with a chore, he again understood him. He didn't want to take something for nothing, which was an admirable trait. "Are we even sure your T-shirts will fit me?"

That part was true. Cole was a little bit bigger than he was. "What are you trying to say?" Tanner teased, surprisingly.

"Me?" Cole asked. "Nothing." He lifted his right hand and rubbed the muscles of his left arm. Then he playfully stretched, obviously trying to flex his muscles when he did so, and Tanner found himself chuckling.

"Okay, so you might do more manual labor than I do, but our sizes aren't that much different. I'm quite proud of my body too."

"You should be," Cole replied, and his eyes widened. "I didn't mean anything by that."

His answer made Tanner frown. He hadn't thought Cole *had*, and he found the response strange.

"Dinner smells good," Cole said.

"Thanks. Not sure how good it will be."

"I'll put my clothes in, and then we can eat."

He disappeared down the hallway. Tanner grabbed himself a plate and scooped pasta, sauce, and meatballs onto it. He got a bowl for the salad because he was weird like that and didn't like his dressing to mix with his food. A minute later, Cole emerged.

"You eat your spaghetti on a plate?" he asked. "I like to use a bowl. Makes it easier."

"You're weird," Tanner joked again. It was surprising, the tentative back-and-forth they had going at the moment.

Once Cole had his food in hand, the two of them sat at the small table, eating and drinking sweet tea.

"Hmm. Look at this. I'm doing okay eating on a plate," Tanner teased.

"Oh, now you think you're funny, huh?" Cole replied.

No, he really didn't. He'd used to be able to make Emma laugh, but she

was the only one. Shit. Why did everything always go back to Emma?

Cole looked at him, his lips pulled together as though he could somehow tell the mood had changed. “You work from home, right? What do you do?” he asked.

Tanner finished chewing and said, “I’m a professor. I used to teach at a college in Grand Rapids, but now I handle online courses.”

“Do you like it?” Cole asked.

The question made Tanner smile. It wasn’t one people typically asked. “Most of the time, yes. I like the freedom, I like providing people with knowledge.” It was Emma who had helped him figure out his love of teaching. He wasn’t going to let himself go there tonight, though. He was enjoying this, speaking with Cole. “What about you?”

“Like my grandfather, I’ve always worked with my hands and dabbled in a bit of everything. He taught me most everything I know. I enjoy working outside,” he said with a faraway look in his eyes, as if recalling some pleasant memory. “I could even tolerate the cold—most days.”

“I’ve always been impressed with people who work well with their hands.”

Cole blushed. “It’s not much.”

“Yes,” Tanner replied. “It is.”

They talked about random things as they finished eating. When he spoke to Cole, he felt like he had his full attention, which Tanner appreciated. Cole took the time to think before he replied, and not everyone did that. When they were done, Cole started the dishes as Tanner ran upstairs to get him one of his T-shirts—one that wasn’t old, if he was being honest. He just knew Cole would need to believe that.

He brought it downstairs and then chatted with Cole as he did the dishes. When he was finished, he dried his hands and pulled the shirt on, which was a little tight. It hugged his chest and arms like a second skin. “You were right. Not sure this will work.”

“It’ll be okay for now,” Cole replied. “Soon I’d like to make a trip into town to get some supplies.”

“I can take you if you need,” Tanner replied. He wouldn’t want to make that walk into town and he didn’t have a sore knee like Cole did.

“I can’t ask you—”

“You didn’t.”

“Okay.”

When Cole left for the night, Tanner realized how pleasant the evening had been. How nice to have someone to talk to. Maybe sometime soon they could go fishing together. Cole might like that, and Tanner thought he might as well.

COLE

Cole lay in his cot the next morning, thinking about his dinner with Tanner. It'd felt more comfortable between them, they'd even cracked a joke, and he'd been so relieved that the man asked to share the meal. But also conflicted. He should've told Tanner about the journal. He wasn't sure why he hadn't, except maybe because Tom's confessions about his best friend, Charlie—at least the two pages he read of it—seemed almost sacred, and he felt obligated to keep their secret, which didn't make a whole lot of sense. More than likely they weren't alive anymore, and if they were, they'd be in their nineties by his rough calculation.

He also felt a bit guilty for reading it. Except Tom had probably left that journal there for a reason—possibly for somebody to find. Maybe he wanted someone to know his story?

He wasn't sure, but he felt a strong urge to protect his privacy. It was hard enough in today's day and age to come out in small-town Michigan. What would it have been like for Tom—or Charlie, if he ended up returning his affection? Downright dangerous for one, especially that many years ago.

He considered pulling out the journal again, hoping against hope that Tom's best friend felt the same way. *If not...* His stomach tightened. Unrequited love was pretty damn unpleasant—he knew that all too well from childhood crushes.

But before his fingers could reach for the tin, that same guilt gripped his gut. Would Tanner feel just as compelled to find out, or would he think the way Tom felt about Charlie was wrong? Tanner had been married to a woman, which didn't mean anything as far as acceptance was concerned, but Cole couldn't be sure. What if Tanner wanted to destroy the journal or take it from him before he had a chance to find out more about Tom? No, he didn't feel like he could take the risk just yet, not before he felt Tanner out more.

As if the man had read his thoughts, Cole heard a knock on the barn door.

He glanced toward the sliver of sky through the roof at the placement of the sun. It was only after dawn. "Come in."

Cole sat up on his cot as Tanner pulled open the door. "You're up early."

Tanner's gaze swung around the space, something like awe in his eyes at the progress. "I thought maybe you'd want to take the morning off and go fishing with me?"

Tanner bent his head and toed at a stray nail on the wooden floor. Cole scratched his shoulder, realizing he was bare-chested, having slept in only his boxers. Thankfully, the blanket covered his legs. He certainly didn't want to give Tanner the wrong impression, especially in light of the journal and the thoughts niggling at him all night. He'd practically made a misstep last night, and he figured he should at least be completely dressed if it happened again.

"And maybe if we catch something, I can make it for dinner," Tanner added.

"Sounds good." Cole's stomach squeezed tight, flattered that he would even ask. He really enjoyed talking to the man. He was funny and smart, but also made him feel like his opinion equally mattered, and he hadn't felt that way in a long while. "As long as you're sure it's okay to leave all this until—"

"Well, I *am* your boss, and I say it's a great idea," he replied with a chuckle.

A smile passed between them, and it made his stomach feel funny.

It took Cole a long moment to straighten out his stiff leg, and when he finally reached for his jeans, Tanner seemed to snap out of it. He made his way out of the barn and left Cole to it. Cole washed up and changed in the bathroom at the house, and then they loaded up the fishing gear in the back of Tanner's truck.

"How about on the way back we stop to get some supplies?" Tanner asked as they pulled onto the main road.

"For the barn?" Cole looked back at the blackened structure in the distance. It certainly was an eyesore, but now he could almost picture it in its former glory. He hoped he could do it justice.

"I actually meant stuff for you," Tanner replied, throwing him a hesitant glance. "I'm sure there are things you need."

"I definitely do," Cole said with a sigh, and it touched him that Tanner even considered it. "Sounds good."

Once they parked at the lake, they found a quiet spot on a large, flat

boulder to place their poles in the water. The water was calm and pristine, and even the swan a short distance away was still as a statue, as if also enjoying the serenity of the morning.

It wasn't lost on him that they were only a short distance from where Tanner first spotted him camping out before offering him a job. Cole couldn't help the feeling of gratefulness washing over him that he now had a soft pillow to lay his head and three meals a day to warm his belly. He didn't know where he'd end up next, but he'd never forget Tanner's generosity.

As if Tanner was thinking something similar, he glanced behind him toward the brush and then cast his line out again. "Had you been looking for work for a while?"

"Yeah, I..." *Fuck*. There were too many secrets between them, but he didn't want to blow everything. Tanner might not have been so charitable if he knew not only about his sexual orientation, but also about his felony.

"After my grandfather passed last year, I..." There was no way to account for his time in prison, or how any friendships he'd had beforehand had either eroded or weren't good for him in the long run. So he needed to tell as little as possible, or this whole arrangement might crumble. "I figured there might be better opportunities in a new town."

Tanner was staring at him as if trying to fit the pieces together. "So that's when you decided to come to Red Bluff?"

"That's right," he replied, averting his gaze and casting his line again.

"I get what it's like to feel...displaced," he said, and Cole's eyes sprang to his. "I was in foster care my whole life."

Cole tried to wipe the look of shock off his face. Never in a million years would he have guessed that this man had also had his share of struggles. "That right?"

Tanner nodded. "Wasn't until I met Emma that I finally got myself together, made something of my life, and I owe a portion of it to her."

"Her name was Emma, and this...this was her dream."

Cole could almost picture it. He must've loved his wife so much, and losing her might've made him feel as lost as Cole did walking away from the penitentiary with no real plan in sight except survival.

"You ever been married?" Tanner asked suddenly.

"I, uh..." *Fuck*, could he risk telling him anything more? When he went to prison, marriage equality wasn't even a thing in this country. And now...now

maybe things had really changed for the better. Still, he struggled to reveal anything. “Nah, never in the cards for me.”

“No?” Tanner asked with penetrating eyes. It was as if the man knew he was holding back, and Cole wanted so badly to let go of something more. To stop clutching all his secrets so tightly. It would require a leap of faith, and he’d already taken one before with Tanner.

“I’m not...” Cole took a deep breath and hoped he wasn’t making a mistake. “Just so I’m completely straight with you...” He chuckled to himself. “Okay, wrong choice of words. I’m *gay*, and before you get all funny about that, I would never... I’m a good worker, so you don’t have to worry about...”

Tanner gripped Cole’s shoulder, shocking him out of his headspace. “Take a deep breath. It’s alright. I’m...I’m all for equality. There’s nothing to worry about with me.”

Cole realized his chest was heaving, which was such a surprising reaction. But he supposed he just didn’t have it in him to pack up the little he had and hit the road again. Not yet.

He sneaked a glance at Tanner, wondering if he’d see any traces of fear or pity. Instead, his gaze was filled with wonder, as if he was seeing him in a new light.

He wasn’t sure if that was good or bad as they stared openly at each other across the short distance. Tanner opened his mouth as if to add more just as Cole felt a tug on his line. “I think you caught something.”

And then they were both on their feet, Cole attempting to reel in a good-sized fish before he snapped the line. As he carefully wound him in, Tanner reached for the net. When all was said and done, he’d caught a sizable bass.

They grinned at each other as Cole removed the hook and dropped the fish in the bucket they brought. “Looks like I just bought us a good dinner.”

“For sure.” When Tanner clapped him on the back, he not only felt pride, but also a greater connection to the man. Cole ignored how his stomach swooped as the light caught Tanner’s long eyelashes and the pretty slash of color across his cheeks.

After neither had any more luck that morning, they loaded up the truck and drove into town. They parked beside a sheriff’s car in front of the general store. He couldn’t help tensing up as they exited the truck and he felt the officer’s gaze on them. He might not be able to shake that reaction to any type of law enforcement for a long time.

As Cole walked up and down the aisles, loading up on toiletries, other customers seemed to take interest in him as well. If he made eye contact, he made sure to smile, hoping it would satisfy their curiosity. Before he headed to the counter, he saw a display of Hanes T-shirts and underwear and threw in a three-pack of each. Though he'd admit he wouldn't mind doing a chore for another of Tanner's shirts, as long as he got invited inside the house again.

He shook that thought away. Best not to get too chummy. Especially now that he'd confessed his preference for men.

"Should I ring everything up together?" the lady at the counter asked when Tanner placed a packet of gum beside his things.

"Yes," Tanner replied before Cole's brain could process a response. His ears flushed as she threw Tanner a sidelong glance and rang them up. No doubt that news would travel like wildfire before the end of the day.

TANNER

They continued to share their meals, which Tanner had to admit he really enjoyed. It was nice to have someone to chat with, even about mundane things. It chased off some of the loneliness clinging to his bones. Not that he would ever rid himself of it completely. It was buried too deep, mixed with the marrow. He didn't think he could ever not be lonely without Emma, but having Cole there helped make him feel a little more human, a little less alone.

And honestly, there was more to it than just having someone there. He could have made friends with anyone if that's what it had been about. Cole didn't push, willing to talk but not pressing the matter, which Tanner greatly appreciated. He allowed Tanner to come around on his own, made Tanner feel comfortable in a way he couldn't really understand. It was almost as if they had always been friends.

He had to admit he'd been slightly surprised to hear him say he's gay. Tanner wasn't sure why; there was no reason for it. It wasn't as if you could look at someone and be able to tell, but it hadn't been something he'd expected. The strange thing was, it reminded him of Emma. As shitty as it made him sound, he hadn't thought much about the LGBTQ community before her. He wasn't gay or bi and didn't really know anyone who was, but Emma used to volunteer at LGBTQ youth centers. It had been important to her. They'd even chaperoned a couple of dances at the center. It had opened his eyes, seeing kids being turned away from their families just because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. He had seen the fear in Cole's eyes of the same thing, that he thought there was a real chance Tanner would fire him.

He let his eyes linger out the window, to where Cole was working as always. He'd moved to cleaning out the garden area, which was boxed in with broken pieces of wood and filled with weeds. Cole had a story—a long one, Tanner reminded himself with a smile. He thought maybe Cole had more

secrets than he did.

He watched him for a moment, studied the set of his shoulders and the way his skin glistened with sweat. *What am I doing watching him like this?*

Shaking his head, Tanner turned away from the window, determined to get some work done. He didn't always work during the summer, but he'd taken on a few business classes this year. It wasn't as if he had anything better to do. Emma used to tease him about teaching business. She'd tell him he'd picked the most boring thing to teach, and he'd say he left the creative things to her.

He worked for a couple of hours and then made lunch. He and Cole shared their meal as they'd grown accustomed to. Afterward Tanner did dishes before going back upstairs to get more work done.

When he realized he didn't have some of the paperwork he needed, Tanner went to the closet where he kept multiple storage containers filled with syllabuses and research papers. He knelt to search through the one he needed, and as he pulled one of the papers out, it sliced across his finger. In reflex he dropped it and jerked his hand back as though the damn paper cut was a mortal injury.

Tanner reached down to pick up the paper again, and his fingers rubbed against the closet wall. The edges were rough, shaped as though something had been engraved there. He felt around, and it definitely seemed like something was intentionally there. Well, now he had to know what it was. It would drive him crazy if he didn't.

He grabbed his cell off the desk to use the flashlight, then pulled the box out of the way. In the very back corner of the closet were the initials T & C.

Well hell. That was interesting. There was only one reason for those letters to be hidden the way they were. Whoever T & C were, it was obviously a secret.

Tanner told himself it didn't matter. Who cared about letters carved into the back of a closet from who knew how long ago? It was probably some teenage couple who thought they were in love, or some lovestruck kid who had a crush on someone.

As he sat back at his desk, attempting to update assignments, he couldn't stop thinking about it. T & C.

He'd always wondered about the history of the house but had never had it in him to research it. All he'd known was he had to buy it for Emma, but suddenly Tanner couldn't *not* know. He'd always been interested in history.

Emma used to try and get him to go back to school to get his credentials to be a history professor instead of business. It was something he'd thought he had time for, of course, and he guessed he still did, but it felt strange to do that without her.

Before he realized what he was doing, Tanner closed down his work site and pulled up a search.

He figured the best place to start was likely with the fire. Obviously, it had taken place before the internet was around, so he went to a site he knew that had scans of old newspaper articles, paid the damn subscription because he was that curious, and typed in: Red Bluff barn fire. There had of course been more than one fire in a barn in town, but it still didn't take him long to find what he was looking for.

Boy sets Crawford barn on fire and flees

Tanner began to scan the article.

Tom Crawford, son of Lily and Bill Crawford, who had been increasingly troubled in recent months, was seen setting a fire in his parents' barn, possibly as a diversion before he left town with local Charlie Meyers, son of Andrew Meyers. It is believed that Tom was resentful for having to stay on at Crawford Farm to help his family after his father's stroke, and was likely persuaded by Charlie, whose family had had their fair share of trouble in Red Bluff.

"I don't know what to do," Lily Crawford admitted. "I just don't understand any of this. But that Charlie has always been trouble. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Sheriff Evans made an announcement that the town of Red Bluff was behind the Crawford family and would help in any way they can. "These two men...they did a horrible thing, hurting their families the way they did. Wherever they are, I hope they realize they were wrong and repent."

Donations for the Crawford family can be made to...

The hair on his arms stood on end, and Tanner felt slightly dizzy. It was as if he'd instantly been hit with an illness, his gut twisting and turning, sweat breaking out on his brow.

It hit him like a wave, there one moment, gone the next.

Holy shit. He leaned back in his chair. Obviously, T & C were Tom and Charlie. Questions slammed around inside him. Were they a couple? Was that why Tom had carved their initials in the closet? Or had Tom just had a crush on Charlie? Or hell, maybe he was jumping to conclusions altogether.

If Tom had been gay, Tanner couldn't imagine what it would have been like to be homosexual in—he looked at the date of the article—1948. People had been sent to the insane asylum for being homosexual. Still, if Tom and Charlie wanted to be together, why hadn't they just run? Why had they set the barn on fire first?

He looked back at the names on the screen—Tom Crawford and Charlie Meyers. The dizziness hit him again in a sweeping wave before it was gone.

The last thing he needed was to get sick. Tanner took a few deep breaths, then went to his bedroom where he fell to the bed. They set the barn on fire...? Why would they have done that? Where did they run to? There were a million questions in his head, ones he intended to research, but right then, he could hardly keep his eyes open. He was exhausted, so he closed his eyes; *just for a minute*, he told himself. He'd get up in a minute.

“TANNER? YOU OKAY UP THERE?”

Tanner's eyes jerked open at the sound of Cole's voice. His room was darker than it should have been, telling him he'd slept a whole lot longer than he'd intended. It was obviously evening. Christ, he must have needed that more than he'd thought.

“Yeah, I fell asleep. I'll be right down.” Tanner went into the bathroom and tossed some water on his face. Tom and Charlie's story slammed into him again, and he wanted to go back to the computer and research instead of going downstairs. He felt guilty for it, though. Cole had worked all day long, and Tanner had promised him three meals a day. Why the hell two boys from the 1940s mattered to him, he didn't know.

“Sorry about that,” he told Cole as he made it downstairs and into the kitchen. “I wasn't feeling too great, so I took a nap. Didn't expect to sleep that long.”

“I can make dinner if you want,” Cole told him. “If you're not feeling well... Sit. I'll do it.”

“No, that's not fair. I—”

“Sit down. I don't mind none. It'll be something light and easy—grilled cheese and tomato soup?” he asked, and Tanner nodded.

“Sounds good to me.” It sounded better than good. It wasn't something Tanner would have asked, but he realized he was glad Cole had offered. But then, Cole was a good man. Of course he would.

It didn't take Cole long to get their dinner going, and a few minutes later they were seated at the table together, sharing a meal.

"Strangest thing happened earlier," he told Cole. It was nice to have someone to talk to, to bounce things off of. Someone whose opinion he was growing to trust. "I found some letters carved into the wood of the closet—T and C. It got my mind going, and I decided to do a little research on the house. I found some old articles dating back to 1948. Apparently, a man named Tom Crawford lived here with his family. He and his friend Charlie set the barn on fire before running away."

As he took another bite, he noticed Cole hadn't replied. Strangely, the hairs on Tanner's arm stood on end, and his eyes darted up to see Cole's intensely on his. "What is it?"

"I..." He rubbed his beard. "That's what it said? You're sure? That Tom and Charlie set the fire?"

"Yeah," Tanner replied. "That's what it said. The sheriff sounded pretty certain in the article. They helped the family out afterward. Tom's father had had a stroke, so it was just his mom here."

"Shit." Cole shook his head. "I don't know what to say. That's... I can't believe that. Found a loose board in the floor the other day. Pulled it up, and there was a box inside, with a journal. Tom's journal. I only read the first two entries. Felt almost...wrong, in a way. Like I was betraying his privacy, even though I know that's silly. I'm sorry I waited to tell you. Should've brought it to your attention straightaway."

Tanner leaned back in his chair, unsure what to say. His stomach felt heavy. Christ, they had the journal of one of the boys who had set the barn on fire? The whole thing felt strange...eerie. "No need to apologize. Do you mind if I go out with you and look at it, though?"

"Of course not. It's really yours anyway. Not mine."

Tanner nodded. They ate the rest of their meal in silence, and then he followed Cole to the barn. Tanner watched, unexplainably nervous as Cole pulled a leather journal out of the box. He reached out to hand it to Tanner, and he saw that Cole's hand was shaking...and damned if his own wasn't when he grabbed it, felt the leather against his fingers.

"Like I said, I read the first two. Didn't go any further than that," Cole told him.

"Mind if I sit?" he asked. Cole nodded for him to go ahead. Tanner went down onto the cot, realizing how uncomfortable it was, feeling guilty that

Cole slept out there. Cole deserved better. He didn't say that, though, just opened the journal with trembling fingers and read the first entry...read about Tom feeling attraction for Charlie, then the second, and his face warmed, his whole damn body flushed like he had a fever as he read about Tom jacking off to thoughts of Charlie. It was very personal, and he could understand why Cole hadn't mentioned it to him at first.

He flipped the page again, his brain telling him to stop, that this wasn't his story to know, while also begging him to move forward. Just one. He'd read just one, and then they'd decide what they wanted to do with the journal.

Tanner cleared his throat and read out loud.

I'M SCARED. I DON'T HAVE THE WORDS TO EXPRESS HOW SCARED I AM. SICKENED too, disgusted with myself, but also as though I see myself for the first time. It's as if I've spent my life walking around in a fog, with the wool over my eyes, working the farm and being a good son to my parents, but now, now I know who I am. Which again, is wrong, and I know it won't last. I know nothing will come from it. One minute I'm shaking and cryin', and the next I'm laughin' and free.

I was in the barn with Charlie three days ago. It was the last time I'd seen him or talked to him. Hell, I can't remember another instance I went three days without seeing Charlie. He was always here, helping me, working for what little wage my parents could pay him, staying even though it wasn't enough to help with the bills after his father drank away their money. We're both trapped, Charlie and me. Him with his dad, who can't stay sober or out of trouble, and me here, on the farm, when all I want is to leave Red Bluff. But how can I walk away when Mom can't do this on her own and Dad can't even walk anymore?

I was watchin' Charlie like I always do now. Sometimes I wouldn't realize I was doin' it until he'd turn to look at me, cocking a smile over his shoulder.

We'd worked for hours, were sweating and dirty when we fell into the hayloft for a break. I watched his throat move as he drank water, then handed it to me. I felt his eyes on me as I did the same.

"You got hay all over you," he told me, picking off my shoulder pieces stuck there with sweat. I trembled just from the feeling of his rough fingers against my skin, and jerked away.

My reaction was over-the-top. I could see it in his eyes, that he knew something was wrong, that he knew I was wrong.

“Tom,” he said softly.

I shook my head, tried to scramble to my feet, but Charlie grabbed my arm, held on, and I couldn’t move, didn’t want to. Oh God, it was wrong! So very wrong, but I wanted him to hold on to me forever.

“It’s okay, Tom,” he whispered. “I feel it too. I’ve always felt it.” Of course he’d known how I felt. Charlie could see through me in ways no one else could. He always had been able to. Sometimes I thought Charlie knew me better than I knew myself. And of course he’d felt it before me, acknowledged it, gotten comfortable with it. That was always Charlie. He was so much braver than I was.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“Don’t be. It’s us.” He leaned in slowly. I knew he was giving me a chance to pull away, and I was both grateful for it and wished he’d take over, that he would just do it because it always took Charlie taking the first step for me to know something was okay.

I felt his breath against my lips. Smelled the tang of his sweat and wanted it to mix with my own. But I couldn’t do it. I’m so much weaker than Charlie, and I jerked away, ran from the barn and didn’t look back. Ran all the way to Paige’s house. She was who I was supposed to want. Desiring Paige was normal.

“She’s hanging laundry. Why you in such a hurry, Thomas Crawford?” her mom asked, but I kept going. Hearing her talk to me like I was normal made me feel even guiltier.

I found Paige out back. She turned and smiled at me, and my heart thudded. Not because I was in love with her, but because I loved her. She was my best friend along with Charlie, and I’d almost betrayed her.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” she asked.

I couldn’t speak, and she grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the cover of trees. There was a rock we sat on often and talked. Once we were there, I cried. It was such a weak response for a man, and the only person I would have felt safe doing it in front of was Paige. She hugged and shushed me.

“I don’t deserve it, your kindness.”

“I find that hard to believe, Tom Crawford.”

“I betrayed you,” I whispered. “I’ve been betraying you. Not physically, but emotionally, and I... God, Paige, I’m so damn sorry. What’s wrong with me? I’m sick. Dirty. Sinful.”

Her eyes pooled with tears, she looked down, and I stumbled backward. She knew. I realized in that second that she somehow knew. How could she know I was a deviant?

“Charlie?” she asked, but I couldn’t answer. “It’s...it’s okay, Tom.”

“No, it’s not,” I told her. It couldn’t be. It wasn’t.

“Yes,” Paige told me. “It is. I know you, Tom, and I’ve seen it. Seen the way you look at him. It’s not how you look at me.”

“Oh God, Paige. I’m so sorry.” My eyes went wide then because if Paige could see it, maybe others could too. “Who else might know? They’ll send me away. They’ll...”

“Shh,” Paige replied and wrapped me in her arms. “No one else would see it...no one but me. I know you just as well as I know myself.”

I hugged her back, clung to her, wished I could love her, wished I could be what she deserved. “I’m sorry, Paige, so damn sorry. I’m not worthy of you.”

“It’s okay. You can’t help who you love.” She was the only person in the world who would have said that to me, the best person I knew.

We’ve talked about it more than once since. She’s incredible. I wish I could love her the way I should, but somehow, Paige makes how I feel about Charlie okay.

And now I don’t know where he is. I even went to his house to look for him. Charlie never wants me at his place because of his dad, who was drunk, like always, and couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Charlie. He’s gone, and it’s all my fault.

TANNER CLOSED THE JOURNAL, DROPPED IT TO THE COT, CLUTCHED HIS HEART, and tried to breathe. Poor Tom, poor Charlie, poor Paige. He didn’t know what to think, what to say, or how to explain the ache in his chest. Looking at Cole, who leaned against a post with his eyes closed, he could see that Cole felt the same.

COLE

Things had been strange since the night Tanner read from the journal. Cole didn't know how to describe it except it felt quieter between them, almost sanctified. Sharing this secret about two boys from a long-ago era left them completely raw and reflective. And somehow he couldn't shake it—couldn't reconcile the Tom from the journal with the one Tanner had read about in the newspaper article. Not that they'd gotten very far in the journal pages, so maybe something else would come to light.

If they even read any more of it. But Cole would follow Tanner's lead since he had kept it from him to begin with and still felt guilty he hadn't trusted him enough. Especially since Tanner had allowed him into his home and even prepared him three square meals a day. At any point, Cole could easily walk away with no footprint left behind, but more and more he felt like he wanted to stay in Red Bluff and see all this through. Not only the rebuilding of the barn, which now held a different meaning, but also maybe his newfound acquaintance with Tanner, which was starting to feel more like a tenuous friendship. He certainly didn't want to let the man down. Still, he needed to be cautious; he learned that much at least in prison.

The night of the journal reading, Tanner had gently placed it back in the tin and handed it to Cole for safekeeping beneath his mattress with the same sort of wonder in his eyes as Cole. He'd retreated to the house and Cole to bed, and Cole had tossed and turned from a similar disconcerting dream as the time before.

Two mornings later, he woke up groggy again and with the same urge to leave the stuffy barn behind for fresher air. Red Bluff was going through a drought of sorts, and the rain had stayed away only to be replaced by heat that soaked his clothing straight through at night. But he wasn't going to complain; it still beat sleeping on the hard ground by the side of the lake. And he'd admit he enjoyed looking at the moon and stars through the open ceiling.

He decided to mow the lawn and clean out the front flower beds near the porch, even though he knew he should get started on repairing the frame before the weather gave way.

After he washed up and ate a quick bowl of oatmeal that Tanner left him while he showered upstairs, Cole grabbed a bench cushion he found in a storage container on the porch to place beneath him so his bum knee wouldn't swell so badly. What he wouldn't give for a hot bath and some Epsom salts like his grandfather used to soak in, but he wasn't going to be greedy. Besides, he enjoyed gardening, anything really that he could shape or create with his bare hands.

Time must've gotten away from him because next thing he knew, Tanner was standing beside him, offering a glass of iced tea and asking what he could do to help.

He reached for the glass and sipped the tangy liquid gratefully. "You don't have to—"

"Please," Tanner replied, and when Cole looked into his eyes, he could see the same sort of stir-crazy desperation he'd felt earlier—the need to change up his routine.

Cole was surprised Tanner didn't just get in his truck and drive farther into Red Bluff, maybe get to know the closest neighbors or people in town. He seemed almost as much of a hermit as Cole, though maybe it hadn't always been that way. Maybe they were both just feeling their way after life had knocked them around a bit.

"Have you ever planted a garden?" Cole asked as he handed Tanner a small shovel so they could work side by side, digging into the dirt and pulling out the weeds.

Dots appeared on his cheeks. "I've, uh, watched Emma. She loved pruning her small rose garden. We lived in a condo near Grand Rapids, and she always dreamed of living in the Upper Peninsula and having more land."

Cole nodded, wondering so many other things about the man's life.

"Pathetic, I know. But I had an herb garden in the kitchen." When Cole scrunched his eyebrows in confusion, Tanner added, "You know, basil, cilantro, dill...stuff like that to add to recipes."

He liked everything Tanner cooked, so he could almost picture him in his house in the city, doctoring up his favorite dishes in a modern kitchen. He wondered if Tanner missed it something fierce.

After a few minutes of weeding, it became obvious that Tanner wasn't the

type to get his hands dirty, but he didn't want to insult his intelligence.

"You, uh, have to get the weeds from the root," he instructed gently. "Like this."

He placed his hand atop Tanner's on the shovel and showed him how to dig deeper. When the root was exposed in the dirt, he used his other hand to yank it out and throw it on the pile behind them. When he felt Tanner shiver, he realized their fingers were still connected, so he withdrew his hand, hoping he didn't send the wrong message. Or maybe Tanner's reaction had only been his imagination. Except when he glanced over, Tanner's ears were flushed, and Cole saw the pulse jump in his throat. He noticed for the first time how soft his knuckles looked, a stark contrast to his own roughened hands. He made sure not to stare too long and make Tanner uncomfortable.

He quickly shifted a couple of feet over to get to the corner section of the garden, and resumed working.

"Can't stop thinking about Tom and Charlie," Tanner said a few minutes later.

Cole nodded. "Yeah. Me neither."

Tanner drew in a quick breath. "How do you think..." And then his voice trailed off.

"What?" Cole asked as Tanner glanced at the dirt beneath his fingernails. "Go on."

"How is it that Tom didn't realize he liked men until Charlie?" Tanner asked in a hesitant voice, as if the question had been plaguing him—and maybe it had. Maybe it was hard to understand something that seemed so straightforward and logical, at least to heterosexuals.

Cole considered the question for a long moment. "Sometimes a situation or even a person can be like a catalyst—and besides, back then there weren't so many examples as there are today on television or online, I suppose, to help someone figure stuff out."

"Makes sense." Tanner met his gaze. "But like, how about now? What if someone..." He swallowed roughly and looked away as if he were too mortified to ask.

"You mean nowadays?"

He nodded.

Cole sat back on his heels and rested his hands on his thighs. "Dunno. Everyone's story is different. I had a friend once..." Cole couldn't admit it

was a guy he became close to in prison. “He didn’t even realize he was bisexual until later in life when...” Cole motioned with his hand.

“What?” Tanner asked, seeming to hang on his every word.

“Well, I guess when his roommate, a guy he spent a lot of time with, suddenly became appealing to him one day.”

“Was it mutual?” Tanner asked.

“Yeah, I think so.” Cole resumed weeding his section, thinking about how many people he met in prison came and left over the years. Sentences commuted or time served. “I suppose it can happen at any stage in life. If you think about it, the straight lifestyle is always the default, so I’m never surprised if it takes someone a while to recognize that part of themselves. Maybe they’d been forcing it out of their mind for so long, it becomes a habit.”

Tanner had this faraway look in his eye. “But not you?”

Cole’s heart rose up to his throat as he thought about his teen crush on his best friend, Jeremy. “Nah, not me. I pretty much knew from an early age. Like I said, everyone is different.”

They worked in silence the rest of the time until they cleared most of the weeds in the garden. There was a new sort of tension between them that he couldn’t quite place his finger on. Best to ignore the thoughts swirling through his head.

“Feel like driving into town after lunch to get some plants?” Cole asked.

Tanner smiled as he glanced at their hard work. “Sounds like a plan.”

After they cleaned up and ate some leftover pasta salad Tanner had made the day before, they slid into the truck and drove to a nursery Tanner had passed once on the way to the grocery store, and which was on the outskirts of town.

They got a large trolley cart and walked through the aisles together as the nursery owner seemed to keep his eye on them. Cole just figured he was curious, as most in town seemed to be. Cole loaded some hostas and daylilies on the trolley, explaining to Tanner how hearty they were and perfect for creating a low-maintenance garden.

Tanner got caught up looking at some herbs he said he could grow in the kitchen window, and when Cole pointed to a small rose bush he’d spotted at a corner table, Tanner’s eyes softened.

“Did she have a favorite color?” Cole asked, not sure if he was

overstepping.

“She loved red. Yellow too,” Tanner said automatically. “But where would we plant it?”

“I’ve got an idea,” Cole replied, thinking of a spot behind the house that was visible from the office window, so he loaded a healthy-looking bush with small yellow blooms in the cart and pushed through the checkout line, ignoring the curious stares.

On the way back from the nursery, Tanner asked if it was all right to explore the town a bit more, and so they did, passing a cemetery as well as a restaurant and quaint corner bar. At a red light, Tanner leaned over to point to a couple of stores where he and Emma used to shop, and Cole could smell him. Sweat, dirt, spice, and all man. He held his breath as a shiver traveled along his spine. He glanced at Tanner’s long fingers gripping the steering wheel, and imagined things he absolutely shouldn’t be, so he closed his eyes and forced the thoughts away.

When he felt Tanner brush his knee, he nearly jumped out of his skin. His palm was warm and soft, and it had been too damned long since a man as attractive as Tanner had touched him. Any man, really.

“You okay?” Tanner asked as the light turned green.

“Yep,” Cole replied, glancing at the passing landscape. “Just got a sleepy streak.”

By the time they got home, it was already late afternoon. Cole was weary but also refreshed. It was one of the nicest afternoons he’d spent since Tanner had offered him the job, and he didn’t feel quite so alone anymore.

“I’ll start planting tomorrow,” Cole suggested as they unloaded the bed of the truck. Cole needed a shower badly, and his knee was aching something fierce.

“Been thinking,” Tanner said as they headed up the porch stairs and inside to clean up. “You should start sleeping in the spare bedroom upstairs.”

“No, *sir*. I...I mean, Tanner,” Cole said as his stomach constricted. “That wasn’t the agreement.”

Tanner stared at him with something like admiration in his gaze, and it caught Cole off guard. No one had looked at him that way in a long time, maybe ever. He was a convicted felon who had been homeless less than a month ago. He didn’t deserve anyone’s approval.

“It’s a single bed, more comfortable than the one you’re sleeping in now. That cot is probably not helping your knee or your back,” Tanner said

pointedly. “Just think about it.”

“I will,” Cole replied and then escaped to the downstairs bathroom.

TANNER

It was strange what having someone around did to Tanner. After Emma died, all he'd wanted was to be alone, to get lost in himself and the memories of her. When Cole first came to stay with him, he'd needed to keep his distance, to hold on to that emptiness because it was filled with her. But then the loneliness started getting harder and harder. Tanner had noticed that already, of course, but it was as if the more time he spent with Cole, the harder it was to sit in the empty house, alone with his thoughts, so he sought Cole out even more. Cole made him smile when he hadn't thought he'd ever want to smile again, made him laugh when nothing had been funny since Emma died. The more he experienced those things, the more time he wanted to spend with Cole. It was a cycle that just kept going, one he wasn't totally sure how he felt about.

There was a comfort to spending time with Cole. He was a simple man, a kind man, and somehow, his friendship and companionship had begun to soothe the constant pain inside him.

They hadn't spoken again about the journal. It was like this unspoken agreement that they needed to process it. Tanner thought about it all the time—about Tom and Charlie and even about Paige. Curiosity gnawed through his gut most days, making it damn near impossible not to run out to the barn, grab the journal, and devour it. But there was a part of him that didn't want to continue. Why was he so interested in the story of two gay men from the past? What would they discover if they kept reading?

Just from those three entries, he felt a fondness for Tom, Charlie, and Paige, and he thought he might be afraid of having his view of them shattered. Tom has apparently left his parents, his sick father, and tried to burn down the barn in the process. But then, maybe that had been the only way he could have Charlie?

He thought maybe that was why he held back from reading any more.

That, and it made him ask foolish questions like he had the other day about attraction and how Tom couldn't have known how he felt about men.

It was...strange to ask something like that, he thought, and wasn't quite sure why he had. It was a curiosity that hit him occasionally since meeting Cole. Luckily, Cole had been kind about it.

The few days since then, he'd found himself working outside with Cole more than not, just because he enjoyed Cole's company so much. Cole was good about teaching him things and not getting frustrated by the fact that Tanner didn't have the same knowledge he did. He hadn't had a father, grandfather, or uncle to teach him those things. Hell, he hadn't had a mother, grandma, or aunt to do it either. He'd had a string of foster homes. Cole knew a lot and made it interesting, and Tanner wanted to latch on to that knowledge.

They planted Emma's roses together, which he felt in his chest. He couldn't explain how much Cole's suggestion had meant to him. He helped Cole frame a new wall on the back end of the barn by holding up some posts, carrying plywood, or handing him nails as he went. Cole had a plan and was very efficient about it. They were lucky the fire hadn't taken the whole barn, only the wall and part of the roof.

Later in the week, Tanner realized how much he liked the roses, so they got more bushes to plant, along with more herbs for the kitchen window.

They shared meals, and talked, and for the first time in the year since Emma died, Tanner began to feel human again...to feel alive.

"Hey." At the sound of Cole's voice, Tanner looked up from where he knelt examining his rose bushes. The sun was behind Cole, making it hard to see. He looked like a silhouette, no facial features, just the bare chest and bright sun around him.

Dizziness swooshed around Tanner, making him feel light-headed, hot. He fell backward from where he'd been kneeling and onto his ass, a heavy weight on his chest.

"Hey. You okay?" Cole asked, a slight edge to his voice that sounded like confusion. Tanner realized he was breathing heavily, that Cole, bum knee and all, knelt beside him.

What the fuck had that been?

"Yeah, I just got real dizzy and light-headed all of a sudden. I felt like I was going to pass out." And he kept seeing Cole's silhouette, the sun bright behind him. It didn't matter how many times he blinked, it was there every

time he closed his eyes.

Sweat rolled down his forehead and into his eyes. He blinked it away, but then Cole was there, wiping at it with the shirt he carried. Tanner froze for a moment, and then a tremble slid down his spine. Cole stilled, pressing the shirt to Tanner's forehead, then jerked away. "I'm sorry. I wasn't—"

"No, no. It's fine. I appreciate it." And Tanner did, but he also couldn't relax right away. His body felt stiff, his brain fogged and confused, his stomach uneasy. It had felt...nice. To be cared for, to have someone there, to have *Cole* there. His new friend, only he didn't really feel new, did he?

Cole cleared his throat, asked, "Can you stand up? It's probably the heat. It's a good ten degrees hotter today than it has been, and the humidity doesn't help." He winced as he stood, likely because of his knee, then held his hand out for Tanner.

For just a moment, Tanner stared at it. Cole's hands were bigger than his, rougher, a shade or two darker due to the sun. He wanted to compare them, thought about how Cole's hand felt different from his own.

Realizing he probably looked crazy sitting on the ground and staring at Cole's hand, and wondering why he was doing it, Tanner latched on, feeling a little weak as he let Cole pull him to his feet.

"Maybe we should take a break, get you inside where it's cool."

"No." Tanner shook his head. "I'm fine. Not sure what happened. What were you coming to ask me?"

"I was thinking about the front porch. I noticed there are hooks on the ceiling, more than likely for some sort of bench swing. If it's alright by you, I'd like to get one and put it up. I think you'd enjoy it out there in the evenings."

Tanner nodded. He thought he'd like that. "Let me go splash some water on my face and get a drink."

"I need to clean up a bit too."

He felt Cole's eyes on him as though he was making sure Tanner was okay. He was much more stable on his feet now. He wasn't sure what that had been about.

They cleaned up a bit, then went to the truck to go to town again.

Tanner felt fine as he drove to the hardware store. They only had about three different porch swings to choose from. He and Cole decided on one that was a dark wood and simple.

They were on their way back to the house when Tanner noticed the cemetery. He'd seen it before, of course, but then the journal hit him, and he asked, "Do you mind if we stop? I want... I think I want to look for Charlie and Tom." Maybe they had come back. Maybe he didn't research enough, or maybe it didn't make headlines.

"Yeah, I think I'd like that."

Tanner parked under a large weeping tree that provided shade. He didn't worry about anyone messing with the swing in the back—not in Red Bluff.

There was an eerie silence as they walked through the headstones—some that looked new and cared for and others appeared as though no one cared much about them. No, he realized, the silence wasn't eerie, but sort of relaxing.

"There's something peaceful about a cemetery," Cole said. "Is that weird?"

"No. I was just thinking that, actually."

They were about halfway through the cemetery when they came to two graves—Thomas Crawford Sr. and Lily Crawford. "It's Tom's parents." He bent, took in the headstones. "Thomas Crawford Sr., loving husband. 1948. He passed the same year Tom and Charlie ran away," Tanner said.

"Lily passed the next year," Cole added. "It says she died of a broken heart."

Hers boasted being a loving wife, but neither mentioned being parents.

Tanner felt like a hole had been ripped in his chest. How sad. How... "Do you think it's because of what Tom did? Setting the fire?" he asked, but he didn't believe that.

"Don't know," Cole replied. "But I doubt it. If they found out about Tom and Charlie...if that's why they ran...in 1948 and being homosexual? No, they don't mention their son because they felt like they didn't have one anymore."

Then...then Cole sat down, wincing as he did. Tanner sat beside him. Cole closed his eyes, and Tanner could feel the pain rolling off him, the ache. He couldn't imagine what that did to him. Cole might not know Tom and Charlie, but he had to feel a connection to them because of their sexuality and knowing how hard things had likely been for them.

"I'm sorry." He reached over and put a hand on Cole's shoulder. Cole inhaled a loud, shaky breath, but Tanner didn't move his hand.

“Not quite sure why this is getting to me so much.”

“Because you’re human. Because we have Tom’s journal and we can see what likely happened.” That Tom and Charlie had fallen in love and had been forced to run away to be together. That his own parents had disowned him because of it.

He realized he wanted to comfort Cole, so he wrapped his arm around him, pulled Cole close, savored the feel of someone in his arms, and Cole let him. They were sitting on the ground, at the grave of people they didn’t know, hugging. To anyone else, they were mourning family or friends, but they were mourning strangers they didn’t even know if they were alive or dead.

Tanner ignored the fact that Cole felt comfortable in his arms. That he was warm flesh, and again reminded Tanner that he was alive. Tanner clutched him tighter, wanted to sear this feeling into his skin. He was still *alive*. And holding Cole was a good reminder of that.

“Sorry about this,” Cole said against his chest, and Tanner trembled when he felt Cole’s breath brush his neck.

“No problem.” He cleared his throat and pulled away. They sat there for another moment, then continued their journey through the cemetery, but Tom and Charlie weren’t there. Either they were still alive, or they hadn’t come back.

COLE

After they got back and hung the swing from the hooks in the porch ceiling, Cole offered to make them something simple to eat that required little effort since they were both emotionally spent from the cemetery.

Whatever had come over him after seeing Tom's parents' graves made his chest throb and his eyes water. And when Tanner reached out to him, he wanted to stay wrapped inside his arms all night; it felt so damned good to have human contact again. The way he smelled and felt and sounded made a longing stir inside him that he struggled to tamp down.

Cole went through the cupboards, his eyes landing on something he hadn't eaten in a long while, and his stomach grumbled in response. "When was the last time you had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?"

Tanner smirked as he went through a pile of mail near the door. "Not since I was a kid. But now you've got me craving one."

"Perfect." Cole smiled. "I'll whip them up, and then we can test out that swing."

"Fancy," Tanner said with a wink, and Cole realized how much he liked the playful side of him. There had been so much heaviness just an hour earlier. "But I don't think I have any jelly."

"S'okay," Cole replied, digging through his pantry—which was filled with more stuff than his living room, if he was being honest—and found what he was looking for. "My grandfather made them with honey."

He fixed two sandwiches each, adding more honey on his because he liked the extra sweetness, while Tanner poured them glasses of milk and followed him to the porch.

Tanner sat down, testing the swing first. "Hope it'll hold," he remarked.

“Guess there’s only one way to find out,” Cole replied, sinking beside Tanner.

The chains and wood felt secure enough, so they lightly swung and ate, both lost in thought.

“This hits the spot,” Tanner said around a mouthful. “Bet it reminds you of your grandfather?”

Cole’s chest twinged as he nodded.

“He was like a father figure to you?”

“Yeah,” he said with a sigh. “I certainly disappointed him my fair share, especially when I...fell in with the wrong crowd.”

He supposed that was the best way to put it. He didn’t have to take that job; he could’ve looked someplace else or quit when he realized something shady was going down.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Tanner replied after a sip of milk. “I’ve done some things I’m not proud of either.”

“Is that right?” Cole cocked an eyebrow. “Ever get caught?”

Ever land in prison?

“Plenty of times by different foster parents over the years. I was so lost and angry back then, which didn’t help. That was usually when they’d ship me off. I was my own worst enemy.”

“I understand that all too well,” Cole agreed, and he’d admit things felt comfortable and easy between them, more so since the cemetery. Even their thighs pressed together on the bench didn’t seem to bother Tanner. Cole thought for sure he would shift over to give them space, but he stayed put, and the heat emanating from his skin made Cole’s entire body buzz with a strange awareness, like there was a deeper thread of connection forming between them.

After Tanner carried the dishes inside, they swung some more and talked about the era they both grew up in some twenty years ago—favorite music and movies and cartoons—until the sun set to a litany of crickets and fireflies, like a beautiful postcard painted across the sky with streaks of pinks and orange. Cole couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so safe and content. His eyes heavy with sleep, he had the brief urge to lay his head on Tanner’s strong shoulder and drift off. Before his imagination stirred up any other ridiculous scenarios, he thought it best they parted ways for the night.

He slid forward on the bench, his thigh breaking contact first. He heard

the catch in Tanner's throat, as if he'd also been snapped out of his reverie.

"I'll water the flower beds before I hit the hay," Cole said around a yawn. "Hopefully there'll be some rain in the forecast soon."

Not that he'd paid much attention, since the succession of blue skies and hot weather seemed to go on for weeks.

"Sounds good. I've, uh, still got some papers to grade," Tanner replied as he stretched. "Night, Cole."

After he replaced the hose and retreated to the barn, Cole stripped down to his boxers and lay in his cot, his thoughts returning to Tom and Charlie. To Tom's mother dying of a broken heart. The tightness in his chest resumed.

His fingers felt for the tin can beneath him, and he was tempted to pull out the journal and read another passage. But he wouldn't do that without Tanner, who was as invested in the story as Cole was.

His thoughts turned to the weight of Tanner's arms around him at the cemetery, the press of his thigh on the bench, and he gasped as a frisson of heat traveled up his spine and his cock hardened. He hadn't touched himself in so long, and no way did he want to now when he was thinking of Tanner. His very straight boss, who was beginning to feel more like a companion.

He pushed down his growing shaft with the heel of his hand, imagining what Tanner's long fingers might feel like. He shuddered and shook his head side to side, willing the dangerous ideas from his brain.

When he heard a rumble followed by the sudden flash of lightning, he startled. It was a sound he hadn't heard in weeks, and before he could even follow that thought all the way through, it was as if the sky had been split open and buckets of water had been dumped straight through the hole in the barn roof.

He jumped up and dragged his cot over to a drier corner, but it was no use because the mattress was already getting soaked along with his sheets.

His hair was drenched, his skin damp, and suddenly Tanner's offer of sleeping in the upstairs bedroom sounded like his best option.

Lightning lit up the entire sky, making the barn feel eerily lonesome as he shoved his legs into his jeans, pushed his knapsack beneath the cot to keep it dry, and made his way toward the door. He turned back suddenly and fished under the mattress for the tin container so he could keep it safe.

Jogging in the rain to the steps, he saw the front door being wrenched open as Tanner flew onto the porch, carrying a blanket.

“I was just coming to offer the spare bedroom again.”

“I’ll take it,” Cole said appreciatively as they hustled back inside behind another slash of electric heat. Tanner shut the door and wrapped the dry blanket around his shoulders.

Cole dried off, grateful to be inside Tanner’s warm house.

As they sank down on the couch with an additional blanket thrown over their legs, Tanner noticed the tin can Cole had balanced on the arm of the couch.

“You brought the journal,” Tanner said.

“I wanted to keep it safe from the rain,” he replied as he reached for it and popped open the lid. He breathed out a sigh of relief that no rain had gotten inside.

The air around them seemed to prickle with anticipation as they stared down at it. “Want me to read another page?” Cole asked in a hesitant voice.

Tanner’s eyes softened as they met his, and he nodded.

With shaking fingers, Cole opened to the next entry.

I WAS LYING ON A BALE OF HAY IN THE BARN, HAVING FALLEN ASLEEP FROM THE heat of the sun, when I felt the brush of fingers against my neck.

When I blinked my eyes open, Charlie was hovering above me, and I nearly sprang up, I was so filled with relief to lay eyes on him after three long days.

But he gripped my shoulder as he lifted a finger to his mouth. “Shhhh, be quiet.”

“Where have you been?” I whispered with a bite of anger in my voice. “I was worried.”

Charlie sat back, his cheeks rosy. “I saw Paige...and she...she told me I needed to come see you. She’s outside the door right now.”

My gaze swung toward the barn entrance. “Paige is outside? What... Why?”

“She knew we needed to talk. She said she’d keep guard.”

My eyes grew wide. Paige had been so understanding the other day, but I never expected her to...to help us...

“Talk to me, Tom,” Charlie said, his voice filled with earnestness. “Why

did you run from me that day?"

I shut my eyes as the same tingling feelings washed over me. Charlie had been so close that day, even closer than he was now, looking down at me. "Be-because I wanted it more than anything, but I couldn't do that to Paige."

Charlie nodded like he understood my rambling. He leaned down farther, his eyes latching on to mine. "Wanted what, Tom?"

I trembled as my gaze split time between Charlie's vivid eyes and his full bottom lip. "For...for you to kiss me," I admitted as my heart thundered in my ears. I could scarcely believe I said the words aloud. I half expected to be struck by lightning.

I heard Charlie's breath hitch in his throat. "Do you still want me to kiss you?"

The words spilled from my mouth. I couldn't hold them back any longer. It physically hurt to keep them inside. "More than anything."

Charlie bent over, his hands landing on either side of my head on the hay bale. I could feel his breath against my lips as he moved closer. My heart was beating so hard, I thought it might explode out of my chest.

"Tom," he whispered as his mouth barely brushed over mine. He was panting softly, and I shuddered, pinpricks lining my skin. His lips felt like soft but sturdy pillows when they feathered over mine again. "Is this okay?"

"It's more than okay," I replied as my hand reached up to cup his freshly shaved jaw, smooth as silk, and this time I stretched to meet him halfway. This time the kiss was firmer, surer, and it felt so good, I moaned against his mouth.

How could something so wrong feel so incredibly right?

His hands wound into my hair as he planted our mouths together again and again, our breaths mingling, until I thought I might combust. My skin felt overheated, like I needed to rip off my shirt and feel the relief of his skin next to mine. But I didn't dare utter such dirty thoughts aloud.

Instead, I squirmed beneath him as he propped himself on his elbows in the hay and sank his hips against mine. It felt like heaven to have our bodies connected that way, like we were molded together, and when his tongue drew a line across the seam of my lips, I gasped.

When he licked into my mouth and our tongues met for the first time, it felt electric, like all my nerve endings had come alive from his touch.

In that moment, I didn't care if I was going to hell, as long as Charlie kept

kissing me like that. Our breaths blending, our bones melding, our hearts stitching together as one.

I wanted us to stay like that forever.

I don't know if I can bear to be apart from Charlie again.

AS COLE TRIED TO SWALLOW PAST THE LUMP IN HIS THROAT, HE FELT TANNER shiver on the couch beside him. It was only a kiss between two young men, but it made Cole's heart ache in a profoundly intimate way. The moment between Tom and Charlie was precious and sensual and made him long for too many things he couldn't name. He was so emotionally raw, he couldn't bring himself to look at Tanner, not right then.

TANNER

Tanner could feel Cole tremble against him. It wasn't the first time they'd sat close enough that their thighs touched, but just like earlier, he didn't move, wasn't sure if he could breathe some of the time, but he couldn't say exactly why.

It was comforting being with Cole, having him close and feeling the heat of his body. Cole's friendship had quickly become a vital part of Tanner's world. How or why, was again something he didn't know; he just knew that it was. And that he liked Cole. There wasn't anything about him that Tanner didn't enjoy.

And like earlier in the cemetery, he wanted to soothe the obviously painful emotions Tom's journal brought out in Cole.

"I'm sorry," Tanner said, awkwardly patting Cole's thigh.

"Why?"

"Don't really know. It's tough, hearing their story, but it's beautiful too. The hard part is knowing how scared they had to be, how careful, and wondering where it went from there." He couldn't imagine not being able to be open about how he felt about someone, but he knew Cole must understand it, same as Tom and Charlie. "I'm probably not real good at this. It's been over a year since I've consoled someone, and the only person I've done that with was Emma. I can't pretend to understand what you're going through...or what Tom and Charlie went through, but...Christ, to love, that's the most basic human emotion...and to have people believe that love is wrong..."

"Sounds to me like you understand it. Or at least can empathize with it," Cole told him.

The strange thing was, Tanner almost felt like he did understand it. Tom and Charlie felt personal to him—he was living in Tom's home, reading his words, and it had somehow become a part of him. "I want things to have

ended well for them. Do you think they did?" Tanner asked, but he knew the answer to that.

"Probably not," Cole replied, his voice full of melancholy. "But I guess we can hope. I mean, they did run away together."

Yeah...yeah, they did. "Do you want to read another?"

"I'm not sure I'm ready for that tonight...but I'd like to continue reading them with you."

Tanner didn't reply right away. The words were trapped in his throat as the desire to do exactly what Cole said built in his chest, this powerful storm he couldn't control.

"If you don't want to, we don't—"

"I want to," Tanner replied.

"Good."

They were quiet again for a few moments, and Tanner wondered if he should move, if he should scoot away or tell Cole good night and go upstairs. But he didn't, he couldn't. He didn't want space.

Reaching over, he brushed his forefinger over Paige's name in the journal. "She must have been something special, huh? To protect them that way."

"Yeah, she must have been."

Another round of silence, but it was the comfortable kind. It wasn't awkward, but filled with the contentment of people who felt at ease with one another. He wasn't sure when that had happened for them, but it had.

"Thank you," Cole said.

"What are you thanking me for?"

"Allowing me into your home. Making me feel welcome...becoming my friend."

"I should be the one thanking you for that. I was drowning in pain before I hired you...not sure if you could tell...but it's bearable now." Christ, how could it be that the pain of losing Emma was bearable? He missed her, he loved her, but yes, it was now easier. Because of Cole, and strangely, maybe because of the journal too.

Cole drew in a shaky breath as though Tanner's words had surprised him as much as they did Tanner himself.

"I don't know what to say."

“Don’t say anything,” Tanner replied. “Not yet. It’ll be easier for me if you don’t.”

“Okay.”

Tanner’s eyes began to feel heavy, the day catching up with him. He stretched, then looked over at Cole, who had his eyes closed, his head resting against the back of the couch.

His dark, thick eyelashes rested against his skin. His mouth was soft, slightly open, his breath sneaking out. He looked relaxed, like he’d let his guard down in a way he didn’t really when he was awake. It was like he was always waiting to be told to hit the road, to be turned away, and Tanner knew that feeling well. He’d felt it in foster care. Anytime he did something wrong, or they thought he did, he would get shipped away.

He realized he would do anything so Cole didn’t feel that.

Cole lifted a hand and scratched his jawbone. Tanner smiled, though he didn’t know what in the hell about scratching his face was smile-inducing.

He felt a flush in his cheeks, a buzzing at the base of his spine. Christ, what was wrong with him? He was sitting there staring at a man sleep, but he didn’t want to look away.

So he didn’t. Tanner drank his fill, not caring to understand and just taking the moment. He didn’t allow himself to take many moments. Emma had always been on him about that. It was why she always talked to him about brewing beer.

He was supposed to do that here.

It wasn’t long until his eyes began to feel heavier, until he let them close, knowing he should get up, that it was strange to fall asleep on the couch with Cole. Still, he didn’t move.

TANNER’S EYES SNAPPED OPEN. HE DIDN’T KNOW WHAT HAD WOKEN HIM SO suddenly, but the moment he did, he realized he’d fallen asleep with Cole on the couch, that Cole’s head was on his shoulder.

It was a little weird...and a little not weird...or maybe he was looking for it to be weird or not? As he sat there a moment, focusing on the heat of Cole against him, the feel of his head on his shoulder, it felt good. Christ, Cole felt *good* to him.

It wasn’t the first time that seeing Cole, touching his skin, studying his

hands or his back, felt right. That truth hit him in the gut, so the moment Cole groaned in his sleep and turned his head, Tanner slipped out from under the blanket.

For a moment he considered trying to lay Cole down. Did his knee hurt? Was the position uncomfortable? But he didn't know how to do it or if he should do it, and he suddenly really fucking needed to get out of the house.

Tanner shoved his feet into his shoes. Thankfully, he was wearing jeans and a tee he'd put on before going to look for Cole last night. His keys were on the kitchen counter, so he swooped them up and quietly sneaked out of the house.

Last night had been...something. How he could breathe easier after the loss of Emma, how much Cole's friendship meant to him, Tom and Charlie, and falling asleep on the couch. It was...a lot, and he wished like hell he had his fishing supplies so he could go fishing.

So what could he do?

Guilt made his stomach tumble because he knew Cole would wake up and wonder where he was, might even think he'd done something wrong, which he hadn't. Tanner just didn't know how to do...whatever he was doing. It was like he was learning how to live again.

He drove around for a little while, taking in the small town he and Emma had loved. What would she think about his friendship with Cole? He knew Emma, and she would be glad Tanner had him, that he'd allowed himself to have someone.

The more he drove, the more he began to feel slightly foolish for leaving the way he had. Who cared if they fell asleep on the couch together? Who cared if having Cole around eased some of the weight in his chest?

So instead of driving around town for no reason, Tanner turned and headed for the general store. He'd get some bacon and eggs, then go home and make breakfast for them.

Tanner plucked one of the handheld baskets from the stack by the door.

"How are you doing this morning, Tanner?" the cashier asked.

"Good, and you?" He couldn't remember her name, but he knew he should know it. That was how things worked in Red Bluff. There wasn't a doubt in his head that everyone in town knew his name.

He stumbled slightly when he thought about Cole. They knew he was hanging around too. What did they think about Cole living with him?

Why the hell should he care? He didn't, he decided, because Cole was his friend. Cole was honest, hardworking, and kind, which was all that mattered.

He grabbed eggs and bacon and was on his way back to the register when he heard, "Good morning, Tanner."

He recognized the voice. It was Mrs. Anderson, who had brought him a basket when he moved in, and whom Emma had called the biggest gossip in town. The memory made him smile in a way he didn't often when he thought of her. Emma hadn't ever been afraid to say how she felt.

"Good morning."

"Making breakfast?" she asked as one of her gray brows rose. It was a strange response to...breakfast? He couldn't imagine what that would be about.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, then smiled when he thought of Cole and how he'd called Tanner *sir* when they first met. Things felt so different between them now.

"For just you?" When he didn't reply right away, she added, "Rumor has it you hired that..."

He immediately tensed up, realizing exactly where she was going, but still, her actions surprised him. What would she have against Cole? The fact that he'd been homeless when he'd come to town?

"Man?" Tanner finished for her.

"Yes, man, to work for you...and that he lives on your property."

"Yes, ma'am," he said again, only this time he heard the edge in his own voice.

"I always like to mind my own business," Mrs. Anderson said, "but I know you're living out there all by yourself and going through a lot since you lost your wife, I'm sure."

Hearing it was like a punch to the gut, but Tanner tried to ignore it. It wasn't often someone mentioned his having lost Emma that way.

"I just want to make sure you aren't getting taken advantage of. That man... For all we know, he could be dangerous."

Well, now she'd gone too far. There wasn't a hurtful bone in Cole's body. "Dangerous?" Tanner chuckled. "Cole isn't dangerous. Why would you say that? Just because he's down on his luck?" He hated judgmental people. He'd been judged too many times in his life himself. Especially growing up as he had.

“Oh...” Her voice trailed off. “You don’t know...”

His gut twisted uncomfortably, a heaviness landing there. “Know what?”

She stepped closer, making Tanner frown, and then she lowered her voice. “He filled out a job application, you know. I’m not supposed to say anything about it, but he’s been convicted of a felony within the last seven years. That’s what the application says. And like I said, I mind my own business, but I thought you should know who you have living under your roof.”

Tanner’s throat went dry, and his stomach clenched, the heavy ache there growing. “No...that has to be a mistake.”

“People don’t accidentally mark that box on job applications. I saw it with my own two eyes.”

Tanner took a step back, his brain spinning while he tried to process what Mrs. Anderson had just said. Cole had been convicted of a felony? What in the hell had he done?

And why hadn’t he told Tanner?

“I...I have to go,” he replied before walking away. As much as he tried to ignore what she’d said, tried to tell himself she was wrong, somehow, he knew she wasn’t. Cole was a felon, and he hadn’t told Tanner. And even though he didn’t have the right, he felt betrayed by the fact that Cole had kept it from him.

COLE

Cole woke up on the couch alone, his knee stiff, his mouth dry, and Tanner nowhere in sight. Panic rose inside him. Had he made Tanner uncomfortable by falling asleep beside him? His eyes had felt so heavy, along with his heart, after the journal entry.

He looked around and noticed that nothing seemed out of place, the coffeepot still empty, so maybe Tanner had simply gone up to bed.

He stood up by varying degrees, working the kinks out of his muscles and especially his knee before going to take a leak. He still felt clammy from the rainstorm the night before, so he changed into different jeans and reached for one of the newer T-shirts he'd purchased that were laundered weekly and folded for him on top of the dryer.

When he didn't hear Tanner stirring anywhere in the house, he looked out the window and noticed that his truck was gone. Christ, had he scared him away, or had there been some errand that needed to be done?

Guess he'd find out when Tanner returned. He hoped it wouldn't be awkward between them after all they'd shared yesterday. Maybe they had become way too chummy, and it was time for him to finish the job and be on his way.

The idea of that made his chest heavy and tight. He'd miss Tanner, and maybe a little of this town. *And Tom and Charlie*. Christ, what a strange thought. They were only men in a journal.

Before Cole made his way outside, he briefly considered making breakfast for Tanner, but his stomach protested the thought. If there was any awkwardness between them, that might make it worse.

He decided it was time to assess the roof damage from the outside, especially after that wicked rainstorm. He retrieved the ladder from the shed and positioned it against the side of the barn. He carefully climbed a few

rungs until he was able to view the burned-out parts in the center of the roof. He imagined Tom and Charlie creating the fire, maybe with some bottles filled with rags dipped in gasoline. He shook his head because something felt off. Why not just leave town quietly and make a life elsewhere?

His fingers stretched toward the rotted wood, which immediately crumbled in his hand. The roof would need a new plywood foundation before nailing down shingles; in fact, he might need to do a complete tear-off, which would be time-consuming for one man, but he was up for the task, just like he was for repairing the back wall, though it helped to have Tanner's assistance during some of it. He could almost picture the barn restored to its original grandeur. He'd ask Tanner about some new paint, maybe a more modern red. Or was he only stalling—finding more things to do around here?

Just as he was climbing back down, he heard Tanner's truck pull into the yard. He stood frozen on the last rung of the ladder because Tanner's driving seemed a bit haphazard, like maybe he was angry or in a hurry.

As soon as the truck was in park, Tanner stormed out of the driver's door and pointed an accusing finger in his direction. "When were you going to tell me?"

Taken aback, Cole prodded his brain for anything he could've done wrong in the past twenty-four hours. "Tell you what?"

"That you were a convicted felon," he said through clenched teeth.

Cole swallowed the bile in his throat. He felt hot all over, his cheeks, ears, and neck flushed red. He supposed it was his fault for keeping it from Tanner in the first place, and now he was going to pay the price of his outrage and disappointment.

He glanced at the truck, then up the road, trying to piece more information together.

"I was in town when someone mentioned it. Said you put it on a job application."

Cole shook his head, unable to form the right words, not that it would matter much at this point. His head was spinning, trying to remember which shop it was that he first asked for a job. He thought it was probably the hardware store. And now all the curious stares in town made more sense.

"Mind you, Mrs. Anderson is the town gossip, so she might've been embellishing," Tanner rambled on. "So...is it true?"

Cole took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah, it's true."

He watched Tanner's face fall. Cole's stomach dropped to his feet, and he

felt the sting of rejection as well as embarrassment.

“I served almost four years in prison for receiving stolen property and two other related charges—because of working as a mechanic in a chop shop with stolen parts.” He couldn’t bear to look in Tanner’s direction. He had always been a proud man, but this felt too much like he’d disappointed a good friend. At least that was what Tanner had come to mean to him. “You probably won’t believe me when I say I didn’t willingly participate, though you could absolutely say I was complicit because I never asked questions and turned a blind eye. That was my mistake—not leaving or saying anything when it was going down—and I paid for it by doing hard time.”

“When did you get out?” Tanner asked in a strained voice.

“A couple months back.” He scratched his neck, his gaze on his worn shoes. “My grandfather left some money with a friend, and I tried to find work, but having a felony on your record makes it hard.”

“Why didn’t you level with me?” Tanner asked with renewed anger as he clenched his fists.

“It’s a hard pill to swallow, even for me.” Cole shook his head, frustration overtaking his senses. “And because I figured you might have this kind of reaction.”

When Tanner blinked in response, Cole hobbled past him to the barn, like a dog with his tail between his legs. He retrieved his knapsack and began loading it with what little he had. His body felt heavy, like he was wading through cement, but he forced his feet to move. He was still sore from the position he’d slept in, so his limp was more pronounced. He hoped Tanner didn’t think it was for show. He wanted to leave with some dignity intact.

When he left the barn, Tanner still stood in the same spot, looking dumbfounded, and Cole could see the wheels grinding in his head. He momentarily felt sorry for Tanner, and he wondered if the tables were flipped, if he’d have the same reaction.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” Tanner asked as Cole began trudging down the driveway, his limp slowing him up.

“Probably time to move on,” he replied over his shoulder. “I can’t bear for you to think poorly of me, or God forbid, be frightened of me.”

“You don’t have to... I can give you time to find another...” Tanner sputtered.

A stab of sadness hit him square in the chest.

“No, it’s okay,” he replied, twisting his head briefly toward Tanner. “But I

appreciate everything you've done for me."

Before he got too choked up, he walked more briskly toward the road, refusing to look back and see Tanner's face.

At the end of the driveway, he considered which way to go, and the only thing he could think of was the same fishing hole where he started in this town. Hopefully that would work out until he could think of a different plan. He didn't think Tanner would report him to the authorities for loitering, but at this point he couldn't be sure—he felt like his whole world was twisted on its side.

He blinked back the tears as he had a good talk with himself. He'd been through way worse in his life, so he needed to pull it together. He'd known this arrangement would eventually come to an end.

He heard the wheels of Tanner's truck as he pulled up beside him.

He dared not look in Tanner's direction as he lowered the window. "You forgot your dog tags."

Cole's feet faltered on the gravel. Shit, how could he forget? But he didn't want to look too desperate or attached to anything in his life, not anymore. He kept his head held high. "Keep 'em."

"I'm not going to keep them, Cole," Tanner replied as Cole picked up his pace.

When Tanner drove ahead, his heart felt punched through until Tanner parked on the side of the road and slid out of the vehicle to meet him halfway. "Get in the truck, Cole."

His breath hitched before he felt mortification warm his cheeks. "You don't need to feel bad or do anything for me. I can fend for myself."

"Get in the goddamned truck, Cole." Cole had never seen this side of him before, and it momentarily threw him. Tanner's hand was still clenched, so he wondered if he'd be frustrated enough to throw a punch. He wished he would; it would lend credence to the pain in his heart.

When Cole hobbled past him, Tanner's voice softened. "Don't want you to go."

Cole's shoulders slumped as he paused precariously on the road. "Why not? I lied to you. I deserve to lose my job."

Tanner placed a hand on his shoulder. Cole nearly crumbled right then. "You're an honorable man."

"No, I'm a convicted felon." His breaths were heavy, and his chest felt so

damned tight.

Tanner moved around to stand in front of him. “You never asked me for anything. You traded your grandfather’s dog tags as collateral. If anything, you need these back.”

When Tanner clutched at his hand and forced the dog tags into his palm, that was when Cole finally glanced up at him. The despair he saw in his eyes matched his own.

“I...I’m sorry I lied to you. I never meant any harm. I was only trying to survive.” Cole could feel his lip trembling as he said the words. “I served my time, and I’m not harmful to anyone, so please don’t go spreading it around —”

“Of course you’re not— *Fuck.*” Tanner took heaving breaths, as if to calm himself. “I’m sorry I overreacted. I was hurt and confused. Please come back home. I want you to finish the job.”

*Home. Such a foreign word. It was Tanner’s home. His and his late wife’s.
Not his. Never his.*

He gulped, refusing to get swayed into a false sense of comfort again. He gripped the dog tags, hoping to leave a mark. “I don’t...” He shook his head. “I don’t want your charity.”

“How about my friendship?” Tanner asked in a soft voice.

“Your friendship,” Cole echoed as he met his gaze.

“I know it sounds crazy, but...you’re all I’ve got.” There was a vulnerability in Tanner’s voice that Cole felt in his bones. He was all Tanner had? That broke his heart, and he wondered how they got there, how they got to that point.

Cole squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to let the man in again, but feeling utterly powerless against this connection they shared. “Same here,” Cole admitted.

He heard the gasp in the back of Tanner’s throat. “So you’ll stay?”

Cole stared at him a long moment, then reached for his hand and placed the dog tags in his care once more. Then he turned and got in the truck.

TANNER

It was a strange day after that. They drove back to the house in silence. Cole had cleared his throat and said he was going to get to work. Tanner had rambled about a lesson he needed to prepare, giving much more information than was truly needed. They were both feeling slightly raw, he thought, vulnerable, at least he knew he was. What he'd told Cole had been true. This man he didn't know well, who had been a stranger before he'd taken up residence in Tanner's house, was all he had. And he didn't want to lose that.

The thought of being alone again made him ache down to his core, made him feel cut open. The thought of losing Cole, his friend, caused a sharp pain in his chest, one that burrowed deeply into places he hadn't been sure he had anymore. Maybe it was wrong of him, but it didn't matter that Cole had been in prison. What he had done was wrong, but hell, who knew, Tanner could have been in the same kind of predicament if he hadn't found Emma.

He looked over at the dog tags that sat beside his computer. He wasn't sure why he'd put them there when he'd come inside earlier, why his eyes continued to be drawn to them. They reminded him of Cole, of course. They were a symbol of the kind of man he was, the kind that would give his most prized possession to Tanner in trust. Those tags meant something to Tanner too.

They'd skipped breakfast, so he'd wondered if Cole was as hungry as he was. Tanner had made lunch, and they'd eaten quietly together before Cole had dismissed himself outside again and Tanner had disappeared upstairs...to obsess about why this was affecting him so much. Why the thought of Cole leaving had left a hole inside him.

Tanner made a roast and potatoes for dinner. Unlike their usual routine, this time he put the food on the table, plates too, before going to get Cole. It was likely that he was stalling—which might be why he'd set the damn table

for them—but the reason didn't much matter to Tanner.

When he stepped out the back door, there was Cole, shirt off, jeans slung low on his hips, peering down at Emma's roses, plucking old leaves off the bush. He felt as though the air had been sucked out of him. The moment sat heavy inside his rib cage. There was something...hell, almost intimate about seeing him gently care for roses that were meant as a memorial for Emma.

And there was something about Cole's sun-kissed skin that made him tremble.

"Oh, hey," Cole said, his eyes darting to Tanner before turning back to the bush. "They're really beautiful. I can't believe how much some of them have opened up."

Cole's chest glistened, the sun sparking off beads of sweat. He was slender but more built than Tanner was, his abs muscular in a way Tanner's weren't. He had more hair on his chest than Tanner did as well. His brain told him those were unexpected things to notice about another man, at least for him, but he did notice them with Cole. "Yeah, beautiful," he replied, but he wasn't a hundred percent sure he was talking about the flowers. "Dinner's done...if you wanna come eat."

"Okay," he replied.

They went inside together, and as always, Cole went into the bathroom to clean up first. Tanner arranged the utensils, again stalling until Cole came out.

"Smells great," Cole said.

"Thank you." It wasn't until they were sitting down, halfway through their meal together, that Tanner added, "I'm sorry about this morning. I shouldn't have come back here like that. I was shocked...felt a little betrayed, but I can't really say why. I shouldn't have reacted the way I did, though."

"You had every reason to react like that. You just found out the man you offered a room in your house to is a felon."

"You, Cole. I found out you're a felon. That's different than some random man." And it was; somehow it truly was. He knew who Cole was. Maybe he shouldn't, given the short amount of time Tanner had known him, but he did...and it also didn't feel like they'd only known each other for weeks. Christ, how could it only be weeks? It felt like a lifetime.

"Is it?" Cole asked.

"Yes."

"I feel it too," Cole replied softly, and Tanner knew the conversation was

over. They finished eating quietly, but his eyes continued to be drawn to Cole. To his lips and the way his tongue traced them. To the honesty in his eyes. To the way his skin was tanned from the sun. The way his throat moved when he swallowed.

Tanner pushed to his feet, feeling too raw, too strange, too...he didn't know what.

"I'll do the dishes," Cole said before Tanner had a chance. He nodded, unable to speak around the lump that had formed in his throat.

Tanner didn't go upstairs, though; he went to the living room as Cole washed dishes, as he showered.

He sat on the couch where they'd fallen asleep the night before, wondering why he felt a strange twist in his gut. How it felt both heavy and light. Tom's journal sat on the table. His gaze caught it from time to time, curiosity pulling at him. He wanted to know more. Tanner thought maybe he needed to.

"I wasn't sure if you'd still be downstairs," Cole said from behind him.

"Yeah," Tanner replied. "I think I'd like to read another entry. Would you?" He looked up at Cole, who moved toward him.

"Yeah, yeah, I would. Can I?" he pointed toward the couch beside Tanner.

"Sit down, Cole."

And when Cole did, Tanner opened the book and read.

WE'RE IN LOVE. IT'S STRANGE HOW WE WENT FROM BEST FRIENDS TO MY noticing Charlie's back, the way he moved, the way he smelled and smiled and laughed, to running away from him, to hating myself for my sinful thoughts toward him, to kissing him and then being in love. Really, though, I think we always were in love. That's what Charlie told me. It was late. We sneaked to the barn because it wasn't as if my father could come out, not after his stroke. Mom would have no reason to, and Kasper was gone for the night.

We climbed to the loft. Charlie always liked it up there. There's this spot toward the back, out of view, where we go. We lay in the hay like we always do now. I was on my back, Charlie on his side, head leaning on his hand, his elbow propping him up. With his other hand, he brushed the hair off my forehead.

"You know I've always been in love with you?" he asked.

My heart sped up, ran wild, like a stampede in my chest. "You have?"

"Yeah. You didn't know? I could have sworn you knew. I think I was about sixteen when I realized it. It was that time my dad got drunk and hit me."

Charlie's dad always got drunk, but that had been the only time he'd hit him.

"You were so angry. I thought I was going to have to forcibly keep you from running over there and killing him."

"I wanted to," I admitted. I would do anything for Charlie.

"I know. And the way you cared about me? Wanted to protect me? That was when I knew I loved you."

Four years. Charlie had known he loved me for four years? How could I not have known? How could I not have seen it?

"I think you've always loved me too," Charlie said with a half grin.

I rolled my eyes because he was so confident, so self-assured...so right. "I think I've always loved you too," I told him, because I was sure I had.

He leaned down then and kissed me until he stole my breath, until I lived off what he exhaled into my mouth. His lungs were strong enough for both of us. Charlie's tongue swept my mouth as he rolled on top of me, settled between my legs. I felt his cock against mine, making me tremble.

We hadn't touched each other like that yet, but I wanted to, wanted to know what Charlie looked like, what he felt like.

"You're the best man I've ever known, Thomas Crawford," he told me as he looked down at me.

"No." I shook my head. "That's you. You're kind, loyal, honest."

"The son of a drunk."

"My best friend."

He smiled, and I damn near melted. I loved Charlie's smiles.

"You're the most important thing in my life. You're all that matters," Charlie told me, and there wasn't a part of me that didn't believe him.

"Wish I could hold you all night," I murmured against his ear. "And kiss you at dawn."

TANNER'S HANDS SHOOK AS HE CLOSED THE JOURNAL AND SET IT ON THE

coffee table. The lump that had formed in his throat earlier was even larger now. He felt warmth against his thigh, and realized it was Cole...that he was close, so very close, and Tanner wanted that, he *craved* it. The closeness, the wiping away of the loneliness.

“Feels heavy, doesn’t it? Even though they’re happy...feels like this weight in your chest. It’s almost...”

“Suffocating,” Tanner finished for him. “But then...it’s like I can feel their happiness too...their love. I don’t know. Maybe that’s weird.” It certainly felt weird to him; they were only words on a page.

“Me too,” Cole said softly, and there was something in his voice that made Tanner look up. They were close...maybe closer than they’d been a moment before. Their legs still touched, their shoulders too. He could smell mint on Cole’s breath as though he’d brushed his teeth when he was in the bathroom. Saw his pulse beat wildly in his neck. His tongue sneaked out and swiped at his bottom lip.

They were closer...closer still. Tanner didn’t know if he was moving closer or Cole was, but then their lips were touching, moving together. That same tongue Tanner had watched a second before now swiped at *his* lips and—goddamn it, what was he doing?—he opened up and let Cole in, tasted the mint he’d just smelled.

He was kissing a man.

He was kissing Cole.

And he liked it.

It was short, sweet, so fucking sweet, and then it was Cole who pulled away. Tanner’s face flamed hot, sizzled.

“Shit, I don’t know what that was. I shouldn’t have done that. Fuck, Tan, I didn’t mean that.”

Tan. Cole had called him Tan.

“It’s okay,” he replied. “I, um...shit, I kissed you too.” He ran a hand through his hair as Cole rubbed his fingers over his beard.

He’d really kissed a man. He’d kissed someone other than Emma. Tanner thought maybe he should feel worse about both of those things. He felt surprised, yeah, like it was different, but he wasn’t sure he regretted it. He didn’t think he did.

But he might need to think on it. “I should go...to bed...” He pushed to his feet, leaving Cole on the couch.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll turn everything off down here.”

“Thanks,” Tanner replied when he was already at the stairs.

He was halfway up when Cole asked, “Are we okay?”

Tanner stopped, looked down at him, and smiled. “Yeah, Cole. We are.”

COLE

It took him a couple of long days, but Cole had finished a complete tear-off of the barn roof. He'd borrowed Tanner's truck for several trips to haul the junk to the landfill. Tanner trusted him not to take off with it, didn't even bat an eye when passing him the keys, and that meant everything.

Afterward he drove to the hardware store to inquire about more plywood and roof tiles, which had to be special-ordered.

"That's a lot of work for one man," the guy behind the counter said, and he recognized him as the man who'd let him fill out an application that first day. His name tag identified him as Andy, and Cole thought he was probably the owner.

His fist clenched as he wondered if Andy was the one helping spread the rumor about him being a felon, so he kept his replies short and sweet. "Yup, but I'm up for the task."

If there had been an alternative lumber store in close proximity, he would've utilized it, but that was a small town for you. So it was best to hold his head high and let their speculation roll off him. It only mattered what Tanner thought, and Cole wanted to help make his dream take shape with the barn, whatever it ended up being. But he got the impression that Tanner didn't really know, that he was feeling around in the dark, same as him.

"You're all I've got."

Fuck, when Tanner admitted that out loud, it had felt like a bell tolling in his heart. He wanted to wrap the man up in his arms and hold him close. Keep him safe.

They hadn't discussed the kiss from the other night, but things didn't feel awkward between them, and that was a relief. If anything, sometimes he'd feel Tanner's intense gaze on him, maybe processing what'd happened, and other times the man would offer a lopsided grin that warmed Cole to his toes.

And each time he stepped inside the barn, his eyes would swing to the corner where Tom had written the loft had been located, and he pictured him and Charlie madly in love, lying in the hay. Fuck, he couldn't believe Tanner had kissed him back. He wanted more of the same, but no way would he push for anything unless Tanner asked for it.

For now, he was content spending his days with the man, and if the tension mounted between them, his hand had always worked out fine.

They went fishing that weekend, Tanner insisting they needed a break from work.

The sun was starting to creep further in the sky, a light breeze cooling their skin as they rested their poles side by side in the water.

"What was prison like?" Tanner asked unexpectedly, then cringed. "Sorry, none of my—"

"Just as awful as you'd imagine," he replied, remembering how naive he'd been about the world at first. He learned rather quickly how to stay invisible as well as useful. "But not that bad if you took advantage of the stuff they offered. The worst thing was having too much time on your hands. So I signed up for classes, read lots of books, kept my nose clean."

"What sort of classes?" Tanner asked, and Cole noticed how his long lashes brushed his cheeks in the sunlight. If he had the nerve, he'd lean over and kiss him right then.

"I stuck to the ones where I could use my hands. Woodworking, electric, art classes, even some gardening. I left the education and Bible stuff to the others," Cole mused, and Tanner chuckled. "My mother left when I was sixteen. She was a kid herself when she had me and was hooked on one drug or another. I didn't know my father, besides hearing his name once or twice. My grandfather took me in; he was the only real parent figure I knew. He was the custodian in our apartment building and always did construction jobs on the side, so I learned a little bit of everything."

He thought about the night he found out about his grandfather's death and how he'd cried himself to sleep. His ashes had been buried next to his grandmother's grave—she had died so young—and before leaving town for Red Bluff, Cole had walked through the cemetery to say his last goodbyes.

"You got me beat there," Tanner replied. "Wish I knew how to do more things with my hands. Had you not come along..."

"Well, I certainly don't have your book smarts," Cole remarked, and Tanner scoffed at the idea. "Bet you're a good professor. Kind and patient."

“Eh, I try my best,” Tanner said. He reeled in his line to switch out the bait before casting it into the water again.

“That how you busted up your knee?” Tanner asked in a hesitant voice. “In prison?”

Cole winced, but he wasn’t going to keep secrets anymore. “There was a guard who was pretty full of himself, wanted us to call him *sir*, and if you didn’t act fast enough, he’d crack you good with his baton. I learned real quick those first months.”

“That bastard.” Tanner’s fist clenched around the pole. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“S’okay. It’s a good reminder of where I came from. A place I never want to land in again. I learned my lesson.”

According to his grandfather, Fischer’s Garage had been shut down, the owner’s sentence double his own. No way he’d ever let something like that happen again, no matter how hungry or desperate he got.

“Just hope my grandfather can see that from wherever he is,” Cole said, and Tanner’s eyes softened. He didn’t get a chance to show his grandfather that he’d gotten his head screwed on straight, and he was making up for it ever since.

They ate the sandwiches they brought and fished some more until the sun was beginning to get low in the sky. They’d scarcely caught anything besides a couple of small perch, so they packed up their gear and headed home.

Cole jumped in the shower while Tanner headed to the master bedroom. From what Cole had seen of it, it was just as sparse as the rest of the house. But at least there was a TV and a large bed, which looked lush and comfortable, not that he was complaining; he was perfectly content—and grateful—for his bed in the spare room.

Once he dried off and slipped into jeans and a white tee, he wiped the fog from the mirror and stared hard at himself. His skin tone had deepened from being out in the sun, and his beard had grown rather unkempt. Cole was amazed Tanner would want to kiss him at all the way he looked. And the disposable razors he’d purchased from the general store wouldn’t do to clean it up properly, no matter how long he hacked away at the hair.

“Considering shaving it off?” Tanner asked from the doorway, startling him.

“Nah, just hoping to trim it properly.” He yanked at the stragglers near his chin.

“Good, because I like your beard,” Tanner replied, and Cole’s stomach

felt all topsy-turvy, like he was in junior high again.

“Yeah?” When Cole glanced at him, a line of red was forming along Tanner’s neck, and his Adam’s apple bobbed with the effort of swallowing.

“There, uh...was this guy in prison, Geno, who was good with hair. Somehow, he’d gotten hold of a decent pair of clippers and opened up a shop of sorts right there on the cellblock. The line would be around the corner, the guards would get first dibs, of course, but he was that good—and I suppose it gave him purpose.”

“Imagine that,” Tanner replied, looking half amused, half impressed before he suddenly straightened. “Hold that thought.”

When he disappeared temporarily, Cole realized how freeing it felt to talk openly about his experiences with someone who wouldn’t judge him. He hoped Tanner felt comfortable enough to do the same.

Tanner returned holding a pair of shiny silver clippers, and he motioned to the toilet seat. “Sit.”

Cole sank down on the closed lid, his stomach buzzing at the idea of Tanner fussing over him in any way.

“Been a while since I used these, but let me give it a good shot. That cool with you?” When Cole nodded, he reached for a towel and draped it around Cole’s shoulders. He plugged in the clippers, slid on the attachment, and held them aloft. “Ready?”

Cole smiled, trying to reassure him. “Go for it.”

Using his fingers, he positioned Cole’s jaw this way and that as he carefully trimmed above his lip and then along his jawline. Cole enjoyed the feel of his deft hands on him as he trailed the clippers to his neck, his skin already feeling freer from the tufts of thick hair.

When he was done, Tanner carefully removed the towel, reached for a fresh one, and began cleaning up any stray hairs on his face, shoulders, and knees. He wet the towel and swiped it across his mouth and chin and cheeks, and his skin tingled.

Tanner reached for a hand mirror in the vanity drawer and held it up to him. “What do you think?”

“So much better,” he replied as he turned his jaw toward the light. Tanner had left it just the length he liked. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. But let me make sure I didn’t leave any stray hairs.”

With his hand cupping Cole’s nape, Tanner positioned his head back as he

checked beneath his chin. “Think I got it all.”

He could feel Tanner’s shallow breaths against his skin, and when he slid his gaze up, Tanner’s eyes were fixed on his lips. Cole inhaled sharply through his nose. They were so close, all he had to do was stretch a couple of inches and their mouths would meet.

“Wh...what’s up?” he asked in a throaty voice.

“I... Sorry, I was just thinking that the other night when we...” He swallowed roughly. “Your beard felt coarse against my chin, but your lips were soft. I guess I didn’t expect them to be so soft.”

“Yeah?” Cole’s pulse was beating wildly against his throat. “Do you feel conflicted about what happened between us?”

Tanner’s eyes landed squarely on his. “No, that’s the thing. It felt good—really good—and I...I want to do it again.”

Cole’s breath hitched. “So do it.”

Tanner held his gaze for a drawn-out moment as he panted softly against his lips.

The man’s fingers trembled against his jaw as he slowly...painstakingly slowly...lowered his mouth to Cole’s. Cole held his breath as Tanner took his time with the kiss. He brushed their lips once, twice, before planting their mouths more firmly together.

Cole couldn’t hold back a groan as Tanner’s tongue swiped along the seam of his lips.

His fingers reached up to grasp the back of Tanner’s neck, sealing their connection as Tanner’s tongue plunged between his lips.

This time Tanner moaned as Cole deepened the kiss, their tongues battling, their kisses turning frantic and needy, their hands reaching and stroking backs and shoulders and hair.

Cole felt like he might crawl right out of his skin. He needed more. More of Tanner’s mouth, more of his hands, of his skin, of the needy noises from his throat. He pushed to his feet, forcing Tanner to step with him as he backed him against the bathroom wall, their mouths still sealed together in a deep kiss.

At that angle, Cole could open wider, explore more of Tanner’s mouth with his tongue, nibble at his upper lip and suck on the bottom one.

When Cole dragged a low moan from Tanner’s lips, a frisson traveled straight to his balls, and his cock jumped to life. He sank his weight against

the man, their hips, chests, and groins aligned, and that was when he felt it. Tanner was hard as a fence post through his jeans. And Cole's arousal shot straight through the fucking roof.

But even through the fog of his blissed-out brain, Cole knew he needed to rein it in. Tanner wasn't ready for something like that. It was only his second time kissing a man, for Christ's sake. And as good as it was, he needed to be the rational one in this scenario.

He dragged his mouth away and rested his head against Tanner's shoulder, panting heavily. "I...I better leave before I..."

Tanner's hands fisted the back of his shirt as if trying to keep him in place. "Before you what?"

"Fuck. Never mind," Cole replied, pulling away and straightening to full height. Tanner's lips were shiny from his kisses, his hair askew, his eyes unfocused. He looked aroused and hot as fuck. "You're too sexy for your own good."

Then he stumbled his way out of the bathroom and to his room to cool off.

TANNER

After Cole had gone to his room, Tanner had done the same.

Christ, what had gotten into him? He'd kissed Cole again, had wanted it, thought about it, basically asked for it. He waited for the guilt to hit, for the wrongness of kissing anyone other than Emma to sweep over him, but it didn't come.

Why didn't it come?

There was a part of him that couldn't make sense of feeling desire for anyone but the wife he'd loved, but he felt it, he fucking felt it, and not just any desire, but desire for a man. Desire for Cole.

That should probably cause him some worry as well, but it didn't. Kissing Cole felt comfortable, right...felt sort of like he'd always been kissing Cole. That it wasn't something new.

"Emma, I don't know what's going on," Tanner said to the empty room. He didn't hear her voice. Ever since she'd passed, he'd heard her voice—she'd talked to him, guided him, supported him. Now he couldn't remember the last time he'd heard her voice.

Jesus Christ, was he going to forget her voice?

Don't be silly, Tanner. It just means you're happy.

Ah, there she was. He smiled at the thought of her, at the fact that he still knew the kind of things Emma would say to him. No matter what, he wanted to keep that with him always.

He wanted to talk to her, he realized. Wanted to share with her, to tell her about Cole, his friend, his... He didn't truly know what Cole was to him. Tanner thought of the journal downstairs, still on the table beside the couch, waiting for the next time he and Cole picked it up.

He didn't have a journal of his own. In his office he had notebooks for

work, but... He went to his closet and pulled out a bag with some supplies. There was a composition book inside, which he collected, along with a pen from his dresser, before he sat in bed. He'd never been a journaler. It wasn't something he'd ever even considered, but in that moment, he didn't know what else to do.

YOU WERE ALWAYS MY BEST FRIEND, EM. I DON'T KNOW WHO ELSE TO TALK TO about this but you. It's awkward too because there's a part of me that feels like this is a betrayal, like I'm starting to move on from you, but how do I move on from my heart? It doesn't make any sense, but I think it's happening. It's what you wanted for me. From the moment we knew you were sick, you made sure to start preparing me. I think even back then you knew you were going to pass, and your thoughts weren't of what you would miss. They were about me.

You kept pushing for this house, and I pretended I didn't need to, that you would be there to move in with me.

You kept pushing about me being happy, living, finding friends and not shutting the world out, but I didn't want to listen to that either. I kept telling myself I wouldn't need to because you'd always be there.

But you're not, and you knew that would happen, didn't you? You tried to protect me, but you knew.

When you passed, I was alone...but now I'm not. It's not the same, of course. It's not that I'm in love with Cole, but he's my friend. He means a lot to me. He sucks the loneliness out of my bones. I'm also...attracted to him. Him, Emma. It's a him I'm attracted to, and it feels easier than I expected, both the attraction in general and the attraction-to-a-man thing. Cole just sort of fell into my life like he'd always been there. Strange, huh? Guess that means I'm bisexual. I think that would have made you smile. You were always such a supporter of the LGBTQ community.

Could you give me a sign, though?

A SIGN? CHRIST, WHAT WAS HE THINKING?

I KNOW THAT SOUNDS CRAZY. I'VE NEVER BEEN ONE TO BELIEVE IN ALL THAT mumbo jumbo, but I know you did. I just... I want to know you're okay with everything, Em.

He's a good guy, a good friend. You'd like him.

Love, Tan

HE CLOSED THE NOTEBOOK, SURPRISED HE'D EVEN TAKEN IT OUT TO WRITE TO Emma that way. Apparently, Tom was rubbing off on him.

As he fell asleep, he wished he'd taken the time to tell Emma about Tom and Charlie. His mind went to Cole then, the feel of his beard against his skin and those soft lips that made him feel alive again.

TANNER WOKE UP TO THE SCENT OF BACON, AND A SMILE IMMEDIATELY tugged at his lips. He didn't know exactly why he was smiling, only that he felt the urge to.

He climbed out of bed, went to the bathroom, and took a quick leak. After washing his hands, he brushed his teeth. It wasn't until he rounded the corner into the kitchen and saw Cole standing at the stove, his back to Tanner, wearing nothing but a pair of sweatpants, that Tanner realized he'd come downstairs in nothing but his pajama bottoms too.

Which obviously wasn't a big deal. Who the fuck cared if they were shirtless? But he'd never been shirtless with a man he'd kissed before...the only man he'd ever kissed.

"Mornin'," Tanner said as he scratched the back of his neck.

Cole looked over his shoulder and grinned. "Mornin'— *Ouch, shit!* Bacon grease and bare stomachs don't mix." He backed away from the stove and turned it off.

Tanner chuckled. "Probably not the best idea to fry bacon without a shirt."

"Are you saying you don't like me shirtless?" Cole cocked a brow before it smoothed out. "Is it okay that I do that? We're in unfamiliar territory here. I'm not gonna lie and pretend I don't want to flirt with you, but I don't want to make you uncomfortable either."

Goose bumps traveled up his arms. "I'm not; uncomfortable, I mean. I think I like it when you flirt with me."

"Good," Cole replied.

"I'll scramble the eggs," Tanner told him.

It wasn't long until the two of them sat at the table together, eating breakfast and drinking coffee. It was strange, these moments. They were

intimate, domestic. Like they were a couple instead of friends who'd kissed twice.

"What are you smiling about?" Cole asked, rubbing his jaw. He did that a lot, Tanner noticed.

"I didn't realize I was smiling, but I guess this. Just...how different my life feels all of a sudden." It actually felt like he had a life now.

Cole nodded slowly, and Tanner saw the trepidation there. "I figure this has to be more of a struggle than you're letting on—because of Emma and because I'm a man."

Tanner leaned back, thinking. He appreciated that he and Cole could have conversations like this together. "Yes and no. I'm not really sure what *this* even is."

"Me either."

"For now, that helps, not labeling it and enjoying it, whether it keeps happening or not. I just know I don't want to lose your friendship."

"You won't," Cole replied. "Never."

It was Tanner's turn to nod. "I wrote a letter last night...to Emma. I know that sounds strange, but I wanted to talk to her...to tell her about you. I thought about Tom and his journal, and it just sort of happened. There's a little bit of guilt, obviously. It feels weird to kiss anyone but her, but I think most of the guilt comes in because I don't feel more of it for what we're doing. It feels like I should. But I know she'd be pissed at me for that. She'd be pissed it took me so long to start feeling a slice of happiness again."

"And you do?" Cole asked. "Feel some happiness again? I mean, I know your life will never be the same without her, but—"

"Yeah," Tanner interrupted. "I do."

"And the fact that I'm a man?" Cole asked softly, as though he was afraid of the answer.

"Don't know how that factors in. I guess it means I'm bisexual, but why didn't I know before? I'm not sure. Or did I know and not realize it? Ignored the signs? Again, I'm not sure. Just know I like kissing you...and Emma would be happy for me." Tanner looked down, slightly embarrassed at what he'd admitted even though he'd done the same thing the night before.

"I like kissing you as well. If we keep doing it, great, but if it becomes too much, you let me know. Don't want to mess up what we have here."

Those words prompted Tanner to look up, to meet Cole's eyes. They just

seemed to get each other; there was a comfort between them, a familiarity that Tanner felt to his bones. “You want to get out of here today? There’s a big farmer’s market in Stallings. It’s about a half-hour drive from here. Emma and I went to it a few times.” He wondered if it was awkward when he brought Emma up that way, but he didn’t want to forget her. He could never do that.

“I’d like that.”

They left the dishes in the sink and went upstairs to get dressed. It was an easy drive over to Stallings. Tanner had the radio on, rock music playing softly in the background.

“You keep distracting me from work,” Cole teased. “First fishing and now this.”

“Are you complaining about spending time with me?” There was a flirtatious tone to Tanner’s words, much like Cole’s had earlier in the kitchen.

“Nope. I’m definitely not.”

“Good.”

They parked and got out of the truck. It was already warm, the air sticky, the farmer’s market packed with bodies. Tanner walked beside Cole down one of the rows. Their arms brushed against each other from time to time, and he wondered if it made Cole’s skin pebble with goose bumps the way it did Tanner’s. He also wondered if anyone noticed anything different about them. It was crazy. How could they know that he and Cole were more than friends? Or were they? Again, maybe he should say friends who’d kissed and admitted they liked doing it.

“Jesus, look at all these colors. My grandpa used to say you should always make your plate as colorful as possible.” Cole’s voice was a mixture of nostalgia and melancholy.

“Does that mean I should be making us more vegetables?” Tanner asked, and Cole chuckled.

“I like your food just fine, but a little color never hurt. I’d like one myself, I think.”

“A garden?” Tanner asked as they stopped at a quiet booth with bright red, orange, green, and yellow bell peppers.

“I think so. I think I’d like it—growing food. Caring for it, watching it thrive. Growing something that wasn’t there before. Does that sound strange?”

“No. Not at all.” It sounded nice, actually. “You should do it. We have the

garden area at home.”

Cole shook his head. “That’s yours. I couldn’t do that.”

“Because I’m doing so much with it already? It wouldn’t even be cleaned out if it wasn’t for you. That house...it has so much potential I’m not bringing to fruition. Feels kind of wrong now, ya know? I don’t know. Maybe I’m not making sense.”

“You are. I get it.” Cole’s hand landed on Tanner’s shoulder before he quickly pulled it away as though he wasn’t sure how Tanner would react. “I’ll think about it. But what about you?”

“Guess that’s where you come in too—the roses, the barn, the porch swing. Baby steps.” Tanner winked.

“What do you like?” Cole asked. “You’re a teacher, but what do you like outside of that? I know there has to be more.”

Cole was right. There was. He felt a burn low in his gut that he hadn’t felt since before Emma got sick. “Brewing my own beer. Em and I both loved beer. It wasn’t something we were able to make much of in the city, but we’d toy around with different flavors. That’s one of the other things we were going to do in the barn...set up my brewing equipment, and I was supposed to make more beer. We were basically going to be drunk all the time.” He winked so Cole would know he was just trying to lighten the mood.

“You should brew beer, Tanner.”

He said it softly, with such care that it made a strange twitch form in Tanner’s chest. “Maybe I will.” It was hard to agree to it, but Christ, Tanner thought he really wanted it.

“What did Emma do?” Cole asked. “What did she love?”

He appreciated that Cole didn’t shy away from Emma, that he tried to incorporate her in Tanner’s life since he struggled with it on his own. “She was a painter. I’ve never met someone as talented as her. She was going to paint while I taught and brewed beer.”

“You don’t have any paintings hung up.”

“In case you didn’t notice, I haven’t been dealing well with her death.” He grinned, again so Cole understood he was trying to lighten the mood.

“In case you didn’t notice, I’m determined to make you happy, Tanner Rowe, and I think hanging those paintings will go a long way toward that. When you’re ready, I’ll do it for you.”

Tanner closed his eyes, let the offer wash over him. He wanted that. He

wanted to see Emma's work in the home she'd wanted so much.

He opened his eyes, discreetly reached over, and grabbed Cole's hand. It was like a jolt of electricity rushed up his arm. He brushed his thumb over Cole's work-roughened skin, then let go. "Thank you...for everything."

"I could say the same to you."

COLE

Paige insisted on giving me and Charlie some privacy inside the barn. We'd only had stolen moments over the past couple of weeks, always fearful of being found out by Kasper or another farmhand.

We considered sneaking off after church on Sunday, but my father was having a difficult time, and my mother needed help. We can't afford to hire a nurse, and on his most difficult days, when his memory isn't so good and his frustration peaks about not being able to use his right arm or leg, I always pitch in. No way I couldn't.

There were so many times I wanted to tell my mother my deepest secret, that I was in love with my best friend, but I knew she'd never understand. Besides, she had so many other pressures with my father and the farm, and no way did I want to cause her any undue stress.

But Paige has been a godsend. She came by the following Monday under the pretense of visiting with my mother during our lunch break. And God, I don't know how I'm supposed to repay her.

Stealing any time alone with Charlie felt like an impossible dream. Like an itch beneath my skin, this desperate need to hold him, tell him how much he means to me, other than with meaningful looks across a haystack or around the cow in the pasture.

When we kiss, it feels explosive, like he's taken up all the space available in my heart and it's got nowhere to go except pour out in waves of affection and love.

So today we were able to scamper up to the hayloft and share lunch together, Charlie feeding me bites of his Granny Smith apple while he cursed and complained about the preacher's sermon the day before. His reading of Sodom and Gomorrah from the book of Genesis, and his fire-and-brimstone warning about what he called sins of the flesh.

“A bunch of hogwash is what it is,” Charlie said. “That Bible passage is about being dishonest, greedy, unwelcoming too. Not about us. Never about us.”

“You heathen,” I said as I fed him the last bits of my bologna sandwich.

“You love this heathen,” Charlie replied, kissing my cheek.

“I do,” I admitted. I’ve always loved him, and I would until my dying breath.

Charlie sank back in the hay with a sigh. “We would never be accepted, Tom. Nobody would ever understand our love. Even my pitiful excuse of a father, who attends services and recites all the right words before seeking refuge in his gin, would be more accepted than us.”

I lay beside him, my stomach churning at the truth of his words.

“Paige understands,” I offered, and Charlie smiled.

He encouraged me to lay my head on his chest right against his heart as he pushed his fingers through my hair. I loved when he touched me so freely like that. I could feel his pulse steady against my ear, and it helped calm my own uneasy breaths.

“I heard there are places in big cities where men like us can go and feel safe,” Charlie said in a dreamy voice as his fingers forked through the curls at my nape.

I inhaled sharply. “Like a safe house?”

“More like a pub or watering hole where we’d be free and protected, at least for the night.”

“I envy those men,” I said, kissing his chest and watching as gooseflesh lined his smooth skin. There was nothing in the world like kissing Charlie. “It would be impossible to travel without much money. Plus, my mother...”

“Yeah, I know. My dad would never miss me. But I wouldn’t go without you.”

The idea of Charlie ever leaving me behind made my stomach roil uncomfortably.

I sighed. “Maybe someday.”

“Yeah, someday.”

Charlie bent his head to take my mouth in a passionate kiss that soon turned desperate and needy as our lips and tongues made up for lost time. He dragged me to lie on top of him, chest-to-chest, and when our stiff pricks

aligned, it felt like I would combust if I didn't get relief soon. My hand had been busy in bed at night and in the bath, but nothing took the place of being connected to Charlie just like this.

Charlie's hands dragged across my waistband, his fingers dipping inside. "Please let me touch you."

Without another word, I helped him push my pants and underwear down to my knees, and when his fingers wound around my cock, it felt so electric, I thought I might spill my seed right then and there.

"Jesus, Tom. Somehow I knew you would feel this good. Pull me out too."

After I dragged his pants down, we were finally flesh-to-flesh, and I whimpered against his neck, unable to hold back how incredible it felt. I reached for his shaft, encircling the velvety skin over hard muscle. It felt too perfect, too right.

We stroked each other's pricks, my fingers exploring the mushroom head, the slit leaking his seed, before Charlie groaned and dragged me flush against him. Our mouths met in a mash of teeth and tongues, and we rutted fast and hard against each other.

We swallowed each other's moans as my hands wound tightly in his hair and his fingers gripped my bare bottom, sending me skyward in no time flat, with him following closely behind.

I had never come so hard in my life, and my limbs felt heavy, my brain mush as Charlie's lips tenderly met mine. "Was that okay?"

"It was amazing," I murmured. "But now we're all sticky."

Charlie reached for the shirt he'd removed earlier when the humidity had done us in, and now as the sun shone brightly through the window, I felt clammy but completely sated.

Just as he finished cleaning up the evidence of what we'd done, Paige's voice reverberated loudly near the barn door.

"Oh, hello, Kasper!" Paige said. "I think Tom and Charlie might just be finishing up the lunch I made them."

Charlie's eyes grew wide as saucers, and I scrambled down the steps, grabbed a pitchfork, and positioned myself in front of the cow stall, pretending to muck it out while she was out to pasture.

I schooled my breathing as the barn door swung open and Paige stepped inside behind Kasper. I could see her chest heaving and relief flitting through her eyes when she spied Charlie near Mirabelle, the horse Charlie always

avored. It was a close call, and guilt slammed through me that Paige had placed herself in that sort of position for us.

As far as I was concerned, she was the best catch on the planet, and most men would not be worthy of her.

COLE COULD FEEL TANNER'S HEAVY BREATHS AGAINST HIS ARM AS HE SAT beside him on the porch swing, the tension radiating from Tanner's body.

"I...I need a minute." Tanner stood up, and Cole immediately noticed the bulge in his pants and the anxious set of his shoulders.

When Tanner headed inside, Cole reached for the bottle of beer he'd propped between his thighs while reading the journal. He bent his head back, finishing the contents. It'd been a while for Cole, and certainly the first time they drank alcohol together, but it felt good going down. His throat was parched from reading aloud, and his nerves were just as shot, wondering about Tom and Charlie's well-being. It was as if they were reading Tom's journal in real-time, that's how raw and close to the surface his feelings were. And he knew it was the same for Tanner.

He heard the snick of the screen door, and Tanner returned to the swing with two fresh beers. He looked flushed as he handed Cole his drink.

"You okay?" Cole asked, setting his empty container on the ground.

"Yeah," he said, taking a swig from his own bottle. "I just... I didn't know it could be like that."

"Like what?" Cole asked, gently placing the journal back in the tin can beside him on the swing and shutting the lid.

"So...sensual between two men." He shook his head as if trying to make sense of his swirling thoughts. And Cole got it because his heart had been racing while reading the passage, his libido affected as well. "Not that I didn't think men had sex. Christ, I just never really considered exactly how it went down, other than penetration, at least, and the way Tom and Charlie..."

When Cole reached for his knee, Tanner bit back a gasp. "Did it turn you on, Tan?"

He clenched his fist and swallowed roughly. "I'm feeling so many damn things. Anxious and sad for them, happy too, but...yeah, I'd be lying if I didn't admit that reading about their intimate moment did something to me."

"S'okay," Cole replied in a soft voice. "I feel all those things too."

Cole didn't want to push Tanner to say more, just stayed silent and let him process as he took another swallow of his beverage. Over dinner Tanner had explained more about how he'd learned to craft his own beer, and when Cole encouraged him to buy the supplies he needed so he could finally sample his creations, Tanner seemed pumped about it.

Cole loved seeing that light in his eyes, and he'd do just about anything to keep it there. The way he was beginning to feel about Tanner was different than with any other man. They had a friendship that was special—almost reverent—and he didn't want to blow it or make any assumptions about where this might be headed.

"I...I want to rebuild it," Tanner said suddenly, motioning in the direction of the barn, its dark silhouette illuminated by the moon.

"What do you mean?"

"The hayloft," he replied, his eyes wide and searching. "For Tom and Charlie. Think that's possible?"

Cole nodded, reaching for his hand and entwining their fingers. Tanner was trembling, and that action seemed to ground him. "Sounds like a good plan."

"Do you think that's where they went? Off to a big city somewhere?"

Cole had wondered the same thing. "I hope so. I hope they got to spend their lives together."

Tension seemed to swirl around them. "Yeah, me too."

They stared at the moon while sipping their beers and lightly swinging with their hands still clasped, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"How about the outside of the barn?" Cole asked, making out the peeling paint under the night sky. "What color do you want it to be?"

Cole had nailed the plywood base down on the roof and reinforced it on the inside so that no more rain could come through the ceiling.

He'd be working on the shingles next, but would admit seeing the barn come together had brought a mixed bag of feelings. He was happy it was being restored, but he also didn't know what would happen once he was finished.

"How about trying to match it to the red it once was?"

"Perfect. Plus you said that was Emma's other favorite color," Cole added and looked at Tanner, saw his eyes soften. When Tanner squeezed their palms together, it made him shiver.

It felt natural talking about Emma. He didn't know why. Maybe because there was no way to change it. It was Tanner's history, and it made him who he was. And she was a huge part of that. He just hoped she would think him honorable. He certainly was trying to do right by Tanner.

"Next time we're in town, you should pick up some seedlings to start your garden," Tanner said, staring somewhere behind the barn, toward the open field. "I'd love to cook with fresh vegetables."

Cole's heart clanged against his rib cage. Tanner's words felt like hope, but he was afraid to expect too much. His dreams could come tumbling down as easily as the roof of the barn had.

"It takes a while to yield a garden, Tan," he said around a swallow. "Two to three months, depending on what you're planting." Cole let the question he couldn't bear to ask hang in the air between them.

"And?" Tanner asked. "You plan on not sticking around or something?"

"I...I dunno," he muttered, his stomach in free fall. "The barn would be done by then, and I don't know what I'd do..."

Tanner's breaths sputtered out. "So we just keep going...plenty to keep us busy around here. Maybe stuff inside the house, like the floors, or I don't know..."

"Tan, I can't keep living off—"

"Why not? Why can't you?" Tanner asked, his nostrils flaring. "I told you, you're all I got."

Cole reached out and pulled Tanner against him, his hand cupping his nape, his lips against Tanner's ear. "I know. Me too. So let's just take it one day at a time."

TANNER

Tanner had just finished hefting the bags into the cab of his truck when he felt someone watching him. He backed up and saw Rosie, the owner of Red Bluff Scoop, the ice-cream shop in town. “Hey, Rosie. How are you?” He nodded at her. She was a nice woman, a few years older than him. She’d made him an ice-cream cake not long after he’d moved to Red Bluff.

He hadn’t been fit for visitors back then and probably hadn’t been very nice to her. He probably hadn’t spoken to her since, which again made him realize how much his life had changed recently. *Because of Cole.*

“I’m doing good. How are you?” she asked.

“Doing pretty well. I’ve been meaning to stop by. I love those homemade ice-cream cakes you make. Maybe I’ll grab one soon and take it home for Cole and me.” The moment he said it, he realized how it sounded...how easily the words had come out. He spoke about Cole and himself as though they were a couple. “I hired him to restore the barn,” he added but felt guilty about his need to do so. What did he care what anyone thought?

“That’s awful nice of you. Especially considering his past... Not sure I’d feel comfortable having someone like that living in my home. Are you sure he’s safe?”

Heat scorched his insides. Christ, wasn’t that kind of information supposed to stay private? The news was obviously making its rounds around town. “He’s a good man, the best, and my friend. Has helped me out in ways no one else in town bothered to do. Are we really not beyond judging someone for their past? Hell, a past that could include a wrongful conviction.” It hadn’t. Cole had been honest with him, but how would Rosie know that?

She frowned, obviously not expecting his defense of Cole. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean any offense.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I can take care of myself and I have

nothing to fear from Cole.” Tanner said goodbye before climbing into the truck. His hand fisted the steering wheel as he drove, angry for small-town drama and angry for Cole. He deserved better.

His temper hadn’t settled down by the time he pulled into the driveway. But then he looked up, saw Cole finishing the shingles on the roof...and smiled. It felt good to go home to someone. It felt good to go home to Cole.

It had been a few days since the last time they read from the journal. Christ, he couldn’t believe his reaction to hearing Cole narrate the passionate moment between Tom and Charlie. It hadn’t been what he expected—not that he knew what to expect, but that hadn’t been it. The whole thing had been beautiful...erotic...had made him curious.

He chuckled at himself before climbing out of the truck, obviously feeling better. Cole looked down at him, grinned and waved, making Tanner’s pulse speed up.

The shingles would be done that day, which only left the loft, painting, and if Cole would take him up on his offer for the garden. The thought of being there alone made Tanner’s insides freeze up, but then he thought about Rosie and Mrs. Anderson and wondered if Cole could ever have a life in Red Bluff outside of his property. He understood that he couldn’t just find odd jobs for Cole forever. Would Cole even be able to find work there?

“What’s wrong?” How did Cole know?

“Nothing. I’m going to get the groceries in the house, and then I have some work to do.”

Cole nodded, and Tanner carried all the bags in one trip. He put the food away, checked the dinner in the crockpot, then headed upstairs. He passed Cole’s room, his office, and went to his room instead. He did have work to do, but he didn’t feel like it at the moment.

He looked out the window and wished he could see the barn from that side of the house. Instead he looked out toward the next property. He couldn’t see the house from there, but he knew it wasn’t too far away. Was that where Paige and her family had lived? Hell, was it possible Paige or anyone from her family still lived there?

It was strange the way Tom, Charlie, and Paige were always in the back of his mind, waiting. They popped up at random moments, and sometimes he found himself wondering if Charlie would like something, if Tom would. What did their laughs sound like? What did they look like? Where had they gone?

With a sigh, Tanner went to the bathroom and turned on the shower. It had been hot outside, and he wanted to wash the sweat off before he went down to finish dinner.

The hot water felt good against his skin, massaging away some of the stress from Rosie, from wondering what would happen with Cole, from thinking about Tom and Charlie. Tanner cleaned up, washed his hair, and then got out, drying off and wrapping a towel around his waist.

He went to the walk-in closet, opened the door, and again...smiled. Emma would have loved the closet. She'd hated the smaller ones they had when they lived in Grand Rapids.

A few months ago, the sadness would have ripped him apart, taken him to his knees, but the memories were beginning to comfort him now.

It was that thought that had Tanner going to the back of the closet, that had him pulling out the canvases, that had him making two trips carrying handfuls to the bed and laying them down.

He took in the splashes of color in front of him. She'd been an oil painter, using color in a way he'd never seen before—splotches that somehow created images. The first one was an ocean, then a scene in Italy, then...a farmhouse...and a barn. Christ, she'd painted this house and he'd never let himself look at it, never let himself see it. He hadn't taken the time to go through her paintings when he moved, just taken stacks of them with him because it had been too painful to truly look at them.

Goose bumps spread across his arms, and a warmth filled his chest. He didn't know why she'd had such a love for this house, but she had.

"Hey."

Tanner's eyes snapped up at the sound of Cole's voice from his doorway.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't realize you weren't dressed." Cole's gaze turned down, looked away.

"It's okay. Come here." Was it strange that he'd just invited a man into his bedroom when he wore nothing but a towel? No stranger than the fact that he suddenly liked kissing one.

"These are Emma's?" Cole asked as he stepped inside and stood beside him.

"Yeah."

"Jesus, she painted the house and the barn."

"Guess so. I didn't know. She loved this house. I told you that, of course."

She'd wanted to move in for years, but I hadn't been ready to leave the city. When she got sick..." He closed his eyes, wiped at them, and then relaxed when he felt Cole's comforting grip on his shoulder. "When she got sick, she made me promise I'd buy it. That I'd move here. I was supposed to be brewing beer, and of course, she was going to paint. It was the one thing I never gave her—this house."

"You're here now," Cole said softly.

"Yeah, I am. And it feels like she's enjoying it with me. I know that sounds crazy, but even if I didn't give it to her in life, I did in death, and somehow, I know Em knows that. I know she's happy."

"I can hear how much you loved her when you speak." Cole's hand came up and brushed his cheek. Tanner leaned into it.

"I really did. She was my heart. Wasn't sure I could ever let anyone inside it again. Not even in friendship. Then you came along," he admitted. He couldn't look at Cole as he said it, but he heard Cole's sharp intake of breath.

"Can't believe I'm lucky enough to have you say things like that to me."

Tanner turned toward Cole's hand and kissed his palm. He did it again, and again, before Cole cupped his cheeks, tilted Tanner's head up, and paused a beat as though waiting for permission.

Tanner nodded, and then Cole leaned over, his lips coaxing Tanner's open. His tongue dipped into Tanner's mouth, and he moaned into it. Christ, he felt good. He was familiar with Cole's taste now. His scent was familiar too, sandalwood with a hint of sweat.

He stepped between Tanner's legs. Tanner paused for a moment before reaching up, holding Cole's waist, wrapping his hands around Cole to grab his ass.

Cole growled into his mouth, and Tanner chuckled. Obviously, Cole liked that. He wondered if Cole enjoyed being taken there, if he preferred it or if he wanted to do the taking. If it ever came to that, would Tanner want it?

His cock throbbed beneath his towel, begging for some relief. He couldn't believe how hot Cole got him, how much he wanted the man.

Tanner dropped one of his arms and pressed the palm of his hand against his bulge.

Cole pulled back, looked down, watched him, and Tanner saw that Cole was hard too.

"Let me make you feel good," Cole pleaded. "You can tell me to stop if

it's too much."

It wasn't, he already knew it wouldn't be, and he didn't even know what Cole had planned. Tanner just knew he trusted him. He nodded, and Cole bent slowly, knelt between Tanner's legs. "Your knee—"

"Is fine. Nothing would stop me from getting on my knees for you."

A delicious tremble raced down Tanner's spine. He liked being spoken to like that. He liked being spoken to like that by Cole.

With rushed hands, Cole opened Tanner's towel. His cock was hard, leaking against his stomach. Cole didn't speak right away, just stared at him until Tanner began to feel insecure. It wasn't every day a man studied his dick.

"Jesus, you're beautiful," Cole said, then reached out and stroked Tanner. He nearly jolted off the bed at the feel of Cole's hot, calloused hand. "Low hangers. I like that." He cupped Tanner's balls. Well...that was different.

Tanner smiled and then called out, "Oh, shit," when Cole's mouth wrapped around the head of his dick and sucked. "God, that feels good."

Cole sucked him deep, bobbed his head, and then paid extra attention to the crown. Tanner noticed Cole's hand moving in his lap and realized Cole was unbuttoning and unzipping his own pants. He pushed up on his knees and pulled them down before going to work on Tanner's prick again.

He threaded his fingers through Cole's dark hair, savored the feel of his talented mouth on his cock. Cole sucked him, licked him, made Tanner feel like he was fucking flying. It had been so long since he'd felt a mouth on him, since he'd touched a lover in this way.

"So good. Cole, you feel so fucking good."

He looked down and saw Cole working his own dick, jacking himself off as he continued to pleasure Tanner. He went from his cock to his balls, nuzzling them, sucking one, then the other into his mouth before wrapping his lips around Tanner again.

"Christ, I fucking ache." He wanted this to last forever, but his body had other ideas. He couldn't remember the last time he'd even been intimate. "I'm gonna come, Cole. Fuck, I'm gonna come."

He expected Cole to pull off, but he didn't. He kept going, worked him more, and when Tanner couldn't hold it back anymore, he let go. His legs trembled, and it felt like he was exploding from the inside, dizzy, frantic, crazy-wild feeling shooting around inside him as he shot in Cole's mouth. Cole swallowed him down, ate Tanner's come, and then pulled back, kept

working himself and giving Tanner the first glimpse of Cole's dick. He was thicker around than Tanner was, but not as long. His balls were tighter, his hair a shade or two darker. He worked his dick with swift, talented hands, and Tanner wondered what it felt like, what it would be like to be the one doing that to Cole, to have his hand on another man.

Cole's body tensed, the muscles in his neck flexing as he dropped his head back and came. He spurted once, then again, thick, white come on his hand and jeans. There was only one word that came to Tanner's mind.

Beautiful.

COLE

Having his mouth on Tanner had made Cole so fucking hard, he couldn't help recreating the fantasy of it in his bed at night. And again in the morning. The way Tanner's fingers forked through his hair then tightened into a fist as Cole paid extra attention to his sac. Just seeing him bare for the first time, his cock plump and leaking, nearly did him in.

Even if Cole never got the chance to touch him again, it was a memory he wouldn't soon forget. Not to mention the fact that Tanner trusted Cole to take care of him. That alone filled more of the lonely places in his heart.

And when he didn't see any regret in his eyes the morning after, he'd breathed a sigh of relief, wanting it to be on Tanner's terms.

The previous evening, after he'd finished the last of the shingles and stood back to admire his handiwork, it felt like such a huge accomplishment that Tanner opened a bottle of red wine, something Cole had almost never indulged in, and they shared a glass on the porch swing.

"It looks great," Tanner had said. "Hard to believe the condition it'd been in just a couple months ago."

The same could be said for Cole's life. He'd been released from prison, homeless, with little to his name, and now his warm thigh rested against a man he'd come to know intimately. His clothes were clean, and there was food in his belly; the wine left something to be desired, but he sipped it gratefully anyway, feeling lucky. He'd been lucky before in his life, but he never appreciated it more than in that moment.

Next thing on the list was painting the barn and figuring out the inside, namely the loft—but it was hard to squash his excitement about starting a garden. Tanner had entrusted him with a little patch of earth to create something of his own, and he hadn't had that opportunity in a long time—maybe never. And just like Tanner had felt that Emma would approve of what

he'd achieved thus far, he was trying so fucking hard to make his grandfather proud as well.

After he mowed the lawn that morning, he'd gone into town to purchase some seedlings at the hardware store, which also included a gardening section. Andy was at the counter as last time when Cole had ordered the roof supplies, and Cole's shoulders hunched up at Andy's scrutiny. Cole wished the younger guy was on shift—the one who helped him when the shingle delivery came in. He seemed kinder, less judgmental. Maybe it was because he had a sleeve of tattoos as well as a nose ring and had looked him up and down with no trace of disapproval.

Cole barely mumbled a greeting to Andy as he made his way toward the back section, where there were shelves of mulch, seeds, and gardening tools.

"How's that roof coming along?" Andy asked, having followed him down the aisle as Cole considered whether they'd also need a new hose. Most of the tools they'd found in the shed were rusted, and Tanner was slowly acquiring replacements.

"It looks pretty good, if I do say so myself," Cole admitted, and it wasn't lost on him that for the first time in years he had something to feel proud of.

"People in town been noticing the progress," Andy noted. "Nice to see something other than that eyesore."

Funny how he had never seen it that way, and neither had Tanner, or Emma, come to think of it, otherwise why would she be attracted to the property to begin with?

Andy's observation also gave Cole pause. He'd only just arrived in town, but there were plenty of old-timers who might remember something about the family. "Sure am curious to know what happened. Only heard rumors."

Andy leaned his elbow against one of the shelves as he focused on a spot just over his shoulder. "The way Sheriff Jones tells it, a couple of young men set that fire and then ran away together."

"Sheriff?" Cole replied, cursing that he had stiffened again at the mention of law enforcement. But he supposed he couldn't help it, even though he was keeping his nose clean. But he'd definitely noticed the man parked in various places around town.

"That's right," Andy replied, absently fixing a stack of lawn bags. "Supposedly, the sheriff from back then felt sorry for the family. The town rallied around them, made sure they were okay."

Cole's stomach tilted uncomfortably. That part of it still made no sense.

He couldn't merge the Tom from the journal with the one Andy was talking about now.

"Why'd they take off like that?" Cole asked impassively, pretending to look at hoses. "Had they done something wrong?"

Cole didn't know why he was pushing his luck, but he just wanted to understand so badly.

Andy lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Apparently, those boys were light in the loafers, if you know what I mean. One of the boys, Tom, was set to marry a local but took off on her too. She left town not long after, probably embarrassed, the poor girl."

"Seriously, Dad? Light in the loafers?" The tattooed young guy from the other day came around the corner. "Who even says that offensive shit anymore?"

"You kids and all your PC bullshit. Thing is—" Just as Andy was about to make a rebuttal, the door jangled open, and a gentleman's voice rang out in their direction. The conversation forgotten, Andy headed up front to help the customer.

"I'm Jordan, by the way. Everyone calls me Jordy," the younger man said. He looked back as if to check that he could speak freely. "I think it's tragic what happened. Some might even call it romantic, for back in the day. And who knows? Maybe the barn was just a distraction so they could escape together."

Cole's pulse beat unsteadily. "Yeah, maybe."

"And Sheriff Jones can be a prick, unless you get on his good side," he said, looking back once again. "So don't get caught in his crosshairs."

Cole bristled, but he didn't think Jordy meant it as an insult; it was simply a warning. Instead, he even felt like maybe Jordy could be an ally or a friend.

"Didn't mean to overstep. Just glad to have some new faces in town," Jordy said and then straightened his hardware-store vest, which seemed in stark contrast to his personality. "So what can I help you with today?"

Cole chuckled in response. "Going to be starting a garden."

Jordy ended up being well versed in growing vegetables, and Cole came away with tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, and bell peppers as well as a bunch of rope and stakes to anchor the vines, along with instructions. At the last minute he added in some basil for Tanner's window, hoping that would get a smile out of him.

TANNER WAVED TO HIM THROUGH THE WINDOW AS HE PULLED UP, AND DAMN if that didn't make warmth flood his stomach. He loved coming home to Tanner, even if he could only pretend it was home for the time being.

He spent the afternoon clearing the field of leaves and weeds for sowing, and that was work enough. He'd also attached the new hose and wet the hard ground to try and loosen the soil, as Jordy had instructed. Tomorrow he'd make the rows and follow his guidelines for planting. He'd also noticed some canning supplies on the shelves at the garden center, but one thing at a time.

After a dinner of roasted chicken and rosemary potatoes, Cole filled Tanner in on his conversation in town. "Haven't really heard much about this Sheriff Jones."

"Let's consider that a good thing," Cole replied as he took his last bite and then helped clear the dishes.

In the evening, he watered the flower beds as Tanner sat with his laptop on the porch swing, grading papers. Cole paused a moment to study the handsome man, as well as the idyllic setting, feeling sublime. This domestic routine they'd fallen into, whether by chance or circumstance, he didn't know, but he wouldn't trade it for the world.

When he stepped back inside for a drink and noticed that Tanner had carried some of Emma's paintings to the first floor, he went out the back door to the toolbox in the shed and retrieved a hammer and nails. Lifting the painting of the farmhouse, he thought it would go best over the fireplace.

"What are you doing?" Tanner asked through the screen door once he heard all the pounding.

"Come see for yourself," Cole replied, his pulse jumping. He hoped he hadn't overstepped.

"Looks perfect," Tanner said with a catch in his throat as he stood back to admire it. "Fuck. Thank you."

When his fingers clutched Cole's neck and he leaned forward to tenderly kiss his cheek, it felt like confetti had been let loose in his stomach. A simple gesture that felt profound and intimate. The man had made his way beneath his skin, and he didn't know what he'd do when it was time to part ways. But for now, he'd help him make this place a home.

He hung two more canvases on opposite walls, then headed to the shower upstairs and enjoyed the feel of the hot water washing off all the dirt from the

day. As he slipped into the pair of sweats he'd bought on one of his trips to town, he saw the light was on in Tanner's room.

"Gonna hit the hay," he said from the door threshold. Tanner lay against his pillow, in pajama bottoms, his attention on the television set atop the dresser. It was the only TV in the house, and it was the first time he'd actually seen it being used. Tanner seemed more partial to computer games or paperbacks—biographies mostly that he'd said he'd brought from his other life. "What are you watching?"

"Well, it's apparently Shark Week and the Discovery channel has nonstop documentaries about all kinds of interesting things."

Cole chuckled. "My grandfather always got sucked into those types of shows."

Tanner hesitantly patted the place beside him. "Watch an episode with me? This one is about how they tag the sharks to try and determine how deep they travel."

Cole swallowed thickly. It'd been so long since he was invited into another man's bed, even if it was only to watch some documentary.

He slipped in beside Tanner and watched for several minutes as biologists on a boat in the ocean sent some of their men down in a cage, and before he knew it, he had fallen asleep with Tanner's warm arm and thigh pressed against him.

He awoke with a start sometime later from one of those inexplicable dreams he hadn't had since leaving the barn. Loud voices surrounded him on all sides, and even though he couldn't place where he was exactly—it certainly didn't feel like his prison cell—he felt a great sense of doom deep in his chest. He gasped, his fingers scrambling for purchase in the sheets.

"Hey, you okay?" He felt Tanner's hands rousing him awake, then holding him steady.

"Yeah, sorry, strange dream." As he blinked open his eyes, he noticed that the room was dark, the documentary long finished, and Tanner had thrown a cover on top of him. "Fuck, I didn't mean to fall asleep. You should've woken me so I could get to my own bed."

He pushed off the covers, his knee aching as he tried to stretch it toward the floor. He felt Tanner's hand land on his arm. "I... I wouldn't mind if you stayed."

TANNER

Tanner and Cole had their arms full of equipment as they made their way into the barn—fermenting buckets, airlocks, brew pots, heat source, and everything else Tanner would need to brew beer—equipment he wouldn't have had the courage to purchase if it wasn't for the man hauling it in beside him.

He'd had some from back home with Em, but he didn't know why he wanted to update. He thought she would like the idea. Plus, he could brew more than they'd been able to in their small apartment, so it made sense to go all out.

As he made his way into the barn, Tanner stopped, almost tripped as his eyes took in additions that hadn't been there just yesterday.

"I made these shelves for you..." Cole said, softly, almost bashfully. He set everything down, and Tanner did the same. "And then these cubbyholes are large enough for your buckets, or anything else you might need them for. It's out of the way of the area I'll be in when I'm building the loft, so I think it'll be okay if you decide to start before it's done. Don't know how long any of this really takes. Depending on how often you're brewing, we might have to reevaluate to give you more space, but this'll get us by for now...you, get *you* by, and you'll be the one evaluating."

Tanner looked at Cole and grinned as he rambled, red-faced.

Cole rubbed a hand over his trimmed beard and said, "Oh hell, you know what I mean."

"You're cute when you ramble," Tanner found himself saying, and he really was, wasn't he? Cole was cute sometimes, other times sexy, and others beautiful in ways he'd never really thought of a man before.

"You think I'm cute?" Cole asked as he took a step toward Tanner, then another.

“Nah, I was just trying to make you feel good.”

Cole laughed, and God, it felt good to make someone do that again. To feel light and carefree.

“I think you do, Tanner Rowe. And that’s a good thing because I think you’re cute too.” Cole stood right in front of him. “Can I touch you?”

“You don’t have to ask,” Tanner replied. Cole cupped his cheek, rubbed his calloused finger against Tanner’s smoother skin. He loved the contrast. Cole was rough where Emma had been soft, and though he’d loved Emma’s softness and always would, he found similar pleasure in Cole’s roughness.

Cole leaned in, and his lips teased Tanner’s open. He gave Tanner his tongue, which he received eagerly. Tanner’s hands went to Cole’s hips as Cole backed him up against the wall of the barn.

His vision flashed, went blurry as they kissed and rubbed against each other, and he suddenly wondered if Tom and Charlie had ever done this against the same wall.

Cole pressed his cock against Tanner’s, thrust their groins together, and Tanner’s vision swam more. His body heated, sparks igniting into flames before they heard, “Oh shit. I’m sorry. I...”

Cole jerked away from him, and Tanner’s heart thudded like crazy as they looked over and saw the young man from the hardware store standing in the barn’s entryway.

Tanner’s face flushed, and his stomach clenched.

“It’s okay. I don’t judge. Your business is your own,” Jordy added. “Barn looks great, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Cole replied, probably thanking him for his words and for not making a big deal out of what he’d seen.

Tanner couldn’t find his words. It wasn’t every day that someone saw him kissing a man.

“Let’s go.” Cole went out with Jordy to take care of an additional wood delivery, and Tanner was thankful for the moment. Cole must have known he needed it.

Just as he realized he was being ridiculous and should go outside, Tanner heard Jordy’s truck pull away and wondered how they hadn’t heard him arrive. Maybe because they’d been too wrapped up in each other.

“Are you okay?” Cole asked when he came back inside, keeping his distance.

“I think so.”

“I trust him. He’s a good man.”

Tanner exhaled. He hated that he was a little gun-shy about anyone knowing. “I trust *you*.” Tanner closed the distance. “Sorry. It’ll just take some getting used to...people knowing. It’s not that I’m ashamed.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for.”

Tanner nodded, hoping Cole truly understood. “Thank you for this.” He pointed to the area Cole had set up for his brewing. “It means a lot to me.”

“Glad you like it.”

They cleaned up and put things away. When they were done, Tanner went inside to prepare dinner while Cole finished up a few things outside.

They ate together, the conversation flowing the way things had begun to flow between them—seamlessly. Cole made him smile, made him laugh, and it warmed Tanner’s chest when he saw he did the same for Cole.

Afterward they did dishes together. Their arms brushed against each other numerous times, making him remember the night a few days ago when they’d fallen asleep in bed together. Tanner had forgotten how much he enjoyed sleeping with someone, feeling the heat of another body, breath against his skin, wrapping his arms around another person.

“I need to take a shower,” Cole said when they finished the dishes.

“Yeah, me too.” He paused, thought, then opened his mouth and didn’t hold himself back. “Do you want to come to my room afterward? We can watch some shows, and maybe you could stay there with me? It feels nice, holding you.”

Cole smiled, reached out, and cupped Tanner’s cheek again. He did that often, Tanner noticed. “I’d like that a lot.”

“I KNOW IT’S NOT MUCH...” CHARLIE SAID AS WE STOOD IN THE LIVING ROOM OF his small house.

“You think I care about that?” It wasn’t the first time I’d been in Charlie’s house, though I could count the number on one hand. But it was the first time I’d been in Charlie’s house since we’d become Tom and Charlie, a couple, since we kissed and touched and admitted we were in love with each other. It was also the first time I’d spend the night in Charlie’s house. His father was in jail and not expected home.

I hated that it had to be that way, that Charlie and I allowed it to be that way. We were twenty years old, but we both wouldn't allow ourselves not to take care of our families.

But soon...soon we'd put ourselves first.

"No," he finally replied. "I know you don't care about that." Charlie went to the refrigerator and looked inside. "We don't have much to eat. Shit, I shoulda thought about that. Got a few bucks. Could have grabbed us some dinner."

His words touched my heart, seared my soul. There wasn't a part of me that didn't realize Charlie wanted to make this night special for me, for us, and that meant the world to me. Charlie always wanted to take care of me, to protect me, and maybe that should make me feel like less of a man, but it didn't. It made me feel treasured, like there wasn't anything I couldn't do.

I stepped closer to him, wrapped my arms around him from behind. "We don't need anything extravagant, Charlie. I just wanna be with you."

He turned, looked down at me, hooked his finger beneath my chin, and tilted my head up. "I just wanna be with you too. Always. Nothin' feels like being with you. You're my heart, Tom Crawford."

"And you're mine, Charlie Meyers."

We made peanut butter and honey sandwiches. Then Charlie took my hand and led me to the bathroom. I loved that we could openly touch each other in his house. That we didn't have to hide because no one was there to see us. We could be free, love freely, just like everyone else.

We took a shower together. It was my first time showering with anyone, and I knew that Charlie would be the only person I'd ever shower with. I would never love anyone the way I loved him.

Afterward we went to his room. It was a small room, much littler than mine, but I liked it that way. The tighter the space, the closer I could be to him.

"Do you wanna—"

"Yes," I cut Charlie off.

"Do you wanna do me, or do you want me to do you?" he asked sweetly, innocently.

My face flushed because I hadn't expected him to ask me. I knew what I wanted, but I wondered what Charlie would rather...and what he would think of me because of my choice.

“Don’t be shy, Tom.” He reached over and brushed his thumb against my hip bone. “You don’t ever have to be shy with me.”

I knew that. I trusted Charlie more than anyone in the world. “I want you to make love to me.”

He smiled, and it damn near stopped my heart.

“Okay.”

Charlie laid me down on his bed. He took my towel off and then did the same with his. I gasped as he stood in front of me, unabashed at his nakedness. His prick was long, swollen, with a pearl at the tip. I’d tasted him before, and I wanted to taste him again. When I reached for him, Charlie shook his head. “Later. Right now I just wanna love you.”

I trembled, my body yearning for the same thing. “I like the sound of that.”

Charlie leaned over and kissed me, kissed me until I turned to mush, melted against him and into the bed. He used the oil he’d gotten from the kitchen to get my body ready for him. He started with one finger, then two, then three. It had hurt, God, it had hurt at first, but Charlie made it okay. He kissed me and touched me and, eventually, it was the best damn thing I’d ever felt.

Until he pushed his cock inside me, and then that became the best damn thing I’d ever felt. We made love until we were slick with sweat. Charlie and I always felt like one, but in that moment, there was no way to know where he ended and I began. We were fused together. He was inside me, and I wished he could always be there.

Then it felt like lightning shot down my spine. Charlie stroked me, thrust into me until I fell apart, spilling my seed between us. Charlie gritted his teeth above me, called out my name before he shot inside me.

“That was...by far the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Charlie said.

When I didn’t answer right away, he looked down at me and asked, “Was it good for you?”

“I can’t wait to do it again,” I admitted.

He fell on top of me, and we laughed...laughed and kissed at the magic of the moment. We had more of those moments the rest of the night, all the next day, and again in the stillness of dawn. My body was sore, but I didn’t care. It was a reminder of Charlie, of what we shared. We were able to pretend we could be together like everyone else. It made us hungrier for that dream to

become a reality.

TANNER CLOSED THE JOURNAL AND SET IT INSIDE THE BOX ON THE BEDSIDE table. He was aroused, how could he not be after what he'd just read and with Cole in his underwear in bed beside him? They'd watched television as planned before they'd decided to read another entry. He was both glad and a little sad that they had, because as much as that had turned him on, it had been melancholy too. The sadness of Tom and Charlie having to sneak around weighed him down. All they'd wanted was to be together, to love each other. He couldn't see what was so wrong with that.

"Come here," he told Cole, who went right into his arms. They lay down flat, Cole's head on his chest as Tanner held him. He thought about what they'd read, about himself, about the constant ache of Tom and Charlie that lived inside him now. "Earlier...with Jordy? If someone sees us again, I won't react the same way. I won't hide." He owed it to Tom and Charlie not to. They hadn't had a choice. He and Cole did.

"I won't hide if you don't," Cole answered, and Tanner kissed the top of his head.

"This is nice...feeling you." Tanner thought he wanted to sleep that way every night.

"It's just as nice being held by you."

"They deserved this...Tom and Charlie. They deserved to love each other openly. I know times were different. Hell, I know some people nowadays still feel the same as people back then did. I just can't understand it, how what they had could be considered wrong."

"It isn't. It's just ignorance," Cole replied.

He squeezed Cole tighter, felt him deeper. They didn't let go of each other for the rest of the night.

COLE

Cole replaced the hose and then stared out at the vegetable garden under the setting sun. Not much growth was happening yet, but he was hopeful that in a few weeks' time his hard work on the little patch of earth would come to fruition.

Like the barn, he thought as his gaze darted behind him.

He still hadn't brought himself to paint it yet, focusing on the inside instead. Maybe it was his way of drawing it out, like it was all a fairy tale and he'd turn into a pumpkin with the last stroke of the brush. After all, the original agreement was about repairing the barn. The vegetable garden was an added bonus, and looking at it now made his chest feel lighter, like there was still more work to be done. Like he wouldn't wake from this dream he'd been living on borrowed time with a man who made him feel so many things. Like he mattered, had worth. Like he could actually be someone's whole world.

"I told you, you're all I got."

Still, he'd gone to the hardware store that morning to pick out the final paint color as well as supplies. He was relieved to see Jordy behind the counter, and not an ounce of judgment about what he'd witnessed between him and Tanner earlier in the week. Had it been anyone else, half the town would've probably known by then. Not that he cared, but he already had one black mark against him, and he felt protective of Tanner even though he said he didn't want to hide. He knew all too well it was easier said than done.

"So, hey," Jordy said as he rang up Cole's supplies. "I'm heading to Moe's Tavern tonight with friends. It's a place where we can all kick back."

When Jordy threw him a knowing smile, it hit him. He likely thought he and Tanner were a couple. Except they hadn't even defined what they were yet. Cole only knew what Tanner *meant*. He'd been sleeping in his bed every night, would sometimes wake in the warmth of his arms—most mornings stiff

and horny. Only once did Cole kiss him breathless while they rutted against each other and came in their boxers. Watching Tanner chase his orgasm as his chest and cheeks bloomed with color was satisfaction enough. Thinking that he could come to mean as much to Tanner was something he needed to lock down tight. He rarely got what he wanted in life. And had obviously fucked up plenty.

Once Cole got home, he'd thrown the idea of meeting Jordy and his friends out to Tanner, and as they mulled it over with turkey-and-Swiss sandwiches for lunch, Tanner looked up from his glass of iced tea with a gleam in his eye. "Let's do it."

Now, as Cole replaced the hose and made his way up the porch steps, Tanner stepped out fresh from the shower, dressed in dark jeans and a button-down shirt that he'd rolled to the elbows.

He was struck by how attractive the man was. "You look good."

Tanner reached out and swiped his fingers along his jaw. "So do you."

Cole had certainly tried by slipping into his best jeans and a fresh T-shirt after washing up, but in a lot of ways he still felt like the same homeless guy who'd rolled into town a couple of months ago.

"Is it weird that I'm sort of nervous?" Tanner asked, digging his keys out of his pocket.

"Nope," Cole replied, heading to the truck. "I can't remember the last time I stepped foot inside a bar. Let's see how we feel after a couple of drinks."

"Sounds like a plan."

As they walked into the tavern, Cole noticed how packed it was for a Friday night. The crowd was young and mostly men, but he observed some women as well as other same-sex couples likely pushing forty.

As Tanner led the way through the crowd, he got appreciative glances from both men and women, and an emotion Cole couldn't readily name welled up inside him. He wanted to reach for his hand, claim him in some ridiculous way, like some ape, and Tanner would likely think he'd lost his mind. Or maybe he'd think it was hot—it was certainly something he'd like to explore further with the man.

Jordy waved them over from a back table, and once they made their way through a glut of people, introduced them to his friends. A server took their drink orders as soon as they sat down, and Cole had never been so happy to have alcohol as a buffer as he was then. His nerves were getting the best of

him, and he needed to cut it out.

For some reason, he felt like a fraud at the table of seemingly whip-smart and open-minded people. He prayed no one asked him what he'd been doing the past four years, but regardless, they were pretty welcoming and friendly. Besides, they might've already heard the rumors around town. Two of the men were a couple, and Jordy, who appeared to be single, glanced admiringly toward both men and women in the club.

Tanner seemed to relax into his first beer, as was evident when his hand came to rest on Cole's thigh. It made his stomach swoop, and as he listened to him talk about different craft beers to a captivated audience, he realized how personable he was in the company of others.

"You should have a small tasting after you get your first batch going," Jordy suggested. "We'd all be in."

When Tanner turned his megawatt smile on Cole, it warmed him to his core. "What do you think, Cole? We can do a sampling."

We. He swallowed thickly as he smiled and nodded.

"How's that vegetable garden coming?" Jordy asked him after he ordered a second beer.

"He completely dotes on it every day," Tanner remarked, and Cole felt the blush rise on his cheeks.

"You could totally sell that shit at the weekly farmer's market," a guy named Adam said. "My uncle even has a roadside stand on Aster Lane with fresh vegetables."

Tanner quirked an eyebrow, and Cole found he was equally intrigued.

"You can like, set up a booth," Jordy explained. "Sell beer steins, fresh or canned vegetables, anything at all. Tourists love that shit. Even name your farm something and use it on your banner. Now that the barn's almost fixed."

"Good to know," Tanner replied and glanced at Cole with a gleam of amusement in his eye.

"'Bout time someone cared enough to spruce it up," Adam added with an eye roll. "Maybe those ridiculous rumors about those men can die in peace already."

When Tanner and Cole shared a glance, he considered asking if anyone knew anything about Paige, but then they'd have to tell them about the journal.

"Anyway, here's to new friends," Jordy said in a toast, and they all raised

their glasses.

They hung out for a couple of hours and listened to how politically motivated this group was and eager to leave their stamp on the world, and it made him wish he would've wanted to stand for something at their age instead of making all the wrong moves that landed him in prison.

They held hands in the truck most of the way home, Tanner seeming especially frisky as his fingernails traced circles near Cole's groin on his thigh, making him hard as a steel rod.

When they got home, they stripped down for bedtime. Cole sank onto the mattress to yank off his socks, eager to climb beneath the warm covers and feel his skin next to the man who made his heart race unsteadily from a simple touch.

Once Tanner kicked out of his jeans, he sank to the floor in front of Cole and leaned forward to take his mouth in an all-consuming kiss, teasing his lips open with licks and nips until he was breathless and panting.

"What's gotten into you?" Cole smirked as he reined in his galloping breaths.

"Dunno exactly," Tanner replied, nipping at his throat. "I enjoyed being out with you."

"Is that right?" Cole mused as his heart throbbed in his chest.

A kiss to his ear. "'Cept all sorts of men checking you out."

"Pretty sure it was you they were looking at." Cupping his cheek, he dragged Tanner in for another greedy kiss as Tanner groaned against his mouth. "Besides, it's only you I want."

Tanner tasted like the wheat beer he'd drank at the bar.

But also like smiles and joy and home.

And all the things he'd ever longed for inside his heart.

Their kisses turned deeper, sensual flicks and desperate moans as Tanner practically left marks on his thighs with his thumbs.

"I really want to... Can I...?" Tanner stuttered, not meeting Cole's eyes. But when his knuckles brushed over Cole's erection, he got the message. Cole's shaft jerked, pushing against his boxer briefs.

He hissed in response. "Fuck, Tan. I don't think the answer would ever be no. You can touch me anytime you want."

Two spots of pink dotted his cheeks, and he looked so innocent right then,

but also stunning as his eyes flashed with longing and his fingers trembled near the waistband of Cole's briefs.

Cole lifted his hips and helped tug his underwear down to his ankles. Sitting naked and exposed in more ways than one in front of the man he desperately wanted was equally heady and vulnerable. But he wouldn't have it any other way.

When Tanner ran the pads of his fingers up and down his shaft, it twitched in response. Tanner licked his lips and studied his cock as a pearl of precome leaked at his slit.

"You're killing me," he groaned, hoping Tanner wouldn't have any regrets.

Tanner loosely gripped his shaft as if testing out the motion. "I don't know how... I've never..."

"Anything you do will be fucking great." He kissed the top of his head. "Don't think about it too hard. Just go with how it feels. Even if you change your mind."

Cole watched as Tanner took a measured breath, then leaned forward to tentatively kiss, then lick Cole's slit. The sensation of his coarse tongue felt so arousing, he nearly melted into the mattress. "Holy shit."

Encouraged, Tanner took his time licking around the crown, then in long stripes with the flat of his tongue up and down Cole's shaft. Cole practically gouged holes in the covers, trying not to lose his mind. It'd been too damn long since someone paid attention to his cock, and having someone like Tanner wanting to show him pleasure made all his nerve endings feel entirely too close to the surface.

When Tanner suckled the head and his gaze drifted upward to connect with his own, it was so erotic, he nearly came undone.

Cole tenderly pushed his sweaty hair away from his forehead. "So good."

He felt like he was unraveling from the inside as Tanner tried taking him deeper, gagging a little before redoubling his efforts. He was nothing if not determined. Tanner reached down to lightly grip his balls before fisting the base of his cock. He worked his shaft with his mouth and fist sloppily at first, but then he got a rhythm going that made Cole's toes curl.

He squeezed his eyes shut as his legs shook, he was so close to the edge already. Opening them again, he needed to see Tanner, watch him as he licked and sucked him into submission.

He feathered his fingers along Tanner's jaw, then slid his hand down his

spine to the waistband of his boxers. Pushing them down slightly, he edged his fingers along the top of his crease.

When Tanner groaned in approval, he brushed lightly again, watching him shiver. “Take yourself out. Want to see you.”

With one hand, Tanner pushed his underwear down to his knees and gripped his own cock. “Yeah, like that. So damned sexy.”

Cole straightened his legs so he could get a better view as Tanner stroked himself in time with flicks of his tongue against his cock. Cole stretched forward to cup his ass cheek, and when that drew a moan from Tanner’s throat, he dipped his fingers farther into his crease, finding his tight pucker and briefly rubbing a finger against it.

A deep groan released around his cock as Tanner’s face flushed.

“You like that?” Cole lifted his hand to brush his thumb along a rosy cheekbone. “You’re so gorgeous, Tan.”

Tanner began sucking in earnest, taking Cole deeper as his head bobbed up and down. When he felt the sensitive tip hit the back of his throat on one of the deeper drags, that about did him in. “Oh, fuck. I’m gonna blow my load.”

He slid his shaft from Tanner’s mouth just as his seed began spurting over his fist and onto the hardwood floor between them. Cole shut his eyes as the room fuzzed around him, but he could hear Tanner’s heavy breaths as he shuddered through his own release.

When the world stopped spinning, their eyes connected around heaving chests and softening shafts. A glob of Cole’s come had landed on Tanner’s bottom lip, and when he licked it, Cole’s cock jerked in a last-ditch effort.

“Was that okay? I know I’m not—”

“It was fucking perfect.”

He cupped Tanner’s nape and dragged him into a soft and sensual kiss. “Let’s get cleaned up. I want to hold you all night.”

TANNER

When Tanner had met Emma, he'd known she was the one. From the very first day there had been no question in his mind because Emma had done the one thing no one had ever been able to do for him. She'd made him *feel*. Deeply. Whether it was laughter, happiness, anger, or anything in between. There had been something about her that reached places inside him he hadn't known he had. Or hell, maybe she helped create those places with her friendship and love. When she died, Tanner had thought those things died with her, but now? Now he was seeing they hadn't.

He'd known for weeks, of course. He'd felt things begin to change, those places inside him pushing to the surface again, but the night they'd gone to the bar with Jordy and his friends cemented it. He didn't like the feel of other people's eyes on Cole. He felt like Cole was his...and that he belonged to Cole too. It was a strange revelation for him, not when he hadn't thought it was possible to feel without Emma. But he could with Cole, and that night had hammered home that his feelings for Cole were changing, growing, evolving. He was falling for Cole, maybe he'd already fallen, and as he lay in bed, Cole's warm body beside him, he couldn't stop thinking about it. Cole. Emma. Himself. The familiarity of being with Cole.

It was nearly dawn. The sun hadn't even risen yet. Tanner kissed Cole's shoulder and then sneaked out of bed. He quietly plucked a pair of jeans and a shirt from his drawer before slipping from the room. He took a leak, washed his hands, brushed his teeth, got dressed, and put his shoes on, then made his way outside.

The sun had begun making her appearance, just a slight edge of yellow across what looked like a gray morning. It was cooler than it had been, and that made Tanner smile. Emma had always liked cooler weather. She would wrap up in sweaters, drink hot chocolate, and paint all day.

Maybe it meant something that it was cool on this morning, at sunrise, one

of her favorite times of day, when he began to realize what Cole was to him.

Tanner looked up at the barn, Tom and Charlie's haven, what had originally drawn Emma to this property. He didn't recall making the decision to walk toward it, to slip inside, but then he was there. Goose bumps spread down Tanner's arms, the hairs there rising. A tremble ran the length of his spine, and he could have sworn he felt close to Tom and Charlie out there, like they were inside him, part of him...strangely close to Emma too.

She would have painted out there—one side of the barn belonging to him and one to her. He swore he could see her, smiling at him, paintbrush in hand. "I'm moving on, Em, just how you wanted. You'd be glad, but it doesn't mean I'll forget you." He never could. It was unbelievable that he could be moving on, but he was, and it felt right, sort of like Cole had always been a part of him.

Tanner looked over at his brewing equipment in the corner, at the supplies waiting there and the shelves Cole had created for him.

He didn't allow himself to think about it, turned off his brain, his hands just knowing what to do as he went from milling the barley to mashing it. It was so damn familiar. His chest swelled as he continued, as he boiled and inhaled the scent. From there to whirlpooling, each part of the process happening as though he'd never stopped doing it, as though it was as easy as breathing. What felt like minutes was actually hours, proven by the fact that he could see how bright the sun was outside and his brew was fermenting.

It was the first batch of beer he'd brewed since Emma had gotten sick. A surge of pride rose in him. He'd done it. He'd really fucking done it.

"I can't believe I slept in so late," Cole's voice came from behind him. "What are you doing?" he asked, his forehead wrinkled.

"Making beer."

"I... Wow... How long does it take?" Cole stepped beside him as they looked at the equipment.

"It's fermenting now. I might taste it after two weeks, but I think I'd like to leave it longer. The longer the better."

"You have to have patience to do this, I see." Cole chuckled, and the sound settled in Tanner's chest.

"Yeah, you do." Tanner turned, looked at him, thought about what they'd done the other night, how he'd put his mouth on Cole. He wanted to do it again. He wanted more. "What are your plans for today?"

"I was thinking I should finally get the barn painted. I've put it off long

enough.”

“Can I help?” Tanner asked.

“Of course. It’s your barn, and even if it wasn’t, I wouldn’t pass up a chance to work with you.”

Tanner felt those words in his chest, wondered if Cole was beginning to feel the same way about him as he did about Cole.

They had breakfast together and drank coffee before they went out to get started on the barn. Tanner had never done much work like what Cole did, but painting was something he could handle fairly easily. They laughed and talked as they worked, and he realized how much he enjoyed doing this with Cole. He enjoyed everything they did together.

They worked into the evening. The sun was nearly down when they stood back, taking it all in.

“It’s incredible,” Cole said softly from beside him.

Tanner could hardly speak. His throat felt too full. “Yeah...yeah it is.”

“Do you think they’d be happy we’re doing this?” Cole asked. “Wherever they are, do you think they’re happy?”

“Yes,” Tanner replied. He knew Tom and Charlie would be proud to see this barn standing again. It had meant too much for them not to.

Not for the first time, he wondered where they went, if they stayed together, what life had become for them.

“Come on, Tan. Let me make you dinner tonight.”

Cole took his hand, and Tanner allowed him to. They went inside together, washed their hands, and then Cole made a quick dinner—pasta and red sauce, using some of Tanner’s basil. After they were finished, Tanner was at the sink washing dishes when he felt Cole behind him. Cole’s chest against his back. Cole’s lips against his neck. “I’m going to take a shower. Meet you in bed?”

Tanner trembled. He definitely liked the sound of that. “I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

He finished the dishes and went upstairs. The water was running in the hall bathroom. Tanner took his own shower, and when he came out to his room, wrapped in a towel, Cole sat on the edge of the bed in a pair of boxers. A few droplets of water still glistened on his shoulders, and it looked like he trimmed his beard again. Tanner took in the familiar light dusting of hair on Cole’s chest, realizing he liked it. And his tattoos...those colors... They added to the allure that was Cole.

Christ, he was so fucking beautiful, he nearly stole Tanner's breath.

Tanner's blood pressure spiked as he walked over, as he stood between Cole's spread thighs. The moment Tanner bent forward, their mouths collided, an unstoppable force that Tanner couldn't fight, not that he wanted to.

His cock hardened beneath his towel as Cole's hands came up and cupped his ass. "Tan," Cole whispered against his mouth as Tanner leaned forward, easing Cole onto his back.

"I want you," he admitted. "I want you so bad, I can't breathe from it."

"I'm right here," Cole replied, and Tanner smiled against his lips. They kissed again, touching, tasting, tongues probing as they crawled up and positioned themselves in the bed. Tanner lost his towel at some point, so when Cole's work-roughened fingers made contact with his ass again, they were skin-to-skin.

"I bought lube...condoms, at the store the other day."

"Did you now?" Tanner heard the smile in Cole's voice.

"Never can be too prepared."

Cole chuckled. "No, I guess you can't."

Tanner kissed him again, kissed him until his jaw hurt and the taste of Cole was imprinted on his tongue, then made his way down Cole's neck, chest, with his lips and tongue.

He pulled Cole's boxers off, knelt between his legs, and looked down at him. It was obviously a man beneath him, the first man he'd been with, but it didn't feel new; it just felt right. "How could I not have known I was bi before you?" It wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation.

"There are no rules to figuring out your sexuality. I'm just glad you're here now."

Tanner was too.

He palmed Cole's heavy sac, stroked his cock, rubbed his thumb around in the precome at the tip. He'd had anal sex before. It was something he and Emma had engaged in from time to time, but despite the comfort in the situation, despite the fact that it didn't feel new, it was.

"It's been a long time for me. You're going to have to get me ready... unless you want me to do it for you?" Cole asked, and Tanner shook his head.

"I want it all, Cole." And he did.

Tanner plucked a condom and the bottle of lube from his bedside table

drawer. His dick ached with need. He couldn't wait to be inside Cole.

Tanner lubed his fingers before rubbing Cole's hole. "Tell me if I do something you don't like."

"Impossible."

Tanner sure hoped so. He worked his finger inside Cole. Fuck, it was tight, so goddamned hot and tight inside him. How would he ever survive when it was his cock?

"Fuck, that feels good," Cole rushed out as Tanner pushed his finger in, then eased it out again.

"You can use two on me, Tan."

So he did, pushed two fingers inside him. Cole closed his eyes, writhed beneath him, and Tanner took that as a good sign. He tested the waters, moved his fingers this way and that before curving them. Cole nearly lunged off the bed when he touched a soft spot inside him. "What did I do?"

"Prostate. Jesus, it's like man's best friend."

Well hell. That sounded interesting. Tanner rubbed the spongy area again, watched Cole shudder as he did. He alternated between rubbing Cole's prostate and working his hole open. His cock jerked against his stomach, desire fueling him.

"That's good...fuck, Tan, that's so good. Want you." Cole grabbed him and pulled Tanner down for a kiss. They rutted against each other, and Christ, how could he not have known another man's dick felt so good against his own?

Tanner pulled back and ripped open the condom wrapper. Cole stroked his own cock, eyes snagged on Tanner's. "You're so sexy."

"You are too. Come here, Tanner, and make love to me."

He didn't have to ask twice. Tanner lubed himself, then leaned forward. Cole spread his legs wide, Tanner helping to hold them back with one of his hands. The other he aimed at Cole's hole. It was pink and looked so fucking tight, he was scared he'd come the second he got inside. "It's been a long time for me too," he said by way of warning.

Cole chuckled. "We'll make it work."

Then Tanner was there, pushing inside. He closed his eyes as a current rocked through him. "Fuck...so tight."

His dick was enveloped in so much heat, he almost lost it. When he was

finally buried to the hilt, he and Cole breathed out in unison.

Tanner leaned forward, and they kissed as he pistoned into Cole. He felt like he could die at any second and he'd go a happy man. Cole's nails dug into his back, and their bodies slicked with sweat. He felt his balls drawing tight, his orgasm rushing closer to the surface. "I'm not going to last long."

Cole spit in his hand and began jerking himself off. Shit. Tanner hadn't thought of that. Should he have jacked Cole as he made love to him?

Cole didn't seem to mind as he met Tanner thrust for thrust. His eyes rolled back, and the muscles in his neck tightened. "Jesus, me too. Fuck, you feel good."

Tanner slammed inside, and it was like a bolt of lightning ran down his spine. Colors flashed behind his eyelids, shadows, the edges blurry, like his orgasm had shot him to another universe.

Cole cried out his name, his hole tightening around Tanner before he shot all over his chest and stomach. Tanner couldn't hold himself up anymore, just fell on top of Cole, who wrapped his arms around him. "That was..."

"It's never been like that for me," Cole admitted quietly.

It had never been like that for Tanner either.

COLE

I sat on the porch steps with Paige, eating the ham and cheese sandwiches she and my mother made us for lunch. It'd been a few days since I'd had any sort of heart-to-heart with my other best friend.

Charlie was helping Kasper in the chicken coop, since Mom had sworn she'd seen a fox on the property last night. She'd even woken me up out of a dead sleep. By then the predator had fled, but she feared our chickens would start disappearing. She informed Kasper first thing that morning, and he enlisted Charlie's help, grumbling that we'd need better fencing around the hens. Kasper was promoted even before Dad got sick, and I'd admit he kept Crawford Farm running fairly smoothly.

"People are starting to talk, Tom," Paige whispered, glancing briefly over her shoulder to make sure Mom was still upstairs, feeding my father his lunch.

My stomach tilted uncomfortably. "Whaddya mean?"

She stared down at her saddle shoes. "I overheard Molly gossiping at the General Store about how you spend more time with Charlie than me. She wondered why you haven't made an honest woman out of me yet."

I was suddenly hit with a memory from my weekend with Charlie when we went into town for some donuts and coffee, not only because his cupboards were bare, but because Charlie had a sweet tooth. We ran into Sheriff Evans coming out of the shop.

"Boys."

"Morning, Sheriff," Charlie had replied in a singsong voice. He was so happy and carefree that weekend, same as me.

"What's that on your chin, son?" the sheriff asked, and when I reached up I could feel a rash forming on my jaw from Charlie's stubble. He hadn't shaved in a couple of days, and I loved the coarse feel of it against my lips

and chin and throat. Charlie had been rougher, more possessive when we kissed, and it made everything we did together feel more real and unfettered.

More perfect and right.

I swallowed thickly while Charlie covered for me. "Guess you haven't outgrown your acne yet," he joked, nudging my shoulder playfully.

Once the sheriff walked away, we'd both lost our appetite. Charlie had shaved his face clean every day since then...

I shook my head to clear it and reached for Paige's hand. "Damn it. I'm so sorry." She stiffened briefly before relaxing into my touch, and that was when I knew something between us had changed. I felt it in my gut. Our relationship had shifted, and it made me queasy. "I...I don't know what to do."

"It's okay. We'll figure something out," Paige replied, squeezing my hand. "But th-there's something else."

"What is it?" I tried to catch her eye, but it was fixed on the barn, which was desperately in need of a paint job, I realized. Maybe Charlie and I would work on it late summer. If we were still in this godforsaken town. At least by then the rumors might be at an end.

Who was I kidding? They would likely get worse, and I'd hate for Paige to have to take the brunt of it. At least for a little while before they found something else to gossip about.

God, why can't the world work differently for people like me and Charlie? Charlie would jokingly say it's because we're a couple of deviants, and that only makes me angrier. All I want is to spend the rest of my life loving my best friend. I can no longer understand why that's so wrong.

Paige drew a deep breath and said, "Isaac Waters," and my gaze snapped to hers. Isaac worked at the custard shop in town, and I jogged my memory about the last time I'd even had a conversation with the guy. "He... I... Well, I know he's got a crush on me. He hangs around after church services just to talk to me. And I..."

I realized I'd stopped breathing, and I wasn't sure why. Maybe because it'd always been me, Charlie, and Paige, and I'd been so caught up in Charlie the last few months that I didn't remember she had her own life, her own interests.

With shaky fingers, Paige straightened her braids. "I...I sort of want to tell Isaac that you and me...that we're only friends."

I gasped as the force of her words hit me. While I was busy drumming up

ways of spending every conceivable free moment with Charlie, I was holding Paige back from living her life. I was an awful friend.

"I... Of course..." I spluttered. "I've been a self-centered prick."

"No," she countered. "You've been busy being in love."

My pulse beat unsteadily as I looked my best friend over. She had on a new skirt that I hadn't even noticed and was now wearing her hair in a middle part. "Anyone would be lucky to have you, Paige. You're the most amazing girl I know."

A rosy flush spread across her cheeks. "I... I'll always be fond of you, Tom, but I'd like to be married someday, have a family of my own."

I wondered if Paige might've given it a go with me, had I shown her any sort of affection beyond friendship. If she thought I could've at least provided her children of her own. I'd probably never know because she was always so good at smoothing things over and being a good listener. Even when we were younger and got in trouble for changing the words to the songs at church camp or dunking each other too much at the swimming pool.

Damn it. I'd been a self-absorbed bastard.

"You'll always be one of the most important people in my life, no matter what," I confessed. "I want you to be happy."

And she would be. I could picture it. I loved Paige with all my heart, and if I could've felt the same way about a woman as I did about Charlie, she would've been it for me.

"I want you to be happy too. You and Charlie deserve to be together. It's just not fair."

"Maybe we'll leave someday. Go away for a little while," I muttered, looking over her shoulder to the screen door. Normally, I could hear my mother rustling about inside, so I wanted to be certain our conversation remained private. Regardless, I still wore the guilt like a shroud about leaving my family behind. Except I sometimes wondered if Mom had secrets of her own, the way she blushed so much around Kasper. But that was ridiculous. Mom would never do such a thing. Now I was just searching for excuses.

"Where would you go?" Paige asked, her voice pitched.

"Dunno...maybe a bigger city. Charlie says there might be places where we could be ourselves."

"I would miss you both terribly," she said, sniffing. "You'd have to promise to write every once in a while."

“Of course I would.” I drew Paige into my arms for a hug as she whimpered into my shoulder. “Besides, it’s all just talk for now.”

“What about the rumors about you and Charlie?” She drew back and wiped at a stray tear. “You’re both unmarried and always together.”

“We’ll figure it out. It’s unfair to ask you to keep covering for us.”

As I walked back to the barn in a daze, I realized that Charlie and I would need to be even more careful now and not be seen together outside of work. The thought sat like a heavy stone in my stomach.

When Charlie entered the barn from the field, he took one look at me and knew something was wrong. I pushed him up against a bale of hay and took his mouth, pouring all my fears and anguish and desperation into the kiss.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked, drawing away to catch his breath. “We’re gonna get caught.”

“I’m tired, Charlie,” I admitted, burrowing my lips against his throat. “Tired of hiding how much I want you. How much I love you.”

“Fuck, Tom. I love you too,” he said against my ear. “It’ll be okay. We’ll figure it out. Together.”

WHEN COLE CLOSED THE JOURNAL, HE HEARD TANNER’S AUDIBLE SWALLOW as he stared out at the newly painted barn from the porch swing. They had finished the job yesterday, and it certainly drew their gazes every time they stepped outside.

Jordy even took a walk around the outside when he delivered the lumber for the loft that morning. Once they showed him the progress on the inside as well, Jordy told Tanner he’d be the first in line for a sample of brew.

“Hey, you okay?” Cole asked, reaching for Tanner’s jaw and drawing his gaze back in his direction. He saw a mix of emotions reflected in his gaze—fear and despair, hope and affection.

“It’s just that Paige...she needed to move on,” he explained as he motioned to the journal, now safely resting in the tin enclosure again. “Find someone to love her the way she deserved. It must’ve been tough for her to... I don’t even know what I’m trying to say.”

But somehow Cole knew he was referring to more than just Paige. Maybe he was talking about himself. And Cole too. The barn was nearly done. The journal too. It was getting lighter in pages, and there was a desperate part of Cole that didn’t want it to end.

But the only way to see around the bend, to see if the people he'd grown to care about were safe and happy, was to keep trudging ahead.

A sickening feeling slid through his gut. "Yeah...moving on is hard."

There was still so much unspoken between him and Tanner, and he could feel it hanging between them like a heavy fog, the thick air coating their skin and throats and chests.

But he couldn't get the right words out, so he did the next best thing he could think of, which was to show Tanner with his lips and hands and tongue how much moving on would probably destroy him right then. But he'd do it if Tanner needed him to.

"C'mere," he said, and Tanner went willingly. Cole gripped his face and kissed him soundly, an outpouring of all his pent-up emotions in the wake of the journal entry and having finished painting the barn. Thankfully, the loft would still buy them time. Their chests pressed together, and Tanner's hands tightened in the back of his shirt as he moaned against Cole's lips.

When Cole opened his eyes to gaze at the man who'd become his entire world in only a couple of short months, he found Tanner's watchful gaze already upon him—raw and real and profound. Cole felt like his heart had been flayed open, his emotions sitting right at the surface for the man to see, and it made him shudder. As he began to pull away, doubt and fear crippling him, Tanner clasped a hand to his nape and dragged him closer.

"Need you, Cole. When we kiss, it makes me feel..."

Alive. Whole, Cole supplied as Tanner took control of his mouth in a bruising embrace, deepening the kiss for long moments right there in the open with the moon and stars as their backdrop, stilling all thoughts in his head and reducing him to pure sensation and frank emotion. It made him wish for things he probably didn't have the right to. He had to remind himself that nothing ever lasted forever. Not for him, at least.

TANNER

There was a heaviness to the air since Cole began work on the loft. The two of them were okay—they still laughed and talked together. As time passed, Tanner had made love to him a few more times, each experience making him feel connected to another person in a way he'd never felt before. Like time stopped in those moments for everyone but the two of them. He felt a little ridiculous thinking about it in those terms. It was something he was too embarrassed to share with Cole, and it was mixed up with guilt because the more he fell for Cole, the more he felt like he was abandoning Emma. How he could abandon someone who had passed, he didn't know, but emotions were funny that way.

He had a feeling Cole was taking longer to work on the loft than he needed to, and that was fine by Tanner. While he wanted to see it completed, he knew that was what the heaviness around them was about. When the loft was done, Cole's work there was technically finished, and while he'd mentioned to Cole before that there was no rush, that he could continue to garden, Cole hadn't given him an answer about that.

Tanner reached into his desk drawer and pulled out Cole's dog tags. He ran his fingers over them as he looked out the office window toward the barn. She really was beautiful with a fresh coat of paint. He wondered what Emma would think if she saw it...he wondered what Tom, Charlie, and Paige would think. Really, it was all because of Cole. Tanner slipped the dog tags around his neck and under his shirt. He liked the feel of them against his skin.

It was late afternoon, the sun hidden behind thick, grayish-white clouds. He was thankful it provided for cooler weather for Cole.

He went downstairs and started dinner. He made lemon-herb chicken and mashed potatoes. He grabbed two bottles of beer from the fridge, excited for when his beer would be ready and Cole could taste it...if he stayed that long. Then he plucked their plates off the counter and made his way toward the

barn. He was halfway there when Cole came out, shirtless and wiping his face on a towel.

“Oh, hey. Let me help you.” He jogged over.

“I thought we could eat outside tonight.”

Cole nodded. “I was just coming to get you. The loft is finished. We could eat up there if you want.”

There was a strange twist in Tanner’s gut, while simultaneously, he felt lighter, floaty. He hadn’t expected the loft to be finished already. “Yeah...I’d like that.”

“You can head up. I’m going to go wash my hands real quick.”

Tanner shook his head. “I’m going to wait for you.” He didn’t know why, but he didn’t think he could see it without Cole. He wanted to share that moment with him.

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

“Hey, Cole?” Tanner said when he was almost to the house.

“Yeah?”

“You wanna get the journal while you’re in there? We can read another entry?” There weren’t many left, and it felt right to read one in the loft space Tom and Charlie had held so dear.

Cole smiled, and damned if Tanner’s knees didn’t go weak. “Yeah, Tan. I’ll get it.”

It didn’t take Cole long in the house. He had on a clean shirt and carried the journal when he came back out. Tanner handed his plate over before the two of them finished the short journey to the barn. There was a ladder in the back right corner to climb up into the loft. Even from below, Tanner could see the love Cole had put into it, the stain on the wood and... “What is that?” he asked.

“One of those oversize beanbag chairs. Jordy sneaked it over for me. It’s not the same as their hay, but I thought you might want to spend some time up there, so you’d need something comfortable to sit on.”

Tanner’s heart thudded against his chest. It was such a small, simple thing, but to Tanner, it meant the world. “Thank you. Hopefully you plan on spending some time up there with me.” He winked.

“There’s enough room for two.”

Tanner liked the sound of that. He wanted the rest of his life to be that

way.

The two of them headed over to the ladder and made their way up. As they stood beside each other, arms brushing, the hairs on his arm stood, a floaty feeling making waves in his gut. Goose bumps traveled from his wrist up his forearm. He looked down to see that Cole had them as well. “Seems silly since it’s a different loft, but it’s almost like I can feel them up here.” Really, there was no *almost* about it. He *could* feel them.

“Yeah,” Cole whispered. “I was just thinking the same thing. I don’t know if it’s silly or not, but I feel them.”

Neither of them moved, neither of them breathed. Tanner just wanted to take it in, soak up this feeling of Tom and Charlie. They’d lain up there and talked, kissed, maybe made love.

“Come on. Let’s eat, Tan.”

Tanner set the beers down, and then the two of them sat on the beanbag and ate. Cole talked to him about the loft; Tanner hadn’t come into the barn since Cole started. He wasn’t sure why, but he hadn’t been able to.

They spoke about Tanner’s work and things that didn’t really matter, both of them seeming to steer clear of the things that did.

When they were finished, they sat side by side, backs against the wall of the barn. “Do you want to do the honors?” Cole asked.

Tanner took the box from him, removed the journal, and with shaky fingers, opened to the next entry.

IT’S LATE. I’M SITTING IN MY CLOSET, WRITING WITH A CANDLE BESIDE ME. I don’t know why I’m in here. It’s as if I expect Mom to come bursting into my room and rip the journal out of my hands.

She’s been looking at me strangely lately...looking at Charlie in a weird way too. I’m assuming the rumors about us have gotten back to her, which makes me feel on edge all the time. She’ll disown me. Everyone will. There’s not a chance Mom would be able to allow that kind of sin in her family.

Earlier today I was working out in the sun. It was hot as hell out there, and sweat was dripping into my eyes.

There was a noise behind me. Goose bumps traveled down my arms, and that rapid heartbeat Charlie always gives me went crazy in my chest. I knew it was him and knew it was important without even turning around. But then I did. The sun was behind him, making him glow. Just a silhouette of him was

all I could make out, and he damn near stole my breath.

He didn't stop, didn't look at me, just kept walking. I knew exactly what he meant. I waited a few minutes and then headed into the thick mass of trees behind us, knowing Charlie would be waiting for me there.

The second I saw him, my heart dropped. "Christ, Charlie. What happened to your eye?" It was swollen, angry and blue.

"Dad got drunk. He told me rumors were going around...asked me if I was a deviant, asked me what I've been doing with you. When I didn't answer..." Charlie shrugged. "This happened."

Blood rushed through my ears. I felt weak, my stomach in knots, my heart breaking apart. "Charlie..." I whispered, stepping forward. It didn't matter that someone could run up on us, I needed to comfort him. I hugged him, kissed his eye.

"We shouldn't...not here..."

"It's not fair. What did we do to deserve this? We just want to be together. Why is it so wrong to be together?" I asked, and then it was Charlie comforting me, Charlie holding me. "I don't want you to go back there. Promise me you won't."

"And where am I supposed to go? I sure as shit won't leave without you." He ran his fingers through my hair.

"Then let's go," I told him. "We talked about it, but let's just do it, Charlie. Let's run away."

"What about your dad?" he asked, but I was already shaking my head.

"I love them, but...you're my heart, Charlie Meyers. It's like time stands still when I'm with you."

Charlie gasped, hugged me again. "I love you, Tom."

"I love you too."

"We can go to New York. I've been saving. I don't have a lot, but I have some. We're handy. We can work our way there."

"I'm expecting my pay next week. Once we get that, we should just do it. We should go."

So that's what we're going to do. Paige knows. She cried when I told her, said she couldn't imagine her life without me, but that she wants me happy. I can't imagine my life without her. Leaving Paige will feel like leaving a piece of my heart behind. I promised to keep in touch. She tried to give me money,

but I wouldn't take it, I couldn't.

I don't know if I'll keep writing from the road. I was thinking about leaving the journal here. Maybe one day someone will find it and they'll understand. Maybe one day people will see love isn't wrong, and they'll read our story and wonder how anyone could have thought how I feel about Charlie is a sin or anything other than beautiful. I carved our initials into the closet, making us a part of this house too.

I can't wait to leave with him. I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with my Charlie.

TANNER CLOSED THE JOURNAL, CLUTCHED HIS CHEST AND FOUGHT TO SUCK IN a breath. When he looked over at Cole, his eyes had pooled with tears, a lone pearl of moisture making its way down his face.

"How could anyone look at what Charlie and Tom had and think they were wrong?" Cole asked.

"I don't know. I..." He couldn't find his words, so instead he hugged Cole, held him close, lost himself in his man.

"You're wearing them," he whispered, and Tanner realized he saw the chain for the dog tags.

"Because they're yours. They belong with you. I was going to give them back to you today and...and ask you to stay. I don't want you to leave, Cole. I don't want to be without you."

He pulled back, his eyes soft. "I don't want to be without you either, but I have to pay my way. I can't live off you, and I don't even know if anyone will give me a job here. Not with the rumors."

Could they really be broken apart by something like rumors? "Don't let that be what keeps us apart. I know what it's like to lose someone you love, and I don't want to lose you too. We'll figure it out."

Cole gasped, and Tanner realized what he'd just said. He couldn't take it back, though, wouldn't. "I'm in love with you, Cole. You make me feel alive again."

Cole fisted his hand in Tanner's hair, pulled him close, fused their mouths together in a rough, passionate kiss. When he pulled away, Tanner almost couldn't breathe.

"You really love me?" he asked as though he couldn't understand how it was possible.

“Yes. I—”

“I love you too, Tanner. Jesus, I love you so much, I don’t know how I ever lived without you.”

They kissed again before Tanner laid Cole out on the beanbag. “Yes,” Cole whispered between kisses. “Yes, I’ll stay.”

COLE

Cole drove into town early, stopping at the donut shop first to get coffee and surprise Tanner with some custard-filled eclairs. They didn't indulge much, but he thought Tanner would enjoy them.

Next, he walked into the tackle shop and headed toward the bait aisle for some new hooks and bobbers for his fishing trip this weekend with Tanner, and possibly Jordy, if his father gave him the morning off. He enjoyed his newfound friendship with the younger man; it gave him hope that they could truly make this town their home.

Cole hadn't been in this shop since the day he met Tanner and traded his dog tags. Seeing them around Tanner's neck the other night brought things full circle in the most satisfying way. He was finally feeling more settled, and Tanner sharing his feelings and asking him to stay fulfilled him like nothing else ever had. He was anxious about how he'd pay his own way, but he'd take it one day at a time.

When Bobby, the owner, spotted him from the register, he smiled in his direction. No doubt he also remembered that very first interaction between them with the dog tags. He'd never corrected him back then about the military comment, but he cut himself some slack. He'd only been trying to survive. Correcting the omission now seemed contrived, and besides, he didn't owe the man anything. By now he'd probably heard he'd been in prison, so his reputation was already tainted.

He felt Bobby's gaze as he checked him out, but he was used to this kind of scrutiny when he went into town. The only thing he could do was hold his head high and prove them all wrong.

"Drove down Magnolia Drive the other day and saw the restored barn," Bobby said, then whistled. "I hear that was all your doing. Nice job."

Pride bloomed in his chest as he nodded. "Was a lot of hard work, but

definitely paid off.”

“Your leg doesn’t give you no trouble?” he asked all of a sudden, perhaps remembering his limp from his first visit as well.

Cole’s jaw tensed, but he supposed he understood the curiosity. “I make do.”

After he said his goodbyes and turned toward the door, Bobby called out to him. “You ever be interested in a side job?” Bobby asked with some trepidation in his eyes. “Tanner probably keeps you plenty busy over there, but if you ever got time—”

Cole quirked an eyebrow. It was the first time he felt like he had the advantage, not only in this town, but also since being out of prison. “What did you have in mind?”

“It’s hard finding a decent handyman,” he admitted. “Someone who actually shows up to complete a project.” It was a complaint Cole had heard for years. If his grandfather had taught him anything, it was to follow through on a job. “That said, my garage needs repairs after a few harsh winters, and plenty others around here have similar complaints.”

He didn’t want to seem too eager, but he also couldn’t help how the proposal lit him full of possibilities. The man had made an offer based on the work he’d seen on the barn, and that alone was something to be grateful for. Along with the fact that Bobby didn’t seem to be letting anything he might’ve heard about Cole’s past hold him back from asking.

“I’ll speak to Tanner when I get home, but I’d definitely consider it.” He didn’t want to give too much away about his life with Tanner, but he also didn’t want to hide anything. “I’ll probably have some time in the coming days.”

Cole glanced outside as Bobby wrote down his phone number and address on a pad of paper. “That Charger belong to you?” He always noticed the classic Dodge in the same parking space near the tackle shop, so he figured his suspicions were correct.

“Yep, a 1970 model,” he replied with a smile.

“She’s a beauty,” he said, reaching for the paper Bobby handed him.

“Sure is,” he said, glancing toward where she was parked. “I dabble a bit in rebuilding engines and such with my cousin Ed. But he hasn’t had time to come over lately.”

Cole never had any real passion for cars other than hoping to have nice wheels of his own someday. He could certainly appreciate the detail that went

into building them, but given that he'd landed in trouble with the law after trying to learn a new trade at Fischer's Garage, he'd do well to stick to things he was better suited for, like construction. He'd take the smell of wood over grease any day.

Once Cole stepped back into the sunlight, he couldn't stop the smile stretching across his face. He had worked hard for Tanner, and it had paid off.

It wasn't until he was inside the truck that he spotted the police vehicle parked across the street. When he pulled onto the mostly vacant street and glanced inside the vehicle, the sheriff tapped the edge of his hat in acknowledgment. He couldn't help it, it was natural, he supposed, but his muscles tensed like the strings of a violin and he felt on edge all the way home.

As he deposited the bags on the counter, he heard the shower running, and the idea of Tanner naked, and warm water soothing his own twitchy muscles, overtook him. He bolted up the stairs as fast as his knee would allow and shed his clothes in record time. A grin split Tanner's mouth as he joined him in the steamy enclosure, his gaze roaming greedily over Cole's bare form. Cole's shaft swelled instantly in response.

Cole looked his fill of Tanner as well, from the long column of his throat down to his tantalizing hip bones framing that mouthwatering cock. Suddenly all he wanted was to touch him, to get lost in the man he loved.

"Cole," Tanner murmured as their mouths collided in a messy, frantic kiss. Their tongues grappled, teeth clashed as their cocks aligned, and they moaned into each other's hungry mouths. He'd tell him later about his trip into town.

Cole reached for the soapy washcloth in Tanner's hand and swiped it across his neck and down his arms as Tanner hummed appreciatively. He rubbed the smattering of hair on Tanner's pecs, then down his chest to the dark patch at his groin above his flushed, leaking cock.

When he rounded Tanner's hip and gently soaped his crease with his fingers, Tanner's breath stuttered. "This all right?"

"Feels good." Tanner sighed as his fingers reached up to fork through Cole's hair.

Cole dipped his head to flick across a tightened nipple as he circled Tanner's hole with his thumb, and he could feel Tanner tremble against him.

He was desperate for a taste of the man, so he dropped to his knees, ignoring the pain that shot through the damaged cartilage, and came face-to-face with Tanner's hard and red-tipped shaft. He licked the water from

Tanner's belly button and nibbled at his hip bone before burying his nose in the springy curls at his groin. They tickled his jaw as he flicked his tongue into his slit and beneath the crown, Tanner's thighs shaking against his shoulders. Cole grasped the base of his cock and nuzzled the head with his lips. A hint of salt burst against his tongue as he enclosed the crown between his lips and sucked him down.

"*Oh, fuck,*" Tanner cried out, the sting of his fingers grasping Cole's hair spurring him on.

He took him to the back of his throat, then bobbed up and down, using his tongue to map the smooth skin, absorbing the layers of sensations. His taste, his smell, the noises he was dragging from his throat. Pleasing Tanner brought him contentment like nothing ever had before.

His other hand reached up to grasp his low-hanging balls, which felt heavy and full in his hand. The hair surrounding them was soft as he licked at the sac and reached behind him to grasp his cheeks. Tanner groaned, his head sinking against the tile.

"Turn around for me, Tan," he pleaded as their eyes met. "Wanna see you."

Chest heaving, eyes blissed out, Tanner clutched at the tile as he twisted toward the wall.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous," Cole said as he kissed each round globe, then used the heels of his hands to pull open his cheeks and expose his pink hole. *Jesus*. His cock jerked against his stomach, he was so turned on.

"Cole, I..." Tanner's knees trembled as he tried to move away. "I've never had somebody..."

"I know, babe," he replied, kissing a plump cheek. "Just want to touch you. We can stop if it's too much."

"No, I want you to...just never had..."

"Shhhh..." he murmured as his thumb stroked across his hole.

Tanner groaned as his forehead sank against the wall.

When Cole leaned in and licked at his hole, Tanner's knees nearly buckled.

"Goddamn, I had no idea it would feel like that. Do it again."

So he did. He kissed and licked his rim, swirling his tongue around the tight muscle, edging the tip inside until Tanner was a panting, trembling mess.

“Fuck, I need to come so bad,” Tanner whined as he reached for his leaking cock.

“Gotta save it for me,” Cole said as he fisted the base of Tanner’s cock to stave off his orgasm. “Need you to fuck me, Tan.”

Tanner turned and hauled Cole against him, their skin slippery and wet. He kissed him deeply, their slick tongues wrestling before they stepped out of the shower and quickly toweled off.

In the bedroom, Cole reached for the lube and a condom from the bedside drawer before lying down on his stomach.

“Open me up,” Cole said over his shoulder, enjoying the friction of the mattress against his stiff cock.

“Fuck, Cole. The way you look right now.” Tanner lubed his fingers, reached forward, and trailed his hand along his cheeks near the crease of his thighs. When he slid one, then two digits into his hole, Cole moaned into the pillow. Tanner’s cock felt stiff against his hip, sending a subtle vibration along his nerve endings.

Suddenly, all he wanted was Tanner buried deep inside him. Lifting his hips, he ground his ass against him. Tanner moaned into Cole’s neck as he jutted his hips toward his crease. Cole could probably come from the solid pressure of his shaft alone. But he wanted more—the burn, the fullness, the ache as his hole was breached and he was sent flying over the edge.

Tanner’s fingers stretched around his hip to his cock, and his fist closed firmly around it as they rutted against each other. He could feel Tanner’s wet and sticky precome coating the top of his crack.

Cole gasped, thrusting into his hand. “Need you inside me, Tan.”

Tanner’s forehead sank against his shoulder blades, his breaths heavy against his skin. “You’re going to make me shoot as soon as I get in there.”

He heard the sound of a wrapper, Tanner fumbling to roll the condom down his cock as Cole rose to his knees. Seconds later Tanner breathed heavily into Cole’s neck as his fingers trembled against his waist and the head of his cock pressed against his rim.

“Fuck yes.” Cole welcomed the burn as his thickness speared his hole. He shifted his knees on the mattress, providing better access. Tanner’s fingers tightened on Cole’s hips as he rocked forward in shallow, restrained thrusts. “Jesus. So damned tight.”

Wrapping an arm around Cole’s chest, he sucked on his neck as he pumped his groin and buried his cock to the hilt. He canted his hips in short

and gentle prods, but Cole needed more.

Cole thrust his ass out and ground against Tanner. “Harder, Tan. Don’t hold back.”

“Holy shit. You’re killing me.” He drove back inside in one solid thrust that knocked the breath out of him as Cole’s elbows sank to the mattress for leverage.

“That’s more like it,” he breathed out as his cock leaked to the sheets below him.

Tanner’s fingers dug into his hips as he railed him good. Groaning, Cole arched his back, welcoming the fullness. He’d feel his thick length filling him all the way into the next night. “Too good, Tan. Never want this to fucking end.”

Cole shuddered and his teeth clattered from mind-numbing pleasure as Tanner’s shaft rubbed against his prostate. Tanner’s fingernails trailed gently along the nubs of his spine, providing a direct contrast to the good ramming he was providing. “Don’t want to be inside anybody else but you.”

Cole felt raw, his chest overwhelmingly achy from his words. “Fuck, Tan. The things you say.”

Goose bumps arose along Cole’s skin like a string of frissons headed straight to his groin, and he was unable to concentrate on much else besides the perfect slide of Tanner’s cock in his ass. Something about the man’s progressively desperate sounds triggered a path of electric fire to his balls, and without warning, he spurted all over the sheets.

“Oh God.” Tanner’s thrusts slowed, became choppy, and suddenly he shuddered, pumping his seed deep inside him.

As they collapsed to the mattress, Cole’s mind blanked out and all the tension seeped from his muscles. All he could think was that Tan owned him body and soul, and nothing else in the world mattered more.

TANNER

Tanner was on pins and needles, waiting for Cole to get home. He'd left that morning for Bobby's, where he was going to give him a quote for the work he wanted done. He'd been gone for hours already. He didn't have a cell phone, of course, so Tanner didn't even have a way to know what was happening.

The only thing he did know was that he wanted this so badly. He didn't care if Cole worked right away, but he knew how much it meant to Cole, and Tanner understood that. It would also make him feel like Cole was more settled in Red Bluff, like he had a reason to stay outside of Tanner.

He sat at his computer, trying to force himself to work as he waited. Cole would have to use his truck if he found work. It was what he drove now. Tanner didn't mind, but he had a feeling Cole would be bound and determined to find something for himself soon.

Tanner finally managed to lose himself in his work. He put on headphones and kept himself busy scheduling lesson plans. He didn't know how much time had passed, when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He looked up to see Cole standing in the doorway of his office, his lips stretched into one of the biggest smiles Tanner had seen from him.

He tugged the headphones off just as Cole came toward him. "I got it. I fucking got it, Tan."

Tanner shoved to his feet just as Cole wrapped his arms around him and buried his face in Tanner's neck, his beard scratching against Tanner's skin in a way he'd grown to love. "God, I'm so fucking happy. I really need to be able to contribute, ya know? This makes it more real."

Tanner exhaled, a sort of calmness washing over him. "Yeah, I get it. I was thinking the same thing. Come on, let's go downstairs, and you can tell me about it."

They made their way to the kitchen, where Cole poured them each a glass of iced tea, and then they ended up on the porch swing together. Bobby apparently wanted Cole to work on his garage and possibly build a new shed for him, which Cole sounded really excited to do. “I was thinking I could maybe make a business out of it. I’m handy enough. I can figure just about anything out. It would take some money, and I’d need to look into what kind of licensing I need, but I think I’d enjoy it...working with my hands that way.”

“I think you should do it. I can help you research, and hell, I’m sure there will be others who need your help in the meantime.”

Cole paused, took a drink of his tea. Tanner could feel the emotion coming off him, could feel the heat of it. “It feels too good to be true. Never really saw myself having a life like this—you, this house. I just sort of feel like I don’t deserve it. Not after what I’ve done and where I’ve been.”

Tanner’s chest squeezed tight, his heart growing even more for the man sitting beside him. “I think you deserve it more than anyone I know. You’ve been through hell and back, you’ve made mistakes, but you came out of it a better man. You deserve it, Cole.”

He looked over at Tanner and smiled. His dark eyes intense, this sparkle in them that warmed Tanner to the bone. “Jesus, I love you.”

“I love you too.” It was easier to say then. Not that it had been hard before, but there was more guilt behind it, guilt because as much as he loved Cole, he had loved Emma too. But she was gone, and he was alive, Cole was alive. They had to live.

Cole leaned in and teased Tanner’s lips open. Tanner let him, savored the taste of Cole on his tongue, the scent of his skin, familiar and heady, filling parts of Tanner he hadn’t known existed before Cole.

“Let me take you out tonight,” he said against Cole’s lips.

“What?” Cole pulled away.

“On a date. Let me take you out to celebrate.”

“Are you sure? People are bound to talk.”

Yeah, they would, and Tanner thought maybe he should be more nervous about that than he was. Not because he felt there was anything wrong with what they were doing, but because it was so new for him. He couldn’t find it in himself to be, though. “I’m sure.”

Cole deserved it. They both did.

TANNER HAD TO FINISH UP SOME WORK, SO COLE ASKED TO BORROW THE truck again. He wanted to go into town and get a new outfit to wear that night. Tanner told him he didn't have to, that he didn't give a shit what Cole wore, but Cole was insistent, and in his own way, Tanner could understand. Afterward they showered together. Tanner wore a pair of nice blue jeans he hadn't worn in years and a black polo shirt. He watched, enjoyed the view as Cole slid new jeans up his legs, as he pulled a gray V-neck T-shirt over his head. It was tight against his chest, making the firm muscles in his arms look more defined. Christ, he was beautiful. It was the only word Tanner had for him.

"What?" Cole asked as he walked over to the bed and sat down, pulling a pair of new shoes from the bag.

"Nothing. Admiring how sexy you are. You clean up nice."

"Oh, you like me better this way?" Cole said with a grin.

"No. I like you any way I can have you. Just appreciating the view."

Cole's grin lit a fire in Tanner's chest. He loved making the man smile.

"You make a pretty sexy view yourself," Cole said with a wink.

"Come on. I'm ready to take you out." They finished getting ready, then climbed into the truck. He drove them to a steakhouse in Stallings. There weren't as many options in Red Bluff.

"It's been a long time since I went out to a place like this," Cole said as they got out of the truck. "When I get paid, I'm taking you out."

Tanner nodded. "I like the sound of a next time."

The lighting was fairly dim inside. It wasn't a real fancy place. He didn't figure that would be Cole's style. Plus, the reviews had been good, and Tanner liked the ambiance. There were both booths and tables, lighting over each one that was welded from different metals and materials that gave it a unique vibe.

"How many?" the hostess asked.

"Um...just two," Tanner replied.

Cole cocked a playful brow at him, and Tanner grinned.

Once they were settled in their seats, Tanner admitted, "I've never done this with anyone except Emma."

“Never?”

He shook his head. “We were young when we met. She saved my life. I sure as shit wouldn’t have attempted to make anything of myself without her. From the very first time we met, I knew she was it for me.” Cole flinched, and Tanner immediately felt guilty. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No.” Cole shook his head. “You have no reason to be. Emma was part of your life...a big part. You loved her, and you probably always will.”

“I did, and yes, in some ways, but I love you now, and it feels just as right and real as loving Emma did. She’d be happy.” He hadn’t seen yet that sign he’d asked her for, but he still knew it.

“Good. I’m glad.”

Cole reached over like he was going to grab Tanner’s hand across the table, but then froze. “No, it’s okay. You can do it.” Tanner didn’t want to hide who Cole was to him. He wasn’t naive. He knew it wouldn’t always be easy, but it was important to him.

Cole smiled, and Tanner could tell he’d said the right thing. Cole covered Tanner’s hand, squeezed it. When the waitress approached, he didn’t pull away, and to Tanner’s surprise, she didn’t look twice at him.

“Are you guys ready to order?” she asked.

It was Cole who replied, “No, ma’am. Sorry. We haven’t gotten around to looking yet.”

She chuckled. “Take your time. I’ll be back. What about drinks?”

That Tanner knew. He glanced at the beer list and ordered one of his favorite darks. Cole chose the same.

“What are you thinking?” Cole asked. “I’m craving a good burger.”

“I’m thinking a steak.”

When the waitress came back, they made their orders. They spoke the whole meal. Cole talked more about what work he would be doing for Bobby and asked Tanner about printing up some flyers he could maybe share around town. “I’m a little nervous...with my history and all, but—”

“It’ll work out. You’re a good man, and you do good work. I have to believe that counts for something.”

Cole grinned in response.

When dinner was done, Tanner paid, and they stepped outside. “Where to now?” Cole asked.

“There’s a park down the road. I did some research, and they do older movies in the park. I think it’s *Jaws* tonight.”

Cole’s eyes stretched wide. “Are you shitting me? I know it’s corny now, but *Jaws* is one of my favorites.”

So that’s what they did. They walked to the park, evening turning into night. They found a tree to sit under. It was halfway through the movie when Tanner lay down and let his head rest in Cole’s lap. He wasn’t going to lie and pretend his spine wasn’t slightly straight, nerves skittering down it, but then he relaxed, reminded himself he loved Cole and it didn’t matter what anyone else thought.

Cole’s fingers carded through Tanner’s hair, his fingertips brushed against his cheek. “This is nice,” Cole said. “And this is a first for me. I’ve never been in love before, but I’ve been with men. This date thing, though? This is new. Thank you for that.”

Those words settled into Tanner’s chest as he stroked Cole’s thigh. “I wish they could have had this,” he whispered. Tom and Charlie never would have been able to go out this way.

“We’ll just have to do it a lot for them.”

Tanner smiled. He liked the sound of that.

COLE

When Charlie drew back from my spent prick, then licked his lips as if pleasing me was his mission in life, everything became crystal clear, like the gleam on the edge of a knife.

I trembled envisioning it. Me and Charlie. Our future, just like he said. A year from now. Five. Hopefully many more. A lifetime of loving him the way he deserved.

It could never be out in the open, of course. We'd always have to hide, pretend in public, except in safe spaces, spaces we were hard-pressed to find anymore in this town. Though it would always be against the law to love each other the way we were meant to, no matter what city we escaped to. But it would have to be enough. Our implicit trust in each other—our love—would have to get us through the rougher times. Just like it did now.

Outside of a quick kiss, hug, or brush of fingertips at work, we haven't been able to be together. And even then it seemed as if Kasper or another farmhand could walk in on us at any moment. Overhear a conversation or spot our eyes connecting when we wanted to convey how much we missed each other. Not only since the rumors started, but always. Like I was a hollow vessel and one glance from him filled me up.

But the scrutiny has been difficult to deal with. I walk around with a permanent pit in my stomach, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Even in church, it seemed like the preacher was talking to only us during his sermons. About morality and getting back on the right path with the herd. It was so uncomfortable, I wanted to stand up and shout my truth to the whole congregation, consequences be damned.

That what I felt with Charlie wasn't unnatural or wrong. It brought my soul peace, made my brain quiet and my body thrum when I was with him, like everything was right and the world was full of possibilities. I ached to see him, talk to him, hold him.

Love him.

We were living on borrowed time, so we met in the loft after midnight to solidify our plans. But it'd been hard to keep our hands or lips off each other even though we felt rushed. Hearing Charlie's harsh breaths and seeing his glazed eyes when we made each other feel good with our mouths and fingers helped strengthen our connection. Charlie was his true self when we were alone. The genuineness was breathtaking. His smile, his sarcasm, his outrage, his hope. I latched on to whatever I could with both hands and breathed him in.

Charlie swiped at his lips with a lazy smile before leaning forward and taking my mouth in a kiss that made my heart unfurl. "Missed you."

"Missed you too," I replied as I righted my pants and he sat beside me in the hay.

We knotted our fingers together and glanced up at the stars, our heartbeats pounding in unison. "I bought our train tickets for New York."

He saw me flinch, and that had been my one mistake tonight. Because it created a seed of doubt that I never intended to plant.

"I need you to be sure, Tom," he said, staring up at the moon.

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling his palm dampen.

"That it's worth it," he said in a shaky voice, finally seeking my gaze. "That I'm worth it."

"Charlie, I—" But he cut me off before I could explain that my hesitation was only sadness and nerves.

"You're it for me, Tom. If it wasn't for you, I'd be long gone. But you're the one taking the bigger risk. This is your home, your farm. You were supposed to inherit it one day."

"But never really run it," I replied, feeling my gut churning. "Kasper belongs here...he should be the one. Besides, I never saw this for myself, not really."

"What do you see for yourself?" Charlie asked. That question wasn't hard for Charlie. He always talked about becoming a vet someday. His care with the animals was something I always admired.

"I honestly don't know. I never thought I had the right to dream. Not with this farm being the only thing—" I turned suddenly and looked at Charlie. Really looked at him. He was so beautiful in the moonlight. My hand cupped his nape, and I placed my lips directly against his, right where they belonged.

We stayed that way. Lips pressed together, eyes open as I saw his truth and he saw mine.

When I drew back, I told him what was in my soul. "You are worth it, Charlie. I would risk everything for you. I want to be with you forever."

"Kiss me, Tom." Tears pricked his eyes. "When we kiss I can feel your heart right against my lips."

I shivered. "The things you say, Charlie Meyers."

Then I reached for him and pushed him down in the hay so our mouths and bodies could be joined again before we ran out of time tonight.

"What will you miss about Red Bluff?" I asked him sometime later as we lay side by side, staring into the darkness and listening to the menagerie of nocturnal insects.

"Paige, of course. And maybe the fancy pastries in town," he said, and I smiled. Charlie and his sweet tooth. "Mirabelle and the chickens. How about you?"

"My parents and Paige...and maybe how still the farm is at dusk and dawn. The melody of the crickets and the rooster's call. The sound of the trumpeter swans on the lake." I turned my head toward him. "Did you know they mate for life?"

Charlie's eyes softened before his lips briefly met mine. "Then I guess we're just a couple of swans looking for a safer pond to wade in."

I chuckled, then took a deep breath. "So what's the plan?"

"Pack a small bag, only stuff that means something to ya," he said in a lowered voice even though we were alone. "I'll meet you here in three days' time, an hour before dawn. We'll leave for the train station together."

We entangled our limbs and joined our lips one last time before we left on our adventure.

COLE WOKE BEFORE DAWN FROM THAT SAME DAMNED DREAM. THE SHOUTING was louder in his ears this time, and he felt glued to the spot, unable to move. Was it the sounds he'd heard from his prison cell at night? No, not there. Fuck. It left him feeling so raw and unsettled.

His legs were entwined with Tanner's, and when he opened his eyes and turned in his direction, he noticed he was already awake.

"You all right?" Tanner asked in a sleepy voice, stroking a stray lock of

hair from his forehead.

“Yeah.” He sighed, capturing Tanner’s hand and kissing his knuckles. “Been restless all night. Didn’t get much sleep.”

“Tom and Charlie?” he asked as if they were real people in their lives. It certainly felt that way sometimes.

As soon as they were finished reading the latest journal entry and Cole had placed it back in the tin container on the bedside table, they’d reached for each other, kissing until their lips were bruised, as if they were pouring all their emotions into each other. Hope and fear and love—maybe not only for the young men they read about, but each other as well.

“I’ll put on coffee. Then I need to get to work,” Cole said as he rolled over and reached for the jeans he’d discarded on the floor the previous night. “Feel guilty taking your truck.”

“Don’t,” Tanner said as he stretched his arms over his head. “We’ll figure everything out in due time. Important thing is for you to feel you got everything you need.”

God, he loved this man. He leaned over and gave him a smooch goodbye.

“First thing will be a cell phone,” he said as Cole reached the doorway. “So I can reach you if something comes up.”

Cole had been without a cell phone for so many years, he wasn’t even sure how these latest devices worked. Besides, he didn’t really have anyone to call, until now. “Sounds like a plan.”

He got dressed, made enough coffee for Tanner’s morning, and then headed to the truck, excited for his day.

He passed the Protestant church and the custard shop on the way to Bobby’s residence, curious if they were the same buildings and businesses from Tom and Charlie’s day. More than likely the basic landscape hadn’t changed, but some of the establishments did. He tried picturing the young adults walking to the train station and felt a stab of pain for them. He imagined the smiles, the joy, but also the melancholy and fear of leaving behind everything they ever knew.

He could relate on so many levels. Though landing in prison was absolutely his own fault, he also had to give up everything he ever knew. And when he finally returned, too much had changed—*he* had changed—for him to stay.

Bobby’s garage needed a paint job and new gutters. He’d put all the tools he’d collected from working on the barn in a vintage toolbox he’d found in

the shed, but he'd probably also need to start purchasing some of his own, especially if he was going to make a go of this and call it a business. But there were too many things to consider, and doing so made him feel overwhelmed. A phone, a truck, tools, probably some better work boots... He could barely afford the new attire from the other night, when he'd used the last of his grandfather's money to treat himself to something decent.

Truth was, he'd wanted Tanner to feel proud to be seen with him on their date. He loved every minute of being with the man and didn't want him to have any regrets. So he took the leap and bought some quality clothes.

It was a wonder people gave up so easily. He thought of the men who got out of the penitentiary only to end up back in the same cellblock again. They'd say it was too tough, too much to overcome, and plenty of temptation to ease the hardship.

His first nights on the street, he vowed not to be one of those men, and here he was, with a love he hoped lasted a lifetime, a home, and the possibility of running his own business. It was all because of Tanner, and he never wanted to let the man down. The very idea of it made his stomach bottom out.

He worked all morning, scraping the paint off the garage so he could eventually sand and prime it. It was a standard size, big enough to fit two cars. And when the sun shone through the window of the side door, he could just make out what looked to be another classic car, this one a blue color, with the hood open, and parts sitting on the floor all around it. He absently wondered if it belonged to the cousin Bobby mentioned at the tackle shop. There was also a huge table toward the back with tools loaded on top, along with what looked like spare fishing rods and unopened packages of bait. It again reminded him of the first day he met Bobby.

Cole wiped the sweat from his brow and continued his task. He was a one-man rodeo, and he certainly didn't have any sophisticated equipment to help make this job run any smoother. So what he lacked in speed, he could make up for in quality and technique. Maybe one day he could even add to his team. Jordy might know somebody who needed work and was good for it. The man had certainly been happy when he'd heard the news about the job offer, and said he'd help Cole spread the word. But like Tanner always said, one day at a time.

"Off to open the store," Bobby said from behind him in the driveway. "Need anything before I head out?"

"I'm all set," Cole replied with a smile over his shoulder. "Have a good day!"

He only took a break to eat two sandwiches he'd packed for himself the night before along with a thermos of iced tea, then was back at it. By the time late afternoon rolled around, his shoulders ached as much as his knee, but he had made great progress. Next time he was in town, he'd get himself some of those Epsom salts so he could have a good soak in the upstairs tub. Should've done it a long time ago, but he didn't want to infringe.

He packed up his supplies, shoved them in the back of the truck, and headed home.

Home. He sighed. Music to his ears.

TANNER

They fell into a new routine over the next few days. Most mornings, Tanner got up with Cole. He'd always been a bit of a morning person anyway. They had coffee and breakfast together before Cole headed out to work. When Cole left, Tanner would take care of his own responsibilities around the house—work, keeping an eye on his beer, cutting the lawn, pruning Emma's roses, or whatever else needed to be done. Cole usually got home late in the afternoon. He'd shower and they'd have dinner together, then end up on the porch swing or in the barn most evenings, just enjoying each other's company.

As if by some silent agreement, they hadn't read any more of the journal yet. The entries were feeling more intense, more urgent. He needed to know that Tom and Charlie ran away and why they set the barn on fire, yet worried no real answers would be forthcoming. He wasn't sure he was ready to find out, and he had a feeling Cole felt the same.

It was Friday afternoon, and when he heard the truck bumping along the driveway, his pulse sped up, warmth radiating through him as though he hadn't seen Cole in months instead of hours. He was so happy for him. Tanner could see how much working meant to him, but the house felt too quiet without him. Not lonely like it had before Cole came into his life, just quiet.

"Hey, you." Tanner stepped outside onto the porch as Cole climbed out of the truck.

"Hey, babe," he replied, pressing a quick kiss to Tanner's lips. The term of endearment always did funny things to his insides, made him feel floaty. "I'm gonna hit the shower real quick," Cole added before heading for the door.

"You okay?" He seemed slightly tense.

"What? Yeah, I'm sorry. Just tired. Not sleeping too well."

Tanner nodded. That made sense. He hadn't been sleeping very well

himself. He wasn't sure what that was about.

Cole went inside and took a shower while Tanner finished the lasagna he made for dinner. When Cole came down, they sat at the table and ate. The conversation flowed, felt comfortable the way it always did. The shower must have relaxed Cole.

Afterward they did dishes together before plucking beers from the fridge and making their way outside.

"It's a nice night," Cole said as he laid his head on Tanner's shoulder.

"Yeah, it is. There's a nice little breeze."

He wrapped his arm around Cole and swung as they watched the colors of the sunset change until they faded away.

"How was work?" Tanner asked.

"Pretty good. 'Bout finished. Hoping some new work comes in ASAP."

Tanner kissed the top of his head. "We'll figure it out." They sat together for a little bit longer before going inside, locking up, and heading upstairs. Once Tanner showered, he joined Cole in bed, where they watched a murder mystery before Cole fell asleep.

Tanner smiled at him, brushed the back of his hand along Cole's dark beard. He loved the feel of it against his skin. The day's work must have gotten to him today. He didn't typically fall asleep that early. Tanner yawned, exhausted too. He'd woken up frequently in the middle of the night lately, having strange dreams he couldn't place or just waking fitfully.

He hit the light, and the next thing he knew, he'd shot up in bed, sweating, his heart racing. He clutched his chest, though he didn't really know why. He almost felt like he was going to get sick, wondered if he was coming down with something, but as he took a few deep breaths, he settled down.

Christ, why in the fuck couldn't he sleep?

He reached for Cole only to realize the bed was empty. His stomach clenched uncomfortably.

Tanner got out of bed, pulled on a pair of sweatpants, and made his way downstairs. Cole was there, lying on the couch with his eyes closed, but as Tanner approached, they opened. "What are you doing down here?" He had no idea what time it was or how long Cole had been out of bed.

"Couldn't sleep. You either?" he asked, and Tanner shook his head.

"Come here." Cole opened his arms, and Tanner lay down on top of him,

settled between Cole's legs. It was awkward on the small couch, but they made do. Cole's hand ran up and down Tanner's bare back, through his hair. Their breathing synched, attuned between the two of them. Before he knew it, Tanner lost himself to sleep once again.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK.

Tanner startled awake on top of Cole, who was frowning. "You expecting anyone?" he asked.

Tanner shook his head. It was extremely rare that anyone stopped by. In fact, outside of people from the hardware store, he was pretty sure this was the first time since Cole arrived.

He stood, Cole right behind him as they made their way to the door. Tanner pulled it open to see Sheriff Jones and one of his deputies standing there.

"Mr. Rowe." Sheriff Jones tilted his hat at Tanner. "Cole."

It didn't escape Tanner's attention that he called Cole by his first name when he hadn't Tanner.

"Can I help you?" Tanner asked. What in the hell was the sheriff doing there? Tanner automatically let his eyes dart toward Cole, who stood frozen stiff, his skin pale.

"We actually have some questions for Cole here," the sheriff replied. "Would you like to—"

"Whatever you have to say, you can say it in front of Tanner," Cole replied, and Tanner's pulse slowed. Christ, he hadn't even realized it had sped up.

"If you insist. We got a call from Bobby Smythe this morning. Seems someone broke into his garage last night and stole some parts of the Chevelle he and his cousin had been working on. With your...history, and the fact that you've been working at Bobby's recently, you can figure out why we're here."

"I didn't steal a goddamned thing. Why would I do that? I'd have to be an idiot to steal from my place of employment!" Cole's voice rose an octave, wavered.

"Maybe...maybe not, but it's a mighty big coincidence that you've been there and suddenly car parts came up missing—parts from cars Bobby himself

told you he doesn't fool around with often. Maybe you thought he wouldn't notice right away."

"No." Tanner shook his head. It couldn't be. Cole wouldn't do that. He wouldn't. He couldn't. "You're looking at the wrong man, Officer Jones. Cole and I were—" *In bed together...*

"It's okay, Tan. You don't have to do this. I'll just go with them and get this all sorted out."

Tanner turned toward Cole, a fist squeezing tighter and tighter around his chest. Why wouldn't Cole want him to give him an alibi? Why was he now trying to keep Tanner out of this when just moments before he'd said the sheriff could speak in front of Tanner? But maybe Cole was just trying to save him. Maybe he didn't want Tanner to have to admit they'd been in bed together. It was something Cole would do.

Tanner turned to the sheriff, knowing he had to protect Cole the same way Cole tried to protect him. "Cole couldn't have done this. He was with me."

"All night?" Sheriff Jones asked with an eyebrow raised.

"Tan..."

"Yes, all..." Tanner felt his heart clench as he had when he'd been shocked awake last night. Waking up to an empty bed... How long had Cole been gone? Was it possible he could have left?

No. What the hell are you thinking? You know him. Trust him.

"Do you mind if we have a look around?" the officer asked.

"Do you have a warrant?" Cole tossed back at him.

"No."

"Then no, you can't. Let me get dressed. We'll take care of this at the station."

Tanner stood there dumbfounded as Cole disappeared.

He'd left their bed for the first time last night.

He wouldn't let Officer Jones look around.

The urge to vomit burned at his esophagus. The second he saw Cole climb into the back of the police car with Officer Jones, he ran to the bathroom, hardly made it to the toilet before he emptied his stomach.

COLE

He'd been at the police station for hours while Sheriff Jones and his deputy, Pearson, questioned him. They tried using the good cop, bad cop routine he would've recognized a mile away. They'd leave him alone for an hour at a time, mouth parched from defending himself, then waltz back in to offer a meager Dixie cup of water to wet his whistle before another go at him.

And here he sat again, alone with his thoughts while they observed him from behind the two-way mirror, hoping he'd crack. He'd been through way worse his four years in the penitentiary system, and still, Cole was petrified he could potentially lose everything. Already might have.

He couldn't shake the look he'd seen on Tanner's face. The momentary doubt that flashed through his eyes. The confusion about Cole falling asleep on the couch the night before after leaving their warm bed. He could imagine him trying to add it all up, a timeline of events, just like the sheriff was trying to establish right now. He didn't know what he'd do if he lost him—the man who had come to mean everything.

Cole had used his time in prison to grow up, to understand his mistakes so he'd never make them again, and it still wasn't enough. Maybe he still had lessons to learn about love and loss. His chest felt hollowed out thinking about it. When would he catch a break?

White-hot anger arose inside him. Why did Tanner doubt him? What had he ever done to put the doubt there? Only once had he omitted information about himself, early on in their friendship. And he had come clean. He'd tried to be an honorable man, the kind of man his grandfather would be proud of, and he ended up here anyway. As if none of it mattered.

All because of a false claim. It almost felt like a setup or a practical joke.

Surely Bobby didn't know the details of his past crimes—only that there

was a felony on his record. Sheriff Jones sure as shit knew, though.

The door burst open, and the sheriff entered on his own this time. Cole glanced at the two-way mirror across the room, shocked at his own disheveled reflection, his hair standing on end from shoving his fingers through it. He was keenly aware that Pearson stood behind it, watching for any guilty body language that might give him away.

“Let’s go through this one more time,” Jones said as he took a seat across from him at the metal table. Cole swallowed down his rage, his fingers trembling on his thighs.

“My story isn’t going to change,” Cole responded through gritted teeth. “Like I told you already, I showed up for work at Bobby’s place yesterday morning. I’d already finished the paint job, so I needed to replace the gutters. I retrieved the ladder from where it lay on the side of the garage and got to work. Bobby waved to me as he got in his car and left for the tackle shop same as the other days. I worked all morning, stopped for lunch around twelve, then got the rest of the job done that afternoon. End of story.”

“Did you notice the padlock in place on the garage door?”

He shrugged. “Vaguely. I passed by it dozens of times every day and didn’t see anything out of place.”

“And Bobby had made you aware that he liked to rebuild classic cars and kept random parts inside that garage?”

He recalled the brief discussion a couple of weeks back. “Not in those exact words, but yeah. Only once at his tackle shop when we first discussed me taking the job.”

Sheriff Jones folded his arms and leaned back on the chair, a smug look on his face. “And that was why you took the job in the first place, right? To have access to those parts?”

“No way!” he barked out, then tempered his voice. “I was just happy to have some work thrown my way. Want to keep earning a living. *Legally*.”

Sheriff Jones leaned forward as if he had something on him. “Yet you’re doing the job for Bobby under the table without a proper license.”

Fuck. Though the license was the least of his worries. “I applied for a license; just waiting for it to come through. Surely, you can look that information up.”

“Course. Pulled your other records too.” Cole’s stomach tightened. Of course they did. He cringed at what they’d found. His past was not the worst, but it was not exactly pretty either.

Jones opened the manila folder he had placed in front of him when he'd walked into the room. "You have an assault charge in your juvenile record."

Cole nodded. "Kid was making fun of my momma leaving. Said she loved drugs more than me. And yeah, I used my fists. I was an angry kid. My mother left; then she OD'd on heroin."

Pain sliced through his chest. Had it not been for his grandfather, he would've been in the system, same as Tanner. The only solace he found during that time was his friend Jeremy, until Jeremy transferred to another school. Another reason why he could relate to Tom and Charlie.

He glanced at Sheriff Jones, wondering if his predecessor had known how Tom and Charlie felt about each other back then. If he would've stopped the men being harassed if it ever turned physical. Cole's best guess was that it would have if they'd stayed any longer.

The sheriff's fingers slid to a line in the middle of the paper. "You went to prison for receiving stolen property, altering VIN numbers, and—"

"I never altered anything." Did it really matter if he argued the point? Still, he felt compelled to set that part of the record straight. "Yes, I worked a couple days a week in that auto shop and heard the parts being brought through were hot. I turned a blind eye. I fully admit I didn't give a shit about a lot of stuff, and I paid dearly for it."

The owner of the chop shop got the worst of the charges. He didn't know about the other guys. Didn't want to know. He vowed not to look any of them up once he got out. There was never any real bond between them anyway.

When Sheriff Jones stared him down, Cole knew he was going in for the kill.

"Isn't it also true that you worked construction at a private home around the same period of time"—Cole clutched at the dog tags around his neck; he couldn't help himself. He'd snatched them from the dresser that morning because he knew he'd need them today—"and the family's car was stolen for parts that were scrubbed clean through Fischer's Garage?"

He shut his eyes and tried breathing soundly through his nose. "I never... never would've set someone up like that. One of the guys from the shop might've overheard me talking about how rich the family was, with their pool and their three-car garage. I may have looked the other way, but I wasn't that invested. I was just trying to get a paycheck and do my own thing."

Fuck, the sheriff really did his homework. Another of his regrets. When you added them all up, it didn't look so good. No wonder the judge threw the

book at him.

He could still see the deep disappointment on his grandfather's face as he was taken away in handcuffs.

Then the image morphed to Tanner's face from that morning, and fuck, he felt ill. He swallowed the warm bile crawling up his throat.

"Why don't you just admit it?" Jones leaned over the table to get in his face. "Isn't this the same exact situation?"

Cole stood his ground. He was not that person anymore. "I'm not interested in making my money illegally. Wasn't interested back then either—just indifferent. I was wrong for looking the other way, and I did my time for it."

Jones moved around the table and put his finger in his face. He could smell the sour coffee on his breath. "Admit it. You thought you could take those parts from Bobby's garage and sell them to a chop shop."

"No fucking way," Cole replied, looking him directly in the eye. "Besides, from what I remember, weren't many clients for vintage parts. S'why they always looked for newer model SUVs and sedans. Unless shit has changed. Wouldn't know, though. Like I said, not how I want to earn money."

Jones stepped back with that information, rubbing his hand over his face, seeming to mull it over. He looked back at the two-way mirror as if to communicate something or other.

Cole couldn't help feeling hopeless at this point. They'd just keep hammering him until he broke and gave them what they wanted. He knew how this worked.

Jones spun toward him again. "If it's not true, why not let us search your property?"

"Because I know my rights," Cole bit out. His muscles hurt from clenching them so tightly. "If you had probable cause, you would get a warrant."

Again, Jones looked back through the mirror. Cole knew the law. Hell, they taught classes on prisoners' rights back in the pen. He straightened his back with renewed determination.

"Am I being charged with a crime?" he asked for the hundredth time. "If not, then I should be allowed to leave. I could go home and—"

"Home?" Jones smirked. "Is that what you call this arrangement you have with Mr. Rowe?"

“Fuck you.” How dare he cheapen what he shared with Tanner?

There was a sudden knock on the door, and the sheriff stepped halfway out to speak to Pearson.

“Got another lead on the missing parts,” he heard Pearson say, and Cole’s heart jumped to his throat.

Jones nodded and then clenched his jaw as he held the door open. “You’re free to go for now. But we’ll be in touch.”

Cole held in his gasp and stood up quickly so they wouldn’t change their minds. He limped through the door, his knee aching from sitting for so long.

He made his way to the exit, tired and emotional—so many things were running through his brain. They had gotten into his head. Showed him he was a good-for-nothing... How could Tanner not feel the same?

Shoulders slumped in defeat, he pushed through the door into the small lobby and saw Tanner waiting for him on a plastic chair, his clothes wrinkled, bags beneath his eyes.

He blinked rapidly, as if it were all an illusion.

“You...you’re here,” he said through trembling lips. Not wanting to hope it was possible.

“Of course I am,” Tanner replied, standing up and patting imaginary dirt from his knees. “Been waiting all afternoon.”

His breath whooshed straight out of him, and the room tilted from dizziness. “Fuck, Tan, I didn’t think—”

“Let’s get out of here,” Tanner said in a hushed voice as he reached for his arm. “Then we can talk.”

Once they got in the truck and Tanner pulled out of the lot, he glanced toward Cole. “You okay?”

“I am now,” he admitted, able to breathe with more distance between them and the police station. Having Tanner show up for him... He thought he might break down in tears. He swallowed thickly. “They were just trying to wear me down. I did not steal those parts.”

“I know you didn’t,” Tanner said in a sturdy voice, and it was like music to his ears.

“You do?” he asked just to be sure he wasn’t dreaming it.

“Yeah, I do. I trust you, Cole. And the man you are.”

Tanner reached for his hand, and he gave it willingly, knotting their fingers together. He lifted their hands to his lips and kissed Cole's knuckles.

"But why not let them search the property? Wouldn't that have helped—"

"Because I know my rights, and you can't let them walk all over you. I didn't want your house turned upside down by a bunch of—" His shoulders sagged.

"*Our* house," Tanner said in an even tone. "And I'd be okay with that if it meant they'd leave you alone."

"They would've still questioned me, Tan. They had something to prove," he said as he looked at the passing landscape through town, weariness settling inside his bones. "Besides, they'll be back if they got something, you can be sure of it."

Once home, Cole hobbled up the stairs to the shower. Tanner took his time washing Cole's hair and skin, somehow knowing he needed to get all the grime of the police station off him. Afterward they ate a simple dinner, then went to bed, holding each other all night.

They were woken in the morning by a few hard knocks at the door.

Cole stiffened. Fuck, they must've gotten a warrant after all.

Tanner reached for his face. "Whatever happens, we'll fight it together."

"No, Tan. I don't want to drag you into this—"

"You're my family. Of course I'm going to stand by you."

"Fuck, but I love you." He felt the stinging of tears as he brushed their mouths together for a simple but powerful kiss.

They quickly slid into jeans and shirts, then headed downstairs together, hand in hand.

But it wasn't the sheriff at the door; it was Bobby.

"C'mon in and get some coffee," Tanner said as he swung open the door.

They sat at the table while Tanner brewed a large pot at the counter.

"Bobby, listen, I never—"

"I believe you, and I'm sorry. I never told them that I thought it was you —" He took a deep breath. "They asked questions and put two and two together themselves."

Cole wasn't surprised in the least. So he just nodded and let Bobby finish.

“Reason I have that lock on the garage in the first place is because stuff’s been stolen before,” he said, and Cole’s eyebrows knit together. “I reminded the sheriff of that.”

“Fuck,” Tanner said. “So why put Cole through all that?”

“I’m a felon,” Cole said as he jumped up to grab three coffee mugs. “They needed to send me a message. S’okay. Just how it is.”

They stayed put, shooting the breeze about the beer, the garden, and the tackle shop over mugs of coffee, and Bobby asked to see the work on the inside of the barn.

Afterward they walked him to his car, feeling like they had made a new friend.

“I hope you return and finish the job,” Bobby said. “I still have a shed that needs to be built.”

Cole shook his hand in a firm grip, a lump forming in his throat. “I’d like that.”

TANNER

What happened with Sheriff Jones was always in the back of their minds. It had only been a couple of days, but Tanner could definitely feel the edge of melancholy that clung to Cole. He hated the fact that he had in some way contributed to how Cole likely felt about himself, because for the briefest of moments, Tanner had doubted him. It had been fleeting but also something Tanner couldn't help but regret. He knew Cole better than that.

"Smells good in here," Cole said as he stepped into the kitchen. He had gotten home from Bobby's a little while before.

"I made roast and potatoes," Tanner replied.

"My favorite."

"I know," Tanner told him, earning himself a sexy half grin.

"I'm off tomorrow. I'd like to take you out to dinner this time, if you don't have plans."

"So many plans. I'll have to check my schedule."

Cole chuckled, walked over, and pressed a kiss to Tanner's lips before they began making their plates to eat.

They chatted while they shared dinner. Tanner told him about some of the excuses he'd received for incomplete assignments in the past, making Cole laugh. Cole shared that a neighbor of Bobby's asked him about rebuilding a porch.

Like always, he heard the pride in Cole's voice at having more work. It radiated off him and straight to Tanner.

It was an hour or so later, as they sat on the porch swing with a beer, that Tanner's cell rang. His stomach twisted when he saw Bobby's name on the screen, afraid there was another problem, that something had gone wrong, and that Cole would somehow get the short end of the stick.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Tanner. This is Bobby. This is the only way I have of getting in touch with Cole. Do you mind if I chat with him for a minute?”

The tightness in Tanner’s gut grew. “No problem. Hold on a second.” He handed the phone to Cole. “It’s Bobby.”

It was Cole’s turn to frown before he took the phone from Tanner. “Hello.”

Tanner watched, only able to hear Cole’s side of the conversation.

“Wow... I... It feels good, ya know? I always knew the truth, but it just... just feels good.”

The moment Cole hung up, his brown eyes pinned Tanner, wide and bright, with a vibrant happiness in them that nuzzled into Tanner’s chest.

“What is it?”

“They found out who robbed Bobby. They had all the stolen property along with other items they’re trying to sell.”

“Hell yes!” Tanner pulled Cole into a hug, felt Cole relax against him in relief.

“I know you believed me...and that Bobby did too, but I feel vindicated now. I knew I didn’t do it, but I have to admit, it feels damn good for everyone else to know it too.”

“Of course it does,” Tanner replied. “It would for anyone.”

When Cole leaned in and kissed him, Tanner savored the taste of beer mixed with Cole. Christ, he loved kissing the man, loved the scratch of his beard and the heady scent of him.

“What are we going to do to celebrate?” Tanner asked when Cole pulled away.

“We haven’t read a journal entry in a while. I’m getting anxious to see what happened. They’re leaving, and Jesus, do I need for them to have ridden off into the sunset together.”

Tanner’s heart thudded, sped away from him. “Yeah,” he replied. “Yeah, I need it too.”

They made their way upstairs together, stripped down to their boxers, and climbed into bed. Tanner leaned over and plucked the journal from its place beside the bed. He opened it, turned to the page they’d marked, where they’d left off before. Tanner didn’t know why, but his fingers shook as he turned it.

Large, messy, frazzled writing took the place of Tom's usual neat scrawl.

Tanner's stomach dropped at the sight, the urge to close the journal burning at his fingertips, his gut cramping in an unfamiliar way.

"Tan..." Cole whispered as though he felt the urgency and the dread that clung to Tanner the way he did.

He couldn't reply, didn't; instead, Tanner started to read.

OH GOD. I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON, WHAT'S HAPPENING. CHARLIE AND I met in the barn like we planned. We were leaving when a group of about six men in masks came out of the woods...chased us back. Oh God, we're in here now. They've locked us in. We're locked in, and we don't know what to do!

They're yelling, calling us names—sinners, deviants, sodomites. Christ, I'm so scared. Charlie says it'll be okay, but I hear it in his voice. He's scared too. If anything happens to us...if anyone finds this journal...it was worth it. Charlie will always be worth it, and I know he feels the same.

TANNER GASPED, UNABLE TO BREATHE.

It was as if he was frozen, lost in this moment in time. Cole pulled the journal from his hand, flipped the page, but Tanner knew, he fucking knew that the rest would be blank.

"That's it," Cole whispered. "It's the last entry."

It was worth it. Charlie will always be worth it, and I know he feels the same.

Tears sprung to Tanner's eyes. When he looked over, he saw Cole with his eyes closed, a lone tear trickling down his face.

"I don't understand," Tanner said, even though he knew the answer. "Why did they stop them? Why didn't they just let them go?"

"Hate." Cole's voice was broken, distant.

Tanner couldn't think, didn't want to. It was the first time he wished like hell he'd never read the journal, that he hadn't been given a glimpse into Tom and Charlie's love story, because it hurt too damn much. "I can't," he replied in a hushed voice. "I can't think about it... I don't want to know... I just..."

Tanner didn't finish, and Cole didn't need him to. Cole's arms went around him, and they fell back to the mattress together, clingy, clawing,

wrapping themselves up in each other as though they could crawl inside each other's skin.

"More," Tanner begged. He needed to be bound to someone, connected, tethered to another soul instead of feeling like he was floating away. Fused in ways Tom and Charlie had been, in ways he hoped Charlie and Tom still were, pleading for a miracle they may never have answered.

Maybe the fire was a diversion so they could get out. So they could run.

"What do you need?" Cole asked, lips against Tanner's skin.

"You."

He was lost in the moment, in sensation. It was as if his boxers had just melted away and they were laid bare with one another, their sweaty bodies clinging, nails digging into skin, groins rutting against one another, mouths taking each other in.

"More," he begged again. He didn't know why he needed Cole so close, like he was afraid if he let go, Cole would drift away, that they'd be torn apart. That they'd lose each other forever.

"I know...I feel it too. Jesus, I've never needed a damn thing like I need you right now," Cole replied huskily.

Tanner spread his legs. He tensed when Cole's finger traced his hole, but it was only a second before it was replaced with desire.

"Can I?"

"Yes." Tanner writhed beneath him. "God, yes."

Cole fumbled with the lube, and then he was there again, at Tanner's rim, a cold, wet finger pushing inside. It was different than he'd thought, a strange sensation to have someone inside him for the first time. But as Cole's finger slid in and pulled out, loosened him, found that spot inside Tanner that Cole had taught him about, his body began to splinter apart. It was everything and not enough, so for the third time that night, Tanner begged for more. "Please, Cole. Need to feel you...all of you."

"Oh God," Cole groaned. "I need that too."

He grabbed a condom from the drawer, rolled it down his swollen shaft, and knelt between Tanner's legs. He was so damn beautiful, he stole Tanner's breath.

He worked Tanner's hole again—one finger, then two, stretching, fucking, loving. When Tanner thought he would lose his mind if Cole didn't push inside him, Cole read him, lubed his cock, and said, "I don't know what I did

to deserve you, but I'll spend every day of my life trying to be worthy of you."

But he was, he so fucking was. "You are, baby," Tanner whispered. "Everything feels right with you."

And then Cole was there, pushing inside. It burned, stretched. His hands fisted the sheet at the pressure of Cole's cock filling him.

"Fuck...feels so goddamned good inside you."

"Yes," Tanner replied, arching toward him. "Feels right...familiar." He knew that didn't make sense at all; how could it? But he couldn't help the way he felt.

They made love slowly, sweat-slicked skin against sweat-slicked skin. Soon, it was perspiration mixed with tears, longing mixed with fulfillment, but he didn't understand how and why he could feel some of those things. All he knew was that he did, and it was overwhelming.

His balls tightened, and Cole tensed above him. Tanner pushed a hand between them, wrapped it around his cock and stroked, right before Cole's mouth came down on his. He tasted salt when they kissed—sweat or tears or a mixture of both, he didn't know, didn't care, he just needed everything of Cole's he could have, wanted them to be a part of one another in every way they could.

When Cole thrust deeper, quicker, Tanner's balls tightened further. He let loose, cried out into Cole's mouth as his orgasm washed over him, washed over *them*, binding them together in yet another way.

Cole was right behind him, swallowing Tanner's moans, feeding Tanner his own as he shuddered, his dick spasming inside Tanner.

He felt like he was lucid-dreaming, awake yet asleep. For a moment Cole's weight was gone, so Tanner reached for him, and then Cole was back, pulling Tanner into his arms, holding him tightly. "That didn't...didn't feel like the first time," Tanner admitted even though he knew it sounded crazy.

"No," Cole whispered. "I felt it too." That was the last thing Tanner remembered before his world went black.

COLE

“They barred the door from the outside,” I yelled to Tom, who was near the corner of the room, fiddling with a loose floorboard. “We can’t escape. Not sure what the hell they’re thinking.”

The chanting was louder now, surrounding the barn on all sides. There were more men. Angry men shouting. Sinners. Sodomites. Deviants. Queers.

Tom joined me near Mirabelle’s stall. She was softly whinnying, pushing against my hand as I tried to soothe her. Her eyes were as frightened as Tom’s, and I could barely contain the panic welling inside me. I needed to be strong for them while I came up with a plan.

But I was out of ideas. We’d fled to the barn so we wouldn’t get beaten to a pulp. But now that they’d locked us inside, I braced myself for what that meant. Maybe they were waiting for reinforcements. More men to throw kicks and punches. Maybe they intended to teach us a lesson, make our faces unrecognizable. If it came down to that, I’d plead for them to leave Tom alone and hurt me instead.

My heartbeat thundered in my ears as I looked around at the two other stalls, hay bales, and grain troughs. I counted four windows. Two lower and two higher on each side. Escaping through any of them meant broken bones either from a fall or fists.

I glanced in the direction of the house. Tom’s mom would come out any minute now and chase them all away. This was private property after all. Or maybe someone would send for the sheriff. He wouldn’t allow this to happen, would he?

I reached for Tom and held him close as he trembled like a leaf. “Maybe they just mean to scare us. We’ll probably still have time to catch our train. We’ll just wait them out.”

The lie tumbled off my tongue easily. I wanted so badly to protect him.

Tom swiped at his cheek and broke away, heading up the ladder to the loft. To our sacred place that now felt invaded.

"There's more of them now, Charlie," he said in a shaky voice as he stood on his tiptoes to glance out the window beside the loft.

"You recognize any of 'em?" I asked, stroking Mirabelle one last time before heading up the ladder to join him.

"Maybe if their faces weren't covered."

I placed my hand on Tom's shoulder to try and soothe him as much as myself as he leaned closer to the window.

"Some are carrying torches."

"Torches?" I asked in a wobbly voice as my stomach bottomed out. The shouts became louder from every direction, and Mirabelle's neighing grew more pronounced.

"Think you're going to leave this town and spread your sickness elsewhere?" one of them hollered. When I glanced past Tom's shoulder, the man had taken the torch to the bags we'd dropped when we ran. No doubt they'd found our train tickets and knew of our plans.

"Fuck," Tom whispered around a parched throat.

"Someone needs to teach these sodomites a lesson!" someone else bellowed.

"That's right," another joined in, and then it sounded like the mob had closed ranks as they banged on the walls of the barn. My teeth clattered together as my pulse skittered in my veins.

There was a loud thump from the roof of the barn as if something had been lobbed up there. "Let's make these deviants pay for spreading sin."

I held my breath, but only a minute later I realized a torch had been thrown as smoke began to waft from the ceiling. More thumping on the roof. More torches being lobbed above our heads in the loft.

"The barn is on fire!" Tom voiced out loud what I was terrified to utter. He turned toward me, and I saw his horrified expression right before he threw his arms around my waist and buried his head in my shoulder.

"Someone's gonna see the flames and call the fire department," I said with as much confidence as I could muster as I stroked his hair. Tom only clutched me harder.

Mirabelle whinnied louder, stomping her feet as the smoke in the barn

grew thicker. My eyes stung, my throat felt raw and parched as I hacked against my arm. I tugged off my shirt and put it against my nose before handing the other end to Tom.

The chanting outside grew louder as our eyes watered and the smoke choked our lungs.

“Maybe we can break the window and crawl out of here,” I suggested in a muffled voice as I motioned toward the lower window next to the stall.

“They’ll catch us right quick and beat us to a pulp,” Tom replied with red eyes.

“But at least we’ll still be alive.”

“Will we?” Tom said as his resistance fell away, acceptance settling in his gaze. I turned away because I didn’t want to believe it even though I knew he was right. They meant to kill us, not teach us a lesson.

“Even if by some miracle we survive,” he said, “I’d never be able to see you or touch you again. They’d make sure of it.”

I sank down in the hay as realization set in, letting the truth wash over me in wave after terrifying wave. I reached for Tom and pulled him into my arms.

Resigned to our shared fate, we lay down in the loft and faced each other.

“If I’m going to die, I’m glad it’s with you by my side,” I said, stroking Tom’s hair as he snuffled into my shoulder, his entire body trembling.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” Tom added through tears that came as a steady stream down his cheeks. I pulled the cloth away, and our lips met for as long as they could before the smoke made us gag.

“Charlie, I’m scared,” Tom whimpered, grabbing me and winding our limbs together.

“Shhhh.” I pulled him as close to me as humanly possible. “I love you with all my heart, Tom. In life and in death.”

Tom sobbed into my throat and then began muttering something nonsensically against the cloth.

“Are you praying?” I whispered.

He nodded. “Praying that our souls will be united for all of eternity.”

I couldn’t hold back my tears any longer. I cried then for Tom and for me. That with all the profound love we had to give, we still couldn’t fulfill our dreams of a life together. At least not in this world. “I wish that too, Tom. With everything I have left.”

It was becoming impossible to keep our eyes open as the barn filled with black smoke. I no longer heard Mirabelle's neighs, which told me that her lungs had inhaled too much and she had passed out. Hopefully the same would happen to us before any flames consumed our bodies.

"Hold me tighter, Charlie," Tom mumbled.

And in the quiet of dawn, I could feel him drifting away from me, his body becoming limp, his head drooping to the side.

I wrapped my arms as firmly as I could around him even though everything was beginning to blur, the stillness almost deafening now. "Don't you worry. I'll hold you forever."

As the smoke filled my lungs and I floated away, I could've sworn I heard the swan's song, calling to her fated mate across the water.

COLE BOLTED STRAIGHT UP IN BED. THROUGH THE BILLOWING DRAPES HE could see the sky beginning to lighten, could feel the wind like a soft caress on his overheated skin. His entire body trembled from the dream he'd just had. He felt like he couldn't even breathe, like smoke had filled his own lungs.

He clutched his throat, the dream having felt so real. He was fully convinced that he had witnessed the last moments of Tom's and Charlie's lives. They hadn't escaped this town; they had become the very foundation of that barn.

Holy fuck. He needed to tell Tanner. He reached over to shake him awake, but Tanner was having a dream of his own. He was clutching the pillow and thrashing.

"Charlie," he mumbled in his sleep.

Cole gasped, then confusion set in. Why was he calling out for Charlie?

"Tan, wake up." Cole tapped his arm, trying not to startle him. "Tan, it's okay. You're having a dream."

Suddenly Tanner's eyes sprang wide open with fear. His hands clenched his throat as he struggled to speak.

"Cole?" he rasped as he looked around the room to get his bearings. "Cole, I saw it. I saw what happened to them. They were—"

"Murdered," Cole supplied, and Tanner's eyebrows shot to his hairline.

"How did you...?" he sputtered.

“I think I might’ve had the same dream.” He shook his head. It didn’t make a bit of sense. “Though I’m not sure how that’s possible...”

He lay back down and stared at the ceiling, sucking in breath after breath. “Th...they were locked inside the barn, the men were on the outside.”

Tanner nodded. “They were shouting and had torches.”

When Tanner shivered, Cole turned and wrapped an arm around him, kissed his temple.

“Unless it wasn’t real,” Cole said against his throat, not sure if his brain was playing tricks on him. But it had felt like more than that, more than a dream even. Almost like a memory...like *déjà vu*.

“No,” Tanner said in a thick voice, his hand stroking the back of Cole’s head. “It happened. I know it did. I can feel it right here.”

He clutched his chest, and Cole squeezed his eyes shut. “Yeah, me too.”

They grew silent, breathing in and out, their arms wrapped around each other.

Cole was unable to shake the grief and anguish and absolute horror.

“I need to go to the barn,” Tanner said, then drew back the covers. “I need to go right now.”

Cole rolled off the bed. “I’ll come with you.”

They slipped into their jeans, and Tanner wrapped a blanket around his shoulders as he padded down the stairs and out to the porch. The moon began to fade in the sky, making the dawn hour feel even more surreal.

When they opened the barn door, it smelled of hops and barley, not ash and smoke. Cole breathed a sigh of relief.

He went to flick on the light, but Tanner grabbed his shoulder. “Don’t.”

He strode to the loft and climbed up the ladder. Cole followed close behind, compelled to do the same.

Tanner glanced out the large window as if imagining what Tom and Charlie had seen that night. He turned and held Cole close for a long moment before they lay down in the beanbag chair, draped the blanket atop them, and stared at the ceiling.

“Fuck. They must’ve been terrified,” Tanner whispered.

“Yeah,” Cole said, barely able to get any words out himself. “Goddamn it. I’m so glad they had each other.”

When a tear leaked from the corner of Tanner's eyes, Cole swiped it away with his thumb. Tanner grasped his hand and kissed his knuckles. "I'm glad I have *you*."

Cole's eyes softened. "You can have me for as long as you want me."

"Maybe I want you for always," Tanner murmured as Cole joined their lips together, their hearts beating in unison, their arms entwined.

They kissed and touched and held on to each other for dear life it seemed, with Tom and Charlie on their minds. Cole wished it could've been different for two boys in love some seventy years ago. It was all he could do to keep the devastation and anger he felt at bay. He vowed right then and there to somehow keep their memory alive—at least in his love for Tanner every single day.

They stayed in the loft, watching the world wake up, the sky speckled in watercolors, reliving Tom and Charlie's final moments, until Tanner's eyes shut on a yawn and Cole fell into a dreamless sleep, curled around the man he prayed he'd never have to be without.

TANNER

Tanner couldn't stop thinking about the dream. It was there, in the back of his mind all the time.

Tom and Charlie had died.

They'd been murdered for being in love.

He and Cole had dreamed about it the same night.

Tanner had dreamed it as if he *was* Tom. It sat in his chest, like a memory he couldn't possibly have.

Obviously, that didn't make any sense. It couldn't. But it had felt so real, been so vivid, his lungs burned, felt filled with smoke just thinking about it.

"You reading it again?" Cole asked from the doorway to his office.

"Yeah," Tanner looked at the computer screen as Cole walked over and stood behind him.

Tom Crawford, son of Lily and Bill Crawford, who had been increasingly troubled in recent months, was seen setting a fire in his parents' barn, possibly as a diversion before he left town with local Charlie Meyers, son of Andrew Meyers. It is believed that Tom was resentful for having to stay on at Crawford Farm to help his family after his father's stroke, and was likely persuaded by Charlie, whose family had had their fair share of trouble in Red Bluff.

"I don't know what to do," Lily Crawford admitted. "I just don't understand any of this. But that Charlie has always been trouble. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Sheriff Evans made an announcement that the town of Red Bluff was behind the Crawford family and would help in any way they can. "These two men...they did a horrible thing, hurting their families the way they did. Wherever they are, I hope they realize they were wrong and repent."

Donations for the Crawford family can be made to...

“His wording...did you catch that?” Tanner asked. “‘I hope they realize they were wrong and repent.’ He’s talking about being gay.”

A boulder filled his gut, sat heavy within him. They’d made the choice to die together, to hold each other as they went. He couldn’t get that thought out of his head.

“I know... I read it that way too. I wish there was more about them.”

Over the past few days since their dream, he and Cole had both done research, hoping that the dream had been wrong, that they’d find something else on Tom and Charlie, but they never had. Hell, they couldn’t even find anything on Paige because Tom had never said her last name.

“I can’t explain it... I feel this emptiness in my chest...like there’s this gaping wound there.”

Tanner rubbed over his heart. “I feel it too. It’s wrong. I can’t help wondering how many other people things like this have happened to. And who were the men? Family of people we see in town every day? And the sheriff... Something doesn’t feel right there.”

“No.” Cole shook his head. “It doesn’t.”

They were both quiet for a moment, Cole’s hands on Tanner’s shoulders. “Come on. Why don’t we go downstairs and have a mug of your beer? It’s incredible how good it turned out. You might be okay at this beer thing.” He said the last part playfully, and Tanner smiled. His beer had finished the day before, and he already couldn’t wait to make more. But... “Why don’t we go out? Have a drink in town? See if any interesting conversations come up.”

Cole grinned. “Yeah, I think that’s a good idea.”

They called Jordy, who was more than willing to meet them at the bar. He was younger than Cole and Tanner—early twenties—but he was a smart kid, who listened. Maybe he knew something.

The three of them shared a beer at a booth toward the back. It was a quiet night, seeing as it was a weekday. They’d just finished when a shadow crossed the table—Bobby.

“Looks like I found the place to be.”

Jordy made room for him, and Bobby sat down with them. They spoke about work around town, Cole easing into a discussion about the barn.

“It’s so strange... I looked it up, and it said the boy who lived there with his parents set the fire and ran. Wonder why he would do a thing like that,”

Tanner said.

“I don’t believe that for a second.” Jordy crossed his arms, and Tanner’s pulse jumped. “When my grandma was alive, she said there was always something weird with the Crawfords after that. Tom’s mom became somewhat of a hermit.”

“Maybe because her son set her barn on fire and ran away?” Bobby asked.

Jordy shrugged. “Maybe, but Grandma didn’t believe it. I guess one of the boys, Tom, had a good friend named Paige. She left town right after and never came back. Tom’s father died, and then Tom’s mom not long afterward.”

“Did she ever say anything about her son? I mean, did your grandma say?” Cole asked.

Jordy shook his head. “Some bullshit answer like...what her son had done was wrong, and that she hoped wherever he was, he found peace for what he’d done. That’s all she’d say about it. Well, that, and she praised the sheriff. Guess he helped their family out a lot after Tom left.”

To keep her quiet? Tanner wondered. Because they’d killed her son and she had needed them? What the hell kind of mother would do that? Would let her son’s murderer go free, and all because he was in love with another man. Tanner had to bite his tongue so he didn’t vomit.

“It was the talk of the town when my family moved to Red Bluff,” Bobby added. “Damn shame—if those boys wanted to run away together, couldn’t they have done it without hurtin’ their family’s livelihood?”

Tanner opened his mouth to reply, but Jordy beat him to it. “Really, we have no proof that’s what happened. My dad said there were rumors they were lovers...so if they did set that fire, maybe they had a good reason to. Maybe it was the only way they could get away from the hate and bigotry of the time.”

It was on the tip of Tanner’s tongue to tell them that wasn’t what happened, that they’d been murdered, killed by hate, but what was his proof? A random journal and a dream.

When he felt Cole’s hand squeeze his thigh, he realized Cole felt the same. “It’s getting late. We should probably be going,” Cole said. Tanner agreed. He wasn’t ready to do this, so they left, went home and held each other, wishing Tom and Charlie could have done the same.

TANNER

Tanner frowned at the sound of a car pulling down the driveway. He felt Cole stiffen beside him on the porch swing. It was a few days after their night at the bar, and neither of them had left the house since. It was as if they needed to come to terms with what they knew and figure out where to go from there.

He held Cole's hand in support, hoping it wasn't the sheriff giving them trouble again, but then a red sedan came into view. They both stood as the car parked and an older woman with graying hair got out. She didn't look at them but at the barn. She stared at it, and her hand went to her mouth, as if she was in shock.

"Let's go see who she is." Cole was already moving as he spoke, and Tanner was right behind him.

She startled as they approached, then wiped her eyes. "Forgive me. I know this has to be strange...someone pulling up to your house and crying while they look at your barn. She's a real beauty. You did a wonderful job with it."

There was a tightness in Tanner's chest, but he didn't quite know why. "Thank you. That was all Cole, though. Can I ask how you're familiar with it?"

She got a wistful look on her face, a sad kind of smile that Tanner felt in his chest. "I grew up with stories about this barn...this house. My mom used to drive us to Red Bluff a couple of times a year, and she'd always tell us stories about her childhood best friend who'd lived here."

Tanner's knees went weak. He almost collapsed and probably would have if Cole didn't reach out for him, steady him. Her mom's childhood best friend...

This woman was Paige's daughter.

“Paige?” Cole asked, and the woman’s eyes went wide, her hand visibly tightening on her cane.

“How...how did you know?” Her voice quavered.

Tanner began to tremble. He couldn’t believe what was happening. His eyes snagged on Cole, asking a silent question. Cole understood, though; of course he would. “I’m Tanner, and this is...this is my partner, Cole. We found a journal hidden in the barn from 1948, written by a man named—”

“Tom,” she cut him off. “My mom told me he kept a journal. She always wondered what happened to it...and I might be the only woman you’ll ever meet in your life named Tommi. Tommi Charlotte Waters.”

The moment she said her last name, it slammed into Tanner. Waters... Paige had fallen for a boy named Isaac Waters. How could he have forgotten that?

“She married him?” Cole asked.

“The journal mentioned him?” Tommi questioned, and Cole nodded.

“Would you like to go inside? We can...we can show you the journal, if you’d like. I’d also be interested in asking you a few questions, if you feel comfortable.”

Tommi agreed, and the three of them went inside. Nerves skittered down Tanner’s spine. It felt unreal, impossible, yet Tommi was there. Paige’s child. Paige’s child had come and found them.

He made three drinks as Cole went upstairs to get the journal. It was only a couple of minutes later that the three of them sat in the living room together.

Cole attempted to hand her the journal, but Tommi shook her head. “I don’t need to read it. That wouldn’t feel right—not from me. I already know Tom and Charlie’s story anyway.”

What story would that be? Was there any way she could know the truth of what happened that night?

“Will you share it with us?” Tanner asked. When Tommi didn’t reply right away, he added, “Please...we need to know what happened to them. The journal ends when they’re trying to run, but then they get chased to the barn and locked in.”

Tommi closed her eyes, took a couple of deep breaths as they waited. “It’s strange that I’m so tied to their story. I never met Tom or Charlie, but I feel like I know them, like they’re a part of me. My mom...” She paused, wiped the tears from her eyes. “She loved him, did you know? I don’t know if Tom

said that in the journal. She was in love with him. She always said Charlie was the love of Tom's life, but that Tom was the love of hers."

Tanner's gut clenched at that. Christ, he hadn't known. Paige had been so helpful to them. She'd supported them, covered for them, even when she loved Tom?

"Your father?" Cole asked.

"She loved Dad. I'll never doubt that. I believe that you can have two great loves of your life, and she had hers. And she was happy, but Tom always owned a piece of her heart. She said she would have done anything for him, she tried too, until my dad took her away for her own safety."

"Her own safety?" Tanner queried. "What happened?"

"She told the truth...or tried to. It nearly got her the same fate as Tom and Charlie. She wouldn't have cared, though. She would have done anything for those boys, but she had my dad...and despite not being married, she was already pregnant with me. That was what saved her—me."

Tanner gasped, couldn't get enough air. He felt Cole stiffen beside him, but then he reached over and grabbed Tanner's hand. Tommi knew the truth. She knew they'd been murdered.

"They killed them, didn't they?" Cole's voice shook as he spoke.

Tommi looked them in the eyes, wrinkles forming around hers. "They did. They burned those boys alive. It was Mom who got the fire department out here. She was screaming, crying about Tom and Charlie. They called her crazy, said she'd lost her mind, was so angry that the boy she loved was a deviant and had run away with another man. And people believed them... thought she'd lost her mind, threatened to lock her up. I know it sounds crazy, unlikely, but it was the sheriff himself—called her in, told her he knew she was pregnant, made her feel like a deviant herself, being pregnant out of wedlock and all. Tried to make her feel like she was going crazy, distraught over Tom running away.

"She had no evidence of what had happened, and the sheriff had a lot of power. No one wanted to know the truth. Dad was scared for her, for me. He talked her into leaving with him, to make a life together. He told her the best way to honor Tom and Charlie was to do that. She didn't regret it because of me, but she always said that not honoring Tom and Charlie, not bringing their murderers to justice, was the greatest regret of her life. It's why she shared their story...it's why I'm here right now. I've spent a lifetime checking on this house...to see the barn rebuilt... I had to know. I had to come."

Tanner's hold on Cole tightened.

Their dream had been true. They'd—*fuck*—somehow they'd *lived* it, the final night of Tom and Charlie's life. He knew it as clearly as he knew he needed to breathe to stay alive.

They'd been killed, their murder covered up...all because they'd been gay.

"I'm sorry," Tommi said. "I know that's a lot to take in. I have no evidence other than my word—my mom's word. She wrote a letter, asked me to share if anything ever came of Tom and Charlie's death, but it's been so long, too long. Everyone's gone."

They'd gotten to live long, healthy lives, and Tom and Charlie hadn't. Christ, the world was a fucked-up place sometimes.

"I believe you," Tanner said.

"We believe you," Cole added.

They spoke for a little while longer. Tanner and Cole brought her out to the barn, and the three of them cried—for Tom, for Charlie, for Paige.

It was a few minutes later that Tommi's phone rang. "I better get that. My granddaughter is checking on me." Tommi pulled her phone from her purse, spoke, and then hung up. "She's named after my mom, reminds me of her—strong, feisty, honorable. Don't know what I'd do without my Emma."

Tanner's heart stopped. His throat closed up, a spark of pain piercing through his chest. Emma? Tommi's granddaughter's name was Emma and named after Paige?

He opened his mouth to speak but couldn't. He didn't have to, though. Cole did it for him. "Emma? I thought your mom's name was Paige?"

Tommi nodded. "Emma Paige, but she went by Paige. Why?"

She had his wife's name...Tom's best friend had shared his wife's name... the wife who forced him to buy this house, the wife who'd felt a draw to this house, this barn, for no explainable reason. Emma had felt like this place was her destiny—she'd believed in all those things—and now this?

"Nothing," Tanner finally forced himself to say. What could he tell her? None of this made any sense, none of it could be real.

"I should get going. Thank you for your phone number and letting me look around. I'll be in touch about Mom's letter."

Silently, trying to take it all in, they walked Tommi to her car, hugged her,

and watched her drive away.

“Is this real?” Cole asked. “Can all this be real?”

Logic told him it couldn’t be—Emma, the house, Cole, the journal, the dream—their *names*. How had he never thought about the fact that even his and Cole’s names started with the same letters as Tom and Charlie’s? Despite all the coincidences, it couldn’t be real. But then Cole grabbed his hand, and he felt a zip of energy, of electricity, flow from Cole to him. They looked up at the sky as the sun set, at the soft pigments blending together. He thought about the letter he’d written Emma...when he’d asked her for a sign and never gotten one. Tanner knew to the marrow of his bones that he was getting it right then. “Did I ever tell you this was her favorite time of day?” Tanner asked. “Sunset and sunrise. She loved them both. She said the world made the most sense at dusk and dawn. That you could find all the answers there.”

“I...” Cole started but didn’t continue. He didn’t have to, and Tanner still understood.

They stood there together, watching the sun close out the day, and when it slipped behind the horizon for good, he felt her, felt Emma there with them, Paige too.

“Feels real,” Tanner finally replied.

“Yeah, it does.”

COLE

Cole set the canning jars and lids on the counter near the hardware store register so he could go back for a couple more. “I looked up how to do it and read several articles, but I might need some extra guidance.”

Jordy laughed. “You’ll get it right; you’re a quick study. Look at all the different things you’re already good at.”

“Well, now you’re just being nice,” Cole replied with a wink even though he was beginning to consider himself a jack-of-all-trades. But keeping busy made him happy, and thankfully, after building a shed for Bobby, and the porch gig, a couple other offers came up. “Though you probably jinxed me.”

“Mrs. Anderson could probably help you if you get stuck,” he said with a smirk.

Cole’s eyebrows knit together. “Mrs. Ander—”

“Don’t forget a good funnel,” the woman he’d come to know as the town gossip said from behind him, and he stiffened. She was also the person who’d warned Tanner about his record and even said he could potentially be dangerous. He wondered what she’d heard of Tom and Charlie’s story from that fateful night. *Those* were the dangerous men. “What exactly will you be canning?”

He sighed. It would do him no good to hold a grudge. “I’ve probably got another month to go on my garden, but I wanted to get a head start and learn. So I stopped at a roadside stand on Aster and bought some homegrown tomatoes and peppers.”

“Good idea. Plus, you’ve got tons of storage space in the barn,” Jordy added, but it made Cole bristle. He didn’t necessarily want someone like Mrs. Anderson to know his business, no matter how benign it was.

“It’s nice what you did,” she said, looking him in the eyes for the first time. “Restoring that barn. Such a tragedy.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her more. But Jordy cleared his throat to warn him off. He was the only person he'd told the real version to so far. Instead, he thanked her as Jordy rang up her two items.

"In the fall, I can pass on my sauce recipe for those tomatoes," she suggested and then waved as she went out the door.

"Well, she's certainly come around," Cole muttered. Still, it was hard for him to trust easily. Not after everything that'd happened. It'd been like a whirlwind, almost like Tom and Charlie had needed to make sure they knew what happened, and since then it'd calmed down.

Jordy smirked. "How can she not when you look so...domestic."

Cole rolled his eyes, then went back for two more jars and a funnel for Jordy to ring up.

"You heading to the Red Bluff carnival this weekend?" Jordy asked. There were signs posted everywhere in town for the annual event that apparently took place near the lake. "They have good food trucks and decent live music."

"Maybe tomorrow night?" Cole replied because he and Tanner discussed attending as a way of getting out and meeting more townspeople. It felt good settling into their lives.

"Text me and I'll meet you guys," Jordy said as he bagged his items, and Cole nodded.

Cole glanced over his shoulder to be sure he wasn't in hearing range of any other customers in the store. "Hey, do me a favor?"

"Of course," Jordy replied, briefly glancing toward the street. Cole considered him a friend, and he knew he'd keep his confidence as he dug in his pocket and pulled out the plain metal dog tags he'd ordered online. They were cheap but would do the trick for what he had in mind.

"Can you engrave something on these?" he asked. He knew the hardware store had one of those machines to make spare keys and another beside it to etch owners' information on silver discs that hung from dog collars, so he figured this would work as well.

"I sure can," he replied, sliding the rectangular metal pieces toward him.

"Cool. Can you make one for Tom, the other for Charlie, and stamp the year of 1948 on them?"

Jordy's expression turned to one of sadness. "Great way to honor them."

“They deserve it,” Cole said as he inspected the first tag he’d inscribed. “Wish it could be a bigger tribute, but this is all I’ve got for now.”

When he left the store, he spotted the sheriff’s car across the street. This time when the sheriff tipped his hat in his direction, he offered a ghost of a genuine smile. If that was his idea of an apology, he’d accept it for now. But he’d never let his guard down where that man was concerned. He figured it would be the same in any town he decided to lay down roots.

He had one more stop at the deli counter Tanner liked before he headed home.

After he and Tanner ate turkey-and-tomato sandwiches, they divvied up chores to finish the housecleaning they had started that morning. Domestic indeed, and he loved every minute of it. He’d even gotten Tanner to discuss getting the hardwood floors redone and maybe some new paint on the walls to showcase Emma’s paintings better.

Afterward Tanner poured two beers, which they enjoyed out on the porch.

The day was just turning to dusk when Cole remembered the dog tags. He did that a lot. Thought of Tom and Charlie at nightfall and again at daybreak; he couldn’t help it—they were part of him.

“Those look great,” Tanner said, tracing each of the letters on the metal pieces. “What’s your plan for them again?”

“Let me show you?” he asked, and Tanner followed as he took off down the stairs toward the barn. He reached for the garden gloves, shovel, and one other supply he had left on the side of the shed, before heading to the outside corner where the loft was located.

Tanner watched as he began digging into the earth that had recently been softened by a rainstorm. He dug down deep enough that the mementos would stay buried. When he nodded to Tanner, he knew to kneel down and drop the dog tags into the hole. Now that all the pieces were coming together about what happened that night, they figured it was time to lay their old friends to rest.

“They were warriors,” Cole said as a bubble of sorrow arose in his throat.

“They loved each other as openly as they could, so that we could have an easier time,” Tanner murmured, his voice just as wrecked. “They deserve to be remembered.”

After Cole shoveled the dirt back in the hole, he formed a little mound and retrieved the small cross he had erected out of spare wood to mark their makeshift grave.

“Rest in peace, Tom and Charlie,” he said as he secured the marker in the dirt.

“You know,” Tanner said with a thick throat, “someone once told me we’re all made of sunlight and stardust.”

Cole’s breath caught.

“And maybe...” Cole said, echoing his own words from one of their first days together, “no matter what time of day from nightfall till morning, when you look up at the sky, you’re connecting with them in some small way.”

“Tom and Charlie, Emma and Paige, me and you.” Tanner reached for his hand and squeezed, his voice tight with emotion. “We’re all connected, all made of the sun and stars. Always will be.”

“Fuck, that’s beautiful.” Cole pulled him into his arms, goose bumps lining his skin. “*You’re beautiful.*”

Just as their lips joined, they heard a boom in the sky, making them flinch.

“I think it’s the fireworks from the festival,” Tanner said, looking up in awe. Cole had forgotten Jordy mentioned them.

It was the perfect tribute to Tom and Charlie.

So Cole encircled Tanner in his arms, and they watched them together, eyes stinging with tears at the magic of the moment.

Afterward they went inside and made slow and sweet love, Cole begging Tanner to fuck him harder so the remaining lost pieces of his soul could be cemented back together by the man he loved.

EPILOGUE

TANNER

Tanner pressed Cole against the kitchen wall in a kiss that had them both hard and panting. He was doing more of that these days—kissing and touching Cole whenever he wanted and not letting anything hold him back... well, as much as was appropriate, anyway.

Tonight was different, though. They were on a tight schedule and had both been anxious about it all week.

“I’ll drag you back to bed if you don’t cut it out.” Cole groaned as he drew away from Tanner’s embrace. It took everything in him not to drag Cole back to him.

Tanner chuckled as he offered one more peck, and they got back to work setting out the wine bottles, glasses, plates, napkins, and trays of appetizers on the new dining room table they’d finally purchased. It had enough chairs to entertain their guests. And tonight they were bound to have plenty.

“I can’t believe this is really happening,” Tanner said as he glanced out the window in time to see Jordy pulling in the driveway behind Bobby.

It seemed ages ago now that they had mentioned to Jordy the visit from Tommi as well as Paige’s letter. Tanner had been a little nervous, but Cole trusted Jordy, and Tanner trusted Cole.

The letter ended up being an account of the events of that fateful night in 1948—events that eerily matched their concurrent dreams. Still, despite what Paige had written, there had been nothing they could officially do. That was when Jordy had taken matters into his own hands and made some phone calls, one to a friend from an LGBTQ center in Saugatuck.

A few weeks later, Jordy’s friend Karrie contacted Tanner and Cole and asked to visit their home and discuss what they knew about Tom and Charlie. Karrie was so moved by the story, she’d called them again with a request. They hadn’t shared their dream, of course, that would have been too

personal...too unbelievable, but they did share the letter and some parts of the journal.

The organization wanted to install a plaque on the barn in their honor.

And tonight was the night of the tribute to the men who lost their lives seventy years ago for simply loving each other. Cole and Tanner could scarcely believe it. It was precisely the kind of way they'd hoped to honor them. If they could no longer hold anyone culpable for the hate crime—due to lack of true proof, names, and on account they were all dead—then they hoped to somehow keep the couple's memory alive.

"Welcome," Cole said, opening the door, and Tanner noticed several more cars now parked along Magnolia Drive near their property.

Jordy and Bobby had helped them put up fliers around town last week, announcing the ceremony and asking anyone interested to attend the dedication.

They also requested backup from the sheriff in case there were any protests or stirrings of trouble. They had no idea what to expect or whether Sheriff Jones would even honor their request. To their complete surprise, Deputy Pearson had shown up late afternoon and parked his car on the opposite side of the road, to signify police presence, they supposed, and Tanner was grateful.

Remarkably, there was no trouble thus far, only people interested in honoring two boys who'd loved each other with all their hearts...and had lost their lives for it. Tanner couldn't help but wonder if anyone that day knew the truth outside of what they'd shared, if it had somehow been passed down through their family. Cole predicted early on that anyone who knew more about the events of that night seven decades ago would've stayed far away from the dedication, and Tanner figured he was right, especially considering police and news vans were present.

About ten minutes later, the LGBTQ center representative arrived, as well as Tommi and her granddaughter, Emma.

Emma. Tanner still couldn't believe that. It filled his chest, looking at Emma, thinking about Tommi and how she was related to Paige. The whole thing was still incredibly unbelievable.

Tommi clutched Tanner's arm, and he helped her out of the car. She had become like a motherly figure to them both. She couldn't travel often due to getting up in age, but they communicated by phone or email often. It only connected them more to their shared history.

When the ceremony officially began, Tanner looked around the yard to see at least a couple dozen townsfolk in attendance. The LGBTQ representative said some words about spreading tolerance and acceptance and then read aloud the words engraved on the plaque. The very top had the words T & C Farm, the name they'd decided on.

"This memorial is dedicated in honor of Tom Crawford and Charlie Meyers, who gave their lives for the cherished freedoms we hold dear today. May they always be a symbol to us of compassion and courage. A sign that truth and love will always prevail."

There was a hushed silence as she read the tribute, and then Tanner, with Cole at his side, helped her nail the plaque, which was quite heavy and substantial, to a wooden plank near the barn door, as the crowd clapped their approval. "Feels good...being part of something like this...something so much bigger than myself," Cole said.

"Yeah, I agree," Tanner said.

He watched Cole, and Cole him. Tanner still couldn't believe the change in his life sometimes—still questioned the journal, the letter, but then in his chest he knew it was real, that everything was true, even the unexplainable aspects.

He took in Cole and felt his love for the man spread through him, fill him as it did daily, and he knew this moment was fated to happen, that it had been born of a night in a barn, seventy years ago.

Their gazes were drawn to other faces in the crowd, swiping away tears, clapping or holding hands. Jordy's father was toward the back, as well as Mrs. Anderson, and even Sheriff Jones, who was standing near the corner of the gathering with a pleasant look on his face. Tanner's heart felt so close to bursting point, he needed to temporarily set aside any caution or wariness he normally felt and just enjoy the moment.

He watched as Cole helped Tommi hand out long, thin white tapers with paper rings to catch any wax. It was her idea that the tribute should be done by candlelight. That it would release light and love into the world ruined that night by the men's ugly torches.

A familiar song was quietly started by someone in the audience, and it was catching, like a wave that grew bigger and stronger. Soon everyone was chanting the words, the candles twinkling in the magic of the moonlight. Just as it should've been for Tom and Charlie that night as they made their getaway to start a new life together.

Two lanterns were lit by Tommi's granddaughter, Emma, and released

into the warm breeze to symbolize Tom and Charlie's eternal freedom. It was almost more than Tanner could take, looking up at the shining stars as the lanterns lifted up and away, but it also made him feel lighter, like he was being reborn...or perhaps he already had been.

The feel of community was evident as many stayed afterward to carry on the celebration in their backyard, and as Tanner approached Cole at the top step of the porch stairs and kissed his cheek, he felt like everything had come full circle—he was standing proud in who he was in ways Tom and Charlie hadn't been able to.

"Tan?" Cole asked, likely knowing any public display of affection would be a huge leap for him.

"I love you, and I'm no longer going to hide it. I want us to live our truth, for Tom and Charlie."

"I love you too," Cole replied. When he reached for Cole's hand and knotted their fingers together, he felt like those lanterns lifting into the sky, a soft incandescence radiating from the inside, like his very soul had caught on fire.

"Do you hear that?" Cole asked a moment later.

Tanner was quiet...listened.

And in the distance, he could've sworn he heard the gentle melody of the swan's song, calling his fated mate home.

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STARDUST!**

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*****WOULD YOU LIKE TO READ OUR OTHER COLLABORATIONS?***

Here's a list of books co-written by Christina Lee and Riley Hart (AKA Nyrae Dawn):

Free Fall series:

TOUCH THE SKY

CHASE THE SUN

PAINT THE STARS

Spinoff from Free Fall series:

LIVING OUT LOUD

Standalone:

EVER AFTER: A GAY FAIRY TALE

***An excerpt of this book is included at the end**

ABOUT CHRISTINA LEE

Once upon a time, **Christina Lee** lived in New York City and was a wardrobe stylist. She spent her days getting in cabs, shopping for photo shoots, eating amazing food, and drinking coffee at her favorite hangouts.

Now she lives in the Midwest with her husband and son—her two favorite guys. She’s been a clinical social worker and a special education teacher. But it wasn’t until she wrote a weekly column for the local newspaper that she realized she could turn the fairy tales inside her head into the reality of writing fiction.

She’s addicted to lip balm, coffee, and kissing. Because everything is better with kissing.

She writes MM Contemporary as well as Adult and New Adult Romance. She believes in happily-ever-afters for all, so reading and writing romance for everybody under the rainbow helps quench her soul.

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NEWSLETTER

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Roadmap to Your Heart series

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M/F books that can all standalone:

All of You

Before You Break

Whisper to Me

Promise Me This

Two of Hearts

Three Sacred Words

Twelve Truths and a Lie

ABOUT RILEY HART

Riley Hart is the girl who wears her heart on her sleeve. She's a hopeless romantic. A lover of sexy stories, passionate men, and writing about all the trouble they can get into together. If she's not writing, you'll probably find her reading.

Riley lives in California with her awesome family, who she is thankful for every day.

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Weight of the World & Up for the Challenge with Devon McCormack

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Touch the Sky

Chase the Sun

Paint the Stars

Standalone with Christina Lee

Living Out Loud
Ever After: A Gay Fairy Tale

AN EXCERPT FROM EVER AFTER: A GAY FAIRY TALE

MERRICK

Merrick was always running late, which certainly wasn't a good look for a prince. His valet, Geoffrey, had hung Merrick's cashmere coat over his shoulders and effectively nudged him down the grand staircase, where a footman waited to usher him out the door.

Geoffrey was not only in charge of his daily wardrobe, but also his schedule, and this evening, Merrick was to be dining with a woman his parents had urged him to court.

Geoffrey was getting up in age and therefore not as fast or limber on the steps as in years past, so Merrick purposely slowed his pace to allow him time to catch up.

He'd admit his lateness was partially due to low enthusiasm about the evening—any evening with a lady, not that it was their fault. He was the one who couldn't shake his penchant for men. But as his parents reminded him, it was high time he married and produced an heir.

The newest footman stood waiting at the door with his eyes trained forward. He'd recently been promoted from kitchen porter, but for the life of him, Merrick couldn't remember his name. He did recall hearing a family detail from the butler—a mother in a wheelchair, perhaps. A plain acknowledgment would have to do for now. Footman duties included assisting the butler with the arrival and departure of royal family members, but also serving the formal meals, so Merrick would be sure to learn his name as he saw more of him in the future.

Merrick nodded at the footman and uttered a simple greeting as he crossed the threshold toward the waiting automobile. He slowed on the icy walkway, knowing Geoffrey would need extra care, and just as he had that thought, he heard his valet stumble behind him. He turned in time to see the footman with a steadying hand on Geoffrey's shoulder, and Merrick's arm stretched out as well to balance his other elbow.

“I am sorry, Your Highness,” Geoffrey remarked in a strained voice, mortification coloring his cheeks.

“Do not give it another thought,” Merrick replied, a stitch tugging at his chest.

Practically everyone in the castle knew it would soon be time to send Geoffrey off to a peaceful retirement with a reasonable compensation package for his years of service. But Merrick could not yet imagine such an adjustment. Geoffrey would properly train his replacement before his departure, of course, but the valet knew all of Merrick’s quirks and routines, and allowing somebody else into his confidence didn’t exactly sit well with him.

His sister, Marjorie, acquired a new lady maid the previous year when her servant had run off to be married to her childhood sweetheart. Marjorie was quite settled now, of course, but missed her maid dearly. These things took time.

Just as Geoffrey opened the door to usher Merrick to the back seat, Merrick heard a deep and unsteady voice. “Your Highness?”

Merrick looked back to see that the footman had left his station at the door and was crouching down to reach for something on the snow-covered ground.

“What is it?” Merrick asked, noting the footman’s wide eyes as he held a shiny, golden piece in his fingertips.

As Merrick approached the young man, the servant kept his eyes averted, but his throat worked to swallow. “Sir, I noticed your sleeve had come undone, and when I looked down at the ground, I detected the gleam of your cuff link.” The footman held the small object out to him.

“Good eye,” Merrick replied, fishing it from the servant’s fingers. Merrick noticed how the man’s hands were clean, yet his knuckles were roughened. It made him wonder what sort of responsibilities he had outside of the castle walls. Certainly, neither kitchen nor footman duties would have toughened them so. Merrick would not allow himself to picture what those other tasks might feel like. This was the life the man was born into, and even if some portions displeased him, people would never take kindly to him whining about it.

“Thank you...Your Highness,” the footman replied, and Merrick’s gaze slid to the man’s eyes, noticing for the first time their translucent honey color along with his dark-brown hair worn tied against his nape as most men in Evergreen did. It was the end of a long day, so some of the finer tendrils were loose around his ears, but Merrick found that he liked the unpolished look.

Life could be so boring otherwise.

“Would you mind?” Merrick asked the man, though he should’ve turned to his own valet for assistance. But Geoffrey would need to don his reading glasses, and besides, something about the footman kept him riveted.

“Certainly, sir,” he replied as Merrick lifted his arm to expose his cuff.

The footman’s hands were warm and slightly clammy, and Merrick pondered whether he made the servant nervous. Certainly, he’d had that effect before, but normally on interested ladies or business associates attempting to win his favor.

“Why these frivolous embellishments are necessary remains a mystery,” Merrick remarked to try and lighten the mood. But also because he somewhat loathed all the pomp and circumstance of royal life, though he rarely got to complain to anybody besides Geoffrey, who seldom offered commentary, just allowed him to sulk in silence.

“A mystery that may never be solved,” the footman replied. “I’ve never had the honor to wear them—thank goodness—but I suppose it completes the polished look.”

A smirk lined the servant’s lips a moment before it was gone, and Merrick wondered if he was poking fun at their customs or only being awkward and shy.

“Indeed,” Merrick replied, and even though the footman had already affixed the cuff link, he remained close, seemingly lost in thought.

Geoffrey cleared his throat. “We must be on our way, Your Highness.”

Merrick startled, and the servant took a wide step back as if remembering his place.

Merrick turned toward his valet, who stood waiting beside the open motorcar door, then quickly twisted back around. “Thank you again. Though I am afraid your name has escaped me.”

“Cassius—Your Highness,” the footman replied as he bowed his head, and Merrick noticed the tinge of pink along his cheeks.

“Cassius. Now I remember.” Merrick tipped his chin in farewell and slid into the back seat of the black automobile, attempting to shake the intriguing footman from his mind and focus on the lovely lady who was about to make his acquaintance.