



Kris Ripper

Going
HOME



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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

GOING HOME

By Kris Ripper

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

The subject of the photograph can be seen through the inverted-V of a tall, looming man's legs. A young, white man kneels on one knee while desperately gripping the other, head down. A chain is locked around his neck, and the man standing in the foreground is holding an alarming-looking whip.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The right to own sex slaves has just been made illegal. The government is taking the slaves to a reeducation camp where we can learn to be a part of everyday society. But what they don't understand is that I've been with Master for 7 years and there's nowhere else I'd rather be than kneeling at his feet, with his collar around my neck and being used in any way he needs. I'm his.

Master and I love each other, and more, we need each other. Help us be together in the way that we need.

I enjoy a loving master/slave relationship with a truly submissive and sweet slave and an attentive and loving master. All kinks are welcome and angst is a plus.

Sincerely,

Breann

Story Info

Genre: alternate universe

Tags: established relationship, BDSM, separated and reunited, master/slave, overbearing friends, dirty talk, hurt/comfort

Content Warnings: past abuse/rape of secondary character

Word Count: 66,722

Acknowledgements

I tried very hard to write a light-hearted angst romp in a contemporary world that only recently reconsidered legal slavery and indentured servitude. Evidently my brain can't do "light-hearted" and "slavery" in the same story. To that extent, this story owes tremendous philosophical considerations to the Marketplace books by Laura Antoniou and the BDSM Universe of prolific fanfiction writer Xanthe. Both authors have influenced the way I think of power and consent, and inspired me to attempt writing an alternative universe which shares many elements of our own.

My deepest thanks to Breann, who wrote the prompt (and found the picture) that sparked this story. I'm also indebted to my beta readers, who pointed out all the inconsistencies and logical failings of the world in this story. The remarkable Enny Kraft did a spectacular last-minute cover for this book, capturing the mood perfectly. And Lucie Le Blanc, as always, provided a razor-edged proofread. This time around she also corrected my lousy addition, for which I'm grateful.

GOING HOME

By Kris Ripper

Chapter One

**IT IS HEREBY DECLARED
THAT ALL PEOPLE IN THIS LAND ARE FREE
AND SHALL THENCEFORTH
BE CONSIDERED FREE FOREVER MORE.**

The plaque—fake-bronze and not yet dusty—hung above the doorway of the large room. Rory couldn't stop staring at it, even though he'd read it enough times for the words to have become meaningless symbols. Free forever more. Except not quite yet.

The woman with the pad tapped her screen. "I know it's difficult," she said, like she was reading from a script. Or worse, probably: like she had it memorized. "Please be as honest as you can in describing your ordeal. All physical details and other descriptors will be kept entirely anonymous and cataloged only as part of the Forgiveness Project. The Forgiveness Project is a movement to empower the formerly enslaved..."

Rory tuned her out. He'd heard the Forgiveness Project spiel at least three times a day back at the "Re-entry Academy." Which was something like summer camp, except it was in the middle of the desert, and you never got to go home. (A tent city in the desert, but they were not supposed to call it "camp.")

Well. Some of them went home. Not Rory. The law was very clear: former owners were forbidden from contacting former slaves. There was an entire chapter in the textbook about it. (They didn't call it a textbook. They called it a handbook. And Rory had read that chapter at least three times, searching for loopholes. There weren't any.)

"Please begin," the woman said, stylus hovering over the screen.

The din of other voices faded as Rory attempted to concentrate on the woman across the desk.

"Sometimes the easiest way to tell a story is to just begin with whatever you first think of." Her voice changed. Warmed, by a degree or two. "What comes to mind when I say 'slave,' Rory?"

Kneeling at Master's feet and losing myself for hours while he worked. Knowing that eventually he'd rest his hand in my hair.

"I don't know," he said. "I have to use the facilities. May I—" He pulled up short. Did he have to ask permission for this? They worked on it a lot, at camp. He pictured the relevant page in the textbook. Bodily functions did not require permission.

The woman waited, like she was used to slaves stumbling all over their words.

A script, a script. Rory reached for the script. "I'm using the facilities. I'll be back shortly."

She nodded, looking vaguely pleased with him. He almost expected a treat. Look, the dim dog *can* learn a new trick! He memorizes phrases and strings them awkwardly together in order to please his—

No. No master. Not anymore.

Rory swallowed and hid in the slaves' toilet for as long as he could justify it, readying his own non-standard script for that exchange: "Stomach troubles, yes, I have been feeling off lately."

Do not cry. Do not cry.

Twelve months, and in those twelve months he hadn't cried. Twelve months since they dragged him out of Master's house. (Master's voice had followed him: "I'll get this straightened out, Rory! Get off me, you—") At the time, it had brought him comfort. But now?

Chapter Three: Protections for Former Slaves and Laborers.
There shall be no contact between persons who once lived under a contracted arrangement such as consensual slavery or indentured servitude for a period no shorter than five (5) years, and for as long as the formerly indentured person so desires.

Rory had completed the entire re-entry program, but he wasn't being released. This farce of Forgiveness Project interviews really only highlighted the truth: he had somehow failed to "fully acclimate to freedom," and now he'd be sent back to camp for another endless six months. Remedial courses in freedom?

He couldn't tell how much time had passed, but he was certain that someone would be in to drag him out any moment now. (No such thing as legal slaves' bathrooms anymore, but he noticed no free people ever seemed comfortable walking into the ones that still existed.) Freedom did not include unlimited bathroom breaks.

In the early days, he'd indulged in near-constant fantasies of what he'd do when he got home. Oh, he'd make elaborate desserts, ingredient-intense entrees, beautiful appetizers. He'd finally commit to soufflés. The visions had grown increasingly bittersweet. At this rate, he may never leave camp, let alone go back to Master's expansive kitchen.

He missed it. His greatest secret in freedom: he missed being a slave.

The door slammed open.

"Fuck! Fucking bastard! I'll fucking—I'll fucking—" *Crash*. "Shit."

Rory tried to curl up very small, but the cursing turned to muttering, and whoever the person was, they didn't leave.

It would be fine. He'd just wash his hands and leave. No big deal.

Rory flushed the toilet he hadn't used and opened the door as unobtrusively as he could.

The woman sitting on the sinks was black, and he thought she was in his group at camp. He'd definitely seen her before. She always spoke way too loudly whenever they shared a class, and her name was a little strange, but he couldn't remember it at the moment.

She'd been an indenture, not a legacy slave like Rory. The indentured work program had been an alternative to jail. Legacy household slavery—which he'd always considered the norm—was apparently a very small, very regional operation. He'd only met former indentures at camp.

"Hey, I know you. You're the one on suicide watch. Huh. What's your name again, kid?"

He bristled. "Rory."

"You don't like it when I call you 'kid'?"

"My name is Rory."

"Nah. Rory's lame. Roar, though. That has potential." She jumped down. "So, you in for another six, too?"

Rory looked up. "I'm not the only one?"

"Hell no, Roar. There's a whole little bundle of us dunces too stupid to be set free in the wild."

He made a face, and she grinned back at him.

"I hate this place," he said. "I hate camp even more."

"I hear that, Roar." She held out her hand and stepped forward, the light surrounding her short hair in a weird double-afro that looked almost angelic. Then she spoiled the effect by saying, "I'm Demon. Good to officially meet you. So. You want to bust out of this bullshit with me?"

Bust out. "What do you mean, bust out?"

"I mean, Roar, that I'm not going back to camp. Not no way, not no how. I'm a free bitch, and I'm getting the hell out of here."

"But—we can't just—can we?"

"How do you feel about running like hell? I got a whole escape route planned, and they're all complacent. Nothin' to see here, just some dumb slaves, don't know what's good for them." Demon smiled and raised her eyebrows. "Or hey, you can go right back to camp. I think it's stew tonight. Again."

"I hate stew."

"Everybody hates stew. This is not how I remember fucking freedom, man. So what do you say? You in, Roar?"

He could have walked away. Except this Demon girl had just expressed *exactly* what had been bothering him. "I don't understand how all their workbooks tell us that we're free now, we're responsible, we have agency, but we don't, not really."

"Oh, sure we do, Roar. Like you and me, right now. Let's go."

"Right now?"

"When they're least expecting it."

"Did you really plan this?"

Demon shrugged. "Does it matter?"

No. "I guess not. What if they catch us?"

"What're they gonna do? Beat us?" She nudged him, shoulder-to-shoulder. "You'd rather go back out there and keep answering their fucking questions?"

"Definitely not. Okay. Let's give it a shot."

"Give it a shot, yeah, Roar. Let's give it a shot."

Rory's heart was pounding. He tried to look normal, but it was impossible.

"Don't walk behind me like a slave," she said, not even whispering. "Walk right here, like a free man, Roar."

"I'm going to faint."

"Nah, you'll be fine."

"No, really, sometimes I—"

Suddenly they were on the stairs.

"We—we're—"

"Stay cool. No one's shouting yet."

Stay cool? He was about to hyperventilate. And his heart was going to explode. "I'm not sure about this, Demon."

"Okay, well, then you can go back upstairs. No? I hope you're ready to run, Roar."

The front door came into view, with an entire world on the outside of it. How was this even possible?

"Hey. Hey! You two!"

"Time to go," Demon said, and grabbed his hand. "Run, boy!"

They slammed out the doors and pounded down the sidewalk, taking a right turn, then a left. Rory couldn't hear anything but their own shoes hitting pavement as they sprinted and Demon laughing, like some sort of crazy person.

Stop laughing, they'll catch us. But he couldn't speak, could hardly breathe.

They ran until he thought he'd be sick, and then she pulled him behind a sliding gate and shoved him to the ground.

"There," she said, panting in his face, maniacal laughter now reduced to a mere maniacal grin. "Welcome to freedom, Roar."

And the truly crazy thing? He couldn't breathe or think, and he still hadn't ruled out fainting. But at that moment, Rory laughed, too.

"There you are, Roar! Dammit! I can't believe you just fucking did that with me. You're insane!"

"I'm insane? You're—"

Oh no. The edges went gray, Demon's face blurred. *I really should have told her—*

Rory fainted.

Chapter Two

Geo Fairbanks stepped into the restaurant and tried to ignore the heavy sinking feeling in his gut.

This is not a date.

He'd been in town ten months, and Teddy Mariposa was the only person he'd really call a friend. He'd gone on a rare in-person call to the recreation department to fiddle with the computer network, and Teddy had been the guy in charge. Geo hadn't managed to work the miracle demanded (if people insisted on running a dozen computers with various operating systems, all of which were completely out of date, Geo didn't know what he was supposed to do about it), but by the end of two days, he'd actually decided Teddy wasn't a waste of space.

They'd gone for a beer and caught the tail end of a football game, during which they'd rooted for opposing teams. Geo had never exactly excelled at making friends (he'd filed "social connections" under "things to prioritize in a partner," back before Rory; after that it had been "Rory stuff"). But Teddy kept inviting him over for barbecues, and Geo kept going.

Tonight, though, they were meeting up at a restaurant, not a bar. Which felt—weirdly date-like, even though two men could go to a restaurant without it being a date. "There's something I want to talk about," Teddy had said, then added, "Jeez, Fairbanks, back off. I'm not propositioning you."

Not a date. Just a date-feeling non-date. Right.

He would've never had to do this, before. Not with Rory waiting at home for him, preparing dinner, preparing everything. Geo had acquired a reputation for throwing parties, to his parents' shock and satisfaction, but it had all been Rory, down to the detailed guest lists and linen choices.

And now? He couldn't even mention Rory, not here, not in the slave-and-indenture-free Northwest. He'd thought coming here was a good decision, that a fresh start was all he needed, and being in a place where he wouldn't run into other former owners around every corner would be ideal. He'd underestimated how difficult it was to keep this secret. (And keep it he would. A month after he arrived in town a former owner had been exposed, and had left soon after. Even Geo, mostly staying in his apartment, couldn't miss the sly comments and more

outright disgust directed at owners. No amount of telling himself that he wasn't *that* kind of owner helped.)

“Sir?”

Geo blinked away memory and foreboding, focusing on the young woman at the host station. “Sorry. I’m supposed to be meeting someone.”

“I know. He’s been trying to get your attention from that table, but you didn’t see him.” She smiled. “This way, please.”

Teddy stood up when they reached the table. “You were lost in thought, there, Geo. Everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine. I don’t even know what I was thinking about.” *Liar. You were thinking about Rory.*

“Probably nothing important, then, right?”

Geo plastered a false smile on his face and opened the menu. “I’ve never been here before. What’s good?”

They both ended up with steaks.

“This is almost as good as I make on the grill,” Geo said, wiping his mouth. “Thanks, by the way. This was a good idea.”

“Hey, if you’re offering, next time you can make dinner.” Teddy went still. “Shit. That sounds—I’m not inviting myself over, if that’s what that sounded like.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Good food, good company. Geo was finally feeling a little bit relaxed.

Teddy glanced around the dining room, which was emptying out as the band started playing on the restaurant’s back patio. “So there’s something I’ve been meaning to bring up with you. But I’m losing my nerve here a little. Do you feel like a nightcap? We could head back to the house.”

“Sure, no problem.” He looked a little closer. “A nightcap, Teddy?”

“I’m still not hitting on you,” Teddy said. “This just isn’t something I feel like talking about here, at the moment.”

Geo’s pulse beat a little harder. Wait. Could it be? Was Teddy an owner, too? How the hell many other things could he be talking about like that, like he didn’t want to risk anyone overhearing?

“Yeah, sure.” He forced himself to laugh. “I’d let you down easy, Teddy.”

“Ha ha. You ready to take off?”

They paid their bill and walked out, Geo’s mind flipping through scenarios at a mile a minute, searching for any other thing Teddy could possibly want to discuss. But hell, Teddy’d only been in town a few months longer than Geo—could he have moved there for the same reason? To escape the past? (Or at least not be constantly reminded of it.)

Geo hadn’t told a single person about his life with Rory. He’d spent a week trying to find a lawyer, an advocate, anyone who could help him get Rory out of the system, but no one had been able to help, so he picked up and left, not even two months after Liberation Day. (What a fucking joke. Rory had fought them until they drugged him and dragged him away, and Geo had stood there, in shackles, unable to save him. Liberation. Whose?)

Was Teddy an owner? Had to be. He ignored the voice in the back of his head that cautioned against making too many assumptions and allowed himself to consider the idea. What would it be like, to have a friend with whom he could be honest? To be able to mention Rory without feeling ashamed?

Teddy lived in the back half of a duplex, which faced another duplex across a lush, ivy-hung trellised courtyard. There were two older couples on the other side of the courtyard, whom Geo had met a few times at Teddy’s barbecues, but the other half of his duplex was empty. Apparently he sometimes rented it out, but at the moment he didn’t want to bother with the complications of tenants.

“I really need a drink. You need a drink, Geo? Never mind. I’ll get you one.”

Geo didn’t *drink*-drink. He’d have beer, maybe wine if he didn’t think he could politely refuse, but he didn’t drink hard alcohol anymore. (Because Rory didn’t like it. No Rory here, though, is there?)

Dammit.

He accepted the whiskey and sat down in one of Teddy’s deep, comfortable armchairs, while Teddy paced in front of the cold fireplace.

“Listen,” Geo said. “I think I might know what you want to tell me.”

Teddy laughed. Harshly. “I doubt that.”

"Everyone has secrets, Teddy." Geo leaned forward and put the drink down without tasting it. He was suddenly desperate for this sharing of burdens, this sharing of himself. He'd kept his name in the somewhat ludicrous hope that Rory would find him, but everything else was a thin fabrication.

Teddy turned away and took a very deep breath. "So what's your big secret, then, Geo? If everyone has them."

Shit.

Then again, maybe he could go first, show Teddy that it wasn't that bad.

He picked up his drink again and said the words he'd never imagined saying to anyone here in the pure, untarnished Northwest, where slavery and indentured labor was treated as an Eastern perversion of good sense. "I was an owner. A slave owner." Then he waited for Teddy to confess in relief.

"Seriously?" Teddy turned and leaned back against the mantle of the fireplace, face impassive. "You owned *people*?"

They stared at each other for a long second, while Geo slowly realized he had made a terrible, terrible mistake.

He wanted to stand up, walk out, not speak, not try to justify it, or rationalize it, or beg for an ounce of sympathy, only to see Teddy go snide and cold. But he couldn't move. His legs were heavy, rooted to the ground, and the armchair felt like it had closed in around him.

"I thought—I thought that's what you were going to say."

"So were you actually a slave owner, or were you just trying to make me feel better? No, never mind, I can see the answer on your face. Well, that's interesting."

Interesting.

"I'll leave," Geo said, and attempted to stand up.

"Stay. I've never met a slave owner. Not that I knew about, anyway. We didn't have visible slaves back home. There were always stories here or there, but nothing confirmed, no flashy collars or leather or chains, any of that TV crap. Stay, Geo. Let me get you a bottle of water."

Teddy sat down when he returned, and Geo noticed he'd gotten himself a bottle of water as well.

"Was that your first time telling someone after the Liberation?"

“Liberation. I hate that word. It wasn't a liberation for us.” Geo took a good pull on the whiskey before washing it down with water. “And yes. I thought—I thought that was your big secret, that I'd found—that I could finally talk to someone who'd understand.”

“Oh, I definitely won't understand. But you can talk to me.”

“Sure I can. And then I'll find posters up all over my neighborhood, warning of the nasty slave owner in their midst.”

Teddy surveyed him, and he didn't see disgust there, exactly, but the warm fellow feeling for which he'd misguidedly hoped was absent, too. “From the outside, it seems obviously unjust. But I wouldn't be so quick to think it's all judgement, Geo. At least some of it's envy.”

“Envy?”

“Sure. Compelling thought, having someone at your beck and call. Hell, I might have considered it, if I had the money. Well, probably not, but I'm still curious.”

Having someone at your beck and call. Exactly the wrong attitude. Exactly the attitude of all those new, stupid “owners,” without whom Rory would probably still be with him. Useless thoughts. “Why would you have considered it, Teddy? More bodies for the grounds crew?”

“Not exactly. Plus, I've got my soldiers and sailors.”

Teddy was short, stocky, military in his youth, and now he ran a rapidly expanding program for former service members going back into the work force. He was the perfect guy for it: laid back and calm, but steel underneath. Geo wouldn't go up against him in a fight, that's for sure. Teddy looked like the kind of guy you felt safe fucking with in a bar until he looked at you just right, and then you got the fuck out of there before he could decide he was offended.

“That brings me back to the thing I was going to say before your big announcement. Hell.” Teddy ran both of his hands into his hair and sat back. “I don't have a dick. I have a pussy.”

Geo felt his face contort. “What?”

“I have a pussy. And scars, where I once had breasts.” Teddy's hands twitched on the chair arms.

“You're a woman?”

“No, Geo. I’m a man. Obviously. You’re looking right at me, do I look like a woman to you?”

“No. No, but—”

Teddy sighed. “I know it’s weird. Take a minute. But I’m the same man you owe fifty bucks to over that third quarter clusterfuck of a loss last week, Geo. I’m not less of a man just because I have a pussy.”

“You really call it that?”

“It seems like the word that disarms people best. ‘Cunt’ just scares them, and ‘vagina’ feels like a disease.”

“You have a *cunt*,” Geo said. “Jeez, Teddy. I could use another whiskey.”

“You and me both.”

It wasn’t cold out, was barely even jacket weather (bring your jacket just in case weather), but Teddy lit a fire and stood there for a while in front of it, looking into the flames.

“So,” he finally said. “How many slaves did you have? Do you miss them? Are you allowed to miss slaves, or is it like losing a gardener—even if you like them, you can find someone else to do the job?”

Geo sank back into his chair and covered his eyes. “Rory. One slave. His name is Rory. And I—I know it sounds insane, but I don’t think I can survive without him.”

He waited for laughter, mockery, pity.

“Well, see, that’s a story. Tell me about him.”

Geo braced and looked up, but Teddy wasn’t smiling, or goading him. Teddy was watching him a little warily, standing there with a now-roaring fire at his back.

“I’m in love with him. You can tell me I’m pathetic now. I’ve heard it all before.”

“In love with your former slave. Rory. All right. How did you end up with him? I admit, I’m not really sure how the system used to work. Did you go to a website and shop for a slave? What did he do to get indentured?”

Geo winced. “God, Teddy. No. My family always had slaves. Actually, it was a tradition. A man would come of age and his father would find him a

suitable slave. *Not* an indentured position, a legacy slave. In our area, it was pretty common, but I guess it was really localized to a few pockets.”

“A legacy slave,” Teddy repeated. “All right. So your father found you a slave? Please skip over the role your parents had in your sex life, okay?”

“No. Not like that. Rory—he was more than that. And my father didn’t pick him. My father gave me a choice of three beautiful women.”

“Ouch. He didn’t know you were gay?”

“He didn’t care. Actually, I think that made a female slave far more important.” Geo shook his head. “He actually included instructions for the legal documentation I would need to have a son with a slave woman and make him my heir.”

“What is this, Regency England?”

“It was important to him. It took me awhile to convince my father I never planned to impregnate any woman, slave or free, so I didn’t get Rory until I was twenty-five.”

“And do girls get a nice lean hunk of slave when they come of age?”

“Well, no. Not generally. They do have full use of their husband’s slave when they marry, though.”

“Their husband’s female slave. How thoughtful.” Teddy sat down again. “So? How did you fall in love with your slave?”

“How does anyone fall in love, Teddy? I took him in, lived with him, and over time—over time—” God, it hurt. It hurt to think of Rory, sleepy in the morning, smiling just before he took in Geo’s dick. Or cleaning the kitchen at night, darkness outside the windows, a warm bubble of yellow light and Rory dancing through it, not even aware Geo watched him. Surprised to turn and find Geo there, dropping immediately to his knees, and smiling. God, Rory smiled so much Geo forgot the world outside those walls.

He wanted to see that smile now. And Rory’s eyes. Rory, service and submission ingrained, had rarely looked him in the eye. It was a sort of game. Geo would beg and Rory would tell him, “Respectfully, no, Sir.” Until he’d at last give in, for a split second, and meet his master’s eyes—

Damn everything.

“I believe you,” Teddy said, voice just audible over the crackling wood fire. “I believe you’re in love with him.”

“Well, it doesn't matter now, does it?”

“How did he become a slave? I've never heard the term 'legacy slave.'”

“He was always a slave. He was born to slaves in a big household, and he'd never had rights to his body. Or, I guess, his life.”

“That's gotta be pretty rare.”

“I didn't realize how rare until I left. It's not even the same thing, you know. I mean, a slave like Rory and an indentured laborer who would be going to jail except they volunteered to join a work program instead.”

Teddy raised his eyebrows, but all he said was, “How long was he with you?”

“Seven years.”

“Seven *years*? No wonder you're in mourning. That's longer than a lot of marriages. Not that it's the same thing.”

“Wasn't it? How was it different? A little unconventional, maybe, but I loved him, and he loved me. He loved serving me, and if any free person can choose to do that, I don't see how it's really that much different, Teddy, goddammit. I don't see why they could come and take him away when we both—we wanted—”

He should apologize. The outburst was uncalled for. To say nothing of, yes, pathetic. But he didn't even look away.

“Tell me about how it worked, after the Liberation. I've only seen the same five news clips over and over again, indentures being freed from dirty cots and from much nicer bedrooms in fancy mansions with subtly locked doors and windows.”

“He fought them. He fought them to stay with me. Or at least—at least to not go with them. They drugged him, as they were dragging him away. It took four of them.” Geo shuddered. “And they shackled me to a truck so I couldn't help him, go to him. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, and I can still hear him screaming.”

“Sounds awful. But I don't understand. I thought the whole point was that they were free. If he's free, why couldn't he choose to stay with you?”

“The law. The law mandates removal and re-education for all former slaves and indentured laborers. Bastards.” But they weren't, really. “Not all owners

were good, decent people. The removal clause probably helps more people than it harms, but I wish—I wish there was some way to appeal it. I tried, but no one wanted to touch it. Or just to—they won't even allow us to speak with one another, Teddy. I can't find out where he is. If I go near him, I could be put away."

"For how long?"

"Five years, according to the law. Five years from when they release him from wherever they've taken him."

"So wait five years, Geo. He's not dead."

"I can't. I don't want to. I—" *I can't live without him.*

"What else can you do? You going to jail won't help him."

"But if I could just talk to him, even for an hour, if I could just tell him he's all I can think about."

"That will help exactly how? Geo, don't be a fool. Give him time."

Geo's gaze narrowed. "You think I'm deluded. You think he doesn't feel the same about me."

"I have no idea what he feels about you. But if you're saying that, from the day he was born, he was socialized to be a slave, then my guess is at best he's pretty confused about a lot of things right now. And yeah, Geo, you're not stupid. You know you can't rely on anything he said to you as proof of his feelings. Regardless of how you felt about owning him, you owned him."

"You don't know what you're talking about. You have no idea what you're talking about."

"I know the world's a strange place, and unpredictable. I don't think you're deluded, Geo. But that doesn't mean I think you should go charging in and demand that someone who submitted to your will for seven years acknowledge your feelings. Give him time."

"I can't find him, anyway," Geo said, giving into the bitterness now that his secret was spilled. "The records are locked down tightly, and they've taken all of them away to isolated places, where you can't just accidentally wander in."

"Tell me you haven't really considered breaking into a government facility."

"I don't have the resources."

“You have. Geo, try to look at this rationally.”

“You have no idea—”

“I’ve been in love. I have at least some idea.” Teddy leaned forward, face orange and shadowed in the firelight. “You want to find him? You want to be with him again? Don’t be stupid about it. Be worthy.”

Geo swallowed. “I’m not sure I am. I’m not sure I ever was. He was such a good boy, and I—”

“Boy?”

“No. No, not a child, he was eighteen when we first—he wasn’t a child. I called him my good boy because it made him go soft, like that was the thing he wanted most in the world, to be that for me.”

“What did you want most in the world?”

“For him to look me in the eye. But it was taboo, and he wouldn’t.”

“Well,” Teddy said, and Geo couldn’t tell what he thought by his expression, which had shuttered and locked down. “You have five years to make yourself a man who deserves him, without entitlement.”

The rational part of Geo acknowledged the wisdom of this. The petty, small part of him wanted to keep arguing until Teddy gave in and agreed.

Like a slave?

The thought chilled him.

“I apologize for my behavior tonight,” Geo murmured.

“Nothing wrong with being a fool about love, Geo. Are you and I okay? I realize this wasn’t exactly a normal conversation. On either side.”

“Sure, yeah.” Oh, right. Geo looked over again, searching for anything about Teddy that read female. But no. “Were you serious, earlier? It feels like a practical joke.”

“Procuring a vagina in order to make you uncomfortable? A very impractical joke that’d be. No. I’m serious. You gonna be okay with that?”

“Of course. I don’t completely understand it, but you don’t seem any different to me than you were yesterday.”

“Good. Thank you. You want another drink, or is it time to call it a night?”

Call it a night, go home to his tiny, dingy apartment, where he'd think about Rory and pour himself into wishes that couldn't come true. *God, no.* "Put the game on. But I can't drink any more of this shit, Teddy. You have beer somewhere?"

"Two beers, coming up. You want to make a friendly wager, Geo? Maybe win back that money you still haven't paid me?"

Geo didn't want to make a wager. He didn't even want to pay attention. The game played out before his eyes, but Geo thought mostly of Rory. Rory, Rory, beautiful Rory, who had been eighteen, yes, when they had first had sex, though he'd been desperate for it by then. The two years before that had been exquisite in a different way, and by the time he'd touched the deepest parts of Rory's body, he'd known that Rory wanted it every bit as much as he did.

Had he, though? Had he, really?

Dammit. The walk home was cold, and he missed Teddy's fire.

Chapter Three

Demon had nightmares. Bad ones. The kinds of nightmares that made Rory curl up in a little ball and scrunch his eyes shut.

He'd tried to talk to her about them after the first night, but she just shook her head. Still. Three days into being one another's only companion, he brought it up again.

"Maybe we could find you something. A pill, maybe. Just so you could get some rest."

"Don't even fucking come near me with drugs, Rory." She brandished her fist at him, like he was going to force pills on her, like he even could.

"Well, no. I mean, I won't, obviously, but D, you're not getting any rest. It's not good for you."

She'd shaken her head, and he'd left it, worried about her. Worried about himself a little, too, because now that they were out here, in the world, he had no idea what to do. It was one thing to follow a crazy girl he hardly knew out into the sunshine of freedom, if that's what this was, but now he was relying on her way too much.

But he'd been so lonely before. Demon's presence didn't leave any room for loneliness, any space for self-pity. Her momentum carried them forward, and she never said a single thing about anyone they'd left behind. He'd assumed she had friends at camp because she was loud, and people laughed at her jokes, but now—maybe Demon had been, in a different way, just as lonely.

It was tenuous, and strange, but it was something to hold on to in a world almost unrecognizable.

He needed to find Master. Not Master, *Geo*; Demon kept making him say *Geo* over and over again, yelling at him when he slipped up. Finding *Geo* had been his only goal when he was stuck at camp, waiting to be released. Now he'd effectively released himself and hardly had time to think about how or when to search for *Geo*, or whether *Geo* even wanted to be found.

On the fourth day, after hopping a train and taking it as far as it went, they stopped running and started hunting.

"Hunting, Roar. We're like lions, right? Only we don't need fuckin' gazelles, we need housing and jobs and food we didn't dig out of garbage bins."

And as stupid as it sounded, Rory found it made the whole thing a little bit easier. Instead of feeling poor and homeless, he felt like a big animal, waiting for the opportunity to eat, to sleep.

Some days were leaner than others.

D wouldn't be deterred. From anything. Which is how they found themselves pretending to be married to get into a room in a shelter.

"We pretend we're married, they'll be more likely to take us," she explained around the block from the place. "You think you can hold my hand long enough to do that, Roar?" Then she'd poked him on the shoulder.

"This is going to be weird."

"Nah. It'll be fine. Plus, I got my knife if anyone gives us trouble."

Privately, Rory had his doubts about Demon's knife and its potential uses in fighting off predators. But it did seem to make her feel better, so he nodded.

D was worried about their lack of legal documentation, but the man running the shelter just looked at them for a long moment, then nodded at Rory and said, "Former indenture?"

He went tense and lowered his eyes, trying very hard not to shake.

"He doesn't like to talk about it," Demon said, putting her arm around his shoulders.

"I've seen it before. You'll want to get your papers in order as quickly as possible, but I don't look down on anyone here. It's not that hard to become someone else, if you need to." He caught Rory's eye and added, "There's a group that meets down in the basement, if you're interested. I can have someone talk to you."

"Thank you," Rory managed to say, very softly.

D waited until they were in their room before nearly bursting. "Oh my god, you were amazing. Man, Roar, I thought you were gonna shit right there in the fucking meeting."

He collapsed on their bed—their one bed. "I think I might be sick."

"Shit, you weren't acting, were you? Hang on. Don't fucking faint, give me a minute."

She brought him a glass of water and watched him drink it.

"Thank you. Sorry I'm so—worthless."

"You're not worthless. Why do you say shit like that?" D stretched back on the bed, and Rory tried to find even a splinter of interest in her long, lean body, but no, nothing. He wasn't interested in men anymore, either. A problem for another day.

He tentatively stretched out beside her.

"So, we're married now."

"We're pretend-married," he countered.

"Mm hm."

"What do you think he meant, about becoming someone else?"

"I think he thinks you're hiding from your past."

Rory turned, curling on his side, to look at her. "D. How am I going to find him? Geo. I don't even know where to begin."

"Well, you're not going to, not today. Today we figure out how food works, and showers, and tomorrow we figure out how we're gonna make enough money to live."

He shook his head. "None of that matters to me. I need to find him."

"I don't mean to rain on your parade, babe, but how do you know he's not out there fucking the next young thing that happened to walk past him on the street?"

The idea of it was ludicrous. It had taken Master two years to even approach fucking him, and shortly after that he'd entirely stopped bringing anyone else home. It was hard to imagine him now, taking advantage of Rory's absence to—do that.

It twisted his guts a little. *Master. My master.* The words didn't matter. The law didn't matter. What mattered was that he had to find Master. He had to go home.

"I need to find him."

Demon sighed. "Fine. But not today, okay? Today we're both taking showers, because we have to share this little bed and you stink."

"Oh, I stink? You're filthy."

"Ha. Yeah, I am."

“Will you—” Rory swallowed his words for a moment, almost not saying it. But he was tired, and even though they were safer than they had been in days, maybe than he had been since leaving Master, he was still afraid. “Don’t leave me, okay?”

“You neither.”

When Demon reached for his hand, he grabbed hers right back.

What are your qualifications? The question haunted him. Rory didn’t have qualifications.

“I can cook, I can clean, I can take a beating. What job does that get me?”

“Take a beating?” Demon zeroed in on him, backing him against the bed. “What the hell does that mean?”

They had to leave. No one was allowed in the shelter from ten until three. But the way she was standing over him like that made it hard to get ready.

“Nothing. I just mean Master was always—proud of me. When I could take a—when I didn’t fall apart.”

“Don’t fucking call him that! And what the ever-living hell was he doing beating you? God, Roar!”

“Please don’t raise your voice.”

“I thought you said he was good to you?”

A trap. He couldn’t get out of it now, and he didn’t know how to explain it to her.

“We have to leave,” he said.

“Yeah. And you’re gonna explain to me what the fuck you’re talking about. Dammit! I was actually—I can’t believe I actually started thinking this guy wasn’t—fuck!”

Demon’s rage frightened him, as usual, even though it flashed out multiple times a day. Rory got up and put himself together (without fully turning his back on her). The nightmares were easing off, since they had a bed in a room. Since she had someone beside her, he thought, but didn’t say, though there was something strangely appealing about the idea that possibly he, Rory, was making Demon feel safe.

The residents of the shelter who didn't have daytime jobs mostly ended up in the park down the street. Some slept, some found food, some clustered into groups and talked. Neither he nor D wanted to socialize, so they took off walking in the opposite direction.

"I thought you said he was good to you."

Rory watched his shoes. "He was."

"So he didn't beat you? Because being proud of you for taking a beating doesn't exactly make him out to be a fucking charmer, Roar."

"I needed it," he managed. His throat was tight, and it hurt to speak.

"Oh, don't give me that brainwashing crap! Nobody needs to be beaten, dummy! God, I can't believe you think—seven fucking years, of course you do." She growled and walked faster. "Fuck! I want to hit something. Not a fucking *slave*, either."

"It wasn't like that. D, please. I used the wrong word. He wasn't punishing me." *I begged. I begged him to send me to that place in my head where I could just exist, without thought. Don't you get it?* "D, please just try to understand that it wasn't like that."

"You're so *stupid*, Rory! I can't believe you're defending him."

"I didn't do anything wrong. It wasn't like that. It wasn't like whatever they did to you, that you dream about, that makes you cry. It wasn't, D. I'm not defending anyone."

"You don't know anything about that," she shot back.

"I know it's not what I'm talking about."

"Fine. Tell me about it. Tell me about these beatings that weren't like beatings, and this asshole who beat you but wasn't like all the assholes who beat me. Sure, Roar. I'll just suspend my fucking disbelief, okay?"

But at least she'd slowed down a little.

It was almost impossible to know where to start, now that she was apparently listening. Despite months of interviews, questions, classes, Rory felt like he hadn't said anything meaningful since he'd left Geo's home. That he hadn't said anything that actually sounded like his story at all.

"I know it's not like most people. But it was always something I wanted, even when I was young. I wanted to be what I was, D. I didn't feel wronged. I wasn't angry at the world."

“You wanted to be a fucking slave? Yeah, you know, white people tried to sell that story a long time ago, Rory. It was bullshit then, and it’s bullshit now.”

“Not like that. I don’t think—” He broke off, considering it. “I thought I wanted to be a slave. But now that I see what other owners were like, that’s not—I can’t say that anymore. But I definitely wanted to be *his*. I loved being his slave.”

Demon said nothing.

“He took care of me. And I don’t mean he fed me and made sure I went to the doctor, I mean he took care of me. And sometimes that was making sure I had soup when I was sick, and sometimes it was—” *Flogging me until I begged him to let me touch myself.* “Sometimes it was in other ways. The sex was always better when he worked me over first, anyway,” he said, trying to go for a lighter tone.

“Rape.”

Rory recoiled. “It wasn’t.”

“Oh, it was. You were a fucking slave, Roar. You didn’t have sex, you were assaulted.”

“No, I wasn’t.” He bit back his first words and tried to calm down. “No, D, I really wasn’t. I never told him to stop. Not ever.”

“Well, it wouldn’t have mattered, because he could have fucked you anyway. He could have called the police and fucked you *while they watched*. Because you couldn’t say no, you couldn’t consent. Not consenting is the fucking definition of rape. You were some kind of fucking sheltered, boy, if you don’t even know that.”

Rory felt cold and heavy. The tea and toast he’d had for breakfast rolled around in his stomach and each step felt more exhausting than the last. “It wasn’t like that,” he said, even though now he didn’t sound convinced.

“Sure, whatever you say. God, I can’t believe I was actually starting to fall for your crazy story. Fell in love with master, yeah right. Sick prick was the same as all the rest.”

“He really wasn’t.” Had he said that out loud? He couldn’t be certain. “I have to sit down.”

“Do not fucking faint again. *Do not.*” She sat beside him and shoved his head down between his legs. “Breathe, Roar.”

It wasn't his breathing, it was his blood pressure. Ever since puberty it would go goofy, and he'd fall, or everything would go dark. But there was something nice about D sitting there with him, ordering him not to faint.

"I'm okay," he said, after a few minutes. "Can we please talk about something else?"

"Sure we can. Like that hyperactive white girl with the frizzy hair who has a fucking crush on you."

"I thought we were married."

"Right? I should beat that bitch's face in." Demon laughed, low and strained. "I mean, I would, except I think she has a crush on me, too. God, she's gotta be a sick little freak, right? You want to keep walking?"

"Yeah."

They kept walking.

Chapter Four

Geo moved through the world in a blur of color and sound for a few days after his conversation with Teddy. A very small voice inside his head waited for everything to explode, even though Teddy had seemed accepting enough.

None of which mattered. The larger issue was that Geo couldn't relax. Whatever uneasy muzzle he'd managed to place on his thoughts, it was gone now, and he thought about Rory constantly.

Rory, over the bench, ass tenderized, writhing and moaning while Geo stood behind him, touching that burning expanse of skin with different things and making him guess what they were. For every incorrect guess, he got one with the paddle. Geo rewarded every correct guess with one minute of kissing, worshiping Rory's ass and thighs and back. If he guessed correctly three times in a row, the kisses became more intimate, which was a blissful torture unto itself.

Rory, pressed back against the refrigerator, attempting, between breathy little moans, to defend the bake time of the coffee cake in the oven. "Master—Master—it will *burn*," he'd said, as he thrust into Geo's hand. And Geo, in a fog of desire, had bit down on his ear and hissed, "I'll eat it anyway, my slave. I'll pour cream all over your body and dip my cake in it." God, the way Rory had moaned, head thrust back, throat exposed and vulnerable except for his collar.

Rory, accidentally catching his eye. Rory's eyes were brown. Brown eyes, dirty blond hair, pale skin (except when Geo had taken it as a canvas to be marked). Rory saying, "No, Master, respectfully. Slaves do not deserve to see their master's eyes." Goading him into it, ordering it, demanding it: "Look me in the eye, slave." Catching him unawares, more as a joke than anything, unprepared for the blazing explosion in his gut, his balls, fuck all of it, his *heart*, when Rory looked back at him.

Was he a fool to believe Rory had felt something, too? Stunning, breathtaking Rory, staring right back at him for a second, a split second, utterly frozen except for the quick rise-fall of his chest.

It didn't matter. None of it fucking mattered.

Geo had to get himself under control. He'd known himself by his control once, defined himself as a man who never lost his temper. He'd never punished

Rory in anger. Of course, Rory was a near-perfect slave. Finding things in him to justify “punishment” had been part of the game they played.

Games. Play. Oh, god. Surely he'd have known if Rory was merely *enduring* him? Except Rory was a perfect slave, and a perfect slave would never let on that he was anything but grateful and hungry for his master's desire.

Three days later he bought steaks for grilling and sent a message to Teddy.

“Man, you weren't kidding, Geo. This is excellent. You need anything from the house?”

“No. Thank you. Actually, another beer wouldn't go awry.”

“Coming up.”

They were at Teddy's again, in the courtyard. When faced with the idea that he'd just invited Teddy to his one-room shit-hole apartment, where he'd have to clear the trash out of the barbecue pit in the lot outside before lighting the coals, Geo had invented an artless lie to change the venue to Teddy's.

“You trying to avoid me knowing where you live, in case I want to tell all your neighbors about you?” Teddy had asked over the phone.

“Sorry, no. Just humiliated to have company. But I'll send you the address.”

“Don't worry about it. I like my place, and my neighbors are all hard-of-hearing or living vicariously through me. Come by around eight.”

The steaks had turned out perfectly.

“So,” Teddy said, returning with beer and bottled water. “You ever make steaks for Rory?”

They hadn't discussed it. Any of it. They'd talked about Teddy's job managing the grounds crew for the rec department, and Geo had explained a little about the networking and security work he did from the apartment. They'd argued the merits of the new coach for the local minor league team.

But nothing about slavery, ownership, or politics.

Geo hesitated. “The thing is, if I tell you about him, I might not be able to stop. I haven't stopped thinking about him since—since I was here. So I'm not sure it's a good idea for me to even begin talking about Rory. I should just forget him.”

"Maybe you should talk about him. Forgetting him doesn't seem to be working that well for you, Geo. And, I admit, I'm curious. The master/slave romance novels were a guilty pleasure of mine, when I was younger."

"Romance novels?" Geo raised his eyebrows. "Okay. I officially believe you have a pussy."

"You want me to kick your ass to convince you I'm a man? I'd hate to blow your stereotypes away." But Teddy wasn't serious, didn't even look offended. "Go ahead. Tell me about him. Did he fight you but secretly love your dominance? That was always a popular trope."

"Fight me? God, no. Well. Not about anything that would make for entertaining reading."

"He fought you about boring things?"

"Mundane things. Yes. And not... *fought*, exactly. More that he loudly disagreed without speaking. He had a look."

Teddy waved his beer. "Go on."

"I had a decent place to live, before. Family money, though I make more than enough to support myself. Most of my indulgences were gifts. And the house had been in the family." *Until I sold it.* "But I'd never been much of a cook, in the kitchen. The grill was one thing. But Rory—Rory's parents had known he was destined for a life of service. So they made sure he had every skill they could teach."

"Which included cooking in a kitchen?"

"Cooking, baking, presentation, and service. He's also excellent at small engine repair, and he took to building computers with passion and innate skill. And creativity. Creativity with everything." Geo shook his head and sucked down a gulp of beer, halfway wishing it was whiskey again. "Unless he was just pretending. Shit. I keep thinking—what if you're right? What if the whole thing was just bullshit, and I bought into it? Fuck, Teddy. What if I made it into a goddamn romance novel?"

"Then you'd be like a lot of people, Geo. You were telling me that Rory argued with you over your kitchen?"

"The oven. Specifically, he wanted a double oven, because when we had people over a double oven allowed him to keep certain things warming while others were being served. Also, he liked to bake, and he could experiment more easily when he could bake a number of batches at once."

"Makes sense. So what form did the argument take, if it wasn't an argument?"

"Oh, little things. He'd mark the ovens he liked, and purse his lips when I showed him something I thought we could use. Or he'd make comments about the things he could be doing, if only he had the double oven. Passive aggressive, mostly."

"Understandable, since outward aggression would have been illegal."

"What the hell do you want me to say? Yes, he was my slave. No, technically he couldn't just get the oven he wanted. I suppose I thought it was a game, between us. I'd hold out and he'd get creative and eventually I gave him what he wanted. Mostly."

Teddy studied him for a long, uncomfortable moment. "I think I want you to say that you understand human slavery is wrong. Ethically, morally, and not just for the people who abuse it, but for everyone. You don't believe that, though, do you, Geo? You think there should be exceptions."

"No. No, I never said that." Had he? No. But, then again... "Hell, Teddy. It never even—that was never a conscious thought. I see those fucking stories all over the place, the horrible conditions, the rapes and beatings and deaths."

"Murders."

"Cut me some fucking slack for half a second!"

"Did you cut him slack?" Teddy leaned forward. "You were saying you see the stories, in the news, and what? You feel for the slaves? Are you angry at the owners?"

"They shouldn't even be permitted the title! Look, I've always had slaves. My family had slaves before I was born. They were always good to me and I never, ever abused a slave, Teddy. Never. It's—it was an honor. My mother said that. She said to hold someone else's life in your hand, that was an honor, and you had to treat it as such."

"I agree with her. But did you ever stop to wonder who conferred this honor on you? Geo, did you ever have a relationship with a man who wasn't your slave first? There is a lot of honor in the world, and free people give it to one another."

"It's not the same."

"I agree. It can't help but be better, to look into the eyes of the person you hold in the palm of your hand, and know they are there by choice. It goes both ways. Did Rory hold your honor as you held his?"

"Rory—wasn't responsible for that."

"He wasn't responsible for you," Teddy said. "Was anyone?"

"Jeez, what is this, therapy?"

"These are honest questions, and you can stop answering them at any time."

Teddy stretched his legs out and shrugged. "It's not just in the extremes. Nothing is just extremes. But even if you were the best owner on earth, and even if he felt true, deep, honest affection for you, that doesn't make it right, Geo. That doesn't justify slavery, even if Rory was the only slave in the world."

"You still have whiskey?" Geo asked, throat dry.

"Yeah."

Teddy cleaned up a little, and got them drinks, and Geo just sat there, in near-darkness, thinking about Rory. But not Rory the slave, Rory the man.

He'd never thought of Rory as a man.

Rory, strapping and sixteen, desperate to please, desperate for touch, desperate for kind words. Such a good investment, people said. From a good family. Rory's abilities and pedigree even out-weighed his gender for most people, eliminated the edge of shifty derision that accompanied the acquisition of young male slaves by single men.

Pedigree. Bred, like a dog. He'd never asked Rory if his parents had married for pleasure or under obligation. Though it seemed a foolish question now; they'd lived their lives in the system just like Rory, just like Geo himself.

He'd been a boy. Surely that was why Geo still used the word in his head. He'd been a boy who loved to hear "That's my good boy." And Geo had been too happy to feed him that praise. Literally too happy. He'd had to curb at least eighty percent of his praise in the early days. More advice from his mother: don't spoil him, don't condition him with sweet words any more than you condition him to respond only to the back of your hand.

Oh, god. He'd trained Rory. *Pedigree*, yes. He'd trained Rory like a fucking dog.

He expected Teddy to speak. Expected more censure, more sharpness. At this point, Geo would welcome it. He thought about canes and paddles and

whips, things he'd played with, but never seriously. Never as punishment. He wished he could hand it all to Rory and let him do whatever he wanted to do.

Which would be nothing. Rory would never raise a hand to him, not even in jest.

"How do I get myself back from this?" he said, finally, not knowing how much time had passed, not remembering the whiskey from the empty glass, even though he could taste it, smell it on his breath.

He forced himself to look over. Not that it mattered; Teddy's expression was impossible to read.

"I don't know, Geo. But that's the question I was waiting for."

"Oh yeah? I get some kind of prize now?"

"Maybe. I spoke to a contact I have."

The words were slow to penetrate. "You spoke to a contact? What does that mean?"

"We might be able to find him, if he's willing to be found. I need you to understand that, Geo. I believe you're sincere about your feelings for Rory, but he's the one who determines where it goes from here. If he doesn't want to talk to you, he doesn't."

"Are you—is this a joke? Teddy, is this a fucking joke to you?"

"Geo, tell me you understand that he may not be ready to talk to you right now. He may not be ready to talk to you ever. Tell me you understand that."

"Fuck." Geo ran shaking hands through his hair. "I understand."

"I don't think it's a joke. All the same, if you end up being a mad stalker, it's my reputation, because I'm vouching for you."

"I won't. I wouldn't. If he—if it turned out he didn't want to see me, that's—" He couldn't finish the sentence.

"We don't know. But those are the stakes, Geo. Are you absolutely certain you want to know? It's possible the fantasy outstrips the reality. And what you lived before was a fantasy. You'll never get that back." Teddy offered a very wry smile. "At least in part because I stripped it from you. Which I'm not exactly going to back off about, either. You're welcome."

"I can manage it. I need to know. And I still believe he loved me. I know you're saying he couldn't have, Teddy—"

"No, no, that's not what I'm saying. Not exactly. I'm saying that his behavior toward you was governed by the legal constraints on him. If he loves you, Geo, I suspect you'll discover his unconstrained behavior pleases you more than slavery ever did."

"Huh."

"Or I've read too many romance novels. Do you want me to talk to my friend? I'd need your name and Rory's. She was also looking for a location, since I told her I wasn't sure where you were from."

"I'll send you the information. Should I—is there money or—do I need to do anything?"

"No money. They don't accept any funding from people currently involved in the service. You aren't the only former owner searching for a slave, and there are slaves doing the same thing. Evidently there's a very quiet effort to reunite free people who wish to be reunited."

"Even though the law says—"

"None of the tactics used to do this are illegal, merely more organized than they'd be if it was individuals attempting to find one another."

"I can't believe this. My fingers are tingling. Is that a sign of shock or something? Wait. Hang on. Were you *testing* me? This whole conversation was a test, wasn't it?"

"And a warning. I can't force you to agree with me, Geo, but I think you might try to find the place in your head that understands Rory will never be your slave again, *before* you find him."

"But if he wants—"

"If he wants to use that word, if he wants to call you 'master,' then he'll be able to. But you might be better off entirely if you think of this as beginning a new relationship, rather than continuing an old one."

A new relationship. With Rory. Not a contract, not a debt, not an exchange of labor for care. A relationship, like the kind he'd attempted to have with men of his station, before he'd met Rory.

"I've screwed up every relationship I've ever had," he said.

Teddy chuckled darkly. "Oh yeah. Yeah, I can only imagine some of the complexities disappear if one of you is always right. Anyway, tell me more about Rory getting his way. I assume you bought him the double oven."

“Top of the line. Also a farmhouse sink, and I installed an espresso maker that had to be plumbed to the house. Well. I helped him install it. Actually.”

“You were kind of a lucky bastard, weren't you, Geo?”

“More than I knew.”

He left soon after, reeling, and the tingling had moved through his arms, down his legs. Geo lay in bed that night and tried to imagine Rory beside him. But this apartment was nothing like his house had been. And he made decent money, certainly enough to live, but not enough to afford what he'd given up.

How could he ever explain that to Rory? “I sold the house and gave away the money. I fled my family in shame, and to escape their pity.”

Some romance. And Rory—Rory wasn't used to worrying about such things. Hell, no slave should have ever had concern for money, for food. Could he keep them both on his current salary? Probably. If they lived thin and kept expenses down.

A relationship. But normal people would just get a job, and the idea of Rory working, leaving every morning, being away all day—no. Geo couldn't stomach that.

And if he wants to? He could be a pastry chef. He could be an auto mechanic, or a repairman doing house calls. He could go to school and be a doctor, or a politician.

Geo turned to his side and clutched his rolling stomach. It was too much, and too awful to contemplate.

Why? Because he needed to own Rory the way he had before? If that was true, there really was no point to trying to find him.

Geo considered it as he waited to see whether he'd actually vomit, or merely come very close to vomiting.

But no. It wasn't the idea of Rory being able to make his own choices. It was the idea of Rory out in the world, without Geo at his side. He allowed himself to contemplate absurd scenarios—Rory in a commercial kitchen (with a double oven), covered in flour dust, tossing his hair back carefully, with Geo leaning in the door frame to watch, as he had so many times at home.

Absurd, yes. Fantasy, yes. But his guts eased off, and he could breathe again.

He didn't think the problem was Rory following other paths, paths Geo didn't decide for him. It was the idea of Rory walking out the door to go to a job. That's the part he couldn't get past without his body seizing up.

Rory had loved it when they threw parties. He loved hosting, creating menus, greeting people and introducing them to one another. He'd insisted Geo invite new people to each gathering, not just the same insular set to which Geo tended to default.

Rory was an extrovert, Geo realized with sharp, sudden precision. He was energized those nights. Amorous, even, or as close as he allowed himself to come to it. Passionate.

That was the real Rory, the one beneath the perfect slave exterior. Act. Well, perhaps not entirely an act. He hadn't been faking the sense of sweet surrender when Geo spanked him over the edge into bliss. Or the gorgeous debauched release of the sex that naturally followed.

So he might have served Rory just a little bit. Not an exact balance, but there was no room between master and slave for balance. Between two men, in a relationship, even if they didn't abandon everything they'd done before? Yes. Surely it was worth trying.

Geo went back to the momentary flash of Rory in a kitchen, surrounded by trays of cookies and cakes and assorted delicacies. He fell asleep, finally, on the strength of that fantasy: the former slave doing as he pleased while his former master did the same, and watched.

Chapter Five

Crazy Maizy was the last one in the circle. Rory tried to pay attention to what she was saying, but a fly kept buzzing past his ear, distracting him. Plus, the man on the other side of Maizy had droned on and on for ten minutes, putting pretty much everyone into a coma.

“Anyway, I worked my butt off to be a good manager, you know? And what am I now? Nothing. But there’s this place I heard of, where they reunite people, former slaves and their masters—”

The group facilitator cut her off. “We don’t discuss that here. Nothing illegal, remember? Anyway, I think we’re done for the day. See you all tomorrow.”

Rory zeroed in on Maizy and tried very hard to look like he wasn’t following her out. It wouldn’t do to look too eager, or creepy, and it definitely wouldn’t do for any word to get back to Demon that he was talking to Maizy, especially not if she was known for talking about this thing where you could find your old master.

Unfortunately, she disappeared into the bathroom, and he had to find a way of waiting for her that looked like anything other than waiting for her.

A wave of people from group passed, on their way to dinner.

“You coming, Roar?” one of the other women called. (Everyone had picked up D’s nickname for him. He found he kind of liked it.)

“I’ll catch up. Let Demon know, please?”

“Sure thing, kid.”

A lot of them called him “kid,” too, which grated a little. In fact, he was older than Demon herself, though he could see people not understanding that. Where Demon seemed sure and angry and entirely resolute, Rory looked around a lot and thought carefully before getting involved in things. Still, he *was* twenty-four. Not that anyone meant anything by it.

The former slaves and indentures group—which D refused to attend—was actually a lot more helpful than he expected. He didn’t have to watch his words, and they all laughed along when someone cracked the kind of joke you didn’t really get unless you’d been a slave or indenture.

It was also enlightening. Rory had no complaints about Master. (Geo, Geo, Geo, dammit; it was one of the rules of the group, calling masters and mistresses by their given names, not their titles, but it was so fucking *hard*.) It had taken three meetings before he'd even admit to the occasional annoyance. Today he'd talked about the espresso maker. "I even told him I'd install it! All he had to do was click the buy button and it took me months to get him to do it."

Someone had said, "Oh, the dance of do-what's-best-you-fool-owner!" and everyone had nodded.

It had never occurred to Rory that other slaves could relate, or that he'd ever be in a position to discuss anything like this. His parents had distinctly warned against the kind of gossiping slaves could get up to, and told him the best policy was to never complain, never show dissatisfaction. It wasn't his place. When Demon asked if he wanted to find his parents, Rory felt guilty for admitting he didn't. They were perfect. He had tried very hard to be perfect for Geo, for himself, but now? He couldn't face his parents as this pathetic un-slave. A man with no education, no work experience, no personality outside of his identity as Master's slave.

God. He missed being Master's slave. Geo's slave. But more and more he missed it the way one misses childhood. Nostalgia and memory combined, but even if you longed for it, you wouldn't necessarily trade adulthood to go back in time.

He'd spent his entire life thinking he was a slave first, a man second, that it was his destiny, that it was all he needed: a sense of service, of belonging to one person, one couple, possibly a family.

Now, after thirteen measly months away from it, he wasn't so sure.

This, he had not confessed. Not to Demon, not to the former slaves group. His parents would be ashamed of how he'd turned out, despite all of their effort. They respected service above everything else. They would never understand that Rory no longer wanted to be a slave.

Rory hardly understood it.

Because he didn't want to go back to that life. But he did want to go back to Geo. He looked for Geo in every vehicle that passed him, around every corner he turned. He looked for Geo's name in every newspaper, and listened for his voice on the radios playing through open windows.

He'd do anything to find Geo. Even if Geo didn't want him like this, even if Geo was still looking for the slave, Rory had to find him. He even had a plan. He'd find a job, save his money, and get on a bus. He'd just show up, at Geo's house, and say hello. Maybe it would be for nothing. Maybe they could be friends. He doubted they could ever be lovers, because Geo needed a slave.

This certainty was a very deep, very dark strand of pain. It wove through his mind when he was trying to concentrate on conversations, and wound around his skin as he showered and dressed. Ever-present.

He could beg forgiveness, beg for acceptance, and Geo might even allow it. But Rory knew, deep in his bones, that he could never be the slave again. Even if sometimes that's what he wanted.

None of that mattered. What mattered right now was that Maizy knew how to find former owners. And Rory was damn well going to talk to her about it, no matter what Demon had to say. (And she'd find out. Demon found out everything eventually.)

He managed to fake-casually not-quite-run-into Maizy, pretending he was going back to the room for something.

"Oh, hey, Maizy."

"Hi, Roar. You look a little green, everything okay?"

Do not pass out. Stop thinking.

"Sure. Um. Can I ask you something?"

"Totally. You walking to dinner?"

"Yeah, just need to get something out of my room first."

"Cool, I'll come with."

Now he had to quickly think of something in the room that he could pretend to need.

"What's up, Roar? You really don't look so great."

"Nothing. I mean, I'm okay. Um. You were starting to say something in group, about the, um, thing where you could find your owner? Former owner, I mean. I was kind of intrigued."

Maizy rolled her eyes. "And then I was shut down by the police state we fucking live in. Yeah. Listen, you don't talk much, which either means your

people were so fucked up to you you're plotting their gruesome deaths, or that you miss it." Pause. "I miss it. I miss it a lot. But I'd appreciate you not saying anything. I know they say they're not gonna send us back to the camps, even if we maybe didn't wait to be released, but still."

Rory's breathing was quickly shooting into too-fast-too-fast range. "You—did you love your owner, too?"

"Love them? Well, okay, maybe a little. But they were really good to me. They made me do all this schooling, and trained me to manage the business because they didn't have kids, and as long as I was in charge of it, it would have to stay in the family, no matter who they hired." She offered a rueful shrug. "I kind of tried to run away once, so I was on the hook for twice the time. I think they figured I'd be there forever. I don't know. I guess I miss feeling useful. I know I'm supposed to be looking for a job, but I don't want a shitty entry-level position, Roar. I want to *work*. But it's not like I have references, so I'm stuck. And the second they find out you're a former indenture, the prostitute jokes start."

They got inside the room Rory and Demon shared, and Rory had to sit down. *Slow it down, slow it down*. It took him a minute to realize the voice in his head was Master's. Geo's, dammit. *Slow it down, Rory*.

"Oh god, you're crying. Sorry, I talk too much! I know I do that. So you had the really shitty owners, right? That's why you don't talk about them? Oh, shit, sorry, Roar."

"No—no." He choked and tapped his knees, trying to get his breathing back into a rhythm. "No. Him. One owner. And he was good."

Maizy sat down on the floor in front of him and tentatively patted his shoe. "You okay?"

"Sorry." *Slow it down*. Okay. He picked up his head to look at her. "He was good to me. I miss him. Can you help?"

"Well, yeah. Sure. I mean, I can tell you where I went. Though it's not like it's just a net search and they hand you an address. I went two weeks ago, and I'm still waiting." She made a face. "They said they 'investigate' first, to make sure the owner's not some kind of freak."

"Yeah. Please. Tell me where. I just—I need to see him. I feel like I can't do anything until I see him."

“Huh. Well, you might not say that. They’re trying to make sure everybody’s normal and sane, Roar, you know? There was a girl crying in the cube next to mine about how her owner loved her and she wanted to marry him and blah blah blah, and I could already tell they weren’t going to help her.”

Good to know. Rory squared his shoulders. “Thanks. And I don’t think I’m that pathetic, just—we worked really well together. And he had this amazing kitchen, that I pretty much redesigned, so…” *I’m not in love with him; I’m in love with his double oven and 30 cubic feet of refrigerator space.*

“How long were you there?”

“Seven years.”

“Oh, shit, Roar. Seven years? Man, I was only at my house for three, and it took six months to stop expecting to wake up there.”

Maizy understood, at least a little. Rory relaxed fractionally.

“Okay, well, I’ll let you know where to go, but is your girlfriend going to kick my ass? Because she scares the hell out of me.” The cheeky grin that followed somewhat eroded the message.

“Oh—um—no. No, I’ll take care of her, no problem.”

“Cool. So you know where the park is? Start there. It’s a little longer, but it’s easier to remember.”

Rory committed the directions to memory. They went to dinner.

Demon was a bit of a problem.

“Oh, fuck no. No fucking way. I’m not *helping*, Roar. Hell, I’m tempted to fucking report your stupid, sorry ass.”

Rory kept breathing, and walking, even though they were on their way to nowhere at all. Best to let D wear herself out.

“I mean, are you *kidding*, help you find him? I want to kill the sonofabitch! Crazy Maizy—I knew that little bitch was trouble!”

“She’s not a bitch, D. She’s nice.”

“Nice? Putting these fucking ideas in your head, like you’re gonna have some kind of tearful, joyful goddamn reunion! Fuck, Roar!” She kicked a

garbage can, which was evidently made of much stronger stuff than her canvas shoe. "Ow!"

"I'm not a child," Rory said. His voice was low, and steady, and hardly recognizable. "I'm not a child, D. Do I want to see Geo? Yes. And I'll do anything I need to do to make that happen, including not telling you about it. So you can be my friend, or you can decide you know best. But you can't do both."

They walked in silence for blocks. Demon was fuming, still angry, though no longer attacking innocent garbage cans. Rory felt oddly calm. It was done. He'd decided. The relief of having a path was greater than his fear of what he'd find at the other end of it. Maybe it would take weeks, or months, but at least it would feel like movement, action.

"I don't think you're a fucking child. Just, I think you're setting yourself up to be really hurt. And it's irritating, because I'm just watching it happen."

"I know that's a risk. And I'm willing to take it."

"Fine. Fuck! Fine, Roar. It's a goddamn risk you're willing to take. But the stuff you told me about him? Doesn't make him sound like the kind of guy these people are gonna be so happy to hook you back up with, you know? Or are you just not gonna tell them?"

"Not tell them about what?"

She waved her hands around. "Whips! Fucking chains!"

"D, come on. There were never chains, that's insane."

"Oh, sorry, whips but no chains, because chains would be crazy. Right. Sure. Just keep talking, Roar. You sound better all the time."

He sighed. Fighting with Demon was a waste of time; she wanted to cast Geo in a light that was vicious and malevolent. But he kept thinking maybe if he came up with the right explanation, she'd understand, and be on his side.

"It's hard to explain. But Geo didn't invent that stuff, D. And he introduced me to it, but I'd wanted it for years before we met."

"You met when you were sixteen."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. I always wanted to—hey, do you remember that movie, a few years ago, *Runaway Master*?"

She rolled her eyes. "I remember it was a piece of shit."

“Okay, probably, but do you remember the scene where the slave finally catches him, and she ties him up and gags him and blindfolds him?”

“And you think they’re gonna have sex or something, but they get interrupted, yeah, fucking tease.”

Rory looked over. “So, piece of shit movie that you watched really, really closely?”

“Oh, shut up, it was unavoidable. That fucking movie never stopped playing for weeks.”

“Are you blushing, Demon?”

“Is there a point to this story, or are you just fucking running your mouth for no reason?”

“Anyway, I watched that scene over and over again, and I didn’t think they were going to have sex, I thought she was going to cane him, or at the very least spank him. And I wanted to watch that.” Now he was blushing, too. “And Geo used to play that scene for me and make me describe it for him, how it’d feel with my hands tied together like that, how uncomfortable the gag would be, how I’d want to beg him for more, but I wouldn’t be able to.”

“Shit, Roar.”

“So it’s not like that was traumatizing. The stuff I told you about.” *And so, so much more.* “I liked it. I tried to be stoic, but Geo always knew just how to get to me, and that was—those were really good nights, D. I know you don’t really believe me, but at least know that he never did anything I didn’t want. I never asked him to stop.”

“Yeah. Well, I fucking begged, and it didn’t matter, so I guess it’s not like that makes it okay, to me, that big bad master-man did what he wanted and you didn’t complain, Roar.”

He sighed.

“And anyway, even if you’d wanted him to stop, you wouldn’t have asked. Just like you never ask anyone to stop, and you eat your entire goddamn meal at dinner, even when you don’t like the food. Damn, boy, you wouldn’t even know if you didn’t like something, you’re so fucking used to not being able to have an opinion. That’s what I’m fucking worried about, okay? You get to fucking live now, like you couldn’t before. You just don’t know it yet.”

But Rory didn't think that was quite the problem. He knew it. Maybe more acutely than Demon did. He just wasn't sure what he wanted to do with this new life.

Yet.

It was just like camp. He started to freak out.

"Can I get a cup of water for my boyfriend? Thanks. Hang on, Roar. Give it a minute."

They'd decided to keep going with their ridiculous made-up relationship. The marriage rights of former slaves were still being legislated in most jurisdictions, including this one. As it was, when Rory said "my girlfriend," most people seemed to hear "my wife," and let Demon come with him wherever they went.

Like the interview room, which was just big enough for three chairs. The guy doing the interview had a clipboard that he kept perched on his lap, but there definitely wasn't room for a table.

"Here. Sorry about the cramped quarters. We're really scraping by on a shoestring here."

"Totally okay. Here, Roar. Drink up."

He sipped the water while Demon and the guy (B-word? Barney? Bobby?) chatted about the poor state of funding for former-slave services.

"But hey, it's nothing to former-master services. Slaves get some bleeding hearts, but no one wants to be associated with masters, not even other former masters. Actually, other former masters least of all."

"What kinds of services would former masters need, anyway? Don't they pretty much just go back to their lives? It's not like they have nothing, the way we have nothing."

"You'd think, wouldn't you? But there's a lot of grief for some people, at the end of a relationship as deep as a master-slave relationship." B-name gestured to Rory. "You had a good one, right? I'm starting to be able to tell the good masters from the bad, just looking at their former slaves."

"What about me?" Demon asked.

Don't answer that, guy.

“Well, you’re not trying to find them, so probably not too good. I meant, though, that a lot of former slaves come through here, and sometimes you can’t tell at all about their past. But some of them?” He tapped idly on the edge of his clipboard. “Some of them are looking right in your eye, telling you they love their master, but they look hunted while they’re saying it. Gives me the creeps. Anyway, Rory, tell me who you’re looking for, and I’ll tell you what I do here.”

Rory had rehearsed this, and very carefully told how Geo had come around a few times as he reached saleable age, how his parents had told him that going to a single man before he married was the absolute best situation, and that Geo was from a good owner family.

“So you’re a legacy slave?” B-name sat back, staring at him. “You know, we did a whole workshop on the special considerations of legacy slaves, but I’ve never met one until this moment.”

“You mean *were*,” Demon said, eyes narrowed. “He *was* legacy slave.”

Barney (maybe) didn’t even look annoyed. “Well, one of the things we try to do is meet people wherever they are. Legacy slaves are far more likely to identify as slaves even into their new non-slave lives, because it’s an identity that goes back all the way to their birth.”

D’s face contorted. “Shit. That’s so fucked up.”

And it was. It really was fucked up. Rory hadn’t ever considered his form of slavery even being similar to the slavery of black people hundreds of years ago, but looking at Demon now, yeah, obviously she did.

“Sorry,” he murmured, ashamed all over again.

“Don’t be a fuckin’ idiot. Anyway, go on, tell him so we can leave.”

He outlined the part of the country, all the names he could remember from Geo’s family, and his own parents’ names, though he was very clear that he did not want to contact them.

“Sure.” Barney closed his file folder. “All right, that’s the information we need. We’ll get in touch with you at the number you gave us.”

“Will you—I mean, if you leave a message—”

“We’re discreet, Rory.”

“Thanks.” Oh god, it was really happening.

“It could take months, so try not to hold your breath. Though, you seem pretty solid, so I’ll try to speed it up. We do some background checks on former owners, nothing big, but it takes a little time. I won’t lie, I’m swamped here, and every file I can get off my stack is a win.”

Rory stood up. “Thanks a lot for all your help.”

“Sure thing. See you soon, Rory, Demon.”

They walked outside and Rory looked over. “What the hell was his name? I kept calling him Barney in my head.”

“Oh my god, Roar. No. It was *Berry*. With an ‘e.’”

“Berry? Okay, how was I going to remember that. Who has a name like Berry-with-an-‘e’?”

“The guy who’s gonna reunite your stupid romantic ass with Geo, so can it.” She dropped an arm around his shoulders, awkwardly, because she was three inches shorter. “I say we use all of our dinner credits on a huge bowl of ice cream and make ourselves sick.”

“Can we do that?”

“We’re free fucking people, Roar. We can eat ice cream for every meal.”

A memory shot through him, part-image, part-sensation: Geo placing a perfect scoop of ice cream on his stomach, then delightedly torturing him as it melted, telling him not to spill a drop. *Oh please*. He’d begged and begged and finally the ice cream had melted down his sides. Geo teased him, called him a very bad boy, then licked the ice cream off while pinching his nipples mercilessly, hands never moving south of his navel.

Rory had to lean against a wall and close his eyes for a long moment.

“You okay, Roar? Hey. You gonna faint again?”

“I’m okay. Sorry. I’m okay.” He was raw and jagged and sad. But okay. Yeah. Probably.

“You were thinking about him again, weren’t you?”

He let her pull him along at her side. “I miss him sometimes. No one’s ever seemed to know me so well. I miss that.”

For once, Demon didn’t say anything about Geo, or slavery, or how stupid Rory was. She squeezed his arm and said, “But what about ice cream? You gonna be all virtuous and hold out for real food?”

“No way. Ice cream for dinner. And if I puke later, you’re totally cleaning it up.”

“There’s my Roar. But there’s fucking no way I’m cleaning up your puke, son.”

“You will if I aim for you.”

D was so shocked, she couldn’t even speak.

“Ha,” Rory said. “Got you.”

“I can’t believe you just threatened to puke on me. You’re a sick prick, you know that, Roar?”

“Oh, I know.”

He tried to put the whole thing out of his mind, but it was hard. He just kept picturing that file folder, wondering if there was another one somewhere, if Geo was even looking for him. When they first left camp, he’d *known* Geo would search for him. But now he wasn’t so sure. There were so many different slaves, so many different owners, and a lot of them seemed to be trying to pretend none of it ever happened. Was Geo one of those? Was he eating breakfast and going to work and coming home to his big, empty house?

Or no, what if it was no longer empty? Was he playing the ice cream game with someone else?

Rory spent most of the night curled around his bloated, unhappy stomach, trying not to imagine Geo stringing up strangers in his playroom, whipping them until they cried and then blowing on their skin until they begged.

It was a long, uncomfortable night.

Chapter Six

A psychological evaluation. A fucking *psychological evaluation*.

Geo blew past Teddy and went straight to the wet bar. "I'm not doing it!" he called over his shoulder. He sucked down a shot of tequila and poured another. "Fuck this, Teddy, I'm not doing it."

"What if I was fucking someone, Geo, you ass? You don't even wait for a polite invitation to come in?"

Shot number three felt good. Yeah, that's it. That's about it. Geo slumped over onto the nearest arm chair. Tequila always felt a little bit like beating himself up, liquid punishment. Two more shots would ride the line, and the sixth would mean losing everything he'd eaten that day.

"I'm not doing it."

"Not doing what? No, you're not drinking it out of the bottle. Give me that."

"One more, barkeep! Fuck that, keep 'em coming all night!" Geo giggled. God, he was a fucking idiot on tequila. It had to be Pavlovian. He knew enough about body mass to know that three shots could not possibly have this kind of physical effect on someone his size. And yet, he wasn't pretending to be drunk.

"Here you go," Teddy said, and slammed a bottle of water into his hand. "Drink up, dear."

"Fuck you, Teddy."

"Oh, I don't think you should be trying to fuck anyone if this is what tequila does to you. What the hell's up your butt tonight?"

"Your fucking *contact* sent me a message."

"I must have missed where you started with, 'Thank you so much, Teddy, for helping my sorry ass out.'"

Geo sighed. "Sorry. Yeah. She—he?—said that we could 'start the process,' whatever the hell that means. But there was an attachment." He raised his eyes and tried to look scary. "A fucking psychological evaluation."

"To weed out all the crazies and freaks, yeah. Please tell me you did not respond with—" he waved his hand. "Please tell me you did not respond at all."

"I can't even *believe* this. I was *good*. I was one of the fucking *good ones*, Teddy! Dammit!" Another drink, but the water didn't hurt nearly enough. "Why should I have to—to prove myself? This is such bullshit."

"You don't have to do anything. But you wanted to find Rory, and this is the way you do that."

"Fuck it. I'll find him on my own."

"Oh yeah? Haven't you already tried?"

Geo slumped. "Dammit."

"What's your problem? Of course they're trying to assess people. Did you really think you were just going to get a phone number and that was it, happily ever after?"

"Oh can it with the fucking happily ever after bullshit. That's your line, not mine."

"Really? Okay, how would you describe what you want? From here it looks like you want to find the man you lost, court him, and spend the rest of your life with him. Or did I miss something?"

"Shut up, Teddy. Just fucking shut up."

"Did you even look at it?"

"At what?"

"The evaluation, Geo."

Fucking Teddy with his fucking stupid voice, like this was all normal, like everything was fucking *fine*.

"I hope you didn't drink tequila around Rory, or you really should be worried he's over your ass." Suddenly Teddy was looming beside him. "You can puke or you can go home. Your charming drunk act is a lot more charming when you're drinking other things. Puke or leave, Fairbanks."

"Or what?"

"Or I kick your ass out my door."

"You can't kick my ass," he said, proud he'd managed not to slur. "You have a *pussy*."

"Which means I have a lot to prove. Should I start with your face? Maybe knocking your brain around a little will improve your outlook."

Geo squinted up, reasoning through tequila. Teddy wasn't angry. Not really. Disgusted, yes. And irritated. But not angry.

An angry man would fight you, but he wouldn't be rational about it. A calm man who wanted to beat you for your own good was a much more alarming proposition.

"I'll be right back," Geo said and lurched to the bathroom.

Once his stomach understood the goal, it only took a couple of minutes to empty everything out. When Teddy came in with a glass of water and a damp towel, Geo accepted both.

"I'm a bastard."

"Yep."

"It was unexpected. The, uh, evaluation." Geo sipped some more water, sloshed it around in his mouth, and spat it into the toilet. "Fuck, Teddy. Sorry."

"I wasn't totally for this idea at first. Even when I talked to Madeline, I wasn't so sure. But she said there are a lot of safeguards in place, and that's why I was willing to do it, Geo. That's why I gave her your information. I *like* that there's a psychological evaluation. There's also a background check. I think you'll be fine on both counts, but I don't know everything, and I could be wrong. You could be a serial killer."

Geo did not roll his eyes. Because then he'd barf again, and there was nothing left, so it'd just hurt. "That the kind of thing they're evaluating me for?"

"Probably weeding out the stalkers and creeps. If they can do that with a psychological evaluation."

"Surprised you put stock in shit like that."

"Why? Because every psychological evaluation I've ever taken ruled me incurable?" Teddy shrugged. "It takes a while for things like that to catch up to reality. But I suspect whatever they're looking for in former owners is relatively straightforward. Like you said, you can wait for five years and see him all by yourself, right? Even if he didn't want you to, you could find him, show up, insist he acknowledge you. It's better for everyone if this kind of thing is controlled."

"So your friend Madeline is part of a secret non-government organization, which has access to some kind of software to analyze psychological

assessments, in order to help people commit a crime? And what, everybody just knows about it and nobody tells?"

"That's the fear, obviously. One bad ending and the whole thing collapses. Though you'll notice I've only given you a first name, and she's sending messages from a dummy account."

"All numbers, yeah, I noticed that. Tried to geo-locate it, too, and got a hit in Taiwan. I can keep digging into it, but she's smart enough not to work from her home network, I figured, so I gave up."

"You might leave that off the eval, Geo."

Geo tipped his head back against the wall. "Never let me drink tequila again. Seriously. I feel like all seven levels of hell."

"Let that be a lesson to you."

"Oh, shut up."

Waiting was going to kill him. He thought if he understood the process, it might be easier, but the plea for understanding he sent to Madeline (of the fake address) went unanswered.

He tried to stay away from Teddy's—partly because he realized he was treading heavily on a friendship that hadn't matured to the point where it was appropriate, and partly because he could only take so much of that guarded expression Teddy wore sometimes, which made him feel like a monster.

Geo had never settled on a hobby. Rory had once told him that he had a timeline of their lives in the boxes he stored up in the attic, all neatly labeled with Geo's hobbies: *Whittling Supplies*, *Coffee Roasting*, *Beer Brewing Equipment*. He liked his work, but when he was done for the day, he shut down his machines and moved on to other things. Lately he'd been reading a great many works of literature—Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Joyce. He enjoyed becoming so lost in the words that he no longer even remembered who he was.

And while he read, he ate.

It had gotten particularly bad lately, since he'd begun to hope. Hope, apparently, necessitated the consumption of fatty, pre-made foods in large quantities.

Which is how Geo came to be standing naked in his bathroom, disgusted and appalled, contemplating the body he'd ignored since the day they'd taken Rory away.

“No fucking discipline,” he mumbled. And was that another chin?

If someone called him right now to say Rory was waiting at his door, he'd be horrified. This was not the man he wanted Rory to see. This man was pathetic, and indulgent, and lacked self-control.

Geo Fairbanks signed up for the gym.

He hated the gym. At the old house, he'd had his own workout facilities, which Rory had used more than he had, but he'd done enough to keep up with his calories. He resented being forced, now, to go to a commercial gym, the kind of place where the lights were bright and there was no chance of Rory bringing him a refreshing drink, or bending over, with a grin, for a refreshing (fat-burning) fuck.

After the first workout—high on a cup of coffee, a grapefruit, and nothing else—he went home and threw away every piece of processed crap in his cupboards. Which left him nothing to eat, so he then filled the refrigerator with fresh vegetables and meat.

Rory could roast vegetables and make them taste like food. On his own, Geo gnawed carrots raw because every way he tried to cook them made them mush. Still, carrots were better than broccoli. Or, god, cauliflower. Cauliflower cooked was like some kind of vile vegetable vengeance, like he was being punished for his role in vegetable exploitation.

And still, he looked like hell. No, he looked old. He looked like an old man gone to seed, and even if that wasn't rational—even though he knew it had been months, not years, since he'd been able to face himself in the mirror—it didn't matter. He hated every bite of cauliflower, and every set of push-ups.

He also hated himself for continuing to drop all of his bullshit on Teddy, but after a week, Teddy called him.

“I thought you might have killed yourself.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Oh, am I interrupting another bout of self-pity?”

“Do you like the way you look? I mean, do you look at yourself and feel good, or do you think you're disgusting?”

“Are those my only options? I do all right. These days. There was a time when I avoided mirrors altogether because my appearance in them caused me such vertigo I felt sick. That the kind of thing you're talking about, Geo?”

But even in *another bout of self-pity*, Geo knew his disgust was probably a somewhat different brand than Teddy's. "I realized that I didn't want him to see me this way, so I joined a gym."

"And how's that working out for you?"

He slumped. "Shitty. I've gone twice and I hate it. Dammit, Teddy. I really am pathetic."

"Yep. But it'll pass. Probably. But consider it from the other direction—what if you see Rory, and he's gained weight? Would he disgust you?"

"Rory *can't* gain weight. He has to drink gallons of milk just to maintain muscle mass."

"Okay, so say you see him and he's scrawny. I almost guarantee you, he's not drinking gallons of milk right now."

"Huh. Okay. No, Rory could never disgust me. But I'm old, it's different."

"Practically ancient. Except I'm older than you, so I guess that makes me Father Time."

"You know what I mean."

"If you want to work off some energy, clean your house. Make some food."

"I bought myself vegetables. I hate vegetables."

Teddy laughed in his ear. "Let me guess—Rory liked cooking for you."

"He roasts vegetables, I think. But they're terrible when I try."

"Then find some recipes and practice, like everyone else. Maybe one of these days you could make Rory dinner instead of him running around serving your sorry ass."

The weird thing, he thought, after ringing off and studying the contents of his refrigerator again, was that he considered Rory the vulnerable one. Out there on his own, no one to look out for him, no one to provide for him, but in truth, Rory had all kinds of skills. Sure, Geo could make money, and he'd been the one with the social standing, and the wealthy upbringing, but Rory was the one who had all the tools necessary for survival literally at his fingertips. All the tools he ever needed: his brilliant brain and a certain amount of hand-eye coordination.

And clever use of fire. *I can make my own food. I can apply heat to vegetables and make them edible. Or, if not, I can learn.*

More than any one thing, though, he kept going back to the thing Teddy had said, weeks ago: *Be worthy*.

All right. He couldn't wake up tomorrow with six-pack abs, and he couldn't conjure enough money to buy a beautiful house, but he could certainly figure out one method of cooking cauliflower that made it edible. And if he was really lucky, maybe someday he could cook it for Rory, who'd love it no matter what, even if it was utterly disgusting.

Well. Maybe not cauliflower. Carrots, though. Carrots might be manageable.

Chapter Seven

Weeks passed.

Maizy got a message one morning and went happily to have a phone meeting with her former owners. She came back furious, and didn't even ask Demon to leave before she started talking.

"They want a fucking *slave!*" she shouted, vaguely in Rory's direction. "Can you fucking *believe* that? They were happy to hear from me and asked when I could come back. So I said, sure, let's talk about my wages and they went *silent.*"

"You might want to keep your voice down, sugar," D said, locking the door.

Rory shot a look at her. *Sugar?*

She shrugged.

"But seriously, can you fucking believe that? God! I could wring their stupid *necks!* Did they miss the part where slavery's fucking *over?* Did they, like, forget I'm not fucking indentured to them anymore?"

Maizy brought both of her fists down on the wall, and D grabbed her, forcing her to sit on the bed.

"Try not to break the room, Maizy. Take a few deep breaths. Have some water."

Rory didn't miss the cue. He handed her a bottle, and she wiped at her eyes.

"I'm not crying over *them*, I just—I guess I just thought maybe they'd—you know, they put so much time into my education, so much money, I guess I thought maybe I had, like, value to them. As an employee, dammit, not a fucking slave. I was supposed to be the manager of the shop, you know? And what, a slave manager is okay, but a free one isn't?"

"What did they say after that?" Rory asked.

"So, they were on speaker, you know? Because the people at the place have to listen. They like it more when the meetings are in their rooms, because then they have video, but my—but sometimes people are far away, so they do phone calls. So my, like, caseworker or whatever, said, 'Obviously, salary and benefits negotiations don't all have to be done right this second,' and something like, 'We're just brainstorming right now.'"

“Bitch,” Demon muttered.

“Oh no, she wasn’t. She knew. God! She must have asshole owners showing up all the time. She goes, ‘So what’s a ball park salary Maizy can expect you to offer? I just want her to have all of the information at her disposal before she makes any decisions.’ She trapped them. They go, ‘Well, we really hadn’t thought that far ahead,’ and she said, ‘Of course, I understand completely. Well, I’d be happy to facilitate future meetings, after you’ve given it some thought and drawn up a preliminary employment contract for her.’ *Ha.*”

Demon grinned, viciously. “So in other words, don’t bother calling back unless there’s money on the table.”

“Yeah, it was good. But you know, I just—I remember them screwing people over. I remember them fucking people over for sick time, or pretending they lost vacation requests, and the whole time I was thinking, they’d never treat *me* that way, I’m practically their fucking *kid*, I’m taking over the business for them when they retire so they can just sit back and watch the money roll in, they have to treat *me* well.” She wiped her eyes again. “That was pretty stupid, right?”

“Only a little stupid,” D said.

Rory glared at her. “It wasn’t stupid at all, don’t listen to her. I totally understand, Maiz. It’s really hard to know what was real and what just felt real because we had to make sense of it somehow.”

“Yeah. Like, I guess all those times they were sweet to me, I was never more than their trained puppy? I could balance the accounts and track promotions and design all their marketing shit, and the whole time they were just congratulating themselves for training me so well.”

“Maybe they’ll call back,” Rory suggested. “I mean, maybe they’ll think it over, you know? Maybe they’ll realize you do mean more to them than that.”

This time Demon glared. “Oh don’t even start. You deserve better than them, Maizy. Don’t listen to Roar. You deserve better than those assholes, and you better believe that.”

“I want to. But just—so then what, I get a job? I get a normal job, and I have to find a place to live, and I have to pay the bills? They used to say that all the time. ‘Slavery’s not so bad, Maizy, at least you don’t have to pay the bills.’”

“Bills aren’t so hard,” D said.

“But I don’t *want* to. I want to go home. And I know it’s stupid, I know it sounds so fucking stupid, but I was happy there. At least, I was happy enough.”

“And what, you thought you’d move right back in and do all the same work, only this time they’d give you a check at the end of the week?”

“I—yeah. I mean, I guess I thought that would work out for both of us, you know? They’d get a return on all the time and money they invested in me, and I’d actually get compensated, like a free person, for all the time I invested in their business.”

Demon reached around for a one-armed hug. “You *are* a free person. And you’re way better off without those losers. They so don’t deserve you. Fuck ’em, Maizy. You have all that knowledge and experience now, so fuck ’em. You can take off and do whatever the hell you want, anywhere in the world. Right?”

Maizy sighed. “It’s all so big. So scary. This just seemed so much easier than starting over.”

“We’re all starting over. Hell, Rory’s starting over, and he’s totally in love with his old owner.”

Maizy, sniffing and tear-stained, looked up. “Are you really? Like in a novel?”

I’ll get you later, he thought at D, who didn’t seem all that worried about it. “I don’t know. But I miss him.”

“Miss him, like, miss living in his house, or...”

“Just miss him,” Rory said. “Anyway, I’m hungry. Are you guys ready to eat?”

“I’m sick of the food here. I wish we could go somewhere else with our stupid credits.”

“Let’s find Maizy a job this week. Where do you want to live, Maiz, huh? The fuckin’ world is your oyster.”

Maizy rolled her eyes, but Rory could tell she was kind of relieved by D’s bravado. “I don’t know. I mean, I gotta live here, right? Until I have enough money to move?”

“Baby, there’s room and board subsidies. Didn’t you pay attention to the brainwashing anti-brainwashing slave camp?”

“Um. Not really?”

“Oh my god. And I know Rory didn't pay attention, 'cause I was there. You two have a lot to learn about survival in the wild.”

“Food,” Rory said. “You can mentor us on the way to food.”

“I really should.” Demon got up, struck a pose in the middle of the room. “I should set up shop as a fuckin' former-slave mentor! Here's how you get a job, here's how you find an apartment. I'd be great. I'm motivational, right?”

“That's one word for it,” Rory muttered, pulling Maizy up and shooping both of them toward the door.

“I think you're motivational, Demon. I'm motivated.”

“Thanks, Maizy.” D stuck her tongue out at Rory. “It's nice to be appreciated for my gifts.”

Watching D ham it up for Maizy made him wonder about her life before. She'd been a slave three years, after being arrested for something “stupid and ill-thought-out,” whatever that meant. She'd picked a term of indentured labor instead of jail, and it was supposed to be the clean kind. It should have been more like work-release than actual slavery, and her owners were never supposed to violate her bodily sovereignty, which Rory assumed meant no sex. “I was supposed to be a file bitch,” she'd told him one of those first long days of walking. “Instead, I was just a bitch.”

He followed along behind them, Demon's arm now over Maizy's shoulders, and wondered who D had been before. And, even more interesting, who she'd be in the future.

The call came in the morning, while they were at breakfast, confirming his appointment that afternoon.

“That's actually pretty slick,” D said, turning the little memo paper over in her hand. “No one's going to ask you about something that sounds like a medical thing, right? Huh.”

Rory took the paper back. “Do you think that means—what do you think that means? Do you think he's—could he be here, like right now?”

“Don't know, Roar. Ask Maizy how it works.”

Maizy had received a similar message, and ended up speaking with her former owners over the phone that same day. Another resident, Turbo, had an appointment with his caseworker, who informed him that his former owner was not fit for a meeting at this time. (“Hey, maybe you and Turbo should hook up, Demon!” Maizy said, giggling. “You could be Demon Turbo! Or Turbo Demon!”)

There were rumors that sometimes the owners were actually in the building, and you could decide whether you wanted to see them, while other times your worker was only in touch to tell you they were still trying to find your owner, and not to worry too much about it.

Rory had no idea what to expect.

He couldn't eat anything. The idea—the slim chance—that Geo might be in the same town made him feel shaky and unmoored. What if they'd decided Geo was unfit? What did that mean? Or, what if they decided that he, Rory, was unfit? (He could tell D still thought so.) Hearing Geo's voice, though. He might be able to do that without puking. He might be able to hear his master's voice and not fall apart. Maybe.

“You have to eat something.”

“Why give myself more to throw up later?”

D wrinkled her nose. “That's disgusting.”

“It's true, though. I can't even think about this. I can't even imagine what's going to happen.”

“Yeah, well, maybe that's a sign, Roar. Maybe this isn't such a good thing if even thinking about it makes you sick.”

He understood what she was thinking, but it wasn't quite accurate.

“It's not seeing him, it's—it's like, I've been building this up, and if nothing happens, if they tell me they're still looking into it, then that's one thing, and I'll just keep building it up. But if we go there and they actually contacted him? If I know that he's sitting somewhere right now, thinking about me? It's like vertigo. It's like standing on top of a tall building and spinning until I'm sick, until I can't tell which way is up. I'm not afraid of seeing him. I'm just—I just have no idea what happens next.”

“Well buck up, son, because we gotta head over there.” She paused. “You know you don't have to do this right? I mean, if you don't want to.”

“That would be so much worse. I have to do it, I have to know.”

“I figured. Just thought I’d mention it.”

By the time they were ushered into another tiny room, Rory was shaking.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me. They’re going to think I can’t handle it, fuck, D, they’re not going to let me—”

“*Roar.*” Her hands descended on his shoulders with a fucking painful grip.

He stopped talking.

“I’m not leaving your side. We’re gonna sit here, we’re gonna talk to Berry-with-an-‘e’ and he’s gonna tell you what’s going on, okay? And anything else that happens, you can decide to keep going or take off. Got that?”

Right. Right. He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

“You okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“Then you should probably sit down and try to act a little bit fucking normal, boy, or they’re gonna kick you out.”

Rory opened his eyes. “So is that part of the motivational speech, or what?”

“You tell me. You feeling motivated?”

Actually, he was, kind of. “Shut up, D.”

“Uh huh. Yep, I’m gonna charge by the fucking *hour*, man. Maybe by the half-hour, for phone consults. People could call me just before they go into their job interviews and shit, and I’ll tell them to fucking suck it up.”

The door opened, and both of them turned.

“Hi, sorry for the delay.” It was Berry again. “Please sit down, both of you. Or—okay, here, Demon, you can have my chair and I’ll stand.”

“Nah, I’ll stand. Rory definitely needs to sit.”

Sitting was the last thing he wanted to do. He wanted to run around in circles, or jump rope, or climb a mountain. He was still shaking, but D pushed him into a chair and clamped her hands down on him again.

Which was good. Grounding. He looked at Berry, who was flipping through a folder.

“Okay. Sorry. I’m a little scattered, and we have, I think, six in-person meetings happening right now, which taxes the staff some. Right, then. Rory.”

Just tell me what’s happening. Stop flipping through papers and tell me what’s going on.

Rory bit down hard on his tongue and managed to stay silent.

“So I’m going to give you the basic update on your case, and then there are a few decisions to make, but I’ll be with you every step of the way. You ready?”

This time Berry looked up, and Rory tried very hard to not look like he was having a panic attack.

“Should I keep going?”

“Sorry. Sorry, I’m really nervous.”

“Perfectly natural response. Laughing, crying, needing to take a minute alone—there are a lot of ways that people handle this, Rory, and I’ve probably seen them all.” He glanced back at the closed door, then focused again. “You ready?”

“Yes,” Rory said, and D squeezed his shoulders.

“All right. Let’s get started.” Berry paused, and Rory braced himself. “Rory, we found Geo. He is no longer living in the house or the town where you last lived, but we found and contacted him. In fact, he had already started the process on his end to find you, with one of our local agents, so that definitely sped things up.”

“He—he was looking for me?”

“And making himself something of a nuisance, though the agent I talked to said his nudges were all in line with what we consider acceptable behavior. He did not, at any point, demand your information, or threaten you, the agent, or himself.”

“People do that?” Demon asked.

Geo’s looking for me. Geo’s LOOKING FOR ME.

“People do a lot of irrational things,” Berry said. “At this point, between the information I’ve gathered, and the file sent to me by our agent, I’m willing to approve a meeting between you and Geo. If you’re interested.”

“I’m interested. When? Where? Here? Do I have to go to him?”

“Breathe, Roar, or you’re gonna pass out.”

Right. Breathing. But he could see Geo! Everything was going to be okay! All right, that was stupid, but his entire body thought it was true.

“I thought you might be interested,” Berry said. “This is the part where things get a little intense, and I need to tell you again, Rory, that you are in charge here. You’re calling the shots. Okay?”

Things aren’t intense enough?

“Okay,” Rory forced himself to say.

“I took the liberty of setting up a meeting, since both you and Geo had expressed an interest in such a meeting.”

“Wait. What do you mean? Is he—is he here? Like right now?”

Berry sat back in his chair, pushing the folder closed. “If he was here, would you be interested in seeing him? Or is it too much too soon?”

“No. I mean yes! It’s not too soon.”

“It’s pretty fucking fast,” D said. “This how you usually run things?”

“Sometimes. There’s not really a ‘usual’ case. But I spoke with the man on the phone, and he sounded—the right amount of eager. If that makes sense.”

“Not really, no.”

“D, shut up. If you’re saying Geo’s here, I want to see him. As soon as I can.”

“Roar, I don’t think—”

“He said *I’m* the one calling the shots, D. And I want to see Geo. So is he here or not?”

Berry nodded. “He’s here. There’s some paperwork I need you to complete first. But let me move you to a conference room.” He glanced up at Demon. “Our conference rooms are all monitored, audio and video, and the tapes are saved for a year. I’ll be present the entire time, and Rory can invite you to be present as well. Geo has a friend with him, apparently, though I have them in the other waiting room.”

Two waiting rooms. Right. You really wouldn’t want to run into your former owner on the way to your appointment. Or Rory would, maybe, but this was more controlled.

“A friend?” he asked, some of his elation ebbing. A friend? What did that mean? Was it someone Rory knew?

“I can find the name on the sign-in sheet, if you’d like. Do you need me to do that before you make a decision?”

“What? No. No, I don’t care who’s with him, I want to see him.” Rory stood up, feeling steadier now than he had before. “You said something about paperwork?”

Berry stood as well, and motioned them out into the hallway. “I’m putting you in conference room C. I’ll be right back.”

He ushered them into a bigger room, with a table, six chairs, and a bench along one wall. Rory couldn’t sit down, couldn’t stay still.

“I’m not sure about this,” Demon said, leaning against a wall, watching him.

“I can’t believe he’s here. I can’t believe I’m going to see him! Did I tell you they had to chain him to a truck so he wouldn’t come after me? They did. They had to chain him to a truck, and he still tried to break out of it, because I was fighting and he wanted to help me.” Rory had no idea what he was talking about, but the words just kept coming. “And I heard them talking, too, after they sedated me. No, I mean after I woke up. They were saying, ‘Did you see that guy?’ and ‘Never seen one of ’em fight like that before.’ Like he really cared about me, like he cared about me more than any owner cared about any other slave, you know?”

“Roar, you really need to breathe.”

He tried to slow down, but it was hard.

Once Berry came back with the papers, at least he had something to focus on. And D made him actually read them all before signing, which was annoying, but probably a good idea.

“I’ll bring you another bottle of water,” Berry said, gesturing to the empty bottles on the table. “It’ll take me a few minutes to go over the paperwork with Geo, and then I’ll bring him in, okay?”

“Good, yeah, great. Sorry, I’m trying to be, um, rational.”

“It’s a very emotional moment, Rory. I get it. I’ll be back, but it’ll likely take another twenty, thirty minutes. All right?”

“Right. All right. Thank you.”

Berry waved and walked out.

It was the longest twenty-two minutes of Rory's entire life, eclipsing the day he'd waited, after being sold, for Geo to collect him. He'd thought nothing could be longer than those three hours, but this was far, far longer. This was an epoch, compressed like taffy into twenty-two minutes.

Then Berry was there, and a man Rory had never seen before, and last, last of all, Geo, *Master*, and Rory stood there, tingling like a lightning rod in a thunder storm, mouth open, unable to speak.

“Roar, you gotta breathe,” Demon said, so distantly she might have been in the next room. “I told you, you should have eaten something—”

Geo stood in the doorway, staring at him, and Rory couldn't drop his eyes this time, couldn't look away, even though D was speaking again, and the other man, the one he didn't recognize.

“Rory.” Geo reached out. “Rory, you should sit down—”

Too late. The dark tunnel closed in around him and everything went black.

Chapter Eight

Geo started toward Rory, heart pounding, when the girl held up a knife.

“Stay right there.”

“But—”

“Yeah, I saw the whole fucking thing, big man. You stay right the fuck there.” She knelt, touched Rory’s forehead gently, and even so, Geo wanted to rip her arms off.

Stop it. She’s trying to help. He quashed, with an effort, the voice in the back of his head screaming *mine, mine, mine, don’t touch him, he’s mine.*

“I’ll get help,” the man, Rory’s caseworker, whatever the hell that meant, said. “I’ll be right back.”

“What’s all this?” Teddy’s hand, strong and firm, squeezed his shoulder.

“It’s some sort of blood pressure issue. His doctor said it wasn’t that uncommon, and it would probably stop altogether by the time he was thirty. He’s usually back inside of five minutes. If I could just—”

“You stay right there, both of you.” She glanced back at the door, and Geo started to move forward anyway, his entire body demanding to go to Rory, touch him, breathe him in, goddammit, but Teddy held him in place.

“How’s his heartbeat?” Teddy asked. “You can put the knife down. We aren’t coming any closer until you want us to.”

Traitor! How could he say that? Geo needed—needed—

Needed the knife-wielding crazy leaning over Rory’s body to put away her knife. Yes. Good idea.

“Hey, I don’t take goddamn orders from you.” The girl’s eyes narrowed. “Are you another one? Another fucking *owner*?”

“Not at all, never took any part in it. Please put the knife down. My friend has been searching for the young man on the floor for months and now you’re standing over him with a knife. You understand how he might be anxious.”

“Years—” Geo cleared his throat, eyes returning to Rory. “He was with me for years—please let me—let me—”

“Stay there.” Her eyes never left them, but she lowered the knife. “Roar, baby, you gotta wake the fuck up.”

“Why don’t we try to get him onto the bench?” Teddy suggested, sounding calm and reasonable.

Calm. Reasonable. It made Geo want to tear his throat out. No one should be calm while Rory was lying there, unmoving.

“Oh right, like I’m gonna trust you.”

“You don’t have to trust me. This building is full of people doing something quite illegal, and I’m at the very least an accessory. You can call for help at any time. I’m sorry, we haven’t met. I’m Teddy.”

“You people are all the same. Don’t try your charm with me, you asshole. I don’t buy it.” The girl leveled a look at them and, in it Geo saw just a spark of Rory, his Rory; beautiful defiance and bone-deep seeking.

He didn’t even know he’d gone to his knees until he was there, holding open his hands. “I love him. Please.”

“We were searched on the way in,” Teddy said. “We have no weapons.”

“Yeah, they searched me, too, stupid.”

“Teddy. Actually.”

The girl rolled her eyes. Younger than Rory. And more afraid.

At least, more afraid than he’d been when he was safe in Geo’s arms. Geo could tell, looking at his sallow skin and sunken eyes, that things had changed since then.

“We should have run away,” he said, breathing too fast. “He begged me and begged me. But there was nowhere to go where we could just be. And I didn’t think they’d take him, against his will—”

“Geo—”

“Why don’t you just *be* two people, equal fucking people, with jobs and a joint checking account, you asshole? Why’s it gotta be about ownership? Why’d you need him to be a slave?”

But he hadn’t, not really. He’d loved that part, and he felt a stupid attachment to the custom, despite its ill uses, but that part had not been for him.

He looked up at the girl. "He needs to be a slave. He knew that long before we ever met. I would take him any way he'd have me. Please let me near him. If I could just touch his hair, I might be able to breathe."

"Fuck," the girl said, after a second. "You're pretty sick, you know that?"

"He's in love, sweetheart. Surely you can see he's no danger. He's groveling on the floor like a dog."

Was that what he was doing? It hardly mattered. He needed Rory, needed to hear his voice, heal his wounds, whatever they may be.

"I'm not your sweetheart," the girl said. She put the knife down, still in arms-reach. "Fine. You can help move him."

Six feet away. Geo choked and lurched forward, but Teddy held him back again.

"Sit, you fool. I'll help move him."

"Don't touch him!"

Teddy raised his eyebrows. "Sit on the bench, Fairbanks. Or I'm going to tell the Amazon she can tie you up there to keep you in line." Then his face softened a little. "I'm bringing him to you. Sit down."

He could do that. Even if watching Teddy move forward, bend, touch Rory's face, feel his neck for a pulse—

Geo looked away. *Don't touch him, he's mine!* But he wasn't. Not anymore. Geo knew that. But he couldn't escape the paradox of wanting Rory to be his slave, and wanting Rory to *choose* that, to choose him. It was impossible. All of this was impossible.

Except Rory, right here, close enough to smell. Beside him.

Tears fell from Geo's eyes, and he brushed them away.

"Rory," he murmured, daring to brush too-long hair from Rory's face. "What have they done to you?"

Teddy and the girl spoke, but he paid no attention to the words. They fell past his ears without making any sense as he touched Rory's hair.

"You don't need to know my name, asshole."

"Well, I'm Teddy. And this is Geo. I'm happy to finally see Rory."

"Oh, I just bet you are."

"I really wasn't ever an owner. I had no part in any of that, didn't even live where I knew people who were slaves."

"You seem pretty fucking chummy with *him*."

"Geo's my friend."

"Uh huh."

"It's all over now, you know. No one can ever make you go back."

"Don't be fucking stupid. I'm not afraid of you, I'm afraid for Rory, because he thinks he's in fucking love, but he doesn't understand that you can't be in love with someone who owns you, you sure as hell can't be in love with someone you own."

"I would have probably said the same thing. But look at them. What do you see?"

"Delusional idiots."

Teddy laughed low. "Maybe so. Maybe all people in love are delusional idiots, regardless. I was hoping for a cup of coffee. If I leave you here, can I be certain you won't cut anyone with your knife?"

"No. But it's dull. And it's not big enough to do real damage, anyway."

"Not without the right training. With the right training, you can do damage with your fingertips."

"Then that's what they should be teaching us, back at their fucking camps."

"Can I bring you a coffee? That's where I would have used your name, if I knew it."

"Ha ha. Fine. You can call me Demon."

"Coffee, Demon?"

"Yeah. Fine. But just so you know, I'm picking out my own cup, randomly, so don't try to do anything cute."

"Understood. I'll be back shortly. Try to resist the urge to scratch anyone with your tiny, dull blade while I'm gone."

"Asshole."

Silence, after the door shut.

"What the fuck did you do to him to make him think he loved you? Drugs? Brainwashing?"

It took Geo far too long to realize the question was directed at him. The room had narrowed to just Rory's body, breathing deeply, still unconscious, and a soundtrack of disconnected voices. He blinked and looked up at the girl, who was hunched over on a chair, eyeing him with suspicion.

"Forgive me. I didn't hear you."

"I said, was it brainwashing or drugs? You did something to him. Some kind of conditioning, some kind of sick trick to make him think he loves you."

It should have been ludicrous, but icy tentacles snaked into Geo's guts.

"Oh god, is that what he thinks? He thinks I brainwashed him?" He turned back to Rory, blinking rapidly. "No. No, honey, no. Please don't believe that."

"No, idiot, *he* thinks he fucking loves you. But unlike him, I know what love is, and he told me the shit you did to him. That's not fucking love, you bastard."

"Shit I did to him?" Because surely Geo remembered everything that had ever passed between them, from that first moment, that first blissful ritual buckling of Rory's collar, before they knew each other well enough to laugh, when all they knew was their eyes met—Geo's searching, Rory's tentative, guarded by long lashes, never daring to look at him outright—and everything around them grew dim.

"You know what I'm fucking talking about," the girl said. "Whips? Paddles? Tying him down? Any of that ring a bell, Master Monster?"

God, but Rory loved to be tied down. "Blindfolds," Geo murmured as Teddy was coming back in, clutching a tray of cups. "Aw, Rory, you have to wake up. Baby, please."

"Did you just say *blindfolds*? You bastard."

"Well, this is cheerful," Teddy said. He offered the tray to the girl. "Demon? Dealer's choice."

"Fine. You tell me, then, not-an-owner. Do whips and paddles sound like the kinds of things that really spell your love out for someone? Because I've heard a lot of stories, and somebody's gotta help me convince Rory that this—this monster isn't good enough for him."

"Whips and paddles, huh?"

Geo looked up when the chair scraped across the ground, and waved away Teddy's offer of coffee. "He likes paddles. Mostly. He likes them more if you

tie him down first, so he can fight against the restraints.” When both of them stared back at him, uncomprehending, he swallowed. “He *likes* that. I would never tie him up if he didn’t like it.”

“You don’t know what he likes, you moron. He was your fucking slave! I was a slave, too. I know the goddamn rules.” The girl, Demon, turned to Teddy. “They don’t care what you like unless they’re taking it from you. The more you hate something, the more they enjoy it. Rory has no fucking idea what he’s talking about. I don’t know what the hell was going on, but it wasn’t fucking love.”

“Sounds terrible. How long were you a slave?”

“Three years. Which maybe isn’t as long as it felt, or I’d’ve ended up like *him*.” She slumped back in her chair and tentatively sipped her coffee. “Oh god. That’s good.”

“What have they been giving you out at your camp, Demon? This is terrible.”

“The coffee tastes like boot polish. You can force yourself to drink it as long as you try hard not to breathe. The shelter’s a little better, but it’s rationed, one tiny little cup a day.”

“Please allow me to buy you real coffee, then. Not here. Geo? I think now would be a good time to work on waking Rory up. I’m not sure where our medical expert is, but it would be good if Rory was awake when they arrived.”

Geo looked up again. “I’m not—I’m afraid I’ll frighten him again.”

“Then let Demon and I wake him up.”

It was nearly impossible to move away from Rory’s side. Geo fought nausea when Teddy knelt and lightly slapped Rory’s cheeks.

“Rory? Hey, wake up now, Rory. You really need to wake up and open your eyes.”

But then those eyelashes—eyelashes he dreamed about, eyelashes he’d pictured thousands of times since they’d taken Rory away—began to flutter.

“Oh, thank god,” Geo whispered.

The whisper drew Rory’s sleepy attention. His gaze sharpened.

“Geo—sorry—Master—”

Geo went to his knees, touched Rory's hand. "No. Say it again. Say my name, Rory."

And oh, god, that sweet, sweet smile. "Geo. Missed you."

It didn't matter that he was the master, that he was the one who was supposed to be in control. Geo put his head down on Rory's knee and wept.

The EMT ruled Rory just fine and told Geo to watch his stress level.

He actually blushed, right there in front of Rory, Teddy, and Rory's Amazon friend.

"I'll be fine."

"It's nothing to be embarrassed by," the young woman said. She leaned forward. "It's hard to transition to freedom, but it's worth it, I promise." Then she packed up her things and walked out, not seeming to notice the heavy silence in the room.

"She just—um—" Rory reached out, tentatively, and touched his face. "It's hard to transition to freedom, Geo. But it's worth it." Then he laughed until he couldn't breathe, and Geo pulled him in close, smelled him, smelled the wrong soap, the wrong shampoo, and underneath, the entirely right smell of Rory, Rory, Rory. Rory's skin, Rory's sweat.

"They're both insane," Rory's Amazon said distinctly. "They're both completely insane. Don't tell me this is normal."

"I think situations like this don't have a normal."

Geo looked up without letting go of Rory, still savoring the way Rory's body melted into his. "Did you say something about coffee earlier?"

"I still think he spit in it."

"Why would he do that?"

The girl shrugged, like assholes didn't need a reason. Which—fair enough.

"I'm fat," Geo said, needing to get it out of the way first. (He thought he heard Teddy snicker.) "I'm fat and soft and I'm sorry. I will be better. I should be better. You deserve better, Rory."

Rory pulled back to blink at him, puzzled and uncertain, but it was the Amazon who spoke.

“Are you *fucking kidding me*? You owned him, like a dog, for seven years, and you’re apologizing for *this*?”

“Demon, shush,” Rory said, not looking over. “Did you lose the way to the gymnasium while I was gone? Or no—they said you moved.”

“I don’t have the house anymore. I’m sorry. My place now is—is not great. Fuck. I didn’t think this would actually happen. I should have prepared better.”

Rory touched his face again, not laughing this time. “I don’t care about any of that. Take me home. Wherever you are is home.” He took a deep breath. “I’m trying really hard to call you Geo. I thought D had pretty much drilled it into me, but it’s really hard in person.”

D? Oh, Demon. The Amazon. The Amazon has a name, and it’s “Demon.”

“Good work there,” Teddy said (to Demon). “I’ve been trying similar things, but Geo’s got a hard head.”

“Oh please, Rory’s a fucking idiot over this whole thing. Everything’s Master this, Master that. Blah, blah, blah.”

“D, shut up. Um. She’s a notorious liar, don’t listen to her.”

“Geo was the same way. Except he must have been more convincing, because I actually started to believe him.”

“Because *you* haven’t been a fucking slave.”

Geo inclined his head. “I don’t think your friend likes me very much.”

“She doesn’t want me to get hurt.”

“I don’t want you to be an *idiot*,” the girl corrected, crossing her arms.

“Hard to imagine that other people won’t be hurt by the things that hurt us,” Teddy mused. “I don’t know how this works now. Can we go get some lunch? Are we stuck here?”

“I don’t know how to move out of the shelter,” Rory said. “I need to get my things. And probably there’s some kind of bill I have to settle up, I don’t really know.”

“So it’s like that? You’re just fucking leaving? God, Roar, I guess that’s fucking it, just fucking throw your freedom away!”

“No. No, D, it’s not like that—” Rory pulled himself upright. “D, come on—”

The girl stood up, side-stepped around the far side of the table. “You know, fuck you, Roar. Never you fucking mind me. I’m fine.”

“Demon, please don’t—”

Teddy turned his chair, which was still between the girl and the door. He didn’t stand. “You’ll regret leaving. You already regret even considering it. We aren’t taking him anywhere right now, Demon. Stay. I’ll buy everyone lunch—from a restaurant, no poison—and we’ll talk it through.”

The girl shifted on her feet, eyes darting to Rory, then back at Teddy. “They’re so fucking stupid, they don’t see what’s right in front of them. You see it, though, don’t you? You see that nothing’s all right. That nothing is fixed.”

“I see that they’ll need some friends if they ever want it to be all right.”

“Well, I’m not gonna turn down decent food. The shit they have at the shelter is barely better than the fucking camp.”

“Great. Do you have any requests? We should probably order in, as much as I’d like to get out of this little room.”

“There’s an Indian place I’ve been planning to go to, whenever I get paying work,” Demon said, still not sitting down.

“Indian it is.”

Teddy and Demon worked out the order, and Demon went down the hall to ask about getting food delivered. But Geo stayed on the tiny, hard bench, with Rory half on his lap, nestled against his neck.

Thank god, thank god, thank god.

Chapter Nine

Demon wasn't the only one who thought Rory leaving the shelter to move in with Geo was a bad idea.

"We don't generally recommend such an extreme move so soon after reuniting," Berry said, mostly to Rory, though he glanced at Geo a few times, too. "As hard as it is to believe you won't be separated again, the situations with the strongest outcomes seem to be the ones where people take it slowly, Rory."

"He's free now," Geo said, and leaned forward, like he was about to get mean.

Rory touched his knee and willed him not to start a fight.

"But you're *free* now. I mean, it's one thing if you aren't interested—but if you are—"

"I know. It's okay." Rory took back his hand, but kept leaning against Geo. "All right, Berry. In your slower version of events, how does this go? What do we do tonight? How slow are you talking? Geo has a life, a job, he can't just hang around here until someone deems me free enough to make my own choices."

He hadn't meant it to be rude, but that's how it sounded. After a very slight hesitation, he let it stand. That *was* what they were talking about. And he was willing to hear it, but not willing to let anyone think he didn't know he could walk out of here at any second.

Because he could. That, more than anything, made it all right to stay and listen.

"The situations I've seen work out tend to be the ones where the principal participants can be near one another but not together all the time for at least a month, maybe two, before making any permanent decisions," Berry said, tapping his folder. "Obviously in this case—"

"I'll relocate. It doesn't matter. I'll be wherever Rory needs me to be."

"That sounds—permanent," Rory murmured.

"I'm *not* losing you again. I watched—I fucking *watched*—"

“That’s not what they’re talking about.” He touched Geo’s knee again and flashed back to a particularly tricky party Geo had once thrown for a distant cousin whom he’d despised. Rory had calmed him down then, too. “It’s just time,” he said, hoping Geo heard the *Master* he couldn’t say in this company.

“I have an idea,” Geo’s friend Teddy said.

Rory couldn’t get a handle on him. He hadn’t chimed in with Berry and D, but Rory didn’t know if he just didn’t want to pile on, or he didn’t think this dance of separation was necessary.

“Please,” Berry said, looking a little worse for wear.

“I own a duplex, but I only use half of it. If Demon and Rory wouldn’t mind a relatively non-committal relocation, they could stay in the second apartment for a while, until they work out where they want to go from where they are now.”

Rory smiled. Because Demon was feeling pretty left out, even if she was hiding it behind how pissed off she was. “That could work.”

“Oh my god, we don’t even *know* this guy.”

“We didn’t know anyone at the shelter, either.”

“That’s different.”

“How, D? How is that even a little bit different?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Well, for one, there’s a lot of people at the shelter. If one of them’s a psycho, that’s a lot of targets. If it’s just us in some dude’s house, then *we’re* the targets.”

“Fair point,” Teddy said. “How about this—we’ll change all the locks and you can keep the keys, Demon. Plus, I can’t imagine I’d be a very good psycho if I killed the people I invited, in front of witnesses, to live in my house.”

“Huh.”

“It takes about an hour to run a preliminary background check,” Berry said. Now he was looking like he just wanted them gone. “If that checks out, will you consider it, Demon? Rory?”

“I’ll *consider* it,” D said, like she was making a big concession.

“A background check,” Teddy said. “Well, this is about to get interesting.”

“Teddy—” Geo began, then shook his head. “Hell, I can’t ask you to—”

“You aren’t. I’m offering. Romance novels, remember? But I better come with you for the background check. Believe me, you’ll have questions.”

Berry frowned. “Well, if you think so. We do a lot of these.”

“I bet, but probably none quite like this.”

The two of them left and Rory turned to Geo. “What was that all about?”

“It’s not really my place to tell that story. But if you ask Teddy, he probably will. Demon? I feel like we got a rotten start, and you’re Rory’s friend, so I’d like to start over.”

“Wow. Guess I should be fucking impressed you’re such a decent guy, right?”

As much as Rory wanted to gag her, he also wanted to see what Geo would do.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t be too impressed.” Geo ran a hand through his hair. “I’m going to screw up. Maybe a lot. Teddy smacks me around about it, but I’m glad Rory has someone, too, who won’t let me get away with any—old patterns. Please come with us. I mean, if Rory decides to come along. Teddy’s place is nice, and I try to take advantage of his barbecue as much as possible.” His gaze drifted to Rory’s (and Rory fought a sudden spinning sensation centering in his spine, twisting his entire awareness out of whack). “I’m sorry I sold the house. I didn’t think you’d ever come back, and it reminded me of you. Every inch of it reminded me of you.”

“I don’t care about the house. As long as you’re planning to buy me a double oven for wherever you’re living now.”

“I—it’s small. We’ll have to look into other places. This is just a rental. There isn’t as much money as there used to be, Rory. I’m sorry. I—lost it.”

“You lost your *money*?” Demon asked. “How the hell did you lose your money? Guy mugged you for your stocks and bonds? Bad game of poker?”

Geo winced. “Not poker, but yes. I didn’t care about any of it. I gave most of it away, a lot of it to the former-slave organizations, thinking maybe some of it would reach you, wherever you were.” He tucked Rory’s hair behind his ear, and Rory tried very hard to keep his breathing normal, even though he wanted to crawl into Geo’s lap and rest there, feeling Geo’s voice rumble through his chest. “Your hair’s longer,” Geo murmured.

“I could cut it.”

“Roar, you were just saying you *liked* it long.”

Rory blinked. “I do. But if Geo—”

“Uh huh.”

“Leave it long.” Geo’s long fingers brushed through again. “I don’t dislike it. It’s just different. But so are we.”

Oh, god, if only Demon wasn’t here right now. He wanted those fingers everywhere, wanted to feel that touch on every bit of his skin.

Rory took a long breath, centering himself. “So tell us more about Teddy’s house. Does he have a good kitchen?” A sudden, horrifying, *obvious* thought occurred to him. “Oh. Are you—you and Teddy—”

Geo actually laughed. “Just friends, I swear. I don’t think Teddy would have me, even if I was interested.”

“Because he wouldn’t let you beat him up?”

“Jeez, D, shut up.” When he turned back, Geo caught up his chin, not tightly—request, not command. “Sorry.”

“Is that how you think about it? That I—that I beat you? Rory, I am so fucking sorry—”

“*No*. Do not fucking apologize to me. Not for that. Don’t be an idiot.” He froze. “I can’t believe I just said that to you.”

“I’m glad you said it. I’m glad you call me by my name. I—for a while I thought you might be—that I’d imagined it, all of it, and that you only put up with me because you had to.”

“He *did*. Even if he doesn’t know it.”

Rory frowned, wanting to argue, wanting to say, *You’re my master and I don’t care who knows it*. But he couldn’t say that D was completely wrong, either. He’d known the rules. And he’d wanted to stay with Geo forever; every slave knew that no matter how good you tried to be, you might wake up one morning sold and lose everything.

He’d tried to be so fucking perfect Geo could never even consider getting rid of him.

“Baby, I’m so sorry,” Geo murmured, and didn’t kiss him, just pressed a cheek up against his and whispered more apologies into his hair.

“Wasn’t your fault.” Because it wasn’t. No matter what Demon thought. If he hadn’t gone to Geo, he’d have gone to someone else.

“Some of it was. But we have a new chance now, Rory, and I swear—I swear to you, I’ll make it all up to you, I’ll—I’ll buy you any appliance you want, no matter how ridiculously large the refrigerator is.”

Rory laughed lightly. “We wouldn’t have needed all that space if you didn’t like leftovers so much. Did you think I was running a restaurant, demanding so many choices for every meal?”

“You *should* run a restaurant. Or a bakery. Or—whatever you want, Rory, you should have it.”

“Just you, right now.”

“Thank god, thank god. I’m so glad you’re all right. I’m so glad you don’t hate me.”

“I could never hate you.” *And if we ever get ten minutes of privacy, I’ll show you how foolish it is to worry about that.* Five minutes. Hell, if D just went to the bathroom, that would be enough.

Teddy and a slightly pale Berry re-entered the room.

Berry didn’t sit down.

“I think I passed,” Teddy said breezily. Geo looked over, eyes narrowed. (So clearly, whatever it was, it wasn’t exactly *nothing*.)

“Ah, yes, we can confirm that there is nothing to be—suspicious of—in Teddy’s background. Solid, ah, work history.” He glanced over and added, “I’ll, um, let you handle—um—”

“Can’t imagine why I would. Is that the kind of information you usually demand from landlords? Do you require medical records? Photographs?”

Berry flushed, highlighting how pale he’d been before. “Ah, no. I suppose not. Um.”

“What the fuck is going on? Did he pass the fucking background check or not?”

Berry focused on Demon, but Rory noticed Teddy hadn’t sat down either. Teddy was short, but yeah, got some mileage out of being intimidating, standing by like that.

“Well?”

“Yes, I can—yes, Teddy passed the background. We will cover all charges the two of you have incurred at the shelter as a—couple. I assume it’s just the one room?”

“Yep. You got anything else for us, Berry?”

Thank god for Demon. Though it was certainly nice that her irritation was focused somewhere else for the moment.

“I have cost of living stipends, a single relocation tab, and of course the local therapist list.”

“Are you fucking *joking*?”

“In fact, I’m not. We have contacts in most places, and you’ll need some kind of—”

“Do I look like a slave to you? Because I don’t think you get to tell me what I need, Berry.”

Yeah, Berry was really done with them now.

He gestured to Rory and said, “In my experienced opinion, you would both do well to accept professional help right now, in the beginning of your transition. Paid for by former-slave funding, of course.”

“Please get us the information,” Teddy said.

“I have it here. There’s a local list, and another for Geo’s current place of residence.”

“Thank you so much. Are we free to leave? Lunch wasn’t that long ago, but I promised Demon a decent cup of coffee.”

“I’ll make follow up phone calls in another week, and again a month after that. I assume one of these numbers will work?”

“Between Geo’s, mine, and the shelter, one of the numbers will work,” Teddy said, shooting a *shut up for once in your life* look at D.

“Good. I wish all of you the best of luck. Let me show you out.”

He led them out through the slave entrance and then, suddenly, they were standing on a sidewalk in the sun, and Geo, *Geo* was right there in front of him.

Fuck everything else.

Rory threw himself into Geo's arms and kissed him desperately, thoroughly, and with blissful release. *Yes. Yes, dammit, this is what I want, and I will have it. Right now.*

Chapter Ten

Details and details. Demon took Rory off to check out of the shelter, and Geo's entire body thrummed with the loss.

"Be cool, old man," Teddy said, also looking through the doors after them.

"I know he's not going to disappear again, but I'm fucking scared shitless anyway."

"Specifically, he's not going to disappear unless he wants to. But I don't see any evidence of that." He glanced over, saw Geo's face, and apologized. "Sorry. Of course he's not disappearing. He'll be right back."

And he was. Rory, Demon, and a short, wild-haired girl with bright pink cheeks.

"Do we have room for one more?" Rory asked. "This is Maizy."

"Oh my god, are *you* the owner he's so in love with?" the wild-haired girl said to Teddy. "Because you're hot, but so not in the way I pictured."

"No, Maiz, stop being embarrassing, or we'll leave your ass here." Demon gestured, a wide open arm first toward Teddy, then Geo. "This is Teddy, and this is Geo, fucking Rory's big secret."

The girl, Maizy, shook their hands. "It is *so good* to meet you. Poor Roar's been just pathetic over you."

"Maiz," Rory said, blushing. "Stop." But he looked at Teddy, not Geo. "Is there room for her? We kind of adopted her."

"Hey! I'm a free agent! I just don't want to lose my best friends. Listen, I have mad business skills. Do you have a business? I can manage it. I have experience." She nudged Demon, and Demon seemed to almost welcome the contact. "Tell 'em, D."

"How the hell would I know? She does *talk* business a lot. Like maybe an annoying amount. Blah-marketing-blah-sales-copy-blah-end-of-month-reports."

"Maiz's former owners wanted her to come back and work for them. For free. Which is such an insult, right?" Rory looked at him expectantly.

Teddy beat him to it. "They wanted you as a business manager, but they didn't intend to pay you? Did they miss the abolishment of slavery?"

“Here’s what I don’t understand,” Maizy said. “Wasn’t it abolished before?”

“I just watched a program about this, actually,” Teddy told her. “Apparently the indentured work program started small, as a better alternative than incarceration, and got a little out of control. They started out with all these safeguards in place, this exhaustive training program for potential owners, but eventually it eroded to a sign-up form and a basic interview.”

Geo met Rory’s eyes. It was like two different worlds, the kind of slavery they were discussing, and the kind he and Rory had known since birth. In their world, the laws hardly mattered and you’d never get the police involved. You were born into their world, not interviewed into it. Slavery, ownership, both were about honor.

Geo suddenly realized that if he’d ever seriously involved himself in the “re-claim consensual slavery” movement, Rory would not be coming home with him right now. He’d thought he had understood it before, when Teddy was banging him over the head, but only sharing this moment with Rory cemented it.

Tell yourself it’s about honor, service, giving people what they need. Surely there’s nothing more honorable than giving the man you love the choice?

“The duplex has two bedrooms, so if the three of you can sort yourselves out, you’re welcome to it,” Teddy was telling Maizy and Demon.

“Well, don’t you—are you guys not sharing a room anymore?”

“No,” Rory said. “Sorry, D, but I’m totally claiming my own room.”

“Jerk. You can bunk with me, Maiz. But you realize this means we have to go back in and get you out of here.”

“Is that a problem?”

They worked out the details—Teddy made a phone call to Berry, seeming to relish it, and arranged to pick up housing vouchers and whatever else from Maizy’s caseworker while the girls went back in to brave the shelter staff.

Rory stood beside Geo and sipped a new cup of coffee, waiting for everyone else to return.

“Are you—do you want—compensation?” Geo finally asked, not quite daring to look over. “I mean, for—seven years of housekeeping and event

planning and generally keeping me in decent clothes and nutritious food. That's gotta be—I mean, I know it's worth something. I know it has value, financially.”

“If you had a husband, would you be paying him? Not that I—I would never say that I was—”

“You were. I know you were a slave, and I realize now what that means, but at the time, Rory, I didn't.” Geo reached up, again, to touch Rory's hair. “I considered you my partner. I'm trying to figure out how to go from here, what this means for us now.”

“I guess I more considered myself your assistant,” Rory said, with a wry twist to his mouth. (Was that new, or had he simply taken better care to hide such things before? Could Geo ask without triggering a fresh need to hide all less-than-fully-positive responses?)

“Well, we're starting something new, now. Teddy kept telling me to think of it that way, but I didn't, not really.” He tugged lightly on the lock of hair with which he was still playing. “We can't just fall into one another like we never left, can we?”

Rory took a long breath and met his eyes. “I wouldn't want to. I hope that's—I hope that's all right. I wouldn't want to go back there. I don't miss all of it, Geo. It's still weird calling you that.”

“It's still weird hearing it.”

They might have said more, if Demon and Maizy hadn't emerged at that moment, weighed down by boxes and backpacks.

“This ain't even all of it,” Demon said. “Fucking Maizy is a *nester*.”

“I really am. Sorry!”

“Bitch, if you think all this shit is going in one little room—”

“Teddy's side of the duplex is relatively spacious. I'm sure the other side is, as well.”

“Well, good. Because there's another load upstairs.”

“Another load?” Rory asked.

“Er—sorry again, everyone. Um.”

Geo caught Teddy's eye as he approached from his latest errand. And grinned.

“What’s all this?”

Demon put her hands on her hips. “How big is your place really? Maizy’s got a lot of shit.”

“It’s not shit!”

“I’m glad we brought the truck,” Teddy mumbled. “All right, let’s go.”

“We gotta go get the other load.” Demon surveyed the pile with some satisfaction, as if anything that caused a wrench in the works was to her credit. “Oh fucking boy, Maiz. You’re killing me. What the hell is all this sh—stuff?”

“My things,” Maizy said primly. “Shut up and keep hauling, D.”

“Uh huh.”

“So,” Rory said, low-voiced, as all of them trooped up the stairs. “These are my friends.”

Geo reached out to tug his hair again. “Glad to meet them.”

“Ha.”

The three-hour drive home was punctuated by stops for food and ice cream. The two girls, both of whom had lived lives before becoming slaves, were delighted to sample all the fast food they’d missed, until at length Teddy told them that there would be time enough to eat whatever they wanted tomorrow, or even the next day.

Rory sat beside Geo and said nothing, practically the entire way.

Moving them into Teddy’s half-abandoned duplex was oddly exciting, even for Geo, and not just because Rory was here, close enough to touch. Maizy changed their dynamic completely; she blunted Demon’s edges and drew Rory out.

And she was the only person whose proximity to Rory didn’t make Geo want to scream.

“It’s late,” Teddy said, studying his cupboards. “You guys will have to go shopping tomorrow, but we can throw something together for dinner.”

“I think I might be sick,” Maizy said. “I seriously just want to fall asleep.”

“Maybe drinking a milkshake on top of a pizza on top of a burger on top of an ice cream sundae was a fucking boneheaded thing to do,” Demon suggested. “I think I mentioned it at the time.”

“Shut up, D. You ate almost all that, too!”

“I know my limits better than you, I guess.”

“Oh, just shut up. Ugh. Feel. So. Gross. You should come with me. To bed.”

“Are you hitting on me, Maizy?”

Maizy blushed bright. “No! I just—”

“Don’t listen to her, Maiz. I’ll come sit with you for a little bit.”

“Thanks, Roar.”

The two of them disappeared, but not before Rory glanced back at Geo. Apology? Request for permission? He looked away before Geo could parse it.

“So,” Demon said, pulling out the stool farthest away from Geo and sitting down at the counter.

It was mesmerizing, watching someone else cook in a near-silent kitchen. Teddy cracked eggs, whisked them together, fried the bacon, assembled salsa and cheese. Geo carefully nursed his beer, letting it ease his frayed nerves.

“What’s the big secret?”

“What big secret?”

“You have a big secret. So big Berry thought you should tell us, but you didn’t want to. I want to know what the fuck it is.”

Geo wondered if he should say something. It was his fault Teddy was in this position, anyway.

“Oh, it wasn’t that I had a problem telling you. But I wasn’t going to dignify his assumption that I should, or that you had the right to guilt-trip Rory into staying with you at the shelter once you’d heard it.”

“So it *is* a big one. Go on. Tell me. You’re a spy? You’re NSA? What?”

“I’m a spy or NSA? Those are the biggest secrets you can come up with? Would either of them be revealed by a basic web search? Which is essentially what they’re running.” He shook his head. “If I hadn’t offered to fill in the gaps, they likely wouldn’t have known there were any.”

“Uh huh. So?”

Teddy looked up, straight at Demon. “I used to look like a woman. Some people would even say I *was* a woman, though I’d argue that point. I still have a

vagina, though I've thankfully gotten rid of the breasts. My mother named me Teresa, not Theodore."

Silence, for a beat. Geo fiddled with his beer.

"My mother named me Angel. Which ended up being a whole bunch of bullshit." Demon tapped her fingers on the countertop for a long moment. "Yeah, all right. So you go in for guys or girls? I ask 'cause I saw some crazy shit in Maizy's books, and she might have kind of a fetish. I'm just sayin'."

Teddy's mouth opened, and he stopped grinding pepper into his eggs. "A *fetish*?"

"Hey, I was like, 'Is this drag?' And she was like, 'Don't tell anyone, I kind of think transsexuals are hot.' Only now I'm telling you." Demon laughed. A real laugh, rich and full.

"I don't believe you," Teddy said.

"Yeah, 'cause this sounds like the kind of thing I'd make up."

"It does, a little. Random, but possible."

Demon stared him down for a full minute, then looked back at her fingers. "Yeah, all right. I made that shit up."

"*Why*?" Teddy shook his head. "Why would you fabricate—why, Demon?"

"Because I wanted to know."

"Because you wanted to know *what*? In the interests of a productive living arrangement—" He stopped. "Wait. Huh. You have a fetish, Demon?"

"Nope. No fucking fetishes here. Had enough of that for a lifetime."

Geo was missing something. Something obvious, by the expression on Teddy's face and the way Demon wouldn't look up from the staccato beat she was tapping out.

"What's up?" Rory murmured, returning from the other side of the duplex and standing just close enough to speak softly.

"I'm not sure." Not even a little. He wanted to pull Rory against him, but didn't quite dare.

Teddy went back to his pan, which was now very, very hot, and dumped the eggs in. "You ever meet someone like me, Demon?"

“Nope.”

“Both,” Teddy said. “Or rather, all. I have no preference along those lines.”

“Good to know.” Demon stood up. “Turns out, I’m not that hungry. You put princess to bed, Roar?”

“She was out, like, immediately. But I didn’t want her to wake up alone, so I stayed a little longer.”

“Cool. Goodnight, all. Weird fucking day, right?” She left through the kitchen door, which led to the back patio both apartments shared.

“I cannot believe that just happened,” Teddy said to the eggs. He stabbed at his pan. “Really.”

“It was interesting,” Geo offered.

“*Interesting*. That’s one way of putting it. I still can’t decide if she’s fucking with me.”

“Did she have an evil look on her face? That’s usually how I tell.”

“She wasn’t looking at me at all.” Teddy glanced at Rory. “What does that mean?”

“Huh. No, she likes to see the effect she’s having on the people she’s fucking with.”

“Good to know,” Geo said, echoing Demon and watching his friend.

“I think I now have too much food.” Teddy dished out three plates of bacon and eggs, then shook his head. “She’s right, though. What a weird day.”

“I can’t believe this morning I didn’t know I was going to see you, and now I’m... here.” Rory smiled shyly. “This was a good day.”

“I guess we should talk about tomorrow. And the next day.”

“Not right now. Right now we eat.” Teddy pointed his fork at both of them. “You two should talk, explicitly, about just how quickly you’re planning to take this reunion. And although Berry was a bit of a tool, I agree with him. All four of you should be in counseling. You two should consider couples counseling if that’s the relationship you’re planning to have.”

“You’re full of advice, Teddy.”

“I’m going to bed. Maybe tomorrow this will all make sense.” He dropped his plate in the sink and waved at the rest of the kitchen. “Make yourselves at home. And it’s been really good to finally meet you, Rory.”

“Thanks. And thanks for taking us in. That’s really—remarkable.”

“Sure. Gets lonely here, anyway, once the old folks across the way go to bed. Goodnight.”

“Night, Teddy,” Geo said.

Then it was just the two of them, in the warm yellow lights of Teddy’s kitchen, sitting beside each other, eating bacon and eggs.

“It’s kind of taking a lot of effort not to kneel at your feet right now,” Rory said, smiling in the direction of his food. “You know how you used to have me do that, before I turned eighteen, because you wouldn’t touch me? So you’d just put your hand on the top of my head, like a pet?”

“I didn’t mean to—I mean, you weren’t a pet, for godssake—”

“I loved that. I loved feeling you there, strong, like you’d take care of me. Like you’d always take care of me.”

Geo swallowed. “Rory...” *Sleep with me. Play with me. Marry me. Be with me forever.* “I like that they call you ‘Roar.’ It’s fitting.”

“Yeah, you know, it embarrassed me when D first started doing it. But now? I don’t know. It’s kind of like it gives me something to live up to.”

“So you don’t kneel at my feet?”

Rory looked up, sharply, eyes dark. “No. Roar would kneel at your feet if he wanted to, and he’d spit in the face of anyone who judged him for it. But I’m too afraid, so I don’t.”

The world tilted on its axis, and Geo resisted the urge to throw his hands up in confusion. “You can, if you want. I won’t—assume it means anything.”

“No. I’m not ready yet. I want all of it to mean something. I want to be done with assumptions and laws telling me what I should be, what I should do, what I should feel. I don’t want to do anything unless it *means something*. Do you understand that? At all?”

“I’m working on it.”

“My parents—I’ve been thinking of them a lot lately. I’ve been thinking about the things they did right. You know, I was angry at them for a while, because they taught me to never question it. But I can see how they were trying to protect me. I can see it in Demon, how being free makes you feel entitled to freedom, and I never had to struggle with that. My parents made sure I knew

the only meaning in my life was slavery, was master, was service. But now it isn't. And I'm never going back, Geo. It would be so easy to just slide sideways back into that and tell myself I was free, so it didn't matter. But it does." He paused. "And if I had a child, I would never, ever want them to think the only meaning in their life was serving someone else. Not ever."

If I had a child. Geo shivered, gooseflesh rising on his arms.

"I should go to bed. Will I see you tomorrow?"

"If it didn't make me sound like just the kind of madman Teddy thinks I might be, I'd offer to sit beside your bed and watch you sleep. I'm taking his couch, right there. If you need anything, Rory, even if you just want to talk. Or not. If you're awake and you just want to sit, I'm here."

Rory smiled. "Thank you. It's also really hard not to take your plate and wash up."

"I'll do it," Geo said, and took Rory's plate instead, watching him track it. He leaned in a little closer. "Is this making you uncomfortable? Maybe you should sit there, Rory, and watch me clean."

"You would have to tie me to this chair or I'd help."

They stared at each other.

"Maybe some other time." Geo brushed a kiss across his temple. "An entirely new form of torture, forcing you to watch me while I cleaned the kitchen. Or no, even better, forcing you to watch me attempt to fix something."

"You wouldn't."

"I don't know. I might. You'd struggle, critiquing my tool choices. I'd probably have to gag you."

Rory bit down hard enough on his lip to turn it white.

"It would be even more fun to plug you first. You'd have to fight arousal and outrage simultaneously."

"Sleeping now will be almost impossible."

"Because I'm not allowing you to clean? Strange hangup, boy. Er—should I not—"

"It's fine."

But his slip broke the spell. Geo backed off, began gathering the dishes in the sink.

“Roar would hug you from behind. Like a man, not a slave.”

Geo did not turn around.

“I’m not ready to do that either, but I want to. Goodnight, Geo.”

“Goodnight, Rory. See you in the morning.”

“Yes.”

He watched Rory’s reflection in the window until he passed beyond the frame, erection a low hum in his nerves, letting the water run far too hot over his hands. *Do not follow him. Do not act like a madman.*

It was almost impossible to stand there while Rory walked away, to accept that they would be separated for hours, that he would wake up not knowing if Rory was still there or if it had all been a dream.

Cleaning was a good distraction. Except he spent the entire time thinking about Rory tied to a chair, watching him.

Chapter Eleven

Rory coordinated therapy for all of them.

First, for just himself and Maizy. Demon had been in the middle of an exhausting rant about how she didn't need any fucking stupid asshole telling her blah-blah-blah when Teddy knocked on the half-open patio door.

"You guys need a ride to your appointments?" And he'd looked at Demon, when he said it.

"Uh, probably. Hey, you got cigarettes? I'm thinking of smoking, again. It's been a while."

"Not in my house. Let me know when you need to be somewhere." That was it. Teddy walked back next door.

"You *do* have the hots for him! I knew it!" Maizy giggled, like a little kid. (Which, okay, she was only twenty, so maybe that wasn't so silly.)

"Shut your fucking face, bitch," D shot back. "Anyway, I'll go one fucking time, but if they're an idiot, I'm not going back. I got you guys if I want to talk a bunch of shit to stupid people."

So that was interesting. And since when had D had the hots for anyone? She'd sworn she was—what was the phrase she'd used?—dead inside, that was it.

Looking at her right now, though, Rory didn't think she looked all that dead inside.

"We need a phone," he said. "You guys ready to go to Teddy's?"

"So we can see your lov-ah," Maizy said. "Oh god, I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm acting this way. I think I'm like regressing! But what's weird is I've been out of the camp for six weeks and this is the first fucking time I've actually felt free. The shelter was like camp, just bigger, and we had off-campus privileges, you know?"

"Shit! It was!" Demon actually laughed. "Fuck me, Maiz, you're so right."

"What's an off-campus privilege?"

Maizy grinned at him. "It's in school, once you hit like sixteen or something, sometimes they let you leave for lunch. That's off-campus. That's

how the shelter was, like we could leave, but there were still all these rules. Now, though? We could just take a walk. No matter what time it was. Even at night. Or we could sit here all day! Not wandering around town or sitting in the park wasting time.”

“We could waste our time indoors!” Demon said, and tousled Maizy’s crazy hair.

“Shut up, you know what I mean. We could do what *we* do, instead of what someone else is telling us to do. Freedom!”

“If you start singing right now, I’ll kick you out of the room.”

Rory smiled as he studied the very short list of local therapists. He’d hoped for a male therapist, but the only one on the list of four was in a different complex from the other three. He thought the girls would probably rather have a female therapist, but he wasn’t going to ask Demon, who’d bite his head off about therapy being worthless, or Maizy, who’d tell him whatever was convenient.

He could manage. And this way they had three to choose from, all in the same spot.

“I’m going next door. I need a phone, or some way to ask about appointments.” *I need to see Geo and reassure myself he’s still here.*

“We’re getting dressed,” Maizy said, and tugged Demon’s arm. “C’mon, let’s see what you have that doesn’t make you look demented.”

“*My clothes are not demented!*”

Hell. Rory hesitated. He’d planned on having them with him, not walking over alone. But he couldn’t wait here for Maizy to approve D’s wardrobe. He’d probably end up getting sucked in, which wasn’t his goal.

Teddy’s patio door was also half-open, so Rory knocked lightly and looked around.

“He’s going to kick himself. I’ve been trying to convince him to run home for a shower and clothes all morning, and he only just left. Come in, Rory. Coffee?”

“Yes, please. Actually—” He stopped. “Actually, um, no thanks.”

“Okay.” Teddy hesitated, coffee pot still in hand, then seemed to decide that Rory really didn’t want coffee. “I took the day off work, for ease of shuttling you three around.”

“Geo doesn’t have a car?”

“Geo has a car. If you can call it that. But I thought I could still be helpful. If we leave the day to Geo, he’ll probably just sit in a corner and stare at you the whole time. I thought I might be able to keep things moving.”

Rory felt himself blush. “Um, I need a phone, I think. If that’s okay.”

“Of course. Phones. Hm. I suppose they don’t give you some kind of phone stipend?”

“Well, we could maybe use our living stipends for them?”

Teddy shook his head. “Not exactly, based on how they pay out. I think what we’ll do is set up an actual contract for the duplex, and you can use your living stipend for living here. I’ll just turn them back over to you when I get them. Of course, you’d have to trust that I’d do that.”

“Not really. I mean, even if you kept the money, you’re actually letting us live here.”

“Well, I can afford to front you the cost of a couple of phones and food, ahead of getting your finances straightened out, in any event. What do you want to do, Rory?”

“Do? Oh. Actually, we had a whole unit on it at camp. ‘Moving on and Entering the Workplace: Former Slaves and the Job Market.’ I didn’t pay much attention, though.”

Teddy sipped his coffee, leaning back against the kitchen sink so he wasn’t quite facing Rory. “How was that? It sounds rather dismal, and that’s actually only counting the positive press reports.”

“Dismal is probably accurate. I don’t think we were in a really bad place. But also—they wanted me to process how horribly I’d been abused, and come up with a recovery plan, and all this stuff that didn’t really feel right.” He shrugged. “I guess it feels like the entire program was geared toward the worst cases. I don’t think that’s awful or anything. I mean, Maiz and I did all right, but the place where Demon was? Was pretty bad. And she said it wasn’t even that bad, when we heard some of the other stories. Still, the kinds of questions they kept asking weren’t ones I could answer.”

“Oh, I see what you’re saying. They wanted you to describe a vicious, violent owner, and you had Geo.”

"They kept asking me about my ordeal. I didn't have an ordeal. I had—I don't know what I had. But it felt more like I was his assistant, his housekeeper, not his slave. Does that sound ridiculous to you?"

"No. It sounds an awful lot like how Geo describes it. All the same, I'm sure there are sneaky things that will come up, Rory, for both of you. I was serious about counseling."

"I don't think he'd go. He's—you know, he's Geo."

"He had to fill out a psychological assessment before they'd let you contact him. He almost had a breakdown."

"See what I mean?" Rory said. "But I'm going. I decided. I can't—D doesn't get any of this, and Maizy's so, like, sheltered. Which is pretty funny, since no one's more sheltered than I am, but some of the things in my head? I can't talk about with them. And he's—he'll just try to validate, or whatever, without actually being able to have a conversation."

"I understand. And to whatever degree I can be helpful, I'm available."

"Thanks. Thanks for—taking care of my family, Teddy." It was kind of a dumb thing to say, but Teddy seemed to understand.

"I like your family, Rory. Let me get you a phone so you can make appointments, and we'll start a list of the things you guys need right away."

It was an awful lot like making phone calls for Geo. Rory pretended he was scheduling for someone else, and lined up three appointments in the same two hour block. By then the girls were there, making breakfast. Soon after that Geo came in, and Rory tried to not seem odd about it, but the second Geo appeared in the doorway everything else went dim.

"You will kneel when I enter a room and wait to be acknowledged," he'd said, the first day. "Failure to do so will be taken as impertinence."

It was hard not to justify his seated position. Then Geo stood next to him, smelling clean and Geo-like (comforting and safe and yes, like home), and the sound streamed back into the room.

Rory sat on the therapist's comfortable sofa and said nothing.

The therapist, whose name was Lauren, didn't seem all that worried about it. Not at all like the interviewers at camp, who'd start looking at their clock or

tapping the pad with their stylus if you didn't come up with the answers really quick.

"I don't like coffee," Rory finally said. "Sorry, I know that's silly, but I keep thinking about it. I don't like coffee and I didn't know that. Until today. Is that—I mean, that's gotta be crazy, right?"

"Well, 'crazy' isn't exactly a diagnostic term. But no, in your specific circumstances, that sounds like an appropriate self-discovery, Rory."

"But I've had coffee every day since I was fifteen. In the house where my parents, um, worked, it was a big deal. They used to give me a little bit from each of their cups, so it was like, it was a ritual, kind of."

"Was that when the process of your sale began?"

Rory considered it. "Actually, it must have been. Though no one told me. I mean, I knew I'd be available when I turned sixteen, but I—sometimes I feel so stupid talking about this like it's normal. Demon's always on me to act like it's this whole black mark in my life, but it's not just a few years for me. It's always."

"Okay," Lauren said, and nodded. "Always as in, always has been? Or always as in you still feel very much rooted to that model?"

"That feels like a trick question."

"I don't intend it to be. Let me explain to you my experience. I started working with former slaves when the only way to do that was to actively break the law. I met with one person, then they recommended me to another, and another, and soon half my practice was people who were doing exactly what you're doing now: trying to understand what part of their story they could own, and what part they had to completely write off and leave behind."

Rory took a slow breath. "And? What's—what did they do?"

"You figure out how to do both at once, Rory. You figure out how to own yourself, the man you are today, and leave behind the child—the slave—you were. It's not dissimilar to what all people do, slave or free, as they age, but you have an extra layer of sediment to wade through on your way to the surface."

An extra layer of sediment. Like wanting Geo to bend him over the bench and flog him until he cried. Yeah.

"Maybe more than one layer," he said. "I don't know how much I'm supposed to say to you. I mean, I know that anything I did—anything he did

—was technically within the law at the time, so it seems like it should be okay, but Demon didn't seem to—she still kind of thinks I'm brainwashed.”

“Demon is your friend, and feels protective of you. I'm not your friend, Rory. I feel confident that you do not need my protection. You can tell me anything at all about the past. In fact, this will only work if you do. And you can tell me almost anything you want about the future.”

“Almost?”

“Well, if you're planning to kill yourself or someone else, I'll have to take action. So keep the homicidal tendencies to yourself.” She smiled. “That was a joke.”

“Huh, yeah, no, no killing. Just—I mean, are you sure? Because some of the things in my head aren't—aren't good. Or—or maybe they are, I don't know.”

Lauren nodded, like she was really thinking about it. “All right. How about you try to tell me one thing that doesn't feel too scary, and we'll go from there.”

“One thing. Okay. Let me—one thing.” One thing, one thing. There were so many things. So many memories, so many fantasies. “Sometimes I still want to call him ‘Master.’ Not because I have to, but because I—miss it. I miss being able to just be, and know that he'd—hold me up.” He watched her carefully, but her face didn't change. “Is that something I—should I just forget about that?”

“You should keep it in mind, I think. What stops you from calling him that now?”

“Honestly? Our friends. Demon would hit me, I don't think his friend Teddy would like it much, and Maizy would probably just pity me. Poor Roar, brainwashed by his owner.”

Lauren nodded again. “Are you waiting for them to care less? Or for yourself to care less about their responses?”

“I guess I'm waiting to not want to call him that anymore. Or to—to kneel at his feet. There was a rule, that when he came into a room, I knelt. And it's really *hard* to not do that. But that's not—I don't want to, really. I'm just so used to doing it.”

“And what happens when you don't?”

“He comes over to me anyway. Actually, that's the same as it always was. Only I'm not on my knees.”

“And how does that feel?”

“Good. Safe. Like he’s still with me.”

“Does he have any complaints about your failure to follow an old rule?”

“Oh, no, not at all. I mean, really, he has no idea what to do either. I can just feel it. And that’s—maybe that’s the thing that throws me off more than anything else. I’m so used to Geo being the man who bought me, who gave me everything I ever wanted, everything I needed. He made our whole life fit into these lines, and it was good. I mean, maybe you won’t believe that, but it was. Even the stuff that wasn’t good, wasn’t bad. But now the lines are all gone and neither one of us knows what to do. And when we try, we kind of screw it up a little.”

“Give me an example.”

“I’m not sure how you’re going to think about it.” Even remembering last night made his skin burn.

“Juicy,” Lauren said, with just a little tease. “Did one of you harm the other in any way?”

“No. No, it was just words.”

“Words can be powerful. Did they frighten you, or make you feel insecure about your safety?”

“More secure. They made me feel—I mean, if we could actually *do*—the thing we were talking about—I think I’d feel so much better.”

“But you ended up feeling like you screwed up? Or Geo did?”

Rory sighed. “Okay. Fine. But don’t—I mean, I hardly know you. Don’t think we’re freaks, okay?”

“I’ll try. I’m out of green files for ‘freaks’ this week anyway, so I’ll have to decide you’re something else. Still have blue for ‘nutso,’ though.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine.” He described Geo’s lapse, how he’d talked about tying Rory to the chair, making him watch Geo clean. After a brief hesitation, he added the bit about the butt plug, as well.

“Sadism by cleaning. Geo has a good imagination. Did the two of you play games like that before?”

“Um. Well. I always did the cleaning before. I mean, that’s what started it last night. I told him how hard it was not to clean up.”

“Mm hm. I suppose my question was more about the restraints and orgasm denial.”

Rory blinked. “Um. Well, yeah. Yes. I mean, is that—is that pretty weird?”

“I’m not sure the category ‘pretty weird’ exists in this office, Rory. But no. In fact, that sounded *relatively* tame. Is there more?”

He wished he’d talked to Geo first, before coming here. Even though it was all confidential, he’d feel better if he knew Geo didn’t mind him talking about what had been, with very few (very memorable) exceptions, private moments they shared.

“I guess I just wonder if I—if I needed that because I was a slave, then now that I’m not a slave, do I just—do I just magically not need him to do that? Or is there—is there some way to be both free and—and—still do that? I mean I really, really miss it. That sounds so pathetic. I guess a free person, like D or Maiz, wouldn’t miss something like that, right?”

Lauren leaned forward in her chair. “Your time is up, Rory. But we’re going to take a few more minutes here. There is no normal response to your experiences. They are uniquely yours, and you are uniquely qualified to determine the appropriate response to them. And nothing you’ve said to me raises any red flags. That you’re asking yourself these questions is, I think, a very good sign. You might also consider talking with Geo about your feelings, your concerns. I’m sure he has some of his own, that he’s discussing with his therapist.”

“He won’t see one. I know that’s bad, I’m working on him.”

“The two of you have known each other for twenty-four hours as free men of equal standing. Please try to be gentle with yourself.”

That was all fine, but it wasn’t really an answer. “So you think I—you think it kind of ruined me? Slavery? I mean, probably it did, right? I mean—about uh—about sex?”

“If your evidence of being ‘ruined’ is that you like things a little—or even a lot—kinky, then no, Rory, I very much disagree. Perhaps next week you can tell me some of the specific things you’re worried about, if you like. Did you complete the former slaves’ program?”

Rory hesitated too long trying to figure out whether he had to lie.

“Don’t give me that look. Fine. So then we’ll do a different version of it here. I daresay a much better version. Next week, come with a couple of ideas for careers. You’re twenty-four. It’s time you had a future, Rory.”

He inhaled into the words, suddenly much more emotional than he had been the rest of the appointment. “I guess I—hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“Well, that’s what it is.” Lauren stood up, so he scrambled to his feet as well. “It’s good to meet you. I’ll see you next time.”

“Thanks. I mean—I feel a little better.”

“Good. And that’s just one session.” She winked at him and waved goodbye.

Chapter Twelve

Nothing was moving fast enough. Three days passed, then four. Geo felt like he was in some kind of insane holding pattern with Rory, and that he'd be stuck there forever.

"This is killing me," he said to Teddy, on the fifth morning he'd slept in the living room.

"The couch was your decision, and you're not sleeping with me, Prince Charming, so you can forget about it. I told you, I use the second bedroom for storage, but you're free to unearth the futon in there if you'd like. No sleepovers."

He made a face. "Don't be a dick."

"Ha ha ha, very funny. What's your problem? I think the three of them are somewhat magnificent, given the circumstances."

"All three of them? Or one, in particular?"

"Don't project your angst on me, Geo. And no. She refuses to be alone in a room with me—that's an observation, not a complaint—and clearly it's been a topic of conversation since yesterday was the first day Maizy could look at me without giggling."

"And Rory?"

"Watches me when I'm not looking, looks away when I do. Maizy thinks it's funny. Rory, I suspect, is evaluating my suitability." Teddy paused. "I approve. I've heard a little bit more about her life before slavery. After her older brother was killed in what she describes as a 'stupid gang thing,' no one was looking out much for Demon."

"Not her parents?"

"The brother was the one they pinned their hopes on."

"A gang member?"

"No, the brother wasn't in a gang. The brother was collateral damage."

"Oh," Geo said, flushing. Right, just because a young black man was killed in gang-related violence didn't mean he was in a gang. Embarrassing assumption, but at least it was only Teddy who'd heard it.

"I did the same thing," Teddy said wryly. "But I cleverly did not say it out loud, or she'd probably have hit me. Actually, I'm not sure that would be a bad thing. I've been considering suggesting to the three of them that they might enroll in one of the classes down at the center."

"One of your classes?" Ha. Teddy's turn to look away.

"Well, I wouldn't insist, no. And I'm not sure Rory's interested in self-defense. But there are so many others, and of the three of them only Maizy is comfortable in her skin."

Geo's gut twisted painfully. "You're right."

"Stop it. He's not afraid of you. He's desperate for your proximity, and almost as desperate as you are for more than that. He's just better at hiding it."

"It's all so different now," Geo murmured, glancing toward the patio door. "I don't know how to be who he wants, or needs. Before I just did, and I knew that was right—I know, I know, it was an illusion, but I had it. Now all I have are questions."

The coffee maker played three notes to show it had completed its cycle.

"Is this a sugar morning, or a no sugar morning?"

"No sugar, no milk. Please." Geo folded the blankets that made up his bed while Teddy got their coffees. "Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if Rory took a few of your classes. Maybe I'd feel a little better if he could hit me if I stepped out of line."

"Geo—he could hit you now. The problem you're having isn't that Rory is weak."

It was like a skylight opening, and the sun streaming in. If he pictured Rory as a body, as a male body apart from the mind he knew lived within, then of course, that was obvious.

"He could kick my ass, couldn't he?" Geo asked, somewhat dazed.

"Physically? Yes. Mentally, he'd probably let you beat him until he passed out." Teddy shifted in his armchair. "When you played, before, you *did* use a safeword, right? I mean, you at least talked about the ways he could stop a scene if it went bad for him. Right?"

Safewords are for lightweights who don't know their partner's limits. Geo tried to think of how to phrase that less offensively.

“You didn’t. Wow.” Teddy stared at him. “You’re more of a fuckin’ idiot than even I knew. So what, the idea was that the owner always knew best?”

“I’m not an *idiot*, I always made it good for him.” This, he knew. “It’s not like he could fake enjoying it, Teddy. Not to get explicit.”

“Not to get *explicit*, but the body reacting to stimulus is not the same as the mind getting off. You fool.”

“How would you even know?”

“Well, for starters, I’m not a bumbling idiot.” Teddy pointed at him, and this wasn’t Teddy fucking around, this was as serious as Geo had ever seen him. “That won’t fly anymore. Red for stop, yellow for slow the fuck down. If I find out you’ve done anything with him and not had that conversation, I will beat you myself, Geo, you get it? And I think we both know I could put you in the hospital without breaking a sweat.”

“I don’t need your help—”

“You do. You really do.”

“You don’t understand. Safewords”—he tried to control the sneer, but Teddy might have still seen it—“safewords are for people who don’t know what they’re doing. I know everything about him. I know every inch of his body and how it responds. Not everyone needs safewords, Teddy.”

“Well, people who want to fuck former slaves with whom they’re in love should probably consider the situation with more depth than ‘I don’t wanna and you can’t make me,’ Geo. Which is about the level of your argument. So help you, if you make me talk to him. If I have to do BDSM safety for beginners with Rory, you’re going to have a much bigger problem.”

“What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?”

Teddy grinned, but there was a dark edge to it. “You ever let him wield the whip?”

Geo sputtered. There was no pretty word for it. He tried to speak, made sounds, and couldn’t complete any words.

“Like I said, you’d probably rather have that conversation yourself, only like free men who are beginning a relationship, not a master and slave who are picking one back up. But you’re right. What do I know about being a psychic top who magically knows everything?”

“You don’t understand—”

"I understand that if your kink was omniscience, Rory would have fulfilled it." Teddy stood up, and groaned. "Hell. I'm getting old. I think I'll take coffee next door and see if anyone's up. Let you stew in your juices a little."

Geo didn't bother coming up with an appropriate expression of annoyance. He'd never done anything that Rory hated in a bad way. Though sometimes part of the fun was doing the things he didn't like as much as other things, as a curve ball, not as a general rule. That was part of the game.

Or would be, if your partner could stop the game. Your slave, though. How different was that? He remembered the free fall feeling of knowing he didn't have to use safewords with Rory, of abandoning "the rules" and playing however they liked.

And yes, he'd made that decision for both of them. Because Rory hadn't known the first thing about any of it.

The headache started pulsing low behind his eyes. By the time Rory tapped lightly on the door frame, Geo was pressing his fingers to his temple to ward off the worst of the pain.

"Geo! Are you all right?"

Oh god. Cool, sweet fingers, pressed to the pulse point in his neck. Geo turned, eyes still closed against the world, and kissed the bit of Rory's arm that he could reach. It was awkward, and embarrassing, but Rory didn't move away.

"We need to talk," Geo said. "Will you take a walk with me? After breakfast, though. I think I need to sit here for a few more minutes."

"Sure. Of course. What happened?"

"Nothing. Nothing happened. I'm just really beginning to get sick of Teddy always being right."

"Ha. For us, it's Demon. Half the time you think whatever she just said was ridiculous, and then later you find out it's true and have to apologize." Rory's face creased. "Why are you drinking black coffee?" He sniffed it. "Why are you drinking black coffee without sugar? You always said coffee without sugar was like a dog without fur."

Geo sighed. "I'm sorry. I was actually—I was kind of trying to lose weight. Actually."

"By cutting out the two tablespoons of sugar in your coffee?" Rory grinned and patted his stomach before taking the mug from his hand. "I don't mind you

turning into a bear on me, Geo. In fact, I kind of like it. Let me get you decent coffee.”

“Thank you.” Turning into a bear. Turning into one of those men he’d always judged for their lack of discipline. But Rory—

Geo turned his body, trying to ignore the headache. “Rory.”

“Hm?”

God, he’d watched Rory doctor his coffee so many times. His brain supplied the backdrop of their old kitchen, and Geo caught his breath.

“You all right?”

“What? Oh. Yes, fine. Sorry, I was going to—you aren’t just saying that, are you? I mean, about—about not minding my—the way I look right now.”

“I like the way you look regardless. There is something kind of different about seeing you softer.” Rory finished stirring, rinsed the spoon, and slipped it into the dishwasher. All smooth, perfect movements. “I don’t know what it is. I loved your body before. I love your body now. I guess I can’t really say I have a preference, but I like this.”

Geo wanted to accept the answer, diplomatic and magnanimous though it was, but his conversation with Teddy continued to echo in his brain. “Are you just saying that because you don’t want to hurt my feelings? Rory, we can’t keep doing this. You can’t keep feeding me perfect answers I never question.”

“Normal people lie to each other about things like this all the time. You want us to be different?”

“Things like this?”

Rory sat down, surrendering the coffee. “I like your body. You gained weight. Yes. I like it. It’s—there’s something potent about the—the idea of you being bigger. I don’t know why. Maybe because I feel so adrift. You are my anchor in a room, and it doesn’t bother me that you don’t look the way you did before.”

“I was doing okay until I met Teddy. But then I started coming over here, and I’d put something on the grill, or he’d make something, and we’d eat.”

“So, by ‘doing okay,’ you mean you weren’t eating before? Because that’s really not my definition of ‘doing okay,’ Geo.”

“I was less repulsive.”

“Well maybe I’ll have to prove to you that you aren’t,” Rory said, holding his gaze. “In total and complete honesty, Geo, I can tell you I’m not repulsed.”

“Brat.”

“You love it when I’m a brat. I’m not confident about a lot of things, but I’m very confident about that.”

“Oh, you’re never really a brat. You only approach bratty. But I was serious, earlier. We need to talk, Roar.”

Rory beamed. “You used my nickname.”

“It fits.”

“Thank you.”

They heard voices outside, and laughter.

“No, you asshole, that’s *not* what I said!”

“I think it kind of was, D,” Maizy said, giggling. “I think that’s exactly what you said!”

“No—I mean yes, but—that’s not what I meant, and you know it!”

Teddy shut the door behind the three of them and waved a hand. “It turns out Demon has a long-running martial arts fantasy, and I’m about to star in it.”

“Oh my god, that’s *not what I said!*”

Rory laughed out loud, with his friends, and god, Geo would do anything, anything in the world, to hear that sound more often.

And damn, this coffee was perfect.

Taking a walk had been a good idea. They were more natural with each other when they were moving, whether it was in a grocery store or on a sidewalk. Some of that tension eased away, and they fell into habit.

Which was, of course, the problem.

“I’m not sure where we go from here,” Geo confessed, after they’d exhausted the safer topics of their friends (who were, indeed, on their way to tour the fitness center where Teddy volunteered teaching self-defense courses).

“You mean sex?”

Geo looked over, but Rory was studying the ground in front of him with an intensity that suggested he was concerned a cavern might spontaneously open before he could jump out of the way.

“I mean—everything. But sex, yeah, if you’re interested. I mean, I guess I don’t know if you want to do that. Any of it.” Except for the night in the kitchen, they hadn’t alluded to the past, not like that.

“I didn’t try to find you because I missed your spareribs, Geo. I miss a lot of things. I really miss sleeping next to you, knowing you’re there.”

Oh god. “Me too.” Which felt like an inadequate thing to say.

“And some of the other, um, things we used to do. I miss them, too.”

Rory, Rory, Rory bound to the cross, high on endorphins, that glassy look on his face as he said, “Keep going. More. Please.” Geo bit down on his tongue.

“What? What are you thinking about?” Rory raised his eyebrows, finally looking up from the sidewalk, but they were passing a woman with a stroller and Geo could only blush in reply. “Oh,” he said, like he knew, exactly. “I think about stuff like that a lot. I’m happy I’m not still sleeping with D, or things would be awkward.”

“You slept with Demon?”

“We were pretending to be married, so no one could separate us.”

“Can slaves—sorry, former slaves—get married?”

“In some places. Here, we could, I think. But in a lot of places, people are pretty decent about acting like you’re married, even if the laws haven’t changed yet.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good.” Geo studied the architecture of the grocery store across the street, trying very hard not to think of Rory and Demon in a bed together.

“Good? Geo, are you jealous of D? Because I promise, nothing happened. She’s like my sister. My really annoying, overbearing, younger-but-thinks-she’s-older sister.”

“I’m not jealous. Well, I’m a little jealous, but I definitely don’t want you to think of me as your sister. Though speaking of Demon, this thing between her and Teddy is interesting.”

“Maizy said she can’t decide who’s less likely to get laid, because me and Teddy are so uptight. Er. I mean, not that we—not that we were talking about—um. Never mind.”

“Does Demon want to have sex with Teddy?” *Do you want to have sex with me?*

“Well, it’s not quite like that. I think she actually just wants to cuddle with him.” Rory looked over again, face acquiring that familiar undercurrent of steel. “You know about Teddy, right? You know he used to be a woman?”

“I don’t think he says it that way. But yeah. I know.”

“D said it’s like having all the good parts without any of the bad parts. She had it pretty rough, when she was a slave. Not that that’s—I mean, not like that’s the only reason she likes Teddy. But I think it helps. Teddy’s pretty cool.”

“Teddy’s a pain in my ass. But I know what you mean.”

Rory smiled. “He never lets up, right? I mean, I thought D was bad, but Teddy’s hardcore. He said he was going to deputize the girls to kick your ass if you step out of line.”

It was clearly a joke. There was no reason it should smart the way it did, like lemon juice in a paper cut.

“Hey. Stop for a minute.” Rory pushed him gently until they were standing against a wall with a giant rose painted on it, no longer in the main sidewalk thoroughfare. “I’m not worried you’re going to step out of line, Geo. I mean, I’m way more worried about how much I *want* you to step out of line. I don’t know what to do with that feeling, that—that need. But it feels like I should fight it, so I’m trying.”

“I don’t understand,” Geo said, even though he thought he kind of did.

“So I still haven’t seen where you live. I mean, when you’re not sleeping on the couch.”

“Rory—”

“I can’t really have this conversation on a sidewalk outside a flower shop, Geo. Please.”

“It’s not a nice place. It’s probably nothing like you’re thinking.”

“So what you’re saying is that your whole life since I moved out has been a step down? That’s so flattering.”

Geo closed his eyes for a second, trying to get his bearings. “How do you do that? How do you—how do you go back and forth between teasing and serious like that? I feel like if I get serious for even a few minutes, it’ll be a vortex that sucks me under for hours.”

“Then let me teach you a trick, a slave trick.” Rory framed his face in both hands. “You aren’t allowed to be self-indulgent. Unless I permit it. Right now, I need you focused and attentive. If you fail to do as I say, I will look at you with just a little bit of disappointment, and it will feel like I have beaten you until you can’t speak. In fact, you’d prefer it if I did. Because in this kind of service, Geo, you fear my disappointment more than you fear my punishment. Do you understand?”

“Thought you said there was a trick,” Geo said, his voice more air than sound.

“This is it.” Rory’s eyes bored into his. “You feel my approval? Isn’t it nice when I think you’re a good boy, Geo?”

Geo swallowed.

“If you disappoint me, I might forget you’re a good boy. And you don’t want that.”

“I never—that was never—”

“It’s a trick, Geo. It doesn’t have to be real to work.” But it was clear as anything that on a different level, it was real to Rory. Or at least it had been.

“Did I make you feel that way? Like you weren’t a good boy?”

“You didn’t mean to.”

“I’m so fucking sorry. I never, ever thought that. God, Rory—you were always my good boy.”

Rory dropped his hands. “I know. I think that’s part of the problem. Take me to your house, okay?”

Shit. “Okay,” Geo said. “We can walk from here, it’s not too far.”

Far enough for him to get his head straight about Rory seeing the place. Maybe.

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

Chapter Thirteen

Despite rehearsing, Rory couldn't quite hide his devastation. And it really was devastation.

"But—where is everything? I mean, I know you moved, but where—where is everything from the house? I thought—I thought it would be here. At least some of it." He didn't recognize a single thing in Geo's apartment. Different table, different couch, different bookshelves. He went over, knelt, ran his fingers across the spines of the books. At least these were Geo's books. It was a stupid thing to feel so relieved by, but it didn't matter. "You should be dusting your books, you know," he called, to cover his discombobulation.

"I couldn't keep it. It all reminded me of you, and I wasn't sure if I'd ever see you again."

Rory turned but didn't stand up, eyes still scanning the room for other recognizable artifacts from their life before. "Why? I don't understand that, Geo. You didn't think I'd try to find you?"

"At first I thought you would. Then everyone—everyone acted like I was so stupid, pining away for my slave. It was humiliating, Rory. I'm sorry I—I guess I just gave up, for a while. Did you always know we'd see each other?"

"Well, I guess I can't really say that now. But I had a plan. I was going to wait until I had a job, saved some money up. Then I was going to find a train, or a bus, and take it as close as I could get to the house." Rory shook his head ruefully. "Can you believe I was just going to knock on the door? What if I'd done that, and it was new people, and they had no idea where you'd gone? That would have been awful."

"Truly awful," Geo murmured.

Rory kept exploring, forcing himself not to repeat requests for permission, which Geo would certainly grant. "On the other hand, you got rid of those horrible tea towels, so that's an improvement."

"Actually—actually, I um—I kept them. In my room. They reminded me so much of you, I couldn't throw them away."

"That's so sentimental," Rory said. The implication hit him. "Do you mean—Geo Fairbanks, are you *jerking off* into those ugly tea towels?"

“No! No, Rory, give me a little bit of credit. No. I just couldn't throw them away.”

“Good. Because I think I can accept a lot of things, but that would just be too far.” He gestured around, trying to figure out how to ask the questions he needed to ask. “So—what happened? How did you get here? And why here?”

“I sold the house. I sold everything I could part with, put the rest in storage, and donated most of the money to different places, places I thought you might need. Which I guess was probably stupid, since now you could use the money—”

“Not the money, Geo, but if you're standing here telling me you sold my blender, then we might have a problem.”

“Baby, I am so sorry.”

They both heard the endearment at the same time. Geo looked immediately contrite, but Rory shivered. “Call me that again.”

“I—” Geo came closer, backing him into the counter without touching. “Baby, I missed you so fucking much.”

“Geo—” *Please, please, please.* “Geo, I need—I want—”

“Anything. I'll do anything for you.”

It couldn't be that easy. Nothing on earth could be that easy. “I need it. I need you to—to—dammit.” Geo's fingers ghosted down his face, down his neck. “Oh *please*, you have to help me. Geo, please.”

“I don't know what you need.”

But that was a lie. Rory looked up, and even now it felt illicit and wrong. “You always know what I need.” *Please take over. Please just do it. Please don't make me say it.*

Geo backed away. “We have to talk. This is part of why.”

He didn't want to. Rory felt like he'd been drenched in ice-cold water. Geo didn't want him, or if he did, he didn't want *this*.

“No. No, it's fine.” He pushed off the counter and walked out of the kitchen. “It's fine.” Now was not a good time to go into Geo's bedroom. The bathroom wasn't that much better, but at least there wasn't a bed there, tempting him with memories he'd rather forget.

Also, if you're going to have a sudden crying fit, a bathroom's not a bad place to be. He'd managed to scrape a wad of Geo's sandpaper-textured toilet paper over his eyes before Geo followed him.

"I'm not sure cheaping out on the essentials will really serve you in the long run," he said, unsteadily, trying far too hard to sound casual. "This tissue is worse than camp, and that's saying something."

"Rory—"

"No, it's fine. I'm a little humiliated, but it's fine."

"You don't understand—"

"I understand fine. It's fine, Geo, really, it's fine." If he repeated it enough, it would be true. That's how it worked. "It's totally and completely—"

"Rory."

He was on his knees before he even recognized his name. The tone. The tone said *on your knees*, so he went.

"Baby, you have to let me talk."

Rory breathed into the position, the beautiful, blissful release of being on his knees, not speaking, not thinking.

"We can't do anything until we talk first. It's not that I don't want to. God, Rory, it's everything I can do to keep my hands off you. Sometimes you turn your back on me and I want so much to surprise you with it, to have you stripped and bent over before you even know what's coming, that I have to dig my fingernails into my palms to stop myself." He held out his hands. "Do you see?"

Rory did see. Actually, Rory saw very well.

"I hope you disinfected these." He reached for the worse hand—Geo's left, he dimly registered—and examined it more closely. "Geo, you need an antiseptic on this. And most of them you can leave open-air, but this one particularly should be covered."

But Geo's hands turned, fingers curling in to enfold his. "Please come sit with me. Talk to me. Tell me everything you want and we'll make it work, Rory, I promise you."

"You can't. You can't promise me anything, remember? I'm not your good boy, Geo. I'm just—I'm just this. I'm just a man."

“I think you can be both. If you want to be. Please get off the ground. I’m at least five years older than I was a year ago.”

“Me too.”

Geo led him to the bedroom, sat him carefully on the bed. “Do you need a cup of water or anything?”

“I need a time machine. I don’t want to go back to being a slave, not even yours, but I wish I could feel so *certain* of everything again. I just—my biggest questions were about whether I needed to hire a plumber for the guest bathroom, or if the new carpets could be installed before your birthday without smelling awful for that party your parents always insisted you throw. I mean, I know that sounds so petty now, but I miss that. I felt like you would always be there, taking care of me, and I get now how lucky I was, but at the time, I was so stupid. I just assumed nothing would ever change. Hell, Geo, I didn’t even seriously worry about you finding someone else, not in the last few years. You stopped dating completely. And I—I let myself—”

This was so much harder than he thought. Rory pulled his legs up and hugged them close.

“My parents, you know. They warned me. Because they knew I—that I liked men. And then when you were buying me, they said it was a very good sale, that I was fortunate, but that I had to be careful not to mistake your intentions. That you were my owner, and eventually you would find a wife, eventually you would have a family, and if I wanted to be content, I had to be very careful how I felt about you. As if I could control it.”

“It’s so funny,” Geo said, voice low. “My parents gave me almost exactly the same warnings about you.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Which was weird, and a little topsy-turvy. Rory tried to focus on what he’d been saying. “But you stopped dating, and you let me sleep in the bed every night, and you paid so much attention to me, I forgot. I forgot everything they said. I let myself feel too much. And now I understand, because it would be so much easier now if I didn’t care. If you’d just been my owner.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. Don’t be sorry.” Rory grabbed Geo’s hand and pressed it to his lips. One kiss. Another. A kiss to his wrist, a kiss to the skin of his forearm, thin

over bones and tendons. "Please don't be sorry. I don't have any regrets. I don't want to go back, but I don't have any regrets, Geo."

"I have to talk to you. About safewords. About—about things we never discussed, but maybe should have, Roar." He smiled, a little weakly. "My beautiful, fierce Roar."

"I thought you said we didn't need safewords."

"I didn't think we did. But I—I don't think I can make this work in my head if I'm always worried there's something you don't like and wouldn't tell me. More than anything, I have to know you'll tell me."

"I don't understand what you mean." Rory frowned. "I liked everything."

Geo shifted so he could hold Rory's hands in his lap. "The way you liked coffee?"

He couldn't quite control the sudden tension in his shoulders, in his back. "I—well, I didn't *dislike* coffee. I just drank it without thinking about it."

"That's not quite the bar I want to clear here, Rory. I want you to—not to love everything equally, but if you dislike something, I want to make it worthwhile to you, in the end." He shook his head. "And apparently not just with orgasms. I don't know. I thought I had a lot of this figured out, but the more I talk to Teddy, the more I doubt I know anything at all."

"Fuck Teddy."

"Rory!"

"Stop talking to Teddy if it means you won't come up behind me and bend me over. I used to love it when you did that. Except when I had something in the oven."

"Those were the best times," Geo said, stroking his palm. "You'd be so distracted, but I knew if I touched you just right you'd forget all about cooking."

"Baking."

"Baking."

Rory tried to remain focused, but Geo's fingers running from his wrist to his fingers over and over was absorbing all of his concentration. How many nerve endings could possibly be in one small patch of skin?

He cleared his throat. "You were saying? About safewords?"

“Right. Right, um. Just, there’s a way maybe they could be helpful to us. To you and I.” Geo blushed, and looked away. “Okay, I’m so—I don’t know how to say this well. Sometimes, when you used to beg me? Like when you had something in the oven and you’d tell me I had to stop, that I had to stop doing whatever it was—that was—I liked that a lot. And I never worried that you really wanted me to stop, at least not for any reason other than something might burn, but now if you asked me to stop, I think it would scare the hell out of me. Does that make any sense?”

“I didn’t ever want you to stop,” Rory said.

“Rory.” Geo shook his head. “I want to believe that’s true. I want to believe it will always be true. But we still need to talk about this. If only so Teddy doesn’t kick my ass.”

“Or the girls.”

“Or the girls, yeah, I don’t really want my ass kicked by anyone.”

“Fine. What safeword?” *And then please, please, can we do something, anything, that will make this crazy feeling go away?*

“Red and yellow. Like stop lights. Red to stop, yellow to slow down.”

“If they were really like stop lights, it’d be red to stop and yellow to speed up.”

Geo leaned forward and kissed his cheek, lingering there. “I’ve been so desperate to touch you, Rory, I can hardly even think about anything else. I lie there all night, thinking about touching you.”

“I lie in my bed all night thinking about you touching me. Or that paddle you have, the lightweight strappy one?”

“The one that used to make you scream?”

Rory shuddered. “Only when you hit me in the balls.”

“Like that.” Geo pulled back just enough to see his eyes. It was far too intense. “No, look at me. Like that. Was that too much? Would you have said red, if you could have?”

“Of course not.”

“Roar. Think about it for longer than half a second. You remember how I had you tied down to the bed when we did that?”

"You always used the bed when it was something terrifying," Rory murmured. "When you kissed me and stripped me and led me to the bed, I'd be so afraid and so horny."

"Afraid of me?"

"Not really. I never thought you'd hurt me too much, or that you wouldn't kiss it better after. It was more—" Now he did close his eyes, and lean his forehead against Geo's, trying to relax. Trying to find the strands of honesty inside his slave-mind. "It was terrifying because I let you. Because I knew that if it was the bed, it'd be bad, it'd be you pounding on my balls or caning my cock, or that time you shoved a plug in me and didn't tell me you had it hooked up to that E-stim machine. That was so scary, but you were right there. I don't know. I mean, I know it's not the same as being free, but I went with you, I laid myself down, I put my arms and legs out so you could buckle them in, knowing it would be like that. And I—I miss that so much. I can't breathe sometimes, I miss that feeling so much. Master, *please*."

Geo's hands gripped his. Hard.

"Please," Rory whispered.

"Say it again, Rory. Say my name."

The second time was deliberate, and thus harder than the first. Rory breathed, felt Geo's breath on his face, and when he could, he said, "Master."

"Stand up and hold out your arms."

Rory stood, legs shaking, and obeyed.

"No. You can call me Master, but you look me in the eye, little slave. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Master." He bit down hard on his cheek, trying not to cry, but it was impossible.

"I said, *look at me*."

Rory raised his eyes, and Master looked back, his own eyes full of tears.

"I missed you so much," Master whispered, and kissed his lips. "Do you want to continue?"

Rory nodded.

"You have to say it."

More deep, intentional breaths, and it was easier, somehow, looking into Master's blue eyes. Easier than doing it alone. "Yes, Master."

"Good boy." Another kiss, this one ending in a quick bite to his lip. "Show me your skin."

He'd undressed before his master hundreds, perhaps thousands of times. This was harder than even the first time. (Though granted, that had been after two years of fantasizing about the day Geo would finally take him.)

"I'm sorry," Rory mumbled, fingers shaking on his buttons.

Master stepped forward, not to help with the buttons, but to put his hands on Rory's sides, slipping under the shirt he'd already untucked. And oh, *oh*, Master's hands on his skin, warm and dry and firm.

His fingers gained confidence. His body responded to Master's touch as if electrified: hairs stood on his arms, now bare; his toes tingled; his cock strained against the dreadful white cotton briefs that were his only underclothes.

Oh. How embarrassing. And how silly to be concerned with—that.

Rory faltered.

"What is it? Look at me, Rory."

"I—would you mind—could you turn away? Just for a minute?"

"Why? What's wrong?" Geo caught up his face. "Speak freely. We're on pause, or mute, or something. What is it?"

"My underwear," Rory said, eyes sliding sideways. "I know it's stupid, but it's just, they didn't let me keep my boxers, those beautiful boxers you used to give me, and these are just—they're so *ugly*—"

"Baby, look at me."

When it became clear Geo didn't plan to talk again until he did, Rory relented. "I'm sorry."

"You made those boxers elegant, Rory. They didn't improve you; you improved them." His hands slipped down, slowly, but remained over Rory's jeans. "Whatever you have on will look good because you're in it. Though I hope you don't plan on staying in it much longer. Please don't make me turn away."

"Just, when I used to be—when I was aroused, in those boxers, I *felt* beautiful. These make me feel like a little boy thinking dirty thoughts, hoping no one will notice and punish me for it."

Geo kissed him, so fucking gently, and it was a thousand times more erotic to be kissed with no shirt on, even if Geo wasn't touching him. He could feel a draft somewhere in the apartment. When Geo sighed, Rory felt the sigh skim his chest hair.

"I will close my eyes while you take them off. And later we're going shopping. I should write a letter to someone complaining about the provided underwear lacking imagination." He moved his hands back up, thumbs brushing over nipples, and Rory shivered. "Mm. I want to devour you, baby. I want to chew on every bit of your skin until you're begging me to fuck you."

When? When?

"Yes, Master," Rory said. "Please close your eyes."

"I'm counting to ten, and then I'm opening them."

Dammit. Always changing the rules just enough to keep Rory on his toes. He almost fell on his butt, pulling off his pants, but he managed to stand back up just as Master reached "ten" and looked at him.

And Rory had intended to lower his eyes again, as was proper (whatever Master said about it), but he was utterly arrested by the expression he saw on Master's face.

"You perfect, perfect thing. You are a work of astounding beauty, my slave. My god. I thought I remembered, but you still take my breath away."

Do not cry again.

"Get on the bed, on your back, legs wide, knees against your chest. Let's see if I remember how you taste."

No crying. Check.

Rory scrambled to obey, cock bouncing a little, and tried to settle himself on the rumples, barely made comforter.

"Look at me."

He shouldn't have looked at his master in the first place. He should have argued harder. Slaves should not—

He wasn't a slave. *I am not a slave.*

Rory lowered his legs and shook his head. "Sorry. Sorry, I—I need a minute."

“Listen, baby, I just want to feel you, skin on skin.” Master—no, Geo—knelt beside the bed and reached out to rest fingertips against Rory’s thigh. “Can I—would you mind if I just lay beside you? We could talk. Touch. Kiss. I need to be near you more than I need to play with your head and watch your reactions.”

“But I *do* want that! Dammit. I don’t know what’s wrong with me!”

“Rory. Nothing is wrong with you. Honey, look at me, *please*.”

“You never called me that.”

“Because when you were sixteen I did once, and you looked at me like I’d insulted your manhood.”

Rory smiled. “Oh, I remember that. Because you thought I couldn’t lift my side of the new washer, not because you called me ‘honey.’”

“I suppose I didn’t consider there might be a difference.” Geo raised his eyebrows. “You like it when I call you ‘honey,’ Roar?”

“I guess it makes me feel—cherished, a little. Like I’m something special to you.”

“You are definitely something special to me.”

Silence, dead silence, a vacuum between them filled with traffic sounds and a distant radio and voices passing by the door outside on their way down the stairs.

“So what do we do now?” Rory whispered. “Did I ruin it?”

“No. But I’m having a little trouble undressing.”

“That’s easy to fix. Let me.”

“But I—”

Rory rolled to the side and touched Geo’s lips. “Hush, Master. Let me help.”

It was so simple. Simple to remove each article of clothing, to fold it neatly and return to a slightly-less-covered Geo for the next one. It should have felt like unwrapping, like revealing, but it felt more like a ritual building in the back of Rory’s mind. Countless memories rose up and fell away: undressing Geo after parties, after sporting events, after the business meetings he’d hated so much they left him shaking until Rory ran a shower as hot as they could stand

and washed him, gently, never teasing, just lathering him and rinsing until he could finally focus his eyes again, until his muscles stopped twitching.

“I can’t believe I survived a year without you,” Geo said, when he was finally naked.

“Me either. Did you wash these sheets at all, or were you on some kind of strike?”

“I was trying to have a moment, Roar.”

“And now you’re pouting—”

Geo swept him up, tumbled him back on the bed, knelt over his body. “Oh god, I need you like this. I need you all skin and sweat and—” He lifted Rory’s arm and buried his nose there until Rory, laughing, pushed him away.

“You’re filthy. Don’t think you’re kissing me now, either.”

“Oh yeah?”

And yeah, Geo could pin him, could concentrate his weight on a few target locations until Rory couldn’t move.

“This was one of my biggest fantasies,” Rory said, recklessly taking advantage of his own daring. “When I was sixteen, seventeen, and you wouldn’t touch me, you wouldn’t spank me, you wouldn’t fuck me. I used to dream of this more than anything else. You, so strong, towering over me, pinning me to the bed so I couldn’t move, touching me and forcing me to climax while you watched.”

“God, why didn’t you ever say so before?” Geo shifted, grasped something on the table beside the bed, and came back. “I hope lotion works for you, because I don’t have anything else.”

“Really, how *did* you survive without me?”

“I really don’t know. Now shut your mouth, boy. You want me to whip you later? How many times did you think about this, Rory?” His hand reached between them. “No, keep your eyes on mine. How many times did you hold out on me?”

The lotion was cold, but his hand was so hot. Rory’s body trembled, attempting to keep up with the changing sensation, attempting to reconcile that this wasn’t a dream, wasn’t a fantasy. This was Geo, really truly here, fucking him right now.

“One lash for every night you came like this. Tell me you want it faster, harder.”

“Faster—faster, Master, please.”

Geo's hand slowed down until Rory couldn't cope.

“Harder, damn you!”

“Damn me? Well, that's five lashes there. Go on. Tell me more of your sick little fantasies, slave. You liked it when I played with your fragile little nuts, didn't you? Do you remember I used to make you clean the cock ring?”

Rory groaned. “Yes. Yes, I remember.”

“Tell me what you remember and I'll give you what you want.”

Cruel, so fucking cruel. Rory swallowed.

“No, look at me, look at me while you tell me how mean I was, Rory.”

“You—you'd leave it on the sink.”

“That's right,” Master said, hand beginning to move faster, a straight up-down on his shaft that felt so good, but would never get him off.

“You'd leave it out for me and I'd wash it in the morning.”

“That's right. What did I call it, Rory?”

“The equalizer,” Rory said, trying not to roll his eyes.

The hand on his cock began to slow.

“You called it the equalizer because you said I couldn't control myself like you could. I'd wash it, and at least once during the day you'd make me bring it to you so you could tell me if it was clean enough.”

“And if it wasn't?”

“I had to wash it again,” he said, flushing hotter with the memory. “You'd tell me to unzip my pants, and I would, and then you'd stand behind me at the sink.”

“That's good,” Geo said, and his thumb slid over the smooth head of Rory's cock. “What would I do, Rory, while you were washing the cock ring?”

“You'd—you'd squeeze my balls while I washed it, and sometimes you'd tell me it wasn't good enough, and I'd wash it over and over and over again while you massaged me.”

“Like this?”

Rory's back arched. “Oh, please, please, Master, let me come—”

“All day long, you'd think about that ring, sitting at the edge of the sink in our bathroom. All day. You'd be obsessed with it. Every time I came around the corner you'd look away, embarrassed by how much you wanted me to put it on you. Isn't that right, little slave?”

“Yes—yes, please—”

“I'd put it on you so good, and I'd play with it a little, do you remember? Do you remember what I said?”

“You were checking it, double-checking it, to make sure my balls couldn't escape.”

“Whose balls?”

Rory breathed into it, into Geo's hand on him, into the truth, which was now an illusion. “Your balls, Master.”

“That's right. Then what did I do to my balls, slave?”

“Hit them. Slap them. You'd—you'd make me ask for it.”

“I would,” Geo said. He shifted, then reached for the lotion. “Baby, I'm close. Are you close?”

Rory nodded.

“Say it, Rory.”

“I'm close, Master, please let me come.”

“Keep talking. Keep telling me what you missed, what you want.” Geo shifted until his knees rested on the bed, bracketing Rory's body, then took both of their cocks in his hand at once. “Talk, Rory, tell me how you want it.”

“I want it so hard I can't walk after,” Rory whispered, watching Geo's eyes narrow with focus and brighten with arousal. Both of them moaned when his hand began to move. “I want you to tie me down on a bench and whip me the way you used to, all the way up my thighs, all over my butt, so every time I moved for days, I could feel the marks. It was like being owned down to my cells. It was even better than the collar because no one knew but us. And sometimes you'd—oh god, Geo—sometimes you'd—”

He wanted to ride the pleasure all the way up, but Geo slowed it down again, not too much, just enough to back it off.

“Keep talking,” he said roughly, and leaned down to bite Rory’s ear. “Keep talking until you can’t talk, Rory. Sometimes I’d what?”

“Sometimes in the middle of the day you’d make me drop my pants, bend over, not even in the bedroom, sometimes in the kitchen, in the living room. Or once, that one time, right in front of the door—”

“The glass panel door, yeah, where anyone could have come up to the house at any time and seen you like that, bare and marked with my whip.”

Rory groaned and finally, finally, Geo’s hand took up a real rhythm, a good rhythm.

“You’d bend me over and finger me open and pinch my marks and sometimes you’d fuck me just like that, wherever we were, but it was almost better when you pulled off your belt, or even when you just used your hand, and—and—” Rory threw his head back, arching up into Geo, whose hand encompassed both of them, ramping pleasure to its peak, cock sliding against cock, and Rory’s orgasm shattered through his mind, his body, burning through doubt and fear and the memory of loss.

“You are so incredible,” Geo whispered, hand still moving. “I’d spank you bent over like a naughty little boy with your marks showing, I’d tell you I owned your ass and I could keep smacking it until it was purple, I could fuck it until it was raw, and you loved it, you writhed around like you were desperate for it. I never talked to anyone like that, baby, just you, just you—”

Geo’s orgasm was more dignified, but when he came down, he came *down*.

“Oof. Hey. Trying to breathe here.”

“Sorry, honey.” Geo rolled, rested. “I really love that you don’t mind me calling you that. It’s so silly, but I always wanted to. I was always so disappointed you didn’t like it.”

“Well, I do. But if you call me that in front of Demon, she’ll probably deck you.”

“Not in my plans.” Geo wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “Here. Will you lie here with me, just for a few minutes? I know we should leave soon, but I don’t want to lose this quite yet.”

“We could always do it again.”

“We will. Oh, god, Roar, we will, we must. Please.”

“Yes. Damn right.” Rory curled in and pressed a kiss against Geo’s chest. “Thank you. It helps, a little. I feel like I can breathe a little bit easier now.”

“Good. I’m glad. I guess we’ll just have to keep having sex until you can breathe easily all the time, then, won’t we?”

“I guess we will. For medical reasons.”

Geo laughed. “That’s right. Medical reasons. Come here, my patient.”

It shouldn’t have been comfortable to doze half-on, half-off Geo’s body, but it was the only place Rory ever wanted to be. He wanted to stay right there, just like that, spunk drying on their skin, the unpleasant scent of Geo’s sheets ever-present at the edges of his consciousness, entirely, completely content.

Chapter Fourteen

Geo couldn't decide how he'd ended up in therapy, except he was pretty sure it had to do with Rory saying something like, "Come with me, sit next to me, and you don't have to say anything unless you want to." Which seemed reasonable. At the time.

But now he was here, sitting beside Rory on a sofa, and an Asian woman named Lauren was nodding as Rory described the two of them having sex.

"I want to know why I couldn't do it," Rory said, hands clenching. "It would have been so good, and I—it was like my brain short-circuited, and all I could think was that I was a slave, but I'm not, I should be, but I can't be, and I—I couldn't do it. Does that make any sense at all? Am I just fucking speaking gibberish?"

Rory of old never used the word "fuck" unless instructed to do so, in very specific situations. Geo caught himself blaming Demon for the more consistent use of the word and revised; Rory could, of course, use whatever language he wanted.

"I know I'm not making sense," Rory said, sounding tired.

"I think everything you said made sense," Lauren replied. "I was waiting to see if Geo had anything to add."

"I told him he didn't have to talk if he didn't want to."

"I'm not too worried he'll feel pressured. Geo? Does Rory's experience echo yours? Did you have a difficult time remembering that he is no longer your property?"

Geo fought the sense of affront. "That's not how I ever thought of him."

"No? But in his re-telling, both of you seemed to enjoy the idea that you owned him, down to his parts, and that you could use them however you wished."

A trap. Somehow. "Well, we were just talking. I was just talking." He glanced aside. "You knew that, right? I mean, that I was just saying that because you liked it, you thought it was hot. Didn't you?"

"Now or then?" Lauren asked.

“What?” He heard the irritation in his voice and took a breath. “Sorry. This therapy thing isn’t really my deal. I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Of course. You reassured Rory that you were just describing something he found arousing, not describing a literal state, and I’m wondering if you’re referring to the other day, or before? Because regardless of your intention, when you played those games before, they were quite literally true, Geo. It would only make sense if the effect of such lines had changed along with their meaning.”

“That’s the problem,” Rory said, looking at his hands. “That’s the whole problem.”

“What is, Rory?”

“I—I don’t want it to go back to *being* true. But I want—I want to go back to it *feeling* true.” He glanced up, at Lauren, not Geo, and Geo fought a wave of anger. Rory—his Rory—was sitting there with tears in his eyes, and this fucking therapist was the reason why.

“Good,” Lauren said.

Do not hit Rory’s therapist. Do. Not. Hit.

“Really? ’Cause it feels lousy.”

“Rory, I don’t think you fully realize how much you’ve changed in the last year. Probably even in the last week.”

“How do you know? I don’t feel different. I feel—I still feel like I need someone to—to take care of me. I feel like I can’t stand on my own.”

“That’s entirely understandable. Those programs are designed to alleviate some of the worst self-doubt—and that’s providing you complete them, which you did not—but no one proves himself until he proves himself. It’s not something you can learn from a book, or a class, or a partner. Or a therapist.”

“So I’m stuck like this?”

“You aren’t stuck at all. You’re in flux. You’re beginning your journey, Rory, and you have no idea where it will lead you. But I want to bring you back to what you said before. You don’t want to be Geo’s slave, but occasionally you want the option to *pretend* that you are. Maybe you will always want that, or maybe you will only want it today, or tomorrow, and then you’ll find you no longer wish to play that role. But the fact that there is a clear line in your head between being and feeling is tremendously important.”

“But in the moment, there wasn’t. In the moment, I got confused, like I wasn’t sure if I had to do it or not, and even though I wanted to, it tripped me up in my head.”

“And you stopped. Would you have done that before? In your old house, where you were a slave, not a free man. Would you have stopped everything to think about it?”

“It wouldn’t have come up. I mean I just—I just did it. I just obeyed. I didn’t even think about if I wanted to. Not that I didn’t want to, that’s not what I’m saying. I never felt like he’d force me into anything I really didn’t want to do. It just wasn’t really a consideration.”

“All right,” Lauren said, and leaned forward.

Geo braced himself.

“Your desire was irrelevant unless Geo decided to take it into consideration. Right?”

“I—I mean, I guess so. I guess that’s the difference between me and D. Nobody cared what she wanted. Geo actually—he wanted to make me happy.”

“Exactly. Geo met his need, which was to make you happy. But Rory, your needs were irrelevant. The part of this that will be the hardest for you is not whether or not Geo respects your needs. It’s whether or not you do.”

Rory held his composure for fifteen seconds before it shattered, and Geo watched, utterly unable to help. When he dropped his face into his hands, weeping, Geo moved closer, draping one arm protectively over his back. He tried not to glare at Lauren, but there was really nowhere else to look, and she seemed so... satisfied.

“Why are you smiling?” he hissed. “Why did you do that to him?”

“Why do you think being with Rory was so much easier than being with a free man of equal standing, Geo?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“He said you stopped bringing home lovers soon after he turned eighteen. I’m wondering what you see when you look back. You gave up a world full of opportunities—for a future, a family—for the love of your slave. What does that reveal about you, Geo? And can you make the transition to loving a free man?”

Geo's muscles tensed, and if Rory still wasn't sniffing into his hands, Geo probably would have walked out.

"I'm not asking you because I want the answers. I'm asking you because those are the kinds of questions you should be talking about in therapy."

"I don't need therapy."

Rory leaned in, leaned closer. He took it, momentarily, as an endorsement. Until Rory said, "You really do."

"Hey."

"Don't be angry." He lifted his head, but didn't move away. "Please don't be angry. But I don't want to do this alone."

"You aren't. I'm right here."

"I want you here today. I don't want you here every time."

Impossible to hold onto his anger, his fear, when Rory looked him in the eye.

"It makes me feel like I'm—not strong enough to be your—to be with you."

"You saying I'm weak?"

"Of course not. You're the strongest person I know." He kissed Rory's forehead. "Next time you can carry the washing machine by yourself, okay, honey?"

"Jerk." Rory glanced at Lauren. "Sorry."

"I'm not the kind of specialist you see regarding injuries sustained moving appliances," she said. "You just said going to therapy made you feel like you weren't strong enough to be Rory's something, and cut yourself off, Geo. What were you going to say right then?"

Fucking therapists. Geo grit his teeth. "Nothing."

"Owner, master, boyfriend, partner? Any of those correct?"

"I—no, I—" He looked away, from Lauren, especially from Rory. "No, I got ahead of myself. Of us. It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," Rory said, and touched his hand.

"I don't want to put more pressure on you. I'm afraid if I say the wrong thing you'll—forget you can tell me to shove it up my ass."

“I’ll practice. What were you going to say?”

Shit. Geo studied the stitching on the seams of the sofa cushion. “Husband. I was going to say I want to be strong enough to be your husband. I’m not—I’m not saying soon—or ever—but—”

“Shut up, Geo.” Rory kissed him, hard, right there in front of the fucking therapist. “*Husband*. I couldn’t have been that, before.”

“Well, I had some feelers out about different legal protections I could offer you, but no, nothing even close to that really. You could never have walked into a room on my arm. I could never have introduced you as my equal.” He stopped talking, suddenly choked up. He’d thought about taking Rory out of the country, some place where there were no slaves, but it had seemed so irrational to leave everything he knew when they had a good life. And now? He’d left everything he’d known anyway.

“You thought about all that?”

“Of course I thought about it. I obsessed about it. You didn’t?”

“Never even occurred to me,” Rory said. “Slaves can’t marry their masters.”

“Well, you can marry me. I mean, not that I’m—just you could marry anyone, is what I meant. Hell.”

“I know what you meant.”

“Time’s up,” Lauren said. “Can I give you the name of a colleague of mine, Geo? I think you’d like him.”

Him. That would be a good start, at least. “Yes, please,” he said, with as much grace as he could muster. “Thank you.”

They said goodbye and went to the waiting room to collect Demon and Maizy.

Something was clearly going on. Demon didn’t go inside, just took off, calling back something about taking a walk. Rory went after her with a wave, leaving Geo and Maizy standing on the sidewalk in front of the entrance to Teddy’s courtyard. Blinking.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“I hope so. I mean, kind of. Just, D’s a little bit stubborn and a lot paranoid, and her shrink told her she has the right to feel safe, however she defines it, so now she’s all freaked out because what she really wants is Teddy, but not to

have sex with him, which she doesn't think he'll go for, which is so stupid because he's obviously totally into her, and also, there's no way he's one of those guys who demands sex. I mean, *obviously*, right?"

Maizy, apparently only just realizing she'd said all that aloud, to Geo, on the sidewalk, blushed.

"Um. Sorry. She had kind of a hard day at therapy."

Didn't we all.

"But it's okay. Rory will fix it. They do this, she and Roar. Walk around, for hours, talking or maybe not talking, I'm not really sure. I guess when I go with them I'm always talking, so I don't know what they do when I'm not there." She looked over again. "He's not, is he? Teddy, I mean. I guess I shouldn't assume that just because he—you know—that he's different. But it seems like he is."

"Different than what?"

"Oh, you know. Men. I guess I only know how men are with women, but there's kind of an expectation, you know?"

"Do you mean women or slaves?"

The blush deepened. "Um, yeah, I guess that was probably insulting. I don't know what I mean. We should, uh, go inside."

He followed her in, but he couldn't quite let it go. "Hey, Maizy."

"Um. Yeah?"

"There shouldn't be an expectation. If there is, you're with the wrong person. That's true across the board, men, women, whoever. Okay?" He didn't add, *You might want to bring this up in therapy* because he didn't really believe in therapy, but surely if there was a use for it, it was to convince pretty twenty-year-olds that they didn't owe anyone a damn thing, former slaves or not.

"I think maybe that didn't come out right," she said, after a minute, hand on the doorknob to the patio. "But he's not, right? I mean, Teddy's not like that. He'd never think that just 'cause she wanted to sit with him, she wanted to sleep with him. Actually, she'd probably love to sleep with him, just not sleep-with-sleep-with him."

"Teddy would probably want her to sign a paper with some kind of diagram on it detailing exactly what he was allowed to look at, clothed, let alone touch. There's no way he'd ever take advantage, Maizy."

“Yeah, that’s what I told her. And her shrink said she gets to feel safe now, she gets to relax now, and that’s, like, her homework.” She rolled her eyes. “So I hope you and Roar didn’t have dinner plans, ’cause they’re probably gonna be a while. Anyway, I’m gonna go take a nap. Therapy’s exhausting, right?”

She was gone before he had to form a reply.

Geo left a note for Rory, then went back to his apartment to gather up as much laundry as he could bundle into his sheets. He also threw away the food he’d let go south in the refrigerator, and took the garbage down to the big outside bins. He cracked the bedroom window before he left, hoping that the place would smell a little better without the bedding, and drove it all back to Teddy’s.

“I’m taking advantage of your washer and dryer,” he said, dumping everything in front of the machines. “Jeez, Teddy, how the hell does all this work?”

“It’s nice to see you, too, roommate. Yes, my work day was fine, and yours? I see you’ve decidedly not prepared dinner for the family. Or cleaned.”

Geo grinned. “I’d hate for you to get used to me living here and miss me when I left.”

“There is almost no chance of that,” Teddy muttered. “Speaking of the family, where is everyone? I don’t think the place has felt this empty since the circus came to town.”

“They’re not back yet? Maizy’s here. Rory and Demon are taking a walk.” Geo slammed the door to the washer shut and hit a combination of buttons that might start a wash cycle. Or possibly shoot the fucking thing to the moon. It was a little hard to tell from the pictures.

“A walk? What, just—walking? Not going anywhere?”

“Just walking. Maizy said this is a thing they do.”

“Huh. All right. I suppose.” Teddy’s eyes narrowed. “How was therapy?”

“I think Rory’s therapist is a sadist.”

“In a good way, I hope.”

Geo considered it, trying to judge her effect on Rory. “Actually, I can see why he finds it helpful. There are things—I think she might have said something that resonated with him. I’m not sure. But he likes going, so it must be doing something for him.”

“Just for him, huh? You aren't a convert?”

“If I want someone to rake me over the coals, I have you, Teddy. And that's free.”

“I don't know, Geo. Rory's pretty sharp. Surely he deserves to be with someone who's not afraid of a little bit of therapy once a week.”

“I'm not *afraid*, you bastard. I'm—I don't—oh, just shut the fuck up, Teddy.”

Teddy smiled. “I bought tri-tip. You want to throw some spices together?”

“You trying to seduce me with your barbecue again? It's unbecoming.”

“Since you've basically moved in, I'd say it's working.”

The exterior door opened and Rory entered, followed by Demon.

“Good afternoon,” Teddy called, not at all aware that he was probably the subject of their long, long walk. “Grilled tri-tip and roasted veg tonight, guys.”

Demon didn't look up, just went straight through to the patio and around the outside.

“Sorry,” Rory offered. “Can I help with anything?”

“You can tell me if she's okay or if I should be hiding the sharps.”

Rory shook his head, but met Teddy's eyes. “No. That was me, when I first got to camp. And she'll never let me forget it. No, she's just, you know, working through some stuff.”

“Would you tell me if I should be worried?”

“It would be better if D told you. Anyway, can I help?”

“You can chop broccoli.”

“Got it.”

“So did Geo make any progress in therapy today? He's pretty sensitive about it.”

“Is he?”

“He's working through stuff, I assume.”

“I'm standing right here,” Geo said, torn between annoyance and amusement that the two people he most enjoyed talking to were having fun at his expense.

"He really is sensitive," Teddy said.

"Therapy is good. It's just kind of weird. I think I've thought about all this so much that there can't possibly be anything new, anything I've missed, but then Lauren says something and all of it flips so I'm seeing a new angle."

"Sounds like she's pretty good."

"She's a lot better than the jerks at camp."

Teddy nodded, and passed Rory a bowl to collect the chopped broccoli. It was intensely pleasing, watching the two of them work around each other in the kitchen. "And Demon said you weren't allowed to call it 'camp'?"

"That was the whole internal conflict of the thing right there. Everything we read was like, 'You're free, you're free, you're free,' but then there we were, stuck out in the middle of the desert, not allowed to leave, not even allowed to use the words we wanted to describe it."

"I saw somewhere that they arranged the camps by ages and tailored the programs."

Rory paused, knife going still on the board. "You know, I never even thought about that. I was so grateful my parents weren't there, I never realized that no older people were there at all."

"You didn't want to see them?" Teddy asked.

"They were—I think they really believed in it. In the system. Our system, not the indentured labor system. I think they thought everyone lived like us, or maybe there were one or two bad owners, but that mostly slaves were taken care of. Or maybe they just acted like that around me because they didn't want me to worry about things I couldn't control. I don't know anymore."

"I think the programs for the older slaves, or maybe for the ones who'd been in it longest, were rather long and in-depth. They're probably still in a—camp, or school, or whatever they're calling them."

"Rory, do you want me to—" Geo began.

"No. No, Geo. I'm not ready. I'm not sure I'll ever be ready. I know I shouldn't be ashamed of being free, but I—the way they always talked about it, service was the only honor in the world. And I don't want that anymore."

Geo wanted to argue, but it was Teddy, voice calm and unruffled, who said, "Well, there are different ways of serving. You and I are serving right now,

prepping food for dinner. If Geo could get off his ass for a few minutes, he'd marinate the meat, and later he'll grill it. That's all service, Rory. And I like to think that with it, we honor one another."

"See, that's—okay. Yes. I want to think that, too."

"Notice Geo's still on his ass. The man distinctly lacks honor."

Rory smiled over at him, so sweetly Geo had to look away. "I think he's pretty honorable, Teddy."

"If you say so."

But Teddy was teasing, and Rory was here, solid and healthy and so fucking handsome, standing there in the lights of the kitchen.

"I need to change the wash," he said, and cleared his throat.

"He's doing laundry?" Rory asked.

"Evidently. Smells something ferocious, too."

"Oh. Um. Huh."

This time when he returned, he joined them in the kitchen and, yes, made the damn marinade. It was domestic and strange and felt very, very right.

Chapter Fifteen

Teddy's barbecues were apparently legendary.

"So what, you just invite a bunch of people over? Don't the old folks complain?"

"I invite the old folks, too. If you have a problem with the idea, Demon—"

"Hell no. I got no problems."

Teddy caught Rory's eye, then looked back at D. "Glad to hear it. I need volunteers for food prep."

"I'm in," Rory said. Food prep. He could definitely prep food.

"I don't know shit about food prep. What about you, Maizy?"

"I can help if someone tells me how."

"Actually, Maizy, I had another idea for you. How do you feel about taxes?" Teddy pulled Maizy off, and Rory couldn't really tell what they were talking about.

He kicked D's shoe. "You really going to be okay with a barbecue?"

She shrugged.

"Because if you're not okay with it and you don't tell Teddy, he's probably going to kill you."

"Whatever, Roar. Anyway, Teddy's not gonna kill me."

"I'm not gonna kill you!" Teddy called from the dining room table, which was currently covered in file folders and stacks of paper. "In fact, I'm taking you shopping. Roar, you in?"

"I'm in. C'mon, D."

"Huh."

"You have everything here, Maizy?" Teddy asked.

"Are you kidding me? This is great. Your files are a mess, Teddy. I'm like *so* excited right now."

"Crazy Maizy," D mumbled. "Let's go if we're going. I don't want to sit around here all day."

“Because you lead such a busy life,” Rory shot back. “Anyway, what’re we shopping for, Teddy?”

“Oh, a little bit of everything. We’re taking the truck.”

A little bit of everything turned out to be a pretty good description.

They started at a home improvement store, the kind of place where Rory always wanted to shop back when he was throwing the annual summer party at Geo’s old house. (It was the only one Geo even halfway enjoyed, mostly because it took place outside, so there was always somewhere to hide.)

“What in the hell is that?” Demon demanded, frowning down at an oblong metal trough with a decorative grill over it.

“Portable fire pit. I’ve always wanted one of these, and today, I’m buying one.”

“Fire pit. For what? You have a fireplace inside.”

“This goes in the yard. I’ve always wanted to put it in the center of the courtyard, so you could see it from inside all four apartments.”

“Is this some kind of white people thing?”

Teddy grinned. “Yes, Demon. Only white people like fire.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“Fire’s good for cuddling,” Rory said. He could definitely see sitting with Geo, watching the flames. “I like this one. It’s not round, it’s sort of oval. More room for cuddling.”

“Speaking of cuddling, we’re gonna need some outdoor chairs.”

Two comfortable chairs and two benches later, Teddy declared them done with the home improvement store. The next stop was even better.

“I love this place!” A genuine party supply store. “What are we buying, Teddy? I used to have to drag Geo into places like this when I was planning parties.”

“It’s hard for me to imagine Geo throwing parties. A little bit of everything, remember? Go crazy, Roar. It’s a barbecue, so think disposable and biodegradable.”

“Got it.” Rory led the way to the summer entertaining section. “Geo hated having parties, but his parents expected him to do at least some social things.

What they really wanted was for him to find a wife, but keep me around for, you know, satisfying his physical needs.” Plates, utensils, napkins, cups. He really needed to know the menu before he could adequately shop for it.

“Seriously?” D asked.

Rory, belatedly realizing that his friends had stopped walking, turned around. “What?”

“Geo’s parents wanted him to find a wife? And what, keep fucking you on the side?”

“Um. Well, not exactly. I mean, she’d know about it. And that was—that would have been a good arrangement for me. It would have been a good life.”

“For a slave, you mean. That would have been a good life *for a slave*.”

Teddy put a hand on her arm, and for once she didn’t shake it off. “Well, I’m happy you’re here in this life, not there in that one. Do you have this area handled?”

“I think so.”

“Great. Demon, come help me pick out frivolous decorations to please the old folks.”

“Because I’m so fucking good at decorating?”

“Because you secretly like my neighbors.”

“Shut it, Teddy.”

They walked away, and Rory turned back to the shelves and shelves of plates in rainbow colors, but he had a hard time focusing on them. It was surreal, trying to imagine his old world from Teddy’s perspective, or Demon’s. It had been such a good sale. His parents had been happy for him, and also something else, a slightly darker undercurrent of relief that he hadn’t wanted to acknowledge at the time, just shy of his sixteenth birthday, and already a little bit in love with the handsome man who’d bought his contract.

They’d told him to be careful, to be good. They’d told him to ingratiate himself as quickly as possible with whatever partner his master brought home, to become indispensable, to be nonthreatening. Geo hadn’t ever brought a serious partner home.

And if he had? Rory picked out plates in neon blue, garish and bright and unlike anything he would have picked out to please Geo’s parents. He would

have accepted a partner, if Geo had settled down with one. He would have told himself it was good, that he was lucky.

Napkins with blue stripes. Multicolored plastic cutlery. Silly, appalling plastic goblets (he'd have to check with Teddy about the prices on those, but there was something so fun about them, and fun was definitely Teddy's goal).

"You all right?"

Rory held up the goblets. "Planning for twenty people, right? These are more expensive than the basic opaque cups, but—"

"Get them. Twenty, but plan for thirty. People always lose their cups." Teddy pushed the cart he'd retrieved forward so Rory could dump his armful of goodies into it. "You really okay?"

"I'm—better than okay. Yeah. It still throws me, thinking about it the way you think about it. It still seems so normal to me."

"Culture shock, I get that."

"Still. You're right, you know. I'm happy I'm in this life, too."

Teddy smiled. "We should track down Demon. I have no idea what havoc she could cause here, but if we leave her too long, I suspect we'll find out. Plus—" He glanced at his watch. "If you're not home in time for Geo to get back from therapy, he'll have a fit."

"Probably, yeah." The cart full of bright colors and patterns suddenly seemed offensive, and Rory shook his head. "Would you rather we get normal stuff? None of this really goes together."

"I think that means it will all go perfectly with Demon's decorations. Come on, Rory. I like the blue. And the goblets really are inspired."

They found Demon (who'd clearly tried to find the most horrifying clashing streamers and balloons she could possibly find), complimented her on her choices (she glared at them), and loaded everything in the truck.

The grocery store was next. Rory had really missed throwing parties.

The best part about Teddy's barbecue was how excited everyone was.

They'd all spent some of their living allowances on clothes, but Geo took the three of them out for more frivolous party choices. Maizy got a cute dress

that swirled around her legs when she spun, making her giggle like a little kid. D got baggy cargo pants and a tight tank top, hitting a combination of feminine and fucking tough that Rory was pretty sure Teddy, in particular, would appreciate.

After about fifteen minutes of wandering around, Geo tugged him into an alcove behind a mannequin and looked at him. Really *looked* at him.

“Sorry. I don’t need anything, really. The clothes I have are fine.”

“I like you in all clothes.”

“Then we can go. I mean, it was important to the girls, but—”

“Roar.”

Rory swallowed, and Geo moved in closer against him. It would probably look like they were kissing, if anyone walked past. He flushed.

“Can I buy you a suit? I keep picturing you in the foyer, greeting people in your beautiful suit.”

“You’re already getting stuff for my friends. You can’t afford a suit on top of all that, Geo. I’m fine.”

“Slacks and a good shirt, then. I can afford slacks and a good shirt. And, of course, boxers.” Geo’s hand cupped his cheek. “It would be my pleasure to outfit you, Rory. May I choose what you wear?”

Should he say yes, because yes, that’s what he wanted, that’s what he needed? He needed to meet Teddy’s people in clothes given to him by Geo, like a shield, to keep him safe. Which was so, so stupid. Or was he supposed to say no because he should be able to choose his own clothes, just like D, just like Maiz?

“Dammit,” he whispered, and leaned his head into Geo’s.

“All right. It’s okay, honey, I swear. Go find the girls and get in line.”

“What’re you going to do?”

“Pick out clothes for you, very quickly, and you aren’t allowed to look at them, either. They’re a gift.”

“Geo—”

Geo tapped his neck until Rory reluctantly raised his head. “If you really don’t want me to, I won’t. But I’d like to do this, Rory. It would please me to surprise you with a gift.”

“Surprise me?”

“I told you, you aren't allowed to look.”

“Really?”

“I insist. Go find the girls. I'll be there in a second.”

Yes, Master. Rory held his breath and pressed a kiss against the side of Geo's face. “Thank you.”

“Thank you, Roar. My fierce, beautiful Roar.”

It was still hard to turn away from Geo. But he did. He rounded up D (trying on boots) and Maiz (touching things: scaly snakeskin belts and soft leather handbags), and got in a long-ish line to give Geo enough time to return. When he did, he made Rory turn away so he could show the girls what he'd found.

“Oh, Geo, Roar's gonna look—”

“It's a surprise, Maizy.”

“Huh.” D's voice. “Well, look at that. You picked out nice shit, Geo. I mean, judging by that trash you wear I'm a little shocked, but there it is.”

Rory grinned in the general direction of the perfume counter and listened to Maiz yell at Demon for being rude.

Now he really wanted to see what Geo was buying.

Chapter Sixteen

Geo was always going to remember the day of Teddy's party. It was the first time he woke up in Rory's bed.

As he drifted to sleep, naked, with Rory's naked legs folded around his, Rory's head nestled against his neck, he imagined waking up early just to lie there and breathe and know that Rory was safe beside him.

When he woke up, Rory was watching him. Smiling.

"I was supposed to wake up first," Geo murmured. "Wanted to bask in your nearness."

"Bask in my nearness?" Rory leaned down, kissed his chest. "I'm here. I guess I've been basking in your nearness, actually. Geo, I—I don't want to move too fast, and I keep thinking maybe we are, but I—it's so good to have you here."

"I agree." More than good. Without thinking, he reached over, settled a hand in Rory's hair. "Good morning." He began to push Rory down, their old morning ritual, but suddenly Rory went still, and Geo realized what he was doing.

He froze.

"Oh shit. Rory. I didn't mean—I'm not even really awake—"

"It's okay. It's fine."

But it wasn't that fine, because he didn't resume the barely begun morning blowjob, either. Geo untangled his hand from Rory's hair and rubbed his eyes.

"Old habits."

"Anyway, we slept in. We should really start getting ready."

"Right."

Rory stood up, pulled on sweat pants and a T-shirt. (New, high-quality comfort clothes were another intervention of Geo's. Teddy had laughed at him, but gently, and said to Demon, "You can tell a lot about a man by the clothing he prioritizes. Geo wears the same corduroy pants for five straight days, but the idea of you guys having threadbare sweats offends him.")

"I'm sorry, Roar."

"It really is fine." Rory leaned over and kissed his cheek. "This is why they say take it slowly, right? Anyway, where are my clothes? I've been waiting for days."

His clothes. Of course. "Hanging up in Teddy's spare room. But watch out, it's a nightmare in there."

"I think I'll survive. Get up, lazy." Another smile and Rory was out the door.

"Fuck," Geo said to the empty room.

What the hell had he been thinking? But he hadn't been thinking. He'd been doing, guided by years of habit. "*You will greet me every morning with this service, do you understand?*" Rory—freshly eighteen at the time—had nodded, eager and excited. That had been the first time Geo threaded his fingers through Rory's much-shorter hair and guided him beneath the sheets. Not that Rory had needed guidance so much as grounding. Geo had teased him once that he'd spend the whole day sucking cock if Geo didn't make sure they had time for other things, and oh god, how he'd blushed.

Geo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. This side of the duplex was quiet, which meant everyone was next door, getting ready for the party.

Parties. There's a boner-killer. Parties and socializing and pretending to be interested in the mundane commentary of other people's lives. Rory loved parties. He didn't think it was boring, he thought it was a game. "Everyone's a puzzle piece. If you find the ways they fit together, no one's stuck listening to the wrong person for long." But Geo's right person was Rory, and he wouldn't be able to get him alone all damn day.

Get up, lazy. Right. Geo got up.

Geo spent the first half of the barbecue at the grill. The grill was a safe place; occasionally someone might come over to talk grill techniques or barbecue styles (the gas grill vs. charcoal grill debate wasn't likely to ever be resolved), but mostly Geo responded to orders and kept a steady supply of chicken, tempeh, and zucchini strips.

Every now and then he'd hear Maizy laugh, which never failed to make him smile. Maizy and Rory were definitely having a good time. Demon, to his surprise, came over to sit in the shade of the ivy beside the grill a few times,

where she muttered insults about Teddy's guests until she was ready to return to the small talk.

"You could go to your side of the duplex and shut the door," he suggested, the third time she sat down.

"Nah. This works."

"You want anything to eat?"

"Nope. Thanks."

Geo followed her gaze to Teddy and one of the neighbor couples (Babs and Eds, not Maria and Luis). "He's a good man. Teddy is."

"Yeah, well, there's nothing good about me, is there?"

"Demon—"

"Let's just skip the part where you try to reassure me, okay, Geo?" She stood. "I need a less chatty hiding place. See ya."

He didn't bother with "Goodbye." Demon went inside—Teddy's side—and a few minutes later Geo watched, unobtrusively, as Teddy followed.

Probably for the best.

Just as he was wrapping up the last rectangular pieces of tempeh, grilled with hatch marks no less, Maizy came up and took the spatula.

"Check on Rory for me? I tried to catch his eye, but he's gone glassy. You know how he does that?"

Gone glassy was an interesting way of describing it. Sometimes it was a precursor to a fainting fit, sometimes not. "Where—"

"Right there, by the fire."

"Thanks, Maizy."

By the fire, yes, standing tall and strong in a deep gray shirt that perfectly picked up the silver flecks in his brown eyes. A pleasure to dress this man. But Maizy was right; Rory's expression was still and distant.

"How is everything?" Geo asked the three men who were standing around, still engaged in some discussion.

"Great, great, Geo," one of them said (Paul, a coworker of Teddy's). The other two, also coworkers, echoed the sentiment.

Geo settled a hand at the small of Rory's back. "Glad to hear it. You mind if I borrow Rory for a minute?"

"No, no. Good to meet you, Rory!"

"You as well," Rory murmured, waving as he turned away, skirting just beyond the reach of Geo's touch.

Hell.

"Inside," Geo said, hoping that whatever was going on, it was something he could fix, or help with, or make disappear.

Rory went through Teddy's side to the back patio, then into the other half of the duplex. Geo followed him to his room and shut the door behind them.

"They were talking about slavery. Our slavery. Like we were—like they didn't really believe it existed. Apparently there's a new documentary." He glanced up. "There's a new documentary about the secret world of legacy slaves, Geo. Like we're some kind of freak organism just discovered."

"Ah." To sit, or not to sit.

"I don't know. I guess it's still hard for me to think about it like that. There was this weird moment when we were shopping, and I think I just—I just forget how strange it is to other people. How strange it will be someday to me."

"Do you think?" Geo asked, and decided to sit on the bed, but not too close.

"I keep thinking about how I didn't know people lived differently until I was a teenager. It was all I knew. And if I had a child, Geo, I'd be so careful about what I said. I'd *want* it to seem freakish to my son or daughter. I wouldn't ever want it to feel normal. But then I think it gave me you, and I can't hate it because of that, but it took away what I thought I was, so it's—it's so hard to know what I'm supposed to believe about it." He shook his head. "But this morning? Should have been perfect. I wanted that so much. But I—couldn't. And I don't understand why."

"This morning was my fault—"

"But I *wanted* it. I wanted it to be like it used to be, but when it was, it was too much."

"Rory, I don't want to make assumptions like that. I want to start new things, not just do what we always did and hope it still works."

"I'm not talking about *everything*, I'm talking about one fucking thing, I'm talking about sucking your cock first thing in the morning, which I loved, Geo,

and I don't think that was because you demanded it, I think it was just because I loved that feeling, that ritual, but now I can't go there without losing myself in my head, and it makes me so *angry*."

Rory's anger, expressed with a slight emphasis on the word and clenched fists, nothing more, took Geo's breath away. He slid to his knees and reached up to gently uncurl Rory's fingers.

"Let me give you something else to think about."

"You can't. You know it'll just—you can't give me what I need here, in the house, with all those people outside."

"Is that a challenge, Roar?" *Look at me, honey, please.*

"Even you can't conjure soundproof walls, Geo."

"Then you will have to be very, very quiet."

"Geo—"

Rory broke off and they looked at each other. The party provided distant background noise—laughter, voices, a chair scraping the ground outside—but it felt like they were in a bubble, insulated from the rest of the world.

It was terrifying, not knowing exactly what Rory wanted. Except that Rory didn't want to think anymore, and Geo'd always prided himself on providing distraction.

"You'll be very quiet, and you'll look me in the eye, so I know it's good for you. Yellow for slow down, red for stop."

A crisp nod, and Rory's fingers dug briefly into Geo's hands, before releasing.

"Good boy." Fuck, was "good boy" too much? But no, Rory's shoulders visibly relaxed. "That's my good boy. Lie back now. Hands behind your neck."

Rory scooted up the bed and did as ordered, and when he allowed his eyes to drop, Geo snapped.

Good.

"I want to see your eyes the entire time. Stay very still."

Rory cleared his throat.

"Yes?"

“The door locks, ah—” *Master*. He blushed.

Geo kissed him lightly. “Good tip.”

He locked the door and returned, running a finger up the row of buttons. “You didn’t have to wear the tie, but it was a nice touch.” He carefully straightened the tie over the buttons, then tugged the shirt down to even out the tension of the fabric across Rory’s slender torso. “Did you like the boxers I got you?” Dark brown with textured stripes, hardly noticeable.

“Yes,” Rory whispered.

“Show me. Eyes on me, Roar.” The nickname was good, let him define this as a new time, a different time.

Rory’s hands unlatched and moved to his belt. Then the clasp of the slacks. Then the zipper. He hesitated, then folded back either side of the zip, exposing a triangle of shorts.

“I can’t quite tell if they suit you,” Geo said, gratified beyond reason when his gaze returned to Rory’s, and Rory was still looking at him. “Show me more.”

A lift of his butt and a dignified shimmy later, Rory’s shorts were visible in full, and his legs were still trapped in his pants.

“Thank you. Hands behind your neck again. Keep your eyes on me.”

Geo looked his fill, would be content to stand there for hours, looking at Rory. His shirt tails obscured the waistband of his shorts; Geo folded them under so the shirt ended neatly just above the boxers, with only a thin line of skin showing. The shorts were perfect, fucking exactly perfect, contrasting with Rory’s pale complexion, fitted enough to show his erection in smooth relief.

“Very nice.”

In the old days they would have played a similar game, but Geo would have felt entirely confident about it. Now, before he touched that firm expanse of stretched fabric, he looked up.

Rory was panting, face flush, eyes wide.

Without looking down, Geo took hold of his cock.

“Ah—yes, *please*—”

And that blissful sound was Rory’s slightly broken voice.

"It's very, very dirty of us to sneak away in the middle of the party like this, Roar," Geo said, stroking his shaft with thumb and forefinger over the top of his shorts. "We really need to get back out there, continue our hosting duties. In fact, we don't even have time to take off our clothes."

A flash of amusement in Rory's eyes. Not the strongest of Geo's personal kinks, by far, but certainly present among them was the thrill of fast, unstoppable sex, without elaborate disrobing or, necessarily, private quarters. (He'd once taken Rory into the slaves' bath at his parents' house and fucked him hard bent over the sinks. Both of them returned to their respective roles mere minutes later, composed and unruffled.)

He stepped over to the bedside table, where they'd stored actual lubricant—procured by Rory, of course, to replace the lotion.

Rory's eyes never stopped tracking his.

"Do not move, do not make a sound," Geo said. "Do you understand?"

"Yes." No crudely severed *Master* this time. Only Rory, playing with his boyfriend Geo. *Thank god.*

"Good boy."

Of course, his actual goal was that Rory be so far gone to lust and pleasure that he fail to control his movement and his vocalizations, but Rory's self-control was heroic.

Someone outside laughed, loudly, and Geo reconsidered the intensity of his ministrations. Maybe another day.

He held Rory's gaze and squeezed lube over his fingers. "Bend your knees."

Bent knees high, still hanging onto the slacks. (Was Rory beginning to worry about the wrinkles? Oh, undoubtedly.) Shorts still forming a straight line at Rory's navel, broken almost immediately below the waistband by his increasingly insistent dick. Not peeking out yet, no, but Geo wasn't about to wait.

"Very still, Roar, or I'll stop."

Liar. Rory's mouth twitched, but all he said was: "Yes."

Geo rounded to the other side, approaching Rory at the center of his body, scissoring the lubricated fingers of his right hand obscenely in the air, a suggestion of what he planned to do with them very, very soon. *Open you like I opened you last night. Too bad we don't have that kind of time.*

“This will have to be quick, my naughty, naughty boy.” He reached under, only somewhat attempting to protect the shorts from the grease on his hand as he slipped his fingers inside, caressing Rory’s ass, teasing his crack. “I’d like to have you spread open so far I can see your little hole tense in anticipation, but barring that—”

One finger slid deeper, to play with the crinkled skin at the edges before pushing inside, testing the give of Rory’s sphincter.

Rory panted faster now, black tie nearly rippling with his breaths.

“Pull me in, boy.”

It took a minute. It always took a minute for Rory to adjust to the idea that he’d be participating, no matter how invisibly, in his own debauchery. And it was so, so fucking hot when he gave into it.

Geo positioned his finger and held firm while Rory’s body pushed out, momentarily, then sucked his fingertip inside.

“Oh, god, Rory.” He bit down on his lip. “Again.”

Again: push, then pull, and Geo allowed his finger to follow Rory’s muscles into his ass.

“Once more.”

This time the push went on for an entire breath, Rory’s body expanding around Geo’s finger, then gripping it and pulling it deep.

“Fuck, baby, you like that?”

“Please—please, Geo—”

“Count to thirty and come before you’re finished,” Geo said, and used his other hand to push down the waistband of Rory’s shorts and steady his dick so Geo could take it all the way in to the back of his throat, all while working a second finger into Rory’s tight ass.

“Five, six, seven—argh—eight, nine—*Geo*—”

Faster now, fingers crooked inside to stroke Rory’s prostate, hand moving on his shaft while Geo sucked hard on the head of his dick.

“Nineteen—twenty—twenty—*ohshitohshitGeo*—”

Yes, yes, one last dive down, working the sensitive head with his throat, then back up, speeding the rhythm until Rory’s body bucked and thrashed and

came hard, and Geo sucked every last drop down, fingers very still but not slipping out of Rory's ass, not yet.

Geo nuzzled against Rory's hip, lips brushing against skin.

"Thank you," Rory whispered, sounding shaky. One of his hands drifted into Geo's hair, rested there. "Thank you, Geo."

"Anytime, Roar. Anytime."

"Mm. That's good."

With a sigh, Geo pushed himself up, very gently removed his fingers from their warm, inviting sheath (he could keep teasing Rory's prostate just like this, ramp him up again, suck on his balls and ignore his dick until he begged—maybe later). "Back to the party. I'm exhausted, and there are hours left."

"Are there really?" Rory was already tucking his shirt into his slacks.

"Have the good grace not to sound so happy about it."

Rory smiled and stood up. A few strategic tugs and shakes later he looked exactly as he had before they'd entered the bedroom. "I'll make it all up to you later, Geo." Then Rory executed tugs and yanks and other re-ordering of Geo's polo shirt and chinos. "There. And Geo?"

Eyes, eyes, Rory's deep, bottomless eyes, pure like the center of a flame. Geo caught his breath.

"Thank you," Rory murmured and kissed him. "I really needed that."

"Me too."

They went back out to the party.

Therapy. Session two. Geo re-crossed his legs.

"How was your roommate's barbecue?" Erik asked. Erik, the shrink with the dark skin and darker goatee.

It probably wasn't worth explaining that he and Teddy weren't technically roommates. Not when there were other important clarifications to be made.

"It was a barbecue. Too many people, who stayed too long, and didn't clean nearly enough."

"Did your roommate have fun?"

"I think so. He liked having partners in crime. Rory always loved throwing parties. I think he enjoyed helping Teddy."

"Good. And the rest of the household?"

On the first session Erik had written their names down on a legal pad, with a line of description. Geo wanted for all the world to know what it said beside Rory's name, but that probably wasn't the kind of thing you could ask.

"Maizy had fun. Demon and I were definitely the—outcasts, I suppose." He shifted in his chair and un-crossed his legs. "I've been spending the night with Rory. I mean, that was the first time, and we've spent the night together since."

"Ah," Erik said, nodding. (But he didn't write anything down.) "In the same bed?"

None of your fucking—"Yes."

Beat.

"And how's it going?"

"It's good. It's fine. Obviously, or we wouldn't still be doing it."

"How's it going for Rory?"

Geo gritted his teeth.

"You probably brought it up for a reason, Geo. I'm just trying to poke around until you figure out what that reason is." Erik held up both hands. "Right?"

"I can't believe I'm paying you for this," Geo mumbled, and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "No one gets it. No one gets the side of the thing where I thought I knew what the hell he wanted, and now it's like we're starting from scratch except we're turned on by all the same shit, and we share all the same memories. My friend Teddy said to pretend like it's a new relationship, but it's *not*. Rory was with me for seven years. Even when we try to act like it's new, we get so caught up in it—" *I try to shove my dick in his mouth without asking because that's just how I start my day. Fuck.*

"Something happen specifically, or is this all a more general concern?"

Rory had told his therapist every detail of that first day back at the apartment, down to how lousy Geo's toilet paper was. It could hardly be a betrayal to share something that *almost* happened with his own therapist.

Geo told the story as emotionlessly as he could, just daring Erik to find some meaning in it. After a brief hesitation, he also mentioned their snatched moment in the afternoon.

“It has been my experience, especially with former legacy slaves, that requesting permission is never a bad way to proceed. Which isn’t quite the same as saying Rory will thank you for doing so.”

Geo glared at the ceiling. The ceiling, textured in peaks and valleys, gave him nothing in response. “So you want me to piss him off?”

“Way I see it, you have two options. You can proceed as you are now, trying to read Rory’s mind, always uncertain, or you can try something different and see what happens.”

“Yeah, but—” Geo blew air out, slowly, and finally looked over. “Me asking permission doesn’t turn him on. That’s one of the—not that I have to be the guy in charge all the time, but it’s one of the reasons we were so—compatible. Because it turns him on when I tell him what to do, and it turns me on to—do that.”

“No reason that has to change, if it makes you both happy. But you pausing for a green light on whatever it is you’re about to do doesn’t have to be a buzz kill, Geo. The mental game counted more, in that story you told me, than anything else. Or am I mistaken?”

“Actually—no. That’s it. It never really mattered what we were doing, it was the way I framed it for him that made it—work.” Why hadn’t he ever thought about that before? “But how do I get around not knowing if—if what I’m doing is really good for him, or if it’s only good for him because he wants to please me?”

Erik raised his eyebrows. “Well, I’d wager very few people are involved in sexual relationships that satisfy their individual psychological cravings a hundred percent of the time. Some of your pleasure is a direct result of his pleasure, right? I’m sure he’s happy to participate in things that please you, even if they aren’t in his personal top five. That’s a relationship, Geo. Give and take.”

“But we haven’t always had that, and now I don’t know where it starts. Dammit! Sorry. Sorry, I just—before, he was always doing it for me. Even when I thought I was giving him what he needed, he wasn’t thinking *I like this* or *I don’t like this*, you know? His shrink said his needs were irrelevant, to him,

not to me—or maybe to me, too, but not as much now—fuck, I'm confusing myself, but the point is he never even considered what he actually wanted before. Now I think back on all that, and I can't sort out where to even begin. Do I just never do anything like that again because it might feel like nothing to him? Or because it might make both of us forget we've changed?"

"I want to go back to what your friend said, about starting new." When Geo opened his mouth, Erik held up a hand. "Hear me out. I agree with you, you can't start fresh, as if you and Rory just met. That's not a good model. But think of it as rebuilding a different home on the same site as the old one. You have piles of bricks and building materials. Some of it's too damaged, and you throw it away. But some of it you can still use, Geo. And you invested a lot in building the master/slave relationship you had before. Both of you did. So now you look at what you've still got, in your memories, that you can use to build the new house, and you bring in a lot of new bricks to balance it out."

Huh. Maybe this therapy thing wasn't as stupid as he'd thought, because that? Yeah, he could see all that like the dust was clearing over the massive, dangerous pile of rubble in his mind.

"You want to build a good strong house, Geo. And that means you and Rory have to work together picking out bricks. You know what I'm saying?"

"I think I actually do."

Erik smiled. "Glad to hear it."

Building a house. All right. They could do that.

Chapter Seventeen

The gathering at Geo's was Rory's idea, but it took him days to work up the nerve to suggest it.

"We don't even live here, Roar." Geo motioned to the bed around them. "We come here to have sex."

"I know. Lucky us. But still, this is more 'our' place than Teddy's, and I want to plan something. I want to host, but for real this time, Geo. Nothing big, just for our friends."

He tried not to let show how important this felt, how vital to his identity. It was stupid. But being stupid didn't stop it being true.

"Rory."

"It's fine," Rory said, trying hard not to be disappointed.

"It's what?"

They'd worked out, over the last couple of weeks (and with help from Lauren, even Geo had to admit), that Rory said "That's fine" usually when things weren't fine.

Kind of inconvenient that Geo knew about that, though.

"We aren't in disagreement, Roar," Geo said in his gentle voice, which was immediately annoying.

"No, forget about it." Rory sat up, untangled himself from the sheets. "It's—I'm fine. I don't need a—"

"It's just that I wanted to find us a good place to live first. Of course I want to have a party, Rory. Of course I want you to officially be at my side, not lingering in the background."

It was hard to remain annoyed with Geo when he said things like that. Rory turned back and crossed his arms. "I don't want to do it if you're only humoring me."

Geo shook his head. "Will you please sit with me?"

"Not right now." It took everything—*everything*—in his power to not give in. Lauren was going to be so proud of him.

“This apartment embarrasses me. It reminds me that I lost everything we had because I was foolish and cared what people thought of me.”

“You lost everything *you* had, Geo. Maybe it’s better this way, to start out together, you know?” Rory looked around. “This is where we’re starting. You and I, this time. I’m not embarrassed to be here with you. I’m not embarrassed to bring our friends here.”

“God, Rory, that’s not—”

Don’t give in, don’t give in.

Geo eyed him, running both hands through his hair, still naked, and Rory didn’t care how self-conscious he was—naked Geo could convince him to do almost anything. (Not like a slave. Like a man. Specifically like a man who enjoyed looking at Geo naked.)

“Would you mind if we did something low-key here, and went back to Teddy’s after? There’s no outdoor space, and there’s not enough seating for everyone. What if we did appetizers here and dinner there? It’s not—listen, Roar, the idea of standing here with you and welcoming people in is amazing. That’s—that’s what I always wanted, every party we had. Or I had. But everything after that makes me uncomfortable. You just know Demon will have some kind of commentary, and Teddy—I’ve never brought Teddy back here.”

“You’ve never brought *Teddy* here? Teddy’s your best friend.”

“I don’t know if grown men have best friends—”

“I do. I have two of them. Three, actually, if I count Teddy, too.” Rory approached, but stayed out of reach. “You saying I’m not a grown man, Geo?”

“You know I’m not.”

“You’re saying that you, Geo, don’t have best friends. I remember the people you used to have over, too, so I guess I’d say that you used to not have best friends, but now you do.”

“All right, all right. Will you come over here, please? Looking at you is torture.”

“Excuse me?”

Geo’s face softened. “God, Rory, I can’t believe you’re really here. Sometimes I think it must be this beautiful dream, and eventually I’ll wake up, here, in this bed, in smelly sheets, and you won’t be here. I guess that’s why I

can't wait to get out of here. This place reminds me of thinking you'd never come back. And now you have."

"I came back. I'm here for good. Can we please give our friends enough credit to know they're not going to judge us based on your apartment? You know, it's not nearly as bad now that it smells better."

"Is that right?" Geo said, and launched himself at Rory. Rory put in only a momentary struggle before allowing Geo to bend him over backwards on the bed. "Are you trying to say I smell, Roar?"

"Anyone who elected to never wash their sheets—or buy new ones—would smell. And don't get me started on the state of your kitchen before I deep-cleaned it."

"Stupid vegetables. Who knew they'd go so dramatically bad?"

"Yes, Geo. It was the vegetables' fault you bought them for decoration instead of consumption."

"You trying to play the brat right now?" Geo asked, and leaned down, pressing his naked body against Rory's.

"Well, when you play the hapless master, you don't really leave me much choice." His voice sounded pretty deadpan, but he couldn't control how quickly he was breathing, and Geo couldn't fail to notice, up close like this.

"Yes or no, Roar?"

He still wasn't comfortable with this level of initiating it. But Geo (and both of their therapists, and the girls, and yeah, probably Teddy too, though thankfully Rory was spared *that* conversation) was adamant. And this was better than their first idea, which had been for Rory to use a start-word. He knew that wasn't going to work in the first six hours, when he'd become almost paralyzed with an inability to say the damn word.

"You aren't hard," Rory whispered, because he could focus on Geo. It was easy to focus on Geo.

"That's true. But you remember what Lauren said: I meet my needs by making you happy. Can I make you happy, baby? Yes or no?"

So fucking hard to just take, like this. Which meant it was all kinds of personal growth, but it was so very difficult to say the one syllable that would lead to—more.

Geo smiled. "You're such a good boy, honey. So strong and bold."

Anything but strong, everything but bold. Rory let his eyes shut and whispered, "Yes, please."

"Sweet, sweet boy," Geo said, and kissed his eyebrows, the corners of his lips, his neck. "Stretch your arms above your head. Let me see you all spread out for me, Rory. Show yourself to your master, boy."

It was another thing Rory was trying to work on: keeping Geo's name straight inside his head. And it was helping. It was so much easier to remember who and when they were when he could think *Geo* in his own voice, even when Geo said insanely hot things like *show yourself to your master, boy*. Slave Rory had never—ever—thought *Geo*.

Rory breathed in, pulling his arms up as he did so.

"Oh, baby." Geo moved back, stood upright, looking down. It was hard not to take comfort in his soft belly and only-half-awake cock. This man loved him, loved to sleep beside him, loved to kiss him, to sit with him at meals and dry the dishes he'd just finished washing.

It wasn't the same as it had been before. It was so much better.

"I want to overwhelm you with sensation, Rory. I want you to forget your troubles. Is that what you'd like?"

This, too, was becoming a pattern. Geo recovered slowly from orgasms, and he enjoyed focusing entirely on Rory afterward. Rory could be teased into another erection, another orgasm, a lower burn with a higher peak. He could be played like a violin—the right notes, the right progression, and he soared—and Geo clearly considered himself something of a Rory virtuoso.

"Clamps, clamps, clamps," Geo mumbled, turning away to the drawer. "Damn me. I think I have—"

Rory's phone rang.

He went very still, then remembered to breathe.

"If that's Demon—" But even as he was cursing, Geo was fumbling for Rory's phone. "Tell her to call back, baby, come on."

It still took a minute to pull himself in, bring himself down, but he sat up and took the phone, smiling his thanks as he opened it.

"Hey, D."

“Where are you? I’m freaking out again.”

“I’m at Geo’s.”

“You’re *always* at Geo’s. Shut up, Maiz! He doesn’t need to get laid fifty times a day! They have a bedroom *here!*”

Rory sighed. “We’ll be back in a few minutes. Don’t freak out, D.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry, but thank you.”

“I know.” He rang off and looked up at Geo, who was shaking his head.

“This is starting to happen every day,” he said, trying pretty badly to mask his irritation.

“Right when Teddy’s supposed to get home from work. I know.”

Geo glanced at his watch. “Really? Shit, Rory. She okay? What’s the—problem?”

“We should get dressed.”

He wasn’t ignoring the question, but it wasn’t always clear how he was supposed to proceed, when it came to Geo and Demon. They weren’t friends. He considered her melodramatic and exhausting, and she thought he was arrogant and overbearing. And really, Rory agreed with both of them. Which, if anything, made it more difficult.

“I’m not trying to pry,” Geo said as he pulled on his pants. “I’m not even that—I had plans for you, but I’m starting to think we have time for them, you know? I just don’t really understand why Demon seems to be getting—worse.”

Was she? Rory thought about it.

“I think it seems like that to you because you don’t know how many hours a day we spent walking around.”

“So you’re saying she’s not taking long enough walks? I don’t mean to be insensitive, but is there no one else who can go with her? Does it always have to be you?”

He thought about the first few nights, after they’d run away from the Forgiveness Project office, walking until they couldn’t walk anymore, then curling up in their clothes and trying to sleep. D’s voice in the dark, crying out until the nightmares woke her.

“She stole makeup,” he said, and studied his reflection in Geo’s mirror. Then he studied Geo’s reflection, still pulling on his shoes. “D stole makeup

from a drug store and the man who was supposed to be her public defender liked her so much he negotiated the heaviest sentence he could, then negotiated her contract as an indentured laborer. In his household.”

Geo's head shot up, meeting his eyes in the mirror. “He sabotaged her case in order to—Rory, we can find him. That's fraud. Or it must be some kind of legal malpractice.”

“All the crimes of consensual slavery and indentured servitude have been wiped clean,” Rory said. “It was part of the law passing.”

“Fine. We'll get him some other way. I'm a tech guy. I have contacts, Rory. I can find a way to make sure he pays.”

“Just him? Not the other men who used her, sometimes in front of him? Not the judge from her own case, who came to collect his due? Which apparently had something to do with blood, though she was crying too hard for me to get the whole story.” *Yes*, he thought at Geo's reflection. *It's so much worse than you imagine.* “So yeah, every day she thinks about Teddy while he's at work, and every day she decides that today she's going to go to the kitchen for a glass of water while he's making dinner and ask him how work was. And then, right about now, she loses her nerve, so we take a walk.”

“I didn't know.”

“It's not really my thing to share. But that's why it's getting worse. Every day she can't force herself to talk to him, she hates herself a little more.” He shrugged.

“We can fix this. If we tell him, he'll—”

“Say something to her? Stand too close? Ask too many personal questions? Or even one. Maiz and I talked about it, but we figure the only way this works is if Teddy doesn't have any idea, so he never acts weird around her.”

“There must be something we can do to help, Roar.”

“D's strong. She doesn't need us to make it better, Geo.”

Geo didn't like that, not at all. But he could see the argument in favor of it. “Fine,” he said wryly. “We will add this to the list of things that are ‘fine.’”

“We should go.”

Would Geo talk to Teddy without Rory knowing? He didn't think so. Not now. He refrained from double-checking and hoped like hell he wouldn't regret telling the story.

They'd decided on Saturday. Naturally, Saturday dawned gray and rainy. The first rain in two months.

"This is pretty fuckin' obnoxious, Roar," Demon muttered, looking at the bags he'd put by the door. "Why isn't your boyfriend doing this again?"

"He's at the store. Listen, the whole thing's supposed to be a surprise, okay? I'd rather you weren't going to see it until it's all ready, but I'm making do, Demon. So *make. Do.*"

She stuck out her tongue.

"Where're you two off to?" Teddy raised his eyebrows at the bags. "I thought we weren't going until three."

"We aren't supposed to be," D said. "But the love birds didn't coordinate that well, so I'm serving as a mule."

"Do you guys want a ride in the truck?"

"No," Rory said quickly. "We'll be fine. Come on, D."

"But Teddy's got a truck. And it's raining."

"Rain's not going to hurt produce. C'mon, D, it'll be refreshing!"

"Do you see my hair? You gonna pay to fix my hair after this, Roar?"

"I like your hair," Teddy said. "Will rain have an adverse effect on it?"

"Fucking stupid men," she muttered. Then looked up. "I—" But D didn't really know what to say after that, clearly, so she just kind of stood there.

"My hair is—much like produce—undamaged by rain," Teddy said, smiling at her. "I should show you a picture sometime of what it used to look like, D. You'll laugh yourself into a fit."

"Did you have a mohawk?" Rory asked.

"I may have experienced a punk phase, which I expressed through the use of various dyes in odd patterns. My personal favorite was leopard print."

And D was back. "You dyed your *hair* leopard print?"

"Don't knock it. I looked very cute with leopard print hair. I bet you'd think so, too."

D nearly choked. "Fuck me. This is more like an insane asylum every day. Come on, Roar. Let's go."

“Okay.”

She went out first, but Rory lifted a bag in Teddy's direction and received a coffee cup salute in reply.

“So,” Rory said, half a block away from the duplex. “I've been thinking.”

“Oh, this should be good. Boy genius thinks!”

“Maybe you should write him a letter.”

“Write *who* a letter?”

He resisted the urge to say “You know damn well who” and instead made his voice very even. “Teddy.”

“What, like Dear Santa, please bring me a nice cuddly teddy bear and maybe not so much slavery this year?”

“I think you should tell him what happened.”

D rolled her eyes, swinging the bags a little faster. “He already knows I was a fucking sex slave, Roar. You really think he needs the details?”

“Nope. But I think knowing something in the abstract and being told a story are different. And I think maybe you should mention that you wouldn't mind it if he sat next to you on the couch. Because he wants to, when you're sitting there, but he does this thing where he hesitates too long and then someone else sits down, or you get up, or something else happens, and he misses his chance.”

“Listen, Romeo, just because you got your Juliet doesn't mean dick, okay? I'm not gonna say a fucking thing to Teddy.”

“I keep thinking about how you deserve to feel safe.”

“Yeah, well, I'm never gonna feel safe. It's off the goddamn table.”

“But if it was just sitting together on the couch—”

“Roar, I will kick your scrawny little ass if you don't drop this, right now.”

“I could. But I'm not going to, and it doesn't matter if you kick my ass. Because you keep thinking you don't get to be happy. Like some people get to be happy and some people don't, and it doesn't matter what you do, you're never going to be one of the lucky ones. And you know who'd probably have a lot of sympathy for that? Teddy. We're going left here.”

They walked awhile longer, their brand new rain jackets wet and dripping on the grocery bags.

“But what kind of pitch is that?” D said finally. “Hi, the thought of having sex with you makes me want to puke, but would you mind sitting next to me 'cause I really think it'd make me feel better about this shitty, shitty world? Roar. What kind of idiot goes for that?”

“Well, I think I'd leave the puking part out. But no, I think he's lonely. I think he came here kind of like Geo did, new town, new people, new start, but I don't really get the impression he was living the high life before we got here, do you?”

She shook her head.

“And he likes you. He likes that you don't take any of Geo's shit, and that you're protective of me and Maiz. He likes that you don't need his approval.”

“Kind of want it, is the stupid thing.”

“I don't know, D. Teddy? Teddy's bedrock, you know. You dig all the way down and you hit bedrock, and that's as solid as you can get. I'm glad I found Geo, I'm glad we're working on all this stuff, but it's so fucking complicated. We can't just be together in a room without all these other layers going on. And that's what you want, isn't it? Just to be there with Teddy, and not have to worry?” He glanced up. “We're pretty much here. This is the building.”

“This ugly piece of shit is where he went after he left that big-ass mansion you were always telling me about? God, Roar!”

“Oh be quiet.” Rory pulled the newly-minted keys from his pocket and picked out the front door key.

One of D's bags hit the cement behind him, sending blueberries and raspberries everywhere.

“Dammit, D, there goes the dessert I was planning. I'm going to make you—”

“You must be Rory. Come with us.”

Rory spun around, but there was no way out. There were three of them and one of them was holding a very limp Demon. The second grocery bag was hanging off the cuff of her jacket, snagged there and dangling.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“We've come to take you home.”

He saw a flash of light just before he felt it. *Syringe*, his brain helpfully supplied, but not soon enough.

Everything went black.

Chapter Eighteen

“I can’t stop, I can’t talk, Rory’s gonna kill me if I don’t get over there.” Geo barely looked up on his way to the spice cabinet.

“Weren’t you just at the store?”

“Yeah, jeez, why didn’t I think of that, Teddy? They didn’t have fucking onion powder. They were out. Of onion powder. How the hell does a store run out of onion powder? How does that happen? Tell me there’s onion powder in here somewhere, I swear to god—”

“It’s not in there.” Teddy sounded amused. Asshole.

Geo leaned his head against the edge of the counter and took deep breaths. “Is it here somewhere? C’mon, man—”

“It’s right here. Wow are you worked up about this.”

“It’s symbolic.” Geo grabbed the container and double-checked the label. “It’s a thing, for Rory, to host a party.”

“I get that. You need anything else?”

“You want to stop smiling like a smug bastard?”

“Hm. Let me think about that and get back to you.” Teddy’s phone went off on the counter, vibrating the spoon sitting next to his coffee.

Geo waved and started out the door, but Teddy’s sharp shout brought him back. “What? I’m late!”

Teddy shook his head, brow creased, and spoke into the phone. “Hacked how? What does that mean?”

Hacked? Who was hacked?

“Berry, try to be clear. Are you saying they’re in danger? No, I’m not looking at them right now. Maizy’s in her room, but Demon and Rory are at Geo’s.” Teddy grimaced. “Listen to me carefully and answer my question—are they in danger? Is Geo’s address part of the information that’s been ‘compromised’?”

The fuck? Geo dialed Rory’s phone and waited through the excruciatingly long rings until voicemail picked up. Then he dialed it again. He’s cooking. He’s cooking, and he’s distracted, and he doesn’t hear the phone. They might

have music playing. Or Demon—Demon could be talking his ear off, loudly, and he doesn't hear his phone.

“Well for fuck's sake, Berry, get it together and call the authorities. I don't care about your operation, you're risking lives now. And it's obvious that word's pretty much out. No, Geo can't get Rory on the phone, so I need to go track them down. Well, reassuring you will be the least of my concerns, Berry. Thank you for calling.” He threw the phone to the counter and patted his pockets down. “I'm getting Maizy, and we're going to drive over there. I'm sure they're fine, Geo.”

“I can't—he's not picking up. Teddy—”

“I know. Fuck! I should have known. They weren't even running their searches in a secure browser, I should have said something—fuck!”

Teddy headed next door, already calling, “Maizy! Rise and shine!” but his voice was alarmingly distant, falling away quickly as Geo stood there, still holding the onion powder.

They were probably fine. They were fucking around, listening to music, cooking, not paying attention. They were not in trouble, any kind of trouble, whatever kind of trouble Berry was calling to warn them about.

Geo's heart pounded against his ribcage and his vision went gray.

Not again, not again, please, not again.

“Geo!”

He blinked.

“Do not fucking do this,” Teddy said, suddenly right in front of him. “You buck the hell up, we gotta go find the kids.”

Not kids. But yes, when more than one of them was in a room, yes, that's how he thought of them.

Oh god. Rory. Rory.

“Come on, Geo,” Maizy said, tugging his hand. “Rory's waiting for you.”

But in the horrible echo chamber of his mind, that made it sound like Rory was dead.

“No, you don't.” Teddy smacked his cheek. It wasn't the hardest he'd ever been hit—not even close—but it was hard enough. “Stay with us, Fairbanks. Let's go.”

Geo breathed in, focusing on the surface sting of the slap. He nodded and squeezed Maizy's hand.

"We're taking the truck," Teddy said, and led the way out, snapping the deadbolt locked behind them.

This was not good. At all. A police car was idling at the curb and, as Geo watched, two cops moved up the sidewalk toward his building, crushing blueberries beneath their shoes.

"Okay," Teddy said, pulling in. "I'm talking to them. You're standing there, quietly, not acting like a psycho, got it, Geo?"

"I'm coming with you," Maizy said.

"It might be safest to stay in the truck—"

"They're the only family I have, and I'm not staying in the car."

"Right. Geo?"

"He had this whole fruit dessert thing he wanted to do, even though it was only appetizers," Geo said, staring at the stains and smears on the concrete.

"Maybe tomorrow," Teddy said. "Let's go."

Geo's landlady was standing on the steps, gesturing, but when she saw him, she pointed. He could not, for anything, remember her name.

"Mr Fairbanks! It was his friends, I told you. I saw the whole thing from right there, at the corner. There were three of them—"

"Ma'am, slow down," one of the cops said, while the other one broke off to approach Geo.

"You live here, sir?"

"I—yes. I live here."

"We're looking for a couple friends of ours," Teddy said, sounding entirely normal. "We were supposed to be getting together today. Can you tell us what happened?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out, sir. Can I take all of your names, please?"

They gave their names, and Maizy and Teddy gave Teddy's address. They gave Demon and Rory's information to the extent they knew it. (Teddy

supplied “Angel” for Demon’s first name, but even Maizy didn’t know her last name, which earned her a raised eyebrow and no comment from the cop.)

“And you said you were having a party today?”

“Appetizers and, apparently, fruit,” Teddy said, glancing around. His gaze met Geo’s, then slid away. “Sorry. Yes. We were having a get-together. What does your witness say happened?”

“Sir,” the cop said, addressing Geo. “Can you confirm for me your apartment number? I’m going to send my partner up to see if your friends are here.”

Hope spiked, but only for a second. “Four B.”

“Thank you.” The cop stepped away to speak to the other cop, and Geo looked up, at his bedroom window, willing Rory to appear there. It could have been someone else. It could have been some other young, white male with dirty-blond hair, some other young, black female with close-cropped natural hair. Some other people, also having a party, also making a fruit dish.

“I’m sorry,” the cop said, coming back over to them (and addressing Teddy this time). “It appears no one’s in the apartment. Is there any reason why your friends might be the targets of a kidnapping?”

Geo felt the blood run out of his legs. Maizy dug her fingernails into his hand, hard, and he somehow remained standing.

“This is where your day’s about to get strange, officer,” Teddy said.

“I’d be surprised, sir, but any information you can give me will help me find your friends.”

“I need to give you another name, and a phone number. You’ll have to call a man named Berry for more details, but here’s what I know.”

Terrible security, Geo thought, concentrating on the level of technological stupidity that had gone into this clusterfuck. Their servers had been “hacked,” Berry had said, though “hacking” implied a challenge that didn’t sound like was actually present here.

“Evidently they keep a shared database with contact information for all of their clients,” Teddy explained. “And early this morning they started receiving frightened phone calls.”

“From former indentures, you said?” the cop asked, frowning at his notebook.

“Former slaves and indentured laborers,” Teddy confirmed. “It’s a poorly run aid organization. They believe someone connected to their network and simply downloaded the database.”

“And what does this—individual? Group? What would they want with this information?”

“Group. I think we have to assume it’s a group, or that the information was passed along to a group, judging by the geographical spread of the phone calls Berry reported receiving. Far too many to be a single individual.” He gestured to the massacred fruit on the ground. “And either Rory or Demon would have put up a fight if it had been a single individual.”

“Demon?”

“Sorry. Angel—Demon’s her nickname.” Teddy swallowed and took a long breath. “I’m not certain what the original intent was, but I think we have to consider it might be an organized effort to kidnap former indentures. Can you tell me what the witness reports now? Please?”

“I’m sorry we don’t know more at the moment, but we have backup coming to canvas the area,” the officer said to Teddy. “And it sounds like I need to start making some calls. I’ll have to ask you not to interfere—”

“Of course,” Teddy said. By which Geo assumed he meant, *The sooner we leave, the sooner we can look for them ourselves.*

Clearly the cop was picking up the same thought, but he only shook his head. “This is my card. If anything comes up, give me a call. It’s always possible they stepped away with these people of their own free will, and they’ll walk in like nothing happened.”

“You get people abandoning their groceries on their front steps so they can go off with strangers a lot?” Teddy asked.

The cop looked around and shook his head. “You never know. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thank you.”

They were silent until they got into the truck.

“We’re not actually gonna stay out of it, though, right?” Maizy asked, leaning up from the back seat.

“Hell no,” Teddy said, starting the engine. “We got our own personal hacker right here. The only real question is: do I call Berry and tell him we’re

going to invade his system? Or do we just do it without bothering him?"

"Call him," Geo said. "Call him and tell him if anything happens to Rory I'm going to come down there and kill him."

"I'm not sure that's going to help our cause, Geo. But I think you're right. I think we'll call him and do our part to coordinate the effort. We have no idea how many people have already been swept up in this, but we have to assume there are a lot more than Berry can handle."

"They're going to be fine," Maizy said. "They're the strongest people I know. They'll be fine."

Geo couldn't help thinking about how in Rory-speak "fine" always meant "not fine at all."

"You need anything from your place, Geo?" Teddy asked. "Computer? Hacking equipment?"

"Hacking equipment," Geo repeated, wishing he could laugh. "No. No, the computer's at the duplex. I'll need coffee."

"Coffee I can manage." Suddenly, out of nowhere, Teddy's fist slammed down on his dashboard, cracking the molded plastic. "Dammit!"

Maizy leaned over and squeezed his arm. "We're gonna find them."

"She's gotta be so fucking scared right now. I hate feeling powerless."

"We need to get home, Teddy."

Teddy took another long breath and threw the car into gear. "Maizy, you should be the one who calls Berry. I'm not sure I can trust myself to—I think your skills are more suited to that than mine."

"Actually, I think I'll start calling everyone."

"Everyone?" Geo glanced back at her. "Who's everyone?"

"Everyone, Geo. Time to blow this open. Past time."

Geo had no idea what she meant, but whatever it was, Maizy had clearly been thinking about it for a while. "What are we blowing open?" he asked, momentarily diverted from an obsessive list of Terrible Things That Could Be Happening To Rory.

"Slavery. We're gonna end slavery. For real this time."

“Good, a plan,” Teddy said. “Let’s go end slavery. Geo’s going to use the computer, you’re going to use the phone, and I’ll make the coffee, Maiz. That work for you?”

“Can’t get it done without support staff.”

Teddy snorted.

It was happening again. The world inside the car tilted, dimmed, then righted itself. *Stay focused*. Geo needed his fingers on a keyboard, right now. And coffee. A lot of coffee.

Chapter Nineteen

Rory didn't so much regain consciousness as enter a nightmare that just happened to be real.

His head was pounding as if his brain was in danger of bursting out of his skull, and he had no idea what had happened to his body, but it was heavy, impossible to move except with the jolting shake of—a vehicle? Was he in a vehicle of some kind?

He listened carefully through the intense pulsing ache. Metal, friction, a jangle of chains close-by. No voices. A whoosh that he recognized as another vehicle passing outside. Driving. He was in a vehicle, and it was moving. The floor was not especially cold, but he'd feel better if he could move his limbs. Was it safe to open his eyes? He tested it out, trying to open them only a little bit.

“Oh god, Roar. I thought you were dead.”

Demon.

“I feel... horrible.” He managed to open his eyes for real. And immediately wished he hadn't. “Are we in cages? Is this a cage?”

Demon laughed, a little too high. “Dog cages. Just the two of us here, but I think I can see a lot more cages. It was brighter before. I think the sun might be setting.”

“But—” That would make it—six p.m.? Five? “It was eleven o'clock in the morning the last time I was awake.”

“Yeah, well, time marches on, princess.”

He searched for her eyes in the gloom. “D. You okay?”

“Is that a fucking joke?”

“There were men. Three of them. They drugged me.”

“Yep. Fun, isn't it?”

“I think I'm about to puke.”

“Puke all you want, but if you fucking faint, Rory, I swear to god—”

“I'll try not to faint, D.”

She shifted, but Rory couldn't see anything but the glimmer of light on her eyes and a vague outline of the rest of her body. "I hate drugs. I can't fucking think straight."

"I want to go to sleep and wake up and have this be a horrible nightmare," Rory said, trying not to let his voice break.

"I want to go to sleep and never wake up. No offense, Roar, but if I find a way to kill myself right now, I'm doing it. And I'm sorry that's gonna leave you with my corpse, but I'm not fucking doing this again. I'm not living like this again."

She said it like she was planning to stop by the store for milk on the way home. She said it like it was nothing.

"I was really starting to freak out, but now I feel better. Now I feel pretty good. They'll slip up, and I'll have an opportunity, and then I'll be dead. I just have to wait for the right moment. I'm not sure if they have guns, but eventually there will be a bathroom, and there's usually a way to die in a bathroom."

"D..." What was he going to say? *Don't do it.*

"You don't know. You have no idea. I'm not going to live like an animal again, Roar."

"They'll come for us. Geo, Teddy. They'll come for us."

"Oh, they'll try. And they'll find you. I'm sure of it. I've just been lying here, thinking about it, and I think you're right, Roar. I think they'll find you. I think you'll go home to your Romeo, again, and you'll live happily ever after."

Tears prickled his eyes. "D, come on—"

"You'll live happily ever after with Geo, and that's good, you know? I mean, some shit's gonna go down, but it's okay, you'll survive. You'll get through it. I mean, if I survived, you'll survive, and Geo loves you, Geo will stand by you like a good man, Roar, and you'll be okay. I mean, I wish I could see it, but I can kind of picture it in my head, and it's good. It'll be good."

"D, please don't—"

"But I'm all done surviving just to fucking fight every goddamn day. There's no happily ever after for me, you know? And I'm okay with that. I'm just going to end the ride a little sooner than it would end on its own. The minute I get a chance, I'm getting the fuck off, so I can stop fighting. Finally."

“You can’t—D—”

“*I can.* That’s the whole point, Rory, and you don’t get it, you don’t understand it because you’ve got Geo, you’ve always had Geo, and you don’t get what this means, you don’t get it. Maybe they’ll find you before you ever have to understand, and I hope they do. But not me. I’m done. I lived last time, Roar. I lived. I survived. I fought. Because that’s what you’re supposed to do. And then, when it was over? Nothing. I got nothing. I got Maizy kicking me in the shins every night, and I love her, but that’s not enough to justify it. That’s not enough to justify how fucking hard I fought. That’s not enough, you know?”

He didn’t know. But arguing with her wasn’t going to get either of them anywhere.

“I love you, D. I wouldn’t have found him without you.”

“Yeah, you would have. Hell, maybe sooner.”

It was pointless to try not to cry. “D, please just, please just hang on as long as you can.”

“Baby, if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have hung on this long. You’re a good friend, Roar.”

Tears cooled his cheeks through the thick dull sensation of the drug.

The truck slowed down, and Rory realized his body was trying to panic, even though he couldn’t move. “I’m—D—”

“Take care of Maizy for me,” D said, her voice sounding low and tense in the dark. “Take care of Maizy and tell Teddy I’m sorry I wasn’t stronger.”

“D, please—” He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. The truck came to a stop and he heard a door open. Then another one. “D—”

“Shit!” A male voice, then a shape blocking the low dusk light from outside. “Hold still.”

Hold still? Rory couldn’t fucking move. He waited to faint, but the bite of the needle invaded his awareness first.

And then—nothing.

Chapter Twenty

It was worse than Geo had expected. He finally traced the database download back to an anonymous user who'd logged onto the wireless network, but the news wasn't good.

"Are you saying the hacker works here?" Berry asked, sounding exhausted.

"First of all, this wasn't a 'hacker.' The password for your network is 'freedom,' Berry. You have seven people right now logged onto it from neighboring buildings, who either know enough to have guessed the password or have had enough contact with employees to know it by other means."

"Our employees would never give out—"

"I'm not going to fight with you. I'm saying you have a very easy, very stupid password on a network that houses unsecured personal information about thousands of people. Those are the facts of this situation."

It was easier to pretend this was just a job. He was evaluating network security and talking down to idiots. Just another day at the office.

"We wanted something everyone could remember," Berry said. "I don't run the place, you know. I just—"

"The database was downloaded eight days ago. Whoever downloaded it has had a week to plan today. And I'm sure some of it was put in place before they had the information. This was not spontaneous. There's a group behind it."

"We've had some—some threats. Or not threats. Just some weird notes left up on the front door, about how we're standing in the way of natural laws or something."

"Standing in the way of natural laws," Geo repeated, looking over at Teddy, who was taking notes. "What does that mean?"

"Who knows? It was just insane ramblings taped to the door."

Teddy snapped at him. "The psychological evaluation. They must rule out some people, right?"

"Berry, what happens when someone fails your psych eval?"

"Nothing. I mean, we do that before they're ever put in touch with their former slave or indenture, so there's no danger. Although—well, the eval isn't everything. Sometimes meetings don't go so well."

“How many meetings don’t go so well?” Geo asked, rubbing his head. “How many angry, abusive former owners are walking around right now knowing exactly where your office is, Berry?”

“We don’t let anyone leave angry! We have a counselor on staff to, um, to debrief when things don’t work out.”

“For the slave or the owner?”

“Well, whoever seems to need it.”

Geo considered, then rejected, the idea of throwing his computer across the room. If Berry was standing right in front of him, the idea would have had more appeal.

“I’ve got something,” Maizy called from the dining room table. “Hi, Officer Johnson? Me again. Do you have Dayton? Twenty-five-year-old white female. Yes. Right. Let me give you the number of my contact at their local office.”

Geo covered the mouthpiece of his phone. “Can I hang up on Berry yet?” (A covered phone mouthpiece was about the same level of security as making the password for your former-slave network “freedom.” Let Berry fume.)

“No, I need him. Hang on.” She touched her map again and smoothed it out. “Yes, I’m seeing the same thing. Well, if I could take all the calls I would, Johnson, but I’m only one person. Got it. Stay in touch.” Maizy hung up. “I need Berry to check the records for every call they’ve had, excluding D and Rory, to see what camp they *exited* out of. That’s important.”

“Okay.” Geo relayed the request to Berry, who began to pull up files, then put the phone on speaker as Maizy explained.

“I think it’s gotta be someone at that camp, Demon and Rory’s camp. I thought they were random, but they’re not. I was distracted by the *entry* points, but people move from camp to camp a lot, and I’ve been staring at this database for three hours before I caught on that almost all of the exit fields are coded for the camp Rory and D left. And I bet we’ll find that the few who aren’t coming up with that for an exit at least passed through it.”

“She might be right,” Berry said. “We’ve heard that story a lot. Confusion at intake, information slipping through the cracks, people waiting all day in a waiting room, only to be told they were still going to be moved to another location. In that case, they might be exited out of a camp they were only in for a few hours, then a new intake record would be started at the next camp.”

Maizy stared at the phone as if she was tempted to smash it. "Berry, I really need you to focus on the records right now."

"The first three check out so far," he said.

"Good. Keep going."

"You're getting all this from that?" Teddy asked, leaning over her shoulder.

"This isn't a particularly well-organized database. The exit fields are in an entirely different sheet, which is part of the problem. Also, they coded the names, but they included the codes *and* the names in a separate worksheet in the same file. I mean, why even bother, right?"

Teddy's expression mirrored Geo's abject confusion. "Um, right. So is this helping us find them?"

"It will when Officer Johnson starts running the criminal records of everyone working at that camp."

"How are we going to get that?"

"I can get that for you," Berry said. "And the other four reports also check out to the same camp."

"You can get us the names of all employees?" Maizy asked, like Berry was promising a unicorn.

Berry cleared his throat. "Not legally, no. But I have a friend who'll probably help me out. Can you give me ten minutes? And the email address where you want that sent."

Geo gave his own, then clicked off. "So. Berry might actually end up being helpful."

"That's a government job," Teddy said. "You think Berry has a good friend who works for the government?"

"Who would have thought?"

Maizy's phone rang and she picked up. "This is Maiz. Excellent. No, I'll have some names for you shortly, but let me talk to your data guy for a minute and see if he's—oh, sorry, *she's*—tracking back the same thing I am. Yep, I'll hold." Her face was flushed and she sucked down another gulp of coffee as she waited. "Oh, cold."

"I'll make another pot," Teddy said. "Is it wrong that I'm hoping at some point I'll get to shoot someone? I'm good with guns."

Geo didn't listen to the rest of Maizy's conversation with the police analyst. He was thinking. It was all well and good that someone, somewhere, was going to start background checks on the employees of the camp, but that would take hours. Maybe they could narrow it some, but there had to be hundreds of names on that list. Maybe more than that. Cleaners, cooks, teachers, counselors, guards, drivers—thousands of names.

Even then, they'd be starting somewhere in the organization, but it would take days to track down all the different branches. Maizy's map was devastating. She'd placed stickers on every town where contact had been made with a former slave (color-coded for whether contact had resulted in an abduction or only an attempted abduction), and there were a lot of stickers.

This was a huge effort. What the hell did they think they were doing with all those slaves? Geo tried to focus, but the map was mesmerizing. Slaves need owners. Did they really think they'd find—he estimated the blue successful abduction stickers at fifty or so, but calls were still coming in—did these people, whoever they were, really have owners lined up for this quantity of slaves?

Owners. How were owners involved?

He went back to his computer. If some group was kidnapping former slaves, that meant another group was recruiting former owners. Could he come at it from the other side?

“Hey, Maizy? Is there any way from that spreadsheet to tell if a connection was actually made between a former owner and a former slave?”

“None. I checked my records against Rory's, but they don't have any obvious tracking in here. Even the call log's not consistent.”

“Okay. Thanks.” There was something here, something he could use. Security was bad, organization was worse, and there was some way Geo could put all of it together to find Rory.

The owners. It came back to the owners.

Geo realized sometime later that Teddy had replaced his coffee without him even noticing it. And the full cup was now cold. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

“I've got them,” he said, typing information into a registration form. “I've got them.”

“Got who?” Teddy asked.

“The owners. I’ve got the fucking *owners*.” Then he laughed. He recognized, distantly, that it sounded like the laughter of a madman, and Maizy had stopped speaking to look over at him.

But none of that mattered. Because Geo had found the other half of their puzzle and now it was just a matter of time before he found Rory, too.

Chapter Twenty-One

Rory woke up alone.

He was no longer in a cage, though his body remembered the cage quite well. There was some kind of thick metal ring around his neck, keeping him from being able to fully relax his head back or lift it up. He was naked and shackled to a metal bed in a very small... cell, he decided. This looked and felt like a cell. The door on the wall was metal and looked heavy, which was oddly satisfying. If you're going to be in a cell, your door should look exactly like this, yes. I've seen this movie before. Will I be the hero or one of the unnamed casualties whose bodies form obstacles for the hero to jump over on his way to victory?

Get it together, Roar.

Demon. Where was Demon? He tried to pick through the muddled images and memories and quite possibly nightmares, since at this point they were indistinguishable, but he couldn't put it all together into a logical string of events.

They'd drugged him again. And that probably meant they'd drugged D again, too.

Demon, oh god. Rory pulled frantically at his chains (actual, literal chains) and tried to dislodge them from the ground, the wall, wherever they were anchored, but all it did was batter his ear drums.

He subsided, heart pounding, head throbbing. *Stop.* Okay. Try to figure this out. Last time whatever dose they'd given him had lasted five or six hours. The second dose probably lasted longer, since the first wasn't out of his system yet. Maybe seven or eight hours. It had been early evening when he fainted, which would make this the middle of the night.

Rory had no idea if that was helpful information or not, but it was at least distracting.

He ran a mental check of his muscles. But no, it was his skin. He could feel his skin. Not the way he'd felt it earlier, in the cage, as if he was covered in layers of cotton and could hardly feel anything. He could feel the mattress beneath him. He could feel the cold cut of steel at his wrists and ankles and the smooth painted surface of the wall behind his hands.

He'd slept it off more this time. He added another hour or two to his mental clock and decided it was probably moving toward morning. Three a.m. maybe. Could be later.

Skin. Muscles. He flexed his feet. He was sore and his muscles burned, so he'd probably spent most of that time in the cage.

None of this matters. None of this helps.

Okay, that was the when and how long. Now for the why.

Demon's words echoed in his skull: *some shit's gonna go down*. Cell, bed, shackled to the wall.

Naked.

He shuddered. Okay, not the why. Let's work on the who.

He ran out of things to think about.

For a while he took a mental tour of Geo's apartment, but that just made him cry. So he tried Teddy's instead, and it was a little easier. He inventoried Teddy's cupboards and pantry. He decided that if he got back he was definitely going to clean out the refrigerator, because while Teddy actually kept edible food in his house, he wasn't exactly keeping the kitchen up to acceptable food safety standards. There was one spot of leaked mustard that especially annoyed Rory, and the very second he got back he was going to attack it with a soapy cloth.

If he got back. No. No, don't think like that.

Don't think about Geo, or Demon, or Geo's apartment, or the old house where he'd been a slave before. Especially not that. Because whatever was happening now, it had very little relationship to that.

He cataloged Lauren's office, trying to remember the names of the books on her bookshelves. When he couldn't do that, he tried to remember the colors of the spines. He'd been there six times and the sofa faced the bookcase, and Rory had a very good memory.

When he ran out of rooms, he began on streets. He and Demon had walked exhaustively, and he took every step again, in his mind, turning the corners, conjuring passing cars and full daylight.

He tried to remember the shelter, but it wasn't absorbing enough, and he gave up.

It took about five seconds of thinking about his parents to know that he had to keep that door closed if he wanted to remain sane. Service, Mom and Dad? Service on my back in a cell, chained to the wall? Is this what you meant by *honor*? Don't answer that.

That's when everything started to go downhill.

He was alone in the room, but suddenly he was in the room with Demon's voice, coming out of the darkness, telling him about the place they'd held her. A bedroom, but there were no sheets on the bed. Just a rubber mattress and straps holding her down.

No, no, stop thinking about this.

But he couldn't. His mind went relentlessly back, working through the words, forming images of things he'd never seen, never wanted to see, but instead of Demon, it was him, Rory, strapped to the bed while men did whatever they wanted to him.

He tried to scold himself in Demon's voice again, but her voice had slipped away, and now the only voice in the vault of terrors that currently passed for his mind was his own.

He realized he was shaking, muscles trembling, twitching against the shackles, his still-heavy legs pulling against the chains that ran under the bed. Too loud, too loud, but he couldn't make it stop, couldn't breathe, couldn't make his heart stop pounding.

Good. He'd faint. Fainting was good. Fainting was a relief. He wouldn't have thought he'd ever be happy to faint, but if there was a moment, this was it.

He didn't faint.

Stupid blood pressure. Maybe if he struggled especially hard against the chains he could push his blood pressure over into the red.

A grating, scraping sound filled his ears, and for a second he thought it was coming from him, coming from the bed, the chains, until it resolved into the door.

The door was opening.

The man who entered was not what he expected. Also naked, also chained, with just enough play between his legs to shuffle forward, just enough play between his hands to hold a bowl.

When the man half-turned, Rory saw an unholy wreck of bloody marks on his back and recoiled. A slave. Had to be.

Oh god, no. Poor man.

“Are you all right?” he whispered.

The man's eyes grazed over his, and he shook his head once, violently.

“I shouldn't talk to you?”

Another shake.

But you're the only person here but me. How many slaves were in this prison, or whatever it was? How many cells? How many beds with brand new chains?

No, those were stupid, pointless questions.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered, trying not to make a sound. The man came closer, shifting the bowl to one hand. “I came here with a friend. Can you tell me if she's—”

A chain came down across his stomach, and he screamed.

Tears filled his eyes, but he thought he saw the man shake his head again as he shuffled closer.

Rory went mad, thrashing, pulling, desperate to escape—the bed, the cell, the crazy slave with the chains—and it was light enough to see the world go gray around the slave man, still coming closer, closer, closer—

Chapter Twenty-Two

Teddy wasn't in support of the plan.

"Let someone else do it. Why does it have to be you going in there?"

"Because I know how to talk like an owner." Geo pulled his coat on. "They're not going to hurt me, Teddy. I'm a free man."

"So are Demon and Rory."

"Like I said, you don't know how to talk like an owner. To an owner, and to the people courting owners, Demon and Rory are slaves, will always be slaves."

"You're scaring the shit out of me right now."

"I'm getting into character. Maizy, we set?"

"Well, I can see you on the map, if that's what you mean."

"Good." Geo turned to Teddy. "Listen, I know how these people think. I can do this."

"So can the police."

"That would take too long. I'm going now. I already have them eating out of my hand, Teddy."

"You don't even know they're going to take you to Rory."

"I asked for him specifically."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"I told them I'd tried to get my old slave back, but I hadn't passed the fucking psych eval. I was pretty angry about it, too."

"That could be any number of—"

"I gave our names and offered them an extra million if they could find me an exact match within a week. They came back to me and said I was lucky, they'd just picked up the very boy."

"How do they know?" Maizy asked. "How do they know his name?"

"Well, they have the same database we have, but like you said, it only connects our names, it doesn't record whether or not we ever met. Teddy, I swear, this is going to work."

“And where are you getting all the money to do this?”

That had been a sticking point. Temporarily.

“Let’s just say my parents are going to be very annoyed that they never changed the passwords to their bank accounts.”

“Your parents have *a million dollars*?” Maizy asked.

“Well, they used to have more. Technically, I’m in possession of some of it now.”

Teddy shook his head. “And if you get yourself killed? Or one of them?”

“If we wait for the police, we could lose them. No one wants to hold a bunch of slaves longer than they need to, Teddy. They’re moving them fast. I should have figured out a way to get Demon out of there, too, but once we have the location, the cops can go in and get everyone.” He wasn’t thrilled about that part, but it would have been much more suspicious if he’d demanded both of them. He couldn’t risk anyone asking those kinds of questions.

“Dammit.” Teddy ran his hands through his hair. “I hate this. Maizy, you have that running through satellites or whatever it’s supposed to do so we won’t lose him?”

“It’s an app on my phone. We won’t lose him. Well, unless we lose cell coverage. Or he does.”

“Great, so we can’t fail. Except in half a dozen likely ways.”

“I gotta go or I’ll be late. I want to come off just a little bit too eager.”

“And that’s a good thing?” Maizy asked.

“They’ll try to get more money out of me, which I have. I just want to mislead them into thinking they understand my motivation.” The story he’d come up with made him a little sick, but maybe it’d be quick and he wouldn’t have to use it.

“I’m calling the police the second you make contact,” Teddy said.

“*No*. You can’t. They’re not having me meet them where Rory and Demon are. It’ll be someplace else. You have to wait until we get somewhere that looks like it could hold people securely. Teddy, if the cops swoop in before we’re even at the holding facility, the whole thing is worthless.”

“This isn’t a fucking James Bond movie, Geo.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I think you’re having *fun*.”

Geo turned away until he could see colors other than red.

“Listen,” he said, rolling his shoulders to try to ease off some of the tension. “These people make me sick. I know they make you and everyone else sick, too, but however delusional you think I was, I believed in treating slaves well. I believed you took care of your own, and these people are twisting it into something black and evil.” Teddy opened his mouth to protest. “*I know*. You don’t have to fucking sell me on freedom, okay? I’m just telling you that I can play this role because I’ve seen bad owners, and I know how to be the prey of these people, Teddy. I’m not having fun, I’m fucking *hunting*.”

“We need to leave,” Maizy said, holding the charger that connected to the car in one hand and her phone in the other.

“Fine. Good luck, Geo. Bring them back.”

“I will,” Geo promised. He kissed Maizy’s cheek, then walked out to his car.

He might never see them again. He knew that. If he screwed this up, they might still save Rory and Demon. Maybe. But if he didn’t pull off his role, the people he was going to meet would surely kill him.

If he was lucky.

Five men. Two standing as sentries outside the warehouse, and another two readying a semi inside.

A semi, with dog cages in it.

Geo forced his eyes away and tuned in to the conversation the man closest to him was having on his phone. (A normal cell phone, and it looked scuffed, not new. It was traceable. He should have fitted Maizy’s phone with an app to steal in-range phone numbers.)

“Well, what do you want me to—I’ll try, but—and if he doesn’t? You think it’s worth the—” The man lowered his voice, but Geo was pretty sure he heard “million” in there. That’s right. Reel them in.

“Excuse me,” he called.

The man quickly got off the phone and strode forward. "So sorry about that. Slight miscommunication about your—ah—request."

"Have you located the slave? I was under the impression he'd be *here*." Geo pointedly looked around at the nearly empty room. He touched his shirt pocket, as if he had a blank check there. It was old-fashioned, but this man had probably watched all the same movies he had (and taken away somewhat different messages).

"We don't keep slaves here, ah, sir. I'm afraid I don't have that particular slave available at this time, but I'm sure—"

"Excuse me?" Geo reached for anger and outrage, suffocating the fear that threatened to break through. "I can't *believe* you've wasted my time like this. When will he be available, then? It's a good thing for both of us that I didn't give you a deposit when you badgered me for one, isn't it? Something tells me with this kind of shoddy management, you would have had a difficult time refunding my money."

The man's eyes narrowed. Humiliated now, but trying to hold onto his position. "I misspoke. That particular slave has been moved out of the area."

"So I understand," Geo said, resisting relief. "Well, is he available or isn't he?"

"I'm afraid it will be some inconvenience to you, sir. We have a number of similar slaves nearby—"

"Listen to me, you fool." Geo leaned forward, summoning his father in a righteous rage. "I've already bought him once, and I spent seven years—*seven years*—training him. If you're telling me he's available, I want him still." Entitled. *I am entitled to what I want*. He could summon that easily indeed.

"Yes, sir," the man said, resigned to losing the battle. "I'll need to make some arrangements. This will take some time. Should I call you when—"

"I'll wait."

A crisp nod, and the man turned away again. Before he did anything else, he called over the apparent driver of the truck. Geo watched without appearing to do so as the driver threw up his arms and shook his head. The man made a brief, angry gesture, then pulled out his phone.

They'd taken Rory somewhere in a truck. *In a dog cage*. Geo bit down very hard on his tongue and focused on the steel support beams of the warehouse, stretching up the walls and overhead like a skeleton.

Don't think about dog cages. Or skeletons. Think about getting him back. Stay outraged and irritated, not terrified.

Ten minutes later, the man with the phone came back. "The slave will be here tomorrow," he began.

"Where is he now? In which direction?"

The man regarded him with weary annoyance. "Our facility is north of here, but I'm afraid—"

"Excellent. That's the direction I'm driving. Give me the coordinates, and I'll program them into my car." He pulled out his own phone, as if ready to take down the information. "Well? I can make a street address work, if necessary, but I'd really rather have coordinates."

"Sir, we do not give out that kind of—"

"For what I'm willing to pay, you should adjust your policy, young man."

"It's ten hours away, driving straight through." There was a note of triumph to his voice now. "You'd really want to drive ten hours for a *slave*?"

"As I thought I'd made clear, I'm driving that direction anyway. Even if your facility is a bit out of my way, it still makes more sense than me waiting around in this little shit-hole town for you to bring me a filthy stinking slave who won't be any use to me for days." Geo lowered his voice. "This way the remainder of my journey home will be well compensated for by a warm slave mouth *available* for my constant use."

As expected, the man drew back, disgusted. And maybe a little turned on.

"The coordinates, please. Look at it this way, the sooner I get my slave, the sooner you get the rest of your money."

"You'll get the coordinates when I see the first half of your balance in the account I sent you."

That was about as much as he had. He set his shoulders.

"I'll begin the transfer, but I'm putting a hold on it until I see the slave. How do I know you're not just sending me to the middle of nowhere?"

"Fine. When I see the funds being *held* in the account, you can have the coordinates."

At this point, the guy wanted Geo gone. Geo carefully transferred half of the agreed-upon amount minus five thousand dollars, then immediately put a temporary hold on the transfer.

“This is not what we agreed on.” A token complaint, so he could tell his bosses.

“This arrangement is not what we agreed on.”

They stared at each other.

“Fine.” The man poked in his phone, then sent a message with coordinates in it.

Geo pulled it up. It looked legitimate: a compound of buildings in an isolated area. “Pleasure doing business with you,” he said as dismissively as he could manage.

“You know,” the man said, color high in his cheeks. “Not all men are slaves.”

“Oh, all men are slaves, boy. A master is a man who knows exactly whom he serves.” With that unintelligible piece of wisdom, Geo took his leave.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rory slept fitfully. For a while he tried to count the minutes, but between sleep and other forms of unconsciousness, he couldn't keep any kind of accurate track and the numbers were starting to make him a little crazy.

The next time the slave came in, he shied away as much as he could, a pathetic twist of his torso that did nothing, at all, to hide any of his more vulnerable bits from the chain. But the slave—no, prisoner—the prisoner made no additional aggressive moves.

Again, he shuffled forward with a bowl. Rory held himself very still and tried not to pass out from fear. It wasn't the pain, it was the fear. He'd never been hit like that for no reason, with no explanation. He had no idea how to prevent it happening again, and tried not to breathe or move or provoke the frightening prisoner with the bowl.

Who sat down, beside him, and leaned forward, reaching one hand behind his head while the other—held the bowl to his lips.

Food.

Rory's eyes darted up to the other man's, but he did not look back.

Oatmeal. Watery and flavorless, but recognizably oatmeal. Rory slurped it, blushed, and slurped it more, wondering how many people were being held here. How big was the pot for this oatmeal? Was it a stock pot? A stew pot? A cauldron? How many people was this man going to serve, bent over, back oozing pus, dragging his chains.

That could be you tomorrow.

No. Well, maybe. But they'd come. They'd come, and they'd rescue him. And Demon. If Demon—if Demon was still—

Stop.

When he reached the bottom of the bowl, the man laid his head gently back down. Very slowly, the man touched Rory's stomach, the still-red marks from the chains.

Rory tensed.

The other prisoner's eyes darted up, just for a second, then away. He stood up, shuffled to the door, and was gone.

An apology? He had no way of knowing. It wasn't malicious, whatever it was.

Rory relaxed back into the mattress and concentrated on his breathing. Stay sharp. He flexed his feet, his calves, his thighs, his glutes. Muscle group by muscle group he made his way up, working his jaw, his cheeks, his eyes and forehead.

Then he started all over again. Stay sharp, they're coming. Geo's coming. Geo's on his way. He had to keep repeating it or he'd spiral back into the horrible nightmares that dogged him every time he closed his eyes. He kept his muscles warmed up so that if he had a chance at all to run, he could take it.

The door opened, but it wasn't like last time.

Footsteps, quick ones, no trailing chains, no clinking. The woman standing just inside the door glared at him, then turned to speak to someone else.

"Keep him tight until we get him to the viewing room."

Rory's usual prisoner shambled in and approached the bed. He tried to track exactly what was going on, but all he could tell was that he was no longer attached to the walls or the bed, but his wrists were chained to his ankles with so little play that he had to walk bent over.

So much for the great escape. He could barely stay upright.

A phone rang.

"You'll be lucky if they don't find your body twisted up at the bottom of a ravine, you idiot. What were you thinking sending him here? You'll blow the whole goddamn thing." The woman walked in front of Rory down a long hallway lit with fluorescent tube lights. He didn't see anyone else, but she wasn't at all worried about a sneak attack from behind. Either she trusted the prisoner who was still behind him, or there were other people around who'd come to her rescue if she cried out.

Probably both.

Could he take her down without alerting anyone? Maybe. But the other prisoner was still a wild card. And then what? He had no idea where he was in the building—the next door could lead to outside, or he could be in a maze-like sub-basement with only a key-controlled elevator for an escape.

He had to stay calm and try to bide his time. But the words “viewing room” were not good. They were not hopeful words.

“Well, I’ll cover your ass with the bosses this time, but don’t do it again,” the woman said. Whoever she was talking to replied, and she barked a laugh. “I have to go conduct a sale. You owe me a whole night of drinking, Swanson. I’ll call you when it’s done.”

The door at the end of the hallway led to another hallway, perpendicular to the first. Rory couldn’t help but notice that all the doors were heavy, perhaps alarmed, but currently unlocked. Interesting so far. Had his cell door been unlocked? It hadn’t occurred to him. Not that there had been a way to test it.

He was making too many stupid assumptions. But he was in chains, guarded back and front—sort of—on his way to something called a viewing room, naked. There weren’t a lot of silver linings to be found.

It hit him. He’d been trying not to let it, but it almost knocked him flat. He was naked, and chained, and these people could do whatever they wanted to him. The man behind him was proof enough of that.

Rory’s steps faltered and the world spun, then righted.

“Keep moving,” the woman snapped, glancing back at him. “I have a very interested buyer, some big shot, and you’re going to make me look good, runt. This guy’s worth millions. If I make it good for him, this might get me another rung up the ladder.”

It took three shuffled half-steps forward for him to realize she meant her job. *I wonder if there’s a pension with the black market slave trade. If Maiz was here she could probably give the nice slaver sound financial advice about her workplace benefits.*

He choked back a wild peal of laughter and manufactured a coughing fit to cover it up.

“None of that! You’re healthy and spry and worth the money he’s spending. You’re a fuckin’ thoroughbred, kid, right? That’s what I heard. A fuckin’ *thoroughbred*.” She pointed a finger at him. “Cough after he buys you, not before. This way, let’s get you cleaned up.”

Oh, please, let’s not.

Rory had been washed by Geo—lovingly, tenderly, gestures full of emotion and care—but he’d never been bathed by a stranger. The other prisoner led him

into a tile shower room, attached wrist and ankle cuffs to eyebolts in the floor and low ceiling, then proceeded to bathe him, clinically, but not without reverence.

Who are you? I promise if I get out of here, I'll send someone back for you. For you, for Demon, for anyone else who's trapped here with these crazy people.

The man patted him dry with a harsh, rough towel, then reattached the chains and led him, both of them shuffling, a man with odd fashion sense and his dog, down another much shorter hallway.

To a room.

The viewing room. Of course. Cinder block walls painted white, like the cell, but no bed. A long window took up most of the wall the door was on, but it wasn't a window to outside. It was a window to another room, and the woman concerned about her job security wasn't the only one in there. Two men stood with her, one of them smoking, none of them looking over at Rory and the other prisoner.

A tug on his chains. He turned, searching desperately for eye contact, anything, any kind of human interaction with the man who was now pointing to a spot on the ground.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Rory whispered. He glanced over at the window, but no one seemed to notice he'd spoken.

The other prisoner tugged again and he moved forward. When he was standing in the "right" spot, the man pressed down on his shoulders.

"You want me to—to kneel?"

A nod.

Rory's stomach rolled. No, no, I don't—I can't kneel here on this cold cement floor—I can't kneel for these fucking horrible monsters in their little window room—

The man pressed again, and with a sense of impending darkness, Rory knelt. He began to shake, merely twitching at first, then it grew violent enough to make the chains rattle.

"You must control yourself," the prisoner said, so quietly Rory almost thought he'd made it up. "If you cannot, they will beat you."

"I can't."

“You must. I will show you.”

The man knelt beside him, unfastening the shackles first on his ankles, then on his wrists. The heavy collar stayed.

Rory remained still and allowed his body to be molded by the prisoner's gentle fingers. He sat on his right heel, leaving his left leg up, knee at chest level. The man crossed Rory's arms in front of his left shin and bent his head forward, bowed, resting on his left knee.

“This is how they want you,” the man breathed. “You must look like a slave.”

The chain still attached to the collar draped down his back.

“Thank you,” Rory whispered into his body, tears dripping down his cheeks. It was over. It was all over. All of his stupid dreams, all of his ideas for the future. All of it came to exactly this: he was naked and kneeling and he could not see anything but his own leg and a patch of floor in front of him. He was a slave. He'd been free, and the only thing he'd even bothered to try was hosting a dinner party.

What he wouldn't give to be sitting in Geo's smelly apartment with his friends right now.

Tears spilled down over his thighs, and he tried very hard not to sniffle or call attention to himself.

The very distant chime of the woman's phone came again. The prisoner departed, with a very light, perhaps imagined, touch to Rory's side in goodbye. It was just him, now. Alone in the room. Waiting for the end.

He waited a long time.

They were talking. Male voices now, in the window room. Maybe the woman had gone somewhere? Male laughter that made him blush hot, even though he had no reason to think they were even paying attention to him, let alone talking about him, laughing at him, telling each other what they would do with him if—

Stop.

He couldn't hear any distinct words, not even syllables. The men spoke continuously, punctuated by laughter, just two coworkers chatting at their particular version of the water cooler. Rory shuddered and focused on breathing again. Now was not the time to faint. He had to stay aware, stay sharp. He didn't have shackles anymore; there was at least a chance he could run for it.

Eventually, when his legs were numb and his shoulders were aching, he heard the woman's voice again.

The door to his room swung open.

“—Good care of him, as you'll see. He's clean and unmarked. I've only had him a day, you understand, so the malnourishment is not my fault. I assume he's just the skinny type, you know? He's recently washed, and hasn't exhibited any aggressive behaviors so far. I have no reason to believe you'll be anything but happy with this slave, sir. As we discussed, you may, of course, test his responses now, providing my colleagues and I will be right on the other side, there. Can't have you damaging the merchandise and refusing to pay for it, right?”

The man, whoever he was, said nothing.

Rory had thought he was out of tears, but he found now that he was not. He couldn't imagine how his body could still produce them after this level of dehydration, but here they were. *Betrayal*. He'd thought—he'd sworn to Demon—that they would come, that the cavalry would charge in, with Geo at its head, and save them, save all of them. But here he was, being sold, and suddenly he was so fucking angry he wanted to scream. *I trusted you, and this is what I got*.

“Well,” the woman said, obviously uncomfortable. “I'll leave you. Let's make it quick, right?”

The door shut.

Rory began to shake. He thought he might shake into little pieces, shatter like glass. When the man finally spoke, he heard Geo's voice. Geo's beautiful, beloved voice, and that made it so much worse. That voice flayed him open until he was holding onto his own leg so tightly he could feel his bones and grinding his teeth against each other to keep from screaming.

And somehow, the words made it through.

“I wonder if they can hear me in there. I'd hate to disturb them. Is there a microphone? Their faces aren't changing.”

The man—the man who sounded like Geo—began to pace. He paced like Geo, too.

“No, it doesn't seem like they can hear me. Elephants dance on sun dials. No reaction. Blue geese sort fleece to bring world peace. Still nothing.”

Rory's breathing steadied. The collar felt like it weighed half a ton, sitting on his neck, pulling him toward the ground, but at least he'd stopped shaking.

"Rory, it's me."

Geo.

Rory sucked in a breath.

"I'm reclaiming you, I told this whole story, and you should be scared of me. I'm scary and you're a slave, and oh my god, if Teddy doesn't get here soon with the good guys, I'm going to punch his fucking face when we get out of here. No, honey, don't look up. Keep looking down. You're doing so good, honey, just keep doing what you're doing. I have to do something horrible now, and those fucking vultures are watching, but I need them to not be suspicious."

The feet stopped in front of him. And there was something else. When he opened his eyes and rolled his gaze all the way up, he saw it. Or rather, he saw them. Leather falls. Heavy leather falls, meant to tear open skin.

"I'm so sorry, honey. I'll try to be gentle."

Rory braced himself, gripping his leg tighter, trying not to think about the people in the room beyond the window—

And that's when they heard shouting.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Where the fuck is the cavalry already?

The shouting started very, very distantly, but it was enough.

There they are.

Geo really wished they had a lock on the door. Instead, he had a whip he knew how to use and three idiots who didn't appear to be armed.

The woman walked over to the door, and he got ready.

"Sorry, I need to go check on the commotion. Please just, um, sit tight here. Sir."

Sit tight? Was she joking? Did she really not know—

She didn't.

"Take care of it. I don't want to be here all night," he said sharply, then turned away.

The door shut.

Geo glanced up at the window. Down to a single man, cradling a phone to his ear. When he saw Geo looking at him, he edged out of the frame altogether.

It wasn't exactly time to celebrate, not yet, but he allowed himself to shift closer to Rory. Who stiffened.

"It's me. Rory, honey, it's me. I'm here."

"You can't be. This isn't real."

"It's real," Geo said. His chest ached, listening to Rory sound like this. Hopeless. Defeated. "It's real. I'm real."

The door slammed open, and oh, thank fucking god, a cop.

"Thank god you're here—"

"On the ground! Both of you! Face down, hands behind your head. Put the weapon *down!*"

Geo very carefully tossed the flogger aside. "Listen, I can explain—"

"On the ground!"

"Geo!"

He spun around. Rory had already followed directions, but at least now he was looking up. At least now he could see—

“Geo, get down!”

Geo obeyed. He got down on his stomach on the disgusting cement floor and locked his fingers together behind his head, like this was some insane movie. “Listen, officer, I really can explain—”

“I’ve got two more, otherwise clear.” The cop cocked her head to the side. “No, ma’am. There was a third here, but he saw me and took off.”

“Shut up,” Rory hissed. “Geo, let her do her job.”

“But—”

Rory rolled his eyes. *Rory rolled his eyes.*

“Do you believe it’s me now?” Geo whispered.

“Because only you would stand there arguing with a cop in riot gear like she’s got nothing better to do than sit around chatting.”

This close he could see the dark pits around Rory’s eyes, the gray pallor to his skin. But he was trying to keep his tone light, and Geo wasn’t about to disrespect the effort.

“Hey, I’m an important person. Actually, I think they might arrest me for a little bit. Not for long, it’ll be fine, I promise. I just borrowed a little money from my parents. Without asking.”

“Geo—”

“It’s fine. No—it’s good. Everything is good. If I could hold your hand without getting shot, I would.”

Rory glanced up at their personal guard/protector, still looming in the doorway, then scooted closer, squirming on his belly until their elbows touched. “Best I can do.”

“Oh, god, Roar, I was so scared for you.”

“Yeah, me too. The first thing we need to do is find Demon. She was talking pretty—it was pretty bad—and then we got separated, and I haven’t seen her. First priority, Geo. Promise me.”

“Of course. And anyway, Teddy’s outside somewhere, probably pulling his ‘I’m military, you can talk to me’ act.”

“Does that work?”

“Actually, Maizy’s the one who really—”

“Identify yourselves, please.”

Geo turned his head. The cop was now looking at them, still standing half in the doorway, glancing back down the hallway periodically.

“Geo Fairbanks. I’m probably the reason you’re here.”

“Rory. Fairbanks. And *I’m* the reason you’re here.”

Rory Fairbanks. Geo didn’t risk turning around again, but his entire body suddenly felt like it was filled with helium, like he might float.

The cop reported back to someone over her radio, then nodded and made eye contact with them again. “For my safety, and yours, I’m going to have you two stay right where you are until they get the situation sorted out there.”

“We’re fine here, officer,” Rory said. “Thank you.”

The cop’s lips quirked smile-ward, before she turned her attention back to the radio.

“I’ve decided we should get married,” Rory said.

Geo flipped his head back around so fast he wrenched his neck.

“Just, I looked it up, and it’s legal where you live for former slaves to marry. And we should have, but I wasn’t sure, and now I am.”

“Rory, you’re traumatized—”

“Try again.”

Geo blinked.

“That’s not the correct answer, Geo,” Rory said, like he was patiently leading a slow person to an obvious conclusion. “Try again.”

“But shouldn’t we—”

“Are you going to marry me or not?”

“Yes, of course, if that’s what you want. Rory, yes, yes, of course.”

“Good. Settled. Now if we could just find D, I’ll feel better.”

Naked, lying face-down on a cold, dirty floor, half-starved and terrified, Rory’s gaze flicked up to the cop, like he was patiently waiting for an opportunity to ask after Demon.

“Roar. Did you just propose? *Here?*”

Rory met his eyes, and for a moment he showed Geo more than his brave face. Something twisted and dark and frankly disturbing was there, underlying Rory's composure.

Then it was gone.

“I proposed, and you said yes, so it's settled. Good.”

“I'm taking you home as soon as I can,” Geo murmured.

“Good, good. Yes. Home.” Then, as Geo watched, Rory closed his eyes.

Was he falling asleep? Right here on the ground?

“Stay with me, okay? I'm just going to breathe for a minute.”

“Of course, Roar. I'll be right here with you.”

“That's good. Thank you.”

Geo swallowed absurd reassurances and vows of protection, watching as Rory's body relaxed fractionally. Just enough for him to breathe.

As soon as he possibly could, he was going to make someone take that collar off. If Rory was going to wear a collar—if he wanted to—it was sure as hell gonna be Geo's.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Never in any of Rory's many fantasies of being rescued did it take so long to get out of jail. He'd imagined the cavalry descending, the prisoners being freed, and warm, soft clothing being passed around.

Well. He had managed to pull on a scratchy pair of scrubs and Geo's jacket. Geo had given his subtle, handsome gray shirt to Demon, whom they'd found on a hospital-style cot, strapped down at wrists and ankles, then wrapped three times with a chain to the cot itself so tightly it left indentations in her skin.

"I caused some problems," she'd said, quietly, in a way that frightened him. "And I thought I heard people—like, people coming to help—but I was afraid I was imagining it, and if I shouted, they'd come back."

Geo stormed off to yell at someone, probably whoever he saw first, about not properly searching the building, but Rory stayed with her. He couldn't find bolt cutters, but he could unbuckle her wrists and ankles, and drape Geo's shirt over her.

"Never thought smelling Geo would be good, but right now it's kinda nice," she said, not meeting his eyes.

"He said Teddy and Maiz are outside somewhere, but no one will let them in or us out. So much for being free, huh?"

"Yeah. How's Geo feeling about captivity?"

"I was pretty sure he was going to get us shot at first, but he's doing better now. Or he was, anyway."

"Hey, Roar?"

She was still talking in this low, soft voice, like she was worried someone would hear her.

"What is it, D?" He grabbed her hands. "You okay?"

"They're, uh, they're gonna want to talk to me. I don't really—I don't really want to talk to anyone right now."

He didn't know if she meant their friends or the cops, but he realized it didn't matter. "Hey, you're a free fucking woman, right? You don't have to talk to anyone. And they can come through me if they want to argue about it."

A brief, ghostly smile, which faded into exhaustion. “Thanks, Roar. You’re the best. Do you think you could find me some water? I think I might actually be dying of thirst.”

“Sure, D. Hang on.”

Someone came to free Demon from the bed, apologizing profusely, and promised medical attention, which she tried to decline.

“Hey,” Geo said, pulling a chair closer so he could sit next to her. “Can we ask them to come in and tell us what we can expect? You’ve definitely got some deep bruising, and I’d feel better if we had a checklist of things that would send us to the hospital if they suddenly came up.”

“I don’t want anyone to look at me.”

“Entirely up to you, D. And Rory and I aren’t going anywhere. Or if you want me to take off, I’ll wait outside, but no one’s going to make us leave.”

“Thanks,” D said, and went back to chewing on her lips.

Rory squeezed Geo’s hand, wishing he could say something, wishing he could show his extreme gratitude. *Later. Maybe.*

They still couldn’t leave the compound.

Geo had spoken to Teddy on the phone at some point, but his phone had been taken as evidence (since it held both messages and account numbers pertaining to “the case;” every time someone called it “the case,” Rory wanted to scream, or possibly cry, or laugh, or something). Now they just sat together, in the main room of the facility, with all the other “witnesses” (another ludicrous word), and waited to be released.

When they were finally escorted out—first, because Geo had a vehicle, unlike the rest of the slaves, who were waiting on a bus—it was seven a.m. on the second day after they’d been taken. Not even forty-eight hours had passed since the only thing pressing on his mind was if Geo’s oven would roast nuts evenly enough, or if he’d have to keep turning the pans.

Maizy and Teddy looked almost as bad as Rory felt.

“You look like shit, old man,” Geo said, giving Teddy a hug.

“It was freezing all night. We left to get blankets and came back, once they told us they had all three of you. But at least it gave us an opportunity to park away from the law enforcement clusterfuck over there.”

“Parking in—what is this, some kind of drainage ditch?” Geo grinned. “Effective, Teddy.”

“Here,” Maiz said. She draped a blanket over D. “You ready to go, love?”

“I have some extra, um, funds available to me at the moment,” Geo said. “Should we get a couple of hotel rooms for the next few hours before starting back?”

Rory wanted to do nothing more than curl up in Geo’s arms and not leave, but he wasn’t sure what would be best for D. And her face was pretty expressionless, now that they were out in sunlight.

“Demon?” Teddy moved closer. He’d been standing off to her side, but in front of her, like he was afraid to hug her. “What do you say we make a nest for you in the back of the truck and you crash for a little bit on the drive home?”

She nodded, and Rory realized she was crying.

“Maiz, you want to—”

“Nest, got it.”

“If you two wanted to stay somewhere, you could,” Teddy said in an undertone to Geo.

“I think we’ll head back, too. Though we’re definitely stopping for food. Sound all right, Rory?”

Slave Rory would have said, “Sure,” and it wouldn’t have been a lie. He didn’t feel strongly about food. But he also didn’t like the idea of going out somewhere, sitting at a table, under bright lights, unwashed and in scrubs that didn’t quite fit.

“Can we drive through?” Rory asked.

“Tell me what you want to eat, and we’ll find it.” Geo hit Teddy in the arm. “They kept my fucking phone. Bastards.”

“You should have seen them try to get Maizy’s. She was essentially running an entire command center from the truck and this really young officer-something came out and tried to tell her he needed to borrow her phone because there might be evidence on it.”

“She said no?”

Teddy grinned. “She cited laws about search and seizure and the voluntary surrender of private property. I wish I had it on video so I could watch the poor

guy's face over and over again. He had no idea what to say, so he left. We expected someone else to come out, but no one did."

"Good. Sonsofbitches. I'll probably never see it again."

"Or it'll be in pieces. Here, take mine, at least for the drive."

Rory edged closer to D while they talked. "You okay going in the truck?" he murmured.

"Yeah, it's—yeah. Uh, Roar, you mind not telling him what I said?"

Tell Teddy I'm sorry...

"Uh huh. But you should let him do a bunch of stuff for you while you're recovering. You know, cut him a break."

Geo laughed, and Teddy said, "That wasn't the best part. The media—"

"D," he said, even softer. "I mean it."

"I got your nest, Demon child! Come see."

Maizy had made a near-cocoon of blankets in the back seat, and pointed out that the seatbelt would still securely fasten.

"Last time I was in a truck, they locked me in a dog cage," D said. When Maizy's face fell, she added, "It's great, Maiz, thanks."

"A dog cage?"

"Yeah, we'll have to share war stories later. Teddy said they wanted your phone?"

"I almost spat in his face! Not Teddy's, the little baby cop they sent out to flirt with me. Screw them!"

D smiled, then leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "God, I missed your voice, Maizy. I'm so glad you weren't with us."

"Well, I would have, you know. But then Teddy told me that a lot of finding you was down to me knowing how to look at spreadsheets and talk to people on the phone like I was in charge, so I guess it was better I wasn't. Still feel kind of awful about it."

"Don't be stupid," Demon said. "Maiz, uh, would you mind if I—I think I might want to sit up front."

"Course. Sit wherever you want, D. And anyway, Teddy was pretty worried about you."

“Oh, can it. I already got an earful from loverboy.”

Maizy and Rory exchanged smiles.

“You guys ready to go?” Teddy asked from behind them.

“We’re ready.” Maizy kissed Rory’s cheek and climbed in the back of the truck. “See you at home, Roar. You guys will come to the duplex, won’t you?”

“I don’t think I want to go back to Geo’s right now.”

“Good. I mean—you know what I mean.”

Teddy walked around to open the passenger door for D. “I might follow you around and physically threaten anyone who cuts you off in the grocery store, Demon. I hope you don’t mind uncalled-for acts of chivalry. Feel free to verbally eviscerate me if I step out of line.”

“Looking forward to it. The verbal evisceration, not the chivalry. I mean, I don’t mind the chivalry—fuck it.” D blushed, strapping herself in, then leaned out the window. “Keep Geo out of trouble till we get home, Roar, yeah?”

“I’ll try.” He smiled at her with all the warmth he could project. “We lived, D.”

“Don’t I fucking know it. Teddy, you gotta teach me better moves at that fucking karate class of yours.”

“It’s not *karate*, it’s self-defense. There are *elements* of karate—”

They waved as Teddy pulled away, then trudged to Geo’s car, still sitting where he’d parked it last night.

“This is your noble steed,” Rory said.

“My what?”

“You’re the white knight, and this is your noble steed.” He glanced sideways, then shook his head. “I had some time on my hands.”

“To think of me as your white knight? I’ll take it.” Geo reached across the gear-shift and touched his hand. “Rory.”

No. Not here. Not sitting in the car, surrounded by cops smoking cigarettes and highway patrol cars and black windowless cargo vans.

“Wait. Wait until we get away from here, until we’re safe. I don’t want to lose it until we’re safe.”

"I understand." Geo's fingers caressed him, but just for a second. "I can't tell you how scared I was."

"Me too."

"Were you serious? About getting married? I mean, it's been a long few days—"

"I was serious," Rory said, and gripped the hand that didn't quite dare take his. "I'm serious. I didn't say anything before because I didn't want everyone to say I was rushing it, or that I didn't know my own mind, but I do, Geo. This is what I want. It's what I wanted before. It's what I want now. All right?"

"Way more than all right. Can I kiss you? My, um, new therapist mentioned that asking permission is almost always welcome."

"You kissing me is always welcome." Rory pulled his face in, and even though his body was sore and his stomach still bore the marks of the chain lash, he kissed Geo with every bit of energy he could muster. "Take us home, please."

"Your wish is my command," Geo said, lips still pressed to Rory's. "I love you, Rory."

"I love you, too."

Rory settled into the passenger seat as Geo started to drive. *Goodbye, slavery.* He hadn't known where the line was, before. Slavery, not-slavery. Slavery with Geo, not-slavery with Geo. Now, though. Now it was all crystal clear, and not just the line between being an item in a catalog sold to the highest bidder and sitting in the car heading home. Right now, sitting here, Rory could think back on his entire life and actually see slavery, where before he'd just seen *life*.

He was getting married. He was getting married to a man he loved, and he had family, who would stand with him, and cook with him, and laugh with him.

Rory was going home.

The End

Author Bio

Kris Ripper lives in the great state of California and hails from the San Francisco Bay Area. Kris shares a converted garage with a toddler, can do two pull-ups in a row, and can write backwards. (No, really.) Kris is genderqueer and has no pronoun preference, but does enjoy the z-based neutrals. Ze has been writing fiction since ze learned how to write and boring zir stuffed animals with stories long before that.

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