

Don't Read in the Closet Event 2014



**LOVE'S LANDSCAPES
ANTHOLOGY**

**BONUS
VOLUME 4**

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance Anthology

Bonus Volume 4

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate 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 these anthologies are 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.

Over 210 stories were submitted and have now been published as a seventeen volume set with five additional bonus volumes, titled *Love's Landscapes*; this edition is Bonus Volume 4.

Words of Caution

These stories may contain sexually explicit content and are **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.

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating over 210 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in e-print involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Over the course of seven months, nearly forty members chipped in to help at various times; the *M/M Romance Group* would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view these photos, 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.

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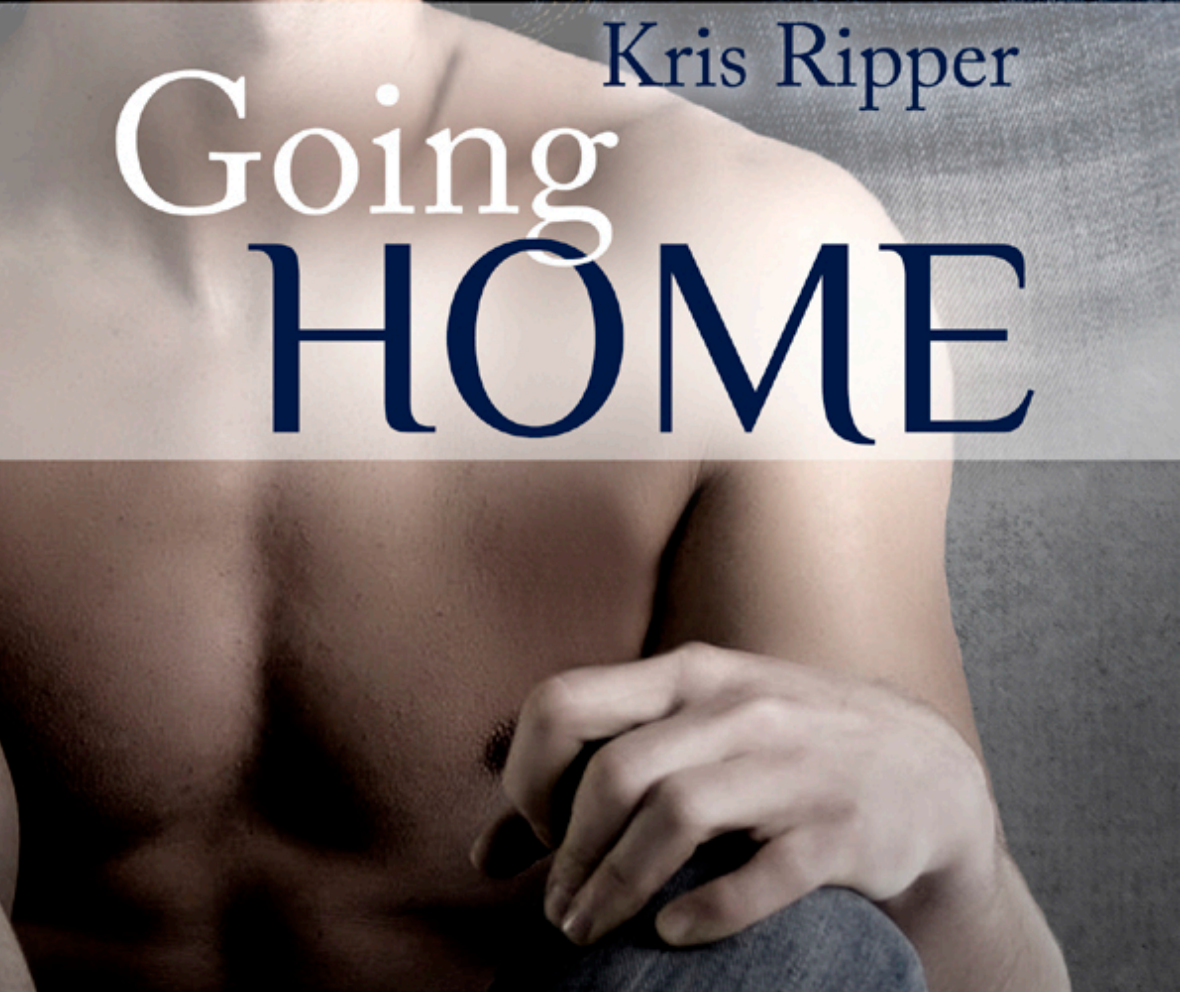
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Kris Ripper

Going
HOME



GOING HOME

By Kris Ripper

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, separated and reunited, master/slave, overbearing friends, dirty talk, BDSM, hurt/comfort

Content Warning: past abuse/rape of secondary character

Word Count: 66,270

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Acknowledgements

I tried very hard to write a lighthearted angst romp in a contemporary world that only recently reconsidered legal slavery and indentured servitude. Evidently my brain can't do "lighthearted" 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 nonstandard 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.

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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.

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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.

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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 outweighed 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.

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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.

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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 nongovernment 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, premade 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.

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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 shooing both of them toward the door.

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

“Thanks, Maiz.” 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.

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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.

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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 noncommittal 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.*

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 rumpled, 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.

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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 retelling, 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.

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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.

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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 reordering 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.

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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.

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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.

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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—

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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.

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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.

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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 facedown 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.

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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. Sonsobitches. 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

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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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Willow Scarlett

**JAGGED
ROCK**



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

JAGGED ROCK

By Willow Scarlett

Photo Descriptions

Photo 1: A young man with tattoos and short hair looks away from the camera, dressed in black pants low enough to show underwear, and a black leather hooded jacket open to show his well-defined chest.

Photo 2: A tattooed and well-defined young man with diamond stud earrings looks at the camera, posed shirtless on a chair.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Meet Will and Connor.

[Photo Description 1]

Will: So, a couple things. I'm a werewolf. I met my mate back in middle school, at the time I didn't quite understand why I was so drawn to Connor, why I was so protective of him and couldn't stand being apart. Now that we're older I get it. I feel like a guardian angel sometimes, making sure he's never hurt and always happy. The thing is, he has no idea that werewolves exist, let alone his best friend is one. Man, I'm not looking forward to that conversation or the fact that eventually (soon) I'm gonna have to bite him and claim him (that part I'll admit I'm excited for :)).

[Photo Description 2]

Connor: Hi, I'm Connor, I'm known to be kinda shy. Let's see, I'm in a band, I drum. I'm a freshman and share a dorm with my best friend Will. We've basically been inseparable since middle school. Will sings for our band and is amazing. He's always been there for me, from the second I moved to our hometown all those years ago, he took me under his wing. The problem? I'm so totally in love with him. I'm so not looking forward to that conversation, but I feel like the time's coming to tell him, before someone else grabs him up.

** These shifters can be born (Will) or turned (Connor) and have one true mate for life (no ménage!) I would love to have the conversation where Will tells Connor he needs to bite him to have some humor :)*

*** Also, Will knowing that Connor is his mate since middle school absolutely would not have hooked up with anyone else ever, Connor is super shy and in love with Will, so yes they are both virgins :)*

Sincerely,

Carey

Story Info

Genre: contemporary, paranormal

Tags: college, first time, friends to lovers, musicians/rock stars, shifters, soulmates/bonded, tattoos

Word Count: 96,447

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JAGGED ROCK

By Willow Scarlett

Chapter One

Connor

We could never decide on a name, but that was fine. We were always just “the band” to me. No matter what name we played under, people would be chanting it by the end of the night.

We’d gotten together at high school back in Layton but only started playing gigs when we got to college. We played a fast jazz-rock fusion that got called “progressive” a lot. Each member had their own different taste and sound and played in their own direction—it should clash but somehow it turned out weirdly beautiful.

We got more attention than any college rock band I knew, and I gave Will all the credit. He was an amazing singer and had the charisma of a stadium full of rock stars.

It was the last song of the night, and Will was flirting with the whole crowd, like usual. He wore his signature black-leather jacket over a bare chest to show off his runner’s body and the roses tattooed up his side. In this song, we each had a solo, and Will would go around the stage introducing each of us. I kept up a steady beat as we all took our turns.

“Chop, fastest hands in the North!” Will called into his microphone. Chop’s hands blurred on the frets as she made her electric guitar sing. She leaned against Will, back-to-back. Then the two of them bent their knees and lowered toward the ground in a trust exercise that was always mentioned in reviews of the gig. Chop kept up the furious, complicated playing the whole way down to the ground and the whole way back up. Then she ended in a wail of strings as she bowed, and Will called out her name again, “Chop!”

Chop stepped back so our second guitarist, Liv, could take center stage. She launched into her own solo as Will called, “Liv, guitar genius! She’s doing this improv and unique, just for you!” Will had never said it aloud but we all knew that he gave Liv longer for her solo because she was often overlooked in the band. She dressed femme to Chop’s attention-grabbing punk chic and played rhythm guitar to Chop’s fancy finger work. People often assumed she was a less talented player or just in the band as a pretty face.

But Liv was a creative genius who drank up any kind of music she could get her hands on and was constantly composing and experimenting. She was the

compositional core of the band and watching her get into her groove was awe-inspiring. When I'd been a shy drummer dreaming of joining a jazz band, it was creativity like Liv's I'd dreamed of.

She finished her solo. "Liv!" Will called again, raising his arms in front of the adoring crowd.

"Matt! That's his bass you feel deep down in your belly!" Matt had a mop of unruly curls which made him look like a clown. He stepped center stage and started dancing with his bass, lifting his legs up and bouncing his curls around as he strummed out a booming rhythm. Will threw his arms out and danced beside him, the two of them jerking around like marionettes. Will hammed it up for the crowd, but Matt danced out of pure joy at being on stage. When Will raised the microphone again, he was a little breathless. "Matt!"

I was the last, and as Will swooped toward me, I got a twist in my belly like I did every time. I loved being on stage with the band, but I hated being the center of attention. The lights focused on me, and I ducked my head, trying not to panic. The whole crowd was watching me. I squeezed my eyes shut and kept my hands steady on the sticks.

"Connor, backbone of the band!" Will called. He leaned in close to my kit, so close that I had to look at him. He was grinning wide and winked as he caught my eye. And, just like every other time, my nerves faded as I remembered that I wasn't alone in front of the crowd: it was me and Will, together, in front of the crowd.

I launched into an extended drum roll, the kind of complicated mess I used to practice in secret because my teacher had told me no one would ever be interested in hearing it. I kept the same time I'd been keeping for the whole song but splintered it in half, quarters, eighths, sixteenths; moving faster and faster as my hands glided around the kit and I pumped my double-kick on the bass like a madman. I let every drum have its chance to sing, then ended on the cow bell—my signature. It always got a laugh.

I paused when I finished, a few moments when the whole band fell silent. In that pause, I looked at Will again. His hand was hooked over my crash stand so he could lean in and close the world out until it was just us. He winked and stuck his tongue out a little, holding the microphone away so only I would hear him murmur, "You're great, Con."

I knew it was just for my morale. But still, his voice echoed inside me, and my stomach gave a flip that wasn't stage nerves. And just like every other time,

I zoomed in on his lips and the sweet, kissable curve of his smile. And, just like every time, I had to remind myself, *He's your best friend! Stop staring at him!*

Will wiggled his eyebrows and gave a dirty, low laugh like we were in on a joke together. Only we weren't, and the joke was on me. I couldn't look away from his deep brown eyes, and I couldn't keep my thoughts from spiraling into the gutter.

He winked again, turning my insides to mush before he stood up and spread his arms and called into his microphone, "Connor!"

I started playing again and let my thoughts melt into the music and think of nothing but the beat before the end of the performance. I didn't let myself sneak peeks at Will hamming it up for the crowd, and I didn't check to see if he was grinning back at me like he always did. I was here to play music and not to gawk at Will.

After we finished and the lights went down on the stage, we all walked off into the room behind the stage. "Okay," Will said. "Let's hang here for exactly three minutes to give the illusion that we actually have roadies to do our dirty work." We fell into a loose circle, and Will grinned around at us. "Great gig tonight. You hear how the crowd screamed? We're just getting better and better."

"Maybe the drink specials are getting better," Chop suggested. "Drunk crowd's a good crowd."

Will nudged her shoulder playfully. "Don't act like you didn't see the girls in the pit wearing 'CHOP ROCKS' T-shirts. We all kicked ass tonight."

After a few minutes, we went back on stage. The bar was still loud, but the area in front of the stage had cleared except for a few people dancing to the house music. We were the last band of the night, so we had the stage to ourselves and the luxury of packing up properly. Chop and Liv quickly got their guitars and equipment out to Chop's van as Will went around pulling up tape and rolling up cables like he was more roadie than lead singer.

I checked all my drums, retuning them and listening closely, running my hands over the skins to check for weak spots. The tiny dorm room I shared with Will had strict noise policies and I had to store my kit in a music studio with restricted access, so I was paranoid about looking after my gear after a gig. It was a nightmare to imagine finding something was wrong and not having time to fix it before going on stage. I did everything I could to keep my performance perfect.

I was on my knees, kneeling behind my kit as I looked it over. I heard Will say, “I saw you, you know.”

For a moment, I thought he was talking to me, and I was confused, then mortified wondering if he'd caught me staring at him and figured out my secret feelings for him. But it was Matt who replied. “Saw me what?”

“Flirting with the boy in the Star Trek hoodie.”

“I wasn't flirting.”

I grinned. Matt sounded so adorably guilty. I thought about peeking over the drums to see if he was hiding his face under his hair like he did whenever we caught him sneaking snacks from Will's supply.

I'd never seen Matt with anyone and he'd never talked about anyone romantically. He'd come out in high school and been mercilessly mocked by Will's cousin Joseph, before Will put a stop to that. I wouldn't be surprised if Matt had been traumatized out of dating for the rest of his life—it had been terrifying for me to watch, and I hadn't even been friends with him back then. Joseph's bullying was one of the reasons why I'd never got around to coming out—that, and the fact that the man I was gay for was also my best friend.

I was glad Matt was showing an interest in someone. But I was also glad that I was behind my drum kit, so I didn't have to talk to him and offer advice. I had nothing useful to contribute at all—I'd never even been kissed.

Will was saying, “Yeah, you were flirting. I saw all those slow glances and lingering smiles.” His voice was teasing but it dropped down to that low purr that swept down my spine like a gentle caress. “Plus I saw the way you kept lowering your guitar strap until you were playing from the hip. I've played that bass, remember? I know how it feels.”

I flushed and was glad I was hidden from sight. I remembered the practice Will was talking about, how he'd taken Matt's bass and tried to strum out a few chords. He'd been laughing until all of a sudden he wasn't, he was just grinning that slow, sexy Will grin. “Feels good, man,” he'd said. “Feels *real* good.” From that day onward he'd nicknamed Matt's bass “The Boner Machine”. I tried not to risk thinking about that day too often in case my thoughts were obvious on my face.

But Will dragged the memory into the light as he laughed with Matt, saying, “I've felt it vibrate on my hip. I don't know how you *don't* flirt with the crowd every time you play that thing.”

“I wasn’t flirting,” Matt repeated. “Not like you do.” He didn’t sound defensive. At a guess, I’d say he was grinning, coaxed into talking with Will about things he usually wouldn’t because that was just the power of Will.

“It’s cool, man. You had to know you were flirting. You were making eyes at Star Trek Boy and leaning in closer to him, smiling and winking.” Will’s voice dropped lower with a hint of gravel. “You were practically having sex with him.”

Matt choked. “If that’s all it takes, you and Connor were doing it on stage.”

Will was suddenly looming over me, leaning on my crash cymbal like he leaned on his microphone stand and looking down on me like I was one of his screaming fans. I hadn’t even known for sure that he knew I was there. “What do you think?”

“About what?” I stalled for time.

“Are you and me doing it?” His dark eyes glittered, catching the low bar light, but his brows and lashes were inky black. He grinned at me with one eyebrow raised, leaning over me all charisma and accidental flirtation. My mouth and throat went dry.

I licked my lips. “I think I’d notice?”

In the blink of an eye, Will was back to his usual joking self, shrugging off his dripping sex appeal like it had never been there. “It’s cool,” he said to Matt. “He was eyeing you too. You want me to track him down, get his number for you?”

“No, that’s fine,” Matt said quickly. I heard this as he walked off the stage. Then he stopped and called over his shoulder, “Thanks. For the offer.”

“Anytime,” Will laughed. He came and leaned on my ride cymbal, hooking his hands around the stand and resting his chin on the cool metal. “How’s it going?”

“Nearly done.”

“Cool. Give me something to carry?”

Before I could respond, some more people climbed onto the stage. Girls, two pairs of tan UGG boots I could see around my bass drum. One of the girls giggled, and the other said, “You were really good.”

“Thanks,” Will replied. All professional. “We practice a lot.”

“You were really, really good.” The fan placed the emphasis on the word, dragging it out. Her southern drawl showed she was from out of state, probably up for college. I wondered if she knew Will was a freshman, or if that would matter—lead singer of the band was probably still brag-worthy, even if he was freshly eighteen.

“Yeah. We practice really, really a lot,” Will said, mimicking her tone.

The one who'd been giggling stopped long enough to say, “She means you're hot.”

“It's just the jacket,” Will said calmly. He was dragging a fingernail across my ride cymbal over and over. I glanced up, and he was looking down at me. He gave a wink and a little half-smile.

“I could buy you a drink?” one of the girls offered.

The other chimed in with, “Or I could.”

“Thanks,” Will said smoothly. “But I've got plans for tonight. Here, take this though.”

I had my own little fan club, mostly studious Engineering or Physics majors who talked about music as math. I attracted the kind of fans who went home and blogged. But Will had the kind of fans who wore tight T-shirts and came backstage to flirt. He'd handed them something, but I didn't see what it was. They seemed happy with it, though. His number? I carefully packed the drum stands away in their bag and tried not to think about it.

I shared a dorm room with Will, and I lived in fear of the day I'd come home and find him *with* someone. It hadn't happened yet, but I knew it was only a matter of time. He was charming and hot, and he had fans throwing themselves at him. One of them would grab him up, and I'd be the loser, third wheel roommate, grinning and bearing it as he politely asked me to vacate the dorm to give him time alone with them.

I didn't look at Will as we packed my drums away in Chop's van. We met the band in the back room where they were unwinding on the couches. Liv had her phone out, playing a new band she was excited about, a glam folk act from Boston she'd introduced me to last week. Chop had her arms over the back of the couch, and Matt had his head resting on her shoulder—on anyone else it might have looked like he was making the moves, but Matt was like a little brother to all of us. Will leaned over the couch behind Liv. “Who is this? They're good.”

“You think so? They’re coming up for a gig at The Cabooze in a few weeks.”

“I’ll get us tickets,” Will said, glancing around to see that we all agreed. “I’ll ask if they’ve got enough supporting acts and volunteer us if they don’t.”

I dropped onto the couch beside Matt. I sneaked a glance at Will who was still leaning over the couch. He was going through an obsession with fingerless gloves, the kind that bike messengers or professional drivers wore, thin stylish leather rather than anything that made sense for the Minnesota cold. When he was wearing those gloves he exaggerated every movement of his hands to show them off. It would have been funny if it wasn’t a tortuous tease. He was scrolling through something on Liv’s phone, asking her a question, but all I could think of was how good it would feel to have those strong hands running down my body.

I couldn’t get my head into the right place. I was always a mess after a gig, all the adrenaline and nerves leaving me a wreck. It was a massive high and a sudden crash. In an hour or so, I would be feeling great again, but until then I was twitchy and miserable and struggling not to obsess over my secret, unrequited love.

So I got up and went to the window. It was always locked but I tried the latches anyway—a blast of cold air might be just what I needed then.

“You okay?” Will was suddenly behind me. “You need anything?”

“I’m fine. Just tired.” Maybe I wasn’t as good at faking a smile as I thought I was. Then again, Will had been my best friend since I was twelve and he knew my moods better than anyone.

Will wrapped his arms around my waist, enveloping me in his scent of leather and post-performance musk. His body was impossibly warm through the jacket and so comfortable around me. His chest was firm and his arms strong, such a contrast to Matt’s pliable boneless cuddling. For a moment, I imagined Will and I were a couple, that any moment he was going to tilt my head back and run his lips and stubble down the sensitive line of my neck. I realized I’d unconsciously tilted my head to give him access to my neck, and that was what made me flinch and pull away.

Will let go at once, chuckling. He stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets and grinned at me. “I’m all sweaty, right? Gross. I get it.”

You don’t get it. If you did, you wouldn’t be standing there with your jacket open and your abs all tight and hard and your skin all warm and beautiful and...

I looked out at the night, the sky lightened by city lights and swirling with snow. A blast of cold air was definitely what I needed. And the courage to tell Will how I felt. And a giant hole to sink into when I told him how I felt and he just stared at me like I was insane. “I wish this window opened.”

“I can go ask for the key? Simon at the bar must have it.”

“No, that’s fine.” I shook my head. Then, unbidden, the words popped out. “So what are your plans? You told your fans you had plans?”

“Same plans I have every night, Brains,” he enthusiastically misquoted a cartoon. “Drink disgustingly sweet milky drinks with you and watch bad TV with the band.”

“What’s going on?” Matt called from the couch.

“I think Will gave some of the fans his number,” I said. The words were ashes in my mouth, but I managed to wink like it was all a big joke.

“Oooh!” Liv sat up straighter, grinning as she started another track on her phone. “Will, you player.”

Will was grinning too. “Come on. I gave her our business card with the web address on it—she kept saying she liked the band, maybe she can buy our music.” He tapped his chin on Chop’s head. “I love you guys. Stop trying to offload me on the fans.” He glanced up at me. “I know you love me too.” He was grinning like we were co-conspirators, but his smile made butterflies dance in my stomach.

I smiled like nothing was wrong but looked away as quickly as I politely could.

I had to tell him. I couldn’t go on like this. Someone was going to catch his eye and grab him up and I’d hate myself for never letting him know how I felt. It would probably be the end of me, but I had to tell him.

My family moved around a lot when I was young, and I never quite knew why. Like moving to Minnesota—it was meant to be for Dad’s job, but he complained about the new job being admin rather than out in the forest like he wanted. But we moved anyway.

I had the kind of parents I couldn’t wait to grow up and get away from. My whole childhood felt like I was waiting, every moment was a countdown until my real life began.

Mom was a teacher, and she pushed me academically. Dad was ex-army and an avid hunter. Every morning before school I'd be woken up early to exercise and train, every night was spent studying and doing homework, and the weekends fishing and hunting. We'd always moved around a lot, never staying anywhere for more than two years. I was busy at home and never long at any one school. Add to that my natural shyness and I was one lonely kid.

So when Will said he'd visit me after school, I didn't believe it. "My parents are really strict," I told him. "No friends allowed." Will hung out with me every day at school, integrating me into his friend group and always sitting beside me. For the first time in my life, I had a close friend. But that stopped at the final bell, when I went back to being the son that neither of my parents seemed to like.

So the first time he came over, I wasn't expecting it. It was two months after I'd moved to Layton. I was at the kitchen table doing homework while Mom made dinner. Dad was in the living room so when there was a knock on the door, he answered it. I heard the boom of his voice and the quiet tone of someone else, but I didn't realize who it was until Dad walked into the kitchen.

"This is Connor's friend William Flight," he announced. Mom looked shocked because we never had guests around. She stood there staring at Will and Dad in surprise.

Will stepped forward, holding out a huge metal dish with a glass lid. "Tuna casserole. I made it myself." He held out the dish, and Mom took it automatically.

"I've invited William to join us for dinner," Dad said. He had a horrible fake baritone he used when he wanted to impress people.

"I'm terribly sorry," Will said politely. "I know it's poor manners to arrive unannounced like this, but my parents were urgently called out and Connor's such a good friend."

"Of course. From school?" Mom offered. She was staring.

I was staring, too. I'd only ever seen Will in his school uniform, clean and new but worn baggy, which was the fashion at the time. I was sitting at the table in my own uniform, which I wore morning to night, except when I was in my workout or hiking clothes. But Will was wearing dark dress pants and a white shirt with his hair brushed neat and parted at the side. He looked like he was going to a job interview.

Will nodded. "He's the best student in class, everyone says so."

"He should be the best in school," Dad said. I wished he wouldn't, but it was like an automated reply, someone complimented me, and Dad had to rebut.

I cringed and looked away. Dad pulled out a seat across from me, and Will sat down. My parents went into the other room, and I heard them whispering. I hoped it wasn't about Will, but I knew it had to be, and that he had to know they were talking about him. I felt too embarrassed to say anything, but I had to rally for the sake of distracting him. "I can't believe you're here."

"You don't want me here?"

"No, I do. I just... How'd you make them let you in?"

"It's the name." Will leaned over the table, eyes glittering as all the preppy manners disappeared. "Flight. My family owns this town. My name opens doors."

I couldn't tell if he was being serious or not. I drummed my pen on my book nervously. I was glad he was there, but I didn't want him to think badly of me. "You're really that rich?" I blurted out. Followed by a silent, *And you want to hang out at my house?*

"Yeah." Will shrugged. Then like that didn't even matter he ducked his head and whispered conspiratorially, "You want to know something funny?"

"Sure."

"My name's not even William. I just say that to sound posher. I'm Will, and my brother's Dave. Not David. Just Will and Dave. Funny, huh?"

"I guess."

"I just had to impress your parents enough to get in the door. Because when I'm in, I'm laughing. Give me ten minutes and I'll charm the pants off anyone."

I believed it. "And you made casserole?"

"I also brought candy," he whispered. "We can ditch for pizza later if you want."

"I didn't even know you cooked."

"I don't. I mean, I can. You just get things and cook them, right? That's not so hard. And casserole's easy. I don't like it, though. Hate fish."

"So why'd you make it if you don't like it?"

“It’s good for you. It puts hair on your chest.”

I blinked. “You don’t even have hair on your chest.”

“Yeah, because I don’t eat enough tuna casserole.” He rolled his eyes and stuck his tongue out.

He was right, though. After one dinner with my parents, he had them eating out of his hand. At school, he was always loud and cracking dirty jokes or pulling pranks that would have got anyone else kicked out of class. But in front of my parents, he became this painfully polite young man with a repertoire of family-friendly anecdotes. He somehow wheedled his way into my family life, eating dinner with us several nights a week and studying quietly beside me at the table—until my parents left the room, when in an instant he’d revert to the cocky smart-ass I knew from school.

My mom was strict and didn’t seem to care about much except her work. But Dad was always on my case and some of that showed when Will was around, when he’d interrogate Will or criticize anything he saw as not suitably masculine for a friend of his son’s—like constantly ribbing him about his meticulously groomed hair. But Will just took it in his stride, not showing any sign of being offended. And if Dad had a go at me in front of him then Will would step in with a joke or remark to turn the tide of my dad’s anger. With Will around, I suddenly felt safer at home as well as more popular at school.

My dad was a big hunter and they bonded over that, talking about the mountains and surrounding forest. Will didn’t seem as interested in hunting, he had a lot of stories about just running or hiking in the woods. But he did have his fair share of stories about hunting moose and deer.

“Have you ever shot a wolf?” Dad asked one night.

“Only with a camera,” he said firmly. I knew his parents were wildlife photographers, but I’d never seen their photos.

“They’re easy to track and hard to catch. I’ve shot one before, but it’s impossible to get a license here.”

Will nodded, but turned to my mother and changed the conversation. I could see on his face that something was wrong, that he was angry about something. But he didn’t say anything and the moment passed.

The time that he did actually have a fight with my dad was over running.

Dad made me train a lot to keep up an impossibly high fitness standard. He had dreams of me being army elite like he’d been. I hated it. It was like he was

constantly trying to beat me into a macho clone of himself. Sometimes I wondered if he tried so hard because he suspected that I was gay, and he was trying to exercise it out of me.

Will started joining in when we were training, and that made things better. Dad wasn't as mean to me in front of Will. Until one day at the running track near my house, when they both pushed things too far.

At first, it went okay. Dad stayed on the sidelines and just yelled a little. But after a while, he just slid back into usual like it was a habit he couldn't break, yelling at me that I was worthless and had poor form. I kept my head down and didn't look at Will. "Ignore him. It's just old army talking. He's used to yelling at everyone."

"I don't like it," Will said. His voice was calm and even, despite the distance we'd run already. "Do you like it?"

"It's okay," I muttered. Then, "No."

The next instant, Will had disappeared from my side. He was jogging over to Dad. I bit my lip, wanting to call him back and tell him I'd changed my mind. I didn't want him to get hurt. Not that I'd ever seen Dad hit anyone. But he'd threatened to often enough, and Will had that way of playfully pushing people around, which Dad might not take as just playful.

"You want to come join us?" Will called. "Come on, show us how it's done."

Even that was too much. I cringed, hoping Will would stop. But he kept talking, goading. His back was to me, but I could see him moving about as he made jokes and tried to playfully beg Dad into joining us.

And then an amazing thing happened. Dad laughed. In all the years of my memory, I'd never heard him do more than bark ironically. But he laughed and unzipped his jacket, threw it to the ground and jogged slowly onto the track. I couldn't believe it. Will had actually got to him!

Dad started off steady enough, but soon he was clearly trying to outdo Will. Will just jogged beside him, not looking phased as they ran loop after loop of the track. Will stayed just a pace or two in front of Dad, and I could see how much that was getting to him, how his face got redder and redder as he tried to outrun my friend. I stood in the patch of grass in the center of the track, silently watching, swapping places with Dad for once.

I heard Dad say, "You're good." His voice was strained and his breathing uneven.

“You’re not. Is that all you’ve got? You call that running?”

Will’s words were so unlike him that I thought I’d misheard. But I hadn’t judging by Dad’s reaction. “You little punk,” he growled.

“You want to prove me wrong, old man? Show me what you’ve got. I could beat you running backward.” It was something Dad said all the time, and I hated hearing it coming from Will’s mouth.

I didn’t understand it. Will wasn’t mean. He was the opposite of mean, everyone’s friend.

“Shut up,” Dad growled. “I’m warning you.”

“Yeah? What are you warning me against? You’re going to hurt me? Try and catch me.” Will darted forward. Then he actually started running backward, loose shorts flapping. “Come on, prove you’re not useless.”

Dad lunged, and tripped, and fell flat on his face. I started running toward him, and Will stopped. For a sickening moment, I thought Will was going to kick him while he was down, but then I heard him asking if Dad was okay. In reply, he got a growl. “Back off, don’t touch me, you little brat!”

“You see how it feels?” Will said calmly. “It doesn’t matter how good you are, it’s never okay to treat someone else like they’re worthless. Connor doesn’t need that.”

“Don’t tell me how to raise my kid.”

“My parents always treated me with respect, and now I can outrun you. Let him learn to love it, and don’t yell at him until he learns to hate running.”

I’d reached them by then. Will held out a hand to Dad who ignored it and stood up on his own. I was standing just behind Dad, and I wasn’t sure if he could see me or not.

“Connor’s just fine,” he growled. “He’s better than I was at his age. That boy’s going far. And he’s getting there on raw talent, not money like an entitled brat.”

“I know. But it wouldn’t hurt if you told him that once in a while.” His eyes flicked to mine, and Dad followed his gaze, turning and noticing me. Will said, “Think about it, next time you’re yelling at your son.”

“It gets the results.” Dad’s voice was still laced with anger, but at least he’d lowered it below shouting.

“In the army, maybe. But Connor never signed up for that. Kindness works just as well.”

“Just leave it,” I muttered. They were both looking at me, and the anger in the air was nearly tangible. I didn’t want to be the source of it.

“That’s enough for today,” Dad said quietly. He walked off the track, and I didn’t follow.

“I hope that helps,” Will said. He smiled at me, back to his usual charm. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I frowned. “That was gross. Seeing you like that. Acting like him.”

“Giving him a taste of his own medicine.”

“I get that. But still. The way you get all excited when you talk about hunting after dinner? It’s like you’re sometimes a completely different person, and I don’t like it.”

“I need to get along with your parents or I won’t be able to keep visiting.”

“Yeah. I get that. But it’s like you’re almost too good at pretending to be a mean prick.”

Will winced. I wondered if he was going over his behavior to figure out what I meant—or maybe if I was the only one who’d spoken to him like that, actually faced down the cool rich kid. He just looked at me for a few seconds. And then his shoulders sagged, and he said, “I’m sorry.”

I wasn’t even sure if he should be apologizing. “That’s okay. You were only looking out for me.”

“I can be dramatic when I want to get my point across. Plus I’m kind of new to this whole thing.”

“What thing?”

Will hesitated a moment. Then he said, “Friendship.”

I laughed, but the most popular kid in school just kept standing there looking dejected.

That day was the last I ever saw him yell at someone, not counting sports of course. He stopped talking about hunting, as well. Maybe because Dad wasn’t around as much—he seemed to be keeping his distance from Will, almost scared of him but maybe just embarrassed. As little as I liked seeing Will acting like a drill sergeant that day on the track, I had to admit it worked. I joined the

track team with Will and we trained with them three nights a week and that seemed enough for Dad. He stopped asking me to do PT. And other nights, Will would sit at the kitchen table with me late into the night, focusing quietly on homework whenever Mom was within earshot so she was satisfied.

From the moment he came into my life, I realized things would change, but I didn't realize how much. Will took me under his wing and looked out for me, every day.

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Chapter Two

Will

It took me exactly two years to put a name to what I was feeling for Connor.

I loved spending time with him, so much so that it felt like I *had* to be around him. Passing notes in class, sitting beside him at lunch, picking him first so he'd always be on my sports team. I even buckled down and studied at his house because it meant more hours with him. I was protective of him, too, and made sure no one hurt him or made him unhappy.

I was fourteen when I started getting more than the occasional fantasy about him. My hormones kicked into crazy overdrive like I was a radio constantly playing dirty songs. And the station I was tuned into was purely Connor. I couldn't get him out of my head, and I couldn't stand to be away from him. And it wasn't just sexy stuff, either. I fantasized about growing old with him, building a life with him, leading the pack with him at my side. I was obsessed with what his wolf form would look like, what it would be like to run beside him through the trees. I dreamed so vividly of sleeping beside him that I could almost catch the scent of him when I woke.

I started obsessing about biting him. I thought about it all the time. It was worse when we hugged because that emphasized how perfectly my head fit against his neck. I had to keep myself from opening my mouth just to feel the sweet pressure of his skin against my teeth. Just one bite and he'd be mine forever.

I'd never even thought about turning a human before. And that's what made me realize: Connor wasn't just my friend. He was my mate.

As soon as I realized, it was so blindingly obvious. All of my weird reactions clicked into place, and I was breathless with wondering how I hadn't realized it sooner. Maybe because I'd never thought my mate would be a human—or that he'd be a guy. But by that point, I was so in love with Connor that I didn't care if that meant I was gay. As long as I had Connor I'd be happy.

I told my parents almost as soon as I figured it out. I announced it one night when we were sitting at the table. "Mom, Dad. I've found my mate."

"That's wonderful," Dad breathed. "So soon. You'll be a strong pack leader, I always knew it."

“I don’t understand.” Mom frowned. “No one’s new to the pack. How did you meet her?”

It was more or less what I was hoping for—there was a big part of me that loved making a scene. “He’s from out of state but his family moved here. It’s like you said about you and Dad: The mating bond is like fate dragging us together.”

My parents fell silent. I made a big show out of smiling at each of them in turn.

“I don’t understand,” Dad said.

“He?” Mom murmured.

“Connor,” I said. “That boy I visit all the time.”

“That human boy?” Mom’s voice rose.

“Yeah, that’s the one. The one with the eyes like clear water and the ass like—”

“Werewolves can’t be gay,” Mom cut in. “You must be confused.”

“I don’t think I’m confused about Connor being a boy,” I said calmly. “He told me so himself.”

“Werewolves can’t be gay,” Mom repeated.

To my surprise, it was my dad who answered. “Maybe they can be,” he said slowly. Mom and I both stared at him. But he didn’t elaborate on the comment. He just asked me, “Are you sure?”

“Of course,” I said confidently.

At the same time, my mom said, “Of course he isn’t sure.”

I frowned at her. “This isn’t a game, Mom. I know what I feel.”

“You’re young.”

“Nearly of age.” Fifteen was when a werewolf came of age. “This isn’t puppy love and it’s not a summer fling.”

The two of them exchanged a grim look. My dad began, “Will—”

“You can go ahead and act happy for me anytime,” I cut in. I’d gone from being amused at their surprise to actually being a little offended.

They exchanged another look. Then Dad said, “So let’s say you’ve found your mate. What are you going to do next?”

“Bite him. Claim him. Take charge of the pack.” Simple.

“Can we meet him first?” Mom asked. “Before you run off making rash decisions you can’t take back?”

I frowned. How could they think I could mistake something as huge as the mating bond? Even sitting there at the table I could feel Connor like a magnet tugging at me. “I want to take him to one of our cabins and let him get to know the mountains. You can meet him then?”

“You know who else should meet him? Bren.” Bren was my uncle, the pack’s omega. He worked as a vet in the local clinic. He was ten years older than me, but I’d been bossing him around since I was tiny. I knew he was an expert on werewolves, he’d done a lot of training and research and was kind of like a walking library for the pack. He was a big guy with an even bigger heart and an easy smile. I didn’t care that he was an omega, Bren was my favorite member of the pack.

Dad went on, “He knows all about mating bonds.” Dad said it kindly, but a moment later he swapped another look with my mom which showed quite clearly that they still didn’t believe me.

“Okay, sure.” I knew what I was feeling and it didn’t matter if they wanted more people to confirm it.

Connor

The first time I met Will’s parents, and the first time I went up into the mountains, was in junior high. I figured I was going to hate it—I’d never liked the wilderness when Dad had taken me hunting. But Will talked about the mountains with this kind of infectious excitement, which I couldn’t resist.

His parents came around to my house to pick me up, driving up in a shiny, dark green car that looked fresh off the lot. I waited in the hall for them with a bag of clothes over my shoulder, peeking out the window to give myself maximum time to worry about how well-dressed and sleek his parents were and how many embarrassing things my parents could think of to say to them.

But my parents were polite, perhaps terrified into it by how stern and efficient Will’s parents were. They both stood tall with backs poker-straight and business casual outfits looking like they’d just walked out of a catalog. I opened the door for them, and Will stepped in smoothly to introduce us.

“Mom, Dad. Connor.” He stepped into the doorway and threw his arm around me, pulling me into his chest. He’d had another growth spurt, and I was still waiting for mine, so I could fit under his armpit, and Will seemed to want to show this off as often as he could.

His mom was wearing gloves, smooth pale leather. She took one off before holding her hand out to me. “Connor,” she said. “Pleased to meet you at last.”

“Mrs. Flight,” I stammered. She was tall and dark with Will’s deep brown eyes. She wasn’t smiling. Her gaze flicked over me from head to toe then she raised an eyebrow meaningfully at Will.

Will’s dad wasn’t much friendlier. He smiled when he shook my hand, but it was a restrained smile, and it faded as he glanced between me and Will like he was trying to figure out how his son had come to be friends with me. Mr. Flight had his son’s delicate nose and sharp cheekbones. But neither of the Flight’s had anything like Will’s life and energy.

We drove through town and into the edge of the forest. Will’s parents asked me questions, about school and drumming and my plans for the future. I wanted so badly to impress them that I knew it was impossible, and of course that just made it worse. I got all shy and mumbled one-word answers into my lap, bunching my hands into anxious fists on my bag whenever they asked me to repeat myself. I was glad when the journey was over—even though that meant we were at Will’s house, which was intimidating, enormous and well-kept.

“So here’s our humble abode,” Will said. I figured he was being sarcastic: It was easily twice the size of mine.

“It’s huge.”

“Yeah, people tell me that all the time,” he laughed. “Come on, my room’s upstairs.”

We passed a living room that was half the size of my house. There were people in there, sitting in chairs and talking in low voices. Will took me in to introduce me to them. They were members of his extended family; two aunts, three uncles and a cousin. I recognized most of their faces from around town including a couple of store owners.

The room had sliding glass doors for an entire wall. Outside, the dusk forest was visible. There were photos everywhere, huge shots of trees and wildlife, which hung in simple pine frames like more windows out into the forest.

“What do you think?” Will called over his shoulder as he led us up the stairs.

“I feel like I’m inside a giant tree.”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “We’re real into nature.” He paused in front of the window on the stairs’ landing. Together we looked out at the trees gilded by the setting sun.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“I know.” Will grinned like the compliment on his house had been on something he personally made. “One day all of this will be mine.”

“Or Dave’s? Your brother’s older, right?” I didn’t know much about Will’s brother, just that he’d gone out of state.

“Yeah, he’s five years older. But I’ll get all the land.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because this is my home.” He shrugged. “Dave’s going to inherit money. He can travel or whatever. But I get the land. I’m going to live in Jagged Rock for the rest of my life.”

“You say that now, but maybe when you grow up—”

“Nope. These mountains are in my soul.” He thumped his chest dramatically. He was grinning, but he talked with even more confidence than usual. “I’ve always known exactly who I am and what I want. And it’s these mountains, all the way.”

I nodded, at a loss for how to reply to that. I couldn’t even imagine having that kind of certainty in my future. Maybe that only came with growing up in a small-town.

“The land we own is amazing,” Will went on. “We’ve got all these cabins in the forest. Officially, they’re for tourists and trappers and stuff, but practically no one uses them.”

“Because of the cold?”

“Pretty much,” he laughed. “People say that most of the year you’d have to be crazy to go up into the mountains. Which makes my family crazy, I guess, because there’s nothing more beautiful than the mountains in winter.” He tapped the window. “Folks in town say we’re crazy for having all the glass in this house, too.”

“It’s definitely beautiful,” I agreed. Inside, I was wondering if the people in town weren’t right about the Flights being crazy. The view was beautiful, yes, but the house was *cold*.

Will's room was under the roof so the whole ceiling slanted. There was a king-sized bed with crisp linens and blankets piled up at the foot and a huge wooden wardrobe like a Narnian entrance. There was a skylight set into the slanting roof, and a leather couch pushed so close to it that it was amazing Will could sit in it without knocking his head.

Most of the room was dedicated to wood projects. There was a workstation—benches lining one wall with wood scraps and tools on them, some big machinery which might have been a lathe and a few electrical saws, and racks of tools. There was wood all over the floor, from uncut logs to piles of carved sculptures. The smell of freshly cut wood permeated the room and reinforced the feeling that we were inside a forest.

“Wow,” I breathed.

“You don't like it?” Will was hovering anxiously beside me.

“No, I like it. It's just... You really like wood.”

“Yeah. I like to be always carving something. I used to whittle in class, but the teachers kept taking my knives off me.”

“Really?” The rack of tools looked like something from a torture chamber. I wondered how my mom would have reacted if one of her students had brought a knife like that to school. She'd have him arrested, probably.

I gestured toward one of the piles of carvings. “Do you mind if I look?”

“I'd love it. You can take some, if you want. Or I can carve you something.”

I got onto my knees to sift through the sculptures. Most of them were hand-sized or smaller. Animals, mostly. Some flower and leaf shapes. The proportions were good and the carving didn't look messy, but the wood felt rough. “These are great. You don't varnish them or anything?”

“Nah. I like to carve fallen wood from the forest and leave it as natural as possible. Help yourself to any you want.”

I picked out a fox the size of my finger. I held it up to show Will, but then I lost my train of thought completely. I'd just seen the back wall for the first time. I physically recoiled. “Whoa.”

“You don't like wolves?” Will asked hastily. “I'll take them down.”

“No, no,” I said quickly. “That's just a lot of wolves.”

There was the door we'd entered through and the rest of the wall was lined with unframed photographs of wolves, floor to ceiling. The photographs were so crisp and clear it was like there was no wall and I was just looking straight out into a snowy forest scene, lean trunks and fresh snow. And *wolves*. There had to be more than twenty. Wolves playing and wolves sleeping huddled together, wolves just standing around or facing into the camera.

"That's a lot of wolves," I said again. I could just faintly see joins between the photos but otherwise it was like a single panoramic shot of a forest, filled with wolves.

All the wolves were variations on gray, but I was amazed how much variation there was, pale gray to one nearly black. But there was one wolf that caught my eye. It was the only wolf with color, but that wasn't the reason it kept catching my eye. It was never looking straight at the camera but there was something about the way it held its head, or maybe something in its pose. It kept catching my attention so even if I looked where Will was pointing my eyes would still stray back to that one wolf. It was pale gray with a dark stripe down its back but reddish fur along its shoulders and legs. "I didn't know there were groups so large."

"Packs. There's not. It's actually seven wolves, just lots of photos superimposed together so each one's there three times. See?" He pointed to a wolf with a dark muzzle and a white teardrop shape under one eye. "Look at the mark on this one's mask. You can see it's the same wolf here, and here." He pointed out the wolf in different positions around the photo, lying flat on its belly or walking around with its head hunched down. "That's the omega. You know about wolf social structures?"

"A little. Omegas are the runts, and an alpha's the leader."

Will shook his head. "Omega's more about personality than size. The omega doesn't have to be weak, or small. This omega's actually bigger than the alpha, see? This one's the alpha." He walked along the wall, pointing out a wolf with dark fur.

"What about this one? It's my favorite." I pointed out the reddish wolf.

Will just looked at me for a few moments. Then a grin spread over his face. "That's my favorite too," he said. "It's the young alpha. It's going to grow into the head of the pack."

"How do they pick the leader?"

“No one picks the alpha, it’s all nature. Wolves all have natural tendencies, which you can tell from the moment they’re born. Alphas are obvious, they walk and hold their head in a certain way and they don’t take slack from anyone. You know they’ll have to lead the pack or leave to start their own pack somewhere else. With omegas you can guess but it’s not for certain, it’s more dependent on the social structure of the whole pack. With all the others—betas, anything else, the exact role is changed depending on the hierarchy of the pack. Like this one is close to the bottom of the ranking, but if he were in a different pack he might have been a beta.”

I looked at the wolf Will was pointing out in the photo. “How do you know so much?”

“I’ve spent a lot of time with the pack to get these photos.”

“You took these photos? How’d you get that close without them eating you?”

He grinned. “That’s good, you think they’re dangerous. You have to think that, if you’re going into the forest with them. Better careful than dinner.”

“Is this meant to make me want to go camping? I no longer want to leave this house.”

Will laughed. “You don’t have to worry. I’m serious. Wolves will prey on whatever’s the best to eat, and we make sure that’s not humans. You don’t have to worry about camping.” He leaned up against the door frame. “About the camping. I’ve got something to ask you.”

“Yeah?”

“I said we’d go camping with my parents, right?”

I nodded. I thought of the room full of people downstairs and wondered if I was going to be going on a trip with the entire Flight family.

But Will said, “How about we just take dirt bikes up to one of my family’s cabins? Just the two of us. There are cabins with working water and everything. I know you hate camping.”

“Are your parents okay with that?”

“Yeah. I kinda told them that’s what we’d be doing. I know, I should have asked you first.” He was looking guilty. “We can ask your parents, if you’re worried?”

“Please don’t ask my parents,” I laughed. “They’d say no. Real working water, you said?” It was getting darker outside, but the forest suddenly seemed a lot brighter.

“We can get totally wasted if you want, or eat junk food and play video games. Anything you feel like.”

“Have you done this before?”

“Gone up to the cabins? Of course! I practically live up there over the summer.”

“I mean, with someone else?”

“Just Dave. Never a friend.” He ducked his head and blinked rapidly at me, perhaps trying to make a show of coyly batting his eyelashes. “You’ll be my first.”

I looked away and focused on the wolf photos, my mouth too dry to form a reply. He was joking! I knew he was joking. The idea of us being together like *that* was a joke. It was just plain embarrassing to get so worked up over it.

“Hey, I’m just goofing around,” Will said—as if that weren’t painfully obvious. He rested a hand on my elbow. He was so tall and solid beside me. “We can do whatever you want. We can drive back into town if that makes you more comfortable, or hang out with my parents if that’s what you want. I’m open to anything, even board games. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot or anything.”

I laughed and shook my head. “It’s not that. The cabins sound great.” I stepped away from him, breaking the contact. Every time he touched me I was afraid he’d realize how much I liked being touched. He’d hug me or wrap an arm around me and it felt great, then I’d panic and have to pull away. He was touchy-feely with everyone, and I didn’t want to be the loser who took it personally. I didn’t want to lose our friendship because of my attraction to him.

To cover the awkward pause, I said, “I’ve never been on a dirt bike.”

“For real?” He laughed in delight. “I’ll show you after dinner. They’re easy to get used to.”

I helped Will lay the settings for dinner. His family seemed to have disappeared except one uncle who was staying for dinner.

Will’s uncle Bren had an icebox with steaks in it, lean and juicy and clearly not store-bought. He cooked them in pans on the stove, keeping an eye on them like a mother bird watching her chicks only with more sprinklings of seasoning.

Bren was the opposite of Will's parents—friendly and approachable, casually dressed in worn work clothes. He was even more out-of-place in the elegant house than I was. He told me he was a vet, but he also told me he'd killed the animals for the dinner, so I hoped he wasn't the kind of vet who only worked with cats and dogs.

The dining room table looked like a tree trunk sliced in half then polished, complete with tree rings and curving rough bark on the underside. Will sat beside me with Bren on the other side, the three of us facing Will's parents. As well as the steak, the table was spread with greens and boiled baby potatoes, multi-colored salads and a small dish of anonymous sliced meat. Will wiggled the plate as he was putting it down. "Like rabbit? Thumper's not everyone's favorite food."

"Rabbit's fine," I laughed.

Will's parents had disappeared into the bowels of the house but reappeared in time for dinner—dressed in different clothes, which was even more off-putting for me. The food was all delicious and there was a lot of it, but I didn't get the feeling the family was trying to show off for me.

"This food is amazing, thank you," I said.

"All fresh from the garden," Bren said happily. Bren's smile was almost like Will's—I could see the family resemblance there, even though he didn't have Will's cocky charm. "So Will tells us you want to be an architect?"

"That's correct."

"Are you planning on studying out of state?"

"I don't know, I haven't really thought about it yet. Probably, though. I've only been here three years."

"So Layton isn't home for you?"

That was an odd one. I chewed on a mouthful of steak while I figured out how to answer it. "As much as anywhere is, I suppose." I was leaning forward to talk to Bren, but I glanced at Will's parents. They were exchanging a look which I didn't like. But what was I supposed to say, how could I answer a question like that?

"Connor hasn't really been up in the mountains yet," Will said. He grinned at me and nudged my shoulder. "You just wait. You'll love it. You'll never want to leave."

“Yeah?”

Will's mother said, “Will's very attached to this land.”

I nodded. “I can see that.”

Will said suddenly, “Connor liked the photos in my room.”

“And the ones down here,” I added. “They're all beautiful.” The room we were sitting in had more wolves, half-lit shots of wolves baring their teeth or pulling apart carcasses. They were beautiful but terrifying. I kept my head down so I wouldn't be put off my meal. I was glad the photos in Will's room were of wolves at peace because these candid shots of predators were going to give me nightmares.

“You like wolves?” Will's father asked.

“I've never been close to one, only seen them when I've been out hunting.”

“But you've never shot one?” he asked sharply.

“Never. I wouldn't want to.” I shook my head, glad it was true because I didn't think I could lie and keep a straight face under their scrutiny.

Mrs. Flight said, “That's good. We're very pro-wolf in this household. We believe wolves have as much right to safety and survival as humans—if not more, because they're endangered and humans aren't.”

I nodded. What could I say to that?

“Our family has been very active in protecting wolves,” she pressed on. “You know it's illegal to hunt wolves in Jagged Rock Mountains? That's mostly thanks to the Flight family. We can consistently prove that the wolves are not a threat to humans or livestock. As they're also endangered, there hasn't been a wolf hunting license granted for this forest in the last ten years. Shooting's a terrible way to deal with overpopulation of wolves because it damages the essential social structure of the pack. They're intensely social animals.”

I nodded. At least now I understood where Will got his interest in wolves from.

After dinner, he led me outside and onto a trail between the trees. It was a short walk in the evening gloom before we reached an area of rocky ground where the trees were sparse. There was a shed and, inside, a series of mud-splattered two-wheel farm bikes. There were also lights all around the clearing,

bulbs in cages wired to the trees. When Will flicked a switch, the whole clearing lit up. He grinned at me, wheeling one of the bikes out. "Time for some practice."

It was fun, and much less scary than dinner with his parents. We started with brakes and moving slowly with my feet on the ground like learning to ride a push bike. After a couple of hours, I could confidently circle the clearing including a series of rocky ridges on the outskirts. Will was delighted, running around after me and making jokes.

We wheeled the bike back into the shed. Will's eyes glittered when he was excited, and it was so beautiful it was hard to look at, even though I treasured every glimpse. He tapped the handlebars of the bike. "Fun, right?"

"Yeah, it is."

"So you're feeling all right? I feel like you've been on edge tonight."

"I have," I admitted. "Your house is intimidating. Your parents, too."

"Yeah, they're scary. They're cool like me but without my nice gene, huh?" He leaned on the wall of the shed and crossed his arms. "Seriously, though. I think you're great. My parents are going to see that and they're going to love you like I do. And if they don't, then they don't deserve you. Just think of that and you'll be able to relax."

"I can't think like that, because I'm not a total narcissist like you," I laughed. But I filed his words away in my head to keep me warm on bad days. *They're going to love you like I do. And if they don't, they don't deserve you.* Who said that kind of stuff? "You sound like a Valentine's card."

"Yeah, except I mean what I say. Those cards will lie to you just to get your pants off. But I mean every word." He nudged me with his shoulder, wagging his eyebrows. "Come on, I've got to turn the lights off."

I left the shed, and Will killed the flood lamps. Darkness dropped onto the clearing so fast I wasn't sure my eyes were even open. I blinked rapidly, looking around, but I couldn't even see the silhouette of the shed behind me. I craned my head up to see the stars and the wisps of clouds, the spiky outlines of trees poking into the sky. For a moment, I imagined I was at the bottom of a deep pool, looking up at light from the depth of inky blackness.

There was a rustling, shuffling sound, and I jumped, spinning around, losing my bearings and balling my fists to face off against something I couldn't see coming at me from who-knew-where.

“Hey.” Will’s husky whisper was right in front of me. “It’s okay. It’s just me. I’m right here.”

His hand touched my elbow gently. I relaxed my fists and tried to release the tension from my shoulders. “I wasn’t scared.”

“Yeah? Looked like you were going to punch me out.”

“You might have been a bear or a psycho killer or something,” I muttered. I felt ashamed of my boxing reflex. Dad had sneaked up on me enough in the night as a “test” that I’d gotten used to being constantly ready to defend myself. I couldn’t believe that Will had been able to see that, though. My eyes were adjusting to the dark but not enough to see Will as more than a patch of darkness beside me. And he had been able to see my raised fists. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s good. Fighting instincts. Probably better to run than punch a bear, though.”

“I just don’t want to get lost.”

“Hey. You’re with me. You won’t get lost—I have an excellent sense of direction. Here.” He tugged at my elbow, and I let him guide me.

He led me back to his house, guiding me steadily on the path so I didn’t trip or walk into anything even though it was still cellar-dark. After a few yards, I gave up trying to see the path and I kept my eyes on the stars above. I was on the ocean floor, but I wasn’t alone; I had Will beside me, and it was just the two of us in the world.

Back at the house, I had the second turn taking a shower. I came out to find Will flopped on the end of his bed. He was sprawled shirtless on his back wearing a pair of long thermal underwear with one leg trailing on the ground. I would have had quite a view of his junk if he hadn’t also been wearing a pair of sweatpants over his long johns, the waistband low on his hips and the legs cut off and frayed around his thighs.

There weren’t many guys who could make track pants *or* long johns look cool. It was just my luck I was best friends with the guy who could rock both at once.

“Ready for bed?” he asked without looking up.

“Yeah. So we’re sharing or...?”

“I was going to sleep on the couch, but I’m cool with whatever you want.”

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

Will sat up, grinning at me. His chest was well-defined and a glowing creamy gold, completely hairless and blemish-free. I tried not to stare at his nipples or the V of his hips disappearing into his thermals.

He leaned forward, smirking at me from under his eyebrows. "Can I tell you a secret?"

I nodded mutely.

"I always sleep on the couch. It's what I do. I haven't even had sheets on that bed for months. Weird, right?"

"I've heard weirder things." Like kids telling their families to breed animals to feed to wolves?

"So I can sleep on the couch, no problem. Or the bed's big enough for two. Which would you prefer?"

Was that some kind of test? I busied myself with my bag so I wouldn't have to meet his eyes. Of course I wanted the bed. He was so physical all the time, I thought he'd probably be a hugger. I wanted to be pressed up against that perfect chest. But I wanted to be *held* and to feel safe and special. But how could I say that without admitting I was totally queer for him? He gave me so much attention and always seemed to want to be around me. That would all disappear if he found out I actually felt *that* way about him.

So I mumbled, "You can stay on the couch. If that's more comfortable for you."

"The electric blanket's on so it should be nice and toasty for you." He patted the bed then climbed off it. He dropped down onto the couch and immediately got up again, twisting around so he was sitting on the arm with his legs dangling over. "You ever have sleepovers when you were a kid?"

"No. My parents wouldn't allow it." Also I had no friends.

"I used to have Joseph and some of the other guys over all the time. It was great. The best part was telling scary stories."

"I hate scary stories. Sorry," I added.

Will grabbed the end of his couch and dragged the whole thing across the floor. It groaned and complained on the hardwood floor, and I actually closed my eyes to keep from seeing if it scratched the beautiful floor. He pushed it up against the wall so it was within an arm's reach of my bed, then he sat down facing me and leaned forward. "Come on. You don't like monsters?"

“Is it okay if I say no?”

“Of course.”

“Then no. I hate monsters. I’m kind of still afraid of them. Those photos in the dining room will probably give me nightmares, and if I think about it too much I’m going to be scared that there’s a pack of wolves under the bed who’ll bite my ankles the moment I put my feet on the floor.”

Will was silent long enough that I thought I’d pushed things too far and confessed one embarrassing secret too many. Finally he said, “I didn’t know that.”

“Army dad didn’t help much,” I admitted. “He used to burst into my room at night and punch me awake as a training exercise.”

“What an ass. Now I wish I’d yelled at him harder. Look, I promise I won’t punch you while you’re sleeping, okay? Ever.”

“You’re a good friend,” I laughed.

“I know.” After a few minutes he asked, “So you really don’t know what you’re doing when you finish school?”

“I really don’t. My parents want such different things for me, and I don’t want to just be their puppet. But I don’t even know what I want for myself.”

“Architecture, and drumming,” Will said decisively. “Those are the things you love, so that’s your life. The rest is just details.”

“Like colleges and jobs? Those are pretty big details,” I laughed.

“Just details,” he repeated.

I grinned. It was a little weird how he seemed to know exactly what he wanted from life. But even though it was weird, I was jealous. “I wish I had your confidence. I hate being shy.” In the darkness, I felt anonymous. I said without thinking, “Sometimes I worry that I’m going to miss out on something great because I was too shy to take a risk.”

“Like leaving to go to college?”

“Yeah.” That wasn’t what I meant at all. I cared less about college than I did about my impossible crush.

“What if I was with you?”

“What?” My heart skipped a beat as I tried to figure out what he was offering.

“I’ve got confidence for both of us. What if I do stuff with you? Apply for colleges, move, whatever. You won’t have to be shy because you’ll have me there with you.”

“I thought you wanted to stay here?”

“I do. This is my home. But it won’t hurt to leave for a while. That’s what friends are for, right? How’s that sound?”

I bit my lip. “Pretty good, actually.”

“Then it’s a deal. Wherever you go, I go too.”

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Chapter Three

The next day Will outfitted me in one of his brother's old leather jackets and rubber pants and helmet. The jacket and helmet fit, but the pants were so comically large that I started picturing Will's brother as Slenderman. Then I realized that I didn't have any idea what Dave looked like because, for all the photos hung in the house, there were none of the Flight family. I guess Will wasn't kidding when he said wildlife was their life.

Will told me the cabin we were going to was one of the most accessible. After an hour and a half on the dirt bike on bumpy roads, my kidneys were mush, and my arms felt like they were made of rubber, and I dreaded finding out what an inaccessible cabin was.

I changed my tune when I actually saw the cabin. I swung around a bend to find Will parked, and I stopped beside him, concentrating on braking correctly and not slipping on the icy path. It was only then that I looked up and actually took in my surroundings. We were stopped on a flat patch of land just above a gorgeous old-fashioned log house. It was set on sloping land, in a snow-covered circle surrounded by trees. It looked like a postcard.

"It's like a gingerbread castle, right?" Will said. He'd pulled his helmet off, and he looked artistically tousled.

I took my helmet off as well, suspecting I looked like a porcupine. For the first time, I was glad of the embarrassing military cut my dad insisted on—less hair meant less hat hair. "It's amazing. We get to stay here?"

"Yep. See why I love it?"

We stored the bikes in a covered shed beside the road, and Will led the way to the cabin. There was a wooden porch running around the front and both sides, covered to keep the worst of the snow out. I could imagine it being like a paradise in the summer, here in the silence of the trees. Right now the cabin looked lonely and isolated, dark and abandoned.

The snow was pristine except for animal tracks—rabbit and fox. Will pointed out a broad expanse of clear snow between us and the porch. "I always think snow like that is tailor-made for me, you know?"

I started laughing. "No, I don't know, you narcissist. What do you want a patch of snow for?"

He winked and lowered his helmet and pack to the ground. The next moment he made a running dive and slid face-first in the snow, leaving a long trail behind him like the wake behind a boat. He rolled over onto his back, laughing. "My snow!"

"You're crazy!" But I followed him, shrugging off my gear and diving into the snow. It wasn't as deep as I wanted, and I landed hard and got winded, but wasn't hurt.

"Our snow!" Will called in delight. "No one else has ever touched this snow but us. We're pioneers!"

I watched Will happily burying his face in the snow, shaking his head like an excited dog. I couldn't help laughing "Snow's water so at some point all of this has probably been someone's pee," I said.

Will spat out a mouthful. "Oh man, thanks for the visual."

"You're welcome," I laughed. I balled up a handful, clumsy in my biking gloves, and threw it gently at Will's face.

He ducked into the snow and came up laughing but covered in more snow than if I'd managed to hit him. "Oh, is that a challenge?" he roared. He started forming a ball, but I was already ready with another of my own.

Playing around evolved into full-scale war then back into messing around. By the time we dragged our packs onto the cabin porch, there wasn't an inch of pristine snow anymore. We'd managed to turn the scenic getaway into a cabin alone in a sea of trampled slush. It was totally worth it.

Inside the cabin was a single room, a wood-burning stove equipped with an array of pots and pans, shelves of non-perishables, two beds and a table. The rest of the space was filled with book shelves. There were board games and wooden carvings on the shelves, but otherwise it was all books. "I hadn't realized there'd be so much reading material," I said, scanning the shelves. Mostly non-fiction, some classic novels.

"I knew you'd like that." Will was on his hands and knees, feeding kindling into the stove. "I've just got to grab some firewood. I'll be right back."

"Do you want a hand?"

"Nah, there's a pile around back. You make yourself at home."

I did, settling onto one of the beds with a thick scrapbook filled with handwritten notes and newspaper clippings about the forest. I got so absorbed in reading that I hardly noticed when Will came back in.

When the stove was lit and the door was closed, the cabin warmed up. Will bustled about unpacking both our bags, lining things up at the end of the beds and beating the blankets. After a while it was actually quite cozy. He brought me a mug of caramel-sweetened cocoa. "If you want to take your jacket off I can bring you a shrug my cousin knitted? Really warm."

I sipped the sweet creamy drink and laid my book down. "I'm sorry, I've just been sitting here reading. I'm a terrible guest."

"This is more or less what I planned, actually," he laughed. He laid on his back at the foot of my bed, crossing his arms behind his head to stare up at the ceiling slats. "I reckon you need a break. I'll make us some bacon and eggs on toast then later we can walk down to the lakes. How does that sound?"

"More or less like heaven," I laughed. I tapped the cover of my book. "Who left all of these here?"

"Tourists or travelers. Before that, generations of Flights. This one's been here over a hundred years."

"I know, I read that." The scrapbook had been very interesting. "There are trails lined with cabins like this one, all through the forest." There was a map, with our cabin circled in pen. The forest was vast and our cabin was so small.

"Yep. It's amazing. We can follow one of those trails, if you want. Or all of them, make a project of it. One of my cousins hikes every trail every year, it takes all his spare time but he loves it. He's a real arrogant snot telling everyone about it, too," he added thoughtfully.

"I'll think about it," I laughed.

Later that day, we bundled up warm and locked the cabin to head out into the cold. I was terrified of getting lost, but Will showed me the GPS unit and compass on his phone, plus the series of markers nailed to trees along the paths. We followed a narrow track winding down between trees to lead us in a circle around two small lakes, frozen-over but still pretty. We were high enough in the mountains that the views glimpsed through occasional gaps were breathtaking.

The views were nothing on Will's excitement. From the moment we left the cabin, he was like a new puppy, running backward and forward and skipping, running up to trees to try and barrel roll off their trunks, stopping to make snow angels or snowballs. He was truly delighted to be out in the mountain air and his joy was infectious. I found myself laughing and playing along, feeling like a

kid again as I thought about absolutely nothing but the next snowball or next small adventure.

At nightfall, we sat out on the porch on wooden chairs with worn and faded cushions. I curled up with a book on log cabins. Will had his legs up on the porch railing as he whittled away at a small piece of wood. He hummed while he worked, and when I glanced up at him after a while, he stopped. "Sorry. I can't seem to shut up. Is that annoying you?"

"No. You hum well."

"Anyone can hum well, it's humming," he laughed.

"Not everyone can hum that well. You can hold a tune."

"I'll trust you if you tell me I'm talented, you're a musician," he said with a wink. "I'll tell you what though—I've always thought I could be a singer."

"Yeah?" He had the attitude for it, that was sure.

"Wanna hear?"

"Of course!"

Will didn't stop whittling as he burst into song, belting out the chorus to a pop hit. His voice was actually really good. I'd always liked the sound of his voice when he talked, even though he had that Minnesota nearly-Canadian accent. But when he sang his voice reached right into my soul. I couldn't help bursting out, "You're really great!"

"Not good enough," he said with a shrug. "If I was really good you'd sing along."

"I don't sing."

"Really? What about now?" He burst into another song. I laughed but shook my head and didn't join in.

Will kept trying, picking songs like a juke box of radio hits. His voice was clear and beautiful in the chill forest air.

When the wolves started howling, I nearly thought they were singing with him. At the first howl, I sat up, grabbing the arms of my chair and looking around. "That sounds really close."

"It is close. We're safe though," he added quickly. "That's that pack I took photos of, the ones in my bedroom? This is their territory."

I'd heard the howl in the mountains before but not this close. It seemed to reverberate through the forest, voices picking it up or dropping it. It was coming from all around us. I sat very still and listened.

"You want to hear something really cool?" Will asked quietly. When I nodded, he put down his knife and wood and leaned over the railings. He tilted his head toward the moon and let loose a howl that blended beautifully with the one to our right. There was a silence and Will did it again, then another silence and the howl picked up on our right again. "They're close," he repeated. "And coming closer. Just past that first lake, I think."

"Were you really communicating with them, or just singing without words?"

"Kind of both," Will laughed. "You pick stuff up when you're around them all the time. For the record, you're not meant to do what I just did. You can confuse the wolves. But I know what I'm doing, and I'm good."

I smiled at Will's usual confidence, but I couldn't deny that I was impressed. "Could you tell them to come here? Your wolf pack, I mean. The ones from your photos."

"You want to meet them?" Will was as excited as he'd been on the trail earlier, his eyes getting wide and his whole body vibrating with excitement.

"Well, you said they're safe right? Of course I'd love to meet them."

"Cool!" Will leaned well over the railing and let out another howl. I wondered if he leaned over the railing to try and protect my ears from the sound—it was loud. He paused and listened as a howl went up beside us again, voices twining together. Then he nodded at me. "They're coming."

I nodded, feeling a thrill of either excitement or fear.

"You want me to teach you?"

"I've done wolf howls at school and stuff."

"Not real ones though, not like I have," Will stepped closer, grinning mischievously at me while the bare bulb gave him a halo. "I'll teach you a special howl, just for you."

"All right then."

Will had me stand up and start quietly, tilting my head all the way back and relaxing my vocal cords. I thought he'd just been messing around, but he took it very seriously, making me do it again and again to give minute changes in pitch.

“It’s like learning another language,” he said, leaning close to concentrate. “You have to get it just right or you’ll get laughed at.”

“Only I won’t be laughed at, I’ll be eaten,” I joked.

Will looked grim, taking it seriously. “I’m teaching you to say that you’re my friend and you’re not here to hurt anyone. If you do it right, you’ll have wolves for friends. They can guide you back to the path if you ever get lost. That’s if you’re here alone. If you’re here with me you won’t ever be lost, and if we get separated I’ll find you.”

I practiced until Will was satisfied with my pitch. Then he made me do it louder, and louder. “Come on, you’re talking to all the wolves around. And there’s a lot of empty space between them and you’ve got to be louder than all the sounds of prey in the night. Think of yourself as a king talking to his subjects.”

“I can’t even imagine that,” I said. Then I laughed at how scratchy my voice came out. “You’ve worn me out.”

“Yeah. But I got to hear you sing.” He smiled gently. I leaned on the railing beside him and grinned like an idiot. The howl was kind of like a song. A loud, painful song. He nudged my shoulder. “You remember that howl. It will bring you help. You won’t ever have to be worried about being lost, or injured, or alone in this forest.”

“You said I’m telling the wolves I’m your friend?”

Will hesitated for just a moment. “Yeah.”

“Why would they care?”

“Pack thing. Social structure is a really important part of the howl.”

“But I mean, is it like all the wolves would know you or something? Like you’re their friend?”

“I am. And I can prove it. Look.” He nodded over my shoulder.

The light from the cabin cast a semicircle on the churned snow but beyond that the forest was gloomy. To my right, a pair of wolves was standing just within the range of the light. “Wow,” I breathed.

“Yeah,” Will said. “They’re beautiful. The deer are beautiful in this forest, and the foxes, even the rabbits have extreme grace. But there’s nothing like a wolf.”

“This is your pack?” I tried to recognize them from the pictures but wolves more or less looked like wolves. I hazarded a guess based on mask color. “That’s the alpha?”

“That’s right. And her mate.” Will looked chuffed. “You want to meet them?”

“Sure.”

I had no idea what I was agreeing to. But as soon as I said it, the wolves came forward into the light as if they could understand what we were saying.

I gasped. “They’re huge. I didn’t know they’d be that big. I thought they’d be like dogs, not bears.”

“Yeah, these ones are actually big for wolves. Like how some breeds of dog are bigger than others?”

“Then these are Saint Bernard wolves,” I mumbled. “Built for the snow and the size of ponies.”

Will wrapped his arm around my waist so his chest was against my shoulder. “You’re safe,” he whispered into my hair.

The wolves came right up to the railing. They really were huge. Their fur was glossy and clean and their yellow eyes were wise and cold. “Beautiful.”

“You should tilt your head to the side,” Will said. His voice was low, and I felt it rumbling in his chest, vibrating down my back. I shivered. “Show them your neck. It’s a sign of respect.”

“I’ll show them respect when they earn it,” I whispered. Will wasn’t showing off his neck, it sounded less like respect and more like submission. I didn’t want to make myself one step closer to lunch meat.

“They earn it by being giant predators with sharp teeth.” But Will sounded amused.

I kept my eyes fixed on the wolf closest to me, the alpha with her dark fur. I could reach out and touch her, she was that close. “I know how to fight,” I said in bravado.

“You hear that?” Will laughed. “Connor’s not afraid of you.”

As if on cue, the alpha rose up and put her front paws on the railing in front of me. Stretched out like that I thought she was easily the same height as me if we’d both been standing on the ground. As it was, I was looking down into her

mouth. And she bared her fangs, letting out a low growl. There were pieces of raw meat caught in her teeth.

I took an involuntary step back, and Will's arm tightened around me. "You're safe," he whispered. "We could go inside?"

"I'm fine." I kept my eyes on the wolf and, feeling like an idiot, twisted my head and tilted my shoulder down so the length of my neck was bared. *Please don't think I look tasty, please don't think I look tasty...* Even facing the threat of the Saint Bernard wolves my thoughts were still on Will's chest, strong and firm against the back of my head, and how his arm around me felt like armor keeping me safe.

The wolf dropped back onto the snow, letting out a snort that sounded smug.

Will squeezed me. "You're very brave. You want to touch them?"

"If you do." I couldn't very well say no right after he'd told me how brave I was.

Will let me go and dropped to his knees. He leaned under the railing and held out a hand. The wolf that wasn't the alpha came right up to us, leaning against the patio so Will could scratch behind its ears.

"I can't believe you're doing that."

"It feels nice. He likes it. See?" The wolf's eyes were lazily half-closed. "Like having a back rub."

I knelt beside him and touched the wolf's back, fingers trembling. Will coaxed me, "That's right." He put his hand over mine and guided my fingers to a spot low on the wolf's neck where a collar would have been on a dog. I scratched at it and the wolf let out a low groan and leaned closer like he was trying to wiggle up the side of the porch.

"They're so huge," I whispered again. "Where are the rest of the pack? That pretty red one? Are they here?"

"I can't hear them. This one's the alpha's mate. When the alpha picks a mate it's made top of the social chain like the alpha. The alpha pair are almost always the only ones in the pack who are allowed to mate. I've always thought that seemed kind of cruel, all the others miss out on love because they weren't born alpha or picked by the alpha."

"That's just nature," I said. "Besides, I'd rather be a wolf than a bee. Only one out of millions gets to mate. I don't like those odds."

“You’re right, I never thought of that,” Will laughed. He looked at me as we squatted there on the porch in front of a pair of wolves. “You’re happy?”

“Really happy,” I agreed. “If tomorrow’s the same as today I’ll be sold on this forest.”

He grinned, cocky and gorgeous. “Tomorrow will be better than today. I’ll make sure of it.”

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Chapter Four

Will

Werewolves came of age at fifteen, and it was traditional that they took a year off to do anything they wanted. The idea was it shaped the kind of werewolf you'd grow into, and gave you a chance to explore your interests. Like my brother Dave had left for California to explore his love of tattooing and not freezing his ass off, and hadn't looked back after his year was up. And my mom had chosen to spend her year leading my grandparents' pack and two years later they'd handed the reins over to her.

I wanted to bite Connor and spend a year rolling around in the snow with him as a wolf and in the bed with him as a human. But I didn't think he was ready for that—he was living in the shadow of his parents, still shy and scared like a wounded puppy. I didn't think he was ready to find out about werewolves. I'd tested him out, introducing him to my parents in wolf form and talking to him a bit about wolves. He obviously liked wolves. And when he'd seen pictures of me in my wolf form, standing out with my reddish fur, he seemed to like it. But liking wolves wasn't the same as liking werewolves so I didn't want to push things.

Then there was the fact that I wanted him as more than a friend. All around us, the kids at school were getting interested in sex, but Connor just kept his eyes on his text books and played his drums. I hadn't seen him show an interest in anyone, guy or girl; though I was half-convinced that was because the options in our town was too country bumpkin for his out-of-state tastes. I'd looked at myself in the mirror enough to figure that I could charm the pants off anyone, even a straight guy. But I couldn't even think about making a move on Connor until I knew he was good and ready.

So for my fifteenth year, I gave into my other interest—wolves. I kept going to school and track meets because I wanted to be around Connor, but at night and on the weekends I ran with the wolves. Werewolves are species punks who stick to their own and don't integrate with humans or wolves. I didn't know much about wolves beyond where they overlapped with werewolves or what a hunter would know.

But that year I ran with the wolves. I started with the territory nearest my house and got to know that pack, their habits and personalities and social structure, their wants and needs. Then I moved on to the next territory, and the

next. I memorized the wolves and learned to hear their voices on the howl so I could talk to them as easily as talking to a person on the phone. I got to know wolves.

I'd always been passionate about maintaining a healthy wolf population in the mountains. A large part of that was keeping wolves and humans apart. Territories near the edge of the forest were most risky because humans lived and kept cattle there. I talked to those wolves about avoiding livestock and even went as far as to introduce them to the local guard dogs and try to open communication between them. I figured if wolves understood the importance of staying away from certain areas or eating certain animals, and if they knew where those animals and areas were, I could keep them from getting hurt.

I'd always been skilled at picking up on emotions, but out there in the deep forest of Jagged Rock Mountains I honed my senses. I practiced on wolves and at night, when that week's wolf pack slept around me, I practiced on the forest. I listened to all the creatures and insects and the movements of the trees and snow. I reached out farther and farther away from myself until it was like my senses were a map of the world around me, as big and real as the world itself.

I practiced on Connor, too. I learned to sense the tiniest shift toward sadness like the smell before rain so I could always keep him happy. I learned exactly how much I could give in to my need to touch him. I could nudge his shoulder or ruffle his hair, rest a hand on his arm or hug him and he'd let out waves of comfort and happiness. But if I pushed things too far it was like he was shutting down and he'd send out alarm bells of fear and anxiety that hurt my stomach. I thought it was probably to do with his parents who kept him at arm's distance so he hadn't grown up being physical like I had. But whatever the cause, I wasn't going to push it.

The worst part of that year was the summer holidays. Connor's parents went out of state and insisted on taking him with them, even when I got my parents to join in on begging him to stay with us. It was three months of loneliness and aching longing. I'd fall asleep with him on the phone just to hear the sound of his breathing. We emailed and even old-fashioned snail mail. Connor updated me with the new bands he was enjoying—branching out from jazz to listen to country and rap and metal, racing through musical genres. I'd listen to every song he sent me and we'd often listen together, laughing and commenting like we were sitting around a CD player together even though we were many miles apart. He'd show me what he was learning on the drums and sometimes, when he was at his happiest and didn't think I was listening too closely, he'd sing along with me.

I knew he was my mate. I didn't know how mates worked, how all that "coincidence so huge it looked like fate" stuff worked. But in those long months, when I wanted nothing more than Connor running beside me, it didn't feel like some outside force pushing us together. It felt like I was in love and wouldn't be happy until the love of my life was back in my life.

I took my dad's advice and talked to my uncle Bren about mates. Bren worked as a vet and lived on a farm with some more of my family. I rode up there one day and found him in the horse paddock. "Got time to talk?" I asked. "My dad said you knew a lot about mating bonds."

His smile faded a little. "I do know a lot. You want to know how to do it?"

"I pretty much just bite my mate, right? And it has to be at the full moon? Then he'll feel the bond?"

"Pretty much. You're an alpha's kid so your bite can turn humans into werewolves. Is that all you wanted to know?"

I shook my head. "I can follow you, and we can talk while you work, if that's okay? I can ride a horse."

He nodded. I helped him saddle up two of the horses, and we set out across the paddocks. As we rode he said, "You want to claim Connor."

"Yes. What do you think of him?"

"You really want to know?" Bren was genuinely surprised.

"Of course. That's why I asked."

He shook his head slowly. "If you don't mind me saying, that is not something your mom would ever ask me. You're one weird alpha."

I snorted. "You're omega. Does that mean your opinion doesn't matter?"

"It kinda does." Bren was still looking at me sideways. "You're unusually sensitive for an alpha."

I recoiled. "You mean weak?"

"No, no." He held out a soothing hand. "I mean empathetic. You're caring. I've heard it on the howl—the wolves talk about you treating them well."

"Because I'm a werewolf. Looking after wolves is one of our duties, right? We're protectors."

"I agree. But not everyone thinks so." Bren shook his head slowly. "The wolves like you a lot."

“You still haven’t told me what you think of Connor.” I was going to claim him no matter what; he was my mate. But I wanted a werewolf to tell me what they thought of him—my parents’ cold disinterest didn’t help.

“I like him a lot. I’m not just saying that. He’s clever and quick. He seems shy but he’s not a pushover. He talks you down, which is frankly amazing. I’ve seen how you’ve changed since you met him so I know he’s great for you.”

I smiled with delight. “You think so?”

But Bren wasn’t smiling. “I just don’t know if you’re good for him.”

“What do you mean? I know his life has gotten better since we met. I’m like a guardian angel.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Bren said quickly. Then he sighed. “You know what the mating bond is?”

“It’s a connection between werewolves. It ties them together forever, like marriage but more so. Their power is united.”

“Yeah. But it’s also like a love potion. You can’t fight it.”

“I wouldn’t want to.”

“But Connor might.” Bren dismounted to walk along a fence, and I kept pace with him from my horse. “Are you sure you want to hear this?”

“I do.”

“Right now he’s a human. He can’t feel the mating bond. But the moment you bite him it’s going to take him over, like a drug. It will wipe out any of his human emotions that contradict it. Say he hates your guts, that’s going to disappear the moment you bite him. Or if he’s in love with someone else, or if he’s straight, or if he’s not interested in settling down—that will all disappear. He’ll be joined to you, forever. Is that something you’re okay with?”

“Oh.” I’d never thought of it like that. I felt sick.

“What does he want to do in the future? College, a career?”

“Maybe college. I told him we’d do whatever he wanted after we finished school.”

“Forget it. His plans will disappear, he’ll just want to be your mate. Does he want to travel?”

“I don’t know.” I didn’t, so it didn’t occur to me anyone else would. “Maybe.”

“He can’t. He’s tied to this town forever.”

I blinked. I felt dizzy, as much from the abrupt way the usually calm Bren was talking as from the words themselves. Mom had talked about how important it was that my mate love Layton and Jagged Rock, but I hadn’t realized this was what she was getting at. I’d be tying him to one place forever?

“The mating bond is a love potion, and it’s also a collar and a leash,” Bren went on. “When you bite your mate you’ll link him to your pack and your territory as well as to you.”

“I didn’t realize.”

“I know. I know you didn’t. That’s the only way that someone as nice as you could be grinning at the idea of biting his mate.”

I grimaced. Because I still wanted to. My teeth itched for the feel of his skin, and I couldn’t erase the idea that it would be heavenly to spend a life beside him at any cost. What kind of monster did that make me?

“What are you going to do?” Bren asked quietly.

“Not bite him. Of course not. If biting him means forcing him to love me against his will I’d...” I fought against the nausea in my stomach. “I’d rather die.”

“The mating bond isn’t love, it’s a connection. An alpha and the person who best suits that alpha, uniting to make a strong team. Your mate will be tied to you but that doesn’t mean he’ll love you.”

“That’s even worse, isn’t it? Like being married to someone you don’t love?”

“No matter what, it will be good for you in the long term. That’s what a mate is for—to make you stronger and a more effective leader. They’re your mate because they’re good for you.”

“But what about him? I hoped... I mean, I love him.” The confession felt huge now. “I thought the mating bond would, you know, make him think better of me. A little. Like a soft focus lens in the movies. I’d look more appealing but it’s not like he wouldn’t have a choice...” I trailed off. I guess I hadn’t thought this through. I’d always just known that’s what you did: You found your mate and you mated with them. Bam. I was used to the idea of werewolves mating, both of them feeling the connection and knowing what they were getting into. “You’re making biting sound like a curse, like I’ll take away a big part of him.”

“It’s not a curse,” Bren said quietly. “But it is a life change. And for you it’s a responsibility. If you bite someone they’re tied to you. Under your command, and tied to your pack and your territory. Forever. With Connor it’s just worse because he’ll feel the mating bond when he’s bitten.”

I touched my mouth absently. All the little weapons I was carrying around with me and never thought about.

“I’m not trying to scare you,” Bren said. “I just want you to know all the facts before you make any decision. You will change Connor, you’ll become a part of him when you bite him. Think long and hard and decide what your conscience can handle. For the sake of being a good leader, are you willing to change your mate forever? But remember there are upsides. Longer life. Strength and agility. No sickness, healing from all wounds. I’ve spoken to a few turned werewolves and they’ve all told me there’s a sense of purpose that comes with the bite, like contentment with your place in the universe that they never had as humans.”

“But he’ll be tied to me forever, whether he wants to be or not. Pretty big downside.”

“That’s your call. The bond won’t make him love you but it will probably make him want to.”

My vision of running through the forest with a Connor-wolf faded. A future together, gone. Those dreams were ugly and pointless if they meant Connor didn’t get any other future or any other dreams.

I thought about my urge to bite him, the nights I’d spent chomping down on a stick or my pillow just to make my teeth hurt less. There were times when my lips had brushed Connor’s neck and I’d obsessed over those. Standing behind him at tennis practice and guiding him with my hands around his body. Hugging him after he won the best in the academic year and holding on a little longer because he was trembling at having to go alone on stage. That prank I’d played on one of our school friends, hiding in a cupboard and only realizing too late that I had to crush up chest-to-chest with Connor, nowhere to go and nowhere to put my face but the crook of his neck.

The memories were carved into my mind like grooves on a record and I played them just as easily, over and over the moment I was alone. I wanted to bite him.

And *this* was what I’d been fantasizing about? My bite would be like paint, pouring over Connor and hiding all his hopes and dreams so all he had left was me. “I can’t do that to Connor. Mess with him like that. What do I do?”

“That’s up to you.”

“You don’t think I should bite him?”

Bren sighed. “I kind of wish I hadn’t told you anything. I think you shouldn’t have asked. Because then you could have just bitten him and been happy.”

“What happens if I don’t bite him? We can still be friends.”

“It will make you weaker. You’re pouring energy into the bond and, until you claim your mate, you’re not getting anything back. If you don’t claim him you’ll be worse off than if you’d never found your mate at all.”

I didn’t care if I was weakened, there was only one thing I cared about. “But what about Connor?”

“Maybe you can be friends. Maybe it will drive you mad.” Bren climbed back onto his horse. He looked down at me as he said, “But I think no one understands the mating bond, not really. I don’t think it can be stopped. Even if your mate doesn’t feel it like you do, I think he’ll feel *something*. The world has pulled you together, and it’s not going to let you off that easily.”

We were silent as we rode for a few minutes. I was feeling sick and shaky. I wanted to get back into the mountains. I wanted to move back in time, back to when I’d just been excited about claiming my mate. But even that word made Connor sound like he was just an add-on or a sidekick and that wasn’t right at all.

“It’s not my choice to make, is it?” I asked.

“It’s your decision if you bite him or not.”

“I think it’s up to Connor. I’ll let him decide. When we’re older, and I’ve told him everything, I’ll keep Connor safe and happy until he’s ready, then I’ll tell him about werewolves. Maybe when he’s eighteen. When he knows, he can decide for himself.”

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Chapter Five

Connor

When I was fifteen, I spent the summer holidays out of state. Mom was going to a big teacher's conference so Dad took the time off too, and they dragged me along. Dad spent days or weeks at a time meeting up with his old army buddies, getting trashed and angry. I'd sat alone in a hotel room day in and day out, going quietly crazy.

I practiced my drums and I sketched, I went online and read books. The same things I'd always done in my spare time. But I missed Will so badly that, for the first time in my life, I wished the holidays would end so I could get back to school. He called me every night and wrote me emails and letters, but I still couldn't get enough. I wanted him there beside me, even if we weren't talking, just to be there with his cocky smile and an arm around my shoulders.

I was a lovesick idiot, and I tried to hate it, tried to tell myself it wasn't healthy to think so much about someone else when I could have been focusing on my hobbies. But I didn't hate it. It felt great to pine over Will.

Being in love was awesome. I still got to do all the things I enjoyed, I didn't lose any of my ambitions or my hobbies, but I got to share them with Will. He was always listening and always interested, the best friend I'd dreamed of but never thought was real.

I thought of him every time I found a cool new band online or read a funny story or found out an interesting piece of information. I was constantly excited thinking about sharing things with Will. I practiced phrasing in my head until my anecdotes were witty and polished, so by the time I was on the phone with Will, I was guaranteed to make him laugh.

It was weird, but in those long months alone I actually felt myself becoming less shy. I felt more comfortable in my own skin, and I opened up to Will more and told him my boring little embarrassing secrets. I introduced him to Led Zeppelin and got to laugh at his excitement, and then got to listen to his crooning Robert Plant impressions. I was so totally in love with Will, I couldn't deny it. I knew I would have to spend the rest of my life hiding it, but for those three months when he couldn't see my face I could let myself indulge in stupid happy smiles whenever I heard his voice.

And, with my crazy teen libido, I'd sometimes touch myself when he was talking. He had this dirty laugh that sent my pulse through the roof. I'd turn the lights off and lie in bed while he told me about Layton and the Jagged Rock Mountains and the wolves which he was studying over the holidays. He was so passionate when he talked about his hometown. I'd close my eyes as his voice got hoarse from talking, imagining his lips on my skin or that sexy rough laugh as he whispered impossibly dirty things to me.

I was nervous on the first day back at school. All my newfound confidence wilted as I approached the big school building in my ugly sack uniform. What if those months of talking hadn't meant anything to him? What if he was just talking to me because he was bored? I knew I had to hide how in love with him I was and that he wouldn't feel *that* way about me. But what if he didn't even acknowledge me at all?

I was outside the main doors when I heard running footsteps. Will threw himself in front of me, grinning hugely with his bag barely hanging onto one shoulder. "Connor! Give me a hug?"

I opened my arms, and he grabbed me tight. He was laughing as he lifted me off the ground and spun me around. I hoped my mom had driven away and wouldn't see this. I hoped the whole world would see this.

"I missed you so much!" He cried. "You can't imagine." He smelled of warm wood chips and varnish, and his hair was soft on my face despite all the product he must put into it. In a daze, I thought of how strong he was, how effortlessly strong.

He was still grinning like an idiot when he lowered me to the ground and looked me over. I felt self-conscious in the same clothes as last year when he was all new and shiny looking. I tugged at the hem of my uniform polo and prayed my shorts would cover any reaction to the heat and strength of his body against mine.

He was even more handsome than I'd remembered, his skin sun-kissed and his eyes a deep, laughing brown. He was taller and broader, his arms firm and his waist tight and narrow in his shirt which seemed tailored for him like he was the model showing us how to wear the uniform that looked like old sacks on the rest of us.

"You've grown tall," he crowed.

"You have," I mumbled. I could feel myself blushing, and I tugged my shirt down again. People were staring at us as they walked past, but Will didn't seem to care.

“I’ve brought you something,” he said, shrugging off his bag. His shirt pulled tight over his wide shoulders and shaped pecs. What had he been doing, pumping weights all holiday? He looked amazing. I had to keep blinking to keep myself grounded. Months apart had convinced me that I’d imagined Will’s good looks. Letters and endless phone calls had not prepared me for how huge and warm and *close* he was.

He gave me a square package of waxy butcher’s paper, carefully wrapped and with a string bow on top. “I watched videos on how to tie that bow,” Will laughed. He loomed over me to watch as I opened the present. “Took me *hours*.”

“It’s amazing. You shouldn’t have.” My hands were trembling, and my cheeks felt hot. “I didn’t get you anything.”

Inside the present was a framed photograph of a wolf in the snow. I noticed the dark wood frame didn’t have any seams—maybe he’d carved it himself out of solid wood? Then my eyes went to the wolf. Its gray fur had hints of red, dramatic against the white backdrop. Its head was thrown back in a howl. “It’s beautiful,” I breathed. “You took this?”

“Just for you.”

“It’s that wolf I like. You remembered.” Maybe it would have been hokey and ‘90s if he’d bought it in a shop. But I couldn’t imagine anything cooler than taking a photo of a wolf howling.

“Yeah.” Will looked as delighted as if I was the one who gave *him* a gift. He pulled me into a one-armed hug and looked right in my face as he said, “I missed you, Con.”

“Me too,” I mumbled. I couldn’t look into his eyes any longer, and I focused on the calloused woodworker’s hand hanging casually at his side while the other burned a hole in my shoulder. I wondered how long it would be before I got used to him again and could stop feeling awkward and clumsy and shy.

It took three weeks, I found out. Three weeks of stuttering and tripping over my feet and forgetting what I was saying whenever Will smiled at me. On the plus side, I was like that around everyone so Will didn’t notice that he made me especially nervous.

The confidence I’d found over the holidays started coming back over the weeks. I’d had Will as a friend for years but after those holidays apart he became an even better friend. He was always beside me and cheering me up or making me laugh.

The only downside was having to hide how I really felt about him. I hated lying to him. I told myself that it wasn't really lying. We were best friends. I didn't expect anything more. It wasn't like I was pretending to be his friend. I was his friend. Being around him made me feel good—and he obviously felt the same. We were friends. I was just also in love with him. I just had to make sure I didn't slip up and say anything too romantic.

One evening in junior high, I did slip up. Will was at my house studying. We were also playing bottle cap hockey around our books whenever Mom wasn't looking. Will was winning at bottle cap hockey, of course. He had just bounced his bottle cap off a glass to send it spinning through my goal.

“One more for Will!” He whispered and held a finger up proudly. He glanced to the side to double-check that Mom wasn't around. And then he did a tiny touchdown dance, wiggling in his seat. “The crowd goes wild! Will's too hot to handle!”

There was a glass of water on the table. I dipped my fingers into it and flicked some onto Will's face. “Better cool you down if you're that hot.”

Will laughed loudly, throwing his head back. Then he clamped a hand over his mouth, eyes darting toward the kitchen.

He looked so ridiculously guilty that I couldn't help giggling. Will started giggling too. Soon we were both curled up in our seats, trying to keep the volume down as we laughed at nothing.

Will still had a hand clamped over his mouth, and his eyes crinkled with laughter. There was never any laughter in the house when he wasn't there. I'd miss him the moment he was gone. And then it slipped out: “I wish you could stay the night.”

As soon as I said it, I felt like a fool. My cheeks got hot, and I looked down at my open book. I waited for Will to tell me that was weird or to act like I hadn't said anything.

But he said simply, “I could.” He leaned forward, elbows on the table and face pushing forward so I was forced to look at him. “You want me to stay?”

His eyes were endless and dark, and I felt like I was falling into them like an open hole. “My parents wouldn't let you,” I mumbled.

“I'll climb in your window.”

“I live on the second floor.”

“I’ll climb in your second floor window.”

I laughed. The corner of Will’s mouth lifted, but he kept looking at me seriously. It was like he was trying to stare me down, waiting for me to take back the words. “Okay,” I said. “I call your bluff. Let’s see you do it.”

He did, too. I left a window open that night, even though it was freezing cold, and I didn’t really think Will could get through my window. But he did. He clambered in and dropped onto my bed, shoes in his hands so he wouldn’t make a noise. “Miss me?” he whispered.

From that day onward, he slept over at my house regularly. We’d talk in whispers or listen to music through headphones or just sleep. He’d be gone in the morning. I had to work harder than ever to not slip up and say something gooey, but it was worth it because day by day I felt more confident in myself and stopped being scared of the dark. Will was always there for me, day or night. I wasn’t a lonely guy anymore.

School with Will was perfect. The only cloud was his friends—his cousin Joseph and their group of jocks. They were nice when Will was around, and the others treated me all right or ignored me when he wasn’t. But Joseph picked on me constantly like I had personally offended him somehow. I had no idea how to make him stop, all I could do was ignore him and walk away. I knew Will would set him straight, but I hated feeling like I had to go to someone else for help, like I wasn’t capable of defending myself.

One morning break, I finally snapped. I was in line in the dining hall when Will wasn’t around and Joseph noticed me.

“Hey Connor,” he called. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

I shouldn’t have loitered. Not for long enough for Joseph to notice me. I turned and walked away.

But Joseph wasn’t having any of that. He followed me, raising his voice. “I asked you a question. Where’s your boyfriend?”

I kept walking. I hated him calling Will that. I knew some people thought I was Will’s boyfriend, and I was terrified it would get back to Will. What if he laughed at the idea, or got embarrassed and didn’t want to be around me anymore?

“Answer me!” Joseph’s voice got angrier and louder.

I didn't let myself show any emotion, and I tried to not feel any. I kept my head down and didn't meet anyone's eyes. I heard the charge of footsteps and just had time to raise my arms protectively before I was slammed into the cafeteria door. Joseph's shoulder was wedged into my back, pinning me to the wall. He was massive compared to me, and I had to fight the burst of panic that threatened to paralyze me.

“Not so tough without Will, are you?” Joseph growled into my ear. I could hear people screaming in the hall and the scuffling of feet behind us. I knew no one would haul Joseph off me, not with his big group of jocks standing around. *How could Will be friends with them?* Joseph's breath smelled like cafeteria ketchup, thick and sweet.

“I don't know what he sees in you,” Joseph said. “You're a weak loser that no one's ever going to want. You're never going to get laid, you're just a pathetic tiny little—”

I cut him off with my elbow. I'd been aiming for his stomach, but I knocked his hip bone. Flames of agony burst up my arm. But my combat training had kicked in, finally useful after years of sparring with Dad. I brought my foot down on Joseph's shin then again on his knee, driving against his kneecap with all the force I could manage from the bad angle.

It wasn't much but it was enough. Joseph shifted his weight backward, and the pressure on my back was eased. I twisted out from under his shoulder and faced him with my fists balled. Joseph was twice my size, and the hit to his knee barely seemed to faze him. He took one look at me staring him down, and he grinned widely.

All the years of nagging comments and tiny torture crashed down on me at once, and my body was flooded with anger. I glared at Joseph. “Come on then,” I growled. “Let's see you fight me face-to-face.”

The mocking smile slid from his face, and for a moment, just a moment, I saw him look perplexed and vulnerable. Then his expression iced over so fast I could almost think I'd just imagined it. He stood up straight, towering over me, tilting his chin up to look down at me. “You're not worth my time,” he sneered. He jerked his head at his friends, and they all walked away together.

I sagged against the wall, all the fight draining out of me to leave me sick and shaking. What had I just done? Actually challenged the biggest guy in school? I wasn't a fighter. But I wasn't going to let someone push me around, either.

“Are you okay?” It was a girl asking. Chop. I knew her by sight—everyone did. She was the only Asian kid at school and also the only punk. She was friends with Olivia, who I tried to avoid.

“I’m fine,” I told her.

“That guy’s a jerk,” she said decisively. “He didn’t hurt you?”

“No, he didn’t. And he is,” I added. “Thanks.”

People were staring, so I shouldered my bag and lost myself in the crowd. I headed away from the cafeteria, and no one followed me. Head down, eyes on the ground, I didn’t make eye contact in case anyone was staring at me.

Joseph *was* a jerk. And all those guys who’d stood around and let him be a jerk, they were all jerks too. It didn’t matter if they dressed well and were good at sports—hanging around them didn’t make me feel any good at all.

At lunch that day, I hid in a corridor facing the staff parking. It was dismal, but at least it was quiet. The windows had deep recesses so I could sit on them, both legs on the window sill in front of me and my head on the glass. I watched my breath clouding up the glass, again and again until beads of condensation dripped down the pane. I tried to convince myself I wasn’t hungry, and I wasn’t lonely.

“Hey, Con. I’ve been looking everywhere.” It was Will, leaning up against the box of the window and grinning at me. Even in his uniform blazer and shorts, he was effortlessly cool, slouching like a moody rock star on the cover of a magazine. He belonged with his jock friends, keeping them in line. Joseph was right—there was nothing to see in me. I looked away from him and back out the window.

Will picked my feet up and slid them along the window sill until my knees were bent, and he dropped into the recess in front of me, knees bent and his shoes resting alongside mine. “I brought you some food, didn’t see you at the cafeteria and figured you’d be hungry.”

He held out a paper bag, but I didn’t take it from him. “I’ve got you some of that caramel pudding you like. It’s not on the student menu, but Venice in the kitchen smuggled me out some just for you.”

“Why’d you do that?” I could hear the petulance in my voice, but I couldn’t stop it.

“You like caramel pudding,” Will chuckled.

“I mean, why’d you bring me food?”

“I didn’t see you in the cafeteria, and I thought you’d be hungry so—”

“Why do you hang around with me at all?”

“Because you’re my best friend.”

“But why?” I snapped. I rubbed at the patch of condensation on the window, smearing the droplets over the glass.

“What do you mean?” Will asked. His voice was low and steady, so calm that it got on my nerves right then.

I tucked my arms around me and kept my focus on the window smear until I started going cross-eyed. “What do you see in me? You could be friends with anyone.”

“I don’t want to be friends with anyone, I want to be friends with you. You’re smart. And funny. And really tough. You care about things I care about and make me care about things I don’t. I like you. I miss you when you’re not around. And if I think about going even a day without you I—” Will stopped talking and just nudged my feet with his. He said softly, “I like you. That’s what I mean.”

I nodded. There was a lump in my throat, and I couldn’t seem to swallow it down. *Even a day without you...* Didn’t I know it. It was like Will was feeling exactly what I was feeling—only the buddies version, the part where you goof around with someone and get close to them but never actually fantasize about kissing them or passing hours just looking at them. What would that be like, having a friend I could just like and not worship? Being able to look at his smile without getting butterflies in my stomach, not feeling like the ground was dropping out from under me whenever he leaned close.

Will leaned closer now, putting a hand on my bare shin. “What’s wrong, Con?”

Heat was running up my leg where his skin was against mine. What would it be like, just being friends? I couldn’t even imagine. And for this, for the chance to be close to him and be touched by him, I’d put up with... Everything else. But I’d had enough. “Your friends are jerks,” I mumbled.

“Our friends.”

“Your friends,” I corrected. “They only talk to me because of you. The moment you’re gone they turn on me like a pack of hyenas.”

“Did Joseph do something?”

“Yeah.” I hated feeling like a tattletale, or like I was running to Will like a kid running to a parent.

“I can kick his ass for you.”

“No, don't. This isn't a movie, I don't want vengeance. I just don't want to be around him anymore.”

“Okay. We won't be around him anymore.”

Will's hand was still on my leg. I was having trouble thinking straight.

After a while he asked, “What did he say?”

Joseph had called Will my boyfriend in front of the whole cafeteria. What were the chances that hadn't gotten back to Will? And if I mentioned it, would he be shocked at the idea, or offended that I thought it was an insult? I didn't think it was an insult. And I didn't think I could talk about it without it being obvious how badly I wanted it.

Thankfully Joseph gave me enough insults that I could pick and choose which one to seem offended by. “He called me weak and made fun of me for being a virgin.”

“Well, you're not weak. And there's nothing wrong with being a virgin. Joseph's a big poo-head.”

I couldn't help a laugh. Will squeezed my leg, and I choked, spraying spit on the window in front of me. That made me laugh more. “You want to tell everyone else that?”

“That Joseph's a big poo-head? I think everyone can see that for themselves.”

“No, the other thing. About virgins.” I rubbed at the glass with my sleeve.

Will tucked his legs up so he could inch closer to me, sliding along the window sill until his chin was nearly resting on my knees. His face was serious, he wasn't joking around anymore. “Do you want to have sex?”

I froze. What the hell was he offering? My mind went blank like a computer shutting down. It was a few moments before reboot and I whirred back to life, actually thinking about his question.

Did I want to have sex? With Will? Didn't I think about it often enough when he wasn't around and I didn't have to feel guilty about where my mind

went? Did I want it? “Well, yeah. No. Maybe. I’m not sure.” I couldn’t break eye contact, Will’s brown gaze was so steady.

“Well, if you’re not sure, it’s too soon,” Will said. He smiled gently. “If you’re ready, you’ll know. You’ll be so sure. And right now you’re not ready and nothing Joseph says should change that. Who cares what Joseph says?”

I swallowed. I could feel my cheeks getting red and wished the window could open so I could just stick my head out into the snow and freeze the shame right out of my face. Of course, Will was asking a hypothetical and didn’t mean it *like that*. How could I think he was propositioning me right there in the hallway on a chilly Thursday afternoon? To cover my embarrassment, or maybe make it worse, I mumbled, “I haven’t even kissed anyone yet.”

“Well, is there anyone you want to kiss?”

This conversation was impossible, with Will practically sitting in my lap and looking so sweet and understanding. There was no way I could answer that question. I sidetracked, “I just feel like everyone else is in this secret club, and I’m not invited.”

“The kissing club? Sounds like a way to spread strep throat.”

“You know what I mean.” I rolled my eyes.

“If there’s a secret club and they don’t want you to be a member then I don’t want to be either,” Will laughed. “But I don’t think there is one. I think everyone’s feeling just as confused and isolated as you are. And not nearly as many people are having sex or kissing as you might think. And even if they were, that shouldn’t change your life at all, right? I mean it: Who cares what Joseph thinks.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“I can kick Joseph’s ass, but you can outsmart him any day.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I eyed Will, looking so effortlessly cool and gorgeous just sitting there in his ugly uniform. I was always flustered and embarrassed, and Will was always confident. Did he really not understand the effect he had on people? On me? “It’s easy for you to not care what people think when you know people want you. I’ve never even been kissed.”

Will laughed, leaning back so his head was against the wall and his hands fell into his lap with only his shoes touching mine. For a moment, I thought he was laughing at my dorky confession or my weakness, but then I saw his sweet smile. “You think I go around kissing people, Con?”

“Well, yeah,” I mumbled.

He shook his head. He was looking at me across the space of the windowsill all dark and graceful and so breathtakingly beautiful. “I don’t,” he said. “And I’ll tell you what—neither does Joseph. So don’t go thinking there’s some kind of race and you’re losing it because there isn’t and you’re not.”

“Wait. You mean you never...” It was weird, and too much to imagine. I thought Will had to be sexually active, even if he didn’t talk about it. I’d imagined this side of him that he never talked to me about. To think that he was just as inexperienced as me was inconceivable. But the moment the thought took seed, I desperately wanted it to be true.

Will grinned. “Nope. Never kissed anyone. Does that make you feel better?”

“Yes. It actually does.”

He slid onto the ground and threw an arm around my shoulder, giving me a quick hug. “So now we don’t hang out with Joseph and his poo-head club for jerks. You want to hang out here all the time? Because I’ve got a better idea. Let’s go sit in the music rooms.”

“Oh. No. We probably shouldn’t.”

“Students are allowed in there. People go there all the time.”

“That’s the problem. There’s this girl...”

“Oh.” Will’s eyes went wide. “You’ve got a crush?”

“No! I don’t! That’s the problem. It’s this girl, Olivia. She’s the daughter of one of the rangers and Dad wants me to...” I ducked my head, wishing I hadn’t said anything. How many times in one day would I accidentally make Will talk to me about sex?

“Oh, I know her. The one from Canada, the insane hunter?”

I nodded.

“Your dad thinks you two would make a cute couple?”

“Something like that.” He thought Olivia would “make a man of me” and had been dropping hints ever since the day he’d come home with a photograph of her next to a bear she’d shot. Dad didn’t hassle me as much as he used to, but he still made no secret of how disappointed he was in me as a son. He seemed to think that pairing me off with a skilled hunter was the solution.

A skilled *female* hunter, naturally. I didn't want to imagine the ways Dad would find to make my life hell if he ever found out about my feelings for Will. I kept my feelings hidden, and I kept away from Olivia.

"We can hide in the drum practice room, no one will bug us," he soothed. "We can even put up a sign saying 'No Girls Allowed'?"

"No, I'm being an idiot. We should just go. We probably won't even see her."

So, naturally, we saw her the very next day. I was practicing on the school drum kit while Will sang along with my radio. The door burst open, and there was Olivia and her friend Chop.

It was Chop who spoke, pointing at me. "Was that you playing?"

I looked down at the brushes in my hands, paused over the drums. "Yes."

"Obviously," Will said loudly. "He was practicing. You're interrupting."

I shot him a grateful look. But Chop just ignored him. She said to me, "You're really good."

"Thank you."

"You know any metal?"

"He plays jazz," Will said. "Besides, aren't you meant to be punk?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Who said I was punk?" Then she turned back to me. "I play guitar and I'm really good. Really, really good. And Liv here's good too. We've got a guy who can play bass all right. We're just looking for a drummer."

"He's not interested," Will said.

Olivia said, "Is that because you have feelings for me, Connor?"

My mouth opened, but no sound came out. I wanted to look to Will for help, but I was too embarrassed even for that.

Olivia pressed on, "Because I've never even spoken to you before, and you're not my type. And if you're anything like your father then I don't want you joining our band."

I mumbled, "I'm not."

"You're not interested in me, or you're not like your dad?"

"Both. Neither." I glanced over at Will. *Help!*

Will said, “He’ll need to hear you play before he decides anything. And you better be fantastic, all of you. Because he is.”

“Was that you singing before?” Chop asked. “Because you might have a place in the band, too, if you can treat an audience better than you’re treating us.”

“Let’s hear you play, first,” Will said. He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Chop.

Three days later, when the five of us took every chance to jam in the school’s music room together, I wondered why I’d ever put up with Joseph at all. And, better yet, Will was saying the same thing.

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Chapter Six

Will

Connor was fascinated with tattoos. He'd mentioned them even before the first time he'd seen me shirtless and noticed mine. My brother Dave was a tattooist and had given me our family crest on my back before he'd left. He promised he was going to give me more, but then his year away had become two and then five and he'd never come back for visits. When we talked on the phone or wrote to each other, we still talked about tattoos, and I was still planning to get more.

A summer without Connor was enough to prove to me that I should spend as much time with him as humanly possible. By age sixteen, we were spending nearly every waking moment together, sitting together in class then practicing with the band and going to track, and later, I'd go over to his house and stay the evening, then sneak into his window at night when his parents didn't know.

It was on one of those nights that I was there without permission that Connor finally asked me about getting a tattoo of his own. We'd been talking about it like water circling a drain, swirling around and taking our time to get to the point. I'd talk about Dave's career and show Connor photos of his designs or finished work or his modified tattoo machines. I'd talk about my plans for a full sleeve and the designs Dave had sent me. Connor would tell me about books he'd read on tattooing and things he'd seen online, he'd show me designs and ask my opinion on how he'd suit them or how they would affect his life and career. But he didn't directly ask if Dave could tattoo him until one night when we were sixteen.

I'd left his house and driven down the block then later climbed in the window. Connor was sitting up on his bed in the dark in his flannel pajamas with just his feet tucked under the covers. He smiled when he saw me in the window. "Good evening."

"Hey buddy, long time no see," I whispered. He scooted over to give me more room even though there was plenty already. I settled on his pillows with my back against the wall like he had. "I've just had a call from Dave. He's going to be back in town soon."

"Just to visit?"

“I don’t think so. I think he’s coming back-back, forever or for a long time.” Or for the year or two that it took for me to take charge of the pack, his loyalty would be important and his support invaluable. “I’m excited.”

“It’s been a while. You might not even recognize him.”

I chuckled with a hand over my mouth to keep quiet. “Dave’s Dave. I don’t think he can change much. I can’t wait for you two to meet each other.”

“I’d love to meet him.” Connor drummed his fingers on his knee for a few moments, steeling himself. “Are you going to get more tattoos?”

“Pretty much the moment he walks in the door. I can’t wait to have that design we’ve been working on.”

“The roses one?”

“Yeah.” Dave had been sending me sketches of flowers growing from barren winter trees, bleak and beautiful.

“Would he tattoo me too?”

“Maybe when you’re older,” I hedged.

“You got one when you were eleven.”

Which I could remove with little effort, any time I wanted to. But I wasn’t about to explain werewolf healing to Connor. “Don’t get a tattoo just because I have one.”

“I’m not. It’s what I want. It’s what I’ve wanted for so long.”

“I don’t want you to do anything you’ll regret.”

“You think I’m fickle? I’m not. I don’t make rash decisions. My few regrets are from missed chances.”

I loved the way Connor talked sometimes. When he got riled up he talked like an old-school book on etiquette, and I couldn’t get enough of it. It made me wonder what he saw in a slob like me who loved running more than reading. “I don’t think you’re fickle. It’s just a big decision.”

“One which I’ve already made.”

He could barely see me, I knew, but I could see him clearly. His brow was furrowed and his lips were twisted. I hated seeing Connor looking messed up. I put an arm around his shoulders and squeezed. “Okay.”

“I feel like you’re not taking me seriously.”

“I am.” Connor had given me a copy of a tattoo design he loved and I’d sent it to Dave months ago, asking if he could do it and would be willing to do it on a friend. But I wanted Connor to be really sure of what he wanted.

“I love tattoos.”

“Me too.”

“I want to show you something.” He pulled out from under my arm then tugged his flannel shirt off over his head. He hesitated. “I don’t want to turn a light on in case my parents notice. You can’t see, can you?”

“I can see fine. Just show me like you would in the light.” I didn’t have much color perception in the dark but I could pick out details almost as well as in the light. “I eat a lot of carrots.”

He wiggled down the bed until he was lying flat and I followed suit, staying propped up on my elbow. Even without much color vision I could clearly see how pale Connor’s skin was and the athletic torso from the many hours we spent working out.

“When we lived in Ohio there was this park that army guys used to train in. They had a confidence course that was really intense. Dad made me do it so many times. There was a part where you crawled on your stomach under barbed wire and one day when it was raining I slipped and got caught in it. It grabbed onto my clothing and I panicked and—” Connor cleared his throat. “Dad was yelling, you know how he does?”

“Yeah.” Connor’s voice was rough with fear like opening an old wound. I was gladder than ever that his dad had stopped hassling him so much. *One more year then we’ll be out of here and never look back.* He tapped his fingers idly against his stomach, they bounced on his taut belly like the skin of a drum. “I just got caught worse and worse. There was blood everywhere. And when I got out Dad made me do it again to prove I could get through without being hurt.”

“Oh, Connor.”

“It was years ago. Years and years. But I’ve still got the scars.” He traced a finger over his abdomen and I let my eyes follow the motion of his hand. I could see the scars, not the color of them but just a texture where his skin gave way to smooth shiny patches like rust above his belly button and stopping just above the elastic waist of his pajama bottoms. “You can’t see them?”

“I can.” I instinctively moved my hand then froze. “Can I touch?”

“If you want. They’re just scars.”

I’d never had a scar except the ones where Dave’s needle had cut into my back and I couldn’t feel those. Werewolf healing made some human things radical and strange. I thought that was probably why Dave had got into tattooing so intensely, all those nights when we were kids and he’d sat up with a pin or knife and a broken pen just trying to teach himself to leave a mark that would stick. He might have been jealous of the kids at school with skinned knees and sunburn and freckles, living this human life that he didn’t have access too. Or I don’t know, maybe I was imagining that and Dave just liked drawing pretty pictures.

But for me, I was captivated. Connor had me spellbound all the time anyway, but the scars on his belly were alien to me. The warmth of his skin then the glossy dips or raised bumps of the scars. They were small and probably most people wouldn’t even notice them, you had to be close and really looking. “Is this why you don’t like people seeing you with your shirt off?”

“Yeah. I’ve never shown anyone before.”

“They’re not large.” I picked my words carefully, not wanting to belittle him at all. “I don’t think anyone would be offended by the sight of them.”

“It doesn’t really matter if anyone else sees them. I know they’re there. Like a physical manifestation of all the things I hated about childhood and feeling like I was still stuck in it—until I met you, of course.” He paused, thinking. “They’re just another thing I have no control over at all.”

I was still stroking his belly and I could feel him tensing up, unconsciously resisting my intrusion into the private world under his shirt. I took my hand away. “Thanks for showing me.”

“They’re on my back, too. I hate them all but I hate these the most because I have to see them so much.”

“I don’t think they’re ugly. I think they’re beautiful. Like patches of ice in the snow.”

Connor smiled, a smile he probably thought was hidden in the dark, but I cherished its warmth. “Thank you, Will.” He tugged his shirt back on, distancing himself from me. “You’re not going to convince me to like them.”

“I wasn’t trying to. Just telling you how I feel.”

“Thank you,” he said again. “It’s not even the scars. It’s what they symbolized. Life out of my control. I just want to have some control, just for

once. I'm sick of seeing memories of my dad on my skin. I want to look down and just see myself, beautiful things I put there."

"Flames," I said, thinking of the design Connor had shown me.

"Yeah. Burn away the old. A primal force of nature that destroys everything in its path and forces fresh starts. I want flames on my body."

"It's funny. I think of you as ice, not fire."

Connor grinned and the serious moment disappeared. "Well I don't think of you as a bunch of roses but you don't see me making fun of your tattoo choice."

I laughed. But I believed him, that he was serious about the tattoo. I told Dave, and he agreed to tattoo my friend—I wasn't going to mention the whole mate thing over the phone. But that's how we found ourselves killing time at my house before my brother arrived.

I kept remembering things Dave had done when we were kids so the wait turned into one long storytelling adventure, Connor grinning on the couch beside me as I regaled him with tales from my childhood—edited down to be human-friendly, of course.

Dave was four and a half years older which was a lot when you're young. But he was mild-mannered, and I'm a born alpha so it worked out that I was often the one taking leaps and goading him.

A car engine hummed, coming up the private road to our house. Close enough that there was no mistake it was on our road. I didn't recognize the sound of the engine, but then it had been years since I'd seen my brother, and he could drive a school bus for all I knew.

"That might be Dave now," I said.

"The prodigal brother," Connor joked. His pewter gray eyes were wide, and he had the lemon tang of nerves. Nervous about tattooing or nervous about meeting my big brother?

"I have no idea what he's going to be like," I joked, just in case. "I probably won't recognize him. Bet he's grown his hair long and wears Hawaiian-print shirts and calls everything cool, man."

"That would be kind of cool." Connor raised a dark eyebrow and added, "Man."

When the engine was right outside the house, I bounded out. There was a dark green hatchback dulled by dust and in it... “Dave!”

“Hey, Little Willy!”

I would give almost anything for Connor to *not* hear him calling me that.

Dave stood with the door open and held his arms out, laughing. I launched myself at him like we were eight again, playing rough and tumble. The force of my impact knocked him back into the car and we both laughed as his arms came around me hard and sun-warmed. He smelled different, the Dave scent diluted by coconut and floral soap, the hint of sunlight lingering around his clothes like snow always hung around mine.

But his laugh was the same deep rumble, and he was just as huge. He lifted me off my feet with those tree-trunk arms and squeezed me tight.

“You’ll break my ribs,” I joked.

“You’ll heal them.”

I hadn’t realized how much I missed him until he was right there in front of me, so achingly familiar yet slightly altered. I stepped back to take him in—he didn’t have long surfer hair and his shirt didn’t have an obnoxious print. But he was tanned golden and dark, and his hair had natural highlights. “We’ve got company,” I said quickly in case he had the urge to shift right then and there.

Dave was looking at me with his head tilted to the side and his eyes narrowed. He kept blinking like he was confused about something.

“I’m taller than you now,” I said, in case that was what had him stumped.

He shook his head slowly. Then a smile appeared on his face like white showing on a fried egg. “You’ve found your mate.”

“You can tell?”

“Dude. Anyone could tell. Bet even humans pick up on it.” He was still looking at me intently, tilting his head from side to side. “You’re so in love. You’re practically glowing. I didn’t even know you could be this happy.”

“I’m so happy,” I confirmed. I couldn’t keep a stupid grin from bursting out on my face.

Dave grinned too, his eyes twinkling. “So who is she? One of the pack? She can’t be, I’ve never met anyone who could keep up with you.”

I could sense Connor loitering in the house near the front door, hesitating because he didn't want to intrude on the bro bonding. I called out, "Connor! Come meet the prodigal brother!"

"Prodigal," Dave chuckled.

"Yeah, he teaches me all kind of fancy words. Connor's real smart. You'll see."

Connor came down the stairs from the front door, hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched with his eyes on the ground. I muttered just out of his hearing, "Don't buy the omega routine. He's just shy." Dave was watching him with a blank expression.

Connor reached us and held out a hand, barely glancing at Dave. His cheeks were turning pink. "Hello. I'm Will's friend Connor."

"Hello." Dave stared at him in confusion.

Then Dave ignored the offered hand and grabbed Connor by the shoulders, pulling him in for a rough hug. Over Connor's shoulder he met my gaze. His eyes were the same brown as mine and Mom's, and right now they were bugging right out of his head. He silently mouthed, "Human?" I just grinned back.

When Connor was released again—with no broken ribs, thankfully—he offered, "Would you like a hand with your bags?"

Dave was blatantly staring at him, then looking at me, then back at Connor. I couldn't get a read on his emotions, he was all over the place. Then he looked me square in the face and grinned like a Cheshire cat. "Mom and Dad," he said, "are going to freak."

"They already know," I said. "I've told them. About the tattoos, I mean." I widened my eyes meaningfully. I could see he wanted to ask questions, so I shook my head quickly over Connor's shoulder. I didn't need my brother going and slipping a mention about werewolves just to make Connor think we were crazy.

"Actually, could I get a hand with my stuff?" He pulled a duffel out of his car and tossed it to Connor. Then he flipped the hatch and pointed at a box inside. "This is for you, Will."

The box was so heavy it just about pulled my arms out of their sockets. "What have you got in here, lead weights for fishing?"

“Just about. That’s local wood from Cali for you.”

I noticed Connor hovering a few paces from the door, and I called, “Take it into the back room, by the kitchen?”

As I hefted my box out of the car Dave put a hand on my shoulder to stop me. “When did you meet him?”

“Middle school. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, I wanted to do it in person.”

He ignored that. “You’ve known him for years, and you haven’t bitten him yet?”

Connor was inside the house and well out of hearing range, but I lowered my voice and stepped closer anyway.

“Nope. I want that to be his choice. When he knows about what I am, I’ll let him decide for himself.”

“When he knows?” Dave repeated. His eyes got huge, and he looked like he was fifteen again, freaking out at my next half-cooked plan for adventure. “He doesn’t know you’re a werewolf?”

“He doesn’t even know they exist. How am I meant to raise that subject, huh? Tell me you’d look forward to that conversation because I sure wouldn’t.”

“But how can he not know? He’s your mate!”

“He doesn’t know that, either.” It was a small comfort while defending myself from my big brother, but I was proud of Dave for worrying about Connor’s knowledge and not about the fact my mate was a guy. “Humans don’t feel the mating bond, not until they’re bitten.”

Dave ran a hand through his hair in exasperation. “So bite him!”

I shook my head. Connor was coming back to the door, and soon he’d be within earshot—and see that neither of us had raised a finger to empty Dave’s boxes from the car. “Listen,” I hissed. “He’s my mate, that’s what matters. So you can treat him with respect or you can turn around and go back to Cali. And trust me to tell him when he’s ready.”

Connor was still terrified of someone bursting through his door in the night. How could I tell him that his best friend was more frightening and threatening than any human intruder?

“Of course.” Dave grabbed a box. He glanced at Connor coming towards us and whispered theatrically, “For the record, I think he’s a total cutie.”

“Hands off,” I laughed.

Connor rounded the car, and I grinned at him. He smiled back, but he was acting awkward, fiddling with the zip on his jacket and barely making eye contact. “Do you want me to leave?”

“What? Why?”

“I think you want to bond with your brother. Which is totally understandable,” he added.

“Nah. I want you here. Sorry if I’m making you feel left out. Or using you as a pack mule.” I handed him another box. “You still up for tattoos?”

“Completely.” Connor met my eyes and smiled timidly.

I grinned back and watched as my happiness seemed to soak through him like sunlight on snow, melting away his nerves.

We got Dave settled in and all sat around eating Dad’s flashy cheese and crackers. I told stories about the band and about me and Connor, Dave told stories about the people he met in California and the fellow workers at his tattoo shop. Connor sat quietly, but he was having fun and drinking in every word.

For my part, I couldn’t believe how happy I was to have my brother back, I hadn’t realized how badly I missed him until he was beside me again. He had never been as wild and strong-willed as me, but he was still the child of an alpha mating, with the kind of intense dedication that very few other people understood. Plus he had been my best friend in the long years before Connor.

Dave was most excited about his modified tattoo machines, and he showed us his favorites, one built on an existing tattoo gun and one which had been manufactured just for him. “I win awards. I’m famous, not just in Cali. People come from outside the States just to get tattooed by Dave Flight. You don’t know how lucky you are, little bro.”

“You get to touch my perfect skin so I’d say you’re the lucky one, big bro,” I laughed. I slung an arm around Connor’s shoulders and hugged him to me in that way that felt so natural I was almost uncomfortable if he wasn’t tucked into my side. “Plus you get to pop Connor’s ink cherry and that’s better than any award.”

He set up in the living room with a quiet portable generator and a big box of inks and fresh cleaning cloths and his pens. I lay on my back on the leather

recliner, propped up on its arm, with my shirt off. Dave sat on a chair beside me and sketched the shape of the roses with a marker over my side and ribs and up to my shoulder.

“Freehand like this is really cool,” he told me. “I do it a lot. We can talk about designs on paper all we want but nothing beats seeing the shapes on your body.”

Connor was perched on the end of the recliner facing me. “Nervous?”

“Nope. You?”

“No. Excited for my turn.”

Dave laughed. “You say this now. Wait until you see Will squirming like a baby under the needle. You’ll change your tune.”

I snorted. “As if. I didn’t even flinch last time, and I was ten.”

“I’ve gotten a lot better at this since you were ten. I go fast and hard and my gear’s modified to give you a gorgeous result. This design should take multiple sessions, more than ten hours. I can do it in four. But it’s going to hurt.”

“Bring it, I can take it.”

Dave grinned. He was loving this, and so was I. Joking around again like real brothers. “You might want to hold Connor’s hand for support when it gets tough.”

“I’m tougher than your needles,” I jeered.

It was like Dave was taking me up on the challenge to embarrass me in front of Connor, he went hard, and it hurt a lot more than I remembered the first time—real pain rather than a prickling sting.

“Whoa,” I hissed. “That’s not meant to hurt that much!”

“It’s worse on the ribs.” Dave sat back, giving me a moment without the needles. “Plus I’m giving you the signature Dave Flight treatment. I can swap to the normal gear and take it slower?”

I shook my head. “Let’s see why you’re so famous, huh?” But as Dave moved higher up my ribs and the pain kept coming, Connor shifted closer to me on the couch. He gently took my hand, and I squeezed back.

When we were finished with my tattoo we took a food break, then went back to the living room to do Connor’s. He took my place on the couch and Dave settled back on his little chair.

“I’ve got these designs Will sent me, you want these?” Dave asked Connor.

“On my stomach and back,” Connor agreed. He pointed at the stencils in Dave’s hands—wide flaring flames for his stomach, curling flames for his back. “I’ve got some scar tissue. Is that a problem?”

“Depends. Shouldn’t be.” Dave bit his lip. “It’s going to hurt. I don’t recommend pieces this large for someone’s first tattoo, let alone two of them.”

“Will they not heal right?”

“They’ll heal fine. It’s just a lot of pain to take.”

“I can take it.”

Dave glanced at me then back at Connor. “I’ll grab the standard gun.”

“I want your magic machine with the gorgeous results, same as Will.” Connor leaned forward, elbows on knees. “If Will can take it, I can. Hit me with your best shot.”

My brother grinned. “You’re cocky. I wasn’t expecting that.”

Connor pulled off his shirt and glanced at me, the sharp little points of his fear glittering clear. I smiled at him, and said to Dave, “I’m the cocky one. Connor’s the one who knows exactly what he wants and gets it. If he says he can take it, he can.” I said it confidently, but I had my doubts.

I was proven wrong when Connor stayed perfectly still and unflinching as Dave tattooed him. It was quick but—as I knew—hard and painful. Afterward Dave busied himself cleaning up and I took Connor upstairs to my room. He kept staring at his plastic-wrapped stomach, resting his fingers on it just beside where the skin was puffy and red with the new tattoo.

“I can’t believe I’ve finally got it,” he said. “It’s like a dream.”

I grinned. Connor’s cautious joy was beautiful to behold. “It looks good, too. Really badass.”

“It’s mine, now. My body.”

“It always was.”

“Now I feel like it is.” He stood up just a little taller.

I’d had plans of hanging out more with Dave and Connor. But Connor looked exhausted, the sudden emotional change taking its toll on him. I steered him toward the couch and sat down with my untattooed arm over his shoulders,

watching the breeze in the trees outside until he fell asleep. Only when he was soundly sleeping did I go back down to find my brother.

Dave was leaning on the porch railing with his eyes on the forest. I handed him a fridge-frosted lemonade. One of the aunts made and bottled it, and I'd been hooked on the bittersweet taste and the feel of the glass bottle since I was tiny.

Dave took a sip and winced. "I didn't miss this stuff. It's like sugary battery acid."

I snorted. "You drink much battery acid? Is that what they feed you in Cali?"

"Just about." Dave wrinkled his nose but took another long sip. Yellow and green and the occasional dusky red. "I missed this, though. The shape of the hills and the trees in fall."

"It's perfect. I don't know why you'd ever leave."

Dave chuckled. "To see more of the world?"

"It's all right here. What else do you need?"

"Warm weather?"

"It's plenty warm here."

Dave rolled his eyes. "Don't you ever get itchy feet? The yearning to see what else is out there?"

"This is my home."

"You could make a new home. Or take home with you. Home's you and your dreams and the experiences you love, and you can have that on the open road. Home's people, you know?"

"No, I don't know. This is my home. My soul cries out for these trees and these mountains." I nudged my big brother with my shoulder. "I'm glad you've found something that makes you happy. I'm really, really glad. But that's not me. I love it here."

I leaned on the railing beside him, propping my weight on my left arm so my right arm could dangle freely between the wooden slats.

"Still hurts?" Dave asked.

"Nah, I can't feel it." Except a sensitivity if I bent my arm or knocked it into anything. "It's weird though, as a human. I'm so used to just instantly healing anything."

“You can heal that, you’ve done it before.”

Healing a tattoo wasn’t just like healing any old wound: If you slipped too far into werewolf healing mode you could heal the scars that the ink sat in or break down the ink and lose the tattoo entirely. It took a certain degree of skill and self-control to do it right. But that wasn’t my problem. “I want to do it human, let it heal in its own time. That’s what Connor’s doing, so I want to do it too.”

“Or, here’s an idea,” Dave started. He stopped and just took another sip from his bottle in silence. Instinct kicked in, and he didn’t talk back to an alpha—or maybe just decided to be nice to his brother. He didn’t need to finish his sentence though, I knew what he was going to say before “Here’s an idea: why don’t you just bite him?”

I could sense Connor upstairs, still sleeping. But I still lowered my voice to make my big confession. “I love him.”

“He’s your mate.”

“It’s more than that. I think. I love him. There’s stuff like how protective I feel of him and how I need to know he’s safe and happy all the time, and I think that’s the mate bond. But there’s other stuff, too. His smile makes me breathless, and his laugh stays with me for days. I’ll find myself grinning when I’m alone because I’ve just thought of something great about him. I want to spend every moment with him. He’s like a balm, like he can soothe me when I’m worried or too excited or anything. Connor’s perfect, and I love him. And he’s also my mate.”

“How did Mom and Dad take it?”

I snorted. “They told me it wasn’t possible.”

“To love a human?”

I looked at Dave long and hard, but there wasn’t any trace of irony in his eyes. Earlier he’d been talking about me “finding a girl” but it was like that had just evaporated out of his head. I said slowly, “They don’t think it’s possible for a werewolf to be gay. Let alone an alpha.”

“You can’t populate your pack through bum sex,” he agreed. Then he squawked like a chicken because I’d hit him with my shoulder, hard. Laughing he said, “So you’re gay now?”

“I love Connor and I’m not interested in anyone else. And I want to, you know, what you just said.” I winked, and Dave laughed dirtily. “So I’m gay. And I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“Except that an alpha needs to breed. It’s essential for the pack to have new blood.”

I shrugged. “Mom and Dad only had us and the pack’s fine. Even when you were off on the road for so long. There’s Joseph and the others. I think the idea that a pack needs to be made by alphas and their kids is outdated. I’ve been spending a lot of time with wolves and I know that’s what they do but here’s the thing: Wolves don’t have cars. They don’t have phones and the internet. Werewolves are humans as well as wolves and that means we get to decide what pack means and what family means. I’ll love my pack even though they’re not my kids.”

“Do you really believe that? Or are you just saying it because Mom’s trying to find you a bride?”

I laughed. “I really believe that. It’s kind of like you wanting to travel: It’s normal for a werewolf to be tied to the place they were born, they should want to stay there and leaving should be like pulling teeth. And I feel that. But you’re the opposite.”

“You’re saying I’m a freak?”

“I’m saying everybody is a freak. What the hell does normal mean?” I raised my bottle, and Dave clinked his against it. We watched the wind in the multi-colored trees. Finally I said, “Mom’s not trying to find me a bride, actually.”

“No way.”

“She respects the mating bond. I mean, obviously, she’s not happy about it. Neither’s Dad. But once they got used to the idea and saw me and Connor together they were less worried about him being a guy and more worried that I haven’t bitten him yet.”

“They’re right to worry. I’m worried.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not you too.”

“I’m serious. You know how I could tell you’d found your mate?”

“You read my aura.” I knew my own abilities were exceptional but Dave was nearly as good. Mom and Dad could do it a little bit but not as well as we could, and no one else we’d ever met could do it at all. I remembered trying

again and again to explain it to Joseph when we were kids and how he'd just stared at me in confusion.

"Here's the thing," Dave said. "I can tell you're happy and I can tell you're tied to someone else. But it feels like you're split in half. There are all these ripples of... Or missing, or lacking, or something. You're giving so much of yourself to Connor or to the mating bond or whatever but you're not getting anything back. And that's scary. And that's probably what's got Mom and Dad so worried. You know how they're kind of amplified because they're together? That's what a mate is meant to do. Make you stronger. And you're missing out on that."

"I know. I know what the mating bond does."

"You just have to bite Connor and turn him."

"I'm not going to bite him unless he wants me to. When he knows everything, I'll let him decide what he wants." Even if what he wanted was to run in horror from me.

"But why? Why don't you just bite him?"

"Free will. And love. If I bite him, he'll feel the bond and that's like forcing him to be with me."

"So what are you going to do? What if he says he doesn't want you to bite him?"

"Then I won't."

"Then you'll be weak forever." Dave froze and added quickly, "I'm sorry, that was out of line."

"No, it's fine."

"It's not. You're not weak. You're definitely strong. It's just... I thought you'd be stronger. And I can tell you would be, if you'd just turn Connor."

"I'm not going to. Not until he's ready."

"Okay. It's your choice. I respect that. But don't think everyone will. If I can pick up on it, others will be able to. No one wants an alpha who isn't focused on his pack."

"I'll deal with that when the time comes. I've got plenty of time."

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Chapter Seven

The first thing Connor did when we moved to college was buy caramel sauce. He'd always liked it but his parents didn't, so I used to smuggle it to him. But when he left home he just went a little crazy. He bought the largest jar of sauce you've ever seen. It was like a keg of caramel sauce, so heavy we had to pour it into smaller jars before it was even usable. And he still went through those jars alarmingly fast.

I hated anything too sweet, but Connor loved that sauce, and I loved seeing him happy. I'd come to love the sticky sweet smell of it just from catching that scent on Connor's breath so often.

I put caramel in his coffee every morning. Our dorm was small enough and my coffee was strong enough that for a few hours in the morning it was like we lived inside an espresso machine.

Connor woke up while I was stirring the caramel into his coffee. "You need to go," he mumbled.

"Good morning, buddy," I laughed. I took the drink over to him and rested it on a wide arm of my chair. That chair was my favorite thing about the dorm room. I'd made it when we first moved down to Minneapolis. It was made of hickory from a slope near my parent's house in Jagged Rock, felled in a landslide. It was the hardest wood I'd ever worked but the result was worth the dulled tools. I kept as much of the bark and shape of the wood as possible. The chair is huge and heavy and takes up space almost like there's a real tree growing out of the middle of the floor between our beds. The wood fills the dorm with the smell of home.

It has a solid back I can lean against to study or to slouch on when I talk with Connor. Most nights I fall asleep on that chair, a pile of cushions under me and a blanket on top and just an arm's reach from Connor. That morning, after our gig, I slumped back into the chair and grinned at sleepy Connor.

"Your parent's place," he mumbled. "You need to go."

"Yeah. In a bit. I've got something to talk to you about. I've been thinking about that presentation you have to give."

"Me too." His face fell into comical despair. Connor hated having to talk in front of crowds. One of his papers had him presenting a project to the entire year and it had Connor tied up in knots.

“I’ve found you something to wear which will make it all better.”

“Oh no.” He grinned as he reached for his coffee. “Another T-shirt?”

“Don’t go ‘oh no’, our T-shirts are awesome.” Chop and I found all the best science fiction pop culture T-shirts for Connor to wear on stage or for band photo shoots. He was the only shy one in a band of big personalities and we played that up, making him out to be the biggest nerd in the world.

He was kinda nerdy, and studious as anything. But he didn’t care about clothes like Chop and I did. If Connor had his way he’d wear the same clothes every day—probably the ratty old shirt he was wearing right now, left over from our track team back in middle school. Chop and I wouldn’t let him go around looking like a hobo. We were like his very own stylists.

He sipped his coffee, wrinkling his face at the heat of it but smiling just the same. He had the most beautiful smile, but I felt it as much as I saw it, like he was smiling right into my soul. I’d do pretty much anything to keep Connor smiling.

“It’s not a T-shirt, actually. It’s way better.” I held my tablet out to him. “Check out these suckers.”

The picture I showed Connor was of a pair of furry brown sneakers with teddy bear heads instead of tongues and little bear arms sticking out the sides.

In his defense, he took his time and really studied the photo. He had after-gig bed hair, and he kept making it worse by scrubbing his hand through it. Finally, he handed the tablet back to me and asked, “When you said these would make my presentation better, did you mean that I should imagine my audience wearing them and it would be so funny I wouldn’t be nervous anymore?”

“Nope.” He knew exactly what I meant. “We’ll be there to watch you, the whole band as your cheering squad. So you can look up and see our friendly faces. I just thought you might want to see a couple more friendly faces when you look down. You wear those and every time you look down you’ll feel a bit happier.”

Connor grinned. “These shoes are friendlier than you guys. What if I just want to look at my feet the whole time?”

“Then the audience will be missing out on this handsome face.” I ruffled Connor’s hair and he pretended to swat my hand away. “Also you’ll bomb your presentation. So don’t do that.”

“Well now I’m not nervous at all,” he joked.

“You’ll wear them and you’ll feel awesome. Trust me.”

He took another sip of his drink. The smell of the syrup was tickling my nostrils. Connor swirled the mug to mix it up and said, “I’ll promise to wear them, if you promise not to take photos.”

“Deal.” I ruffled his hair again, just for the fun of it.

“Now you’ve got to go, you’re running late.”

I really was. But it was just a family meeting—nowhere near as fun as time with Connor. I drained my drink and said, “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon, okay?”

“Okay. I can’t wait.” Connor couldn’t help a huge grin. He loved staying at the cabin in the mountains.

I was nearly out the door before I called over my shoulder, “Oh, by the way? I never promised Chop wouldn’t photo you in those shoes. Bye now.”

I closed the door just in time to block the pillow he threw at me.

Dave was waiting outside my parent’s house, his tattooed arms crossed over his chest. “You’re late.”

“Yeah. You know how it is.” I grinned. I could sense the werewolves inside the house, our whole pack gathered there. I waited for Dave to go inside, but he just stood there making me even later.

“You haven’t turned him yet.”

Why was he bringing that up now? “Nope. I haven’t got his permission yet.”

“I hoped you’d have turned him by now. You promised you’d tell him when he turned eighteen.”

“I did say that,” I agreed. I had meant to, I honestly had. But then he’d told me he wanted me to build him a house...

I knew how Dave felt about me not turning Connor—the same as most of my family did, that I was throwing away my strength and power for no reason. Werewolf strength wasn’t really a physical thing, it was mostly based on “loyalty”, the respect you got from others that decided your ranking in the pack.

I started off stronger than average because I was born an alpha. But I was losing power constantly from all the energy I put into Connor and our mating bond without it being reciprocated. I knew that, and everyone knew that. But I didn't know why Dave was talking about it now.

"I really wish you'd just do it," he pushed again.

"What's really bothering you, bro?"

He lowered his voice. "I'm loyal to you, you know that."

"I know. I can feel it." Werewolf loyalty was like a flame, bright and warming. Dave was older than me, but he wasn't alpha and his loyalty was a steady fire burning for me.

"I need you to remember that."

"Why are you bringing this up now? Chill out, everything's fine," I laughed, Dave was usually laid-back and casual. This seriousness didn't suit him.

But Dave just shook his head and looked grim.

My mother was waiting for me in the hallway. "You're late."

"I know. Me and Connor—"

My mom was alpha through-and-through, the only werewolf I knew with the confidence to cut me off when I was speaking. "You haven't turned him yet."

"Yeah, I know." Why was everyone going on about this all of a sudden?

Mom turned away, and I followed her into the living room. The house was lined with photos she'd taken in her day job as a wildlife photographer, and the huge living room was no exception. Photos of wolves lined the walls, and living werewolves lined the couches facing the glass sliding doors that opened right onto the Jagged Rock Forest.

I leaned against a wall as far from my cousin Joseph as possible. I only had one brother, Dave, and the rest of the pack was aunts and uncles and cousins from Mom's side of the family and a few from Dad's—he wasn't alpha himself but he was very highly ranked as a werewolf in his own right so some of his pack had followed him when he left his old pack, or drifted into ours over time. I got along with everyone, even though I didn't see anyone outside of the full moon now. But Joseph was a thorn in my side; he'd made himself my enemy when he started picking on Connor back in high school. He was a loud and

arrogant bully, and whenever I came back home, I was constantly breaking up fights that he started with lower-ranked wolves.

Mom took her place beside Dad in front of the glass doors, addressing the whole family. “We’ve gathered you all here for a serious announcement. As you know, I’ve been leader of this pack for over 65 years. It’s time that another leader stepped up and took over.”

I blinked. I wasn’t ready. Leading the pack would mean more time in Layton, less time at college in Minneapolis. I was still having fun and had years before graduation. Maybe she didn’t mean now, maybe she was making the announcement that she’d retire in a few years.

But Mom kept talking. “Pack loyalty makes it clear who the new pack leader is.” She paused like she was an Academy Awards announcer, and I rolled my eyes. Then she said, “Joseph. Congratulations.”

The bottom of my stomach dropped away, but I was able to keep my face calm. This was a mistake. It had to be. Or some kind of weird joke—not that I’d ever seen my mom crack a joke. I was the only alpha born in the pack, Mom and I were the only alphas, she had to hand the reins over to me. Nothing else made sense.

All eyes had turned to me, people twisting around in their seats to look at me loitering in the back of the room. Even Mom looked at me as she said clearly, “Any disputes about leadership can be taken up at the full moon. But I nominate Joseph.”

She swept past me out of the room. I followed her into the hallway, checking we were alone. “What was that about?” I kept my voice low though werewolf ears could easily overhear. “Joseph? He’s not even alpha. I’m alpha.”

“And you haven’t been here. Not for years.”

“I’m here every full moon.”

“You know that’s not enough to keep pack loyalty. No one respects you. No one wants you as leader. Everyone knows you’d rather spend your time with humans than with your pack. Why on earth would I nominate you as leader?”

“Why would you nominate Joseph?” I could hear my voice rising, and I consciously calmed myself down, breathing slowly. My head was spinning, and I could hardly understand what had just happened.

“Joseph shows a lot of leadership traits. He’s a strong decision maker. He has clear vision, and the pack respects him.”

“He’s impulsive and a bully. If that makes him a leader than yeah, sure, go ahead and follow him,” I growled.

“You can challenge this decision,” Mom said calmly. “Take it up in front of the pack at full moon. See who has the strength and loyalty to lead the pack. I suggest you claim your mate if you have any chance of facing Joseph. Otherwise you can leave the pack or submit to Joseph’s authority.”

My insides burned. “You know I can’t do that.” Any of that. There were no good choices. “You should have waited.”

“What for? For you to remember that you’re a werewolf and not a human? For you to claim your mate? You gave me your word you’d do it on his eighteenth birthday. We’ve waited long enough. Maybe now you’ll choose between the pack and your band.”

I cursed and pounded my head into the wall, hard. *No good choices*. Use Connor like a game piece in a play for more power. Leave the pack, which would mean leaving Layton and Jagged Rock forever. Or make myself take orders from someone I didn’t respect and I *knew* was no good.

And over all of it hovered my fear for Connor. We were mates, tied together forever even if he didn’t feel it. If I bit him he’d be tied to my pack which meant being tied to Jagged Rock and controlled by Joseph who had bullied him mercilessly all the way through high school. At least back at school, I had been able to defend him, or he could defend himself. But if he was in Joseph’s pack there was nothing he could do.

I didn’t know what to do. Every choice was the wrong one.

I whacked my head into the wall again, seething with pent up emotion and confusion as I tried to solve an impossible problem fast.

If Joseph was my leader and I turned Connor, that would make Joseph his leader too. Joseph had picked on Connor all the way through school and he wouldn’t stop just because Connor was a werewolf. Connor wouldn’t be able to defend himself without being thrown from the pack, and neither would I.

If I challenged Joseph and lost, I would be thrown from the pack. Turning Connor would make me stronger, his strength and mine united through the mating bond. But Joseph had so much of the pack’s loyalty that there was no guarantee that I’d be strong enough to beat him even with that bond. So I could turn Connor and fight Joseph and lose, and get both of us kicked out of the pack.

And getting kicked out of the pack would mean losing my home—losing the mountains that were carved into my heart. And if I turned Connor he'd feel that connection too, and he'd hurt just as much as I would at losing the mountains.

I wouldn't turn him without his permission. And I wouldn't get his permission without telling him everything. And I was so terrified of telling him because that would mean popping the bubble of happiness we lived in, and maybe losing his friendship forever.

I couldn't do it. Connor was worth more to me than the leadership of the pack. His happiness was worth more than the strength I'd get from biting him.

So I went back into the living room where my family was assembled. I held my hand out to Joseph. "Congratulations."

He took my hand and shook it. He was trying for a display of strength, and I took a little satisfaction in crushing his fingers. He said casually, "No hard feelings. I earned this."

I forced my lips into a smile.

As soon as I could, I got away from him and out onto the porch. Dave followed me out. His face was heavy with sadness. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"Did you know they were going to do this?"

"No. Not until just before you arrived. I told them it was a bad idea. You're not ready."

"Of course not. They know that." I looked around the room. The whole pack were assembled, eating snacks like this was some kind of celebration. "I feel like I'm the only one who cares that I'm not leader."

"I care," Dave said. Then he added, "I hate to mention it. But there is something you can do."

"I'm not biting Connor."

I could see that Dave wanted to talk about it further, so I distanced myself. I physically moved myself away from him. I went the short distance into the forest to the dirt bike track where I'd taught Connor to ride. The bike shed had a roof with a small slant so I could sit comfortably on it and look out into the forest. I let my werewolf senses extend until the wall of trees became a 3D map, a window into an endlessly moving world of critters and bugs and the

slow seep of life through the trunks of trees. I let everything disappear except the peace of the forest. After a while, I felt calm again.

I could sense Bren coming from the moment he left the house. When he finally climbed up onto the roof beside me, I said, "You shouldn't have come here. Joseph will know you're coming to talk to me, and he'll be mad."

"He knows where my loyalty lies. I can't hide it." Bren tucked his legs up and rested his head on his knees. He was so huge but permanently stooped and shrunk himself in, hiding his massive frame to get as small as possible. "You should be pack leader," he said quietly.

"I guess I'm just not leader material after all," I said. I could hear the bitterness in my tone, and I tried to calm it down. "I've made my choices. The pack is loyal to Joseph. They've all made their choices." Even my mom. I could have done with some warning about *that*. But it was true—I'd made my choice.

"I don't think it's the right choice," Bren said quietly. He was sending out guilt and pain in waves—that was the burden of an omega, loyalty to the pack leader was so deeply entrenched that even questioning it was hard for Bren. "Joseph's a bully."

"Better than a weakling like me, huh?" I joked.

"You're not a weakling." Bren was so earnest it hurt to look at him.

"That's how they all see me, though. I could have taken charge years ago if I'd just claimed my mate. But I loved a human more than I wanted to be pack leader. I knew what I had to do and I didn't do it. And that makes me weak."

"I feel like this is my fault. If I'd just never talked to you about mating—"

"Then you wouldn't be a very nice person," I cut him off. I threw an arm around his shoulders, and he leaned against me. He was so huge and so heavy; comforting Bren while he leaned against me was like comforting a landslide. "You shouldn't be feeling bad right now, you should be feeling great because you helped me out when I had a question, and you helped me make the best decision of my life."

"What best decision? You've lost your pack," he mumbled.

"But I didn't turn Connor into a mindless Will-worshipping zombie. So maybe I'd be the pack leader. But I'd be the kind of leader who didn't properly care for his mate. That's not the kind of leader I want to be. You helped me see that."

I really wanted to make Bren understand that I appreciated his advice. He lived for the pack and gave everything he could. I felt like he didn't get much thanks, and that he was rarely treated as if he was a real person and not just a walking library.

I wondered if life would have been easier for him as an omega if he hadn't been so large. He just *looked* so strong all the time that no one stopped to check if he was okay. That was just the way it was. And Joseph was the worst—always tormenting Bren to prove his own worth to the pack. Hopefully, he'd stop picking on Bren as much now that he was in charge. Joseph would know he was the top dog so he wouldn't have to prove himself at every moment.

“Can I tell you something?” Bren asked quietly. “What I think?”

“Yeah. Please, do.”

“I think your parents wanted to make you fight Joseph, and that's why they made this decision now. They wanted the whole pack to see a fight so they knew who to be loyal to. You're alpha, you won't ever fully understand what the loyalty is like. It's a very real need and without a strong alpha it's not being satisfied. A fight would let the pack know exactly who to rally behind. United under a strong leader. For years, we've been torn because you haven't been around. And I'm not blaming you for that,” he added quickly. “But that doesn't change anything. We need a leader, and we know your parents are stepping down. Not having someone else to be loyal to is like having a bad toothache all the time.”

“I'm sorry.” I truly was. Not that it would change my decision. But for Bren's sake I wished things could have been different. “I just don't think this was the way to deal with it. My parents could have talked to me. I didn't even know this was coming. I don't think that's good for anyone, and if I was leader I'd never have pulled a stunt like this. But maybe that's because I'm a weakling who thinks about feelings as well as power,” I joked.

“You're not your parents, that's for sure. You'd be a very different kind of leader. I've seen you with the wolves. And I'm sorry I couldn't see you as a leader for werewolves.”

“And I'm sorry for you, with Joseph in charge. I hope he'll be kind to you.”

Bren shrugged. I tasted sadness in the air but mostly resignation. An omega's lot.

I found myself unconsciously looking after him. Would I treat him that way if I didn't know he was omega? Where did werewolf roles end and social

structure or personality come into play? I knew I treated Matt the same way, unthinkingly assuming that he needed protection and caring.

But Matt was happy. Every day he was loved and cuddled, treated with respect and friendship even if he was a follower rather than a leader. My friends weren't like my family, they didn't take advantage of a generous and kind nature. "You don't have to have Joseph as a leader," I said slowly.

Bren looked up, radiating hope. "What?"

"You could come stay with me. Start a new life away from the pack."

His shoulders slumped again. "In the city?"

"Cities. There's a lot of space. And forests and lakes and a river."

"It's not the same. I can't. I'm sorry. I wish I could. But I can't. Jagged Rock is in my soul. I'd rather be hit with sticks here than live in luxury anywhere else."

"I get that," I sighed. It was why I'd take a loser like Joseph for a leader—I couldn't risk losing the mountains. I missed lazy nights in the dorm with Connor or movie marathons with the band so I could run in the mountains at least once a month.

Joseph was going to be my leader, and I was going to have to live with that. It wasn't the life I'd planned when I was a kid. But I would have my best friend Connor. I would have the run of the mountains and I would have my band. I could be happy like that—I had been, for years. And if Connor and the band were happy too, then that was enough for me.

Connor

Will was up in Layton and would be staying the night. So when I heard his footsteps behind me on the way back from my architectural drawing class in the afternoon, I knew it had to be someone else.

Then his arms were around my waist from behind, and he lifted me off the ground to spin me in the air, laughing like I was fifteen again and it was the first day back at school after a summer apart. There was his rumbling laugh and those leather driving gloves, and when I looked toward the spinning ground I saw him sure-footed on the icy ground in the hideous neon hiking boots he wore just for the attention. It was Will, no question.

"Miss me?" he laughed.

“After all of eight hours apart?”

“Yeah, stupid question. I know you did.” He lowered me to the ground. “How were classes?”

“Really great,” I laughed. “How was your family?”

“Really not great. Skipped out on staying the night.” He rolled his eyes and stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets. His shoulders were hunched with a tension that hadn't been there in the morning.

“What's wrong, what happened?”

But instead of answering, he jerked his head over my shoulder. “Incoming snowball fight in three seconds.”

I turned to see Matt, racing across the snowy lawn with a snowball in each of his mittened hands. I just had time to register the sight before both snowballs were in the air and hurtling toward me. I screwed my eyes shut, but only powder fell gently on my face.

I opened my eyes and there was Will, standing in front of me, both hands out to catch the snowballs in mid-air. He winked at me, then bellowed, “Nobody throws snowballs at Connor. This means war!” Then he ducked and grabbed fistfuls of snow as Matt whooped and started running away.

I laughed and started preparing snow missiles of my own. Had I missed Will? You better believe it.

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Chapter Eight

Will

Three months in Minneapolis weren't enough to make me think of it as home. I was just glad that the whole band had wanted to go to college within the state—I would have been miserable if I'd had to catch a plane every time I wanted to visit the mountains. But we all enjoyed driving up to Jagged Rock whenever we could.

For Thanksgiving, we packed everything into Chop's van and headed home for a camping trip. The long ride north was fun with the band around. Chop and Liv and Matt would take turns sitting in the passenger seat with an acoustic guitar, and the rest of us would sing. We'd pass around bags of marshmallows and potato chips or a big bottle of soda. It was our own little karaoke party.

I had a favorite cabin which I often went to with Connor. It had beautiful scenery and gentle inclines which we could run or walk together. It was also convenient for driving—hard to find if you didn't know where it was, but down enough of a trail that you could drive right up to the front door step. Sometimes the whole band would stay there together, sometimes just me and Connor. Sometimes, like this time, we'd all go up together but only me and Connor would stay in the cabin as the others went deeper into the forest.

For me, this trip was all about luxury. I wanted to forget about werewolves and pack hierarchy and Joseph. I just wanted to have fun with my friends. I stuffed the trunk with junk food and pillows and blankets, jammed in around the camping gear to the point of overflowing. I shared the back seat with Connor and Liv and spread a blanket over our knees, resting an arm around Connor's shoulders. I loved seeing him excited. His eyes got bright and clear, like college stress was grime on his eyes that I could polish off with enough smiles.

It was just over a week until the full moon, so I'd be back in the mountains again soon to see my family. But the journey was nowhere near as fun on my own as it was in the backseat with an arm around Connor and a smile on my face.

We all shared a meal on the steps to the cabin, overlooking a frozen lake. Every now and again the conversation would lull, and then the silence would drag as we each got suckered in by the natural music of the woods around us.

After eating, we double checked our phones were working so we could stay in contact. Then Chop, Liv and Matt headed off with their packs. Connor and I settled into chairs on the porch, wearing our fur hoods and wrapped in blankets, Connor with a text book and me with my whittling.

It had been at this exact cabin that Connor and I had met the wolf pups, a little over a year ago. We'd been walking together and I'd heard a wolf in the forest, on its own. I had told Connor to wait on the path while I jogged into the forest to check it was okay.

When I was out of sight I shifted into my half-form, wolf head and throat for easy communication. Wolves are a lot more accepting than humans—if I'd shifted like that in front of a human it would have caused a panic. But the wolf knew it was me no matter what shape I was in.

I knew the wolf and its pack from my year in the forest. I got excited and invited it to meet my mate. I knew he was a human—soft belly and no natural defenses—and of course I wanted to protect him, but the wolf wasn't going to hurt him, and I just wanted someone who understood what I was to meet Connor. Apparently, that's not something werewolves do often because the wolf got all excited, too. After it had finished licking Connor's face and hands, it lead us into the forest, to a hollowed shell of a tree where the pack's newborn pups were. There were just two of them, a brother and sister. The wolves even let Connor climb into the hollow tree and touch the tiny wolves.

He'd stroked the little pups like they were made of gold and looked up at me in amazement. "What we're doing right now?" He kept his voice low. "It's the coolest thing ever."

I'd come back to visit that pack often, getting to know the pups as they grew. I was hoping we'd see them this time. Over the days and nights in the cabin, I kept an eye out for tracks or the sound of wolves nearby. But I couldn't find anything.

Over the phone one night, Liv had told us how they'd found wolf tracks and followed them for half a mile before branching off again. I didn't know if that was *our* pack of wolves or not, but it was more sign of them than I'd seen.

On the phone another night, I asked Chop, "Any sign of wolves?"

"None yet. Liv would know, too. We saw bear tracks, though."

"Can you keep an eye out for wolves? You're my eyes and ears out there."

"Roger that, Captain," she said with only a trace of irony.

I was disappointed. I'd wanted Connor to see how the young wolves were growing. But I figured the pack had followed prey to the edge of their territory and away from our cabin.

On our final day in the cabin, Connor and I woke with the sun and ate breakfast on the cabin steps. Chop called to say they were on their way back to the cabin before we all drove home. The weather was crisp and clear so Connor and I went for a walk to enjoy the forest, our last chance before diving back into the city.

"It's so beautiful," I said as we wound our way through trees between two lakes. I had a pack with food and water, and I was hoping we'd have a meal somewhere nice. "The city's just not the same."

"Like you're not up here all the time anyway," Connor laughed. He was so beautifully relaxed, his arms swinging at his sides. He kept looking up at the sky.

"Yeah, but it's not the same." I tilted my head back so I could see what he was seeing—the clear pale of the sky framed by the white aspen trunks, heavy with snow. Winter was definitely on its way.

"We can come up over the summer," Connor suggested. "Camp out for weeks at a time."

"What would we do with weeks of free time?" I laughed. "Maybe we could get one of those long fantasy computer games everyone talks about, the ones which take more than a hundred hours."

"Or we could patchwork a quilt?"

I could think of a lot more things I'd rather be doing with Connor. It was still over a week until the full moon so I couldn't blame my feelings on my hormones—but Connor's relaxed smile did more for my libido than the werewolf instincts ever had. I licked my lips and tried to think about something, anything, else. The weather was so perfect and the forest around us was a glittering jewel. Everything felt calm and still.

We were walking between lakes, picking our way downhill on a rough deer track that we'd walked and ran down many times before. I bounded down the path, bouncing off the trunks of the aspen and birch trees and imagining I was a living pinball. I swung around to stop an inch in front of Connor. Still breathless, I belted out the first line of one of our band's biggest hits. It was a fun showstopper called "Here's the Sun" with a catchy chorus that got crowds singing even when they didn't know the words.

Connor laughed and blushed, and then he took the bait. He sang with me, his sweet hesitancy and my enthusiasm mingling in the chill air.

“I could howl?” he suggested. “Like you taught me?”

“You remember that?” Fourteen felt like a lifetime ago. It was crazy that it had only been four years since I’d first brought Connor into the Jagged Rock Forest. Back then, I had thought it was only a matter of months before I bit him and claimed him, then took over pack leadership with Connor at my side. I’d introduced him to my parents in their wolf form and I’d taught him to howl a werewolf peace call—it would keep wolves from attacking him and identified him as *mine*, and every time he’d thrown back his head and howled that howl it filled me with pride and delight.

Connor gave a shy smile and stopped walking. He thought for a few seconds then threw his head back and howled. I started in surprise—he was perfect. Pitch-perfect, exactly how I’d taught him.

There was something incredibly warming about Connor remembering. He didn’t have the volume, but if any wolves were nearby they’d clearly understand him. When he was finished, I threw my arm around his shoulders. “I can’t believe you remember that!”

“Of course.” He grinned up at me, then threw his head back and howled again. I couldn’t resist the temptation to join in. We stood there on the worn track in the melting snow and howled like a couple of amateur wolves.

We’d been in a band together for a couple of years, but that howl was the most beautiful music we’d ever created. I smiled at Connor, breathless, and he grinned back. His cheeks were flushed and his gray eyes were wide and clear under his dark brows. He was so stunning with his pale face disappearing into the huge black coat. I could hardly keep myself from leaning close and tasting his sensual pink mouth.

At that moment, I felt two completely opposite things at the exact same time. I felt that I could tell him about werewolves then and there and he’d understand because he was *Connor*, the coolest guy you’d ever meet, who’d understand anything. And at the same time, I felt that I could never, ever have that conversation because he was *Connor*, the most important person in the world to me. Losing him would be worse than death.

So we just stood in the snow and smiled at each other. Like we were just best buddies goofing off by making fake wolf howls. Connor didn’t even know that he was the mate to one extremely conflicted werewolf.

“How was that?” he asked. “Did I get it right?”

“Perfect. Completely perfect. You’re a great student. No wonder you get better grades than me.”

Connor looked down at his hiking boots, like that could hide his happy grin. I could tell how chuffed he was, warm waves of pink and yellow happiness and embarrassment rolling off him like the first roses of spring. “I’m an okay student,” he joked. “You’re just a bad one.”

“You’ve got that right!” I laughed. I threw my arm around his shoulders for a quick hug. His hands squeezed my waist through the puffy layers of jacket, and I had to tilt my head to resist the urge to just kiss him. The thought of kissing him made me ache with longing. But I wasn’t going to take him without knowing he wanted it as much as I did—and not until he understood what I was.

We kept walking down the frost-hardened track. The mood was so happy and peaceful that I was seriously wondering if now was the time to tell him. It was a conversation I didn’t want to have, but when could be more perfect than right there in the woods where I could shift and show him? And Connor was mature, it wasn’t like he was the scared twelve-year-old I’d first met.

But fear was keeping me back, selfish fear saying it was better to keep lying to him if that meant keeping him in my life. And the less selfish fear of saving him the choice between life as a free human or life as a werewolf under Joseph’s thumb.

I was so wrapped up in thought, so focused on my own inner conflict, that I didn’t even sense the wolf until it was close. By the time I realized it was approaching us, it could almost be heard by human ears. So I stopped and held up a finger to my lips. Connor stopped and fell silent.

A few minutes later, the wolf was visible, emerging between the trees on the path in front of us. It was pale gray with a dark mask and stripe down its spine. Connor’s surprise and joy radiated off him like sunshine against my back, but in front of me the wolf was sending signals of fear and panic. It was almost confusing to be caught in the middle of it.

I walked closer to the wolf, picking my steps carefully so I didn’t slip and lunge suddenly. The wolf’s fear increased, and it watched me from wary yellow eyes.

It was one of the pups we'd first met in the hollowed tree trunk—the girl. She knew me and she sort of knew Connor, and that must have been why she approached us. But why was she so scared?

I got within a few paces of the wolf then lowered myself to the ground. I didn't care if it looked weird; I didn't want to frighten the wolf. I rolled onto my back and extended my neck, exposing as much as I could in my winter coat. *Peace! I submit to you! I'm not a threat!* I heard the rustle of Connor's clothing as he did the same, lying down half on the track and half in the snow to mimic my actions.

The wolf came toward us, hackles raised. She sniffed for a long time, wary. There was something wrong. I had never met this kind of fear before. And she didn't seem afraid of Connor, just of me. I could smell the lingering metal tint of blood about her even though her fur was clean. What was wrong?

Finally, she was satisfied. She gave a small whine and nudged my neck with her nose. Then she turned and ran into the woods. A moment later, she was back, looking at us lying on the ground. She turned again. The message was clear. "She wants us to follow her."

"Is it okay? It seems scared," Connor whispered.

"I don't know. She's not hurt. But she is scared. Are you all right with following her off the track?"

"Of course," Connor said without hesitating. "If you're going too."

The wolf set a harsh pace through the trees. Even with all our practice running in the snow, it was a demanding chase. By the time she stopped, both Connor and I had taken our jackets and hats off. I had my pack slung over one shoulder, but even its small weight was irritating.

She stopped in a small clearing where trunks leaned together and kept the ground dry. Debris had piled up to form a natural fort and under it was a wolf. Its back was to us and its fur was dark with blood.

I dropped to my knees and crawled toward the wolf. I made a low growl of introduction, hoping that would be enough and it wouldn't bite me. But I could tell how bad its condition was—its breathing was shallow and wheezing. I rested a hand in its matted fur and felt the trembling of its body.

"What happened to you?" I whispered. "Show me what's wrong." The blood was dried, caked onto its fur. How long had it been here? Where was the

rest of the pack? I couldn't sense wolves anywhere nearby. A fight within the pack?

But as my senses got used to the overwhelming shock of the blood, I picked up on another scent. One so familiar and so unwanted that my stomach heaved. Joseph. Joseph's werewolf scent was on this wolf. Had he attacked it? Why?

For the first time in my life, I wished Connor wasn't there. I wanted to shift into a wolf and communicate clearly with this injured one, earn its trust and find out what was wrong. My curiosity was burning, and I wanted so badly to have made a mistake with the scent.

But my first priority had to be helping this wolf. It was one thing to say fights happened all the time and that was nature's way, but now I'd seen this hurt wolf—now I'd been led to it—it was my duty to help it. Besides, there was nothing natural about a werewolf hurting a wolf just as there would be nothing natural about a werewolf hurting a human. We were protectors, not killers.

“What can I do?” It was Connor, his voice low. He crouched beside me, careful to stay behind me enough that there was a clear space in front of the wolf's nest so it wouldn't feel caged in. *How did he know to do that?* He placed a hand on my shoulder, gloveless after the run in the snow, and his warmth seeped through my thermal top and spread through my whole body. I felt my body relaxing and my swirling thoughts calmed just a little. Why had I wished just a moment ago that he wasn't there?

“I'm going to check its injuries and see if there's anything we can do right here and now. Then we're going to call Chop and see how close they are. We can carry this one back to the car and drive to the vet's.”

“Okay.” He squeezed my shoulder. “How do we check its injuries?”

I carefully ran my hands over the wolf's fur, along its back and across its muzzle. I had to lean forward and reach over it to feel its legs and stomach. “There.” There was a sticky patch of nearly fresh blood on its side and it flinched when I touched one of its legs. “Its front right leg. And there's a wound on its side. Doesn't feel too deep but I'll have to see it to know for sure. Move back a bit, I'm going to slide it out.”

I missed the warmth of Connor's hand as soon as it was gone. I carefully wrapped my arms around the wolf and pulled it out into the clearing. It gave a low growl of warning, but I made my own growl back—*friend!*

The blood in the fur looked worse in the light. I moved around the wolf to check its wounds. Its leg was clearly broken and there was an open wound on its side the size of my spread hand, hair and flesh torn away. Its face looked wrong—one of its eyes was swollen and it might have a dislocated jaw. There was also blood all around its muzzle—not its own. The stink of Joseph was unmistakable. *Good on you, I hope you bit him hard*, I thought absently. I didn't know what had happened, but even if a wolf had gone crazy and attacked a werewolf it still wasn't good to attack the wolf back. Werewolves could heal easily, wolves couldn't. Joseph knew that. When I saw him in a few days, I was going to tear him a new one for this.

“We'll have to get it to the vet, but I think it might be okay,” I said. “I'm no expert. But the wound isn't too deep. It will take a while to heal from this leg, though.”

Connor didn't reply. He was standing up now, leaning against a tree. For a moment, I thought he was panicking and distancing himself. But then I saw his eyes were focused on something outside the clearing. “Will,” he said quietly.

I followed his gaze. There was snow on the ground where the trees didn't shelter it, snow just deep enough to leave a clear print but not deep enough to distort it. There were wolf tracks there but also boot prints. There was also the clear indentation where a human body had fallen over in the snow, flailing with one arm out. And wolf tracks leading toward it.

Oh, no. This didn't look good. It looked a hell of a lot like a wolf attack. There wasn't the scent of humans anywhere, just Joseph. I knew no one had been hurt, but Connor didn't.

Why the hell were wolves attacking Joseph?

“I will understand completely if you don't want to do this, I know it's asking a lot,” I said slowly. “But I need to follow those tracks and find out what happened here. I can move faster alone. I need you to stay here. You can climb a tree if you don't feel safe, I can help you get high above where a wolf could attack.”

Connor swallowed then met my gaze. His eyes were steady and his face was calm even though I could sense the prickling of fear, a clear map of panic in the set of his shoulders and his clenched fists. “Do you think there's a chance of a wolf attack?”

I didn't hesitate. “No, I don't.”

Connor simply said, "Okay." He sat down beside the wolf and put his hands in the fur at its shoulder, stroking slowly like it was a big cat.

I had to blink back a sudden overwhelming rush of emotion. *This boy, this perfect boy...*

I draped my jacket over the wolf. "For warmth." Then I pulled a bottle of water and a bag of trail mix from my bag and put it beside Connor. "I won't be long, but..."

"I might get bored and want snacks." He grinned crookedly. "I'll call Chop and the others?"

"Yeah. Tell them we're going to need to leave in a rush, and leave space in the car to fit a wolf. Or two." The uninjured wolf was keeping a close eye on the one on the ground, and I didn't think they'd want to be separated again. I closed my eyes and breathed past the smell of blood and werewolf and picked up the scent of the wolf on the ground. "You remember those pups we met in the hollowed out tree a year ago?"

"Of course."

"This is them. Brother and sister."

"They remember us?" he asked tentatively.

"They do." And they weren't old enough to want to be separated from their pack for long. So where were the others? I couldn't sense any wolves around, or anything larger than a rabbit. But just in case...

I knelt beside Connor and wrapped my arms around him. "Thanks for this." Under the guise of a hug I rubbed my head against his shoulder, making sure my werewolf scent was on him. *Ally! Friend! At worst, predator. Don't hurt this boy!* Then I looked into his face. "I'll be back soon. If Chop asks, tell her we're safe but don't give her our actual location, okay?"

Connor nodded. As I followed the tracks into the thicker trees and Connor disappeared from view, I heard him call, "Look after yourself, and come back safely."

I ran until the trees grew thick and dark around me, then I stopped to strip and wedge my clothes into a tree branch. I shifted and continued following the trail as a wolf. Giving into my instincts, I followed with my nose rather than my eyes, and the forest floor flew by under my confident paws.

It wasn't long before I found the rest of the pack. Four of them were close together, huddled up. Joseph must have killed most of them while they slept, sweeping in with a blitz attack. The alpha was further away and his skull was completely crushed, his jaw nearly torn away from the rest of his body. He had gone down fighting. Not far from him was his mate. I hoped she'd known that two of her children had survived.

Snow had fallen to cover some of the bodies, but boot prints and paw prints were still visible in the snow. It felt like staging—I could see places where Joseph had deliberately stopped and dropped onto his back like he was miming falling over. I had a sick itching feeling that he was hoping hunters would find this scene and think a human had been attacked.

I had to be misreading it. I had to be confused.

I obliterated the boot prints, kicked around the snow stained with Joseph's blood. Then I sat in the midst of the carnage and howled. My wolf throat opened up and let out all the grief, the sadness of the scene. I howled my misery. I howled my confusion. And my anger, and a promise: I would find out what had happened here and make sure it never happened again.

I followed the track back to Connor, running low with my belly dragging in the snow to smear away all of the boot tracks. If any hunters stumbled on this path they'd find only wolf marks. I didn't want to think about the kind of panic there would be if people thought wolves had hurt a human—there were plenty of hunters who would be keen to shoot a Jagged Rock wolf. It was important to me that wolves weren't hunted in these mountains, and I worked hard to make sure it stayed that way. Maybe Joseph was trying to undermine my authority further by taking that away.

When I got back to the clearing, fully dressed, I'd calmed myself enough to think straight. Joseph had killed almost a whole pack of wolves. Maybe for some ugly political reason, maybe for revenge. But there could be no good reason.

Connor was still sitting and stroking the injured wolf. The other wolf was leaning against Connor. He had an arm thrown over her. It was a touching scene of peace compared to the violent deaths I'd just seen.

Connor looked up. "I heard a howl."

"That was me."

"It was beautiful. Like a song. You could do it on stage, if we turned off your mic."

“I never want to howl like that, ever again.” I knelt down beside the wolf. The one leaning against Connor didn’t move, she just fixed her yellow eyes steadily on me. I asked, “Did you call the others?”

“They were nearly back. They should be at the car before we are.”

“Good. Okay.” I rested my hand on top of my jacket where it covered the wolf. The belly-crawl in the snow had left me cold and numb even through my wolf fur, and as a human my chest and stomach felt like rubber.

I needed to sit down and warm up—werewolves had great healing abilities and I could heat myself, but it took a lot of energy. It was something I could do with effort and focus, or it would happen while I was sleeping when my body could focus on its own. But right now wasn’t the time for focusing on myself.

There was blood on the wolf’s muzzle—Joseph’s blood. It had never occurred to me to find out if werewolf DNA tested as human or wolf or something in between but this wasn’t how I wanted to find out. Maybe there would be panic about a wolf attacking a human or there would be panic about human-wolf hybrids, and I’d be the one who outed werewolves after all these centuries. Neither were good options. I couldn’t risk that blood being tested.

“Connor. I know I’ve already asked a lot from you,” I said. “But I need to ask you to trust me. I need to do something and it’s going to look bad. I can promise you that no one’s been hurt here, but I can’t prove it to you or tell you how I know. Maybe I’ll never be able to. And I need you to never tell anyone about this.” I took a slow breath. “But I need to wash this blood off and get rid of those human footprints.”

“You’re sure no one’s been hurt?” he asked.

“I’m sure.”

“Okay.”

“You trust me?”

“Of course. You’ve got my silence.” He looked at me steadily. “Do you want me to shake on it?”

“No, that’s fine.”

“Do you need my help?”

“Call the clinic in town and see if Bren is working today. If he’s not, tell them he needs to. I can give you his number.”

Connor nodded, fishing out his phone.

“Thank you,” I said, loading the words with as much emotion as I could express. I knew I could trust Connor’s word. I just wished his aura read as calm as his face.

I used my bottled water to wash the blood from the wolf’s muzzle and inside its mouth, holding its jaw open to scrub between its teeth with my fingers. There was a lot of blood and when I’d used up my water I had to use snow to clean the last of the blood from the fur around its face. I warmed the snow in my hands, but it was still barely better than a handful of ice.

When I’d kicked away the boot prints and human-shaped mounds in the surrounding snow, I crouched down and picked the wolf up. My jacket was still draped over him. He was heavy but that was a good sign to me—I’d carried enough dead animals to know the odd way their bodies seemed to lighten when they were dying. “Come on,” I said to Connor, and to the wolf. “It’s a long walk back.”

Connor nodded. He fell silently into step behind me. The uninjured wolf hesitated then followed after us, all her fear gone now. I wondered if she’d been scared at first because I smelled so much like Joseph, and if that fear had gone because of Connor’s gentle way with animals.

It was a long walk back to the cabin, much longer than the sunny walk down. I was still desperately trying to think of reasons why Joseph’s blood would be all around a pack of dead wolves. I hoped the one in my arms would survive. I didn’t let myself think of anything beyond that. I had to focus on this wolf, on keeping it warm and safe on the journey to the animal clinic. I had to get the band back to college in time for classes tomorrow morning. Later, I would confront Joseph. But I wouldn’t let myself think of that when I had other things to organize.

Matt met us on the steps to the cabin. “Are you guys okay? Connor said something about—what the hell!” He stumbled backwards, tripping over the steps as he spotted the wolf in my arms.

“Are you ready to leave?”

“The car’s all packed, yeah.”

I looked at Connor over my shoulder. “Grab your books and things. What you’ll need for the next few days, I can bring the rest back with me later. Just make sure the cabin door’s locked.”

He nodded and jogged into the cabin. The female wolf watched him go but stayed beside me—beside her brother.

Matt was staring at us. “Is that a big dog?”

“No. It’s what you think it is.”

“What the hell,” he mumbled again. He went inside the cabin, walking backwards with his eyes locked on the wolves like they would leap to attack him the moment he looked away. As if early warning would help at all, if wolves attacked him.

When we were alone together I took the chance to talk more freely with the wolves. I dropped to my knees and shifted my vocal cords and my ear canals enough to communicate with them. Starting with the basics—who they were, their role in the pack, the kind of details which were crucial to wolves. Then about what had happened—a surprise attack, a half-man, half-wolf stranger leaping silently from the trees as they slept and beating them with fists like tree branches. Running and being chased.

Connor and Matt emerged from the cabin. Connor had his pack on his back. “Ready.”

Chop and Liv were waiting at the car. The doors were open and Liv was poised to slam them shut after us. Chop was in the driver’s seat with her keys in the ignition. Ready to spring into action the moment we arrived.

Liv’s eyes widened when she saw us, but she didn’t say anything. Connor shoved his bag into the back then slid into the middle seat and Matt climbed into the front seat. I growled a quick command to the sister wolf and she jumped into the boot, settling into the pile of bags. I hoped the band wouldn’t comment on my ability to communicate with wolves.

“Here,” Liv said as she patted down some bags to make the space less lumpy and more comfortable. She moved around the wolf, seemingly unafraid. Then again, she’d grown up as a hunter and had been around wolves and bears plenty of times. I’d never been hunting with her—I hadn’t been hunting at all since Connor had told me he didn’t like it back in middle school. But I suddenly realized that I was missing out on seeing a whole other side of Liv, the practical fearlessness of a true predator.

I slid into the back seat with my precious cargo, moving slow and carefully. Connor reached over to do my seatbelt for me and Liv closed the door. Chop met my eyes in the rearview mirror and nodded, not bothered by her two

additional passengers. She was already starting the car by the time Liv made it into her own seat.

I hadn't noticed how bumpy the road was until I drove it with an armful of damaged animal. The wolf's body trembled constantly and twitched whenever the car juddered. Connor buried his hand in the fur of the wolf's neck. The wolf rested his head in Connor's lap.

"Does he have a name?" Connor asked. It was the first anyone had spoken since I'd told Chop to drive us to the animal clinic in town.

"Yeah. He loves fishing and watching the movement of light on ice in the lake, ever since he was a pup. That's his name—the way the light shimmers on a fish. And he's big and catches big fish. Like," I thought a moment. "Trout Shimmer. And his sister is dappled like sunlight through trees and in the fall she plays in the piles of dead leaves. Her name's Leaf Mold."

"You're making this up," Matt said. He was leaning forward so much he strained against his seat belt, trying to distance himself from the wolves as much as possible.

"Maybe," I said. I wasn't, but it didn't matter at all. "Wolves don't really have names in the same way that humans do. They know who they are, and they know who other wolves are. They're very social. And now their family and their pack is dead, so for a while they won't know who they are. Losing your pack is the worst thing that can happen to a wolf."

No one replied. For a while the only sound was the road, and the fur rustling under Connor's hand.

"Thank you for getting ready so fast, I appreciate it," I said.

"No problem." Chop met my eyes in the rearview mirror. She smiled just a little before focusing back on the road. "You're our leader. You command us, we leap into action." Matt and Liv nodded even though I didn't think Chop was being serious. "Besides, you take us on such great adventures."

"This is one to write home about," Liv agreed.

Trout Shimmer the wolf gave a low whine. His fur was thick with blood and his jaw was swollen from where my thorough cleaning had exacerbated his wounds. I squeezed his flank, willing him to know how sorry I was for all that had happened to him and to the pack. Connor's hand was sticky and red with bloody but he didn't seem to notice. He was just staring at the wolf, stroking it again and again. When I focused on Connor's face, I realized he was crying, tears running silently down his cheeks.

“What’s wrong?” I wished we were alone. Connor was hurting, and I didn’t know how to make it right.

His eyes flicked to mine, the gray rimmed with red. He said quietly, “Who would do this to something so beautiful?”

I swallowed. I didn’t have an answer. Everyone in that car was precious to me, and I wanted to protect each and every one of them. But right in that moment, looking at Connor’s unselfish caring, I wondered if I could ever do enough to deserve his trust and friendship.

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Chapter Nine

Connor

Will carried the injured wolf into the animal clinic as Matt and Chop ran ahead to open doors. I trailed in Will's wake, entering the building just in time to see the stunned look on the receptionist's face turn to fear. "That's a wolf!" She was staring at Leaf Mold who had followed me in. Wolves never came down out of the mountains.

Will ignored her complaint. "I need Bren Flight."

"That's a wolf!"

"Bren Flight," Will repeated. He was holding Trout Shimmer in his arms like the wolf didn't weigh anything, but I knew he was heavy.

Liv nudged my shoulder and nodded at Chop who had her camera out and was taking photos of Will and the wolves. I glared. "What are you doing?"

"Are you kidding?" Chop whispered. "This should be our album cover."

The receptionist was still staring at Leaf Mold. "Wolves aren't like dogs, they're not pets for you to lead around."

"Do you know who I am?" Will's voice rang with authority. I hadn't heard him like that since we were kids and he was trying to impress my parents.

Will's uncle Bren appeared from a back room. "Will. This way." He glanced around at us and nodded his head at me. He held the door open for Will and the wolves. I wondered if I should follow them in, but Bren closed the door before I made up my mind.

We sat in the waiting room. Time passed, minutes turning into hours. The clinic closed and we just kept waiting. We ate junk food and Matt tried to make jokes, but the rest of us were too tired or stressed.

By the time Will came back out, I was so worried I'd twisted myself into knots. I tried to read, but I kept thinking about what had happened in the mountains and worrying about the wolf and Will.

Finally Will emerged, Bren behind him. His uncle waved at us and left the clinic, pulling the door closed after himself and leaving us alone in there.

"How is it?" Chop asked. "What did your uncle say?"

“He’s not sure. He says it’s touch and go.” Will ran a hand through his hair which was already standing on end. I walked up to him and rested my shoulder against his like he always did to me when I was the one who was stressed. Will leaned into me, just a bit. “I’m going to stay the night here,” he said quietly. “You guys should head home.”

“No way. I drove us all here, I’m driving us all back,” Chop said. She crossed her arms and glared at Will.

“How about we all stay the night in town?” I suggested “We can head back in the morning after we know how the wolf is. All of us, together.”

Will nodded. “Okay.” He looked too exhausted to protest. “I’ll make sure I’m ready to leave in time to make it for classes. I’ll call a hotel and get you rooms.”

“We can stay at my parents’ house,” Matt offered.

“Okay,” Will said. “I’ll be staying here.”

“Here, as in in the vet’s clinic?” Matt laughed, but stopped laughing when Will just nodded.

“If I stay then they won’t need to be in cages.”

Chop frowned. “No way are you allowed to be here alone with uncaged wolves.”

“It’s okay. I’ve helped Bren look after injured wolves before. I know what I’m doing.” He kept looking down the corridor like he was unconsciously trying to get back to the injured wolf.

She crossed her arms. “You get that’s crazy, right?”

“Crazy is Will’s middle name,” I said. “I know, I’ve seen his driver’s license.”

Will smiled at me, then quickly threw an arm around my shoulders for a hug.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” His voice was quiet and some of the tenderness was back, the strain of whatever had happened up on the mountain fading from his face just a little. He let go of me and gave quick hugs to everyone, then disappeared into the corridor.

“Will looks a mess,” Liv said quietly. “Is he okay?”

All eyes turned to me. "I don't know," I said. "I hope so. He loved those wolves."

"Still," Chop said. "I can't pretend that Will walking in here wasn't the most badass thing I've ever seen. He's holding a wolf, there's a wolf walking behind him, everyone's freaking out... That was great."

"I hope the wolf's okay," Liv said. "And they catch whoever did this. Is Will going to track it tomorrow?"

"I don't know," I said as all eyes turned to me again. I twisted my arms together under my big snow coat. I felt useless and tired. "Maybe he'll get his whole family on it."

"We should stay and help," Liv said.

I shook my head. "Will likes to be up here with just his family, you know that."

"We're as good at tracking as anyone in his family. I can call Dad, get him to keep an eye out." She was already pulling her phone out of her pocket.

Liv's whole family were hunters, and her parents worked with the Layton wildlife services. "Maybe not yet," I said quickly. "We might disturb the wolf population." *And find whatever Will asked me to never tell anyone, blood on the snow and the shape of a body...* "Let's wait and see what Will says."

"Okay," Liv said. "But I need to be back in the city for classes in the afternoon."

"We'll get back in time," Matt said quietly. "Don't worry. Will will sort everything out."

I smiled at him, appreciating his faith in Will. "Why don't we all just get some sleep," I suggested. "Talk to Will in the morning."

But the more I thought about it, the more I thought I couldn't leave Will alone at the clinic all night. I wouldn't sleep right if I knew I could have tried to help him and didn't. Even if I was worried about what I'd agreed to cover up. Had I covered up a death, or was there someone out there on the mountain starving and freezing to death, and no one would find them because of what we'd done?

The worst of it was, even as those thoughts flicked into my head, they were so easy to push away. I trusted Will. I trusted him completely. I trusted that if he said things weren't how they looked then he was right. I trusted him enough

to not look further even when all the signs pointed to something going terribly wrong. I trusted him. And that was terrifying.

And I didn't want to leave him alone.

So I stood at the doorway of the clinic and waved good-bye to the others. Then I took a deep breath and headed down the dark corridor, not knowing what I'd find at the end.

The room was small with only tables and cages for furniture. Both the wolves were on a table in the middle of the room. Will was shirtless and in the process of pulling his shoes off.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He froze, one boot in his hand. "What are *you* doing? I heard Chop's van leave."

"I'm staying. I can sleep out in another room if you want or something." I tucked my hands into my pockets to keep them from twisting around anxiously. Will's brows were raised in a question. I went on, "I don't want you to be alone."

Now that I'd said it, it sounded lame. It had been a long day. Maybe I should have just gone to the motel and crashed. But all I wanted was to make sure Will was okay. He always looked out for me, and I wanted to look out for him, too. Wherever he went I went, since we were kids. So I tilted my chin up and said, "I can tell you're not happy."

Will took his socks off and put them in his boots on the floor. He was standing there barefoot in a sterile room lined with cages and the two wolves huddled on their table in the middle. He rested his hand on a wolf—Trout Shimmer, the injured male. "Their pack are dead."

"All of them?"

Will nodded. He was looking at the wolves and not at me. "Wolves are social creatures. They shouldn't be alone. Losing their pack is like you losing your family." He shot me a quick grin. "Or maybe worse."

He hoisted himself onto the table, a brief flash of his athletic physique before he settled down beside the wolves. Even in the harsh lighting and weird circumstances. Will was beautiful. When he laid down, it looked like the roses tattooed across his side were a real garden growing around the wolves.

His voice was a low murmur, soothing against the clinical setting. “Imagine spending every day of your life with the same people. You’re always together. And then one day they’re brutally slaughtered in front of you.” Will stroked Trout Shimmer’s fur where it was still matted from chemicals or blood or water. I didn’t know if he was talking to me or to the wolf. “You can’t sleep because you’ve never had to sleep without them there.”

The wolves were huddled together on the table. Leaf Mold, the uninjured wolf, was lying on her side, and Trout Shimmer was pressed close with his muzzle resting on her neck.

Will lay down on his side, spooning his body around the injured wolf. He draped an arm over its neck. His voice was even lower now, and I had to step closer to hear what he was saying. “The pack sleeps together, often with their heads over each other’s necks. I can’t bring their pack back, but I can make sure they’re not alone.”

Then Will met my eyes, and his gaze was blazing fierce over the neck of the wolf. There was so much pain in his face and so much fear, and the way he held the wolf spoke of so much love. I’d never seen him like that, laid raw and emotional with no jokes or smiles.

The creature he was cuddling was a fierce predator—I’d seen its muzzle stained in blood. And I’d stroked it when it was a pup and its teeth were already sharp enough to tear through flesh. But now it was curled into itself and breathing hoarsely, scared and hurt.

I kicked off my shoes and shrugged out of my coat.

“What are you doing?” Will asked when I pulled my shirt off.

“A pack’s more than three, right?” I clambered onto the table nowhere near as gracefully as Will had. I stretched out on my side and wiggled until I was curled around the uninjured wolf.

Leaf Mold lifted her head when I lay beside her, turning one yellow eye to watch me. I nearly stopped breathing as I waited to see if she would rip my throat out. But after a few moments she tilted her head to look at her brother or maybe at Will, and then she laid back down again. My heart was beating quickly with fear.

“Wolves are always touching,” Will said. “They often sleep with their heads on each other’s necks like Shimmer’s doing. Like this.” He nuzzled his face behind the wolf’s ear, his nose in the thicker fur around her neck.

I could feel the strength of the wolf in front of me, and I knew how helpless I would be if she tried to hurt me. Still I moved closer, leaning my head on her shoulder. When she didn't object I carefully placed my arm on her ribs, cuddling her. She let out a low rumble and wiggled her head.

I was ready to pull away, but Will reached out and stroked Leaf's muzzle. "She likes that. She thinks you're really warm."

I was too nervous to laugh. "She told you that, did she? I wish I had her fur, I'm freezing here." I kept my voice very quiet in fear of startling the wolf.

Will grinned. "You'll see. Cuddling with the pack is the warmest you've ever been." He draped his arm over his wolf, careful of the injured leg but otherwise as casual as if he was cuddling a pillow. He caught my elbow with his hand and guided my arm so our forearms were pressed together, cuddling over the bodies of the wolves. The fur was soft on my bare skin, but it was Will's skin that had my attention. "Is that better?"

I nodded awkwardly. I was trying not to get the world's most embarrassingly ill-timed boner.

"Not many people have been this close to a wolf," Will whispered. "Or have the guts to. You're brave."

Even in the ugly clinic light, Will looked like a movie star, dark hair and glittering eyes. I wondered if he knew how beautiful I thought he was, or if I'd ever have the guts to tell him. I didn't feel brave at all. "I just keep telling myself that if the wolf attacks she'll go for you first," I whispered.

"She wouldn't hurt you." His smile was playful, but his tone was completely serious. "She knows you. They met you when they were tiny, and their parents told them about you and me."

"I don't know if wolves work like that." I smiled.

"I do." Will petted Leaf's belly, the back of his hand brushing against my bare skin over and over as he moved. His left forearm wasn't tattooed so it was just his warm butter skin glowing all the more against the unsaturated gray of the wolf's fur. My eyes kept being drawn to the cut lines of his muscles like gills over his side. The elegant roses moved slightly every time he breathed.

"Their pack was all killed," Will said.

I dragged my eyes away from his bare chest, feeling guilty and skeezy. "Are you sure?"

He nodded, his cheek rubbing the wolf's fur. "I saw their bodies. They didn't stand a chance."

"Shot?"

He shook his head. "Not shot. But I know who killed them. I just don't know why."

"What will happen to Leaf Mold and Trout Shimmer?"

"I don't know." Will kept stroking the wolf, and she made little wheezes with every pat almost like a cat purring. "They could come stay at my parent's place until Shimmer's leg is healed."

"Maybe I could visit them?"

"I think they'd like that." Will smiled. He stopped petting Leaf's belly and moved his hand to my elbow again. He gave me a squeeze. "Thank you. For being here, and everything."

"No problem," I whispered. I couldn't hold his gaze when he was looking at me so closely.

Will was right, it did get warm. And that's how we stayed, cuddling wolves until we fell asleep.

Will

I parked outside my parent's house and raced inside without bothering to lock the car. I knew the house was empty, and I only took the time to shuck my clothes before I was out through the living room's sliding doors and running through the snow on four paws. It wasn't the full moon, and no one would expect me to be there, even though the pack met almost every night. I bellowed out a howl to let them know I was coming and the answer was Dave, distant in the mountains.

Running felt good, the warming of my muscles turning to a good ache as I ate up the miles. Nothing beat emotional runs, and I was fueled by pure rage. Hand me a microphone right now and I'd front for a punk band.

I howled like a game of "Marco Polo" to zero in on my pack's location. I'd only get a voice or two in response which should have been a sign, but I didn't even think about it.

The first pack mate I saw was Dave, his back on a tree and his eyes wild in his werewolf form. For just a second, I took the time to appreciate how cool he looked, that teardrop marking on his dark mask with his dark human eyes, the intricate dark tattoos and the huge breadth of his chest disappearing into the thickly furred half-wolf legs. Just a second. Then his panic and fear suffocated me like a cloud of gas. I shifted enough to make human speech. “What’s wrong?”

“They’re all hunting.”

I grunted. I could pick up the presence of their bodies, the smell and sound of werewolf paws on snow. I started running again, but Dave called out to me, “Will! They’re hunting wolves!”

I swore and ran faster. Dave ran behind me, struggling to keep up with his heavier body when he was out of practice in these woods. I was on my own when I finally found my pack—and I was just in time.

There were some of my family in wolf form, spread out in a semicircle facing a rock formation steep enough to form a short cliff face. In front of the cliff was a wolf. I knew it, a three-year-old beta. He was my favorite from his pack, strong but placid and he let pups climb all over him and nip at his ears.

But all that calm was gone now, he was terrified. He tried to scramble up the cliff face, again and again, but his claws couldn’t find purchase. My pack was just standing and watching. As I raced up, the wolf turned around, tail between its legs, and let out a low whine.

Joseph was at the head of the pack, center of the group. He growled as he moved forward with his teeth bared and his ears back. Happiness was wafting off him, and it stank.

I came upon the scene from the side, and the only thing I could think of was stopping it. I raced along the rim of the jagged rock formation and leapt into the air, free falling for a few seconds. In that time, I shifted into a werewolf, body of a human augmented huge and bulging by the strength of a wolf, covered in reddish gray fur. I landed between the wolf and my pack, facing down Joseph.

“Stop this!” I growled.

Joseph twisted into his werewolf form on the ground, then stood up to face me with a smirk. “You have no power here.”

“Try me.”

“I’m the alpha. You can’t tell me what to do.”

“You’re about as alpha as a bumblebee, Jerk-Off,” I growled. It was a silly nickname but it used to get him so mad back at school. And sure enough, he flinched like he’d been slapped. *That’s right. I can boss you around. Always have and always will.* “What are you doing?”

“Hunting. Like werewolves should.”

“This is wrong.”

“Not your call, Willy. You’re in my pack. I tell you what to do.”

“What are you going to do to this wolf?”

“Kill it. Like we kill all the other wolves. They’re here for our sport.”

“They’re here for our safekeeping,” I growled. I looked past him to where the rest of the pack were taking their werewolf form. I memorized every face: These were the ones who were willing to hurt wolves. Cousins and aunts and uncles. My mother and father, looking supremely disinterested. I hated them for that. This loser “took charge” and less than two weeks later they were giving up everything they’d always stood for. If there was ever a time I hated the wolf social rules, it was now. Morality came over blind obedience, any day.

What really got me was Bren. He stood up, shaking and looking sick. There were tears streaming down his face, and he didn’t bother to wipe them off. The wolves were his life, and I could hear his heart breaking. He didn’t want to do this any more than Dave, but he was powerless to resist. He was omega. He followed rules, and he followed the leader. It was as much in his blood as alpha was in mine, and that couldn’t be changed.

But the rest of them, standing there like hunting wolves was nothing, like they enjoyed it? They had a choice. And this was the choice they’d made. “This pack is here to defend wolves, not hunt them.”

“This pack *was* here to defend wolves,” Joseph sneered. “Now it’s my pack. We don’t need wolves in these mountains and we don’t need humans in our town.”

“You’ve done something, haven’t you? Staged wolf attacks on humans?”

“You noticed already?” He looked proud. “This is the start of a war, wolves against humans and werewolves against wolves and humans. We’ll rule these mountains and no one can stop us.”

“You’re serious, right? You’re actually trying to start some kind of war? That’s crazy. Just... Crazy.” I looked around the pack. My mom had her arms

crossed and was watching me impassively. Bren was looking at the ground, tears of anguish freezing on his cheeks. I called out, "Can't you hear what this guy's saying? It makes no sense!"

"We don't need to be cowed by humans anymore, we don't need to be slaves to wolves," Joseph growled. At the back of the pack, Dave appeared, walking with a hand to his side where he had a stitch. He went immediately to Bren and threw an arm around him. It's what I wanted to be doing—comforting rather than challenging. I wanted Joseph to disappear so I could heal the damage he'd caused.

"When have we been cowed by humans? When has any of us been attacked by a wolf or a human? They're not a threat. You're the only threat, Joseph. Making werewolves commit murder for sport. Thinking about your own fun and not the health of your pack or the wolves under your protection."

I stepped backward and held out a hand. The frightened beta wolf came forward and leaned against my side. I rubbed him behind his ears, soothing. "Wolves are our allies. To kill them is petty and pointless—you're just jealous that any creature has as much right to these mountains as you do. You're not an alpha. You're a bully who's put himself in charge."

"This pack put me in charge, and you didn't challenge it." His eyes glowed wolf-yellow.

I thought of Connor, the life we had together that was all that I wanted. All the reasons why I hadn't stepped forward and taken control of the pack. They were all great reasons, and they were all true. That hadn't changed.

But Joseph was killing wolves. And the pack was letting him. It sounded like he wanted to hurt people, too. And I was the only one in a position to stop it.

I wanted a life with Connor, but I wasn't prepared to let others die for it.

"I challenge you," I said.

He started laughing. "You don't stand a chance."

"I challenge you," I repeated.

My dad said quietly, "Will. Look around you. You don't have the pack's loyalty."

It was true. Loyalty flared like a flame and these werewolves barely had embers for me. Dave's faith in me was a roaring furnace and Bren's was strong

and steady. Loyalty came from the wolf beside me, the beta who looked up at me with yellow eyes filled with pain but complete trust. But wolf loyalty wasn't worth a tenth of a werewolf's. And the pack burned for Joseph, and his stupid crazy claims of oppression that would see innocent blood spilled for no reason.

Even my parents were on his side, though barely. I met my mom's eyes, and she said, "You've been away too long. We don't even know who you are."

"You know I'm not a killer," I said.

"You'll never have the pack's loyalty."

"And this jackass will? You'd rather throw away your life's work and kill wolves than trust a born alpha?"

"You're not part of this pack," my dad said. "You haven't been since you met your mate. You look after him, not us. You're a born alpha but you've let your duty down. You've let the pack down."

That stung. And it was true. I had focused on Connor and my band and not on the pack. Then again, I couldn't make myself regret it—there was nothing in the world that would make my band start killing people, or wolves for that matter. And my pack had done it in the blink of an eye. Whose loyalty was worth more?

"I challenge you," I said again, fixing my gaze on Joseph. His smile slipped, his bravado cracking. He was obviously trying to figure out what I had up my sleeve to make such a hopeless challenge. I didn't have a hope, but I was fueled by the simple wish to stop the killing as long as I could. "We'll fight at the full moon to decide pack dominance."

"You can lose at the full moon or you can lose now, doesn't bother me at all." He shrugged.

"If I win, you'll leave this pack. You'll take your followers and you'll leave the state. I won't ever see you in this forest again." That was standard for pack hierarchy, if there was a dispute over dominance then the loser would leave to start their own pack. But that was between alphas, and I wanted to be sure that my crazy cousin understood.

"When I win, you'll leave," he said. "Though you can stay around in my house as my pet and do my laundry, if you want." One of his brothers snickered. I glared at him, and he fell silent at once.

"And you don't hurt any more wolves, or any humans, until we fight." It was only a few days but it was better than nothing. Maybe just enough of a respite for me to try and think of a solution. "Do I have your word?"

“Yeah, whatever,” he said. “You don’t scare me.”

“You don’t hurt any more wolves until after we fight at the full moon,” I growled. I unconsciously squared my shoulders and rose to my full height, alpha confidence rolling off me. Joseph flinched and stepped backward. *There!* That was how you sorted the bullies from the true alphas.

“I was bored of hunting anyway,” he mumbled. Then he pointed at the beta wolf who still stood at my side. “We won’t kill any except this one.”

“This one goes free. It’s under my protection. You won’t hurt any more wolves until after we fight.”

“We’ve already caught it. It’s ours.”

“This wolf is a beta, did you know that? If you were to try and join his pack, he’d rank higher than you.”

“I’m the leader of a werewolf pack, I rank higher than any—”

“Oh, you tell yourself that,” I laughed. It was satisfying to watch Joseph’s face turning red, to provoke him like poking at hot coals. Maybe he had the pack’s loyalty, but that didn’t mean he had mine. I would never think of Joseph as anything more than a weakling and a bully. “Are you killing wolves because you know you couldn’t rule them? They won’t give you their loyalty and you hate that?”

“Wolf loyalty is worthless! They are prey!” He was aiming for menacing, but he sounded like a kid throwing a tantrum.

“This wolf you’re going to kill is very calm and strong. Did you know that? He loves to look after new pups and spends hours playing with them. His territory has a lot of exposed rock faces, and he takes the pups there to sleep in the sun. That’s what he’s known as—something like, Sunlit Rock. That’s the creature you want to kill for fun. And you think he’s just prey?”

I was hoping I could get through Joseph’s bloodlust, show him the mistake he was making. But he spat on the ground and said, “It’s a wolf. It runs fast. A good hunt. That’s all I care about. Hey, that human you hang out with runs pretty fast, I wonder if he’d—”

“Stop,” I growled. “You want to stop talking right now.”

And Joseph did. He smirked, but he shut up.

My blood was boiling, but I had to push my emotions down. Joseph was going for an easy rise. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of seeing that

he got to me. So I didn't let myself think about Connor, didn't let myself imagine a pack of werewolves hunting him as he ran for his life. No. This wasn't about Connor. This was about Sunlit Rock, about the life of a wolf and its pack and everything that Joseph wanted to destroy in the name of sport.

"Come on," I said, nudging the beta wolf at my side. I started to lead him away from the werewolves. When Joseph stepped forward, I glared at him. "This wolf goes free."

"No!"

I ducked and growled a message to the wolf. *Run! Get away! It's not safe here, run and don't come back.*

The wolf turned stubborn eyes toward me and huffed a disagreement. He wanted to stay. He wanted to fight.

This isn't your fight. You can't win.

He kept glaring at me, anger and fear and defiance in every line of his body.

The full moon, I growled. I'll fight for you at the full moon. Werewolf on werewolf. There's nothing you can do, but I can fight for you. I stood up as I growled, *Go! Run!*

This time Sunlit Rock obeyed. No one moved to stop him, all eyes turning to Joseph.

"You'll regret defying me," Joseph growled.

"You'll regret going back on our agreement. No wolves will be hurt before we fight."

"Then we fight now!" He was on me before I realized what was happening. I wasn't ready to take a hit, and I went over backwards. I caught myself on my elbows, the hard ground and sharp rocks cutting into my exposed arms. Joseph kicked me in the side with all his might. His force was insane. It was like I'd been hit with solid rock. I felt ribs breaking as the breath was knocked out of me. I tried to climb to my feet, but he kicked me again, in the face. Then his hands were at my neck, and he slammed me back to the ground, his weight on me and his fists and legs flying.

"Enough!" It was my mom's voice, and her hands that dragged us apart. She had a hand on Joseph's chest and held us separated. He had the gall to swing at her, and she responded with a booming growl. "This is not right! You agreed to a fight at the full moon."

“I’m pack leader,” Joseph snapped. “I do what I want.”

“Honesty means more to a pack leader than anyone else. You gave your word.”

“You’re just protecting him because he’s your son,” Joseph snarled.

“You gave your word,” she repeated. There was nothing quite like my mom in full alpha mode.

Joseph backed down, ducking his head. “Whatever. I’m going to beat him anyway.”

Mom turned to me like she was going to say something, but I didn’t want to hear it. I climbed to my feet and pushed past her, ignoring the pain in my legs. Everything hurt. It felt like I had broken glass instead of bones. How much of my body was broken? Oh, god. What had I just set myself up for? I couldn’t win a fight with Joseph. This was proof.

As I staggered out of the clearing, I passed Bren. His eyes were wide as he watched me walk past. “Offer’s still open,” I growled. “You can come live with me in the city.”

He shook his head, tears frozen on his cheeks. These damn mountains and the effect they had on us. I knew how he felt, how difficult it was to think of leaving here.

But right then all I wanted was to get back to the city. Because that was where Connor was. And I needed to feel close to him.

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Chapter Ten

Connor

I woke up in the dark. Through the window, I saw snow falling. It was still dark. I'd been woken by the sound of the door opening.

I sat up in bed, rubbing my face. "You're home early."

"Connor," he said. "I'm so glad to be home." There was something strange in his voice, something rough that wasn't a whisper. I couldn't see anything in the room except the corner of the drawer by the window, the hint of a silhouette.

"Are you all right?"

"I don't know." A shuffling sound and a thud—his bag sliding to the ground. Then a rustling as he came over and settled into the chair beside my bed. He lowered his voice now that he was closer, but I could still hear something was wrong. I'd known him for years, I knew his voice. A single word could tell me the mood he was in. And right now something was wrong. He said quietly, "I think I've messed up. I don't know."

"What happened? Whatever it is, I can help."

He made a little choking sound. What was happening? Was he crying? I was fuzzy with sleep, and I didn't function well without coffee. My brain was sluggish even though my heart was racing and my body was on high alert. But it wasn't the first time I'd focused all of my attention on listening for Will to make the slightest sound. I needed to know what was happening so I could help, any way I could. I thought about turning the light on, even though the air in the room was cold and I didn't want to get out of my bed.

I was just about to get up when Will finally spoke again.

"Can I get into bed with you?"

"What?" I squawked.

All those nights he slept beside me on his chair, just a stretch of an arm or a million light-years out of my reach. How badly I'd wanted him to ask. All the *Brokeback* fantasies, the porn scenarios I'd gone through in my head, the endless dreams of just casually saying, "It's cold, why don't you come over here and get comfortable?" and Will just climbing into my bed and realizing he was in love with me, too.

And now the man of my dreams was asking the question of my dreams, and I froze up and clutched the blanket to my face like I had to hide my blush in the darkness.

“It’s okay,” Will said quickly. “I just thought... I could really use a friend.”

And he thought I was saying no to him? I was so glad for the darkness because I knew my eyes would be bugging out of my face as I tried to say yes as fast as I could, firing my words out like a machine gun.

“No! Will. I mean. Yes. Of course.” I pulled the blanket aside and slid closer to the wall. Just a few moments to run through a mental checklist of horrors: Did I smell, would my breath smell, were there food crumbs in my bed? Then the mattress shifted as Will’s weight slid in beside me. My mind just went blank.

“Tell me if you need anything,” I mumbled. “Water or... Anything.” I had no idea how to share my bed. I slid down so I was lying on my back, but my limbs felt stiff and uncooperative.

The bed was tiny and Will’s shoulder was brushing mine. He reached over me to tuck the blanket in—Will’s arm, across my body like we were lovers cuddling. My ears were ringing, and I seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. But after he tucked the blanket in his arm stayed there, hand resting on my shoulder. He was heavier than I imagined, his body so solid even when only his arm was over me. I just had to focus on my lungs, making sure I kept pulling air in and out of my body.

“Thanks.” Just one word but it came out as that ultra-low Will growl that reached right into my bones and squeezed them to jelly. His fingers were at the collar of my night shirt, his hand curled close to my skin. I shifted, a nervous twitch controlled by my desire and not my mind, and it brought the back of fingers against my bare skin for just a moment. There was a rough touch of wool—he was wearing his gloves?

“Are you okay?” Will whispered.

I jerked my head in a nod. I was the one who was meant to be looking after him, in his weird mood. And all I could think about was how close his body was to mine.

I couldn’t sleep. Even when I calmed down enough to just breathe like a normal person, I couldn’t sleep. I watched snowflakes getting caught in the wind outside our window and thought about all the things which had led me to

this moment in this bed with this man. My head was buzzing with his closeness and every tiny movement of his body sent waves of shock through me. But as the long minutes drew out in the silent room, my fear and nerves dissolved. I was feeling happy, a huge and calm happiness that pumped through my veins and reached every part of my body every second. Will was asleep, and I didn't have to worry about what he thought of me, what he'd see on my face if I let my happiness show. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I didn't have to hide how I was feeling. And all I was feeling was happy.

Will's body was warm in my bed. But as the night ticked on he started feeling warmer. At first, I thought I was imagining it. But he just kept getting hotter and hotter, waves of heat radiating off him and scorching my side. His arm over my chest was like a band of burning iron. My skin itched and sweat trickled down my neck, down my ribs and thighs.

I blinked and shook my head and hoped I was dreaming, that I was stuck in a hypnagogic dream state or some kind of sleep paralysis where I was imagining my best friend's body burning up like the sun. But I was definitely awake. And I couldn't lie through it. I lay still for as long as I could, but his sleeping heat was hurting me.

I pushed Will off and sat up, throwing the blanket off. I could feel where he'd been touching me and it wasn't just the sweet awareness of his closeness that I usually felt. There was a line of tender skin from my right armpit to left collarbone and my skin felt hot to the touch.

Will didn't sound sleepy at all. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Nothing. You're just really hot." The double entendre slipped out without me realizing it, and I instantly wished I could pull the words back.

"I'm sorry. You're right." He climbed out of the bed. There was a loud thunk as his feet hit the ground—his boots. No wonder he was hot, he was sleeping in his boots. "Must be the room after my car, change of climate and all that." A long zipper sounded. He was wearing a jacket as well?

Will had been in my bed, and I'd kicked him out. I started wondering if I'd made it up, if his body heat had been bearable and I was overreacting. I was still sweating like I'd just been for a jog in the summer. I pulled my shirt off and felt my chest. There was a line of puffy tender skin which told me I hadn't been making anything up. The blanket was crisp and warm, and I kicked it off.

Will paced the small room. He was wearing his nylon snow pants, I could tell by the slow egg-cracking sound they made with every step. We had

matching pairs—mine were charcoal gray, Will's were glossy black like leather. He went to the window and leaned his head against the glass. His silhouette was cast in pale blue, shirtless so when he raised his arm over his head his ribs caught the light like sand dunes at night. He slid the window as high as it would go and stuck his arms out as far as the elbow.

There was something wrong with his silhouette. His ribs looked funny, crooked. I'd sneaked enough glances over the years to know.

“What's wrong Will?”

His teeth glinted as he grinned at me over his shoulder. “You're right. I'm too hot. I just need to cool off.”

“It's snowing.”

“I can shut the window?”

“No, that's fine.” There wasn't much wind, at least not enough to reach me. The cool of the room was a relief after Will's unexpected blazing heat. I laid back down and closed my eyes. My chest felt better now, the welt gone and my skin not tender anymore.

Will closed the window and locked it with a click. There was the egg shell rustle of his pants until he settled into his chair and dropped his shoes onto the ground one after another. Even when he was acting scary weird, I still found comfort in that sound. It meant the end of the day, settling in.

I didn't expect Will to get back into my bed. But he did, sliding onto the mattress and wrapping his arm over me again. My chest was bare and so was his arm. “How's that?” he whispered.

“Cold.” Even in a whisper my voice squeaked. He was still wearing his gloves, the wool rough on my waist.

“Can I ask you something?”

I nodded. I was lying as still as possible. I didn't want to move and scare Will off.

“What would happen if I couldn't live here anymore?”

“In the dorms?”

“In this state. What if I had to move away?”

“You love it here!”

“I know.” Will’s hand moved confidently, even in the dark. He grasped my hand and linked our fingers together. His words were a gentle rumble which trembled through my body. “But what if I had to move? Would you come with me?”

I wanted to ask him what was wrong. I wanted to know, and I wanted to never know. What had he and Dave gotten into? But he was asking for help, like this. He said he needed a friend. And right now that meant terrifying hypothetical scenarios.

I kept my voice as steady as possible when a weird-acting Will was in my bed and touching me. “Of course I’d come with you. We could move west. There are plenty of lakes and forests. Or go up to Canada, even. I could start looking at colleges and apply for a transfer, everything can be done online so we wouldn’t even have to drive anywhere until moving day. We could get a dorm just like this. Or a house, even. The band would love it, we can have a road trip and a few months as this glamorous band from out of state.”

I didn’t know what else to say, what else he wanted me to say. I was taking some marketing with my degree and it was something I had trouble with: Figure out what your client wants and give it to them. I just had what I had, and hoped that was good enough.

Maybe it was. Will stayed curled up against me, silent, warm but not blazing hot. We were still holding hands. I didn’t move to pull my blanket back up.

Gray dawn found us still lying on my bed. As the light lifted, I let myself look at Will. His face was tilted down so I didn’t have to worry that he’d catch me staring. The arm over my chest was dark with tattoos, a slab of color against my pale skin.

I was thinking that he’d got a new tattoo on his ribs, but as the light increased I realized it wasn’t a tattoo—it was bruising. Dark purple and red ringed with green. His whole side was a mottled bruise. And the shape was wrong, jagged. It looked like he had a broken rib.

What had happened to him?

As the room lightened, the bruises became more obvious. They were dull and looked old. I wasn’t an expert in bruises, but I’d seen enough to know that I was looking at the final stages of a really severe beating. What had happened—something last week? After a gig? I tried to think if he’d slipped out for a while,

if I'd seen anyone suspicious hanging around, if he'd walked with a limp or winced in pain at any point. I couldn't remember seeing anything odd. How had my best friend gotten so badly hurt without me noticing?

"What time is it? I'll put coffee on," Will said.

I started, quickly looking away. "How long have you been awake?"

"Pretty much since I burned you," he laughed. "You want coffee?"

"No. Maybe. I think I might try and get more sleep." Lying in Will's arms felt even more charged in the light of day. I wondered if I was going to smell like him, if my bed would smell like him. I wished he didn't have to be beaten before I got the chance to find out.

Will let me go and rolled onto his back. His side pressed into me, hip to shoulder. Distancing himself, maybe. He was still so close. "Can't believe you don't want coffee. Not the Connor I know."

"What happened to you?" I burst out. I'd just seen his face. It was as bruised as his ribs, swollen and mottled like a rotting apple.

"Nothing." He sat up and threw his legs over the side of the bed. "Thanks for letting me crash here." With his back to me the bruising looked even worse.

"Will. What happened? That doesn't look like nothing."

"Yeah. I got in the way of a bear. It's nothing serious."

"Oh my god." I sat up. "Have you seen a doctor?"

"It's fine. Looks worse than it is. It hardly hurts."

"I think you've got broken ribs."

"What? No, I'm fine." He chuckled.

I didn't join in. His stupid infectious laughter could wait. "Will. I'm worried. Please go to a doctor."

He'd been leaning over the bed to search the floor for his clothes. He stopped now and twisted around to look at me, half in and half out of his jacket. "Connor. You're being a good friend, but it's okay."

"It's not okay." I couldn't even look him in the eyes. His face was tenderized mince. I'd spent the night touching myself imagining he was there, and then hyperventilating when he was. I didn't feel at all like a good friend right then.

Will sighed. "Let's make a deal. I'll go take a shower, and when I come back if you're still worried I'll go to the doctor. How's that sound?"

I gritted my teeth. I hadn't imagined the damage to Will's side, but he was grinning at me like nothing was wrong. It was confusing at the least. "You promise?"

"I promise."

I nodded. A few minutes wouldn't make him hurt any worse.

I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes while Will was showering. I wanted to sleep so I would be in a better place to deal with the day, but I couldn't get my mind to stop spinning. Will had lain in this bed. His head had been on this pillow. The thought wasn't any less intoxicating when I knew that that head had been bruised and beaten. His body had been beside mine—bruised, yes. But bare. He'd laid himself bare beside me.

I was getting aroused and calculating how long Will would be in the shower. I was interrupted by a movement on the mattress—a vibrating by my leg. When I pushed the sheet aside I found Will's phone. It must have been in his pocket when he'd lain down and it must have fallen out.

Dave was calling. I answered without thinking. "Hello?"

"Hey. Connor?"

"Yeah."

"Will there?"

"He's in the shower."

"Oh. Tell him to call me back?"

Dave's voice was already fading when I snapped out his name. "Dave! What happened?" I pressed the phone tight to my ear, so close I could hear my own pulse. But I could hear Dave's breathing even if he wasn't talking. "Will's hurt and he won't tell me what happened."

"Will's fine," Dave chuckled. I'd always liked Dave, he was relaxed and friendly when the rest of his family were permanently keyed up. But in that moment I hated him.

"Have you seen his ribs? You should have made him go to a doctor."

"Whoa. Hey. He's fine. Maybe he looks worse than he is. You know how Will gets."

“What do you mean?”

“He pushes himself hard. You know that. He just got a bit excited running and took a few too many falls. That’s never going to stop him, though.” Dave laughed again. It sounded forced.

“I guess you’re right.” My head was spinning worse than ever, and I had to struggle to keep my tone light. “I’ll tell him you called.”

“You do that, Con. See you soon.”

I sat with Will’s phone in my lap and visualized the words “running and took too many falls” and “got in the way of a bear”. I desperately tried to find overlap, some way I could have misheard them. Neither lines made sense and they didn’t work with each other.

Will was hiding something. Dave was in on it. And it had got Will hurt.

Whatever it was, I was going to find out.

Will

I looked at myself in the mirror before I got in the shower. Damn. Connor had been right—I looked a mess. But maybe Connor hadn’t seen *that* much. Maybe I could convince him that it had just been a trick of the light. That should be easy, since I’d be fully healed by the time I got back into the room.

I shouldn’t have taken the risk, though. I should have slept in my car. I should have healed myself overnight. I should have stayed in my own damn bed. But *Connor*. In a month I might lose everything, and I needed so badly to be reminded of my good thing. The best thing I had ever known. I needed to believe in a future where I could lose everything and still have him. I needed to believe that he could just pick up his life and move across state lines. That I could lose everything and nothing at once. I needed, just once, to know what it was to hold him.

But I hated that holding him had come at the price of having him see me like this. Was the warmth of his body in my arms worth the fear in his voice when he saw me?

I turned the shower on cold and stood naked under it. I reached inside myself to the werewolf part, the part of me that wasn’t wolf and wasn’t human and didn’t answer to any laws of nature. I focused on healing. I watched my ribs sliding back into place, the skin knitting until it was smooth, the blood and

darkness washing away until there was no sign that there had ever been bruises at all. My skin heated from the inside out. That prickling burn that felt like a tattoo gun under my skin trying to drill out. The cold water hissed and some turned to steam as it touched me.

For a moment, I remembered falling asleep with Connor, letting my guard down and letting myself be weak just once. What if he hadn't pushed me away? What if my sleeping self had just kept healing and I'd burned right through him like molten lead? The thought made me sick. Too uncomfortably close to true.

I could tell something was wrong the moment I entered the dorm. My eyes went to Connor automatically, as always. He was sitting on his bed with his back against the wall, and he wasn't looking at me. I could practically feel the unhappiness rolling off him like arctic wind.

I fanned a hand in front of my face and cracked a cocky grin. "Hey, look. No bruises."

Connor didn't look up. "What happened?"

"Wasn't as bad as it looked. Must have been dried mud or something, I got it smeared on my face and..." I stopped talking. Connor had crossed his arms over his chest and tucked his head into his body.

Connor met my eyes and the breath was knocked out of me. I'd been reading him as unhappy. I couldn't handle the anguish I saw in his face, that beautiful face twisted with fear and anger. I would have given anything to never have to see him like that.

"Will," he said quietly. "Just tell me what happened."

I was just standing there in the middle of the room, holding a bundle of my clothes. I wanted to go to him, but I was afraid he'd flinch or shy away. "I'm not hurt. You don't have to worry."

"Tell me what happened," he repeated. I couldn't think of a lie, so I just said nothing as he sat on his bed and watched me. Finally, he said, "Your brother called. Your stories didn't line up. Do you normally check them with each other before you get home?"

I flinched. "Connor..."

"What happened? Just tell me." Connor was the one who closed the distance between us. He crossed the floor in a T-shirt and the thermal pants he slept in. His heart was beating fast, but he'd calmed his expression. It was still there in his eyes, though. The pain and confusion.

And even then, even seeing Connor messed up because I lied to him, I was mostly thinking that I should have got my stories straight with Dave before I left. I'd been lying to the man I loved so long that all I could think of was more lies to tell him.

“Just tell me what happened,” he said quietly. “Whatever you're into, I can help. Is it drugs? I don't care if it's illegal. I just want to help. Let me help you.”

Connor was so sincere. I had to look away. Like I needed any more reminder that he was a better person than I. I knew that he meant it—and it was funny, to think of him trying to help me with Joseph, but I knew he would. That was just who Connor was. Endlessly helpful. I didn't want to lie to him. I didn't want to tell him the truth and risk losing him. I didn't want to tell him the truth *now* when it felt like using him as a strategy move.

“Please don't push me,” I muttered.

Connor hesitated, biting his lip. Then he shook his head. “You're hurting. I can't let you get hurt. You have to tell me what's happening. This isn't a secret you should bear on your own.”

He wasn't *ready*. But there he was, up in my face and asking for it. I knew right then and there that I would never think he was ready. I would never be satisfied that telling him wasn't going to cause more harm than good. But I didn't have a choice. What else was I going to do? Never tell him? Get my ass whipped by Joseph and have to leave, or become alpha to a broken pack—and either way, never have my mate know? “I have to ask you something.”

“Anything.”

“When you said you'd move, did you mean that?”

“Yes.” No hesitation. “I can start looking at college transfers right now. If you need to get out, we'll get out. Anything.”

I looked at the snowy lawn so I wouldn't have to look at Connor. “But you love it here.”

“Only because you do.” He was silent a few moments. Then he said, “Will. Tell me what's wrong. I can help. The whole band will help. Just tell me what's wrong.”

I looked him straight in his gray eyes. “I'm a werewolf.”

Chapter Eleven

Connor

Will was waiting for me to say something. I searched my mind for an appropriate response. I said carefully, “What do you mean when you say ‘werewolf’?”

“I can turn into a wolf. And I can turn into a sort of half-wolf half-human.”

“Okay.” He seemed serious. Was this the set-up to a joke? “How did you become a werewolf?”

“I was born one.”

“So your parents...?”

“They’re both werewolves. And Dave. And Joseph—his whole family.”

“Okay.” Ninety percent certain he was joking.

Will took my hands in his. Even exhausted and confused and wrung out with emotions, I still forgot everything just feeling the tingling from his skin on mine. Without his gloves, I could feel his rough callouses, the dry skin. Strong woodworker hands.

“That’s why I’m so fast and strong,” Will said. “I’m a werewolf.” His voice was dipping lower. His breath was on my face. How could he be so sexy and so crazy at the same time?

“You’re so fast and strong because you work out all the time,” I corrected.

“I work out all the time because I’m a werewolf. Too much energy.”

I snorted. Too much energy. That much I believed.

I was still waiting for the punch line. I was just hoping it was a joke. Will was sounding all too serious.

“Would you like to see?” he offered. “I can show you.”

“No.” I tugged my hands out of Will’s and walked to the window. I rested my head on the cool glass, mirroring his posture from this morning. Had that only been a few hours ago? When I’d woken with his body weirdly hot against mine. I should be studying right now. Soon people would be waking up and going for breakfast, starting their days. I should be with them.

How crazy was it that I'd still rather be here? I'd rather have my best friend acting weird than go a day without him. I'd rather face off with whoever had hurt him. I'd rather have him telling me that he was a werewolf and his whole extended family were werewolves than go a single day without him.

Love's weird.

Will had gone to sit on his chair, but I could see him from the corner of my eye. His head was in his hands and his elbows on his knees. Where had the idea of werewolves come from? He didn't even watch werewolf movies. I can show you. No. I didn't want to see him fail. I didn't want to stand there and watch him trying to do something impossible. I'd take on drug lords or mafia bosses or loan sharks or whatever he'd got himself into. Break my knee caps. Just don't make me watch Will fail.

"I know it's frightening," he said.

I shook my head. "It's not that."

"I shouldn't have said anything."

Yeah, I thought. You really shouldn't have.

Couldn't we just go back to the part where I lay in bed and he cuddled me?

But I couldn't turn back time. And I couldn't just walk away and forget what Will was saying. I didn't believe him. But it was Will. I had to give him a chance. So I said, "Okay. Show me."

Will came to the window. The light was full on him, white-gray throwing his features into contrast. Maybe he was crazy, but right then I wished I was a painter so I could permanently record how beautiful he was.

"I'll stop if you're scared," he said. "I can leave. Whatever you want. Just say the word."

He waited until I nodded. Then he held out his arm, the left arm with tattoos which only reached his elbow so his forearm was bare. I focused on that smooth skin. Will took a slow breath. And then, as I watched, his skin started to move. Like goosebumps which just kept growing.

His skin boiled and grew bumps like a pot of rice without enough water. But the bumps burst into hairs and in a second Will's bare arm was covered in steel gray fur. Above the elbow he was just human skin, the thick line-work of his curling tattoo. But from elbow to wrist he was covered in fur.

I didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say.

“Scared?” Will asked. His voice was just a husk. I could tell how important it was to him that I say something, but I couldn't look at him and I couldn't say a word. I just mutely shook my head.

Will held both his hands out, palm down. The fingernails grew out, thickened, curved into claws. He rotated his hands so I could see them. I had been watching his hands for years, sneaking glances and indulging in fantasies of those calloused woodworker's hands on my body. I watched those beautiful hands become paws.

I pressed my forehead onto the window and closed my eyes. Maybe if I didn't look at him I could forget what I'd just seen. I thought, I don't believe you. I don't believe you. The words echoed around in my head, but I was yelling into an empty room. I wasn't going to change a thing.

“Connor?” he husked.

“I'm not scared,” I said. It was important that Will knew that. Whatever else I was feeling, it wasn't fear. I was confused. I was dizzy and sick and tired.

I was so in love with my best friend that he could literally transform into a monster in front of me and I'd still be worried about the pain in his voice and how I could make it go away.

“You're...” Where to even begin? I licked my lips. “You're really a werewolf, then? Not just hairy?”

Will laughed. “Definitely a werewolf. Look at this.” He lifted up his shirt. There was his perfect hairless belly, the hard swell of his abs and his flat stomach contoured by the sharp V of his hips. He held his shirt all the way up to show off his right pec, the tiny pink nipple. I knew the hours he put into that body. He used to pose like that all the time when we were younger, goading me to touch him and tell him how ripped he was. He didn't show off like that anymore, but I still remembered exactly how his body felt. I burned it deeper into my brain with every silent secret jerk session.

Will tapped his side. “All healed, see? Super werewolf healing. It heats my body up, though. That's why I got so hot last night.”

I nodded. I wished I'd thought to pull on some heavier pants. I tried to angle surreptitiously closer to the wall to hide my interest. I didn't know which was less appropriate—Will grinning like it was a joke as he told me he was a werewolf, or me being aroused.

He dropped his shirt back down and started unbuttoning his pants. I barely had time to be shocked before he turned around and lowered his pants, showing

me the whole of his backside. “Look at this.” He had a tail, growing just above the crack of his ass. “See? Full-on wolf.”

“How do you hide that in your pants?” I asked weakly.

“People always ask that when they see me naked,” he quipped. He winked at me over his shoulder.

The tail shrunk back into his body, disappearing like it had never been there at all. For a moment, I was just staring at Will’s bare ass before he pulled his pants back on.

I leaned my head on the window to watch students down below, making their way to classes. I should be down there. Was it weird that even when Will was making me question my own sanity, I’d still rather be with him than anywhere else in the world?

“You doing okay?” he asked. “Want to touch?”

“Touch what?”

“I don’t know. Anything. I’ve never done this before. Here.” He held up his arm and the fur grew out again. “Touch it.”

I stroked the underside of Will’s forearm with one finger. The fur felt soft. Fur. On my best friend’s body. I was a hard time making any thoughts stick, they just kept floating out of my head. “Soft,” I said aloud. The wolf in the back of Matt’s car had felt coarse. But I knew how satin Will’s skin felt—go figure even his werewolf fur was perfect. I wanted to keep touching him. “Why’s your fur softer than that wolf we rescued?”

“I eat well every day and never have to forage for food. I look after myself. Also I use conditioner. So my hair is amazing.”

“No kidding,” I laughed. “I’ve always been jealous of your great hair.”

“Plus this is my undercoat. See?” More hair sprouted from Will’s arm, growing up around my fingers like I was just a lawn ornament in a time-lapsed garden. This hair was dark red-brown, it looked familiar but I couldn’t figure out why.

I processed something he’d just said. “You’ve never told anyone before?”

“Of course not.” Will chuckled. “Mom and Dad and Dave already know, obviously. You’re the only other person I share secrets with.” He smiled tenderly. “You know that.”

I was still touching his arm. I took my hand away and tried to put it into my pocket but of course my pajama thermals didn't have pockets. I just crossed my arms over my chest and looked out the window again. I was such a mess of emotions I didn't know what to do with myself, where to look. Will was just so close and so open right then. I was scared of what might come out of my mouth if I kept looking into his honest eyes.

"You doing okay?" he asked again after a while.

I nodded. "It's just a lot."

"You want me to leave, give you some time alone?"

I shook my head.

"So what do you want? I mean it that I haven't done this with anyone before. I didn't know how you'd react. I can't even imagine what you're feeling." He left a little silence which I couldn't fill. I was tired with a confused boner. That wasn't the kind of feeling he probably wanted me to talk about.

"Anyway," he said. "If you have any questions, or... Whatever you want to do, I'm fine with that. If you want me to leave or want me to stay. Just say the word."

I could feel his gaze on me. I reached around inside my echoing head and tried to figure out what I wanted. "I want to sleep," I said.

"Okay."

I went to my bed and got under the covers, pulling the blanket up to my neck with my T-shirt still on. Will stayed standing where I'd left him, his fur sucked magically back into his body so he looked all human again. I couldn't read his expression before he pulled the curtain closed.

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"You said you can turn into a wolf?"

"Yeah."

"Could you show me that?"

I expected Will to open the curtain again but he didn't. There was a series of rustling sounds and then quiet footfalls on the carpet. I could see something, a low shape moving toward me. It could have been a dog.

I was just thinking that he might not have turned into a wolf, that he could have faked it and just walked tippy-toes to trick me in the dark. Then I felt something pressing down the mattress like a hand pressing down on the side of it. I put my hand out from under the covers. Something cold and wet touched my fingers then there was warm breath and the rasp of a thin tongue.

“How do I know you’re even a wolf,” I mumbled. “You might just be licking my hand.” And even that was an attractive image to my Will-obsessed mind.

Will rumbled a low growl which reached down my spine. I kept my hand still even when my monkey brain was warning me to tuck myself under the covers and hide from the monster beside my bed. He moved his face along my hand to show me the muzzle, the short fur and tough bone structure. That definitely wasn’t Will’s face. He nudged into my hand, and I felt the nubs of canine ears under my fingers. I scratched instinctively, and Will gave another growl.

“This is surreal,” I whispered. “I’m scratching behind your ears.” To be fair I could have done that to human Will. It was the kind of thing I could actually imagine him asking for, when he was in a playful mood. But the ears I was scratching were very definitely not human.

I was trying to reconcile what I was touching with what I knew my best friend looked like and my brain just kept giving up. Will was a werewolf. Werewolves were real, and Will was one of them. It felt like my thoughts were folding in on themselves. “I’m going to go to sleep, okay?” Maybe when I woke up this wouldn’t have happened. Or maybe I’d wake up to Chop telling me she was a vampire. Anything could happen.

Will

I was kind of expecting Connor to scream. Or faint.

But when I told him I was a werewolf, he just took it like it was nothing.

I figured that was shock. He was sleeping it off and any moment he was going to wake up, look at the wolf on the chair next to him and scream until someone carried him off to an asylum.

But damned if it didn’t feel good to be lying beside him as a wolf.

He slept restlessly, thrashing around and letting out small moans. Connor usually slept quietly, and I knew it was my fault that his sleep was so disturbed.

Already I was wishing I hadn't told him. I hated lying to him, but I also hated him knowing that his best friend was a monster.

When he woke up it was with a start, a sudden shocking intake of breath. He rolled out of bed, and I stayed quietly on the chair, as still as possible, even trying to keep my breathing quiet so I wouldn't freak him. He went to the door and tested the lock. Then he paced to the window and pulled the curtains open. He stayed there a long time, his back against the window, his arms crossed on his chest and his eyes on me.

"I'm going to grab some lunch," he said at last. "You'll be here when I get back?"

I nodded my head but, not knowing how obvious that was in my wolf form, I gave a little woof of assent too.

Connor came back rosy-cheeked and panting, arms full of snacks. "I brought beef jerky," he said as he poured everything onto the bed. "I didn't know what you eat, so..."

My chuckle came out as a wheezy bark. Two hours in my wolf form and Connor had already decided I should eat nothing but meat. Or meat and junk food, if the cartons of chocolate mousse on his bed were anything to go on. Maybe treating me like a dog was his way of dealing with the werewolf knowledge.

Connor extended a strip of the dried meat. "I've seen those photos of wolves eating," he said. "You better not take my hand off."

I bit the meat gingerly, jaws well away from Connor's hand. Maybe he thought it was a joke—he didn't even know how terrified I was of accidentally hurting him with his fragile human body which couldn't heal properly.

The meat was tough and there was no way I could neatly bite a chunk off. I gripped with my teeth and tugged backward, but Connor kept holding his side. We tugged against each other, fighting for the strip of meat. Connor laughed, his cheeks flushed.

I'd been raised knowing that it was an alpha's place to give out food. In my wolf form, I was used to everyone being subservient to me. Connor didn't even realize how radical it was to be the one choosing what I ate and playfully fighting with me over it. I wanted Joseph to see him now, this boy he kept calling an omega. How many people would fight for food with a wolf, let alone an alpha wolf?

I stared up at Connor's laughing face and wondered if it would make any difference to him. He wasn't raised as a werewolf with all the social structure which made sense for wolves but not for humans. Wolf social hierarchy didn't bring into account art or creativity. Joseph looked at Connor and saw that he was quiet, that he was shy and would never pick a fight. And to him that spelled out omega because he hadn't learned to see life as anything more than a fight for dominance, a constant struggle for survival where empathy was only needed toward your own pack.

It was so strange that I'd once thought the same way. I'd once lived to fight and prove my role as an alpha. But that had changed, and now that I was facing that fight, I wasn't sure if I wanted to win. There were so many lives relying on me, and for them I would fight for the death. But for myself? I'd rather be here in a tiny dorm room with Connor laughing, than free in the majesty of the snow-covered mountains if it meant Connor being afraid of me.

Connor had changed me. Meeting him had changed everything about who I was and what I valued. And I had to believe that was more than a mating bond.

No, it wasn't just that Connor was my mate. There was something about Connor, his quiet strength, his endless kindness and his unquestioning loyalty. His sharp mind and shy smile. Connor had entered my life like ice wind from the mountains.

I'd loved him before I'd known he was my mate. Maybe that was me being slow on the uptake, the mating bond kicking in the moment I met him, and me just not noticing. But I truly believed that I would have loved Connor even if he wasn't my mate. I couldn't imagine a single reality in which I could have met Connor and not loved him.

And I didn't know for certain that I wouldn't have changed if I hadn't met him. Dave was proof that I could have grown up in a werewolf family, surrounded by alpha's children, and not want a werewolf life. But Connor was the reason I questioned everything I'd been raised to believe. Connor had taught me strength beyond fighting. He'd taught me the beauty of music and of quiet, patient hard work. Joseph would never see that, and his life was worse for it.

I playfully fought for food with my best friend, my mate, my true love. And as I looked at his flushed laughing face, the force of my love hit me like the blast of ice wind that Connor often brought to mind. The man I loved was truly seeing me, for the first time. He knew I was a werewolf. And he was still locked alone in a room with me and still laughing with me.

The relief was more intense than anything I could have imagined, like a physical force lifting from my shoulders. I didn't have to hide anymore. Connor knew. Not everything, but he knew enough. And he still smiled at me.

He let go of the beef jerky, laughing. I trapped it between my paw and the chair so I could rip a chunk off. The meat was salty, not something I liked much as a human. But on my wolf tongue it was amazing.

Connor held up a bright polystyrene cup. "Do wolves eat instant noodles? No? How about cheesecake?" He looked down at the pile of junk food on the bed then back at me. I could see that he was scared, but it was a small emotion, pushed far beneath something warm and furry, that intense human mix of emotions that was always hard to read.

Friendship was in there, happiness, and awe—I'd seen that awe on his face in the backseat of Chop's van. Connor obviously found my wolf form beautiful. But there was more to it than that. There was a warm fuzzy emotion that flickered over his face and in his scent. I'd seen it on him when we were younger, sneaking pizza into his bedroom, listening to music on headphones so his parents wouldn't hear and find out I was there. Connor was warm with the glow of sharing in a secret.

He ripped open a container of mousse and laid it out on the chair for me like a bowl of dog food, then lay on the bed to eat his noodles. "It's all vending machine food, sorry. I didn't want to go into the cafeteria in case I saw anyone who knew I was skipping class."

Connor kept his textbooks on the table above the head of his bed. He picked one up and lay on his back with the book braced on his knees, reading as he scooped up noodles. I sat on my handmade bench and licked chocolate foam from a plastic bowl with my flexible tongue and wondered if this was the weirdest thing a werewolf had ever done.

"You know what I keep thinking?" Connor said suddenly. He put a finger on his page to hold his place as he looked over at me. "You're naked under that fur, right? So if anyone barges in here you're going to have to either stay as a wolf and scare the whole dorm, or you're going to have to shift back into a naked dude and be the laughing stock of the whole dorm." He went back to reading, and I craned my neck to double check the door was locked.

I lay lazily, enjoying being in my wolf form inside. And enjoying watching Connor through my wolf eyes. He was concentrating on his book, a pencil in one hand, which he'd alternately suck in his mouth or tap against his thigh.

Sometimes he'd pause and stare at the page, eyes unmoving. Sometimes when he did that his hand would move faster as he drummed out a secret beat. I knew he was listening to songs inside his head, whether they were old ones or ones he was composing. But I couldn't guess what else was going on in his head.

Finally, he put his book aside and sat up. "I have something to ask you, and I need you to be human so you can answer it."

I'd already started shifting before I remembered that all my clothes were lying on the other side of the room. I transformed into my human shape, lying naked facedown on the wooden bench seat.

I glanced at Connor. He was staring at my back, his eyes huge and surprised. I started laughing. Connor blinked and looked down, a blush rising up his cheeks. "You could have, like, given yourself a fur loin cloth or something," he mumbled.

"Oh what, you want me to lie around with a super hairy ass? No thanks. You'd take pictures and put them on the internet."

"I wouldn't!" He protested. "But now you mention it, maybe I'll take photos of you with a tail and hand them out at your twenty-first." A giggle escaped his lips.

I stayed lying on my stomach, partly to protect Connor from more embarrassment at my bare body and partly to hide the semi I got from hearing him laugh like that. Laughter was good. Any of the questions he was about to ask would be better if he was in a good mood.

Connor balled up his blanket and handed it to me, carefully looking away. I sat up with it draped around me like a toga. "So what did you want to ask?"

He bit his lip. Even though I was decent now he still wasn't looking at me. Uh oh. I ran through a list of worst-case scenario werewolf questions. But I wanted to answer truthfully, even if it sucked. Just please, don't ask anything about mating. Not yet. Not when things are going so well.

He reached over his head to his chest of drawers. He held out the photo I'd given him on the first day of school when we were sixteen. It was a picture of me, howling out my heartache. "Is this you?" he asked.

Of all the questions I'd imagined, that hadn't even entered my mind. "Yeah."

Connor looked at the photo intently. "I never realized."

“Of course not,” I laughed.

He shook his head. He was tracing the photo, fingertips on the wolf's muzzle—my muzzle—like he'd been touching me this morning. “I can't believe I didn't figure it out.” His voice was quiet like he was talking more to himself than to me. “I see you every day. And you're still so you as a wolf. Were you hoping I'd figure it out?”

“No! Of course not. How could you possibly figure that I was a werewolf because I gave you a photo of a wolf? I gave you shoes with teddy bears on them, does that make me secretly a teddy bear?” I was hoping to get a laugh from him but he hardly smiled.

When he looked up at me his clear gray eyes were wide and vulnerable. “If you didn't want me to figure it out, why did you give me a photo of you as a wolf?”

Oh. A few moments ago I'd been promising myself I'd give him an honest answer. So I did. “I guess I wanted you to have something of me, like I could watch over you even when I wasn't there. And I felt bad about not telling you, so I guess a part of me did want you to know even if you didn't know. I wanted you to have that part of me even if you didn't know it was a part of me.”

Connor stared at the picture and didn't say anything.

“Sorry if that's weird,” I said. “It's part of the werewolf thing. I can be overprotective. I have this huge urge to look after my friends. I just want to be around you all the time.” Because you're my friend. Yeah. That's why.

Connor grinned, “No kidding. That's a werewolf thing? I thought it was just a Will thing.”

“Kinda both. I just need to know you're safe. Sorry if that's weird.”

Connor drummed his pencil on his knee, staring at the wall. “Nah, it's not weird. I loved it when you slept in my room back at school. I sleep better knowing you're here.” He wrinkled his nose and laughed. “Plus you'd back off if I ever asked you to, or if one of the band asked you to, right?”

“Of course.”

“So you're fine. Maybe werewolves just make really great friends.” He put the photo back, stretching his arms over his head so his shirt rode up and exposed a few inches of pale abdomen and the dark lines of the tattoo under his navel. I double checked I wasn't making a tent in my blanket toga.

Connor sat back down, holding his sketchbook. It was in a leather folder which I'd given him. I'd commissioned it from one of my cousins who worked leather. It was deer hide, stained dark brown nearly black. Connor could reuse that folder, swapping in new sketchbooks as he used up the pages.

He gingerly opened it and flipped to the very back where there was a section that folded out—there was one at the front and at the back, a place to store important documents. Connor hesitated, looking at the book, then he held it out. “I never showed you because I didn’t know if it was clingy or something. But now I want you to know how much it means to me to have photos of you.”

The folding pages were lined with photos in neat orderly rows. Photos of the band, on stage and practicing, stuff that Chop and I put on our social media sites. The glamor shots Dad had done for us before college, our publicity shots looking moody and distant with the woods in the background. And photos of me and Connor, spanning the six years of our friendship. Selfies from camping and movie nights. The one Connor took of me grimacing under Dave’s needle when I was getting my full sleeve done. Our prom photos—one goofy picture, one serious. My yearbook photo, complete with corny quote about friendship and leadership.

“Wow,” I breathed.

“Is it weird? Silly? I shouldn’t have shown you.” Connor anxiously reached out for the book.

I held it out to him but kept holding onto it so our hands were connected by the book. I met his eyes. “This is really sweet, Connor. It’s amazing.”

He smiled and tucked the book to his chest, hugging it. I didn’t think he was aware of the gesture. “It’s us,” he said. “I like to be reminded of us. I never thought I’d have great friends like you guys. When I’m stressed or sad I like to be reminded of that.” Connor smiled up at me and the shy happiness on his face made my heart melt. He said quietly, “Maybe I could have another picture of you as a wolf? To put in here?”

“Of course.” The words came out rough because my throat was thick with emotion.

Connor nodded happily and went back to his book. I sat a while watching clouds through the window, then finally got up in my portable blanket marquee and went to my clothes.

“Can I ask you something else?” Connor called.

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Was it a werewolf that beat you up last night?”

I hesitated. How much would he want to know, and how would I go about explaining it? “Yes.”

Connor looked at me steadily from where he lay on his bed. He said simply, “I want to hurt the guy who hurt you. But how am I going to beat up a werewolf?”

I laughed. Connor grinned. “I’m serious,” he said.

“I know.” Like I was going to let him have a go at Joseph.

But I knew he meant it. Connor the human, wanting to defend me from werewolves. He would never stop inventing new reasons for me to love him.

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Chapter Twelve

Connor

We ate dinner at my favorite diner. Burgers with salad in lots of different colors and generous baskets of fries. We'd eaten there on our very first night in the city. That was as much why it was my favorite as the food. We'd sit in the same narrow booth as the first time and get dizzy and giddy on free soda refills, and it always felt like the first night of a big adventure with my best friend.

That was exactly how it felt after Will told me he was a werewolf. We were taking another big adventure together. Minneapolis had turned out okay; maybe a best friend as a werewolf would be great.

The streets were cold after the warm comfort of the diner. We half-ran to stay warm, laughing and trying to knock each other over on the ice—trying, but not really trying.

Will stopped us on the path up to our dorm. He tilted his head to the side. Between the large sign for the dorm and tree line there was a stretch of clear snow. Still beautiful and white and not trod into the ugly gray mush that lined the sidewalk. "Our snow," Will said.

Will loved finding the freshest most beautiful snow he could and ruining it by jumping into it. He dropped his bag on the path. "Come on!"

I lowered my bag carefully down beside his and pulled my beanie lower over my head. The next moment, a snowball hit me in the chest. It was packed lightly so it disintegrated on impact. I laughed. "I thought you didn't want people throwing snowballs at me?"

"I'm not people." Will was sprawled on his back, grinning hugely.

I threw myself into the snow, face-first. It wasn't deep enough for a good dive, and I landed hard on my elbows. Will was beside me in an instant. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," I laughed. I waited until Will dropped down onto his back, then I grabbed a handful of snow and dropped it onto his face. "Payback!"

Will shook the snow out of his face, laughing. "That's why I'm not afraid to throw snowballs at you, see? I know you can stand up for yourself." He tugged his hat off and ruffled his hands through his hair. "You got snow down my collar, you know? That's going to melt and I'll have a cold neck."

“Maybe you’ll think of that next time you go to attack me.”

Will spread his arms out. I thought he was going to make a snow angel, but instead he just lay there with his arms wide. I mimicked his action. It felt strangely pleasant to lie on my back in the cold and damp. Or maybe it wasn’t that strange—Will was beside me. We were all alone in our own private patch of snow. I watched my breath frost then disappear against the light-shot sky.

His hand touched mine through my glove. He fumbled until his fingers were against the bare skin of my wrist. I thought he was retaliating, his hands were as cold as snow down my sleeve. But he held his hand there, just touching. Intimate.

“Connor?”

“Yes?”

“You’re really fine with this?”

My pulse was speeding up from his hand on me, my breath coming quicker. What was he asking? “With what?”

“With me being a werewolf. I wasn’t looking forward to telling you. I was afraid you’d think I was a monster.”

“I’d never think that. I know you.” We were only a few feet from a major sidewalk, but it still felt like we were so alone. Will, whispering secrets to me in the dark. He needed my reassurance and it was easy to give. “You’ve been my best friend forever. And I guess you’ve been a werewolf as long as I’ve known you. I didn’t think you were a monster before I knew, and I don’t now.”

“I can’t believe this, you’re so cool with it. Wow, Connor. I’m so glad you guys moved to Layton.” Will’s voice was husky and low. His fingers moving on my wrist made me shiver more than the cold did. He whispered, “I’d be lost without you.”

“Other way around. I’d be lost without you, Will.” I could sense him looking at me but I was afraid of what his expression would be—or what mine was. I knew my feelings must be painted out on my face, how my heart was squeezing from having him touching me and whispering sweet things to me. I knew I couldn’t look at him and hide it.

Will squeezed my wrist then let go. “Thank god you like wolves, huh?” His voice was back to normal—cocky, half-laughing. I’d almost think I’d imagined the moment of intense intimacy, the vulnerability he’d shown. Except my whole arm was still tingling from his touch.

“Yeah.” I stuck my hands in the pockets of my coat. “At least now I understand how you get such great photos. You’ve got inside agents to help you pose all those wolves.”

“Being a werewolf doesn’t make you a good photographer. I’m naturally talented.”

“Anyone could take beautiful photos if they had wolves pose for them.”

“Anyone, huh?” Will rolled over and jabbed me in the ribs with one finger. I hardly felt it through my thick coat.

“Definitely. Even me.”

“Prove it.” He was grinning down at me, the campus street lamp behind him so he had a halo.

“You want me to take a beautiful photo?” His chest was pressed into my arm. I remembered holding him in bed last night. It made it harder to breathe.

“Go on,” he teased.

“Okay.” My phone was in my pocket so I pulled it out and set it to camera. My hand was trembling slightly. “One beautiful photograph.”

As I sighted on Will his expression changed. The mischief faded away so his smile was sincere and sweet. Beautiful. I took the photo.

I couldn’t think of anything witty to say. I couldn’t find any voice to say it in.

“You think I’m beautiful?” The husk was back in Will’s voice.

I just nodded mutely. He was leaning in so close. I was lying in the snow but I didn’t even feel it anymore.

“You think I’m pretty?”

I nodded. My throat felt swollen. Will’s face was in shadow, a dark smear under the streetlight’s corona.

He jabbed my ribs again then clambered on top of me, lodging his hands under my armpits so he could tickle me even under the layers of coat. “You think I’m beautiful, huh?”

I snorted with laughter. “I meant handsome!” Trying to get away from him just made more melting snow get under my clothing. “You’re very manly!”

“Damn straight!” He bellowed. “I’m handsome and beautiful!”

I managed to wedge my hands into his coat so I could tickle him right back. Will was hiccuping with laughter, struggling to talk. "I'm sexy, too!"

"Yep," I agreed. I could clamp my arms down so he couldn't get at me, but that made it harder for me to get at him. Tickle fights were a war, and they needed strategy. I could only half-concentrate when I was being distracted by Will's weight on my body and his legs tangling with mine as we thrashed around. "You're every groupie's dream boy."

"I'm a werewolf," Will said. He suddenly stopped tickling me. It was like he had only just realized what the words meant, like they were a shock to him. The playfulness drained away, and he was still.

He placed a hand on either side of my head, gloves pressing into the snow. Our legs were tangled, his weight on his knees but also on my chest so I could feel the solid strength of him. When we weren't play-fighting, that felt much more intimate.

I looked up at him along the column of his arms. His head was angled so the light caught his face. His eyes were narrowed and his brow furrowed and his lips were partly open.

"You're a werewolf," I whispered.

Will nodded. He lowered himself closer, closer, until I could see the rich brown of his eyes. I'd been close to him so many times, at sleepovers and camping and fooling around. But this didn't feel like any of those times.

He smelled sweet from the endless sodas at my favorite restaurant. The place we went to before starting big adventures.

There in our own patch of snow he gave me the smile that I'd never seen him give anyone else. Natural and honest, sweet. He was close to me, in every way. He'd told me his big secret. I needed to tell him mine. I love you, Will Flight!

I opened my mouth. To tell him, maybe, or to beg him to kiss me.

Then there was a shout from the sidewalk. "You there! Break it up!"

Will jerked away from me. "He thinks we're a couple stealing alone time," he chuckled. There was a bright beam of light on us—a flashlight from the campus security.

Will stood up, whacking the snow off his jacket. "Hey man. Nothing to worry about here."

The security guard was just standing on the sidewalk, watching us. He focused the light on Will's face. "Will? Is that you?"

I snorted and dropped my head back into the snow. Go figure. Will knew everyone. I wondered if he'd run into this guard while leaving campus for his monthly family trips. Or if he did get caught having alone time with someone special—he definitely never brought anyone back to our dorm. He never talked about anyone, either. The last we'd talked about sex at all was back in high school when he'd told me he was a virgin.

In my dreams, he was saving himself, just waiting for the day when he suddenly realized he was madly in love and lust with his best friend. But I'd heard the screams of the adoring crowd at our gigs, I knew how many fans loved our band's sexy lead singer. It was far too much to imagine that he'd never been interested in any of the offers.

But as for the other part of my dream, that Will would suddenly realize he wanted me? There had been looks, glances. Hugs that lingered. Unnecessary touches. But that was Will, he was touchy-feely with everyone. And I was his best friend. In all of the time we spent together, it made sense that he'd give me enough innocent looks or innocent touches that I'd misinterpret.

But lying in the snow on top of me, gazing down at my face, getting closer and closer... That wasn't something friends just did with each other, right? Or was it? What had almost happened? Had I imagined that he was about to kiss me? I couldn't get my breathing right and my head was spinning from more than just sugar.

What had almost happened?

"You coming?" Will called. I heard him say quietly to his security guard friend, "He's not drunk, honest. He just likes the snow a lot."

Will and his big mouth. Even confused and aroused, I still moved instinctively to follow him. Like I was the dog, coming when I was called.

I scooped a handful of snow as I stood up. Will waved goodbye to his security buddy and we fell into step. When we were alone again on the sidewalk, our dorm looming huge and safe in front of us, I ground the wet snow into the back of Will's neck.

He screamed and leaped forward like I'd burned him, clutched at his neck and dragged the jacket off like it was live rats I'd dropped down his collar. "Connor! You're evil!"

I nudged him with my shoulder. As we reached the dorm, he nudged me back, angling to knock me into the door frame. We entered the building laughing, forgetting the weirdness of the moment in the snow.

Will

I lay on my back on my bed, head propped up on my chest of drawers and my hands on my belly as I worked at a carving, whittling a little wolf. I made them to sell at Mom's shop, and I'd work on them whenever I had a spare moment. It calmed me to work with my hands and the soft white wood from a fallen aspen log.

I needed to relax. Connor was obviously stressed, and I didn't know how to change that. I felt like making some joke, goofing around. But he was totally focused on the glossy textbook propped on his knees. He was just on the other side of the dorm room, but he might as well have been a hundred miles away.

I listened to a comedy podcast and tried to keep my mind on the voices, to just watch my hands moving in front of me. Because if I let my mind wander, it would wander right out to the scuffed up patch of snow where Connor had looked at me in that way that made my insides hot and cold and tingling, all at the same time. He'd looked at me in a way that had nothing to do with mating bonds and everything to do with raw human lust.

But the look had gone as quickly as it had arrived, and I was left wondering if I hadn't just imagined the whole thing, if it wasn't just a quirk of the light. And I couldn't let myself think about it because if I did then I'd get hit with the urge to walk over to Connor and just demand that he give me an answer, just tell me if that need in his pale gray eyes was real or a trick of the light.

Who was I kidding? I couldn't think about anything else. I just had to keep promising myself that I'd stay on my bed like a good boy and not give into the temptation to get closer to him.

"What are you laughing at?" Connor asked.

I took the excuse to look at him. He was on his bed with his back resting on the wall and his socked feet toward me. The room was warm enough that he was in short sleeves. Tattooed flames licked up his arm, begging me to come over there and touch them. "Just listening to a podcast," I said. "I didn't know I was laughing out loud. Is it bugging you?"

"No, that's okay. It must be funny." He smiled at me.

That smile was all it took. I was off my bed and walking over to his, plopping down on my chair before my brain even had time to catch up. Screw self-control and keeping my distance, Connor smiled at me! “You want to listen, too?”

“Sure.”

My tablet speakers were janked, so I had to listen with headphones. I settled on my chair and held one of the ear buds out to Connor. “Maybe we could listen to your music next, or something? You must be listening to something new.”

“Chop recommended this new jazz group, they’re amazing,” Connor said. He propped up pillows and got his back against his chest of drawers then took the ear bud from me. “I’ve got to finish figuring out which tracks I like best, though.”

“Cool.” Connor was always finding new music, but he’d only share his absolute favorites with me. It was weird, maybe, but I loved knowing that my music library was one hundred percent Connor-approved.

When we were settled down side-by-side, I knew exactly why I’d told myself I shouldn’t. The cables for my earphones weren’t long so Connor had to sit right at the edge of his bed. I could smell him so clearly, his fresh shower scent and the mint of his toothpaste. I couldn’t keep my eyes on my carving because Connor was absently drumming his pencil on his knee, the muscles in his arm flexing so his flames seemed to leap and dance.

I put my knife and sculpture away in the ledge under my chair to keep from getting so distracted by Connor that I slipped and cut myself. I closed my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest—so I could bask in the scent of Connor, radiate in the warmth of his closeness, but make sure I didn’t actually touch him.

“You know,” he said after a while. “If you’re just going to lie there and take a nap, you could do it as a wolf.”

“You want to see me as a wolf again?”

“Yeah. You’ve got to keep showing me or I’ll think you made this whole thing up.”

I laughed. I tugged my shirt off and unbuttoned my pants—werewolf prep 101. I sneaked a glance at Connor just before I shifted. He was holding my tablet, focused on the screen and not my bare chest. I’d sort of been hoping

he'd be staring at me so I could stop wondering if I'd just imagined his look in the snow.

He did stare when I shifted, shaking his head and blinking his eyes fast. I'd grown up with it so to me it was natural, but I could imagine how shocking it must look to a human.

I settled back down on my stomach and rested my head on my paws. Connor carefully put in the earphones, laughing when it kept slipping out before he settled for resting it beside my ear. There was no way to tell him that my hearing was much better as a wolf and, besides, I enjoyed his hands in my fur.

He scratched softly behind my ear. "Your fur's so soft," he whispered. "Your ears are cute."

Cute. And handsome. And beautiful. I was having a good day receiving compliments. Connor always joked about me having a big ego, and there he was fueling it.

When the podcast finished, Connor turned off the main light so the room was only lit by his bedside lamp. He lounged back in the bed as he went through the music on my tablet and picked out some smooth jazz for us to listen to. Romantic lighting and romantic music... Connor was getting me so worked up, and he didn't even know it.

After he put the earphone back in my ear, his hand stayed on my fur. He turned a page in his book with one hand, and the other played with the fur on my neck and shoulder. I'd never been stroked before, the closest I'd come was rough cleanings from my mom or gestures from other wolves like a head over my neck or nudge of shoulders. But being stroked by a human hand was a totally new experience. I was being petted. And I loved it.

I didn't think Connor was even aware of what he was doing until he muttered, "You're just like a big dog, really. You're a weredog."

I could show him my fangs and prove him wrong in an instant. But my pride wasn't that fragile. I settled for licking his hand.

"Ew." He wrinkled his nose but he didn't take his hand away. I licked him again. He gave me a little scratch under my chin, and I whined in pleasure. It felt so good. Not even sexual, just warm and sweet and nice. Who knew, maybe I was just a big dog after all.

Connor put his book down on the pillow and took our earphones out. "Come here." He patted a spot on the bed beside him.

I climbed onto the bed, then right onto Connor's side and sat down on top of him. He started laughing and I could feel it, vibrating through my whole body until I was wuffling a laugh as well. I licked Connor's smiling face, and he kept laughing, pushing at my muzzle and nudging my paws out of the way. I licked all the harder, swiping at his hands and neck with my long tongue until he was squirming with laughter.

"Oh man, I can't believe you're licking me!" He paused then giggled harder. "What if someone walks past and hears me saying that? Stop licking me, Will! Get out of here with your giant weird tongue!"

While he was giggling and distracted, I took the opportunity to lick his nose.

"I knew it. I knew you were just a giant dog." Connor stopped fighting me and just scratched behind my neck instead. I rested my head on his chest and grunted my approval.

"You know what I keep wondering?" he asked idly. "Where's the rest of you go? I can't figure it out. You're a big wolf but you still must weigh, what, half as much as you do when you're a person? No way could you put all your weight on me usually. There must be all these Will bits which just disappear when you become a wolf. Where do they go? Newton would love to meet you."

I'd been a wolf among wolves and werewolves, but I'd never been a wolf around humans. I'd never realized how badly I could want to communicate, and how impossible it would be. I wanted to tell Connor that I couldn't believe he'd accepted that I was a werewolf, and then worried about details.

I rolled off Connor's chest and lay on the bed beside him. He propped his book up on the pillow above my head. Then, as naturally as anything, he draped an arm over me. His hand was on my front leg just behind my paw, stroking my fur slowly. I closed my eyes and relaxed into him, letting my side press against Connor's.

All my feelings from before were still there, all the arousal and need, but they simmered beneath the warm feeling of love and closeness. I just wanted to enjoy being near my best friend, the love of my life. Maybe I felt more for him than he did for me, maybe he could never love me in the way that I wanted. But there would be time enough to worry about that later, because right then all that mattered to both of us was that I was lying in his arms, and he was stroking my paw.

“I feel like I should be scared,” Connor whispered. In my wolf form, I could pick up every word clearly even when he whispered. “You’re a wolf. Even you think I should be scared of you. But I’m not. I just find it comforting.”

I knew I had enough to be worrying about, that there was a whole world of trouble outside and my life was falling apart around me, I had to face the consequences of decisions I’d made, but this time it was so much more than just myself depending on the choices I made.

And yet none of that seemed to matter. I was floating in the bliss of Connor’s nearness. He’d seen me for the first time, and he didn’t mind.

If I were human right then I would be smiling. Instead, I did the closest wolf equivalent—I draped my head over his neck so my muzzle and the length of my throat was resting on him. It was how I slept with other wolves and I hoped Connor would understand the trust and intimacy of it—I will protect you while you sleep, and I trust you to protect me!

Connor nuzzled into the fur of my neck, his arm still around me. It was just the two of us, a werewolf and a human, alone in a half-lit dorm room. It was as close to heaven as I could imagine.

The light was off when I woke up, but that didn’t matter with a wolf’s night vision. I’d fallen asleep on Connor’s bed with his arm around me, lulled into a blissful sleep. At some point, Connor had fallen asleep too and now he was sprawled out with his back touching my side. Maybe he was used to taking up the whole bed and that was why he was pressed so close, but I imagined it was just because he enjoyed the closeness.

The heavy textbook Connor had been reading was still open on the pillow over my head. It had migrated during the night and now teetered dangerously close to falling off the bed. I didn’t want it to fall loudly to the floor and wake Connor up like a gunshot so I slid out of the bed and shifted back into my human form to grab the book.

The chill of the dorm room was worse on bare skin than fur, and so much worse after the warmth of my best friend’s body. I closed his book and put it on his chest of drawers then wrapped my own blanket around my waist and padded to the bathroom.

When I got back into our room, Connor’s lazy sprawl over the bed had changed into a tight ball against the cold. He was lying on top of the blankets, so I unthinkingly wrapped my blanket around him.

Then I stood there naked in my dorm room wondering what to do. It was so tempting to climb into bed with Connor. But I'd lived by the same rule for the many years since I'd realized I'd found my mate in a human:

The more I wanted to do something with Connor, the more I should resist the urge.

Thanks to last night I knew exactly how great it was to sleep beside Connor. I wanted to warm him up until he was sprawled all over the bed again. The idea was so sweet. Which was how I knew it was a bad idea.

I went to my bed and got ready to lie down even without my blanket. But then Connor made a whimpering sound. "Will?"

"Yeah?"

He whimpered again. He was still asleep. But I couldn't ignore it when he called my name out again. "Will? Where are you?"

"I'm right here," I said. Connor's hands clutched at the blanket in his sleep. With my night vision I could see the strength of that grip. Bad dream?

I was across the room in a moment, clambering over my chair and hesitating beside Connor's bed. Resisting temptation was one thing but leaving Connor lonely was just being a bad friend.

I climbed onto the bed and under the blanket. Connor's body heat hadn't filled the space yet and he was still curled up to get warm. I wrapped an arm around his waist and pressed into him, his shoulder blades against my chest and my legs curling around his. I kept my hips back so he wouldn't know how I felt about the intoxicating scent of his warm skin at the curve of his neck.

I kept my arm loose around his waist so he could pull away if he wanted to. But he didn't. He wiggled closer, nestling into my chest, and moment by moment his body relaxed as he warmed up.

"I'm here," I whispered. "I'm right here."

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Chapter Thirteen

Connor

I was making a habit of falling asleep with wolves. The last thing I remembered was Will's fur was under my hands and his wolf breath in my hair. I woke in the dark still feeling his breath and warmth, but it felt different. My night shirt was wrinkled up around my waist from rolling around in my sleep, and Will's hand was resting on my chest, two of his fingers on my bare skin where my shirt had ridden up. Our bodies were tangled together, and my face was nuzzled into his chest. His chest was bare, just warm skin and no fur.

He was human. Sometime during the night, he'd shifted back into his human form. I didn't know if it was something that just happened or if he'd planned it. I didn't know if he was awake. My hand was on his leg, and I only felt skin. I moved my fingers but I could only feel bare skin, no clothes. Was he naked? I wanted so badly for Will to have made the decision to lie naked in my bed.

Will was breathing steadily against my collarbone, his cheek on my shoulder and his nose touching the bare skin just above the collar of my night shirt. That nose was warm and human and not the cold wet of a wolf. When I shifted my head, his hair brushed my cheek. We were cuddling, as humans. And this time Will wasn't hurt, and he wasn't acting strange and scared. I was the only human who knew he was a werewolf, and I was the one he was in bed with. That wasn't just friends, it couldn't be. I couldn't be imagining this.

My hand was on his bare thigh. I wanted to move it, but I was scared. Scared that he was sleeping and had just shifted into a human in his sleep and didn't mean to be naked beside me. Or what if I touched him and he just laughed and thought it was a joke?

"Will?" I whimpered. My hand was on his thigh, and I moved my fingers just enough to feel his bare skin there. Even my whisper was just a croak and my heart was pounding. I wanted to touch him but I was so scared. I thought of how easy it was to stroke his fur when he was a wolf. So I said, "Can you show me your fur? Right here?"

Will was silent and his breathing didn't change. Sleeping.

I felt the fur growing. His skin prickled and made bumps under my fingertips and the silken fur erupted. My hand was trembling, and I tried to

steady it, but it was hard when I was breathing like a frightened rabbit. I had more nerve endings than I'd ever noticed before, and all of them were in the palm of my hand.

Will's fur was so soft under my fingers. So soft. It was all I could think as I lay there in the dark, playing human Tetris with my best friend. He was a werewolf, and he felt fluffy like a bunny rabbit. I moved my fingers as far as I could urge myself, stroking the same patch of fur over and over again, petting him. So soft, I repeated like a mantra. I murmured it aloud, "So soft."

Will didn't say anything. His breathing was steady but quicker than before—or maybe I was just imagining that, hoping for it. I was so scared to be reading too much into this. I felt like I was going to be sick, but at the same time, I was as happy as I'd ever been. Like dancing with Will at senior prom, that mix of hope and fear and delight.

Thinking about prom helped. I remembered Will's sturdy arms around me and his tender smile as he'd whispered, "I'm here forever," and meant it. He was my rock, the one who'd held me up when I was scared and fragile, until I learned to stand on my own. Forever.

And for the first time, I felt the weight of that word as more than just a security blanket to protect me. Bleeding from werewolf wounds he'd climbed into bed with me and begged me to stay with him no matter where he moved. Forever didn't just mean he was there for me, it meant he needed me there with him. Forever. I loved him and I'd never told him, and that ate away at me every day.

But there in the dark with my hand in his fur and his face against my chest I knew with complete certainty that even if he didn't feel the same he wouldn't turn me away. Maybe he would only ever love me as a friend and a brother, but that was a big only and better than most people ever got in their lives. I didn't want to hide anymore. The time had come to tell him.

I could barely find my voice. "Can I feel you?" I whispered. "Just..." I couldn't finish the sentence. Just you. No wolf. I couldn't summon the courage to push us over the line, to show that I was more than just curious about Will's fur and that what I really wanted was to touch him. I licked my lips, but no more sound came out.

Beneath my trembling fingers Will's fur moved on its own, rustling like a breeze was rippling through it. Then it disappeared, sliding back until I was just touching Will's bare skin. I thought I'd faint, my heart was beating so fast. My

mouth was a desert and my hand was too heavy to move. I just lay there, still and hopeful and terrified.

Will's breathing hitched, and he moved his head slowly, rubbing his cheek on my shoulder ever so gently. What did that mean? I managed to swallow. Then I managed to place my hand on his thigh. Skin to skin. The point of no return. No way to pretend we were just friends now.

Something rough—his stubble, on my collarbone. Will was rubbing his face into my neck—was he smelling me? His chin was always rough, impossibly stubbled, even when we'd first met and all the other guys were years away from shaving. Kind of made sense, now I knew: He was a werewolf.

What was he smelling on me, what could he sense about me right now? Could he hear my heart like I'd just been running and my mouth so dry I couldn't swallow? I imagined my arousal pouring off my body in waves and me incapable of stopping it, a tiny body stormed by the weight of my desire.

My hand on his thigh was still moving, but I could hardly feel his skin, I'd gone numb and couldn't feel anything except his hot breath on my neck. No way to pretend this was just an innocent exploration. Friends didn't do this. "Will?" My voice didn't sound like my own.

"I'm right here," Will whispered. His voice didn't sound his own, either. The raw husk that was mostly growl, that rock star heartthrob that made me shiver. His lips moved against my neck. "I'm right here, Connor."

I opened my mouth to speak but a moan slipped out instead, a desperate squeaking whine embarrassing against Will's low growl.

Will moved his lips to mine and they were gentle, so gentle. Just the lightest brush of his mouth but it was enough to send shock waves through my whole body. My hand was on his bare skin and his lips were on mine and it was almost more than I could stand, so hot I thought I was going to burn up alive. Is this happening? Is this really happening?

His hand rested on my waist, his skin so warm through my T-shirt—not the searing heat from before but just as much of a shock to my system. I felt the wet of his tongue. I opened my mouth and he angled in closer and was kissing me, my first kiss and it was with Will just like I'd always dreamed.

His lips were soft like I'd never imagined, and when he hummed, I felt the sound in the back of my teeth. I could feel the heat cooking off his face at my cheek and chin. I moved my hand tentatively on his thigh, stroking the firm

muscle. I got shivers up my arm from the fine hairs on his leg, so light and human and different from the fur I'd touched earlier. Will pressed in closer to deepen the kiss. His hand at my waist was strong and confident, his bare chest bumping up against my thin T-shirt. His rich intoxicating smell was all around me and all over my sheets.

I was kissing Will. Will was kissing me. Right there in my dorm bed where I'd dreamed of him every night. He could have had anyone, but it was me he was kissing. It was me who was sharing the sticky, secret warmth under the heavy blankets. Kissing Will. I'd wanted it so long I could barely handle it, my mind was fizzing, and I didn't know what to do or how to move. His breathing was steady but mine quavered, I couldn't seem to get it right because I kept focusing on the feel of my best friend, and I forgot to breathe.

He probably does this all the time, this probably means nothing to him and I'm an idiot for reading too much into it. But I couldn't hold onto a thought as Will nibbled at my lower lip and squeezed an arm under me to pull me into a closer embrace. My thoughts were just as short and shaky as my breathing. This is Will. Will! I'm kissing a werewolf.

His hand slid down to my ass and cupped my cheek through my thermal pajama pants. I gasped—it was too much, just too much. My ass was so sensitive and I'd only ever touched it myself, I couldn't handle the calloused strength of his hands. I was going to come, right there and then from my first kiss and the tiniest exploration of his hands. I pulled back enough to choke, "Stop!"

Will stopped immediately, pulling away and shutting down the kiss. I rolled onto my back and tried to get my breathing under control. I felt like I was being smothered, but when I pushed the blanket down the feeling didn't go away. It was just too much. I was painfully aroused and reeling from Will's touch. But I was terrified it didn't mean anything, not to him. I was in love with him. But to him it was just two warm bodies and he probably didn't even think of me like that, he probably wasn't even thinking about me at all.

I clambered out of the bed. I felt calmer the moment the cool air hit my skin. I switched the light on and rested my head against the door, breathing slowly. I took my time calming myself down and getting my thoughts together. This was my first kiss. This was Will. I didn't want to mess it up, and I didn't want to do anything he'd regret later.

Will was sitting on the edge of the bed with his elbows on his knees. Watching me. His face was tortured with uncertainty. I wondered if he was

regretting it already, trying to figure out how to laugh this off. But then he asked, “Are you okay?”

I nodded, biting my lip. My breathing was mostly normal now. It didn't help that Will was just so gorgeous, that lush creamy skin and the intricate dark tattoos. He looked amazing fully dressed. But naked he was a work of art, every muscle sleek and defined.

The silence stretched out, both of us waiting for the other to say something. Tell me it's not a mistake. Tell me you want this too. I had to tell him how I felt, but I didn't have the courage to do it. I didn't have the courage, either, to keep acting like I wasn't in love with him. I couldn't let him go back to his bed and act like this never happened, sleep it off on his chair and wake as just friends again. Things had changed, and I wouldn't let them change back.

But I couldn't get myself to say anything. I was so totally in love with him that just looking at him made my breathing go wonky again. It was just a day since he'd stumbled into this room with his face and body bruised, but there was no sign of that now. He was back to being flawless. Inhumanly perfect—because he wasn't human. He was a werewolf, and I was the only human he'd told.

The thought calmed my spinning insecurities. I was special to him, of course I was. I had years of close friendship to prove that. Even if Will didn't love me the way I loved him, he still cared for me deeply. He wouldn't use me up and spit me out. I had to tell him.

Then Will sat up a little and moved his arm, and I saw his cock for the first time. Smooth and creamy like his skin, uncut and perfect and so hard, so impossibly hard even after he'd been sitting there in the cold. I felt dizzy, and I had to close my eyes because if I didn't I'd keep staring at him for hours—or beg him to let me touch it, just let me taste it. I squeezed my eyes shut and rocked my head back onto the door and tried to breathe right. I tried to not think about that erection being for me.

When I opened my eyes again, Will had stood up and wrapped my sheet around his waist. Like he was hiding himself, like he was ashamed or even like he was getting ready to leave. He'd shower it off then he'd come back all cocky and friendly again and maybe he'd laugh about this kiss, or maybe he'd act like it had never happened. This moment would be gone forever, and I'd never have told him how I felt.

I couldn't let that happen. The panic rose up in me almost like bravery, and I said, “I'm in love with you.”

I'd finally forced the words out, squeezing them out of my lips like a bellows squeezing out air. Only they came out as a tiny breath and a sound too small to hear. I tried to say it again louder but my lips were frozen together and my heart was squeezing in fear and embarrassment. I'd tried to say how I felt. But I'd failed.

But Will said, "Since when?"

In a rush of relief and terror, I realized he'd heard me, caught my whispered words with his werewolf hearing. I couldn't look at him, tall and strong and standing there being perfect and wearing a sheet like it was tailored for him. I stared at the corner of the ceiling and choked out my confession. "Years. Junior high. Maybe longer."

Will sat down suddenly. He was less intimidating then, sitting on his chair like he always did. I scanned his expression but I couldn't read it. Not anger or revulsion. Shock, maybe.

I leaned back on the closed door. I was just in my ratty "pajamas", old track team tee and woolen leggings and shorts, warm enough under blankets but not enough to stand around like this. But I was still semi-hard. In the midst of my confession and emotional turmoil, Will still had that effect on me. I looked back at the ceiling, scared of seeing hatred in Will's face.

Finally he broke the silence, talking quietly. "Same here. I've loved you for years. I remember that summer you went out of state. I missed you so much it was like my heart was being crushed. I couldn't make it a day without you, and I had to go three months? I thought I was going to die. I felt like I did die," he laughed.

My mind reeled. I forced myself to look at him, to check if he was joking. He was looking at me with a smile so filled with love it was breathtaking. So much emotion, all the friendship and caring he showed me every day but now it was warmed with pure, open love. I didn't know how he could have hidden something like that—except that I had, too. Every day that I'd pretended we were just friends and pulled away when I felt too much, and now I knew he felt it too.

It wasn't possible. It was too good to be true.

Will asked suddenly, "Even now you know I'm a werewolf?"

"Of course."

His grin went soft with relief. That squeezed at my heart—I had been thinking it was too good to be true, and it was like Will had been thinking the

same thing. He looked at me a big cocky grin, smiling like he did on stage to grab you up and break your heart. But this time it was just for me. He kept smiling as he walked to me, his dark eyes so intense with love that I thought my insides would melt onto the floor.

“I love you,” he said quietly. He put his hands on my waist and leaned in close, trailing his lips from my ear to the crook of my neck so sparks flared and crackled inside my body. He opened his mouth against my skin, breathing me in and licking my neck. He kissed me softly, his lips ghosting over my throat and jaw, every touch so gentle but felt through my whole body.

I wanted to wrap my arms around him and pull him close or just spend hours following the lines of muscle on his shoulders and chest. But I was so nervous I was held paralyzed, terrified of moving wrong and losing this beautiful moment. I whispered, “I’ve never... You know this is my first time...”

“Mine too.”

I swallowed. I hadn’t known, not for sure. “I’ve never kissed anyone before,” I confessed.

“Me neither.” Will pulled back to grin at me, his hands still on my waist. “You just gave me my first kiss, Connor. I think it was a good one. I hope you do, too.”

“What? No way. You’re so...” Gorgeous, amazing, perfect? “You’ve got so many fans.”

He chuckled. “I love you.” His face was just inches away, so I looked into his walnut eyes as he said it. He was so intensely happy that looking at him was like basking in sunlight. “How could I want anyone else when I know you?”

And then he winked, he actually winked. All cocky and grinning while he said something that rocked my world—typical Will. But I knew this time it wasn’t a flirtatious joke, he truly meant it. He proved it by kissing me again, those soft lips opening so he could lick the inside of my mouth, and I could suck on his tongue.

I got lost in learning to kiss. I got control of my arms again, and I touched him, running my hands over his biceps and his shoulders and as much of his back as I could reach. Everything was smooth and firm and warm except where our lips met, there it was wet and soft and blazing hot. I could feel the damp spot I was making on my pants, but I didn’t care. I just wanted more of him, endless amounts of him.

“We can take it slow,” he whispered against my lips. “If you want.”

His hips were angled away from me, his back arched so we wouldn't touch below the waist. What was he hiding? I pushed fully into him and felt the length of his erection down my thigh. I groaned at the feeling and so did Will, only his groan dropped to a growl that rumbled in my chest and straight down to my cock. I dropped back against the door, my head rolling backward, and Will followed me. He leaned fully into me and traced the line of my throat with his lips, reaching my jaw then gliding back down to the collar of my shirt. I itched to have it off so I could feel Will's hands and mouth all over me.

“I don't want slow,” I said. “I want you.” I liked that he was looking out for me, but I also knew what I wanted—what I'd wanted for a while now. The sheet was tucked into itself, riding low on Will's hips. I tugged at it with trembling fingers until it unwound and dropped onto the floor.

“Wow,” he gasped. “Moving fast there, Con.”

I lifted my chin to meet his dark eyes even though I wanted my gaze lower. “I can go slow, if you want.” I was teasing to cover my nerves—not that I had any doubt what I wanted, just that I'd never thought I'd actually walk into my fantasy.

Will balled his hands in my shirt and tugged gently. “Can I touch you?”

“Yes. Of course. Any time.”

“Careful, an offer like that might make us both wind up in jail.” Will grinned. He was still cocky and graceful, not mumbling and stuttering like I was. But his eyes showed the same desperate eagerness that I was feeling.

He dragged my shirt up, and I helped him tug it off. Freed to the cool air and anticipating touch, my nipples pebbled and goosebumps rose along my arms. I was almost holding my breath, like time was standing still, and my whole body was primed and just waiting for Will's hands.

“You're so perfect,” he said, his voice rough and his eyes wide with something like awe.

“You can talk. Look at you. Look at that body.”

“What, this?” He flexed his arm like a preening body builder. “This is werewolf, through and through. I don't think I could keep abs like yours if I was human—or if I had your brain.”

I shook my head. “You outrun me, every time.”

“I know. It sucks.” He rested a finger at the center of my throat and ran it down my chest. Shivers chased after his finger like the tail of a comet. “If I had my way, I’d always be behind you. So I could always look at you.”

I was having trouble following the conversation when he was touching me like that. Good. More. Oh, god. More! “You could run backwards?”

“I could,” he laughed. “See, there’s that brain. Ugh.” He made a grunting sound, his eyes darting all over my chest. “Look at your nipples. They’re so hard. That’s me causing that?”

“Definitely.” My nipples weren’t the only part of me that Will was making hard.

“So what happens if I…” His words trailed off as he pressed his mouth to my skin, tracing his tongue from the center of my chest and out to lick at one of my nipples. My back arched involuntarily, and I let out a hiss of breath. His eyes were dark with lust but his brows were lowered, serious as he looked up at me with a question. “Good?”

“So good.”

He nibbled at my flesh then nipped hard enough that my back arched again. My hands were sliding over the wall trying to find something to grab onto. I latched onto Will instead, grasping at his back, fingernails scraping over the moving lines of firm muscle.

“I knew you’d taste fantastic,” he muttered. He kept kissing and sucking my skin. “You always smell so good. It’s like being drunk, being around you all the time. Feels so good, breathing you in.” He ran flat hands over the pale skin of my abs and ribs and up to my pecs, gliding over every inch of my chest and making my skin shiver and burn. “I just want to touch you, all the time.”

“Anytime,” I gasped. “You’re welcome to.”

He touched and kissed and sucked at my skin until I was gasping and gibbering. I hoped I wasn’t making much noise, but I didn’t know, and I was almost beyond caring. I was beyond embarrassment or nerves. My skin felt like it was expanding and contracting at the same time, my body feeling things I’d never thought were possible. I lost track of time or the small dorm room or the hum of the electric light, all I could focus on was Will’s sure hands and gruff murmur.

I was beyond ready when he knelt in front of me. He hooked his fingers into the waistband of my shorts and looked up at me. His pupils were so dilated his

eyes looked inky black, and his hair was tousled from my hand. “This okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. Yes. More than okay.” I took a slow breath and tried to slow my racing heart. Shivers kept running over my skin like I was in the middle of an electrical storm.

“The view from down here’s pretty great,” Will said. “Your tattoos...” He ran his fingers over my navel and the flame tattoos that hid old scars. I remembered the first time he’d done that, back when he used to have to sneak through my window to see me. It was strange to think of all the secrets that we’d kept over the years, and how the last big one had been stripped away tonight. I love you.

“We match, see? Almost the same tattoos.” He linked his hand with mine, his right to my right so our tattooed arms crossed between our bodies and joined us.

“We look great together,” I agreed.

Will grinned. “Yeah. The fans are going to love this.”

“So we’re going to tell—oh!” The last of my breath puffed out as Will tugged at my waistband, dragging my pants down an inch. I held tight to his shoulder, feeling like I was going to slip over or melt into the ground at any moment.

“Sorry.” He kissed my hip, teeth tracing my hipbone down to the worn elastic of my shorts. My cock was straining to be free, and I could see a wet patch. I knew Will didn’t mind—I could look down the tunnel of our bodies and see his own cock jutting proudly out. “You were saying?”

“Nothing.” I leaned back into the wall. Will’s tongue slid over the sensitive skin just above my pubic hair. I gasped. “I’m not going to last long.”

“Of course you won’t. Have you seen me? I’m a babe. And I’m about to put your dick in my mouth.”

My body shuddered, and my eyes snapped shut. Please, please, let him at least get to fulfill that promise before I faint...

Will tugged my pants and long johns down in one motion. My erection sprung free and slapped him in the face. He was frozen in a moment of comical horror before he started laughing. “Did you just hit me, Connor?”

“Not on purpose.” I scrunched my face into my hand. “I’m sorry.”

“I think that’s my fault, actually,” he chuckled. “I like it.” He wrapped his hand around my shaft and squeezed. Stars burst in front of my eyes, and my hunger leaped up to swallow my mortification. He stroked me slowly, one hand exploring my cock while the other roamed over my thighs and cupped my balls.

“I can’t believe you’re doing that,” I whispered. “I’ve wanted it so long. I’ve dreamed about it and thought about it, and now it’s really happening.”

“Yeah.” He pressed his nose into my hipbone again and breathed me in. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted this. I must have rubbed myself raw thinking about you, a thousand times.” It was like the start to one of his dirty jokes but there was no punch line. Just his eyes dark with lust.

Then he ran his tongue along my cock, and it was all I could do to keep from crying out. He lapped at the tip gently, then he closed his mouth over the head. His wet mouth felt incredible, and when I looked down I could see him, brows lowered and dark eyes focused on me.

That was all it took. I was too wired up, too stimulated to handle more than his lips and hand on me. “Will!” I choked, the best warning I could give before I was coming in his mouth. My abs clenched and my shoulders hunched over as instinct took over, and I emptied my pleasure into him. His hand jerked in surprise and he gave a tiny groan of pleasure. I wanted to watch but I couldn’t keep my eyes open. That was okay though because the image was seared into my mind forever—my best friend on his knees in front of me, my cock in his mouth.

It was long moments before the room stopped spinning and my body relaxed enough for me to stand up properly again. Will kept me in his mouth, licking me clean until I softened. Then he stood up and wrapped his arms around me. “That was incredible.”

“You didn’t have to swallow.”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t waste a drop. You know you taste just as great as you smell?”

I buried my face in his neck and clung to his back. “I’ve eaten it,” I admitted. “A few times.”

“Oh, Con,” he groaned. His erection was pinned between our bodies, and he gave a little buck of his hips. “Do you know what you’re doing to me?”

Will slanted our mouths so we could kiss again, openmouthed but gentle. When we were both panting I leaned into his neck again and said, “I taste okay.”

Not amazing, though. I bet you taste incredible. You're so effortlessly sexy. I bet you taste like gumdrops and sugarplum rainbows."

He snorted. "I'll take that bet. Here, let's get back into bed. It's too cold to stand around naked." He flicked off the light then wrapped his arm around my waist and guided me back to the bed. "Your butt could freeze off, and that would be a crime."

He crawled under the covers after me and cuddled me close. The curtain was open enough that I could see the darkness outside. I could hardly believe it was still night, it felt like a lifetime of change since I'd first climbed into bed.

"Sorry I came so quickly," I muttered.

"Hey. No." He cupped my jaw with one hand, finding my face in the dark with no hesitation. "Listen to me. That was the hottest thing that ever happened in my entire life, all right? Don't apologize. You could come in my mouth every thirty seconds and I'd still lap it up."

"Wow, true romance," I chuckled.

"You better believe it." He pressed a kiss to my forehead.

"I want to suck you, too. But I don't know if I'll be any good." I'd read guides online but that just wasn't the same thing. I never managed to focus on reading the guides, either. I'd strain my neck looking over my shoulder in the fear that Will would come home and see what I was reading. Or I'd imagine myself getting to practice on Will, and then I'd have to stop reading to just think about that for a while.

It was lucky I wasn't studying the theory of blowjobs for school or I'd totally fail that class.

But Will just kissed me again and said, "It's crazy how you have no idea how totally hot you are. I could bust a nut from you explaining quantum mechanics to me. I'm serious. Anything you do to me will be amazing." He paused to kiss me hard and slow. Then he added, "Plus what's the worst you can do, bite my dick off? I'm a werewolf, super healing abilities. Bring it on."

"I won't be that bad!"

"Then don't be worried!" He laughed, and sucked my lower lip into his mouth.

We only had to kiss for a few minutes before I was hard again. I got so caught up in the feel of us together that I forgot about trying to suck Will off.

We rubbed each other off under the sheets, his gorgeous cock in my hand and his strong hands around me. Afterward, I fell asleep with Will curled behind me, sticky and exhausted.

It was better than any fantasy I'd had.

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Chapter Fourteen

Will

I'd been trying to ignore that it was morning, and I'd done a pretty good job of it until there was a knock on the door. I could ignore light glowing through the curtains but knocking was too much.

"Ugh, I hate whoever that is," Connor mumbled. His face was buried in my chest, and his hair was tickling my chin.

"It's Chop. You don't hate her."

"I hate her," Connor grumbled again. Then he looked up at me, gray eyes narrowed. "How did you know it was Chop? Did you hear her walking?"

"Nope. I sensed her. Liv is out there too."

Connor sat up, the blanket sliding off him to reveal mouthwatering abs and the flames under his belly button. I'd licked that tattoo so many times last night, but I already knew that I'd never get enough of it.

Connor was staring at me wide-eyed. "What do you mean you 'sensed her'?"

"Kind of a werewolf thing," I shrugged half-apologetically. I wished there was some guide on how to tell humans about werewolves, or that I'd known it was coming so I could plan it better. There was so much to explain and I didn't know what was important or not. I'd have to make sure Connor understood everything before I talked to him about turning. I wasn't looking forward to that conversation.

But that was a long way and one terrifying fight away from happening. "I've got great smell, even when I'm a human. My hearing is amazing, too. Eyesight's good, but human, except that I can see pretty much as well in the dark as I can at day. Those are all werewolf traits. But I'm especially good at reading emotions."

"You're saying you're a superhero." Connor nodded. "You're an empath."

"Something like that," I laughed. I gave into temptation and grabbed Connor around the waist, pulled him back under the covers. There was another knock on the door, and I heard Liv make a joke: "They're still asleep, you can tell because it doesn't stink of coffee." But it was easy to ignore her when the love of my life was naked and smiling beside me.

And in the meantime, there was Connor spread out on his back. I ran my lips over the head of his dick, already shiny and wet with pre-cum. I licked at it and Connor gasped. His hand tangled in my hair and he bucked his hips gently, halfway between guiding me and just holding on for the ride. I slid him into my mouth, the taste of him already so familiar and addictive. How could something feel so good for both of us at the same time? I loved his dick in my mouth like it was the sweetest reward, and it seemed like he felt the same.

There was a pounding on the door loud enough to wake the whole floor. Liv yelled, "Get up guys, we can get coffee on the way!"

"I hate her," Connor moaned. He covered his face with a pillow while his other hand stayed in my hair.

I climbed out of bed and walked naked to the locked door. Connor stayed lying on the bed, his erection wet from my mouth and his expression almost comically disappointed.

"Hey Liv, could you go wake up Matt and wait in the lobby?" I called through the door. "Connor needs a bit of a pep talk, and I don't want to put any pressure on him." I winked at him and was rewarded with a smile like the first sunny day in spring.

Liv sounded worried. "Is he okay? Can we bring him anything?"

"He'll be great in a few minutes," I called back. Connor grinned. That smile never failed to make me feel warm all over like Connor's happiness was wrapping me up in a blanket. I tapped on the door and called, "We'll see you guys soon."

I couldn't get back to the bed fast enough. "They're gone," I said. "Now you can be as loud as you want."

Connor laughed and squirmed on the bed, watching me. I dived onto the bed naked and climbed to him on my hands and knees. We didn't have long and I didn't want to make him late, but still I took the time to take in his body. He was hot, yeah. Totally gorgeous. All the more so because he didn't realize it, he didn't strut around like some guys did (guilty as charged). But he was so much hotter because he was Connor, my best friend, the guy I knew inside out. I knew every little facial quirk and the way he held his body and how his voice changed when he was sad or nervous and trying to hide it. I knew him so well and had so many memories with him, and that made his body endlessly fascinating.

I ran my hand over his right arm, the sleek muscle under the vibrant tattoos. “I remember when you got this, you were such a badass and just laughed the whole time,” I said.

“I remember you making me laugh.” Connor’s voice was all husk, and his eyes were half-lidded. I bent down to kiss his eyelids, and he purred in satisfaction. “You kept trying to make me move.”

“You did the same thing when Dave tattooed me,” I protested. “You tickled me when he was doing my ribs!”

“Your brother must think we’re crazy.”

“Nah. He thinks I’m crazy, maybe. But he gets us.” I was running my fingers over his arm, following the curves of the dragon and flames. They looked like they were moving, even now after I’d seen them so many times. Dave was a talented artist, but I figured it was Connor’s sexy arms which made the dragon look so great. Connor’s eyes were closed and his mouth was open, pouting open as he breathed in quick pants. This wasn’t the time to talk about mating bonds—it was the time to get Connor off, quick and hard and sweet.

“I want to make you so happy,” I whispered.

“You already do.” Connor’s eyes were clear as he looked up at me, biting his lower lip in that way that made me want to kiss him so badly.

And I could, I could kiss him. So I did, lowering myself onto my elbows so my bare chest was pressed against his and our bodies were hot and hard against each other, bare skin to bare skin down our thighs and hips and hard straining cocks. Connor gasped, and I swallowed that gasp with my mouth over his, pushing our lips together and burying my tongue in his warm, wet heaven. He tasted so good, so damn good even in the morning when he hadn’t brushed his teeth and should taste terrible. Because he was Connor, and everything about him would always be perfect. I kissed him with my mouth open and my body rubbing up against his, cocks sliding together, until he was trembling beneath me.

“Now where were we?” I whispered. “Oh yeah.” I took his hand from where it was lying on the bed, boneless with arousal. I tangled his fingers in my hair so the warm of his palm hummed at the back of my head. I slid down his body until his erection fit against my abdomen and his left nipple was right under my mouth.

I teased him with teeth, with lips, with tongue, taking it slow and deliberate even though we didn’t have time for slow and deliberate. I got him worked up,

I got him so his back was arching and his fingers were clenching in the sheets and his head was thrown back to expose the sweet line of his pale neck.

Soon his hips were fluttering desperately under me, and his chest was heaving as he took short shallow gasps. His hand gripped tight in my hair as he shoved my head down to his dick. "Please," he whimpered. He was bucking his hips, and that exquisite cock was bobbing in front of my face, a trail of pre-cum on his belly and a string of it running from his slit to pool on his tattooed skin. He pushed me down his body, but he didn't force me onto his cock, just showed me where he wanted me. Even in the intensity of his need he didn't push me, he just guided. His voice was choked and needy. "Please."

"All you had to do was ask," I whispered. Then I licked the pre-cum from his belly and followed it up to his cockhead, lapping up the slimy, salt chill of it all the way up to where it was warm and fresh. I took his dick into my mouth, closing my lips over the head and wrapping my hand around his shaft.

"I'm not going to last," Connor gasped.

I nodded my head and my teeth scraped on his dick. Oops! But Connor just gasped again. I slid him into my mouth as far as I could go before he made my throat burn and my eyes prickle. I wrapped a hand around his shaft to get the rest of him covered and started working him, stroking like I did to myself, cupping his balls with my other hand.

I was lying awkwardly half on his legs with my weight on my elbow and shoulder but I didn't care because Connor was moaning, head thrown back and eyes closed like he'd really taken my words to heart and was letting himself be as loud as he wanted. I had no idea what I was doing, so I did what felt right, lapping at him with my tongue while bobbing my head and sliding my hand up and down his shaft.

"Do you want to—" Connor started before his words turned into a groan. He was breathing in short bursts through his nose and the tension in his abs made his whole body tremble. I hummed a question and nearly choked and then tried to swallow with Connor's dick still halfway down my throat. He hissed and mumbled, "Oh! Oh." His cock jerked in my hand, and I pulled back just in time to taste him, to feel the salty wetness of his release in my mouth before swallowing quickly as my mouth filled up again.

Beneath me, Connor was shaking, hands thrashing about, clutching at the blankets, the air, and pulling my hair so hard my head throbbed. His abdomen was a taut rigid plain. I swallowed and swallowed, head held still as Connor

writhed under me. When he was done, I kept licking him, trying to clean him up and get every last taste of him as he softened in my mouth.

“Sensitive,” he whispered.

“Good?”

“Yeah. In a minute, it will be too sensitive.” His voice was slightly slurred, and his breath was deep and irregular. “Wow.”

“Good?” I asked again. I let him slide out of my mouth and gave his head one more kiss. His hand relaxed in my hair, and I slid up his body to rest my cheek on his shoulder.

“Amazing,” he said. “Couldn’t you tell?”

“I want to be good for you. Really good. Maybe you could give me lessons? Connor’s Body 101.”

“I would love that so much.” Connor was smiling hazily, his eyelids drifting closed. “Can I have a go with you now? I want to taste you.”

“We’ve got places to be right now,” I whispered. Connor was looking so content, and I didn’t want to freak him out about his presentation or how close we might be cutting it to get there on time. My number one priority was keeping him happy. I went up on my elbow and leaned over him so my lips were just grazing his. “Let’s do this again tonight, take it slow and get each other off.”

I kissed him deep enough that he could taste himself on my tongue. His body was so warm and limp under mine, completely blissed out. I wished school didn’t exist, that the whole world didn’t exist so I could just lie there in bed with him and bask in the flower garden colors of joy radiating out of him.

I wrapped an arm around his waist to help him sit up on the edge of the bed. “You want me to carry you to the shower?”

“I can walk,” he chuckled. But when he stood up he staggered just a little. He laughed and looked over his shoulder at me, cheeks flushed pink. “This is kind of new to me.”

“Yeah, me too,” I laughed. “I’ll grab some clothes and bring them in to you. Make it quick, okay?” The clock on my nightstand said we’d taken less than ten minutes which obviously wasn’t right because I’d just spent an eternity in the sunshine meadow of Connor’s pleasure.

“You’re not going to shower with me?”

“Nah, I’m going unwashed like the filthy animal I am.” I grinned at him, loving that I could make a pun like that now, and Connor would get it. “I’ll shower with you tonight when we’ve got time to play with bubbles.”

Connor grinned and left the room. I went into instant panic mode, scrambling to get dressed and get all Connor’s things together as quickly as possible. I left a fresh change of clothes outside the shower and checked everything he needed was in his briefcase portfolio—not that he couldn’t do it himself, I just liked helping out and knowing that if he worried on the way to the presentation about forgetting something I could tell him exactly where it was and help him stop worrying.

I leaned against the door and opened up my werewolf senses, scent and hearing and that special werewolf sense all combined together to bring me feedback like I was in the middle of a 3D building diagram. I could sense people moving around their rooms all around us, and I reached out further to find... There! Chop, Liv and Matt all waiting in the lobby, their loyalty to me like a bright spark that glowed even when they were far away.

Connor entered the room with his hair still damp and his skin smelling of mango. His cheeks were still glowing and his smile was warm and content, but he looked fully awake. Content, but not sleepy. Perfect.

“Let’s do this every morning,” I said.

“Sounds good, if you let me reciprocate.” Connor grinned. “So you were serious about these?”

It took me a moment to see what he was talking about—the shoes I’d bought him. Tan hiking boots with exaggerated curves and plush bear heads for the tongues. He had them over his gray jeans and he looked fantastic. Real rocker boy chic with his tattooed sleeve and ear studs. I glanced down at my own pair, black and white boots with panda heads laced up outside of my black jeans. “I was dead serious about these boots. We look awesome! Look at us. I’m going on stage like this tonight. You should too.”

“I’ll think about it.” Connor zipped on his heavy overcoat. He was smiling in that way that said he was ready to follow me on our own little adventure, whatever silly thing I wanted to do. I’d done enough totally silly things with him to know that face well.

I bit back a joke about getting the whole band some teddy boots and went for, “No one will see your feet behind your kit, anyway. Next I’ll buy you a hat with teddy ears, and you’ll have all the fangirls screaming.”

“They can scream; I’m not interested.” He smiled up at me shyly.

I twisted my hands into his damp hair and breathed in his shampoo and body lotion. “Me neither,” I whispered. “I’m already taken.” I kissed him. Less than twelve hours since our first kiss and it already felt so natural—maybe because I’d been spent so many years imagining kissing him. “Come on. You’ve got a presentation to rock. The others are waiting downstairs. Race you?”

Liv cheered when we came into view, and Chop held out a tray with two takeaway coffees, size extra-large. She said, “We were just worrying you wouldn’t make it!”

“Plenty of time,” I said confidently. I quickly hugged everyone before grabbing my coffee. “Thanks.”

The snow was shoveled so we could walk at a quick pace. I took the lead and Connor and Chop fell into step beside me, taking up most of the path. Liv asked, “So how’s the wolf?”

For a jarring moment, I thought my secret had got out already. Then I remembered Trout Shimmer and the last time I’d seen my friends. “He’s great, Doc thinks he’ll make a full recovery and he’s going to stay with my parents for a while.”

“Scary. I wouldn’t look after an injured wolf,” Matt said.

“You already did, bro,” Chop pointed out.

“Not in my house.”

“You know how big our yard is,” I said. “Plus my parents are good with wolves.” I met Connor’s eyes and winked. I was glad to see he wasn’t looking too grim, though he wasn’t as contented as he’d been a few minutes ago.

I asked Connor, “How are you? How are you feeling?”

“Really great, actually.”

“That’s awesome!”

“And unexpected,” Chop said. “I like your shoes.”

“I want some,” Liv said.

“Thanks.” Connor was grinning. “Will bought them. He’s buying me a matching hat to wear on stage, but I asked for a wolf hat instead. Wolves are better than bears any day. Wolves are beautiful.”

“Wolves are scary,” Matt said again. “I wouldn’t want one in my house, and I wouldn’t want one on my head. Or my feet.”

“What about bears?” Liv asked.

“Nope. Bears and wolves aren’t coming anywhere near my feet.”

I laughed. “I’ll buy you some bunny slippers to wear on stage, okay?”

“Hey, I’d wear them,” Matt said seriously.

Chop said, “And I’ll wear a horse mask. Liv can wear bunny ears and tail.”

Liv snorted. “If you’re a horse, I get to be a unicorn. And we’ll go on stage like that and people will really respect our music, huh?”

“You guys are all so talented,” I said. “People would still respect your music if you played wearing bananas for shoes with rolls of toilet paper on your heads.”

“I’d wear banana shoes,” Matt said. “I’m always slipping over my own feet anyway.”

I laughed and turned around to slap him on the back for the pun. Just outside Connor’s building, Matt stood on an iced-over puddle and almost slid over, and we all laughed.

We made it to Connor’s building in plenty of time—enough time for him to sit and stew and start getting nervous. I would nudge his shoulder and murmur, “Look at the shoes!” and he’d smile just a little bit more. As the time for his own presentation drew nearer and Connor started obsessively checking over his briefcase again and again, I calmed him down with shadow puppets. I used to do it all the time in school assemblies, when Connor would get worried about having to go on stage for an award. There weren’t any shadows in the well-lit lecture room but I could mime with my hands—thumbs up, a hand cupped for a smile, two hands making the shell and body of a snail when one student went way overtime with his presentation. When I put two hands together to form a heart Connor returned the gesture, then blushed and looked both ways to see if anyone noticed.

His presentation was great. He started off too fast and looking down at his notes too much, but once he did look up, we were all there smiling at him, and I had to think that helped. I could see the exact moment when Connor got caught up in the slides and illustrations he was showing, and the fear of being in front of an audience just slipped away. I loved watching him geek out over

architecture. Once when I stayed over at his house, he'd told me that he didn't have any plans and certainty, and he was jealous of how I knew exactly what I wanted from life. But eight years on, it was the other way around, Connor so excited and dedicated and me the bum clutching at plans for the future. Still, I had Connor. That felt just as right and certain as being alpha ever had.

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Chapter Fifteen

Connor

After my presentation and before our gig, we killed time in our dorm room. The band sat around on my bed or Will's chair as we watched movies on Chop's computer.

I was nervous, not knowing how close I should sit next to Will. I was between him and Matt, and they were both leaning on me. That was perfectly normal. But this time I felt awkward and out of place. I knew Will and I had this big secret that no one else had. We were a couple, and the band didn't know. Also Will was a werewolf, and the band didn't know.

But I cared about the werewolf thing a lot less than I cared about getting Will alone again. Maybe that was wrong of me. But Will being a mythical beast didn't interest me half as much as the thought of Will wanting to touch me. I was like a motion detector, my body firing up every time he moved. I kept watching his hands as he ruffled his hair or handed around snacks. I loved when he talked because it was an excuse to watch his mouth. I kept remembering the things he'd done to me with his mouth, how it had felt to be kissed and sucked by him.

I couldn't concentrate on the screen at all, I could only concentrate on Will. I kept hunching my legs up further because I was afraid someone would notice how aroused I got just from sitting next to my best friend.

When Matt got up to look at a picture on Liv's phone, Will took the chance to whisper in my ear. "Are you okay?"

I nodded.

"You're sure? I can tell something's got your brain whirring."

I twisted my head to whisper back, and my lips nearly brushed against his. Shock waves of awareness zapped through my body.

Will chuckled. "Are you thinking you want to get me alone?"

"No." Well, yes. "Are we going to tell them?" I lowered my voice further, paranoid. Liv and Matt were still talking, but Chop was doing a poor job of acting like she wasn't listening in on us. I barely opened my mouth as I said, "About us?"

"Up to you. I know what I want to do."

I raised my eyebrows. Please, please, don't want to keep this a dirty little secret...

"I want to hire one of those sign-writing planes and let the whole world know."

My shoulders relaxed. "Me too," I mumbled.

Will gave me the full wattage of his movie-star smile. Then he said aloud, "Hey, guys. We've got an announcement to make."

Liv and Matt looked curious, but Chop rolled her eyes. "Bet I can guess."

Will glanced at me. I gave a little nod—he could be the one to tell them. Then I looked down at my hands in my lap, not wanting to see if there was disapproval in my friends' eyes.

Will said, "Me and Connor are a couple."

"Congratulations!" Liv cried.

"No surprises there," Chop said.

"Weren't you already?" Matt asked.

Will laughed. Liv asked, "Since when?"

"Just last night," I muttered.

"Last night, aye? There's a story there, and I don't know if I want to hear it."

Will said quickly, "You really don't."

Chop laughed and leaned forward to put a hand on my leg. "This is great," she said. "If you guys are happy, we're happy. Just don't mess up the band dynamic."

I looked up at the genuine smiles on their faces. Friends. That's what it felt like to have true friends. "Thanks. For not... For being accepting of this."

"Of course," Liv said seriously.

Matt asked again, "No, really, weren't you already together?"

Will

I waited until Connor had his drum kit all packed up and sitting pretty in Chop's van. As the band got into the van, I took Connor aside and asked, "Any chance you want to hang around a bit longer?"

A mischievous grin lit up his face. "Have you got something in mind?"

I couldn't help smiling—that was my boy, his mind always leaping to adventures! I held up the key I'd begged from the bar manager. Connor looked at it, tilting his head and squinting as if he could figure out its purpose by sight alone. It was a canine sort of head tilt, and I had a sudden flash of how gorgeous my mate would look when (or if) he was truly my mate, wolf traits spilling into his human form.

"What is it?"

"A key you've always wanted."

"Is it for your chastity belt?"

Connor asked it so solemnly that it was a moment before the joke clicked in my mind, and I let out a bark of laughter. "No. Not quite. Maybe."

Connor ducked his head and looked up at me, shy and sweet with that sparkle of mischief in his eyes. "Yes please."

"It's the key to the windows in the back room. I thought we could snuggle up on the couch in front of the city lights for a while. Just us."

"Yes please," Connor said again.

He looked so happy, his face glowing with a smile that I'd put there. There couldn't be a feeling in the world as great as making Connor smile. I cupped his chin and kissed him gently. "I'll just tell the band to go home without us," I whispered. "Then it's just you and me and the city lights."

Chop was less than impressed when I told her. "What, so you get a boyfriend and now you're too cool to hang out with us?"

Liv was already in the van, upfront in the driver's seat because gigs gave her the kind of energy that loves to drive. She leaned out the window to holler, "Battlestar isn't going to watch itself. We're going to keep watching without you. Feel sorry now?"

I raised my hands in mock surrender. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I couldn't keep back a grin. "But have you seen Connor? Hot damn. Let the Cylons eradicate mankind, I'm too happy to care."

Matt came up beside me, smiling wide with his deer eyes all gooey and warm. "I'm glad you're happy, Will. You both deserve to be happy."

"Thanks man." I pulled him in for a hug. Over his curly hair, I said loudly, "See guys? This is what a real friend's like. I always knew Matt was the nice one."

“So, Matt’s the nice one,” Chop said. She rolled her eyes, fighting back a grin. “No surprise. I’m the mean one with photos of you in high school, and access to your social media accounts. You’ve been warned.”

Liv laughed. She started the engine so she could get the radio playing. Out the window she called, “I’ll keep an eye on her for you, Will.”

“Thanks, Liv.”

Liv continued, “I’ll only let her post four or five embarrassing photos of you, okay?”

“Thanks, Liv,” I laughed.

Back inside, Connor was loitering by the window. The light in the backroom was low like I was seeing him through a soft-focus lens. I got a thrill in my belly just thinking about being able to touch him.

“I’ve got the key,” I said. My voice came out all soft and small.

Connor smiled with that perfect delicate mouth. He’d rolled his sleeves up enough that I could see the flame tattooed on his arm. I loved his tattoos but I often thought that we were the wrong way around—I was fire, he was ice. I was always loud and leaping around. I was vocal and upfront and exactly what I seemed. Your first impression of me was pretty much spot on. Connor was delicate and beautiful, shy and quiet. But then you looked past that and found out that he could reach right inside you and still your heart.

I unlocked the window and shoved it open. It was on a hinge and opened outward with a blast of cold air and the sharp smell of snow. The sound of the city got louder, cars driving slowly and music playing low. If I reached out with my werewolf senses, I could listen past the city sounds to the slow slide of the Mississippi. I glanced at Connor, wiggling the key. “Worth the wait?”

“Definitely.” I hoped he wasn’t just talking about the window.

He was nervous. He kept fidgeting with his hands and biting his lip. Running his fingers through his hair then smoothing it back down. Tugging at his earlobes.

So I stepped right up into his personal space and put my hands on his shoulders. There was the spike in his emotions, the nerves fluttering into that deep purple bass that I was beginning to recognize as arousal. “You used to be scared when I touched you. But now you’re not.”

He nodded. His face was inches from mine. His eyes were wide, the gray catching the light of building signs outside the window.

“Is it because of your parents? They didn’t touch you much so you don’t like it when I get too touchy-feely?”

Connor frowned. He said quietly, “I love it when you touch me.”

“But you used to get scared. I had to be so careful not to go too far. You’d be comfortable then I’d push things too far and scare you.”

“Oh, Will.” His eyes opened wide. “You didn’t scare me. I was scared of myself.” A blush rose on his cheeks, but he didn’t look away. His voice dropped even quieter until he was almost whispering into the hushed room and filtered street noise. “I was so scared you’d find out how I felt, every time you got close. You’d touch me and I’d love it so much, and I knew I had to hide it but it was hard. Because I want you so much. Because I love you so much. But now I don’t have to hide it.”

Oh. There he was, looking so innocent but squeezing my heart tight until I thought it might stop beating. I closed the distance between us to trace my lips over his. Connor let out a tiny puff of air then rose up on his tippy-toes to push himself into me, so hard and so close and insistent.

Let the Cylons eradicate mankind. Let me get ripped to shreds by my bully cousin and lose the mountains that I called home. All I wanted was another moment alone with Connor.

I led him over to one of the leather couches. He sprawled out on his back and held out his arms. My body slotted over him so perfectly, like we were made to fit together. I licked his lips then pressed into his open mouth. I kissed him until he stopped feeling nervous and just lay in smiling contentment. Then I whispered, “Your mouth tastes so great.”

“Thanks. You too.” He giggled. “I don’t know where to put my hands.”

I caught his hand and placed it on my hip so his fingers cupped snugly around my ass. “You can put your hands on my ass,” I said. “I’ve got a great ass.”

“You do.” Will was blushing, giggling so hard I couldn’t tell if the flush was embarrassment or exuberant joy. He squeezed my ass then tentatively put his other hand on it, too. “You should wear leather.”

“I’m wearing leather, Con.” I shrugged my shoulders so the hem of my jacket brushed his stomach. “That’s what they call this.”

“No, I mean like leather pants. On stage. Or just in the dorm. They’d show off your great ass.”

“They’d show off other things too.” I nudged my hips against his so the length of our erections rubbed together.

Connor moaned then laughed at himself for the noise. He slid his hand around to my front and stroked the strip of bare chest in my open jacket. Up to my neck, down again to my belly button. He licked his lips and whispered, “You promised.”

“What did I promise?”

As an answer, his hand slid lower until his palm was warm on my fly. Then his fingers curled around my cock, and I lost my breath. Oh. Even through my jeans his hand felt amazing.

“You said I could taste you?”

“Oh god, yes,” I groaned. I shrugged my jacket off my shoulders, but Connor stopped me.

“Leave it on?” He was starting to blush. “Please? I’ve thought about you in that jacket. A lot.”

I wanted it to last, but that was never going to happen. I was a goner the moment I had Connor’s lips on me and his eyes looking up at me. But that was fine—I knew it was just the first of many, many times together.

After he swallowed me and I finished him in a splashing mess on my stomach, we cuddled on the couch.

We lay like that for a long time. Watching the snow through the window and feeling the freezing wind on our flushed skin. My hand was on Connor’s chest, snug between his beautiful warm skin and that Trek/Zone tee. We didn’t have to say anything; we’d been together so long that there wasn’t any awkwardness even though we hadn’t been together very long.

Connor’s eyes slid closed, and his breathing evened out. Not sleeping but close to it, lulling. I loved how he got after a gig, that burst of weird energy that drained away until he was floppy like a cat on a windowsill on a warm day. I let myself just look at him. Those thick eyebrows and sensual lips, the sweet choir-boy good looks and the diamond studs he wore in his ears. Good boy gone bad, all tattoos and black clothing.

Finally, he gave a little snort and shifted his weight, wiggling back into me. The curve of his ass felt so unbelievably good. I started getting hard again just from feeling him against me like that.

Maybe it wasn't good to be so relaxed and comfortable because a thought floated into my head: I could bite him. He was in the perfect position. I could just dip my head and feel the give of his flesh and taste the sweet relief of his blood in my mouth. It was a sick, wrong thought which made my heart beat faster, the blood pumping straight to my boner.

It would be so easy to bite him. And then all of my troubles would go away. I could claim my mate and lead the pack, save the wolves, live the life I was meant to... And ruin Connor. Take over him so that all he wanted was to do what I wanted.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't turn Connor just to win a fight. I'd rather have Joseph tear me to shreds. I'd have to fight as hard as I could and try to win. And when I lost, I'd have to find a way to help the wolves. There had to be a way. I'd do anything I could to save the wolves—anything except sacrifice Connor.

Connor tilted his head to look at me over his shoulder. "Are you all right? You've gone all tense."

He smiled at me, and my thoughts just melted away. I just wanted to lie forever with his heartbeat against my palm. Whatever else happened, I knew I would survive if I had Connor with me.

So I flexed my hips and said, "My dick's gone all tense."

He snorted. "So are you ready now?"

"For round two? Definitely."

Connor rolled over, fitting his thigh between my legs. My jacket was hanging open and the curling roses tattoo was visible. Connor touched my skin with a tentative hand, brushing his fingertips from just below my armpit all the way down to the waistband of my pants. His eyes were half-lidded, the dark of his eyelashes making his irises stormy gray.

I was so grateful for that tattoo, if for no other reason than how absorbed he looked right now. Like my body had Connor mesmerized. I remembered the day we'd got our tattoos, our first tattoos together, and how impressed Dave had been. I had so many memories of Connor, he was wound around my past like the roses in my tattoo. It really hit me right then: I would never love anyone else. I couldn't. And why would I want to?

Connor dragged his eyes back to mine. His face was flushed and I could feel his stiffy. But he cleared his throat and blinked and got himself back together. "I mean," he continued. "Are you ready to tell me the rest of the story?"

“What story?”

“About who hurt you. All I know is that it was a werewolf.”

“Oh.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and cuddled him into my chest. I would much, much prefer round two. But I had to tell him some time.

“You can tell me later, if you’re not ready now.” Connor’s lips moved against my sternum, hot breath on my skin making me want to agree with him.

“No,” I sighed. “I should tell you. And soon. Everything is about to change for me so you should know now.”

And so I told him. About werewolf pack structure and my family, about being born an alpha and all the responsibility that came with that as well as the power. I told him about my year of running with the wolves. I told him about my parents being awful and pulling the ground out from under my feet, and Joseph being awful and forcing my back against a wall.

I told him about Trout Shimmer, barely pausing to realize that it had only been three days since we’d found the injured wolf and I’d told Connor he might never know the full story.

I told him in a jumbled mess, pulling memories out of my butt and explaining things at random. Anger at Joseph and love for Connor and love for the mountains all mixed up and dropped on him like confetti. Connor kept nodding and listening. I figured I was making a mess of it, but Connor was smart, he could stitch together the pieces. I talked so much that my throat was sore when I was done.

And, hoarse and tired, I finished with trying to sum it all up. “So I have to fight Joseph. And I’m going to lose. But I can’t stand by and let the wolves get hurt.”

He had leaned back on his elbow to watch my face as I talked. My arms were still around him and that felt right. He was silent a long time as he digested the information. I watched his emotion flickering just on this side of panic. Finally, he said, “You’re a lot stronger than Joseph.”

“Werewolf strength isn’t like that. He’s got me beat when it comes to loyalty. Because my pack are crazy,” I added bitterly. “And they’re giving their trust over to a madman.” It felt good to be able to express my frustration. I wondered how long it would take for me to get used to not keeping secrets.

But there was still a secret. One huge, scary secret that I couldn’t force out for fear of popping the perfect bubble we were in. I hadn’t told him we were mates, and I hadn’t told him I could turn him—that I was expected to turn him.

Connor was idly tracing my rose tattoo again, pushing his hand up under my jacket in his quest to feel more of it. It was sending sparks of interest through my body and messing my head up when I needed to think clearly.

“I didn’t know Joseph was that bad,” Connor said. “He killed all those wolves, and he wants to kill people? At school he was just calling people names.”

“It’s the loyalty. It’s kind of like a drug. You know that saying about power corrupting? It’s true. I’ve heard about it happening to packs when their alpha is killed and the beta takes over leadership. It can make them go crazy. And Joseph’s not even a beta, he was always toward the bottom of the middle. So he’s got these big dreams but no one respects him so he has to prove himself by being a dick to anyone lower-ranked than him. And then he gets more power which just means more people to be cruel to. Only now he’s got to be even crueler to prove that he deserves the loyalty he’s getting. It’s vicious and disgusting. I should have been there to stop it happening.” The truth tasted bitter in my mouth. “I’m responsible for the wolves that died. If I’d kept Joseph in check, none of that would have happened. And now it might be too late to fix things.”

“This isn’t on you.” Connor closed a fist on the lapel of my jacket. He bumped his forehead into mine so I had to look straight into his eyes. “You’re not responsible for what Joseph’s done. You didn’t even know.” His hair was mussed and darkened by the dim light, a messy crown framing his frowning face.

He was right that I hadn’t known. But I was still right—I should have been there, and I should have known. It just hadn’t ever occurred to me the pack would move on and pick a leader without me. But that wasn’t an argument anymore. “Now that I know what he’s planning, I have to stop him. It’s my responsibility. I’m the only one who can.”

“And you think he might kill you?”

“Not kill me. Just wound me enough that I surrender. Then he gets to laugh while I crawl away. I’ll lose my home.” The thought didn’t bother me half as much as it had a week ago, before I knew the lives of thousands of wolves were on my shoulders.

“That’s why you asked me about moving out of the state?” Connor breathed.

“Yeah. I just need to know I won’t lose you.”

Connor's face went soft. Then he buried it in my chest. I could feel the warmth of his cheeks heating in happy embarrassment.

I pushed his shirt up and rested my hands on the skin of his back. I wanted to stop talking and just enjoy his body. But his emotions were a confused jumble, and I had to help him. "How are you feeling?"

"It's just a lot to take in."

"Too much?"

"Maybe too fast. But, no."

"Are you mad I didn't tell you earlier?"

Connor leaned back and stared up at the ceiling for a few long moments. I liked that he actually stopped to think about it. Finally, he said, "No. There are so many other things I'm feeling and thinking about. Like this." He tapped my fly.

I barked a laugh of surprise. "I like you bold."

"Get used to it. I'm just going to get worse as I get used to touching you." Connor grinned as his cheeks colored.

I tilted his head so I could taste his lips. I wanted to taste his happiness. I thought again of how much I wanted to know every inch of his body, to know him as well as I knew his emotions. The kiss deepened as we clutched tight with hands and lips.

When we ended the kiss, Connor was breathing heavily. He swallowed and kept talking like he'd never stopped. "It would be different if you weren't in danger now. Or if I didn't get this." Another kiss. The palm of his hand rubbing at my side. "Or if werewolves weren't so cool. You can actually turn into a wolf! That's amazing."

"I guess it's pretty cool."

"It's amazing," he repeated. Then he tilted his head up to meet my eyes. "Would you have told me if I hadn't asked? If I hadn't caught you out with Dave?"

"Yes." I didn't hesitate. "I've wanted to tell you since junior high."

And there was the opening to tell him about mates. That last big secret that stood between us. I didn't know how to tell him, but hadn't that been the theme of the last few days? Me just diving in with some messy explanation that Connor seemed to understand. Now was the time to tell him.

But before I could say anything, Connor asked, “What’s it like? To be a werewolf?”

Now it was my turn to stop and think. “I don’t know,” I said at last. “I have no idea. I’ve never been anything else.” I remembered a conversation we’d had years ago, back at school when I’d sneak into his room and he’d open up to me. Connor was crippled by his parents conflicting dreams for him, and he had said he didn’t know who he was or what he was meant to be. I’d never understood that. But Bren had told me that turned werewolves talked about finding a sense of purpose that they hadn’t felt as humans.

So that was how I approached it. “I’ve always known exactly who I am and where I belong. I know how everyone around me feels about me. Like if everyone respects me and is loyal to me. And I know where I am in the world—I can’t get lost. I know where I’ve been and everything that’s happening around me. And I can feel the moon, constantly. More when it’s close to full like this. And I can feel Jagged Rock like a magnet.”

Connor’s lips were parted, and his eyes were wide with awe. He gave a little nod to show he was paying attention.

I traced a finger over his smooth skin, the hint of stubble on his jaw. “There’s nothing like running as a wolf. The snow and the wind and the forest. There’s just nothing like it. And I always imagine you beside me, running as a wolf.”

His lips quirked, and his eyes went soft. “I’d love that.”

Warning bells in my head. I hadn’t meant to make it sound too good. I didn’t want to manipulate him. So I said quickly, “There’s bad stuff, too. I’m tied to my pack and to Jagged Rock. I miss it, it aches to be away for too long. And the downside of pack loyalty is it can really hurt if you go against the pack leader.” I remembered the agony on Bren’s face as he had to hunt wolves. “Like Bren—he’s the pack’s omega. He has to do what he’s told. It’s like peer pressure times a million.”

“Bren?” Connor’s eyebrows rose. “No way. Your uncle? But he’s huge.”

“Yeah. That doesn’t matter to werewolf power. But he’s been taking orders from me since I was just a pup.”

Connor laughed at the turn of phrase. My hand was still on his cheek, and he twisted to kiss the wrist. “You’re a wolf. I just can’t get over it.”

Now was the time. I had to tell him. I couldn't go my whole life lying to him. But just thinking about telling him made me want to hide behind the couch or make dirty jokes until he forgot what I was talking about.

I had to tell him, but the words were lodged in my throat. I had to swallow again and again before I was finally ready. "Connor," I said. "There's something else. You and me are mates."

"Yeah."

I blinked. "I mean, like soul mates. True mates. In all the world, you're the perfect person for me."

"I could have told you that." He kissed the palm of my hand.

"I mean it. This is serious. Like, fate bringing us together and the world changing to make sure we meet. That kind of serious. You said you don't know why your parents moved to Layton? I do. It's my werewolf mating bond bringing you to me."

Connor bit his lip. "You really are serious?"

I nodded. "My parents are mates. Only alphas have them. It sounds like magic, but it's a real thing."

Connor frowned. He pushed away from me slightly. His body let in a rush of cold air and it stung like rejection. "Are you saying I'm only in love with you because of some werewolf magic? That can't be right."

I shook my head quickly. "No. Only werewolves feel the bond."

"So you only say you're in love with me because of the werewolf magic?" His gray eyes were brooding and he muttered, "Ouch."

"No!" It came out loud, and Connor flinched. And then the distance between us made sense, and I stopped focusing on my words long enough to pick up on the roiling emotions coming from him. Oh. The confusion and the hurt and anger were all as clear as if he was yelling. "I say I'm in love with you because I am. I love you. You're also my mate. But you being my mate doesn't force me to love you."

"So what does mate mean, then?"

"It's related to love, but it's not the same thing." I hesitated. Honestly, I hadn't fully understood when Bren told me years ago. I'd gotten freaked out wondering what it meant for Connor, and I'd never stopped to consider what it

meant for me. “Like, you can be mates without being in love. It’s a force that draws us together because you’re the perfect person for me. But you don’t feel it. Only I do. Because only werewolves feel the mating bond.” I took a deep breath. Then I looked into my mate’s beautiful gray eyes and I said, “You won’t feel the mating bond until I turn you.”

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Chapter Sixteen

Connor

I wanted to close the distance between us. I wanted nothing more than to be snuggled into Will's warm chest. But it sounded like he was blaming his feelings for me on a supernatural force and that stung. And if I gave into the urge to touch him, then I wouldn't be able to think straight.

I almost didn't understand what he was talking about. "Turn me?" An image of a pancake flipping in a pan. Then it clicked. "Into a werewolf? You can turn me into a werewolf?"

"Yeah." Will looked wretched.

My brain shut down, overwhelmed by the possibilities. "I could turn into a wolf?"

"Yeah."

It sounded too good to be true. Way, way too good to be true. "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"I need you to understand what 'werewolf' means."

Will looked sick and miserable and that didn't make sense. I bit my lip. "Werewolf means I can turn into a wolf or human or anything in between, I can heal and have super abilities."

"And you'd be tied to me." He said it loudly, like it was a damning closing argument. He sat up, straightening his jacket so his tattoo disappeared from sight.

I sat up too, scooting over so there was an empty space between us and I wouldn't be too tempted to touch him. "Will," I said slowly. "I am tied to you. That's what I mean when I say I'm in love." Saying it the first time was hard enough, and I hated that Will didn't seem to understand what "love" entailed. I was his forever, had been since I was a kid. Even if we were never more than friends, I wasn't going to leave him. But now that we could be more than friends... Well, being "mated" with Will sounded like a bonus, not a curse. Why was he acting like it was the most repulsive thought he could imagine?

Will zipped his jacket up. I knew how uncomfortable he truly was, then. He never missed a chance to show off his ripped body. "This isn't going how I

wanted this to go,” he admitted. “I’ve been messed up over this for years and I don’t know how to explain it to you.”

“You explained being a werewolf fine.” Even when I was hurt and confused, I wanted to comfort Will. Because I was in love with him, even if he didn’t seem to understand that.

“I don’t think I did explain it, otherwise you wouldn’t... Look, werewolf isn’t like being a human but now you can turn into a wolf. Werewolves aren’t human, in the same way we’re not wolves. We can take on that shape but we don’t work the same. Like the loyalty thing or pack structure—it’s more than friendship or trust or anything, it’s written deep into our nature. Like instinct. It can’t be ignored. Like, I’m an alpha. I can’t ever change that. Even if I tried. It’s not just about being loud or being bossy or whatever. And you’re my mate.”

“And you can’t ever change that, even if you tried,” I echoed. I regretted it as soon as I said it. I’d wanted to cause him pain. But as soon as I saw him wince I realized that no, I definitely didn’t want to see him hurt.

“I’m botching this up again,” he said. He looked so unhappy that I couldn’t keep away anymore. I moved closer to him and wrapped an arm around his leather-clad shoulders. Will smiled at me, grateful but still anguished. “Please understand, I would never want to change the fact that you’re my mate. You are the best part of my life, hands down. And up to this point it’s been a pretty good life, so you understand what I’m saying. I was willing to throw everything away for you. I didn’t even hesitate. Until I knew Joseph was hurting wolves...”

“I’m not questioning that,” I said quickly. “Of course you don’t want wolves to get hurt.” I took a deep breath. “Here’s what I’m caught on. I don’t understand what ‘mate’ means. And I don’t think you understand what ‘in love’ means.”

Will’s forehead wrinkled. “Of course I know what ‘in love’ means. I’m in it with you.”

My heart squeezed when he said it like that. Like it was so simple and so obvious. “This is really important to me. Are you gay? Do you think you’re gay?”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t have a problem with that? It’s not like you wish I was a girl, or...?”

“Of course not. You’re perfect.” Again like it was so simple and so obvious.

“Okay.”

“Also, your dick is perfect.”

I snorted. There was Will, back to the dirty-joking man I loved.

“And your balls,” he went on. “And the shape of your hips and your Adam’s apple and your stubble and your ass and—”

“Okay,” I cut him off, laughing. “I get it.” His words warming me and I could feel the strength in his shoulders. I was getting aroused again. This was exactly why I’d thought it was risky to sit too close. “So explain ‘mate’ to me again.”

“When I turn you—if I turn you—you’ll feel the mating bond. It’s this undeniable force which ties us together.”

“Like what the law does with marriage?”

“I guess. It means if you’re ever away from me it’s going to hurt. Like, soul-wrenching agony. You can’t even imagine what those summer holidays were like when we were fifteen.”

“I bet I can.” I wished my fifteen-year-old self could hear this. It had been so hard, finding myself in love and believing it couldn’t ever be reciprocated. “I don’t get how this is different to anything I feel now.”

Will dropped his head back against the couch, looking up at the ceiling like he was getting frustrated. “It will really, really suck to be apart. You’ll be tied to me and want to spend every moment with me. If I ever say or do anything to hurt you—which, believe me, I don’t want to, but if I do—it will feel like being burned alive.” He hesitated and then pressed on, “You’ll live for my smiles. I don’t know if that’s how it works for you or just for alphas, but for me I have to protect you all the time. I freak out thinking about you ever getting hurt, or sad. The thought of you crying makes me sick. But when you smile... That’s the best feeling in the world. Your happiness makes me feel invincible.” Finally, he turned to look at me, his dark eyes solemn. “And it will be forever.”

I shivered. He felt all of that for me? After all these years of telling myself I could handle being just friends, to know how he felt... My body couldn’t handle the amount of happiness I was feeling.

I manage to hold Will’s gaze as I said, “So how’s that any different to what I feel now?”

His eyes widened and a smile lit up his face. But he wouldn't let this go. He pushed, "It's not just a feeling. It's a certainty." He tapped his chest through his jacket like he was saying, Here it is! This is the part of me that is certain it's going to be in love with you forever! Now come on, join me in acting like this is a bad thing!

"And that's the reason you don't want to turn me into a werewolf?"

"Yeah. You won't feel the bond until you're turned. But once you do, you can't turn back. It will take over any bits of you which don't want to be mated to me."

"I don't have any bits like that."

"You do," he pressed on. "You have dreams. You want to be an architect. You want to stay in college. That will disappear when—if—you feel the mating bond. You'll just want to be with me."

I frowned. "But I can be with you and be an architect and go to college."

Will shrugged. "The mating bond makes you want to do anything to stay with me."

"Because you're alpha?"

"Because we're mates. That's scary, right?"

"No, I mean... Why will I want to do what you want to do? If we're mates isn't it just as likely that you'll want to do what I want to do? Or is it because you're alpha and I'm omega?"

Will looked confused, but maybe that was my poor wording. Finally, he said, "You're not omega. Why'd you think that?"

"Joseph picks on me."

Will turned, wrapping both of his arms around me. I threw my legs over his so I was half-sitting in his lap—what did it matter if I couldn't think straight?

He rested his forehead against mine, so close that his eyes merged into one and looked like Cyclops. He said, "You're not omega. Joseph challenges you, and you fight him back. I've seen it. I think he's scared of you—or was, before my parents let him have power. You know how many times he tried to convince me you were omega? He didn't believe it, either. But I could tell he really wanted to."

"You fight him, I don't."

Will shook his head. “You do fight him. I’ve seen an omega interacting with Joseph, and... Well. I can tell you there’s no way you’re an omega. When you talk, people listen. And you talk back to me. You know who else does that? My mom, who’s an alpha. And sometimes Chop. But even she doesn’t interrupt my sentences like you do.”

“So what am I?”

“Humans aren’t as simple as wolves. With wolves you just know your pack and how you rank with them, but with humans there are so many different social interactions every day it’s impossible to gauge rank. I don’t know where you sit now, but I know you’re a total badass, if that helps. If you joined my pack you’d be my mate, so ranked equal with me and just above my beta.”

“Who’s your beta?”

“Right now, it looks like no one, because I’ll lose my pack in a few days.”

Way to be a downer, Connor. I pushed past the depressing topic of conversation. “So here’s the thing. The mating bond would mean we’ll do anything to be with each other, right? And you say that means I’ll give everything up for you?”

“Yeah.”

“But you just told me you were ready to give everything up for me. And—no offense—but you’re not a college kind of guy. You didn’t want to go to college, and you didn’t want to leave Layton. So why did you?”

“To be with you.”

I just looked at Will, waiting for it to sink in. I saw the moment it clicked—his eyes got huge and his mouth fell open a little. I never got to see Will looking dumbfounded. He was always Mr. Cool.

I bent my head and brushed my lips over his. I just wanted to taste his amazement. Will was so cool all the time and I wanted to savor his surprise. But then his lips were so firm and his mouth was so hot, and I found I didn’t care about amazement or surprise, or ruffling Cool Will’s feathers. I just wanted to taste his love for me. His love was in his kiss and I drank it in. I would never tire of that taste.

When the kiss was broken, Will murmured, “I follow you around. I never thought of it like that.”

“You always said I was the smart one.”

“Yeah, you’re the brains and I’m the brawn.” His hand slid up my chest under my shirt. “So how come you get a smoking hot body, too? Not fair.” He found one of my nipples and tugged at it, just hard enough to make me jump.

“So maybe you’ll turn me and nothing will change. But even if it does... Right now you feel the bond, and I don’t. That’s not fair. And it hasn’t been bad for you, has it? Why not let me feel it, too?”

“I can’t believe you aren’t freaked out by this,” he said. His fingers brushed over the center of my chest. Maybe he could feel where my fire sleeve curled onto my chest, his werewolf fingertips picking up the scars of the tattoo. He looked amazed. By me. It was me putting that expression on Will’s face. Now that was something that freaked me out, but in a very good way.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “Because I’m in love with you, Will.” He pinched my nipple, rocking me with a jolt of good pain. “I want to be with you, forever. I want to feel what you’re feeling.”

“I can’t think when I’m touching you,” he said as he moved his hands to my hips. His smile was rueful. “But I really, really want to touch you.”

“Lucky I’m not in love with you for your brain, huh?”

It was a risky joke to make. But it paid off. Will’s eyes darkened, and his grin grew wicked. “I’ll show you why you love me.” He flipped me onto my back on the couch and covered me in his body. His hips ground into mine, and I could feel how hard he was, from the ridges of his abdomen to the V of his hips to that glorious boner straining his jeans. I went from half-hard to fully erect in two seconds.

“You love that?” he whispered. Cocky as always, but touching because I could see how aroused he was. His face was dark and his brows drawn together and his breath was rough.

“Yeah. I love that.” I grabbed the zip of his jacket, smushing my hands between us because our chests were pressed so close. “I love everything about you.”

“I love everything about you too, Con. You’re perfect.” The last word was dragged out as a groan. He sat up, straddling my hips, his weight on either side of me. He shoved at my tee and I tugged at his jacket. We were both warring to get the other’s clothes off which meant neither of us were getting anywhere at all. “Whatever happens, it’s you and me forever. Right?”

“Of course.” I still didn’t see how Joseph could hurt Will, but if Will said it was likely then I believed it. But even if Will was broken and maimed, I’d love him forever. Because I was joking when I said I just loved his body. I loved his brain full of wisecracks and I loved his boundless energy and the way that he looked after everybody all the time. I couldn’t imagine anything better than a lifetime with Will. So I said, “Turn me.”

“Huh?” Will had worked my shirt up to my armpits and was tracing the outline of the tattoo above my navel. He was completely distracted.

I took the chance to unzip his jacket and shove it off his shoulders. He dropped it on the floor, then helped me out of my shirt. It was awkward undressing on a couch with Will on my lap fumbling and breathless and my chin caught in my collar. My hand slipped, and I boxed myself in the nose. It was up there with the most embarrassing fumbles of my life as a gawky shy kid. But I wouldn’t have traded it for all the smooth movie-star undressing in the world, because at the end I was looking up at Will’s cocky smile and that was perfect.

Will ran his lips up the center of my chest. He paused at my nipple, mouth barely touching my skin. “So gorgeous. You always smell so good.”

“Turn me,” I said.

He froze. “What?”

“Turn me, Will. I want to be a werewolf.”

“You only just found out werewolves even exist. Now you want to be one?” His breath was warm on my chest.

“I want to run beside you in the snow. I want to feel the mating bond, too. Turn me.”

Will sat up, carefully distributing his weight. His ass was right on my crotch with just enough pressure to make me think that he was right, he did have a great ass and maybe I’d like to explore it. Maybe, some time when Will wasn’t staring at me with a mix of confusion and fear.

“You won’t ever be able to go back to being human,” he said quietly.

“Would you want to be human or werewolf?”

“That’s not fair. I’ve only ever been a werewolf.”

“Would you want to be human?”

He didn’t answer. That was answer enough: Werewolf. Who would choose human?

“What do you have to do? Some kind of magic spell?”

Will was silent long enough that I thought he wasn't going to answer. He was watching me, his eyes on my pale chest until I started feeling self-conscious. His body was so perfect, those tight muscles and healthy glowing skin and the sharp crisp lines of tattoos. And any time he wanted, he could change his shape into a wolf just as beautiful and just as strong. Why would he deny me the chance to do the same?

Finally, he said, “I have to bite you.”

I raised my hand and pushed a finger against his lips. “Go on then.”

I felt his smile against the back of my finger. “Not like that.”

“Like what then? Go on, bite.”

When he didn't move, I reached up with the other hand and grabbed his nose. I squeezed it tight so he couldn't breathe.

He probably could have pushed me off but he didn't. He just playfully batted at my hand. “Hey! Stop that!”

When he talked, I shoved my fingers into his mouth. “Bite me!”

“You're crazy!” His words were muffled by laughter and fingers.

“Bite me!” When he didn't respond, I let go of his nose and wedged my hand under his armpit. I jabbed hard and fast with a tickle and Will yelped. His ass and inner thigh slid over my cock as his hips bucked. His teeth pressed down on the hand in his mouth. But at the same time he shoved his own hands under my armpits and tickled me back. I squirmed and squealed and hiccuped with laughter, trying to keep my arms at my sides to defend myself while also tickling him and keeping my hand in his mouth.

“You taste good,” he said, stretching his jaw around. He leaned over me, eyes dark and smile wide. “You actually taste like salty caramel.”

“Yeah, I had a Twix backstage,” I admitted. “The salt's all you, though. Is that the hardest you can bite?”

Will shook his head. Then he admitted, “I don't want to hurt you.”

“I can take it.” I was actually offended when he kept just sitting there. “What, you don't think I can take it? Look at my tattoos and tell me I can't sit through pain for something I want.”

“It's not that.”

“Then what is it?” When Will didn't reply, I offered, “What if I bite you first?”

“What?”

“I'll bite you. Then when you bite me, it's like you're making it even.”

“That's not how it works. Also... No one bites alphas. It's not something anyone does.”

“Then I'll be the first. Come on. Are you scared?”

Will frowned at me, and for a few long seconds, I thought I'd pushed things too far. Then he burst out laughing. “What's your deal, Con? Why do you want to bite me so much?”

“Because I'm secretly a cannibal, and I have a taste for you.”

“Oh god. You get that I'm a werewolf, right? I'm a raise your pitchforks and hide your children kind of monster. I've torn the throats out of living creatures. Cannibalism is so far from being funny.”

“Then why are you laughing?”

“Because I—” Will stopped, shaking his head. He picked at a frayed seam on the leather couch as he frowned in thought. Then, suddenly, he tilted his head up and exposed his neck. “Okay.”

“Okay?” I pushed up to a sitting position.

“Yeah. No. Wait.” Will let out a breath. Then he put his hands on my shoulders and looked me straight in the eye. “This is whack, okay? This is full-on bizarro. But if you want to bite me, yeah, go ahead. You'll see it's nothing glamorous. Just... Go as hard as you can, okay?”

I nodded. I raised myself to my knees on the couch and wrapped my arms around Will. I kissed him until I built up the courage to move my mouth to his neck. Then, nestling my face in the crook of his neck, I bit down hard.

I'd partly expected him to writhe in agony and spurt blood everywhere. But I couldn't even break his skin. We were hugging chest-to-chest, and I felt Will tense against me. I loosened my jaw and pulled back.

But then Will tilted his head to whisper against my neck, “That all you got?”

I snorted and bit down harder. Strained until my teeth ached and I thought I was going to damage my jaw. When I couldn't bite any harder, I pulled away

again. "Your turn," I said. It felt like my jaw was vibrating, memories of the strain making my face throb.

Will slanted his mouth into mine and kissed me roughly. "I didn't think I was going to like that," he chuckled. "And I was kinda right. How about you?"

"Could go either way. It hurt. I like holding you, though."

He gently pushed me onto my back and grabbed my arms, pulling them up over my head. He pinned me to the couch, his hips over mine.

Will lowered himself until his body was stretched out over me again, his hands still trapping me but hooked around so our forearms were pressed together. "You want to know what a werewolf bite feels like?" he whispered.

"Yes. Please."

His mouth was against my ear. He breathed out, and I tilted my head, extending my neck instinctively. Will pressed his lips to the side of my neck, his stubble rough. I felt the scraping of his teeth and then the wet of his tongue. I shivered. It was sensitive there, the skin so tender. I'd never known. Suddenly we weren't playing around anymore, I was fully aroused. Will was keeping his weight off me, but he was still heavy and so strong, his muscles firm and his body radiating heat. My nostrils were filled with his leather and musk and the shampoo we shared.

His teeth scraped my neck, his mouth opening wide while his lips stayed clamped on my skin. Like a seal joining me to him, or closing his mouth off: Out here was the rest of the world, in there was Will's jaw with the power to change my life forever. He was sucking on my skin, the pressure like an ache that sent throbbing pleasure straight to my cock.

His tongue was lapping at me so hot and wet, flicking over my skin with the beat of my heart. He was a werewolf, and I had my neck bared to him. But I had never felt as safe as I did under him.

Will released my arms and buried a hand in my hair so his arm was crooked around to hold his head against my neck. His other hand dragged along my ribs, fingernails catching on my skin. My body was stretched out under him, and his fingernails left a blazing trail that seemed to go on forever. His hand found my hips, then my ass. He cupped it and squeezed, lifting me against him. His zipper was hard but his dick was harder, trapped against my hips and my own erection.

His teeth pressed at my skin. Then something weird happened, a surreal feeling like a heavy liquid was being thrown at my shoulder and sliding off it.

Something moving, sliding over my neck. Will's teeth. He was shifting. I wrapped my arms around his waist and felt his back, skin warm and smooth and human. But his jaw shifted into the sharp predator's bite of a wolf.

He was still sucking my skin, licking, slowly driving me mad with the steady beating of his tongue. Sharp teeth sunk into my neck. Stinging pressure, a sudden blaze of pain that made my body stiffen. My cock surged and my breathing stopped as I tried to deal with the overwhelming feeling. Pain and pleasure at the same time. It felt so good, but not like the good ache of a hard workout. This pain was intense and immediate, and my delight was just as strong.

When I flinched, Will lessened the pressure then started to pull away. I wanted to scream at him to keep going, explain to him that this was a good pain, just something I was trying to get my head around because I had never felt anything like it before. But my brain had dissolved, and I couldn't articulate anything. I clutched at Will's back and squeezed his body closer. My hips rocked, and I ground my dick against his, needy and insistent through the layers of heavy clothing.

Will hadn't broken the seal against my neck. He kept licking me, his tongue stroking my skin like he was trying to soothe away the pain of the bite. I wanted him to let him know I was happy—more than happy—and things were okay. All I could do was cling on to him. I managed to choke out a few words. "If you're going to keep doing that, maybe you should get it pierced. Your tongue, I mean."

His laughter was a snort against my neck, but I felt tension melting from his shoulders. Good. When had this become about me making Will feel comfortable? Then again, when had it not been? His pleasure would always be as important to me as my own, if not more. Maybe that's what he was worried about. Suddenly it hit me: That was why he was so caught up on the mates thing. He was afraid I'd stop thinking about myself and just want to make him happy. Only our happiness was already linked in my mind and had been since middle school. And that was exactly how I wanted it.

"I want this," I said. "Please. Bite me."

I couldn't tell if Will's groan was human or wolf. It was desperate and shaking, and I felt it through my neck and straight through the rest of my body, shivering through me like he'd taken control of my nervous system. He bit down gently. My eyes rolled back in my head at the trembling agony of so much pleasure. My neck was raw but he just kept licking.

I snaked a hand between us where our hips were rocking together. I shoved at Will's fly, fumbling blindly for the button. Our skin was slick with sweat and my back was sticking to the leather of the couch, but I didn't care. All I wanted to do was grind against Will and have Will grind against me. I freed him from his pants and held him trapped between our bodies and my jeans. He had a hand in my hair and teeth at my neck and he was unraveling me a strand at a time. He grabbed my zipper and dragged it down. Suddenly we were together, skin-to-skin, hot and slippery and impossibly hard.

Another blaze of pain from his teeth. My head bucked into the couch and my back arched enough to lift Will's weight above me. I wasn't in control of it, like my muscles had taken over or like it was my spine pulling tight and controlling my body. Frantically I wondered if this was it, if this was what it felt like to shift into a werewolf?

Will kept suction on my neck but pulled back enough to lick at the place where his teeth had been. It didn't hurt but it did feel raw. Our hands and cocks were desperately groping in the tunnel between our bodies, sweat and pre-cum easing the glide as our hips and hands guided our cocks.

Even without the pain, the sensation was too much to take. My back arched again as my balls pulled up tight and I gave in to orgasm. I shuddered under Will as my hands scrabbled fast and hard and out of control.

Will groaned again, that half-human half-animal sound that was so primal and rough it made me want to come all over again. His arm was crushed against my body. I could feel the strength in it, the muscles working against my skin as he squeezed himself to climax. He groaned again as he came. His sticky jizz joined mine, plastered between our bodies and leaking into our jeans and down our sides.

He kissed my neck gently and the bite echoed with the feel of his lips. He lifted his head to graze against my mouth then rolled over so his weight wouldn't crush me. He held me and breathed, just breathed for a few moments.

My whole body felt warm, loose and relaxed. I whispered, "Am I werewolf now?"

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Chapter Seventeen

Will

It had felt good. So, so good. Connor's ready neck under my mouth. The pulse of blood under his skin just waiting for my bite.

It had felt good. But not enough to lose control.

"You're not a werewolf," I told him. I aimed for comforting, but the words came out raspy. I cleared my throat and tried again. "I didn't break the skin."

There was a mark on Connor's neck, purple-red and dark. An intense hickey with my teeth marks around it, pale blue outlined in white. I hadn't realized I'd leave a mark. If I'd realized I would have asked, and offered to bite him somewhere less visible.

"You didn't bite me?" Connor's emotions were a sleepy beautiful mess. There was fear in there, and excitement. But mostly the warm contentment that came before sleep. "You said you'd bite me."

"I bit you. Just enough that you'd know what it feels like." And so I'd know.

It had been incredible. Better even than the shameful fantasies. I'd tried not to let myself think about it since my conversation with Bren three years ago. I was afraid of all that my bite could do to my mate. But then Connor had begged for it, acting for all the world like my embarrassing secret desire was something good. And all at once the need had rushed back into me, even stronger now that it was possible and right there in front of me.

Impossibly good. And impossibly dangerous. I stroked Connor's jaw, keeping away from the bite. "How are you feeling?"

"Annoyed that I'm not a werewolf." His eyes were closed, and he was smiling.

"I didn't hurt you?"

"No. Yes. In a good way."

"You like pain?" I hadn't seen that coming.

Connor lazily licked his lips then opened his eyes and fixed me with that smoky gray stare. He joked, "Came as a surprise to me, too."

I laughed as I shook my head. “I can’t believe this. I keep thinking you can’t get any better, and then...”

His grin faded as he said seriously, “Soul mates, right? We’re perfect for each other? I never thought I’d want to be bitten, but when it’s you doing it...”

I leaned in for a slow kiss. His breathing was slow and relaxed, and I liked that a lot. “It will probably hurt more,” I warned him. “If I do it for real.”

“Why won’t you do it now?”

“Because biting you would make me stronger right before the fight and I don’t like that timing. I won’t ever know if I didn’t just do it because it would make me stronger. I can’t spend the rest of my life wondering if I bit you because you wanted it or because I did.” Because it’s what my mom would do, and I don’t want to be the kind of leader she is.

“Wait. Biting me would make you stronger?”

“Yeah.” Looks like I missed that in my yard sale of an explanation.

“Then you have to do it. To save the wolves.”

“It has to be at the full moon, so there’s no time. And even if there was, there’s no guarantee it would work—Joseph’s had years to build pack loyalty and I’ve had years of losing it. He’ll have all the pack together giving him their loyalty and I honestly don’t know if our mating bond can beat that. My pack is large, I have a lot of cousins. And very few of them have loyalty to me.”

“It’s better than nothing though, isn’t it?” Connor sat up, tucking his legs against his chest. Goosebumps had risen on his arms.

My jacket was out of reach and besides, my body heat would work more quickly. I sat up and pulled him into my lap, his back against my front and my arms around him so my hands rested at his thigh and neck. He was sticky with semi-congealed semen but, then again, so was I. At least I knew where that cum had come from. Connor leaned back into me, nuzzling against my jaw and ear. Everywhere he touched felt like it was glowing hot like metal pulled from the fire.

After years of wanting, it was ecstasy to finally be able to touch him. Even if I had to tell him bad news. “If I bite you, you’ll get tied to my pack and to the mountains. That will stay, even if I lose the fight. And if I lose the fight I’ll be exiled. We’ll never be able to find a new pack and there will never be a home for us. We’ll always be wanting Jagged Rock and we’ll never be able to go back there.”

“But if you win that’s not a problem?”

“If I win, being tied to the mountain will feel amazing. But that’s too much of a gamble. I can’t risk it.”

“But that’s going to happen to you anyway if you lose, right? Losing the pack and the mountains? At least if you bite me you won’t be alone.”

“No.” I said it quietly because his face was so close to mine, but I said it firmly. There was no negotiation on this. “I won’t put you through that. There’s a chance I’ll find a pack later, but even if I don’t we can find a new home and if I bite you there then that will become your home.”

“Somewhere cold,” he said, like he’d said last night. “Like to the East, or even Canada. We could go to Liv’s hometown, even. She’d like to go there, she’s only visited but all her family are there.”

“Too close to Jagged Rock. We could go somewhere warm, you know. Like to California with Dave.” We’d just have to avoid being shot when we were wolves, but that was a risk we’d face almost anywhere except Jagged Rock.

Connor fell silent. I was enjoying the feel of his skin, and not letting myself think of anything else. Well, maybe something else: I was wondering if we’d permanently ruined the leather couch, sliding around on it in our delicious filth. I should probably just take the whole thing and reimburse Simon the bartender for it.

“Can I watch you fight Joseph?”

“You want to see me getting my ass kicked?”

“I want to be there for a big moment in your life. Plus I won’t be able to just wait around, wondering what you’ll be like when you get home.”

“Of course you can, if that’s what you want. You can do anything you want. Except becoming a werewolf right now,” I added. “I don’t want you to be there, because it’s going to be grisly. But you’ll be safe.”

“You don’t want me there?”

I hesitated. “Well, I do. Selfishly. Anything’s better with you around.” It wasn’t something I’d thought much about, but Connor’s face in the crowd would be a small ray of sunshine. “But for your sake, I don’t want you to have to see that.” There was also a childish part of me that just wanted Connor to keep thinking of me as some kind of superhero. I didn’t want him to see me fail.

“I want to be there,” he said again. “Even though I kind of don’t want to.”

“Yeah. I get that. I feel the same.” I squeezed Connor close as he chuckled. “Honestly, it might help just having you there. Even though we’re not mated yet and the unfinished bond kind of messes me up. You’re very loyal to me and that will give me some strength, even though you’re not a werewolf.”

Connor froze. “It works like that? You get loyalty points from people?”

Loyalty points. He made werewolf power sound like a supermarket promotion. And it was funny because it was true. “Yeah, definitely. Not anywhere near as much but it’s still great. That’s part of why I like being on stage so much.”

He twisted to kiss my cheek. “Plus you’re a giant attention whore.”

“Yeah. That’s the other part of it.”

Connor rubbed absently at the mark on his neck. It was fading but not much. I loved how it looked but I didn’t like that I didn’t have his permission to put it there. He said, “Why don’t you bring the band up, too?”

“To watch me fighting a werewolf?”

“Yes.”

I laughed. “Um. Because they don’t know about werewolves.”

“So tell them. Who’s more loyal to you than the band?”

“I’m not going to use our friends.” Cash your friendships in at the checkout, bonus loyalty points for every friend!

“I think they’d want to be used, if you asked. I know I would.” Connor started tapping at his leg, drumming out a nervous rhythm. “But I think you should tell them. I think you have to. The more I think about it, the more I know you should.”

All my petty little complaints dried on my tongue. I just asked, “You think that’s a good idea?”

“Definitely. We’re all parts of your life, Will. You tell me you’re alpha and I believe that. But you can’t tell me you’re a lone wolf. We’re your friends and we have been for years. If something big is happening in your life, we want to help. Plus we care about the wolves.”

That was true. Chop and Liv probably loved Jagged Rock as much as I did. Still. “It’s a big secret, Con. I don’t want to scare the band.” I thought of Matt refusing to even wear a hat with a wolf on it.

“I wasn’t scared.”

“That’s because you’re tough. And awesome. I love you for a reason.”

He smiled shyly and looked down like he was trying to see the smile on his lips. But when he met my eyes again his face was set with determination. “You love the band for a reason, too. They’re not wimps. They all love you and they deserve the truth.”

“It’s a big truth, Con.”

Over his shoulder the window was inky dark. Snow was falling again, and the temperature in the room had dropped. But our bodies had formed a private cocoon on our couch. All I could focus on was his eyes, slate gray and drilling into me like he was the alpha here. “You say I was drawn to you because I’m your mate, right?”

“Right.”

“The world rearranged itself so we’d meet, that’s what you’re saying?”

“Yeah. That’s how it seems.”

“There are pubs in Canada named after Liv’s family.”

“What?” I laughed at the non sequitur.

Connor nodded and held up a finger. “Liv’s family are like a tradition there. The entire family lives there, going generations back.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“So why’d her parents move to Layton?”

“For work. They’re rangers.”

“And the pay was good enough to leave all that tradition behind? You think so?”

I didn’t know where Connor was going with this. “Liv says they had a fight with her grandparents or something.”

“She says she thinks they might have, because that’s the only explanation she can find for why they moved. But they’re still on the phone every night so that doesn’t sound right, does it?”

“I guess. Why are we talking about this?”

Connor raised a second finger. “Matt’s parents never even showed an interest in hunting supplies until suddenly they up and moved to Layton. That’s weird, right?”

“Plenty of people like a fresh start.”

“And move from New York, New York to Hicksville, Minnesota?” He pressed on before I could answer, raising a third finger. “Chop’s family had never even left Singapore before they moved here. And the immigration process is a lot of work. Why go through all of that to be cold all the time?”

“The American dream?”

“You’re being stubborn.” Connor shook his head. He was totally cute when he was worked up. “It’s you, Will. Layton’s full of people who have lived there forever. Then suddenly four families move in, all with kids the same age as you? You brought us together. You’re the thing we have in common.”

“Coincidences.” It was a lot of coincidences, I had to admit. “You think fate brought the band together? Or something? That’s a lot of fate.” How much fate did it take to drag someone across oceans?

He took a deep breath. His eyes nailed me to the back of the couch as he said firmly, “Call it fate or call it coincidence, I don’t care. But you and the band are the most important people in my life. The only things that matter. And if you ask any of the others, I guarantee they’ll say the same. I think you brought us all here with your freaky alpha magic. But even if you don’t think so, you can’t act like they’re not in your life. You owe them the truth.”

Connor

Will and I got the band together in our dorm room. I locked the door discreetly. Mainly for the secret clubhouse thrill of it. But also because if any of them were terrified out of their wits and went running down the hallway yelling about werewolves the RA might kick us all out, and I loved our dorm.

Liv and Chop were sitting on Will’s chair, Matt was on the ground at their feet. We’d twisted it around so it faced the door and that’s where Will and I were. I had my back to the door and Will stood in front of me. He started by saying, “I’ve got something to tell you all.”

“You’re getting married,” Liv said.

“You’re pregnant,” Chop said at the same time.

“You’re leaving the band,” Matt said, his face falling.

“I’m a werewolf,” Will said.

There was a beat of silence then Matt started laughing. I crossed my arms over my belly and mentally timed it—if he kept laughing until he sounded ‘manic’ or ‘hysterical’, I might need to slap him like they did in the movies.

“What do you mean by ‘werewolf’?” Chop asked carefully.

Will laughed. “Connor asked pretty much the same thing. I mean a werewolf. I can transform into a wolf or a human or any stage in between.”

Chop nodded slowly. I could tell she didn’t believe him but was humoring him—almost the same response as mine. Matt’s mouth had fallen open but he’d stopped laughing at least. Liv’s face was completely blank.

“What are you thinking, Liv?” I asked. My voice surprised myself, I hadn’t meant to ask the question.

Liv was looking at Will intently. “I’ve heard stories, of course. You spend a lot of time up at Jagged Rock but you never get lost. Your family take shockingly candid photos with animals, especially wolves. You’ve lived in your house your whole life but when we go over there it always seems sterile and empty. There are wolf tracks surrounding your house. You have an unnatural affinity for wolves and you can communicate with them. I’ve always wondered.”

Chop stared at her in disbelief. “You wondered if he was a werewolf?”

“Didn’t you?”

“His palms aren’t hairy and I’ve seen him using silver.” She thought of a pun, and said suddenly, “Will was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Does that sound like a werewolf?” She crossed her arms over her Sepultura T-shirt. “Furthermore, werewolves don’t exist.”

“Will’s never here at the full moon,” Liv countered.

“You grew up in the mountains. Ever seen a werewolf?”

“I’ve never seen a bear taking a dump, that doesn’t mean they don’t.”

“I’ve seen bear poop, though,” Chop pressed. “Piles of it. But I’ve never seen a werewolf.”

“What’s a werewolf look like? Maybe you have.”

Will cleared his throat. He winked at me over his shoulder then said, “This is what a werewolf looks like.”

He did what I'd told him to, what we'd discussed—shifting enough to not be scary but enough to be convincing. It was what had worked with me. Then again, I'd always thought of Will as superhuman anyway.

Chop gasped, and Liv went pale. Matt recoiled so fast he knocked his head violently on the base of the chair.

There were a few beats of silence. Then Chop swore loudly.

"I knew it," Liv said. "Do you eat people?"

"No. Never." Will shook his head firmly.

"But you hunt people?"

"Never. I don't even hunt animals."

She nodded. She might have looked a little disappointed. I might have imagined it.

Matt said suddenly, "Can you make me one? A werewolf, I mean?"

It was the last question I'd been expecting—it certainly hadn't crossed my mind when Will had revealed himself to me last night. Will was obviously surprised, too. He said, "You hate wolves, Matt."

"Yeah, because I'm a human. If I was a werewolf I wouldn't hate anything. Or I'd hate wolves and humans equally. Can you make me one?"

Will hesitated. Then he ignored Matt's question completely and said, "I need you to know that I'm still the same person I've always been. I'm sorry for keeping secrets from you but I had my reasons." He paused, and then added, "Obviously. Anyway, I want you all to know that I'm not going to hurt you or anything, and you don't have to be scared."

Chop laughed, her eyebrows raising. "Why would we be scared? We know you, Will."

It wasn't that I had been afraid of how they would react. But seeing the band reacting so well made me all warm and fuzzy inside.

Will just said, "Thanks, Chop. I mean it. Do you have any questions...?"

"Can you make me one?" Matt asked again.

Chop asked again, "So what does 'werewolf' mean? Do you turn into a wolf at the full moon?"

“No. I can do it at will. The full moon doesn’t make me do anything, it just heightens some hormonal responses. It’s nice to be in wolf form sometimes but if I don’t shift the worst I get is an itchy feeling. I’ve got amazing hearing, smell and night vision. I can heal wounds. I can move fast, and I’m strong. I don’t get sick. I live longer than humans. That’s what werewolf means.”

“Your family are too, right? Not just you?” Liv asked.

“Yes. My extended family.”

“No way,” Matt burst out. “Even that jerkbag Joseph? He’s got Super Saiyan powers and he still goes around tying people’s shoelaces together? What a waste.”

Will winced, glancing at me again. “Worse than that. But yes, Joseph’s a werewolf.”

“Are you at war with vampires?” Matt asked.

“No. Vampires aren’t real.”

“How do you know?”

“Because they’re not real.”

“But how can you know?”

Liv added, “He’s right, you know. You can’t prove a negative.”

Will looked over his shoulder at me, eyes huge in amazement and exasperation. Not how you thought this would go? I laughed and nudged his shoulder until he laughed with me. Then Matt joined in, and soon we were all laughing at nothing.

At last Will said, “I’ve got something serious to tell you all.”

Chop’s arms were still crossed but she was smiling. “More serious than you being a freak of nature?”

“Yeah. More serious than that. It’s about Joseph, actually. There’s something I need you all to do.”

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Chapter Eighteen

Will

We were all in Chop's van on the way up to Layton for a werewolf fight.

How the hell had that happened?

A few days ago, I'd still been fixated on someday telling Connor. But now I'd told the whole band as well. When we stopped for gas, I idly wondered if I should tell the attendant about werewolves.

I was being unfair because I wasn't thinking clearly. And I wasn't thinking clearly, because I was freaked out of my skull. The big fight.

The more I thought about it, the more right Connor seemed: Something had drawn the band together. It might as well be fate or werewolf magic, for all I knew. They had fierce loyalty to me which wouldn't hurt in the fight against Joseph. And they had a van, which couldn't hurt when dragging my battered body home from the fight with Joseph.

But more than that, the band could help me out. They all knew the forest well and could keep an eye on it when I couldn't be there. Liv was very well respected in the hunting community and Chop was a whizz with social media. Between them they could maybe try to undo some of the damage of Joseph's hair-brained campaign to set up a war between wolves and humans.

We'd talked late into the night about all the ways the band could help the wolves after I was exiled. We'd talked until Matt had fallen asleep on my bed. Then I'd climbed in beside him and Connor behind me, then Liv and Chop on the other side, all of us piled together on top of my cramped dorm bed. I rarely slept in it myself so that was probably more action than it could handle. But it had felt right to pile up with my friends as if we were all wolves. They'd even tried to peer pressure me to spend the night in my wolf form, but I'd talked them out of it by reminding them that wolf meant naked, and if I shifted back in my sleep then they'd be officially weirded out. Connor said he didn't mind, but Chop hit my face with a pillow and yelled, "Gross!" That settled it. We all slept fully clothed. Still, it felt right.

After the fight, everything would change. I couldn't hang out at college and play in a college band anymore. I couldn't be with the band all the time anymore. But at least I'd have that one dogpile night to remember them by. That, and a digital scrapbook of embarrassing photos.

Matt was in full jokester mood on the ride up to Layton. He seemed determined to get everyone to smile. He kept asking Liv to turn the music up then trying to get us to sing along. Then he got me to teach everyone wolf howls. He stuck his head out the window and howled a garbled greeting to the wind, and when a bird poop landed on the van right beside his head his expression of total shock was the first good laugh I'd had all day.

We drove straight through Layton and up to my parent's place, set just within the forest. Dave came out onto the porch as we pulled into the driveway.

"Who are all of these people?" he asked in bewilderment. "It's like a clown car, people keep piling out."

"You know the band," I said, rolling my eyes. Dave kept shifting his weight and rubbing his neck and just watching him put me on edge.

"I just don't know why they're here. Sorry, I'm nervous," he added quickly.

"That's cool. And they're here because I told them. Everything."

Dave's eyes got even wider. "Last week you hadn't even told your mate. I guess when it rains, it pours."

"That's pretty much what I was thinking on the way up." I looked past him to where a wolf was hobbling toward us. I dropped to my knees and held out my arms.

Behind me Connor told the others, "That's Trout Shimmer."

"I know," Chop said. "He'll be on the cover of our EP. If we ever make an EP. If Will doesn't get decapitated by his jerk cousin."

I looked back at them. "Don't freak out, okay?" Chop started to say she wasn't freaked out, but then I shifted my head and throat so I could communicate with Trout Shimmer. Chop fell silent.

It was Matt who spoke up. When I was licking Shimmer's muzzle Matt said loudly, "When you make us all werewolves, do we have to do that? Because I don't know how often Liv washes her face."

Then there was the unmistakable sound of an elbow in a rib and Matt laughing breathlessly

I checked how he was healing—well—and how he was feeling—not good. I asked after his sister but he said she'd taken into the woods a few days ago and hadn't been back. It was cruel of her to leave him, but I wasn't that surprised—

the older they got, the harder it would be for them to integrate into a new pack, and one wolf had a better chance of finding a pack than two did.

Afterward, I offered the others drinks. We stood around in the driveway with our hands in our pockets. I didn't want to go inside, I could sense my parents in there and I didn't want to talk to them. The house had been my home since I was a child, and the place of my first sleepover with Connor. But the forest had always been just as much my home, and I knew which I was going to miss more.

I didn't like being nervous; it was pointless and painful. And I especially hated seeing my friends trying to hide their nerves. We still had hours to kill before the fight, and I didn't want to spend them watching my friends trying to hide their nerves. So I offered, "Bet I can beat anyone at a dirt bike race?"

Mom came out to talk to me while we were racing the dirt bikes. We were in the clear space in the forest not far from the house, the place where I'd taught Connor to ride, and where I'd hidden after my parents had betrayed me to Joseph. I'd kinda started thinking of it as a private place where only my friends could find me.

The band was riding the outskirts of the clearing, and I was on foot in the center, watching them like a ringmaster. I was keeping an eye out for accidents—I would probably have time to run in and prevent injury from all but a massive pileup. I was also acting as judge—Chop and Liv often finished neck-and-neck, and Matt often tried to cut corners. I didn't need to watch that closely to stop Matt cutting corners because every time he did, he would snicker so loudly about getting away with it that I could bust him over it.

I sensed my mom coming, but I stayed in place. I kinda hoped she'd be too afraid to cross the path of the dirt bikes.

But no such luck. Soon she was beside me, back straight and hair pulled into a bun, wearing those soft gloves that showed off her wealth. I realized I was wearing my gloves too and that annoyed me. Right then I wanted to be the opposite of her, as far removed from an alpha as possible. I wanted no one to know that I was related to the woman who sold out her son to put some maniac in charge of her pack.

"It's getting late," was the first thing she said. "You don't want to miss the fight."

“Would you even care if I did?”

“Very mature,” she drawled.

A moment later, I was struck with the force of her loyalty, a flame so bright and hot it roared like an open fire. I had to blink and tilt my head away. Wow. I hadn't been expecting that. She hadn't been giving me much loyalty since I was sixteen. She'd hoped I would spend my fifteenth year leading the pack like she'd done, but instead I'd got to know wolves and fallen deeper in love with Connor.

That was the start of the end, I now realized—I'd spent years assuming it was just a matter of time until I took over the pack, but my mom had known since I was sixteen that it wasn't going to happen. I'd stepped away from pack leadership so I could be with Connor. Still, I couldn't bring myself to regret it.

But I couldn't figure out why she was loyal to me now. I felt the force of it almost like an energy drink, my blood and bones and muscles buzzing with fresh power. She was an alpha with a mate, that made her loyalty more than twice as strong as any other werewolf. I wondered if she had come out here just to show me that, so I asked directly. “Why are you so loyal to me all of a sudden? I haven't bitten Connor, if that's what you were hoping.”

“I'm aware. I was hoping, but not much.” She settled her hands on her hips, watching the band on their bikes. “When I asked you to choose between the pack and your band, I didn't think you'd take me so literally.”

Connor kept looking over at us. I was uncomfortable with seeing him so distracted. I crooked a finger and beckoned for him. “You want me to choose? My band comes first. I've told them what I am. They accept me.”

Mom said, “I know you think this wasn't fair.”

“Forcing me to make a decision before I was ready? Yeah. Not fair.”

“It had the desired result.”

“The desired result? To put Joseph in charge?” I echoed. She had stood around as Joseph hunted and killed wolves for fun.

“The desired result was that you decide where your loyalty lies, and prove it. You can't lead a pack if your heart isn't in it.”

“You could have waited.”

“Would that have helped? You knew I was ready to retire. You're eighteen now, you should have been leading the pack for years. When I was your age—”

“I’m not you,” I snarled.

“That’s abundantly clear.” Her face showed it wasn’t meant as an insult.

Connor’s bike skidded to a halt behind me, and he slid off. Chop stopped her bike sharply beside Connor, then Liv was a beat behind that. Then Matt climbed off his bike, and the clearing fell silent. It was so abrupt that it was less like the stopping of sound and more like a silence had swept in and taken over. Even the trees were still, no wind to move the branches in the gathering dark.

I was angry, my body tight at the way Mom could work me up with her lousy arguments. Connor came up beside me, close but not quite touching. He tilted his head until his lips brushed my ear and whispered, “I love you.”

My shoulders relaxed and my stress released as Connor’s words flowed through me like a soothing caress. It was meant just for me, but Mom would have heard it with her werewolf ears. I didn’t care. I hoped she heard. If she couldn’t see now why I thought some things were more important than the pack, she never would.

The band stood around me, facing my mother down. She’d never really got along with the band; Dad had been the one to make an effort to chat with them and hand out snacks when they were over at my house. Mom could be intimidating. I felt a surge of pride for my band, standing beside me against someone they now knew was an alpha werewolf.

“You could have been leading the pack,” Mom continued. “If you hadn’t been so focused on your extracurricular activities.” Her eyes flicked to Connor, and she frowned slightly. “Make that bite deeper and you might have more hope against Joseph. You still have time to—”

“Leave Connor out of this.” I stepped forward, putting him behind me, blocking my mother’s view of the bite on his neck.

Mom nodded and, to my surprise, didn’t push further. She looked at me steadily, and said, “I wanted you to know you had my support.”

“If you really meant that, you would have waited until I was ready.”

She smiled softly. “Then I would have waited forever, and you know it. This has been the best thing to happen to you, and in time you’ll see that.”

The weird thing was, in a way she was right. If she hadn’t forced my hand I might never have got around to telling Connor, and I might never have actually made a fight for leadership. I would still be caught in limbo, stretched between

a human life and werewolf duties. At least this way, I would know where I belonged, even if that meant leaving Jagged Rock. So it kinda made sense. Except... “Don’t you even care that Joseph’s killing wolves?”

“Of course I care. But it’s not my call to make. I announced him as pack leader and now I have to respect that, same as everyone else.”

“You’ve fought your whole life to help these wolves, and now they’re all going to be killed. How can you think that’s okay?”

“It’s my duty to follow the pack leader. You know that. You could have been the pack leader, if—”

“Don’t act like this is my fault!” My anger was rising again, fueled by the image of a pack of wolves bloodied and frozen in the snow. Connor put a hand on my arm, unafraid, calming me. I took a long slow breath and relaxed back into his touch. My friends and my mate were beside me, and that meant a lot. “You’re as much to blame for the death of Jagged Rock wolves as I am, or as Joseph is. You know he’s not alpha and you know he can’t be a good leader. For all I know, you knew he’d become a total psychopath with power. You could have stopped this.”

“I have to look out for the pack,” she said simply. “It was time for me to step down. I wasn’t a suitable leader anymore. If you don’t win the fight tonight, then you’ll know you weren’t either.”

“So you get a psychopath for a leader. Well done.” I managed to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

Mom shook her head sadly. “That’s still better for the pack than a leader who can’t make his mind up whether he wants to be a werewolf or a human.”

“Maybe it’s good for the pack, but it will be the end of the wolves. Their blood will be on your hands.”

Her eyes flicked over my band before settling back on me. “For what it’s worth, I hope you win. I truly do.”

She turned and walked away. Chop nudged my arm and—well within the range of hearing—said, “Will, your mom’s a cow.”

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Chapter Nineteen

The drive into the Jagged Rock Mountains took a little over an hour. The fight would take place in a large clearing where there was often a lake. The area was rocky and the lake would swell or split or drain depending on the seasons. A lot of Jagged Rock was impermanent—rivers changed their course and lakes changed their borders or disappeared, trees were destroyed or new ones sprouted. Maps never stayed current.

The area we were headed to was nicknamed Skull Lake. The water was tainted so animals who drank it would die and leave their remains, hence the name. I was fighting the leader of a large werewolf pack, and I was doing it at a place where animals came to die. Brilliant.

As we neared the spot Chop glanced at me in the rear mirror. “Pity you’ve got that bite. It’s very visible.”

I angled my neck to try and catch a glance in the mirror. The bite was a purpled bruise from my collarbone to my shoulder. Connor mumbled an apology, but I said, “No, I like it.”

“It’s not very macho,” Chop commented.

“I’ll show macho where to stick itself. I wear whatever marks I want.”

Chop stopped the van, and we piled out. There was a ridge of rock we had to scramble over before we reached the flat land called Skull Lake.

By the bright light of the full moon, I could see Connor’s eyes on my bite mark.

“I like it,” I repeated.

“You don’t have to say that,” he said quietly. “I know it’s not an ultra-alpha-dominant kind of thing to walk around with.”

I went over to the rock pile and deliberately cut a deep slice out of the palm of my hand. I held my palm up to display the blood oozing out.

Chop said, “Crazy mofo.”

Matt gasped. “Why’d you do that?”

“Because,” I told them, “I want to show you this.” I healed the cut and wiped my palm on my jeans. Once the blood was smeared away there was no

trace that I'd ever been wounded at all. I caught Connor in my gaze and said firmly, "When I wear a mark, it's because I choose to. I don't care if people don't think bite marks are tough. This is proof that I told the man I love how I feel about him. What's braver than that?"

Connor smiled wide, his eyes going soft and warm. I wrapped an arm around his shoulders to squeeze him, and he muttered, "You and your big showy displays. We get it, you're a superhero."

Liv said loudly, "I just hope you didn't drip any blood around. The last thing we need is a bear attack."

We climbed the rocky ridge and came upon Skull Lake. The last time I'd been up the lake had been wide and frozen—not quite safe enough for a human to skate on, but it had been fun to slide with my wolf paws. That had been more than a year ago, back before college and the band had taken up so much of my time. Now the lake was dried up and the area was just frigid rocks. The trees bordered it in a line so it was almost like we were in a natural sports field, a rough rectangle. As much as he was a hateful prick, I had to hand this to Joseph: He'd picked a good spot for a showdown.

The full moon was bright and the sky was clear. There were also lights set up in the trees, casting light and sharp shadows over the rocky clearing. The pack was already waiting just outside the line of trees, every werewolf from Layton there to watch. And Joseph was there, standing on his own.

"Didn't think you'd show," he called across the clearing.

"You wish!" I yelled back. Then I turned my back on him and led the band to a clear spot under the trees at the edge of the clearing.

Dave ambled over to us with Bren trailing behind. I frowned to show Bren I didn't think it was a good idea to wear his heart on his sleeve like that—Joseph wouldn't like Bren hanging out with my friends. But Dave said quickly, "Joseph's been going around grilling everyone about their loyalty. We're your biggest supporters, no surprise. There are others—you can tell because they've been bullied into standing on their own. Big surprise is Mom and Dad are on your side, did you know?"

"Yeah, I know." Not that it will help. I had the support of a quarter of the pack, maybe less. Loyalty crackled like lightning through my body now that I was close enough to feel it.

I couldn't believe it was here. The big fight. My last chance to save the wolves and my home. I took a deep breath and clenched my hands into fists to hide their slight trembling.

Liv said quietly, "Whatever happens, we believe in you."

Chop agreed, "We'll be right here. We're not going anywhere."

Matt stepped forward and hugged me, rubbing his face against my belly.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm so lucky to have you guys. Now look away, I'm about to get naked." I shucked my jacket then paused and said, "Connor can look, if he wants."

Connor snorted and shoved me in the chest. "Stop wasting time and just do it already. You're always making me wait for it. I've been waiting six years." He laughed, but all his little body signals showed he was officially scared out of his mind.

I stripped then shifted into my werewolf form—two legs and long arms, fur from the waist down and across my shoulders and back, mostly human head. Not too far off the special effects from horror movies. Part wolf and part human but mostly badass. Not much good for running or day-to-day life, but great for fighting or looking cool.

"Wow," Matt whispered. "Now I definitely want to be a werewolf."

I winked at him. "I'd have to bite you, you want that?"

"Anything if I get to look like that!"

I laughed. "You might change your mind when you see all the things werewolves have to do." My gaze moved unconsciously to Bren. There was no doubt in my mind that if I bit Matt he'd fall into the role of a low-ranked wolf, maybe even an omega.

Connor rested a hand on my furry arm. "I love you," he said. Right there in front of everyone. He held eye contact and everything, even as his cheeks went red.

"I love you too. I'll see you soon." I gave him a brave grin like nothing was wrong, and Connor smiled back the same.

As I turned my back and headed out into the lakebed battle arena, Connor howled. He let out the howl I'd taught him, loudly proclaiming who he was and that he was my mate. I smiled and held my head higher. Then Matt joined in,

and Chop and Liv with the imperfect howls I'd taught them on the long drive to Layton. It didn't matter that they were human and their howls were hard to understand, they were showing their support for me and that warmed me. I hadn't asked them to do that, and they probably didn't know how much it meant to me to hear their voices and know I wasn't fighting alone.

Joseph was waiting, posed on top of a rock near the center of the dead lake. He was making a big deal out of rolling his eyes toward my band and wincing when the howl wasn't quite right. As I loped toward him he called, "Your girlfriend's not going to give you a kiss for good luck?"

"You want to come down here and say that to my face?" I growled. The moon was huge in the clear sky, and I felt it like a gentle caress on my skin. I felt strong, buoyed by the loyalty of my band and a few werewolves. Being with a pack, that ego trip of loyalty, was the best thing I'd ever felt before I first went on stage.

I reached Joseph. He'd picked a tall rock to stand on, the highest point in the mostly flat space. He'd probably picked the spot because it made him look most dramatic and cool, he'd probably walked around and looked at it from different angles, practiced that pose in the mirror. Yeah, he looked cool. Plus I had to tilt my head back to see him. That sucked.

"Let's howl," I said.

"I don't howl."

"It's tradition." Like humans shaking hands or bowing before a fight, werewolves howled together. It was a sign of respect for each other but also for the wolves in the area. I didn't respect Joseph as a person, and I didn't think he had any place being pack leader, but if he'd earned the loyalty of the pack he earned some recognition. "We always howl to acknowledge the wolves."

"I'm not an animal. And I don't care what the animals think of me."

And just like that, he lost the last of my respect.

I threw my head back and howled alone. I howled to the moon and to the forest. I am Will Flight, alpha werewolf. I lay a challenge to rule Jagged Rock Mountains.

The sound was swallowed up by the still night air. Joseph snickered. "Feel better?"

"I'll feel better after kicking your ass."

“Then get ready to feel terrible,” he growled. He leapt from his rock, claws extended. I braced myself for the blow. The fight had begun.

I knew it would be bad but I hadn't realized how bad. Joseph wanted blood. He came at me with claws and teeth and fists and showed no mercy. He fought dirty, and he fought strong. I used all the moves I knew from play fighting, but it didn't matter. The pack loyalty was burning in him, and I was no match. He was stronger, faster. His fists blurred and his teeth tore through my flesh like it was butter. From the start I was on the defensive. Even when I landed a blow, he barely seemed to feel it.

At last, Joseph pinned me to the ground and pummeled my belly. I tried to push him off but he got hold of my right arm and snapped it again and again. Sickening noises like wet gunshots and a white-hot pain. When I shoved at him with my left arm, he broke that too. Then he grabbed my neck and rammed my head onto the freezing rock, shaking me until my head bounced like a ball on a string. I tried to fight him off through the blinding pain, but it was like pushing at a solid wall.

There was a noise to the side, a strangled cry. I looked up to see Connor running toward me. “No!” He was screaming. “Stop that! Stop it!”

I yelled at him to get back, stay back, stay away from Joseph. But my voice wouldn't come out. When I opened my mouth all that emerged was blood, thick and hot and bubbling over my cheek. There was a sticky wet agony in my throat and chest, and I couldn't breathe right. That was the moment that real terror set in. Not from the pain or the inevitable defeat. From seeing Connor scared and not being able to help.

Connor ran to me until I could see the whites of his eyes and the stretched mask of horror his face had become. Joseph's lips were curled back to bare canine teeth, a snarl or a cruel smile. His growl was barely understandable. “I'll eat your boy if he comes closer.”

I shook my head urgently, the motion making the world pivot and jerk wildly around me. No! Maybe Joseph was mouthing off. Maybe he was serious. He could say Connor got in the way, interrupted a fight that should have been just between two werewolves. Maybe he'd get in trouble for it, but by then it would be too late...

Dave was suddenly there, lunging to grab Connor from behind. Dave's tattooed arms wrapped around Connor's waist, and he dragged him backward. I heard him yell, “Not your place!”

“He’s hurting Will! I’ll kill him!”

“This isn’t your fight.”

Connor was fighting Dave, swinging with his elbows and legs. I heard the dull thud of boot on bone. Then Bren was there, grabbing Connor’s arms to stop him fighting. Chop raced forward and grabbed Connor’s hand to get his attention. She talked to him quiet and low and urgent. “It will be okay. Everything’s going to be okay. Will knew what he was getting in to. He needs us to be strong.”

I knew I’d never forget how Connor’s face looked, taut with terror. His fear hurt as much as my physical wounds. I felt sick, waves of nausea on top of the pain. Please look away!

Joseph’s eyes were flicking from my face to Connor’s, relishing our pain. The sadistic bastard! I couldn’t believe my family were going to follow his orders. I tried to push him off, but my arms were lead and the pain made me want to pass out. I had to fight to stay conscious, my brain screaming with all the things I stood to lose if I didn’t keep fighting.

“He doesn’t like watching you like this, does he?” Joseph leaned close, gloating. “I never liked him. Stuck-up nerd. I wonder what he’ll do if…” Joseph caught the index finger of my right hand and bent it back deliberately. A snap and a rush of pain. I clamped my teeth shut to stop a cry of pain, but nothing came out anyway. I was choking and could feel blood running from my nose and lips.

“Stop it!” Connor screamed again. Chop had her hand in his and was trying to calm him while Dave and Bren held him restrained.

Against a backdrop of Joseph’s laughter, I twisted my head away. I wanted to shift into a wolf, something less familiar so Connor wouldn’t have to see my face as I suffered. But I couldn’t seem to shift right. I didn’t have the power. The flickering flame of loyalty was fading—my parents weren’t loyal to me anymore, I could feel them deciding I wasn’t worth having faith in. I was going to lose. I’d lose this fight and lose the forest. But it would be the wolves who suffered most, wolves and any person who got in Joseph’s way. I’m so sorry! I tried! I did everything I could.

Joseph broke my fingers one at a time, laughing as Connor screamed. I was numb. The pain was too intense so my body just shut down. I floated out of my body and looked down at myself, wondering absently how long Joseph could

keep torturing me. Forever, maybe. If I was left alone for a few hours, I could heal myself. At what point would that stop working? Did Joseph want to push me until I was so broken my body couldn't heal anymore? Maybe he didn't have a goal. Maybe he was just hurting me for the fun of it.

Connor had stopped screaming, but he was still struggling against Bren and Dave. Chop was still whispering to him, her voice choked. Trying to keep him calm. I could hear Connor's quiet sobs and his pained breathing, the sounds so tiny but reverberating through my empty head like he was yelling into a megaphone. Why had I thought it would be a good idea to bring him along? I wanted to yank this memory out of his head. I wished he'd never had to feel fear like this. His sobs were like gunshots to my ears.

Then I heard something else. A howl, strong and loud. Close. Two wolves raising their voices into the forest. I imagined floating away from my body and into that howl, letting the hope of it lift me up to the moon.

But I didn't want to float away. I wanted to fight. I needed to be strong, for the sake of those wolves. Joseph broke another of my fingers, and I forced myself to feel the pain. I forced myself to open my eyes and to look up into his laughing face.

He was sitting on my hips, but both his hands were on my right arm—he wasn't bothering to hold me pinned down now I'd stopped struggling. I bucked up and clamped my teeth on his neck. My vision went blotchy and I heard a popping tearing sound inside me, but I ignored it, embracing the pain because it meant I was still here and present in the moment. It was years since I'd tried to take down an animal with my teeth, but I acted on instinct. Grab the jugular, make it quick and hard and if your teeth don't touch at the end, twist to do as much damage as possible. I made it messy and I made it hurt, the exact opposite of what I wanted to do with Connor.

Joseph roared. "Bastard! Just stay down!" He pounded my head into the ground with an ugly crack I hoped Connor didn't hear. Both Joseph's hands were on my forehead, holding me down like a vice around my head. My arms were spread out beside me, crippled and useless. "I'm going to kill you," Joseph hissed. "No one can stop me. You want to die like this, with your girlfriend screaming?"

I spat in Joseph's face, thick dark blood splattering his chin. I tried not to hear Connor's struggles to reach me, but every cry of his cracked voice was like a saw through my bones.

And then I felt something I didn't expect. A warm tickling in my belly, a good heat. This must be what death feels like. It still hurt but there was something else beside the pain, something warm and buoyant.

A moment later the feeling was suffusing my whole body. Soft heat all over like I was basking in sunlight. It didn't feel like I was dying, it felt like I was getting stronger.

I tried healing, just a little. Two minutes ago, I would have told you it was impossible, that I was too damaged and I needed to lie alone for hours before I could heal myself. But healing was easy in that new warm glow. The bones in my arms popped back into place with no effort. It had never been that easy, even at full strength.

But suddenly, I was stronger than I had ever been before. My senses sharpened, the world around me coming into focus until I could sense everything. I could hear the slow movement of water under the ground and I could smell rainclouds that wouldn't reach us for half an hour. And I could sense the reason I was stronger—wolves. The forest around us was filled with wolves. And every one blazed with loyalty—for me. As they approached I got stronger and my senses got sharper, so I could sense further and further away and the hundreds of wolves that were moving toward us.

I reached inside of myself and fixed my lungs, my throat. Lined my spine up right and meshed my tendons and muscles and bone. I taped myself back together and it was easy, so easy. I felt godlike. And Joseph didn't even realize, he was still teasing Connor and not even looking at me.

I laughed aloud with my healthy lungs. "You feel that?"

Joseph whipped his head around to face me. He saw my smile and responded with a fist. I caught it in midair, no problem. When he kept pushing, I twisted until the bone cracked. His arm splintered like a bag of kindling.

"No!" He swung the other fist but I caught it, too. Joseph flailed in my grasp, and I sat up, pushing him off me and pinning him to the ground. I wedged his arms behind his back so he was groveling facedown in the rock. He tried to kick me so I broke his leg.

"Stop fighting and I'll stop hurting you. Admit you've lost." I looked over at Connor and winked. Everything will be okay!

"I haven't lost! I can't have! I'm pack leader!" His eyes darted over the werewolves gathered around the clearing. I knew he was making sure he still

had the loyalty of most of the group—and he did. But he couldn't sense the wolves in the forest. Even as they stepped closer, as they filled the spaces between the trees, Joseph wasn't aware of them.

It was funny. Everything was funny, right then. I was so filled with power it made me giddy, and I just wanted to laugh. "Can't you sense the wolves out there?"

Joseph struggled under me. He tilted his head, listening. There were so many wolves they nearly outnumbered the trees, their breathing as loud as the wind. Joseph obviously heard because he muttered, "So what?"

"Those wolves are my friends. I've shared food with them and slept beside them. They're as important as people, and that means as important as werewolves. I've protected them as an alpha should."

Joseph wasn't brave enough to shout defiance when he was down. But I felt his body stiffen with his disagreement.

"They're my friends," I repeated. "They belong in this forest more than the pack does. And they've chosen me." I wanted to just bask in the feeling of power, but I knew I was feeling it for a reason—to get rid of Joseph, once and for all. "Say you give up," I hissed.

"Never. So you've got some wolves on your side, big deal. I've—"

I cut him off by dislocating his jaw. "Say you give up."

He shook his head.

I had his hands behind his back and I broke one of his fingers. I knew how much that hurt.

He screamed—louder than I had, so that was something.

"Say you give up."

His body was trembling. He didn't shake his head, but he didn't nod, either. I was used to him starting fights with smaller kids and backing down the moment he faced a challenge. He wasn't crawling away with his tail between his legs right now, so I knew he must want this really badly. It must have hurt for a weakling like him to lie there acting strong, and I respected that.

Still. He killed wolves.

I picked him up by his elbows and threw him across the clearing. He hit a tree and crumpled to the ground. A wolf walked from the shadows by the

tree—Leaf Mold. She watched Joseph with her yellow eyes, standing perfectly still. Joseph crawled away on his back, scurrying over the ground with his broken arm and dragging his broken leg.

I dropped to a crouch by his head and put my hands on his shoulders to stop him moving. His face was twisted and white with pain and terror. I growled close to his ear, “You see that wolf? You killed her family. You killed her whole pack and tried to kill her brother. That’s why she’s looking so pissed.”

“You can’t—” He choked then tried again. “They can’t interfere. A werewolf fight is two werewolves, you can’t—”

“Oh, I know. I wouldn’t let her touch you. Yet. But if you stay here, you’re staying in her forest.” A second wolf stepped into sight—Sunlit Rock, the beta I’d defended from Joseph. My love of drama flared like a hot coal inside me. “And you know who that is? You hunted down his pack and you wanted to kill him. Not so weak now, huh? You want me to let you go so you can try ‘hunting’ him again?”

The beta wolf Sunlit Rock flattened his ears and curled his lips back. His teeth were long and stained, and when he growled Leaf Mold joined in. The sound filled the still clearing like a motorbike starting up.

“No!” Joseph was shaking. “No! They can’t hurt me!”

In the shadows, more wolf forms appeared, hundreds of yellow eyes and thousands of bared teeth. The growling went on and on.

“They can’t hurt you, Joseph. But I can. The strength of their loyalty is in me. I have the power of every wolf I’ve ever cared for—and they’re pissed, because you never cared for them. Can you feel that?”

I picked up a chunk of dense rock and held it close to Joseph’s face. He flinched and tried to pull away. His lips were wet and quivering. I closed my fist and the rock exploded into a cloud of dust. Joseph choked and spluttered, but I leaned in even closer to whisper straight into his ear. “This is what it feels like when the forest fights back. You’re not welcome here.”

“I give up,” he gasped. “I give up.”

“Louder. So everyone can hear you.”

“I give up!” He shouted. “Please, just...”

I nodded. When I let go of him, he collapsed onto the ground.

Leaf Mold and Sunlit Rock were watching from the forest's edge. They had stopped growling which was good because, yeah, that big growl was starting to scare even me.

An advantage of being a werewolf was the two hands which let me groom two wolves at once. I stroked them behind their ears and scratched their necks, and just like that they went from fearsome predators to friendly dogs. Still, their loyalty to me was bright and huge and intoxicating. "Did you bring everyone here? You knew there was going to be a fight and you wanted to be on my side?"

The beta wolf licked my face.

I laughed. "This is amazing. Thank you. But I hope everyone's left a wolf or two at home because otherwise there are going to be so many territory disputes. I kinda don't want to be here for that."

Leaf Mold licked the other side of my face. Then she threw her head back and howled.

It was the most amazing howl I had ever heard, let alone been part of. Hundreds of voices joining together until the air grew hot and heavy with the weight of sound. We were howling for me, for victory. At some point, the werewolves joined in, and my band. I was lost in the howl and the power of loyalty pulsing through me.

When the howl stopped and I finally came down from the high, Connor was beside me. There were tears on his cheeks but that was fine—my face felt hot and cold, and I knew I'd been crying too. He asked, "It's over?"

"Yeah." I looked around the clearing at the werewolves. They were all watching me. "Or maybe it's just beginning. But this bit, this bit is over." I pulled Connor in close and buried my face in his neck. I knew I was covered in blood but he held me just the same. "No more fighting."

I held my mate there in the light of the full moon, and my heart soared. Everything was right. Everything had worked out right. I felt the wolves leaving and my strength fading. The funny thing was, the giddy high didn't leave. I'd spent so many years struggling with stress and pressure and secrets, torn in two as I tried to balance werewolf life and human life and tried to treat my mate as just a friend. All of that was gone now, and the weight lifting from my shoulders made me want to jump around in excitement.

"I love you, Connor."

"I love you too." His voice was muffled by my furry blood-caked chest. "Even when you stink."

Connor

I'd never seen Will drunk, but I imagined this was what it would look like. He couldn't stop smiling and he walked with even more swagger than usual. My cheeks hurt from how hard I grinned just looking at him. And also from the sharp relief after having to watch him being crushed to a pulp.

Will had an arm around my shoulders, and I had mine around his waist. We walked toward his family while hugging like we were joined. Chop rushed up to us. "What happened? Seriously, what just happened?"

"Will can't really talk right now," I said. "He's high on life."

Will laughed. "Chop, you won't believe what I'm feeling. It's incredible. Like being on stage, but with a really, really big crowd. It's just amazing."

"We can see about booking a stadium tour for the band or something." She was keeping it cool, her face impassive. She'd kept it cool and talked me down when I was out of my mind with fear and worry. Every now and then, I'd feel like I was meeting the band for the first time, completely in awe of them and amazed that anyone that cool would want to be friends with me. I was having one of those moments.

Will said, "Would you like me to bite you?"

"What? Like you just tried to rip Joseph's throat out?"

"Not like that. I mean, I'd like to turn you into a werewolf. All of you." His arm tightened around me. "You're my pack."

"Hang on." Chop hooked a thumb toward Will's werewolf family. "I thought those losers were your pack?"

"Most of them were happy to kill. I don't want or need them in my life."

The rest of the band gathered around us. Will's brother Dave was just grinning and shaking his head. Liv's face was calm but her hands were shaking as she grabbed me and Will and hugged us both. "You're fearless. That was incredible."

Matt was clinging to Will's uncle Bren, and they were both wide-eyed and white-lipped. "I thought you were going to die," Matt gasped. Will held his free

arm out and Matt fell into him, clinging on like a limpet. "I thought you were going to die."

"I didn't die, see? I'm right here. Like a superhero, huh?"

"You're always like a superhero to me."

Will laughed, then we all joined in. "I like when you get scared and compliment me."

After a few moments, Matt went back to hugging Bren. Will looked really pleased about that, and he raised an eyebrow at me. Something to tell me later, maybe. Out loud he said, "I'd like you to be my pack. You should take time to think about it."

"We don't need to think about it," Liv said. "We already are your pack, right? We've been calling it a band but we're more like a pack."

I nodded. It was something I'd been wondering since Will started talking about fate and mating. If his magical alpha superpowers had brought me to him as a mate, why couldn't they bring a pack to him too?

Chop said, "A pack that plays music, though. We're a band. But maybe also a pack."

Will's eyes were still shining with energy he'd gotten from the fight. "You're my beta, Chop. My second-in-command."

"Does that mean I'm in charge of Connor?" She asked.

"Nope. Connor's my mate and that makes him equal with me."

Matt asked, "What about me?"

Will glanced between him and Bren but just said, "You're as vital to the pack as any of us, just like you're vital to the band." Then he looked over at his family. Joseph was there still, lying on the ground and groaning as he healed himself. Will said, "Now I need to go talk to the others. Then we're going to drive home for too-sweet drinks and maybe watch some TV before I sleep for about the next ten years. How's that sound?"

It didn't run quite as smoothly as that. The conversation with the pack took a long time. Will started by pointing out over half of his family and telling them that they had to leave and never come back. His mom tried to get into an argument about it, but Will wouldn't budge. He kept saying he wouldn't have wolf-slayers or murderers in his forest.

“The local economy is going to be gutted,” Dave muttered. “Who’s going to take over the hunting shop, or work at the vet’s? Will can’t just get rid of half the pack.”

“He can.” Bren was cuddling Matt like an oversize teddy bear, and Matt was happy. “It’s his pack now, he can make it how he wants it.”

“Yeah, of course you support him,” Dave chuckled.

Bren didn’t laugh. He said quite seriously, “This is the best thing to happen to the pack. Will’s going to be a leader like no one has ever been before. I’ve never heard of wolves getting together like that. It’s all Will—leading with love, using empathy to bind people together. Even when the people are wolves. This pack is going to do good things. Will you stick around to watch?”

“Maybe.” Dave put his hands in his pockets. “I’ll want to be here to finish Connor’s tattoos.” Then he looked at me. I’d almost thought he didn’t realize I was there.

“What do you mean, finish my tattoos?”

“When you have more skin.”

“What?”

“When you’re a werewolf. You grow extra muscles so you’ll have bare patches around your tattoos. When you’re used to shifting, I’ll get you to shift into your werewolf form and I’ll finish off your tattoos. Then you have to not heal them which, trust me, is hard. I reckon you can handle it, though.” He grinned at Bren. “You should have seen this guy when I first tattooed him. He was like, sixteen? And he’s just staring me down like, ‘I can handle anything Will can’.”

Bren smiled at Dave. Then he glanced at me and away again.

I could tell he was thinking something he didn’t want to say. “What?”

“It’s not my place,” Bren muttered.

I frowned. Was he thinking something mean about Will, or about me? I frowned. “Let’s hear it.”

Bren rested his forehead on Matt’s frizzy curls. He hesitated then finally said, “So he’s going to turn you? That’s what you want?”

“More than anything.”

“You know it will change you? He’ll be a part of you forever.”

“I can’t think of anything better,” I said. And I meant it. Truly and completely.

Chop joined in the conversation by asking, “What about us? You want to warn us off, too?”

Bren flinched. “I wasn’t warning anyone off. I respect your decision.” He looked down, not meeting her eyes. And then something Will had said clicked: Omega. Bren was an omega. That was why he had trouble saying things he didn’t think we wanted to hear. Because we were Will’s pack. Even if Bren questioned whether we should be turned he acted like we already had been.

Chop pushed on, “Will’s been trying to warn us off, too. Do you know a downside to being a werewolf? I think we need to hear it.”

Bren bit his lip. Finally he said, “I’m something of an authority on werewolves, that’s part of my job. And I can tell you that turned werewolves aren’t the same as born wolves. You’ll be tied to Will—you’ll have a part of him in you, like a little voice in your head. And you’ll be tied to each other. You’re not born into a pack but, if Will bites you, then you will be turned into one. Closer than family. Forever.”

Chop looked at him steadily, then said, “Connor spoke for all of us. I can’t think of anything better.”

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Chapter Twenty

Will

We were in the cabin. I was thinking of hiding the keys and calling it our cabin, we loved it that much.

It had been a month. A whole month that I'd been the official alpha of Jagged Rock Forest and all of my family. Joseph had taken four of his family with him, probably to try and start his own pack somewhere or to beg for a place in another pack. In a year or two, or maybe more, I would get into contact with him again and extend an olive branch. But not right now. Now the wounds were too fresh and the lesson needed to sink in—he'd taken a gamble, and he'd lost.

And I'd won. I'd won everything I'd ever wanted. After a few years of feeling lost, I was back to exactly where I needed to be.

I was spending more time in the mountains and in town, and that meant seeing less of Connor. That sucked. But at least when I did see him I got to touch him and hold him close and make sure he knew how much I loved him. And there would be summer break, even if Connor was interning during it. We just had to make it through college then there was a lifetime of time together. And in the meantime I did everything I could to make sure Connor was always happy and his mind was on his studies and getting the kind of grades that made his high-achieving mind happy.

But now, it was time for us and just us. We'd driven up from Minneapolis for the weekend, the full moon hanging low over the mountains as we took the bumpy road at night. We'd been singing and laughing but now we were alone in the cabin I could tell Connor was nervous as hell. He was sitting on the edge of the bed chewing his bottom lip. It was the time I'd dreamed of for so long I'd stopped even letting myself want it: Connor knew everything and understood who I was. It was finally time to claim him.

I'd brought along a small set of speakers which I set up on the shelf near the stove. I connected my phone and started playing an old love song. "You remember this?"

Connor looked up at me. His face was tight with nerves, but his eyes were dark with desire. "This is the song from prom."

"I've had it on my playlist for years. That was a good night."

“It was a great night.” Connor looked down at his fingers. “I remember being afraid that it would be our last great night—everything was changing, we were going off to college. I thought we might have just had something at high school and that would be the last of it. That we’d drift apart and I wouldn’t see you anymore.”

“Never. You’re a part of me, Con. I couldn’t live without you. Everything can change but not that. It’s always you and me.” I held a hand out to him. “Come dance?”

He laughed and blushed, but he stood up. I pulled him into my arms. He was in a beanie and snow pants but he was every bit as handsome as he’d been in his tuxedo. “I love you so much,” I whispered. “So much, Con. You can’t even imagine.”

“Bet I can.” Some of the tension was gone from his face as he smiled shyly at me. I held his hand in mine, his other hand on my shoulder and mine at his waist. We swayed gently over the wooden floor, amateur and graceless in hiking boots. Connor admitted, “I’m nervous.”

“Me too.”

“Really?”

“Of course.” I laughed at Connor’s surprise. We’d spent nearly every night together, rolling in his dorm bed and exploring each other. I was getting to know his body as well as I knew his mind and that was exactly what I wanted. But he still left me breathless. Every time he came in my mouth or took me into his, I’d feel my brain shutting down. I just couldn’t handle him, all his sweetness and joy and his... The Connor of him. He was just so Connor and that had always overwhelmed me, even when we were just friends goofing around. “You make me nervous. I want for this to be so great for you that I’m afraid it’s going to suck.”

“It’s not going to suck,” Connor laughed. He tilted his head forward until his head was resting on my shoulder. “I didn’t know you got nervous. You always seem so...”

“Cool?”

“Arrogant.”

I laughed. “Alpha, baby. It’s in the blood.”

The song ended and started playing again. I pulled Connor closer, his body so strong and hard against mine. It was a joyful shock every time I held him. “I

remember prom. I remember wanting to kiss you. You kept looking at me with those eyes... And that smile that drives me crazy.”

“What smile?”

“Any of them. All of your smiles are like a drug, I just lose control, and you get me wanting more. I thought I was going to lose it when I held you for this song. I was so careful to keep my hips back so you wouldn't feel how much I wanted you.”

Connor's lips brushed my neck, and I let out a groan. He whispered, “I wanted you to kiss me. It was all I could think about. And you were thinking it too?”

“Of course.” I squeezed his hand. “Always.”

“How did it take us this long to get together? I've been hiding how I feel for so long. I'm so sick of hiding.” His tongue flicked out. Wet heat on my neck as he tasted me.

“I didn't want to push you. I didn't want to move too fast.” It felt so good to hold Connor, it felt so right. I'd been missing out on that for years, not making a move on him for fear of pushing him too far. I'd missed out—but it was worth it, to make sure he was ready. And there would be a lifetime to try to get my fill of him. “I had to make sure you were ready.”

“I'm ready.”

The words were like an electric shock, pure voltage right to my cock. I swallowed. “There's no time limit, we've got our whole lives. We don't have to do anything tonight. Not until you're ready.”

“I'm ready,” he repeated. “I want you to take me and I want you to bite me.”

“You're sure? When I bite you, I can't take it back. You'll be changed forever. You'll feel the pull of the moon and of your wolf and of these mountains. And I'll be a part of you, forever. It's much more than marriage. You're sure you want it?”

“Yes.” He brought his mouth up to mine, and I kissed him, drinking his words off his sensual lips. “I want it,” he whispered.

“Okay.” I tried to calm my breathing. “Let's go outside.”

We kept our hands linked as I led Connor down the trail to the lakes. The two small lakes were close together and between them was a patch of dry barren ground. There was a large, flat rock there where we'd lain once or twice. On that rock, I'd always felt like the forest hushed and the sun shone brighter so it felt close to sacred. I led Connor there, then laid out a crammed pack worth of blankets and, discreetly, a bottle of lube I'd bought weeks ago and had been carrying around just in case.

"We don't have to do anything tonight," I told him again. "We can just lie here."

Connor sprawled out beside me on the pile of blankets, looking up at the stars and the heavy full moon. At last, he said, "When we're joined, you'll be able to know what I'm feeling?"

"More than I do now, yeah. I guess."

"So you'll stop asking me twenty times if I want something I totally want?"

I flinched. "I'm sorry. I just want to make sure that you're sure."

Connor butted his forehead up against mine. "That was mean of me. Sorry. You don't need to apologize. You're in the right—it's good you check. It's just frustrating for me when I crave you so badly, and you don't seem to realize."

I grinned. "You crave me, huh?"

"I really do. You want to know how much?" Connor swallowed, his eyes wide and clear. The strong moonlight let me tell his cheeks were getting pink. He took another huge gulp of air, and then he said very quickly, "When you're away I masturbate."

I chuckled. "Everyone masturbates."

"About you. I masturbate about you. I put my fingers inside myself and think about you."

"Oh." No chance of a witty retort when my brain was tapioca.

"Yeah," Connor mumbled. His face was bright red. I swooped in and kissed his cheeks, trying to kiss all the embarrassment off him. He laughed and wrapped his arms around my neck. "Now you know. How ready I am. I am so completely sure."

"Roger that."

"I can be quite rough with my fingers," he added. "I slide them into my ass one at a time or sometimes all at once."

“I would love to see that.” My voice came out a croak.

Connor just lay there smiling, lazily toying a toggle on his jacket. “Oh, yeah. I like it to burn a little. I put my fingers inside myself and I just roll around enjoying how good it feels. I think about you being in me, and my dick gets so hard and leaking that I have to—”

“Okay, now you’re just torturing me!” I covered his mouth with mine. Connor laughed into the kiss, burrowing under my clothes to press his hands against my stomach. His fingers moved restlessly up to my nipples and he pinched, hard.

“I’m ready. I want you. Don’t you want me too?”

“You know I do,” I groaned. “More than anything.” I’d worn loose snow pants so they wouldn’t restrict my boner too much, but that was a lost cause around Connor. He made me so hard I worried that all the blood was leaving the rest of my body, and I was at risk of fainting.

I kissed and touched him, so grateful that I was learning to know this beautiful man’s body, and that I had the chance to please him. We stripped out of our clothes and piled them up around us like we were in the middle of our own fort of coats and blankets. When I shucked my pants and reached for Connor’s, he asked, “Is there anyone around?”

I reached out with my werewolf senses. “No. No one. No wolves or deer or anything.” I’d howled earlier to make sure of that. “We’ve got the place to ourselves. There are some birds in the trees, though, is that a problem?”

“Do you think they’re voyeuristic birds?” Connor’s skin was pale and flawless in the moonlight, his lips the sweetest pink lifted in a kissable smile.

I laughed. “I don’t think so. I could climb up a tree and ask them though, if you’d like?”

I went to stand up, but Connor grabbed my hips and pulled me back down again. “You’re not going anywhere.”

I landed on my side and angled my body so it was pressed the full length against Connor’s. I could spread my hand wide enough to touch each of his nipples at once and that’s how I teased him, watching the sharp peaks get even smaller and tighter in the frigid mountain air. “You want the birds to watch us, huh? Kinky boy.”

“I’ll show you kinky,” he whispered. He pushed up, and I let him, rolling over onto my back so he was on top of me. He wiggled out of his pants and laid

down on me, naked, our hips nestled together so our cocks rubbed. “You like it out here in the mountains?”

“Love it. I’ve always wanted you here with me.”

He was rolling his hips slowly, and I mimicked the motion, bucking gently so our erections could bump and slide. “I remember you telling me you wanted to run with me up here. This doesn’t feel like running.”

I said, “The only thing in the world better than running with you in the mountains is fu—”

I was cut short when Connor rammed a handful of snow into my face. He aimed for my mouth, but in his excitement he missed and most of it went up my nose. I choked and snorted and tried to get it out while Connor stayed firmly on top of me. His laughter made his hips wiggle, and that was sweet torture.

“What was that for?” I slapped the side of my nose to get snow out of it. “We were having a moment! I was being sweet!”

“You were being dirty,” he corrected. “You said you loved the mountains and you wanted it kinky, so there you go.” He sat up with his back straight and his legs straddling my hips. My dick fit so perfectly between his cheeks that I forgot what we were even talking about.

When Connor moved his hips again, I groaned aloud. “That feels good.”

“For me too.” He nodded.

“Better than a faceful of snow?”

He rocked his hips, sliding his ass over my dick. “Definitely.”

“How do you know for sure? Maybe I should lob some snow at you just to find out.”

He slapped me on the chest, his eyes half-closed as his head dropped back so I could just see his grin. I gripped his thighs and helped him rock on my cock, back and forth, back and forth, sliding his perfect ass over me. When the head of my cock lined up with his sphincter, he’d stop and give a little shudder.

I was lulled by the motion, slipping almost into a trance in which nothing existed except Connor’s slow metronome glide over my dick. I lay with my head back and the stars in my eyes, the crisp mountain air made sweet by the scent of my mate. Sometimes I’d crunch my abs so I could sit up and watch Connor’s movement. It looked as great as it felt—the muscles in his thighs and

abdomen flexing as he moved, his head thrown back in silent pleasure, his lush erection bobbing in the air.

I took him into my hand and squeezed and pulled his cock in time with the movement of his hips. The forest was still around us, and the moon hung silent and huge in the sky to make the snow glow around us. We didn't talk or joke around, we just enjoyed our bodies together.

I wanted to go on like that forever, just the quiet and the lake and Connor. But the pleasure built up and up until I couldn't hold back anymore. We sped up, my hips lifting and Connor's grinding, my hand flying on his cock and his hands pinching his nipples. When we came, it was almost at exactly the same time. Connor's moan of joy drifted out over the lakes and was swallowed up by the forest.

I cleaned up with a towel, and we cuddled on the blanket, my body heat keeping us both warm. We whispered and laughed with each other, sleepy and quiet. For a long time that was enough, just lying there together under the stars.

But small sleepy kisses got heated and my libido kicked into gear again. I rolled Connor onto his back and climbed on top of him, bumping and grinding as we made out like we'd never done it before. I angled my hips and Connor bent his knees so my cock would sit between his cheeks again. As we kissed and rubbed, I started drizzling lube down there between us, slicking us up until our thighs and the blanket and everything felt slimy.

"Hey Will. You want to see it?" Connor was grinning but obviously nervous.

"See what?"

"Me stick my fingers inside?"

In answer, I just groaned, like a total zombie. That got us both laughing, and Connor looked a little less nervous.

He lifted his knees and spread his thighs until his little hole was clearly visible. His cock laid flat on his belly, and I sat between his legs to get a good view. Connor looked at me between his legs and laughed. "It's cold. All the lube and the wind."

"You want me to warm you up?" I stuck my tongue out and waggled it suggestively.

“Oh please no.” His head rocked back as his body quaked. “I’d come in a second. I want to do this myself, then finish with you in me. How’s that sound?”

“That sounds awesome.” I would have agreed to an egg and spoon race if Connor had proposed it in that smoky voice with his ass spread like that.

I dribbled lube on Connor’s fingers, and he tapped them against his hole. “Are you watching?”

“Like a hawk.”

“The voyeuristic kind of hawk?”

“What?”

Connor chuckled. Then he popped both fingers inside of him up to the first knuckle, just like that.

“Whoa,” I breathed. “That doesn’t hurt?”

“No. You’ve never tried it?”

“I’ve thought about it.”

“It doesn’t hurt at all when I’m relaxed or really, really aroused.” He pushed his fingers in a little deeper, and I saw his hand flex as they moved inside him. He groaned, “Feels good. I want you in me.”

“You think I’m the size of two of your fingers?” I laughed. “Keep stretching or you’ll hurt my feelings.” I squirted some more lube over his fingers where they disappeared inside of him. I didn’t care if I had to throw the blanket out, the lube could get on everything as long as it got where I needed it to be.

I watched as Connor pressed a third finger in. When they were nearly completely inside, he groaned. “There. Starting to burn. It’s good, though.”

“Can I join you? Just a finger, I mean.”

He hummed his approval and lifted his head to smile at me. His cheeks were flushed, and I knew it wasn’t just from the cold.

I slicked up one of my fingers and slid it in beside his. It was so hot I almost recoiled. I hadn’t been expecting that. It felt even more inviting in contrast with the chill air. It was just like our tattoos—fire and ice. We were both using our right hands so those tattoos were in my field of vision, Connor’s flames and my frost and snowflakes moving and flexing.

I watched my finger disappearing into Connor's ass and felt his fingers against mine, stretching him open together. I said, "If you'd told me two months ago that I'd be doing this..."

"Then what?"

I'd meant to say "I wouldn't believe you" but that didn't ring true—there was something like fate or destiny here, a kind of rightness that felt like certainty. Maybe it was the mating bond. Maybe it was just love, like I couldn't love Connor as much as I did for so long without finally getting with him at some point. So, would I have believed it if I'd been told I'd get to be here with him? "I'd probably jerk off at the idea," I admitted. "Or if it was you telling me, then I'd be begging to take you up on the offer."

He laughed, happy and confident and free of nerves. So I wasn't surprised when a moment later he said, "I'm ready."

I crawled closer and positioned my dick at his entrance, coating it in some more lube. Now that I was actually there and about to pop our cherries I wondered if I was ready. I felt dizzy and a little unsteady. I'd been waiting for this moment for so long.

I pulled Connor up for a kiss, slow and open and breathless. When I had him humming with joy, I finally felt ready. "I love you," I said.

"I love you." He held my gaze for a few seconds, those soul-touching gray eyes so clear they were like a pair of moons. He raised his dark eyebrows, and his smile grew wicked. "And I'd love you more if you got on with it."

I laughed and nodded, but I stole one more kiss. Then I was back between his spread legs and lining myself up at his entrance. This was something I got to share with Connor and no one else, and it felt a whole lot like magic.

Then I pushed into him, and it felt a whole lot like heaven. Slick and hot and so tight. I slid barely an inch before Connor tensed up and hissed a warning. I had already stopped, freezing the moment his aura showed that he was in pain. "Should I pull out? This was too soon, I should have—"

"No. No. It's great. I just... Oh, wow. I should have used more fingers."

"I can stop."

He shook his head hard. "No. Don't ever stop." His legs were trembling slightly. I sat there for a few moments freaking out, not wanting to hurt him but not wanting to disappoint him either. His hands were curled in the blanket, and

I reached out—carefully, carefully, not moving my hips or cock at all if I could help it—and wrapped my hand around his. Our fingers interlaced, and he fumbled for me with his other hand. The touch seemed to calm him. His breathing steadied when I was holding both of his hands in both of mine. His legs stopped trembling, and he relaxed. He gave a little nod. “Ready. But slow.”

I moved my hips as slowly as I could, sliding myself into the sweet heaven of his ass. I listened to Connor’s breathing and watched his face, but he didn’t show any more pain. When I was all the way in, I held still and waited. Connor breathed slowly, and I let our breath sync up, matching him inhale and exhale. I felt connected to him like never before, very aware that we were breathing in the same air and making love under the same sky.

After a while he squeezed my hands and said, “Ready.”

I still took it slow, as slow as I could. But once I let myself really feel him, I knew I wasn’t going to last long. He was just so warm and he was squeezing me like a hand opening and closing around my shaft. His own cock lifted from his belly a little and dropped back down in time with the squeezing motion. There was a string of pre-cum trailing on his tattooed navel, and I wanted to lick it up, but I didn’t want to stop my slow grind.

“I want to touch you,” I said. “But I also want to keep doing this.”

“Life is tough,” he said. His voice was thick and sleepy. The flexing muscles in his abs looked so great behind his cock.

I tilted forward slightly, thinking about trying to kiss him. But Connor froze and then his whole body shook like a dog getting water off its fur. He radiated surprise and happiness like he was shouting it through a megaphone. “That. You did the prostate thing,” he gasped. “Do it again.”

The internet hadn’t explained how freakin’ hot my partner would look when I pegged his prostate. I slid into him again on exactly the same angle and watched as he writhed and convulsed. His fingernails bit into the backs of my hands and his ass clenched tight over my cock.

“Yes,” he choked. “That. Oh, yes. Exactly that.”

I did it again, and again. It had to be as hot for me as it was for him. My senses were reeling, trying to take in all that pleasure. Every gasp and moan from Connor brought me a step closer to climax, and it was all I could do to hold it back. I just wanted to give him a little more, a little more... “I can’t hold on much longer.”

“Me neither,” he choked. “So good. So good.” His head rolled back again, his spine arching like he was trying to dig into the earth with his shoulder blades as shovels. “Will.” He managed to look me straight in the eye before I knocked that special spot again, and he gasped and his eyes slid shut. “Will. Bite me.”

The fear was sudden and intense, swooping down on me and bringing back all my old worries. “You’re sure?”

“So sure.”

“Everything will change. I’ll be a part of you, maybe taking over your mind. You won’t be able to take it back, it’s forever.” I just had to be certain. It was too big a decision for any hesitation.

“I want you forever. This is my choice.”

I maneuvered clumsily, my knees slipping on the blanket and my arms useless to help because I didn’t want to let go of Connor’s hands. I got myself up over him and pressed my lips into his mouth for a scorching kiss. “You’ll be mine, forever. My mate.”

“And you’ll be mine.”

It was all I’d ever wanted.

I teased his neck with my mouth and teeth while I kept moving my hips. It was only a few thrusts before Connor’s body tensed, and he groaned, “Now!”

And, at long last, I bit him.

I spread my mouth wide and it kept going as I shifted my jaw. It was werewolf teeth that bit into Connor’s flesh, that sunk deep into his skin. He rocked under me, his body stiff from orgasm rather than pain. I bucked my hips into him and my own orgasm crashed through me. I tasted his blood, copper sweet, the last thing I could focus on before I was lost in my climax and the blinding spots that danced in front of my eyes.

All I was feeling was an intense and savage joy: Mates. At last. Finally, we were mated.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Connor

The bite was confusing, a white-hot moment of so much sensation that I couldn't tell good from bad. I just knew there was a lot of it. It faded and left flickers of feeling, like afterimages from looking at the sun. There was a sharp prickling pain in my shoulder, but it was surrounded and wrapped in warm rightness. Something was right.

Yes, that was what I was feeling: Something was very, very right. I was still shimmering from orgasm, and I felt pleasantly tired, like I'd just been for a run. A long run, maybe like the path up to Eagle Peak like I used to run all the time with Dave.

No. Wait. Where was Eagle Peak? I didn't know it. So why did I remember the view of the ash and aspens and the feel of pebbles and snow under my paws?

Paws. What?

I blinked and shook my head. Everything felt too loud and too bright. Hadn't it been night a moment ago? It was almost like day, but the colors were wrong. I could make out the needles on a pine tree across the lake. I could see a caterpillar wriggling along a branch. I could hear its feet moving.

"Ugh," I grunted. Will moved his weight off me then slid out. I didn't want him to pull out yet, I wanted another go. I never wanted to leave Connor's tight warmth.

No. Wait. I was Connor.

Then why could I remember biting Connor? I could still taste his blood in my mouth. But at the same time I could feel Will's bite on my neck.

"Will," I said. I moved my tongue around in my mouth and there definitely wasn't any blood. I was looking up at Will, and I could see him as clear as day. There was blood around his mouth. "Will, I think I'm a werewolf."

He nodded.

"I think I'm reading your mind."

He nodded again. He opened his mouth, but then he closed it again and shook his head slowly. Tears welled up in his eyes and spilled over his cheeks silently.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. It was weird—I could almost see what he was thinking, all his tiny movements amplified and this complex network of pheromones around him like a colored cloud. I could tell that he was happy, but there were ripples of intense sadness too.

He said, “Your dad. Oh, Connor. He was such a bastard to you. I never knew. How you learned to swim?”

I blinked. I’d never told him about that. But then again, he’d never told me about anywhere called Eagle Peak.

I thought back and all my memories felt intact. I could trace my life up to this point, right up to finding myself naked on a blanket in the snow of Jagged Rock Mountains. But at the same time I could remember a completely different life. The pack and the quiet house made of wood and glass. I could remember shaping furniture with my hands. I remembered having a brother who was older but gentler, my best friend before I’d met a gawky kid with too-short hair and a too-shy smile.

I remembered walking in on Dave with a leg black with blood clots and a knife in his hand as he tried to make ink stick. I remembered stepping on stage for the first time and feeling like I was lifting off the ground with all the strength of loyalty, and looking over my shoulder to see Connor grinning at me like he knew how I felt. I remembered my bones breaking as Joseph tried to defeat me. I remembered leaving home and how every mile I drove was like another nail in my heart but it was all worth it because the radio was playing my song and Connor was beside me, and if I made him laugh enough he’d sing along with me.

“I think,” I said slowly, making sure the words were coming out of my mouth and not Will’s. “I think we just did a full-on Vulcan mind-meld. I’ve got all your memories.”

“Lucky,” Will said. “I’ve got yours. Being a human kind of sucks. My childhood was way better than yours.”

I laughed. I was feeling the weight of responsibility from a pack who only expected greatness from me, and I was feeling the pressure of love and a destiny that could damage that love, a decision with only wrong answers. Being a werewolf wasn’t all runs in the snow. But I also remembered every wolf I’d run beside and the feeling of all of their loyalty hitting me at once like a gift of godlike power.

I had no idea what was going on, but at least I had Will there to go through it with me.

He laid down beside me and draped a blanket over us. I burrowed into the safety of his firm chest and breathed in his scent. I could pick up so much more of it than before—his skin and his soap and shampoo, washing powder and the food he'd eaten and my own scent all over him. If anything he smelled better now, more deep and complex. I was feeling safe in his arms, but I also knew exactly what it felt like to need to protect my mate.

“This is so weird,” I said. “But I think I like it.”

“You wait until you shift the first time. Bet you ten bucks you get stuck halfway. It won't hurt if you do,” he added quickly.

I could feel the tiny changes in his mood, see them laid out around him as clear as a show on TV. No wonder Will always seemed so good with people, he held everyone's cheat sheet.

Right then, Will had some anxiety, and he was looking at me with a question on his mind. I asked him, “What?”

“What do you want to do in the future?”

“Be with you.” Like I was going to turn my back the moment he turned me?

“I mean, what are your dreams. Tell me about your ambitions.”

I frowned. “First, I'm finishing college, then I want to be an architect. Maybe here in Layton. Definitely here,” I added with a rush of love for the town and for Jagged Rock. “I'd like to take my music further, too, so I'll want the band to stay around me.”

“What if I asked you to quit school and come lead the pack with me? Hypothetically.”

I frowned. “Hypothetically, I'd tell you that you're being a bit unreasonable to ask me that. You know how much my education means to me.”

He squeezed me tight. “You're still you. It's still you in there. I didn't wipe your brains and turn you into a zombie clone of myself.” He kissed me tenderly, hands roaming over my back. He finished the kiss by planting a small one on my nose, then he whispered, “I'm going to kill Bren for scaring me so much. If I'd known it would be like this, maybe I'd have bitten you years earlier.”

I remembered the conversation Will had had with Bren as easily as if it were my own memory. “It sounds to me like Bren gave you the best advice he could. He told you to think before you bit me, and that was great advice. He told you the risks and I'd say I'm feeling all of them. You're a part of me now,

definitely. If I wasn't in love with you then this would be disastrous. I really want to be with you and I really want to stay close to the mountains, so he got that right. Only those were things that I mostly felt before. About you, anyway."

We lay in the still of the forest clearing, only it didn't feel so still now that I could hear and see and smell everything around me. I explored my new senses, zooming in on bugs or birds or the path of the wind through the trees. I felt the tug of the moon. When I got used to it, I turned my senses on Will and tentatively explored his body. "I know what it's like," I whispered. "To be you. All bold and brazen and not afraid of anything."

"I know what it's like to be you," he agreed. "And looking at me. Damn, I really am fine."

I laughed and wedged my hands under his armpits to tickle him.

Everything was right, and everything was better than I could have ever imagined it.

The band played a gig the night before break, then we all drove up to Jagged Rock. We were excited for the chance to get away from the city and also to spend more time with Will since we didn't get to see him as much now he was taking fewer classes and spending more time in the mountains.

The distance was actually easier on me than the others. I had our weird nearly telepathic mind-meld—or the mating bond, whatever you wanted to call it. The further away Will got from me the more I could read his thoughts. When he was close it was like I was myself, just with my new werewolf powers and Will memories. But when he was more than a few miles away we found we could tune into each other's thoughts. In the weeks since he bit me, that was still the most amazing part of being a werewolf. If I ever missed him, I could be instantly connected with him. I had to be careful if I did that in public, though, because Will had quickly figured out how to hijack the connection and send me tantalizingly dirty fantasies.

I hadn't had the chance to spend much time in wolf form. I kind of wanted to save that until the rest of the band were werewolves too and could run with us.

But I had had the chance for more sex with Will, and that was always amazing. It just got better and better as we learned each other's bodies and how the mating bond could amplify our feelings.

But this break was about the band—or the pack, as Matt was insisting on calling us. During the whole drive up, Will kept telling us that he had something amazing for us to see. He took the wheel just South of Layton and drove us up into the mountains and straight to... A patch of forest, with a lake.

“This is it,” he called happily as he jumped out of the van. I climbed out of the passenger seat and looked around, but I couldn’t see anything special. Will was beside himself with joy. “I’ve been working on the road up here for days, getting it ready for cars.”

“It needs more work,” Chop said. She’d brought her acoustic guitar at Will’s insistence and had played us Dragonforce covers for a solid hour. She was still carrying her guitar. “That road was basically tissue paper laid on top of a pot hole.”

“But this is perfect, right?” Will insisted.

“Perfect for what?” Liv asked.

“For our houses.” Will said it like it was completely obvious.

And then, looking around at the landscape, it was. The trees hid the lay of the land, but when I imagined the land bare I could see the swell of hill where our house would go. The house I’d designed and Will had promised me for my birthday. There was the lake, and there was the elevation to catch the sun during the day. I could visualize exactly what our front porch would be like, and the doors that would let out onto a mountain trail.

“It’s perfect,” I breathed. I smiled at Will, and he grinned so wide my heart swelled. “You’re a genius.”

“I know, right? I talked to the wolves until one pack told me about the perfect place.”

Chop said, “Guys, are we going to live in tree huts or what?”

I shook my head. “We’ll fell the trees and use them to construct the houses. We’ll get local glass, too, and local nails. Everything from the area. Your house will be on the other side of the lake, beside Matt’s. Chop’s will go there.” I pointed out the spaces, already picturing the houses and how they’d blend into the trees. “It’s going to be so beautiful.”

“Beautiful,” Matt echoed. He’d been quieter the past few weeks and spending more time on his phone. I’d finally asked him what was up, and he’d told me he was in contact with Bren. He said that Bren had explained about

being an omega and everything made more sense now—and that he didn't have to try so hard because he knew we would always love him. He said it with complete earnestness, and I'd given into my touchy-feely werewolf instincts and hugged him tight.

“All I care about is the acoustics,” Liv said. “What's it sound like up here?”

“Sounds like a lot of hard work,” Chop said. But she was grinning.

I said, “We'll build a recording studio, if we can get enough solar panels or a generator. But it will be completely silent.”

We talked about it longer, but we all knew we were just haggling over details. This felt right—the new pack building a home together, making dreams for the future. We were all misfits pulled together by fate or coincidence, and this would be our home.

That night we played an acoustic jam session with the moon and stars and trees as our audience. In time, Will would bite the others and make us into a real pack. But for now it was enough to just be the band.

And for me, it was enough to lean on Will's chest and have his arms around me as he sang. He was my best friend and he was my true mate. It was everything I'd ever wanted.

The End

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Author Bio

Willow Scarlett writes from where you'd rather be: Beautiful New Zealand, surrounded by water and trees and the occasional stingray. She writes queer romance with an emphasis on unique characters and a strong love story.

Willow doesn't have pets or children, but she does have enough kooky friends to stock a sitcom. She also has a mysterious clicking sound in the wall which gets louder every night.

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Tutti Fruitti Rudi



S.M. FRANKLIN

TUTTI FRUITTI RUDI

By S.M. Franklin

Photo Description

Black and white gif: Two half-naked young guys rubbing against each other on the bed hopefully leading to frottage.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

These two were out on the dance floor grinding and groping, touching each other everywhere until the tension got to be overwhelming. Now that they're finally alone, the passion between them is ratcheted so high, they can't spare a moment to get properly undressed.

** I'd really love a hot, tension-filled dance scene and for release from frottage to be incorporated with the gif. The rest is up to you, dear author.*

Sincerely,

Jilly

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: sex industry, masturbation, frottage, public activity

Content Warnings: dubious consent, child abuse, drug use

Word Count: 61,936

A Glossary of terms used may be found at the end of this story

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Dedication

For my Mark!

Maria Wright, and to whoever takes the time to read this.

Whether it's just one person or a thousand...

I thank you. It means a lot.

TUTTI FRUITTI RUDI

By S.M. Franklin

Chapter One

My hand just needed to move over to the left a tad more for my fingers to turn into a little pair of pincers before I could lift the wallet from the dude's pocket. The old guy stood in front of me attempting to flirt with a girl over three-quarters of his age younger than him. In other words, he was a geriatric and she was, well, barely out of school by the looks of her.

By the reddening of the back of his neck—that was about three inches above my face—and the almost slight tremble running through his body, the old bastard was probably experiencing his only boner in something like six months. No, probably six years.

The old dick moved a little, dislodging my index and middle fingers.

Shit!

Quickly moving with him, I sidestepped on the balls of my feet and bit my bottom lip. Normally this wasn't so hard. Normally, I was in and out like a fiddler's elbow. I could pick-pocket from the best of people, but tonight, I was trying to hit something bigger. I needed what this dude had in his wallet, and I was going home with it, whether I had to hover, perched like a budgie all night long or not.

Whilst I waited—and rolled my eyes at the bullshit the old guy was spewing to his would be mate—my eyes flicked up to the room at large wondering if anyone had noticed me. They hadn't. Various people of all different shapes, sizes, colours and races were planted throughout the hall. Tinkling of glasses sounded, along with people's laughter and guffaws—rich and arrogant. More of the chinless wonders meandered around, seeking out their prey. Old men with no women at home scoured and scouted the room for possible take-homes. Their beady, old eyes flickered from one barely dressed woman to another, their orbs grabbing their fill of boobs or arses. My eyes, no matter how much I told myself not to look, flipped down to their crotches—and yup—there was growth.

None of them, not one, batted an eyelash in my direction.

That was exactly what I wanted.

It wasn't the first time that I'd been nicknamed "The Cat" because I just seemed to slink inside a place, purr my way from person to person, and whilst doing that, I grabbed what I liked, including a man on occasion.

Tonight wasn't one of those occasions.

Don't get me wrong, a man right about now—a juicy bottom with an even juicier bottom—would be right up my alley. What I wouldn't give to sink my cock into some guy's arsehole and forget my troubles for what—an hour tops—but I couldn't.

Parrot, my street buddy and one-time escapade down below, waited across the room from me, part of him hidden in the shadows of dark, heavy drapes. He, like me, didn't stand out at all, even with how tall he was and how dark his skin was, compared to the old, regal gentlemen in the room. He looked over the hall, his dark eyes scanning for something. No doubt he was on his own little mission. Of what, I had no fucking clue. His eyes quickly flicked over me only to roll sideways back, pegging me with his stare. His eyes widened on the dude I was trying to lift from, then a smirk danced across his mouth. Those dark eyes of his twinkled and lit up.

A slight nod from him was all I needed.

Seconds later—possibly a minute—a huge crash sounded, suspiciously in Parrot's direction if I was hearing correctly. The old geriatric in front of me went to move to protect his little, ripe prize, giving me the opportunity I needed. I moved forward, listing to the side a little and slipped my whole hand into his pocket, seizing the thick wallet I'd been after for the past hour.

Doing a little dance and fist pump in my mind, I calmly slipped the wallet into the front of my jeans, knowing it would slip down my leg and rest at the bottom in the pouch I'd had specially sewn in. Once I felt the old leather slink against my leg, I knew I was home.

Quickly moving past the mayhem, I gave a nod of thanks to Parrot and received a raised brow in reply. I sighed. That meant that I owed him, and I didn't like owing people. It always seemed to come back and bite me in the arse. Normally, I wouldn't have minded that—in the right context, but I needed this tonight, and if that meant I had to accept Parrot's help—which I had—then so be it. My chocolate Cheerio wasn't good enough to earn as much as I'd seen the geriatric shine around tonight. I'd be lucky to earn a hundred and fifty quid before soreness cut in, and then I'd have to turn around and take all that jizz in the face. Now, that was something I wasn't doing. I'd done that plenty of times, and hell no, I wasn't doing it again.

With my steal in my jeans, I slipped out the back emergency doors and through the car park, dodging all of the fancy cars lined up like they were back

on a showroom floor, and slid my way through the copse of trees and bushes that surrounded the posh working men's club.

I knew these back turnings and little routes through bushes and trees like the back of my hand. I'd spent the night in most of them, trying to keep warm underbrush when home wasn't a very nice or warm place to be.

Only once I was sure I was far enough from the hall, I moved into a bush that was close to the park's water and pulled out my phone. Pressing the screen on, I noticed that I was low on battery. I hadn't been home in a couple of days to charge it. Tonight though, I would.

My eyes lingered on the face looking back at me. A huge sigh left me then. Responsibility and care weighed heavily on my shoulders. Sometimes I did wonder whether I was made for anything else other than what I'd been doing for the last five years.

It wasn't the first time that I questioned what the fuck I was doing with my life.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts and get me back into the game, I rolled my lips in and wedged my phone just inside them and clamped my lips down on the hard plastic, holding it in place. Then I reached down and quickly unbuttoned my loose-fitting jeans, letting them fall down so I could reach the wallet.

Grabbing it in my hands, I shuffled a little on the spot and glanced around just to make sure I was alone. I wasn't sharing my bounty with no one. My eyes lingered on the entrance to my little surroundings of bushes for at least a minute before I was satisfied, my ears perked to the slightest little snapping twig or rustle.

Opening the wallet, I found the old dude's driving licence, which showed he was well over pension age, and a few other membership cards to places I couldn't even begin to pronounce. Leaving them situated in their little holders, I eyed the credit and debit cards and groaned when I saw that they were chip and pin. A couple of years ago, you could get away with a little credit card fraud if they were on the old system, but now, it was a nightmare. If you didn't have the PIN, you were fucked. I'd been there a couple of times and just like having a dick in my mouth, that wasn't happening again.

Next to come was the money, which was what I had been after all this time. I sighed out loud and felt a huge weight leave my chest when I saw the huge wad the wallet held. I'd seen the thick lump of papers when the oldie had been

flashing his shit around, but I never imagined this much was lying in wait. There had to be at least four hundred quid inside. That would help me and Penguin enough for at least a couple of weeks. I hoped.

Lists started piling through my mind. Things we both needed, things she needed in particular. What she really needed was a decent meal and some new clothes. I'd get the food tonight then tomorrow take her to get some clothing and shoes.

With a nod to myself, I slipped the cash from the wallet and stored it in various places throughout my clothing, just in case I got jumped on the way to the supermarket. Again, like everything else, that too had happened before.

I moved from within the bush, adjusting my jeans at the same time. If anyone had been watching me, they'd probably accuse me of beating off in the bush. Little did they know?

Tossing the wallet into the water, I watched little bubbles appear in the black ripples, then nothing. I waited just a few minutes more, my eyes scanning the surrounding park. I'd practically grown up here. I'd slept on the benches before they'd been removed. I'd lost my virginity in this park, behind the old, used toilets that the council kept locked up now, and I'd spent a stupid amount of time just standing watching the water move and sway to its own beat.

This place, no matter how much I hated it, was and is a big part of my life.

I blew out a long breath and started to walk the way to the bus stop. I should have brought my bike, which was stored behind Barry the Barber's, chained up to the street light. He let me store my shit there in exchange for me cleaning up for him. He wasn't too nifty on his feet anymore, so I kind of helped out. I was just gutted that he couldn't do anymore than that. He'd tried, but he just wasn't pulling in the dosh anymore, and I couldn't sponge off him. I wasn't like that.

Catching the bus, I climbed the stairs on the double-decker, holding onto the green handles tightly because the driver decided to pull off. I got to the top without falling back down the stairs and weaved my way to the back. The moment I got within touching distance of the seats, I smelt the piss and heavy stench of cum.

Admittedly, my cock stirred in my jeans, making me adjust the growing bulge. Damn, by the ripe smell, I'd just missed the action. I was absolutely gutted. Now if I'd have been here at the time, I would have tapped some of that shit, or at least got my phone out and started filming it, maybe put it up on

YouTube to get me some hits. Yes sir, bending a willing guy over the edge of a seat was damn-right special, or having him on his knees in front of me, blowing me away. Now, that was nice.

The bus ride took forty-five minutes. The moment the bus pulled into ASDA, I jumped off and headed straight to the trolleys and grabbed one. Thank God for twenty-four hour opening. I stepped foot inside the supermarket, and my persona completely changed. I was here for Penguin, no one else.

Responsibility made my spine straighten, the thoughts of cock disappeared from my mind, and the jeans that had been hanging around my rounded backside were adjusted so they were situated a little better. I even straightened my T-shirt that I'd been wearing for three days. Okay, so it was a little stretched around the neck and at the sides, but I still smelt okay. I gave my armpit a whiff just to make sure.

Weaving my way through the supermarket, I saw things I wanted, things I personally needed but, again, this was about Penguin. She needed so much more than me. I came second. I could sort myself out with the money I earned from bending over.

Not once had I bought anything for her with money I'd earned whilst on my back or front—whichever way. I'd only used stolen money for her. Whether that was better or worse, I didn't care. What I did know, was that my conscience liked it a lot better if I used the latter.

An hour later, I was done. I had a trolley full of meals and snacks for Penguin and myself, enough to last a month at least if I timed everything right. I just had to get it all home and hope that everything at home was and would be okay.

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Chapter Two

The moment the cab turned onto the road where I lived, I knew something was wrong. I could feel it deep in my bones. A chill swept through me at the same time that my asshole clenched. Normally, that was a good thing but not now.

I shifted in the back seat, the leather creaking a little under my weight and moved forward, wedging myself in between the two front seats. The driver glanced over at me warily, obviously not liking how close I was to him.

Obviously, my *gayness* was intimidating the man a tad. Reaching forward, I placed my hand on his meaty shoulder and gave it a little tap. “Don’t worry, friend. You’re safe.”

He sputtered. His mouth opened and closed much like a fish.

I rolled my eyes and turned my head, scanning the road as he continued to drive, waiting for my instructions to tell him when to stop.

“Stop,” I nearly shouted, pushed open the back door and jumped out the car when I saw that the front door to our shit hole of a house was open slightly. At this time of night, it should be closed and locked up. Immediately, my heart kicked up to double time, beating hard and fast in my chest. Worry and panic overwhelmed my system. Worry and panic over Penguin.

Forgetting about my shopping, I marched up the small rubbish-littered garden path, over the overgrowing weeds and stopped in front of the wedged open door. I leaned forward, the tips of my fingers just brushing against the scarred PVC door. The once-was-white door was now a dirty, yellow colour and had small cracks at the bottom where various people—including dealers—had kicked it in a time or two ago.

“Excuse me,” a voice said quietly from behind me, making me jump nearly six foot in the air.

Shit, I had forgotten about him.

Gritting my teeth, I turned and saw that the cab driver had gotten all of my shopping out and had set it down on the path next to his feet. I glanced up at him with my brows raised. “What?”

“The fare,” he mumbled quietly, seemingly nervous.

How could I forget about the fare?

“Your money,” I murmured and quickly skimmed my pockets looking for a fiver. I found one in my back pocket and handed it to him. He took it and eyed me a little longer, obviously looking for a tip. Sighing, I reached back into one of my pockets and pulled out a few bits of loose change, a used, crumbled tissue and my receipt. I dug through the money and found a two-pound coin. Part of me screamed not to hand it over because two pounds was two pounds for Christ sake, but another part of my mind reasoned that it was the best thing to do. So, I went with the latter. He smiled, gave me a nod and then he was gone.

It was then I realised that I was alone. I stood in the middle of my pathway wondering what the hell I was going to find when I walked inside. Fear like no other burned through my system.

Gathering my courage and pulling on my balls to get a fucking grip, I squeezed my hands together and pushed against the door, trying to get it open. I couldn't. What I had to do was body check the fucking thing until I fell inside the door.

Stumbling through the passage, I grabbed hold of the doorframe and caught myself before I face-planted the floor.

The whole place was in darkness, which wasn't really unusual. That was the first thing I noticed. I reached over blindly to the wall and felt along the plaster until I came in contact with the light switch. Flicking it on, I blinked at the intense brightness then groaned at what I saw, once the round flashes stopped dancing across my eyes.

The whole place had been turned over. It looked as if someone had been looking for something. What? I had no fucking clue.

Cabinets that held basically shit had been pulled away from the walls and were now facedown on the floor. The sofa had been turned over and laid haphazardly against the far wall, looking as if it were ready to topple over at any minute. Picture frames that were as old as dirt had been ripped down from the walls, thrown across the room and now lay smashed and in bits on the floor. The flat screen TV that I'd bought from a druggie outside the Prince pub for fifty-five quid had been pushed back against the wall, a huge crack across the front of it.

Right in the middle of all the shit though, high out of her fucking head, was my mum. She was lying on the floor at an odd angle. Her ratty, dark hair, that

was greasy as hell, lay splayed around her, the ends lying in spilt drinks and ash that had been knocked over from the ashtrays that had littered the coffee table.

“Mum,” I called and stepped my way through all the shit. My boots crushed food and ash into the already ruined carpet. Bits of broken wood and glass squished and cracked under my weight. I bent down next to the woman who birthed me and pressed my fingers to the pulse in her neck, feeling it beating. It wasn't as strong as it should be, but that was due to the hypodermic needle sticking out of her left arm. “Mum, it's me, Rudi. Wake up.”

No matter how hard I jostled her or nudged her with my hand, she wouldn't open her eyes. That told me how recently she'd scored. Pulling back her eyelids on her pale, pasty face, I immediately noticed her rolled-back eyes and the blown pupils.

I fell back on my haunches and rubbed my eyes with the tips of my fingers. I knew I needed to check on Penguin, but I couldn't risk her seeing Mum like this. Of course, she had before but that was when she was younger. I'd been trying to change things, change the way she was growing up, but it looked as if it wasn't working.

My head dropped back on my shoulders as I stared up at the ceiling. It was covered in light patches of brown from nicotine and little sticky patches of oil from the kitchen that was next door. Rubbing my hands up and down my face, I looked back down at Mum and heaved a big sigh as I reached out and snagged the needle from her arm. A trail of blood just dribbled from the mark. If I looked closer, I knew I probably wouldn't even find a viable vein. I managed to keep my fingers on the plastic plunger instead of actually touching the metal.

Standing up, I walked to the kitchen with the needle outstretched away from me and stopped dead in my tracks, again. The kitchen looked even worse than the living room did. Whatever food, plates, and bowls that were left in the cupboards were now smashed and in bits on the floor. Bits of broken porcelain and cheap china along with cornflakes and flour covered the counters. The kettle and toaster—even though they were plastic pieces of shit—were broke and lying on the floor near the back door, which was like the front one, wedged open. Shaking my head, I walked over the debris to the small red and yellow sharps bin I'd lifted from a clinic where I usually got tested every month for HIV and all those other pesky diseases everyone carried. I dropped the needle through the little hole then went over to the door and banged it closed with my shoulder. I went to lock it but noticed the key was gone. Huffing, I searched my pockets for my keys and locked the door back up, giving the handle an uplifted tug just to make sure.

Walking back through the living room, I gathered my mum up in my arms. I wasn't big exactly but I was built enough. My muscles and strength were compacted. I had a six-pack, but it was barely visible because I didn't exercise enough or eat the right foods. So, gathering my mum who weighed less than ninety pounds soaking wet because of the drugs—was nothing to me. I carried her through the living room and up the stairs where I had to watch where I was stepping because, just like everywhere else, there were broken pieces of glass scattered.

Nudging my mum's bedroom door open with my foot, I sucked in a breath and felt my back teeth grind at the state of her room but especially the bed. The small space was normally a mess anyway, but the bed was just... wow. There in the middle of her used bed were little spots of blood and crusted spots of what looked like cum juice. By the smell of it too, it hadn't happened long ago, which just made my blood heat and my anger surface.

For fuck's sake.

Admittedly, part of me should have been angry and upset that someone had been using my mum, using her roughly enough that blood had been spilt, but the bigger part of me, the responsible almost parent side, just couldn't care. She was a grown woman and should have known better.

Jostling her in my arms, I settled her onto the corner of the bed in a ball, and managed to pull the sheets off without moving her too much. Not that she would have noticed anyway, mind. Once I done that, I shifted Mum until she was in the middle of the bare mattress. I pulled her covers from the floor and immediately turned my head to the side, burying it against the top of my arm when I caught a hum of the duvet. I felt sickness bubble up my throat as I gagged a little. I had to swallow hard a couple of times to get the bile to roll back down.

Now that my mum had been dealt with, I had to sort Penguin out.

What I would have liked was to have come home to see my mum be an actual normal mum or not be here at all which was normal really. She was either out getting high, prostituting herself to pay for her habit, down the pub—again—prostituting herself for drink money or she was here, banging anything she could, however she could.

What I didn't want or need was to come home to find my mum so spaced out and doped up that she didn't even know me. What I didn't want or need was to see the state of my mum and the bed she slept in whilst Penguin had been next door the entire fucking time.

Knowing that I couldn't hide the way the place was downstairs, I walked across the hall, wiping my hands down the front of my jeans. I stopped outside my bedroom door, which I had personally fitted a couple of deadlocks to from the inside. No one was getting in—well, unless me or Penguin wanted them inside.

I raised my hand and knocked once, twice, and then three times in three quick successions, which was our secret code. I waited, my ear to the door, listening for movement. When I heard none, I began to worry. Sweat beaded on my forehead, and the bottom of my back just above my crack began to dampen.

Double-checking the door, I satisfied myself that no one had gotten inside by force.

“Penguin,” I called softly and knocked again.

With my weight pressed against the door, I listened intently. I waited five minutes before I decided that I was actually gonna try and kick the door in, no matter how much I would hurt myself because I would with how much I had reinforced the door.

Just as I stepped backwards and raised my leg, the lock clicked, signalling Penguin was opening up the door. I quickly rushed forward and dropped down to my knees. My hands hovered over the door waiting for the three-foot munchkin to come out.

The door opened until only a slice could be seen. A pair of crystal-blue eyes that neither belonged to me nor my mum looked at me warily. They were wide and frightened, but the moment she saw me and it registered in her mind that it was in fact me and not anyone else, relief coursed through her big blue orbs. A huge sob broke from her mouth.

Penguin—my little five-year-old sister—pushed the door open with such strength that it banged back against the wall and went to slam into her, but I reached forward quickly and slapped my hand across it, stopping it dead.

“Rudi, where have been?” she sobbed into my shoulder. Her sentences weren't whole, because she wasn't at school, but I understood how she spoke. I did try to teach her, but I wasn't here all the time and TV wasn't the best of help.

I let my eyes drift closed at feeling her small trembling body straddle my legs, trying to worm her body into my own. She clung to me like a monkey, holding on for dear life.

“I’m sorry.” I mumbled into her hair. Burying my nose into her crown, I sniffed. She needed a bath. I was secretly glad she was dirty because that meant she hadn’t been out of the room, which in turn meant she had been doing as she’d been told. I’d made her promise me not to leave the room when I wasn’t here. It wasn’t safe for her. The only time she was allowed to leave was when there was an emergency, or if I was here to protect her.

Now I was.

“I thought,” she hiccupped and moved to straddle me even further, her small hands grabbed at my neck, “that you left me.”

A sobbed gasp broke free from my throat. “I would never leave you, Penguin.” And I wouldn’t. Penguin was the only reason I stuck around.

The first time I ran away was because Mum had started using again, and the men she brought in were horrible and liked to touch me. It got too much at one time that I ran away. When the police found me because the school had reported me missing, they’d brought me back. After that, Mum told me she was pregnant. Whose child it was, no one, including Mum, knew.

It was obvious, at that point, that she was keeping the baby. From that point, I went to the library and read up on as much as I could. By the time Mum was due to have Penguin, I was ready for the baby. I’d used the money I’d earned from street-walking to buy second-hand stuff from the charity shop on the high street. Without me doing that, the baby—Penguin—would have had nothing.

When Mum came home with Penguin, she in effect became my baby. Mum slept so much and claimed to be depressed and didn’t really take much notice of the baby. I stopped going to school and running away, pledging myself to Penguin that I would never leave her and abandon her like my mum had done. I pledged to Penguin that night that I would give my life for hers.

Since that day, I hadn’t gone back on my promise, and I never would. Penguin was my world.

“You hungry?” I asked as I stood up with her in my arms.

Penguin held on more tightly. Her tiny fingertips dug into my shoulders. “Hmmm.”

“Good because you know what?”

Her head shook back and forth as we moved downstairs. I made sure to sidestep around the shit on the floor, so I wouldn’t trip, and cleared a space on the kitchen counter for her. She was reluctant to let me go though. Her small hands clung to my shoulders, trying to hold onto my neck.

“Please,” she begged and held on.

I sighed into her shoulder and rubbed my hands up and down her back soothingly. “I’ve got shopping outside.”

Now, she pulled back to look at me. Her crystal-clear eyes were wide still, but the fear was gone. Thank fuck. Worry still lived deep in her depths, more worry than a five-year-old should even have. “Really?”

I nodded and smiled a little. “Oh yes.”

“Food?” The hope in her voice just about broke me.

“Food,” I leaned into her and mock-whispered, making my voice a little deeper, “I’ve got sweets too.”

Her eyes went wide with excitement. Her brown brows popped high and her honey-brown scraggy hair that so needed washing bounced limply a little around her shoulders. “Wow.”

“I know.” I laughed and pulled back from her, now that she let me go. “I’m gonna go and get the bags, okay?”

Penguin hesitated in nodding but did eventually.

I quickly rushed through the house, not caring about what I was or wasn’t stepping on, and opened the front door back up. A huge sigh of relief left me when I saw the shopping still there. I had secretly been worried that someone might have stolen it, but they hadn’t.

Not being able to manage all the bags by myself, I got the first half inside then came back out for the next lot. Once everything was inside, I managed to shut the door, even though it scraped a little along the bottom of the frame because whoever had kicked it in had broken the bottom hinge, therefore, the door had dropped.

Walking back into the kitchen, I caught Penguin with the Coco Pops in her hands and the box in tatters where she’d ripped the thing open. Now she was stuck with the thick plastic bag.

I sighed. “Couldn’t wait, huh?”

“I’m hungry,” was all she said and held the bag out for me to open.

Not being able to say no to her, I rolled my eyes and even smiled a little. “Grab me a bowl.” She eagerly got up and nearly tripped over the bin that had been knocked over. “On second thought,” I stopped her and got one myself.

Penguin wasn't very big for her age. I blamed my mum for that and her drug use during pregnancy. I'd read that for a five-year-old, Penguin should've been a certain height and weight. When I did take both of those and compared them, Penguin was in the three-year age bracket. That included her speech and thought processes.

Once she was sorted out with fresh milk and Coco Pops, I went about tidying up the kitchen. I sorted the shopping into two loads. One load would stay down here for my mum to share, and the other—the bigger load—would go in my bedroom with the rest of mine and Penguin's stuff, so that when I left again, she would have plenty to eat.

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Chapter Three

My eyes snapped open when I heard the first bang. It seemed to vibrate through the house.

I sat up quickly, dislodging Penguin who'd been wormed into my side, her head buried under my armpit. Her small body jerked and sprang up, staring at me through wide, frightened eyes that were still clouded over from sleep. They darted from me to the door and back again.

Reaching out, I pulled her to me and held her close as I listened to the thumping coming from downstairs. Minutes later, I heard the bedroom door—my mum's bedroom door—open and her grumping on about the banging. We both sat still as statues as we listened to my mum's grumbling and heavy stomping footsteps sounding down the stairs. Then seconds later, the banging stopped, and the front door opened with its scrape along the bottom.

I listened intently as Penguin yawned and straddled my lap. She settled her head on my shoulder and reached for her dummy off the nightstand.

"No," I said and took it away from her. She didn't need it anymore; she was too grown up for it. I could already see the damage it had done to her teeth as it was.

"Mine." She snatched it back fiercely and jammed it into her mouth.

"No," I repeated and gripped my fingers around the plastic and pulled, but her teeth were clamped down on the rubber like a vice. "You're gonna break it."

"Let go," she growled, actually growled at me.

With a heavy sigh and a narrow-eyed look, I let her have it. Settling her back down on the bed, I stood up, moved to the window and pulled the curtain back a little so I could look outside. I squinted against the bright sunshine and glanced down towards the front garden where a shiny black car sat parked in the spot outside. I'd never seen that car before parked outside, so it was obviously someone new.

Banging at my own bedroom door made me jump. I whipped around and caught Penguin slinking off the bed and crawling underneath it, effectively making herself disappear. Once I was sure she was out of sight, I straightened my boxers and T-shirt.

“Yeah?” I called out.

“Rudi?” That was my mum’s cracked and abused voice.

I blew out a breath I didn’t realise I’d been holding. Running my hands through my sleep-mussed hair, I grumped, “What?”

“I need you,” she whispered through the crack.

I moved towards the door and leaned against the frame, pressing my hands against the warmed wood. “What?”

“Come out. I need you.”

My brows furrowed, and I gave a little snort. She never needed me. That was one thing my mum didn’t need. She didn’t need me, nor did she need Penguin. She’d made that plenty clear plenty of times.

Unlocking the door anyway, I opened it a little and eyed my mother. She was a state. Her hair that looked as if it hadn’t been washed in a month was stuck to the side of her face where she’d drooled whilst sleeping. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she was listing from side to side, barely able to keep herself standing up straight.

“Rudi,” she whispered, leaning forward towards the crack. Her breath and bodily stench nearly knocked me over. “I need your help.”

Rolling my eyes, I opened the door a little wider and stepped out, pulling the door closed after me. “What do you want?” I was willing to hear her out.

She fidgeted on the spot. Her fingers scratched at her bony and scabbed elbows frantically, tearing the skin in the process. The clothes she wore were tatty and hung on her small, almost anorexic frame.

It was clear that the drugs were killing my mum.

“I’m in trouble, Rudi.”

God, how many times had I heard that very sentence?

“What do you want me to do about it?” I had to be cruel to be kind. It was the way it was with her.

She stepped forward to touch me, but I moved out of the way, plastering my back against my door. I held my hand out to stop her progress. “I need, Rudi.”

“You need what?” I snapped. I was getting annoyed. The woman hadn’t seen me in a couple of days, hadn’t even noticed that her five-year-old daughter

had been in the room next to her whilst she'd fucked God knows who. She couldn't even be bothered to ask how I was, or Penguin was for that matter.

"Money," she pleaded. Her head tilted to the side, her bloodshot and glassy eyes wide and begging. She was truly all over the gaff. "I owe him."

My head was already shaking back and forth. "No." I'd helped her enough as it was. Countless times over the past five years and more, I'd laid myself down with plenty of dealers in payment for her borrowing too much and not being able to pay her debts.

I wasn't doing it anymore.

No fucking way.

My mum moved quicker than I gave her credit for and grabbed me in a strangle-hold. "I need you to pay him, Rudi."

"I haven't got any money," I grunted as I knocked her backwards, yanking my arms out of her hold. She went sailing into the door and fell into the bathroom doorway, landing on her back with an *oomph*.

Shock registered as she attempted to climb back to her feet. She was a tad unsteady and had to reach out for the doorframe to actually stand up but when she did, she launched herself at me, nails bared.

"Stop!" I shouted as I gripped her forearms in my hands and pushed her away. "Stop it."

The damn woman was fucking mad.

"You dare hit me," she screamed as much as her croaky voice would allow.

"I didn't hit you," I shouted back and pushed against her, knocking her backwards again. With my strength and her weakened state, she was no match. She tumbled backwards again, but this time her back hit the doorframe, and she let out a pained wail as she slithered down the wood. "And I told you, I don't have any fucking money."

"I'll take Anna away."

I froze. Everything inside me froze. I blinked at her once then twice then three times for good measure. "You wouldn't dare," I whispered with a tight throat. Fear as tight as a boa constrictor whipped through my body, squeezing my lungs and heart in a hold so tight, little spots of black danced across my vision. I stumbled backwards and reached out for the doorframe, settling my

back against it so it could hold me up. If it hadn't been there, I would have hit the deck.

Pushing her way back up from the floor, a smug smile danced across her mouth. Yeah, she knew she had me. "I would."

Swallowing hard, I tried to turn my face neutral but couldn't. Anna—Penguin—was my world. Mum, no matter how bad a mum she was, was indeed my mum and Penguin's. She did have rights. She had more rights than I could ever have. She could in actual fact, if she wanted to, take Penguin away from me and then where would I be?

"I won't let you," I whispered fiercely. My teeth ground together, and my blood pressure shot through the roof. I clenched my hands together to stop the trembling that I could feel rolling through me. Possessiveness burned like a brand on my flesh.

"Pay him," she instructed slowly, the smug tint of her voice grated on my last nerve. She reached forward, her hand snatching my T-shirt, grasping the material tight in her fist. As if I were a puppy, she began to pull me along.

Stupidly, I followed her down the stairs, not fighting the hold she had over me physically and emotionally. The place was still a state because she hadn't been bothered to get out of bed and sort anything out. My feet hurt as they crunched into God knows what, but I was too focused on her previous comments of taking Penguin away from me to care. Mum continued to drag me into the living room where—oh my God, Giovanni Manetti—stood.

Now that woke me up, snapping me out of the verbal blackmail I'd just been subjected to minutes earlier.

I knew those wide, rounded shoulders anywhere. I'd stared at them enough previously. Slowly, he turned and revealed those dark, almost black, tar-coloured eyes. His Greek or Italian heritage was strong in his facial features. His brows were almost a monobrow, his eyes were round and widely shaped and set far apart, his nose was wide and spread on his face, and his lips were a tad on the thin side but admittedly, he did have a nice smile even with the fake, altered teeth. That was the only thing nice about him though. Everything else was pure monstrous. The thing that gave me the shivers was the nasty, almost purple scar that ran down the left side of his face next to his sideburn. The beard he tried to grow grew almost sporadically around the torn, previous sewn flesh.

Giovanni Manetti was one of the most known drug dealers in Southend. If you wanted, Giovanni had. His prices were a tad on the expensive side, but with the superiority that came with his name, he could afford to rip a few people off.

Not only was Giovanni Manetti a pig, he was an extremely nasty pig who liked dirty pig sex even more—not giving a shit who the unfortunate underneath him may be.

Many times over the years, my mum had gotten tick off another dealer and screwed them over in not paying her bills. They'd come round, kick the shit out of her and take whatever they could find in our home to pay the dues. When she was sober enough, she'd realise that she'd fucked her normal go-to guy, and then she'd go to Giovanni. Giovanni would give her twice the amount of smack on tick knowing she couldn't pay any of it back. But personally, I think he did it on purpose. He knew that if she didn't pay him back by a certain day, he could come round here, throw his weight around and demand repayment in the form of me.

I hated that man.

“Tutti Fruitti Rudi,” he smiled and even gave me a wink as his eyes drifted up and down my body, settling on my cloth-covered crotch.

A revolted shiver rolled through me, sending the small hairs on the back of my neck flaring up, standing on end. My eyes slid closed at the use of my street name that I'd earned from the very man who stood in front of me.

“Ah, come on,” he said as he moved closer to me. I went to move, but his hand shot out and latched onto my shoulder, gripping hard enough to bring tears to my eyes. His meaty fingers were like mini knives piercing my flesh. “Eh, don't be like that, Rudi.”

I looked up into those tar-coloured eyes and realised that the longer he stood here holding onto me, the more power he had over me. It was better to nip it in the bud right about now.

“How much?” I managed to get out through gritted teeth. The pain in my shoulder threatened to take my legs out.

“Five.”

My eyes went wide as they darted to my mum who stood off to the side. Her whole body was trembling, but, no, not out of fear of Giovanni. No, she was no doubt wanting—needing another hit, a hit she probably didn't even have, because she'd stuffed her body full of the shit last night.

“Five hundred quid?” I shouted with exasperation. Was she fucking serious? I tried to count how many wraps that was but lost count at somewhere around fifteen. My mind whirled at the intense anger that I felt for her stupidity and selfishness.

“I needed it,” she said with complete conviction.

“Sure you needed it,” I sneered and crossed my arms over my chest, hoping to dislodge Giovanni’s hand, but I was unlucky. “Your daughter fucking needed it. Don’t you get it? She needs food more than you need to put that shit up your arm.”

“That shit helps me with my troubled life.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I stepped forward and pointed my trembling finger at her. Angry tears burned my eyes. I didn’t want to cry. No, I wasn’t going to cry. “You’re a selfish fucking person. You don’t think about anyone other than yourself. You’re a fucking waste of space.”

“Stop speaking to me like that. I’m not a child,” my mum screamed.

“Then stop acting like one,” I screamed back. I screamed so hard that my voice gave out, making me have to clear my throat. I sucked in a sobbed breath and let my eyes close, telling myself over and over again to breathe. It was all going to be okay.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Giovanni butted in, waving his massive bear-sized paws around. “Let’s check this out. It’s not issues.”

My eyes snapped open. Was this guy crazy?

I made a face and spun around. This time, his hand was dislodged from my hurting shoulder. “Are you fucking crazy?”

His eyes darkened even more, if possible, and a snarl curled his top lip. He stepped forward menacingly, making my insides quiver in fright, but I stood tall and didn’t move, even though my mind screamed at me to just get the fuck away from him, to back down and act like the submissive he wanted—that he liked.

“You talk back to me, Tutti?”

My eyes narrowed at him, my jaw ground together. “No,” I finally gritted out.

“Good.” He smiled and cuffed me upside the head. “Now we sort the arrangements.” He clapped his meaty hands together, making his top arms wobble and smiled at both me and Mum.

“He can pay everything.” Mum nodded frantically, her eyes pleading with Giovanni.

My stomach turned in on itself at her words. I knew my mum felt little for me, but for her to just basically whore me out like that, tore me apart. I wanted to cry; I wanted to stamp my foot. Fuck it, I wanted to grab hold of her and shake her to death, trying to get it through to her that mums didn't do this to their children... ever.

Giovanni's brow rose at Mum. I think he was shocked at her words, too.

Silence, intense, horrible, pain-filled silence, filled the room. I stood looking at the woman who birthed me, wondering what the hell I had done wrong. What had I done that had been so bad for her to do this to me?

When she nodded continuously at me and mouthed, “Anna.” I relented hesitantly.

“I can't pay,” I said quietly, but I knew Giovanni didn't want money anyhow. The Queen's head was useless right now. He knew the only way to get me into his bed was blackmail or debt because otherwise, I wouldn't be going anywhere near him.

The smile turned even more sinister. It reminded me of a predator—a shark, to be precise. It was full and grave, making me cringe. He walked over to where I stood and ran his hand through my black, short-cropped hair, tugging at the front part, where my tousled spikes were. When my face was upturned to him, my neck clicking and resisting against the angle, he leaned into me and pressed his chubby cheek to mine. His onion pits assaulted my senses first, then his breath came next, making my nostrils wish they were blocked. “I want you, Rudi.” His shirt-covered, extended belly first pushed up against me, brushing against my sternum. Then I could have gagged when I felt his hips thrust against me, his hardness already evident. “I want some tutti fruttii, Rudi.”

My head instinctively turned away from him at the same time I tried to make some space between our bodies, but he wasn't having any of that. He moved with me until we were up against the wall. When I realised he had me blocked, I cleared my throat. “I don't do that anymore.”

The hand that was in my hair pulled even harder, yanking on the strands. Little tendrils of pain shot through my scalp. “Don't lie to me, Rudi.”

I gritted my teeth and looked him in the eye. I so wanted to hack up some phlegm and shoot it at his bully mug, but the fucker would probably enjoy that.

Instead, I smiled a little, even though my eyes were stone cold. “Okay,” I managed to get out through my tight jaw. “Name the time and place.”

Giovanni’s head tilted to the side like an inquisitive dog. “You’re always so easy, so pliable,” he commented in wonder.

Shame flooded my system. “You’ve got what you wanted; now you can go.”

He stared at me for a long time before he nodded and stepped back, slowly releasing the hold he still had on my hair. Turning to my mum, he said, “Once Rudi pays me in kind, you’re clean again.”

The relief and gratitude on my mum’s face made a puddle of bile rise in my throat. I looked at her with utter contempt and hate. Fuck, did I hate her. I chewed on my lip to stop the flow of abuse that wanted to escape my mouth. I also snapped my hands under my pits to stop from reaching out and strangling the woman until she turned blue and collapsed.

“Thank you,” she gushed and smiled full out at Giovanni, who looked way too pleased with himself.

My hands grasped my T-shirt so hard I heard fabric tearing. My whole body jittered, but it wasn’t in fear of Giovanni—okay, maybe a little bit—nor was it because I was cold. No, it was pure, white-hot-poker anger that was so hot and thunderous; it burned and bolted through my body, making everything from the bottom of my feet to the tips of my fingers quiver.

Giovanni moved to the door, but before he opened it, he turned and moved back to where I stood, still leaning against the wall. His massive body shadowed completely over me. I turned my head to the side and closed my eyes when his hand slid up my neck to cup my cheek. He thumbed the skin under my eye at the same time he snapped his hips against me. Again, I could feel his hardness, except it felt bigger and harder than ever. Leaning down so his rank breath fanned over my face, he groaned, and said, “Don’t bother stretching yourself, Rudi. You know how I like it.”

A cold, bitter chill travelled through my body making my hairs stand up on end.

Yeah, I knew how he liked it.

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Chapter Four

“That’s it, boy, take it, you worthless whore, you fucking fuckrat, fucking tight, twisted, twink bastard,” Giovanni grunted. His punishing thrusts continued to pound into me, unrelenting, uncaring. His thick cock pounded into my small hole without any lube easing the way. In fact, the only lube that had been used was what the condom was coated in. That was it.

I was sore as hell, and my back teeth along with my cock and balls were in constant, terrible pain. My cock felt raw like it had been scraped against a wall of sandpaper, the head pulsing but not with pleasure, with tendrils of pain. My balls pained me every time they moved inside their bag and what didn’t help was Giovanni’s own balls slapping against them.

My elbows killed too. Every momentum forward, my elbows rolled along the cold, hard surface of the kitchen counter and no matter how much I repositioned myself to ease the burning ache, I couldn’t get comfortable. For over an hour, he’d been back there behind me, banging away. I was sure with how much sweat was dripping on my back and the expletives leaving his filthy, grubby mouth, he was on something. What? I had no fucking clue.

All I wanted was for him to hurry up.

If he carried on like this, I wouldn’t be able to take a shit right for weeks.

“Yes, you’re gonna take my load, fuckwit,” he bellowed, his voice echoing in the spaciously decorated kitchen. His spittle flew over my back, landing on my neck. His meaty hand gripped the top of my shoulder holding me in place as his thick hips pounded into me, harder, faster. His cock jammed into my arsehole with bruising quality. Faster and faster, his flabby, hairy belly slapped against the bottom of my back, his huge hairy balls banged heavily against my own pinioned ones.

“Here it comes, boy, here it comes. Take my fucking load and shit it back out again, take it, boy.” The hand on my shoulder tightened incredibly; his chewed, crudely cut nails felt like small blades digging into my muscles.

Dropping my head to the counter, I let my elbows drop and folded myself in half, basically so the pain could go from the six o’clock mark in my backside to twelve o’clock. The intense burn and constant in-and-out rhythm pain was too much. I squeezed my eyes closed and hissed when he slid down then upwards, pushing against the sore and swollen flesh surrounding my sphincter.

No matter how hard I fought not to make a noise, a pained groan left me, and I tensed on instinct, really knowing that I shouldn't have because that turned him on more than anything—a man fighting his way through a good fucking—oh yeah, Giovanni loved that. Giovanni must have felt it because his speed picked up even more. His spittle and sweat flew over my back and now both his meaty hands clamped onto my shoulders, holding me into place more than ever.

“That’s it. Oh daddy’s coming now, spitting his load into your tight backside.” He pushed in once more, then stilled. His cock thickened even more then exploded inside my arse. The condom holding his spunk, threatened to implode into my hole. Whilst his cock unloaded, his body stood away from mine, his fingers just digging into my shoulders. The moment his tube steak stopped its unburdening, his body slid against mine, his hairy chest rubbing against my back. I cringed away from him instinctively and pressed myself into the cold counter, trying to dislodge his body.

“Get off me, you fucking pig,” I growled through gritted teeth and forced my way out from underneath his dead weight. My sweat-soaked body slid against the counter, my skin pulling on the granite. Giovanni’s cock slipped out of my backside with a wet plop, making me hiss and bite my bottom lip to stop the wheeze of pain from escaping my mouth. Giovanni’s heaving, panting body flopped to the counter and there he lay, all hairy, smelly and fat. His rolls of flesh squished against the side. He turned his head from where it rested on his forearm; his beady weasel, tar-coloured eyes watching me.

My own eyes dropped to the wooden floor when I heard a wet slap. I grimaced when I saw the condom that he’d used—that was covered with lines of red and pink—had slipped from his decreased cock and was pooling on the floor, along with his spunk that had splattered upon contact.

Untying the wound wire from around the base of my deep-purple-coloured balls, I could have cried with relief. Fast, hot blood shot through my testicles, giving them life once more. What I would have liked was to have held my precious weights and massaged them better, but in all honesty and before I emptied my stomach all over him, myself, and the floor, I wanted nothing more than to get the fuck out and away from him.

I winced when I moved to pull my jeans on. My arsehole burned like a bitch and felt torn in at least four different places. The fucker knew I didn't like raw sex—who did?—but yet that's what he had chosen as part of his repayment schedule. I guess I should have been lucky that my mouth wasn't used. There was nothing worse than that.

As if reading my mind, Giovanni smiled, revealing a string of white teeth that looked so fucking fake it wasn't even funny, especially with his heavy, weighty face covered in patchy, overgrown hair.

“Next time, Rudi, I get your mouth.”

The promise in his tone made my eyes close as bile wanted to roll up my throat. I wanted to puke all over his floor, all over him, show him what my mouth was capable of—well, now, that wasn't such a bad idea.

“Whatever,” I grumbled and slipped my boots on, not even bothering with the laces. I was only going to walk through the park, so it wasn't that long a walk home. The hate I had burning for the man who was watching me, who had just used and abused me, was overwhelming. Hot anger, burning hot anger, coursed through my veins. What I wouldn't give to give him some of what I had to put up with—to see how he liked it or better yet, do something to him like maybe—kill him—that'd stop the fat fucker from hurting anyone else.

“Same time, Thursday,” he said and turned his back on me. I watched him as he walked to the bathroom that was just off to the side of the kitchen, his big, naked body wobbling and slapping as he moved. Gah, the man was fucking horrible as fuck.

I flipped him the bird even though he couldn't see it and moved quickly through his house and out the front door where Joey, his henchman and all round cocksucker, sat. He winked and smirked at me, but I ignored him. He was just a wind-up merchant and a prick anyhow.

The park was near on empty as I walked through it. I liked to stay near the water if I could, unless I had to dip into the bushes. I loved watching the ducks disappear at night and the ripples of water under natural moonlight.

I stopped next to the water and watched it, letting it calm me a little before I went home. I knew Penguin would be waiting for me. I'd gotten her a new book when I'd taken her to get some new clothing. I promised her that I would read it to her after her bath if I got home at a reasonable time.

Turning away from the pond, I grimaced as I stepped on a rock and it altered my stride, making my arsehole stretch. Damn it, I'd be sore forever. Luckily, I'd pinched that four hundred quid because my hole would be useless right about now on the streets.

As I moved through the grass, I heard a couple of grunts and low moans coming from the bushes. Even though I was in a vile mood, I smiled a little, thinking that someone was getting lucky. It wouldn't be the first time that I'd witnessed someone getting it on in this particular park. After all, I did lose my virginity here.

I carried on walking and continued to look back over my shoulder every so often. By the time I got to the entrance to the park, a couple of guys came running up behind me. I instinctively moved aside and let them pass.

“Fucking faggot won't be coming through here again,” one of them said so loudly I was surprised the next town didn't hear him.

My body tensed at his words. The one with a white cap turned backwards replied, “Yeah. I can't believe we caught him scoping your arse out like that, fucking pervert.”

Immediately, my hackles rose. I continued to walk behind them as they slowed, listening to their conversation. Why I did this, I had no fucking clue. All I knew was that something inside me told me to, so knowing my gut had good judgement, I followed it.

I followed them all round the outside of the park. I knew they didn't even notice me behind them. It was as if I slipped into “The Cat” mode and slinked my way along, trailing. I did know that by the time they had crossed over the street and I had stopped by the side of the park, I was fuming at what I had heard. Listening to their running commentary of faggots and everything on the gay spectrum and what needed to happen to faggots like that; my stomach was twirled and twisted up real tight. To me, it sounded as if they'd gone out tonight to do one thing, and that thing was looking for gay guys to bash the ever-loving shit out of.

Eying them until they disappeared, I shook my head, climbed up onto the green fence and hopped back into the park, landing with my knees slightly bent. Even though my arsehole protested, I ran over to where I'd been hearing the grunts thinking that someone was getting busy, when in fact, someone was getting their face smashed in. I stalked through the bushes, my boots breaking the fallen twigs in half at the same time my hands caught bunches of the green stuff and pushed it out of my way. My eyes narrowed, searching for a body. I prayed to God that whoever they'd beat the crap out of was at least alive.

When I couldn't find him, I stopped dead in my place and tilted my head to the side. I cancelled out the toots and engines in the distance. I struck out the

music booming somewhere nearby and the voices entering the park from the south side. Once I heard nothing but air, I closed my eyes.

I knew this park very well. I knew where grass ended and mud began. Where wood chips surrounded the swings, to the tarmac that started around the roundabout and where gravel ended and concrete started around the pond.

Nothing. I could hear absolutely fucking nothing.

Just as I was getting annoyed that I couldn't hear anything, I heard a moan. It was a little breathy, but it was something better than nothing.

I followed the direction to the east a little and crouched down, my fingers brushing against the cut and trimmed bushes. The darkness was too much; I couldn't see anything. I could have been standing in dog shit and I wouldn't have known. Whoever the injured guy was, he had to be wearing something dark because I just couldn't make him out.

Taking out my phone because my eyes could see fuck all, I pressed the screen, seeing Penguin's face. I smiled a little as I waved it around in a circle, shining the bright light over the ground around me. Turning in a circle, I tilted it this way and that way, continuously pressing the button so the illumination wouldn't go out.

There.

I moved forward quickly when I saw a black lump buried in the bush. Kneeling down, I rolled the guy onto his back, making him moan out loud and automatically bring his hands up to protect what looked like a seriously beaten and bloody face. "Please," he croaked, and then hacked up a wad of blood as he coughed. He hacked up another gob load of the red stuff and spat it out of his mouth; little rivers of it dribbled down the side of his face to his neck.

"Shhh," I crooned softly and settled my phone on his chest. I bent over at the waist so I could see him a bit better and sucked in a breath. He had dark-blond hair that was styled at the front, and the eye that was open, watching me warily, was a very vibrant green colour.

I'd bet that, without being beaten and all bloody, he was gorgeous.

"We need to get you to the hospital," I suggested, even though I knew that whatever his name was, he wouldn't go for it. Hell, if this had happened to me, I wouldn't have wanted to go to the hospital either.

The guy's head began to move back and forth. "No."

Sighing and shaking my head, I moved him a little bit more to get comfortable, even though he cursed me to hell and back again for it. Once he was comfortable and I had the moonlight shining down on us, I could get a better look at him. “What’s your name?” I asked, as I pulled my T-shirt up over my head. I valued that T-shirt, but he needed it more than I did.

Gripping the top at the seams, I pulled it apart, watching small bits of white cotton fly around in the air above us. Stripping the two halves into pieces, I kept the biggest parts to press down on his cuts with, whilst the others that I cut into smaller pieces could be used to wipe away the blood from his eyes, nose, and mouth area.

“Jay.”

Stopping what I was doing, my brows pulled together as I leaned down, trying to hear what he said. “Huh?”

“I’m Jay, Jay Bruins,” he said a little louder this time.

A smile popped up on my face. “It’s nice to meet you Jay, Jay Bruins.”

In return, I received a grunt.

“Anyway,” I cleared my throat and spat into the cloth then began to clean the blood from his face and mouth so he could speak properly. In the moonlight, his blood looked almost black. “I’m Rudi Costa. I live not far from here, but I’ve got to admit, I haven’t seen you around. I kind of know everyone, even if they don’t know me.” I had to, with how many people I lifted from on a weekly basis, I had to know faces even if I stole from them behind their backs.

“I just moved here,” he croaked. His eye watched me closely, never leaving my hands. It looked like he was waiting for me to hit him or something, rather than help him.

I nodded and wiped the last of the blood from around his mouth, then started on his eyes. He’d have a couple of shiners in the morning, a swollen nose and a fat lip. Probably a bruise or fracture to his ribs, but no doubt, he’d be up on his feet. He didn’t look like a guy to be kept down.

“Yeah? Where’d you move from?”

“Portsmouth,” he said. His eyes, the colour of green, green grass now that I could see them under moonlight, were utterly gorgeous. The best thing I had seen in a very long time, if ever. The more blood I cleaned off his face, the more of his gorgeousness I revealed. He had a strong jaw that promised

stubbornness and was coated in a sprinkling of dust where he hadn't shaved this morning. His pert—almost female—nose had a small little bump at the top that I wanted to know more about, and his lips, dear God, his lips were thick especially the bottom one. Admittedly, it was swollen but I just knew that without the fleshy look, it would still be pouty and fuckable.

What the fuck?

Where the hell were all these thoughts coming from? Here was the guy lying in the bushes of my local park after being gay-bashed, and I was practically mind fucking the guy. Next thing you knew, I would have been wondering whether his cock was cut or not and whether he sucked head like a good'un.

Dear God, I had to get a grip on myself.

Finished with his face, I sat back on my haunches, wiped my hands on a spare rag of my T-shirt, and stared down at Jay as he stared up at me.

“Why you helping me?” he asked quietly.

My shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Because you look like you need it?”

“Ah, right.”

“Where'd you live?” I asked, when silence reigned a little longer between us than I felt comfortable with.

Swallowing to gather more tone to his voice, he said, “Gunners View.”

My eyes narrowed as I pictured a map in my head. I was sure I knew where he lived. My brows furrowed as I stood up and dusted off my jeans, which were now covered in blood, leaves and mud. “If you live there, why are you so far away?” By my calculations, that was something like five to seven miles away.

“I came out for dinner.”

Huh, why come all this way for dinner? Instead of asking him that, I bent down and slid my arms under his armpits, feeling the dampness pressing against my inner wrists, and sat him up. He opened his mouth to no doubt scream but clamped it shut at the last minute. He took a long, deep breath and pushed back against me. “Please,” he whispered. Obviously, his pride had taken a battering.

Nodding even though he couldn't see me, I grunted and lifted him up to his feet. Judging by his weight, we were roundabout the same kind of size. He rested back against my chest breathing heavily. Even though he didn't stand

straight, I could tell that we were kind of the same height, too. There had to be a couple of inches separating us, maybe?

“Can you walk?” I asked. My mouth was in direct line to his ear, which looked mighty tempting to take a bite from or even give a little lick too.

No, I shouldn't be thinking like that.

Ignoring the voice in my head, I readjusted myself to Jay's side mainly because it would be better for him to walk like that, but also because I'd popped a boner for the first time in a week. I'd been limp as a noodle because of worry, Giovanni, and just the fuck pot of life, and yet I'd just met Jay, and here I was sprouting wood over him already.

“Just,” he said and then moaned when he limped forward. His jaw ground together and his hands fisted at his sides. “I can try.”

I nodded. “That's good, real good.”

For that, I received another grunt.

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Chapter Five

“You wanna tell me why those guys beat you up good and proper?” I already knew the answer, but I wanted Jay to tell me.

A shrug lifted his shoulders. “No clue.”

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I tightened my hand around Jay's waist, grabbing his shirt in my fist. “You know,” I said quietly as we walked through the squishy grass. My eyes continually scanned the surroundings, checking to make sure Dumb and Dumber hadn't come back to finish Jay off. “I'm gay.” I wasn't ashamed of who or what I was. I was gay, out and proud.

Jay jerked violently away from me, only to stumble and windmill his arms out as he fell backwards, tripping over his own feet. Clucking my tongue, I rushed to his aid and grasped him around the waist, pulling him against me, nearly toppling over myself. Once I steadied him on his feet, I shook him a little for stupidity. “What the fuck was that about?”

“Nothing.” His eyes, though, betrayed his feelings.

Gripping his chin in my hand, I lifted it a little so I could look into his battered and bruised grassy eyes. “Were you like running away or something?” Okay, he wasn't a kid—although he didn't look much over nineteen or twenty—but he could have been running from something that might have happened to him, or maybe I was just projecting from myself.

Jay rolled his eyes and snatched his face away. “Running away,” he scoffed and rolled his eyes, again, dramatically this time. “I told you already,” he snapped and moved completely away from me. “I came out for dinner.”

“Alright,” I raised my hands in placation. “Calm down.” The guy was proper defensive. I only asked a question, for God's sake.

Jay nodded and looked away in the opposite direction, his eyes fixated on something else other than me. “If we can get to my car, I can drive home then.”

My brows popped up at that. “You have a car?”

Even with his swollen face, I knew Jay was giving me the *duh* look. “Of course I do.”

I recoiled a little at his tone. Now, he sounded like a spoilt little shit and as if everyone his age should own or have had a car. A little jealously beamed

through my system at that. I'd never driven a car in my life or even had the keys to one in the first place. He must have some real nice parents to be able to afford a car.

"I guess by the look on your face, you don't have one?" he asked, obviously sensing the silence that had descended between us.

"No," I admitted quietly.

Jay shrugged and leaned into my side a little more, pressing against me. Whether he did it on purpose or by accident, it felt good. "It's just a banger. My dad says until I can be trusted with something more important like his truck, then I can't have a better, more expensive one."

More jealousy came to life deep inside me. "You've got a dad, too?" I never had a dad.

Jay smiled, revealing a string of not-quite-white teeth that were gorgeous nonetheless. His smile took my breath away. "I have the best dad ever."

Not knowing what to say to that, I kept quiet. I continued to hold onto Jay all through the park until we reached the entrance. We stopped and he leaned his shoulder against the railing, whilst glancing up and down the street, then nodded towards a little car parked across the road. He was right, it was a rust bucket.

I didn't know too much about cars. Okay, I didn't know anything about them. All I could see was that his car didn't look that old—but what did I know? I did know that it had rust patches all over the back and front wheel arch type things, the wheels were black, not having any silver things on them, and it just had that "I'm fucked" look about it.

"I know." Jay chuckled and reached into his pocket for his keys.

"I didn't say anything."

He snorted, or at least tried to. "You didn't need to, I saw your face."

Once the small, red car was unlocked, I opened the driver door and helped Jay inside. He grimaced and was obviously in pain but didn't want to admit it. I couldn't blame him, I wouldn't either. Shuffling my feet, I rubbed the back of my neck. "Are you sure you're okay to drive?"

Jay rolled his eyes again. He sure did that a lot. "I'm fine."

"Sorry to tell you, mate, you don't look too fine to me."

Huffing out a breath, Jay slid the key into the little slot and waved his hand towards the passenger side. "You wanna ride with me?"

My brows pulled together as I once again shifted on the spot. There was just something about this Jay Bruins that made me nervous as a cat ready to jump from a high branch. My mouth opened then closed again. I had to get back to Penguin, but I also didn't want to leave Jay either.

"Get in." He sighed and yes, again, rolled his eyes.

I chewed on my bottom lip for a couple of seconds before nodding. I ran around to the passenger side, popped open the door and slid in. Only when my butt hit the seat did I wince and squeeze my eyes closed at the feel against my abused ring.

"You okay?" Jay's voice was softer and a lot closer to me than I would have liked at that precise moment. In the park, I didn't mind him being close, but this close when I was feeling the ill effect of Giovanni's attentions wasn't good. The two didn't belong together.

"Fine," I squeezed out through gritted teeth.

Even with the darkness in the small confines of the car, I could feel Jay's eyes burning into the side of my head. I continued to look out of the windscreen. For some reason, I didn't have the balls to turn and make eye contact with him.

With a long drawn out sigh from him, he turned the key and nothing happened. "Oh come on." He banged his fists against the steering wheel, startling us both when a *bib* sounded.

"What's the matter?"

"The fucking thing won't start," he grumbled and tried the key again. The car turned on a little; the engine sounding like it was coughing then dying again. "I told him."

Now I was just downright confused. "You told who?"

"My dad," he snapped and arched his body, which looked like it pained him to do, and reached into his front pocket of his jeans for his phone. Once he had the expensive-looking thing out, he fiddled with the screen and pressed the loudspeaker button. Seconds later, a man's deep voice sounded.

"Son?"

"Dad," Jay breathed. "I'm stuck."

There was a few seconds of silence on the line before, “Stuck?”

“Yeah,” Jay snapped irritably and rested his hands on the steering wheel, his fingers clenching against the leather. “My car died again.”

“I told you to not leave the lights on. Did I not?”

Jay rolled his eyes again. “Dad,” he interrupted, “I didn’t leave the bloody lights on, okay? I parked the car, got something to eat, and when I come back, it’s dead.”

There was another silence down the line, then a loud sigh. “Where are you?”

Whilst Jay rattled off where we were, I sat back in the seat feeling uncomfortable, jealous, wanting and complete all at once. It was a strange mix of feelings. I closed my eyes and listened to the timbre of Jay’s voice—the love and affection, even if he was in pain and annoyed at his dad’s constant questions—I could tell he loved the man and it was reciprocated. It was nice, albeit a tad uncomfortable to listen to.

My eyes popped open when everything went silent. I looked over at Jay to find him staring at me, his split lip hanging open and his grassy-green eyes focused on my face.

Clearing my throat, I asked, “All sorted?”

Jay shook his head. “Uh, yeah.”

“Is this them?” I asked as a silver truck with *Bruins & Son Construction* printed across the side pulled up across the road from us.

The driver door opened, and a big bear of a man jumped down from the seat and slammed the door closed behind him. Seconds later, the passenger door opened, and a slightly plump woman got out and joined Jay’s dad at the front of the truck, their hands joining immediately.

Jay nodded, pushed off his car and moved towards his dad. “Yes, that’s David Bruins, my dad.”

The moment Jay’s dad clocked the state of Jay’s face, he stopped dead in his tracks and his face morphed into something so fierce, I couldn’t even describe it. I’d seen a lot of violent and angry-looking men in my life but never something like that.

“What the fuck?” he boomed, his voice echoing in the darkened street, and rushed to Jay, gently taking his face in his big paw-like hands. He turned Jay’s face this way and that way, getting a good look at his son. “What the fuck happened?”

“Dad—”

David’s angry face turned in my direction, his eyes zoomed in on me. Slowly, he pushed Jay out of the way, like he was nothing more than a piece of paper and marched over to me, his chest heaving, his hands fisting. His size was real intimidating, but I’d dealt with punters the same size as him who’d wanted something for nothing and hadn’t gotten it, so I was damn sure I wasn’t going to let Jay’s dad intimidate me.

“Sir—”

Suddenly, I was thrust up against the car with David Bruins’s arm across my throat, cutting off my windpipe. “You fucker, you hurt my boy,” he roared down at me as spittle flew from his mouth, coating my face.

My own mouth opened and closed trying to tell the stupid dickwad that I hadn’t laid a hand on his precious boy, but I couldn’t even get a gasp out. My Adam’s apple felt as if it was being crushed, and my lungs burned with need for air. My legs kicked out, trying to get him to move, but he was fucking huge.

Jay appeared at my side, his eyes panicked as he tried to get his dad off me. “Dad, Rudi didn’t hurt me, he saved me.”

The woman also appeared in my line of sight. She rested her hand on David’s bulging bicep, giving it a little squeeze. “David, release the boy, you’re being stupid. You heard Jay.”

As if seeking the truth, his eyes turned to his son, whose chest was heaving. His hands were fisted at his sides, and his mouth was tightened into a straight white line. “Dad, let him go.”

“You’re sure?” David asked.

Now, I wanted to roll my own eyes. Didn’t the two of them just tell him that?

Jay nodded and swallowed hard, his eyes darting between me and his dad. He gave the big man a placating nod. “I’m sure. Let him go, now.”

Slowly, hesitantly, the big slab of steel was removed from my throat. I rolled to the side, my throat raw as I coughed and spluttered all over the dusty, dirty car. Intense, hot air rushed its way through my lungs, burning like a bitch.

“Are you okay?” Jay asked as he settled his hand on my shoulder, giving it a small squeeze.

I shot a glare at him and his dad then shrugged off his hand. “I’m fine, thanks,” I sneered and straightened myself up. I went to smooth down my T-shirt only to realise that I wasn’t actually wearing one. “Although being assaulted, *again*, wasn’t in my plans for tonight.”

“What do you mean, ‘again’?”

“Nothing, it doesn’t matter,” I grumbled and rubbed at my aching throat that no doubt was red and would be bruised by morning.

“What happened?” the woman’s soft voice cut through the silence.

Jay moved away from me, giving us space and leaned back against his car holding his side. “I got jumped.”

My head snapped towards Jay, wondering why he wasn’t telling them the truth. Okay, he did get jumped, so he was partly telling them the truth, but why hadn’t he volunteered that he was jumped because he was gay. By the way he talked about his dad, it was obvious he knew which way his son swung, so why didn’t he tell the truth?

David slapped his hands on his hips and thrust his chest out as his eyes intently watched his son, as if looking for a crack in his facade. “What the hell do you mean, you were jumped?”

Jay shrugged and shifted on the spot. “I was jumped, that’s it.”

“Who, what, when?”

“I don’t know.” Jay rolled his eyes and blew out an exasperated breath. “I didn’t exactly have time to ask for their names and numbers.”

“Boy.” Jay’s dad’s voice rumbled and seemed to darken. “You best remind yourself who you’re speaking to.”

The stubborn point of Jay’s chin became prominent for at least a minute before his shoulders slumped in defeat, and his body seemed to fold in on itself. “Yes, sir,” he mumbled belligerently. “Sorry, sir.”

“Are you okay?”

Again, my head snapped around to the sound of the woman’s voice. She was now at my side, her small, pale hand reaching out to touch my shoulder but hesitating. “Are you okay?” she asked again.

The touching and genuine tone of her voice made a small smile pop up on my face. “Fine, thank you.”

Her intelligent blue eyes scanned my face then dropped down to my naked chest before travelling back up to my face. Her head tilted to the side a little. “Did I hear that your name was Rudi?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Well, Rudi, I’m Monica and this is David.” She reached backwards blindly, grabbed hold of David’s hand, and pulled him forward until he was standing in front of me and next to her. David now up close looked very much like Jay but his features were more masculine, rougher and older. His scowl, though, was what got me scowling back at him. “This is David, Jay’s dad.”

Neither of us said anything, until Monica elbowed David’s side. He huffed and sighed then held out his hand to me. “Hello, Rudi.” He said my name as if nails were being pinned to his throat.

My brow popped up as I looked down at the huge work-roughened hand hanging there waiting. A nudge from my back jerked me forward a step. I sent a glare to Jay over my shoulder as I shook David’s hand. “Hello.”

When another bout of silence rained down on us, Monica once again elbowed David. He grunted and said, “I’m sorry for that misunderstanding, Rudi, but you can understand my confusion though, can you not?”

“Sure,” I mumbled and nodded.

Monica clapped her hands together and slithered her arm around David’s. “You’ll have to come to dinner.”

“Oh no,” I objected immediately, shaking my head back and forth.

“Do what?” Jay’s dad’s eyes bugged out of his head.

“That’s a really good idea,” Jay commented from behind me.

All three of us had spoken at once.

“Well, that’s settled.” Monica beamed. Her blue eyes sparkled under the streetlights as they darted from me to Jay and back again. “We’ll host a thank you dinner for helping out our boy.”

Chapter Six

“Where have you been?” Mum asked the moment I walked into the house. She was sat in her normal, nicotine- and God-knows-what-stained armchair that funnily enough hadn’t been touched last week when the house had been trashed.

The fourteen-inch CRT TV I’d had to get down from the loft after the other one got broke was switched on and showing the midnight quiz show on ITV. Fortunately, the sound was muted. I couldn’t stand the woman’s squeaky voice at the best of times. My eyes lifted towards the coffee table that I’d managed to put back together with a couple of screws and odd bits of old, used wood. There on the top lay bright silver foil, a lighter and an empty draw bag. I couldn’t stop the snarl building on my lips or the disappointment and righteous anger flooding my system.

“Nowhere that involves you,” I grumbled and headed to the kitchen to grab a glass of water.

After that rather strange meeting with Jay’s parents, I’d left them at the park, declining Monica’s offer of a lift home. For one, I wasn’t *that* comfortable with them yet even though I’d been invited to dinner in a week and a half, and second, I didn’t want them knowing where I lived. It was embarrassing.

Part of me though, the moment I opened the front door wished I hadn’t. Part of me—a small part—wanted to stay with Jay because he was fresh, new and exciting, but I knew I couldn’t. It was just weird that I was feeling something for him after just knowing him tonight. It was stalker-*ish*, wasn’t it?

“Where’s your shirt?” I heard Mum call after me.

My brows shot up as a snort left my nose. “You actually care?”

Ignoring my comment, she asked, “Why do you have blood on you?”

Glancing down at my bared chest, I did in actual fact see small trails of Jay’s blood which had dried in sticky lines on my skin. Shrugging, I ignored her completely and headed to the cupboard where I’d stored all the glasses that had survived through the raid. The kitchen looked completely different after I’d sorted it out and repaired what I could. There was still stuff missing that needed to be replaced, but I just didn’t have the cash or time at the moment.

Mum followed me into the kitchen. Leaning against the doorframe, she chewed on her thumb nail. Strangely, she wasn't itching or out of her face, but that was probably due to the empty draw bag on the table. The more I stared at her though; I could tell she was up to something. I could feel that deep in my bones.

Swallowing the tap water from the glass, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand as my brows popped up, expecting her to say what she obviously wanted to say. When she failed to say anything, I prompted her. "Well?"

She shuffled on her feet and chewed on her bottom lip, eying me warily. "I've been speaking to Giovanni—"

"I don't want to know," I interrupted. I'd had enough of Giovanni already tonight, I didn't need more. Just the thought of his bear-sized hands on my body again made a shiver trickle down my spine. My torn arsehole clenched in reaction—not good.

"Just wait." She moved to grab me, but I shifted to the left out of her reach. "Just listen."

"Don't touch me," I growled and spun around, shooting her my most hateful glare because to be perfectly honest, I felt absolutely fucking nothing for her, and that just about killed me. How fucking sad was it that I didn't feel anything for the woman who created me, carried me for nine whole months then brought me into this world, this horrible fucked-up world?

Absolutely fucking shameful.

"Listen to what?" I lashed out.

Mum swallowed loudly and rubbed the back of her neck, nervously. She began to fidget, so that was my clue it was something I wasn't going to like.

"Well?" I shouted making her jump.

"Giovanni says that if you make—" She rolled her hand towards me, attempting to explain. "If you make what you and he did together a regular thing, I can get my gear from him from now on." When I just stood there in shocked silence, she hurried on. "That means, Rudi, that there'll be no more trouble from other dealers or anything like that. Imagine how good that would be. I wouldn't have to pay for my gear anymore, and you could just work it out with Giovanni. You like him, don't you? I know he likes you," she almost gushed. Her eyes had glazed over a little. I could just see the thoughts going

round and round in her head, the piles of crack in front of her, getting high and comatose every night. “When I go see him, he talks about you all the time. He asks me what you’re doing, who you’re with, all that shit. Sometimes he says that I can get double from him if he has you. Say you’ll think about it, huh?”

My mouth dropped open in pure unadulterated shock. I stood there staring at my mother wondering what the fuck had happened along the line. I wondered for real if I had actually heard her properly or whether my ears were deceiving me. My head dropped to the side, my eyes begging her to be wrong in what I’d just heard. “Say it again. I don’t think I quite understood you.”

“Giovanni says that if you make... If you make what you and he did together a regular thing, I can get my gear from him.”

I did hear right the first time.

I spun around on the spot and gripped my short hair in my fists, pulling on the strands until pain shot through my scalp. I half turned and grazed my eyes up and down her withering, almost anorexic body. Again, for the millionth time I wondered where the fuck we had gone wrong.

When her eyes so much like my own continued to look at me, begging me to understand, a sour, bitter, foul laugh bubbled up my throat and tears burned my eyes as my breath came out in gasped chokes. To stop from bursting into tears like I wanted to, I bit my lip hard enough that I tasted the metal tang of blood floating around in my mouth, coating my tongue with the stuff. I swallowed a pooled amount of hot saliva mixed with the red stuff, feeling it flow over the heavy, intense lump in my throat.

“How could you?” I whispered, trying to gather myself. I would not cry in front of this woman. I would not give her my tears, my fears, my all, that was admittedly, mostly her fault in the first place. No, I wouldn’t do that; I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of that.

“Do what?” she asked completely innocently. It was as if she’d not realised what she’d asked me, wanted me to do, not even five minutes ago.

My tears intensified, burning badly at the back of my eyeballs. But this time anger joined in with every other emotion. Anger, hot blazing anger, coupled itself, twinning with shame, incredulity and damn-right butchered hurt. I marched towards her, my hands clenched at my sides, stopping from wringing her fucking neck.

She backed up against the doorframe, trying to make sure she looked as small as possible. Leaning into her space, I ignored the druggie smell emanating from her pores and breath where she'd sucked the pipe, and whispered, "Do what?" I gritted out, my lip curling much like a dog ready to attack. "You've just told me, your only son, that you practically want to pimp me out and why? Because you want more shit to put up your arms." Her mouth opened to no doubt correct me, but I beat her to it. "I hate you," I said simply, even though my insides were slowly dying because after all, she was my mother, I was part of her and vice versa. "You're a disgrace, and I wish on everything that I am that you weren't my mother."

The night was a bit chilly, making the hairs on my arms stand up on end. I walked from around the corner of Baxter's Drive, fixing my jeans at the same time. I'd just serviced old Morris who was one of my regulars. I saw him at least once a month. He was an old goat who had a severe paunch and rotted teeth, but he was a dear.

Apparently, his long-term bird wouldn't give him some backside, saying that it was immoral and taboo. The way Morris explained it one time a few years ago to me was that he'd experimented as a youngster whilst he was in the Navy with a couple of his buddies. Afterwards, he'd realised he'd liked it, but due to his strict family background, expectations and society in general, his fantasies, wants and needs took a backseat. So, he did the right thing and married his sweetheart, popped her a couple of sprogs and lived life as straight Morris. Only within the last couple of years had he said that he was feeling the need for a manly touch. He didn't want a relationship with a man, didn't actually need the whole shebang, but a little cock and the feel of man hands on his body was enough to satiate that need. So, that's where I came in.

I would meet him much like I had just a few minutes ago. I'd get into his car, he'd drive us to the usual spot around the corner and we'd get it on in his car, with me bent over the reclined passenger seat, my arse perched up high, high enough for him to have a little feel about, then do me one. He then liked for me to reach around to his arse, give it a rough squeeze and pull him into me, as if I needed him pounding into me anymore than he usually did. For an old guy, he certainly had stamina, but he wasn't rough or abusive with it. No, Morris liked it quick and fast, but there was a caring ability that came with him that no matter how much he wanted to go the whole hog, he couldn't. It wasn't in him.

Now, I stuffed my hundred quid in three different pockets and made my way home, shaking off the chill that skipped down the back of my neck.

Opening the bedroom door, I noticed the room was bathed completely in darkness. I tiptoed over to the chest of drawers and pulled out a clean pair of boxers and a T-shirt. After toeing off my boots, I moved over to the bed silently and flicked on the side light. Penguin stirred a little on her side of the bed clutching the little stuffed—once white, now grey—penguin to her chest. She had that damn pink dummy in her mouth again.

I leant down and pressed a kiss to her cheek and inhaled her scent. Something inside me settled deep down. Something deep down knew that someone loved me even if she was only three foot tall.

Grabbing my clean clothing, I closed the bedroom door after me and went to the bathroom across the passage. Opening the door, I immediately noticed there were clothes on the floor—my mother's clothes—that she obviously hadn't been bothered to pick up.

Bending down, I grabbed them all and dumped them in the broken wicker basket in the corner. The washing was piling up; I'd have to do it at the end of the week... again. Sighing, I rubbed my hands up and down my face, feeling tiredness coming on.

Feeling my phone vibrate in my pocket, I pulled it out and saw I had a text message from Jay and smiled. We'd exchanged numbers, but he hadn't contacted me immediately. Admittedly, I was a bit disappointed, but I hadn't wanted to text him because I didn't want to come across as too desperate. I was already having dreams of the guy, and waking up with a steaming boner with my baby sister in the bed was just plain... wrong.

Hi, it's me, Jay. Just wanted to say thanks for the other night & I can't wait till you come over. Maybe we chat until then? Speak later. J x

I quickly typed out a reply and hit send afterwards.

I know it was u, J. U're name came up. No probs with talking, we can do that. Hope U get better. See u next week 4 dinner. Night. R x

Whilst I stripped off my clothing, I leaned into the shower and turned on the shower, yanking my hand back when the intense hot water hit it. The system

would need filling again. Dumping my clothes on top of the very growing pile of washing, I pulled the flimsy pound-shop shower curtain open and stepped into the creaky, yellow-stained enamel bath. My feet slid along the bottom as I moved out of the way of the still too hot spray.

I made a mental note to buy a bath mat when I was out next.

Whilst I waited for the water to cool down a little, I reached over to the shelf and grabbed the strawberry kid's detangling shampoo I'd bought for Penguin. The other shampoo—my shampoo—was gone. Where, I had no clue.

When the stream was cool enough, I stepped under the water and leaned against the wall, letting the fine spray patter against my tired, sore muscles. My hands pushed against the wall, my back arching a little, my feet spreading a tad. I bent over a touch, pushing my backside out, liking the way the hot water felt running down onto my exposed arsehole. I groaned into the wall, my heated breath fanning over the cold tiles.

Rolling my forehead to the side, my eyes slid closed and immediately an image of a smiling Jay popped into my mind. I felt my own smile breach my face. I licked my lips as Jay's smile in my mind changed from welcoming to downright lustful. I could just see him without the blood, swelling and pained look on his face. He was truly and utterly gorgeous; there was no doubt about it.

With his dirty-blond, spiked hair and intense green eyes watching me, goading me silently to do something naughty, I reached down to my cock that was half-hard, the tip pressing against the tiled wall. I grabbed hold of it in my hand and gave it a couple of jiggles, encouraging the blood to flow more freely and quickly.

I groaned when my hard cock pushed out of my hand and landed against the wall with a loud smack. Hissing, I turned and sucked in a lungful of water. Quickly moving from the spray and coughing, I reached for the flannel and gave it a whiff. Eh, it was alright.

Soaping up the off-white coloured flannel, I hastily whipped it around my body so I could get back to the hard need poking out from my body. Once I was squeaky-clean and out of the direct spray, I hefted one leg up onto the side of the tub, my toes gripping the edge as my hand plucked at my hard-pebbled nipples. I stretched the small hard flesh and gave them small little yanks, letting the thrill skip and dance through my body until the warmth of arousal settled into the base of my balls, making them roll and spread in their sack.

I slid my hands down my flat-planed stomach feeling the semi-ridges under my skin. One of my fingers pressed into my bellybutton then glided over my small treasure trail before arriving at my swollen and pulsing cock, giving the extra skin a small tug. My fingers circled my cock, giving it a squeeze, feeling, sizing up my girth. I was nice and pretty thick and uncut. I looked down at my foreskin, watching as it pulled from the base of my dick all the way to the end where it rolled over the swollen head, covering my piss slit before pulling it back. The skin slipped back over the head, gathering just underneath it.

Pushing my hand further down the length, I hissed when it scraped over the tip, collecting the dribbled sap that had escaped. I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth, biting on the flesh as I gathered the sticky pre-cum in my hand and lifted it to my mouth, spitting into my cupped palm making sure I had plenty of lube.

My head dropped back on my shoulders and my eyes closed, a moan leaving my mouth, coming up from my throat. I was sure I heard Jay's voice in my ear, goading me on, telling me to rub my hands up and down my shaft, to feel the skin ripple and pull against my cock, tug on it until more clear liquid dribbled from the end.

Loosening my hold on my cock, I let my fingers trail over my smooth, velvety skin, feeling the slight veins underneath the length, pumping wildly, ensuring the red stuff built up enough to make me hard.

With my other hand, I reached down past my cock and squeezed my tight balls, giving them a gentle tug, pulling them away from my body, loving the little hint of pain that mixed with pleasure. Another moan escaped my throat, making my arsehole clench when I pulled on my nuts, at the same time I rounded my palm over the head of my throbbing cock, rubbing the sensitive plum. I hissed as I slid my hand underneath the tip, where my fingers played with the thin piece of skin and nerves that resided there.

Images, more of them, tonnes of them filtered through my mind: Jay smiling wider revealing his crooked front tooth, his eyes twinkling with mirth and naughtiness and his body radiating absolute lust and horniness. At that, my feet bounced and fidgeted in the bath, my body sailing up and down onto the tips of my toes only to drift back down again. I sighed and bit my bottom lip when I felt the tingles start in my toes and work their way up my body.

Grunting, I bent over and held onto the side of the sink with one hand whilst I leaned into the side of the bath, my knee pushing into my side as my saliva-

and sap-covered hand moved faster, my hips pushing and thrusting hard into my palm, searching for more friction. My balls bounced and rolled in their warmed, hairless sack and pulled even tighter to my body, warning me that I was nearing release. I glanced down at my cock that was hard as nails and an angry red-purple colour. My foreskin, which rolled back and forth over the head, was a slight pink that made a different contrast against one another. I watched, fascinated, as a long dribble of pre-cum seeped from my piss slit and hung down, catching on the side of the bath before hitting the floor, breaking the line.

I could feel the fingers of arousal grabbing at the base of my balls, my muscles in my legs and back, along the front of my stomach and then down to my groin. Tightening surrounded the base of my cock just like a hand... Jay's hand.

That just about did me in. My mouth dropped open as an endless sigh left my lips and my eyeballs rolled. Squeezing my eyes closed to stop the dizzying feeling I could feel coming over me, I fisted harder, faster with urgency, wanting so badly to call out his name, have his name on my lips. Better yet, to have his taste coat my lips and fill them with his own personal flavour. I wanted to suck his thick lips into my mouth, bite them then lick up the sting at the same time; I wanted to taste his tongue. To know what he really tasted like. I wanted to suck on his neck and bury my head in his shoulder, smelling his true scent.

When I felt the telltale signs that I was ready to shoot my load, I snapped my mouth closed and bit my lip, at the same time I felt my legs contract and shake, my arse clench and my hole flutter.

"Uhn," burst from my throat as my heart pounded deep in my chest beating an intense rhythm. Little hitches of breathy, puffy air pushed from between my closed lips. I lifted myself up onto my toes, clenching my calf muscles tight as the first gush of cum shot hard and fast from the tip of my cock, splashing against the side of the bath.

Jerking my cock harder in my fist, I squeezed the intense hardness and aimed it upwards. My eyelids became heavy as I glanced down, watching my cock as it bolted string after string of white and clear liquid in a fountain flush, making it dance in front of me before dripping down off the end of my fisted fingers and falling onto the floor with heavy splats.

With the last image of a smiling Jay leaving my mind along with his voice, my cock spurted its last bubble of cum. Relief and completion settled deep in

my body. With my heart pounding out a breath-taking rhythm, I turned back to the shower and leaned my shoulder against the wall. I was worried that if the wall hadn't have been there, I would have collapsed into the bath with pure exhaustion.

Never once had I come so much with just the thought of a person... and that person be a person that I'd known for not even a day. Not even twenty-four hours of knowing each other, and I was already invested. Why? I had no freaking clue.

Did it scare me? Sure.

Did I feel something for Jay even after only knowing him such a short time? Yep.

Did I want to explore it? Hmmm, that was a good question.

Was I in trouble? Definitely.

Glancing down at my now decreasing, half-hard cock, the final dribble of cloudy liquid fell from the tip. I reached down and caught the drip, and then rolled it around between my fingers. I brought it halfway to my mouth, wondering if I could just taste it and maybe from that I could savour something of Jay, but the memories came back then and... No.

Sighing, I moved back to the other end of the bath and stood under the spray, letting the water wash away my evidence and hopefully the bad memories.

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Chapter Seven

I ran my hands through my hair, dislodging all of my precisely twisted little spikes for what felt like the millionth time tonight. I was so bloody nervous, it wasn't even funny. I looked down at my hands and saw they were shaking like crazy. I clenched them together, telling myself over and over again to calm the fuck down before I did something stupid like fainting or something.

The days had seemed to go real quick, until today that is. For nearly two weeks, I'd worried and sweated my bollocks off wondering how the hell I could possibly get out of going to Jay's for dinner. I'd dialled his number hundreds of times with my thumb hovering over the little, green button, but for some reason, I just couldn't press it. I'd typed out the messages, my finger again hovering over the send button but I hadn't been able to do it.

Now though, I stood across the street from his house in the pricey, expensive neighbourhood, watching the people move around inside. I could see his big built dad in the living room, sitting watching the TV, Monica whizzing around the kitchen and Jay was whipping from room to room doing... whatever. I could tell they were expecting me though because if I stepped to the side, I could see a dining room that was to the east wall. The table had been set for four places.

Sighing, I ran my hands through my hair one more time and blew out a long breath as I moved across the road. My head darted from side to side, checking for what I had no clue. I did catch an old woman watching me from one of the houses across the street. I snorted; she was probably watching, waiting for me to either do some damage to something or nick something. She probably had her mobile phone at the ready.

Rolling my eyes, I reached the fence post outside Jay's house and positioned my bike alongside it. Bending down, I unlocked the chain from my bike and fastened it around the post and a couple of my spokes, locking it into place with a small snick. Giving it a small tug, I tested the strength and give, then nodded to myself.

“Hey.”

I jumped six foot in the air at the sound of Jay's voice, nearly falling on my arse.

Where the hell did he come from?

Glaring at him, I fumbled a little as I got up and rubbed my sweaty hands up and down the front of my best jeans. “Did you have to do that?” I snapped, feeling ridiculously nervous and embarrassed all of a sudden.

Jay’s mouth opened and closed before his brows pulled together. “Do what?”

“Nothing.” I waved my hand and cleared my suddenly dry throat. Pocketing my keys, I watched Jay from under my lashes. He was gorgeous in his beige chinos and white T-shirt that fit him just right. In fact, he looked perfect, well, perfect to me that is.

Christ, I wasn’t normally this nervous. Tutti Fruitti Rudi, street Rudi, was never nervous. Grown men paying for a body for the night didn’t want nerves; they wanted a willing male with an even more willing hole.

But tonight, I wasn’t Tutti Fruitti Rudi, I was just Rudi.

Taking a deep breath, I said with a smile, “Can we start again?”

Jay nodded quickly, seeming to like that idea. “Hi,” he said quietly, his voice no more than a whisper.

“Hi.” I moved towards him and inhaled his scent as I stopped in front of him. Freshness and something sporty assaulted my senses, making my body tingle, my cock jerk in my tight jeans.

“I hope you’re hungry; Monica’s cooked up a storm.”

A little whimpering sound may have escaped my mouth. No, I wasn’t particularly hungry, I was anything but. I was too frigging nervous to eat a thing. I’d never done this before, never been to anyone else’s house for dinner before. What did people actually do when that happened? Did you have to bring anything?

At that thought, I looked down at my hands and saw them empty. Glancing up at Jay, I felt a deep blush blooming across my face, burning the tips of my ears. Clearing my throat, I said, “I didn’t bring anything.”

Jay’s dark-blond brows shot up in confusion. “Bring what?”

Shuffling on my feet, I shrugged. “Aren’t you supposed to bring something to dinner when you’re invited?”

The laugh that left Jay’s throat made my hackles stand up on end a little. I didn’t like the piss being taken out of me. I may not have had much to my

name, but I had some dignity and pride, well a little of each at least. My semi-boner disappeared and all my tingles extinguished.

“Hey.” Jay grabbed my hand and began to pull me up the path, letting the gate close behind us with a hard click. “I didn’t mean anything by it. You didn’t need to bring anything, we’ve got enough.”

A little snorted laugh left me then. “Well, that’s alright then.” Damn, that was a relief.

“Good.” Jay nodded, seemingly nervous now. He stopped us outside the front door that was open just a tad. “I just wanted to say before we went in that I’m... I... just... thanks for what you did in the park and all that and well... thanks for coming tonight, you know?”

Ah, he was nervous just like me. It was nice to know that I wasn’t in the nervous club alone.

Adjusting my hand a little, I let my fingers curl around his, feeling little calluses that marred his hands. “You’re welcome.” I smiled and scanned his nearly healed face. He still had bruising under his eyes, but it was more yellowy-green than the reddish-purple it was when I found him. “Your face looks a lot better.”

Jay smiled shyly and tilted his head to the side. “Monica’s been a big help, she hasn’t let me do anything this week. I’ve been on bed rest. That means no work, no gaming, and no going out. I also haven’t been... Well you know.” A dark blush stained his face. Yeah, I could guess what he meant.

“Man.” I shook my head and smiled full out despite the butterflies creating torpedoes in my stomach. “That must be a hardship.”

“Well.” He laughed, took his hand back and jammed it into the front pocket of his beige chinos that looked very nice on his lean, thinly muscled body. “Yeah, it is a hardship... because...”

I assumed because he trailed off, he wanted to say something but didn’t think it appropriate. When silence reigned between us, and to save us standing there like a pair of lemons, I cleared my throat again and pointed to the door. “Can I ask you a question?”

Jay looked relieved to say the least. “Yeah.”

Scratching the back of my head, I bit my lip a little, nibbling on the flesh. “Do you sit at the table and eat?” That thought had been bugging the shit out of me all week long.

Obviously, Jay wasn't expecting that question because his brows popped up comically, and it took him a couple more seconds after that to answer. "Well, yeah. Why?"

Well didn't that just suck?

"See the thing is—" I hesitated and eyed Jay, wondering if he was one of those people who looked down at the poor people in society. Whether he classed himself above working class? He lived in a really nice neighbourhood of Southend, actually one of the best. I, however, lived in the pits. It was the low class, the let-down part of Southend, the part that never featured on the adverts for one of the best beaches to come to, the best place to bring the family for a day out at the arcades or to the adventure park along the seafront. My part was the benefit sector, the hand-me-down-and-take-what-you-can-get part of the sparkly Essex town.

"What's the matter, Rudi?"

My eyes snapped up to Jay's. It was only then that I realised I'd been off on my glider again. I shook my head. "Uh, right, yeah. Anyway, I was saying that, I don't eat at the table. Do you ever eat watching TV?"

"Please." He snorted. "My dad's all big for family. I can't actually remember a time when we haven't had dinner at the table."

My shoulders slumped in defeat. "What if I make a fool of myself?"

Jay's hand slithered around my shoulder and gave me a sideways squeeze. "The only way you could make a fool of yourself was if you slobbered like a pup or something like that."

Beginning to feel a headache coming on, I rubbed my temples. "What if..."

Jay rolled his eyes and gave my shoulder a squeeze, indirectly brushing his own body against mine. Damn, I liked that a bit too much. "Will you just stop and relax? I swear you're more wound up than a cat on a hot tin roof."

"It's just—" I sighed and chewed on the inside of my lip. "I don't do parents. I don't do family and I don't do dinner, well not like this. All this," I waved my hands around as I struggled to explain, "this is not me. It makes me itchy as hell."

"I could be the soothing balm to your itch," he offered with a little brow waggle and a cheeky smile.

Yeah, I'd bet his balm felt real good. Fuck, I bet his balm tasted just as good, if not better.

“I said parents, not you.”

Jay's chest moved up and down as he took a deep inhale. His green eyes darkened a little and closed an inch. “That settles that. Anyway, we'll just go with you slobbering, huh?”

Whether I wanted to or not, I smiled. “I don't slobber but... what if your mum and dad ask me to pass the salt?”

Jay's plump lips twitched in an effort not to laugh at me. “Then you pass the fucking salt.”

“Do you like shepherd's pie, Rudi?” Monica asked as she set down even more dishes on the table. The whole freaking wooden surface was filled with brightly coloured plates, dishes and pots. How the hell they managed to eat like this every night was beyond me. I'd never seen so much food in one place—other than a party that is, and this definitely wasn't that. I felt like my eyes were gonna pop out of my head for Christ's sake.

I shifted a little in my seat and glanced sideways at Jay who had his elbows on the edge of the table, his chin rested on his fist—and he was staring right at me. “Yeah, I do.”

Baloo, Jay's dog, which was a giant black and tan Great Dane, slumped on the floor next to me, his nose twitching as his eyes kept flicking from Monica to the table. He was probably waiting for her to leave the room for more than a couple of minutes before he lunged at the table and polished the lot off.

Jay's dad, David, walked into the room, a cold beer in his hand. The T-shirt he had on stretched over his overly wide chest. The smile he had for Monica made me wish I was somewhere else right at that moment. Damn, that was not for public consumption. The moment his eyes slid to mine, a sneer built on his lips and his own eyes narrowed on me. It was official, that man did not like me one bit.

“Rudi,” he acknowledged with a curt nod.

“David.” I blinked at him innocently.

Yup, the sneer stayed in place.

“Stop it,” Monica snapped and sat down to the left of David and directly across from me. She smiled brightly, her blue eyes twinkling. “It's nice to have you over, Rudi.”

Jay groaned next to me. "Please don't start."

"It's nice to be invited, Monica. Thank you."

She hushed Jay with a wave of her hand and glanced back at me. "Oh, it's no biggie. After what you did for our Jay, you're welcome anytime," she gushed and handed a big spoon to David who rolled his eyes and stood up to start serving the shepherd's pie from the roast tin. Once we all had a big splat of pie on our plates, we passed around the other dishes. By the time I put the last one down, my plate was overflowing.

Jay leaned over and whispered in my ear, "You don't have to eat it all."

I couldn't even if I tried. My body wasn't made for food like this. "I'm that obvious, huh?"

He snickered and started eating. "A little."

"Rudi, honey," Monica shuffled the gravy boat a little, "can you pass the salt?"

My eyes went wide and a choked laugh caught in my throat. If I'd have had a mouthful of food, it would have sprayed across the table. I zipped my eyes to Jay and found his eyes just as wide and comical, his lips rolled together to stop from laughing. He dropped his fork on his plate with a heavy clatter. He couldn't hold it for long before a high-pitched laugh burst from his throat. I just couldn't help it. The more I tried to hold my laugh inside, the more it wanted to come free. Seconds later and with watery eyes, giggles erupted from my mouth. We both fell into each other and laughed like crazies. I turned away from him when I couldn't look at his face anymore and nearly fell off my chair. Actually, I did. My hand shot out to grab the table, but I missed it. I slipped right off the edge of the freaking chair and hit the floor with a dull thud. Baloo let out a yelp and quickly shuffled out of the way. When I remained on the floor, the dog trotted back over to me and began to wag his stubby tail, thinking it was playtime. The dog pounced when I held my hands up and started licking my face to death, leaving trails of slobber coating my face. That set Jay off even more. He bent over my chair so his head was hanging off the edge. A thin line of drool dripped from his mouth as he struggled to breathe.

From what I could see of him, damn, he looked fuckable and cute.

"Stop," I gasped and pushed at the big dog to get the hell off me. Shit, he weighed a tonne. Leaning past Baloo, I playfully slapped at Jay's head. "Move."

“Can’t,” he panted and slumped onto the wood even more, his chest shaking with intense laughter.

Monica’s head appeared around the edge of the table, a bright smile on her face. “Are you two okay?”

I blew out a long breath and wiped at my eyes with my hands then plucked a napkin from the table and washed the dog slobber off my face. Pushing up from the floor, I shook out my legs, straightening my jeans and T-shirt up before nudging Jay to move over. He calmed a little, well enough to also wipe his eyes and sit up straight. I told Baloo to move away with a sweep of my foot. I’d give the dog a sausage or something later on when no one was watching.

“When you two are finished,” Jay’s dad said. His voice was hard and stern. He was not amused. His eyes burned into both me and Jay, burned enough to immediately snap us out of our laughing fit. We both cleared out throats and settled back into our chairs.

“Sorry, Dad,” Jay mumbled. Me, I said nothing. I had a feeling I should have apologised, but there was something in David’s eyes that unsettled me. I didn’t know if it was a judgement that he’d already made of me or dislike, but it was something and not a good something either. Part of me though, rebelled against him whilst the other part of me silently respected the man for being a dad to Jay, a dad he obviously had a lot of love for and his own bout of respect for.

Silence filled the room as we ate. I got a quarter of the way through mine before I had to stop. For as long as I could remember, I’d never eaten as well. I looked down at my plate and wondered whether it would be rude to ask if I could take the rest home. Penguin would thrive on eating good, wholesome food like this. Deciding that would be a good idea, I set what was left on my plate into a neat pile and pushed it aside.

David cleared his throat across the table from me and took a sip of his beer. “So, Rudi,” he smiled even though it looked mean as hell, “how old are you?”

“Dad,” Jay interrupted.

“No.” I placed my hand on his arm, giving it a little squeeze. “It’s okay.” I looked back up at David and caught his eyes narrow and his teeth grind at where my hand rested on Jay’s arm. I snatched it back and settled it in my lap instead. “I’m twenty years old.”

David nodded and sipped more of his beer. “What do you do for work?”

I swallowed nervously. I knew this would come up eventually. I shifted in my seat a little first. "I work part-time at the barber's." It wasn't a lie but it wasn't the truth either. There was no way in hell I was gonna tell them the whole truth. They'd kick me out on my arse in a second, and that would be after they'd all let me know how much of a dirty bahookie I was.

"Part-time only?" He frowned. "You don't work full-time? Why not?"

My mouth opened and closed. I wondered whether I should let it slip about Penguin, but by the expectant looks on all their faces, I decided against it. Instead, I said, "Yeah, only part-time. I have to take care of my mum the other times."

Monica's face changed from brightly smiling to one of sympathy. She reached across the table and grabbed my hand, giving it a little squeeze. "That must be difficult."

She had no idea.

I nodded and moved my hand away. I was uncomfortable with how touchy-feely these people were. In my world, people weren't like this.

David's fingers idly skimmed his beer bottle. I knew he wanted to ask me more, probably a shitload more questions, but he kept his mouth shut. For that, I was immensely relieved. I had a feeling that if David Bruins wanted to know something, he'd get to the bottom of it.

"Okay." Monica stood up from the table and began to gather plates. "Time for dessert."

"Let us do that," David quickly offered.

Taking his lead, both me and Jay jumped up and grabbed plates, taking them to the kitchen. Whilst Jay scraped, I loaded the dishwasher. "Thanks," Jay whispered as he came up beside me, loading the cutlery into the little pots.

"Why are you thanking me?" I asked, whispering back, knowing full well Monica was over the other side humming to herself as she prepared another load of plates.

"My dad can be pretty intrusive and come across as domineering." He shrugged. "I know he can be overbearing, too, but he's only looking out for me."

"I understand." I stood up and eyed the single plate that was left. Jay reached for it but I stopped him with a hand on his arm. How the hell was I supposed to say I wanted to take it home for Penguin?

Monica saved me. She moved to the fridge, eyeing the plate at the same time. Her intelligent, blue eyes flicked between me and the food and back again. “You want me to save that for you, Rudi?”

A sigh of relief left me then. “Please.”

She patted my shoulder. “No worries.”

I waited till Jay was finished with the cutlery to close the dishwasher door. After I did that, I stood dumbfounded; I didn't know what to do next. I moved out of the way for Jay to take over.

Jay took my hand and pulled me out into the hallway. I quickly looked around to make sure we were alone because he obviously wanted to say something to me. Under the wall lights, his hair appeared almost golden. I felt the needy urge to run my hands through it, just to feel how soft it really was. His green eyes glowed too, showing off the real, deep colouring. He really was gorgeous and seriously lickable and definitely fuckable.

“What's up?” I asked when we both continued to stare at each other. Damn, he had the strength to make me feel like a silly teenager all over again. Usually, I had confidence that bounded out of me, but with him, it just seemed to sail completely out of the window, leaving me feeling abandoned in the big, deep blue sea.

His mouth opened and closed a few times before he moved on closer to me so our bodies were just mere inches apart. Being this close though, I could smell his aftershave and his fresh smell that did things to my body. Taking a deep breath, he licked his bottom lip slowly as he shifted from one foot to the other. “I like you, Rudi.”

Well shit. I wasn't expecting him to just come out and say it.

Smiling a little, I moved on closer to him, filling the gap so the front of our bodies touched, and because I just couldn't help it, I gently ran my hands through his hair, feeling the softness wisp over my fingers. I closed my eyes and scratched my nails subtly along the top of his scalp. Images assaulted my mind, images of my hands running through Jay's hair as he went down on me, sucking me into his throat.

My eyes popped open when I heard a needy moan. Looking directly into bright, green eyes, I leaned in even further, feeling my heart kick up, and my cock starting to harden behind the zipper of my jeans. My eyes flicked between his green ones and his oh-so-tempting lips that so needed a good lick and a bite.

If I could just...

We were centimetres apart when a throat cleared behind us. Like guilty kids getting caught doing something they shouldn't, we jumped apart and looked towards Monica who stood at the kitchen door with her hands on her hips. Her rosy cheeks and embarrassed smile gave her away that she'd been there a while.

“You're both missing dessert.”

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Chapter Eight

“Let me show you around.” Jay grasped my hand in his. He seemed to like doing that a lot. I looked down at our joined hands as he pulled me out of the dining room, down the hall and to the stairs, which we climbed, Baloo following behind us. The contrast of our skin colours was breath-taking to look at. My hands were almost female-looking whilst Jay’s, were rough and had calloused little points all over them where he’d worked for a living. With Jay being a blond too, his skin was naturally lighter than mine. Yes, he had a suntan, but he was still relatively pale compared to my olive-toned skin.

“This is Monica and Dad’s room,” Jay said offhandedly as we passed a closed, dark wooden door at the top of the stairs.

Pulling Jay to a stop outside another closed door, I made him turn to face me. “You don’t call Monica mum?”

Jay smiled and shook his head. “Nah, she’s not my mum.”

“She’s not?”

“No.” He carried on until we came to a lighter wooden door that was on the jar. He pushed it all the way open and switched the light on. “This is my room.” He walked inside and splayed his arms wide, a big grin on his face.

I moved inside slowly, my eyes darting over his bare, pale-blue painted walls to the big double bed with black headboard and frame, to the unpacked boxes stacked by the windows. “You haven’t unpacked yet?”

A blush stole over the cute guy’s face. Jay backed up until he slumped down onto his bed and patted the space next to him. I moved over and sat down too. “I’ll be honest with you,” Jay said. “When Dad told me we were moving, I was kind of hoping that I would move with him to Southend then kind of move into my own place, not actually *in with him*.”

“Why didn’t you then?”

Baloo jumped up on the bed wobbling the both of us. “No, Baloo.” Jay clicked his fingers and pointed to the floor. “You know better.” When the dog jumped down and settled at our feet, he carried on. “Because I don’t have enough savings saved up. I have about seventy percent of the whole amount I need from the work I’ve done for the last couple of years with Dad, but renting in Southend is just as bad as London—or so I hear.”

Again, just like the car business and him having a dad, a shard of jealousy pushed through my body making me shift uncomfortably on the bed. I wondered just for a split second what it would be like to have my own place, where I could actually go to bed without a little three-foot munchkin burrowing into my side and waking me up in the morning with her small, little snores. But then, reality slammed me back down to earth again with a great big splat. That was never going to happen. One, I didn't have the money or availability like that, and two, I didn't have the support network Jay clearly had.

Heavy, thick jealousy squirmed its way through my body even more. It burned like a bitch and even turned the warming food over in my stomach this time. I jumped up from the bed and moved quickly to the door. I threw it open and began down the hall to the stairs.

"Hey," Jay shouted and raced after me. He grabbed onto my arm and yanked me backwards to face him. "What the hell, Rudi?"

From the corner of my eye—because I couldn't look directly in his face without feeling the green-eyed monster taking over, making me angry—I glanced at him for a second and saw the confusion and slight hurt in his green depths. "I'm sorry," I whispered and snatched my arm away.

Our feet thumped down the hardwood stairs, making enough racket that David and Monica appeared with worried frowns on their faces. "What's the matter? It sounded like a herd of bloody elephants were trampling down the stairs," Monica said as she dried her hands on a tea towel, which lay over one of her shoulders.

"Nothing," I quickly shook my head and reached for the tubs of food that Monica had prepared for me earlier on that I'd left by the stairs. I stopped in front of Jay's parents and held out my hand, begging it silently in my mind to hold steady. "Thank you for the invitation into your home and the food."

David looked down at my hand then back up at Jay who stood silently on the stairs. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Nothing," I repeated.

"I don't know," Jay answered at the same time.

Monica opened her mouth then closed it again. She did this about three times before sighing heavily and patting David on his shoulder. "Drop Rudi home, David."

"But—" he sputtered.

“Now.” There was no messing with that tone.

The big man sighed with frustration and grabbed his keys from the hall table. He then opened the front door without a word and walked out. Obviously, he expected me to follow.

“Rudi, please stop.” Jay’s dejected, hurt voice made me stop in my tracks. I wanted to turn around I really did, but I couldn’t. With my hand on the doorknob, I dropped my head and let out a little breath. “Please, Rudi.”

Swallowing hard, I squeezed my eyes shut and said, “I’ll call you, Jay.”

Ignoring his protests, I slammed the door after me and walked down the path to where my bike was locked up. Digging through my pockets for keys, I shuffled the tubs, nearly dropping them, until I realised that my hands were shaking too much to hold them and unlock my bike at the same time. I set them on the ground and knelt down onto my knees and let my head hang. I could feel a nasty as hell headache coming on.

I couldn’t believe what I’d just done.

“Don’t bother with that, boy.” David’s deep voice boomed from behind me. Turning quickly on my knees, I glanced over at the truck idling in the drive. David waved the hand that hung out of the window towards the back. “Throw the bike in the bed and get your fucking arse in my truck.”

I gritted my teeth and narrowed my eyes at him. “I don’t need a lift home.” I left off the “thanks” at the end. I’d cycled the five odd miles here; I could do that home too.

“Boy,” he warned and tapped his hand against the side of the door. His ring dinged against the metal.

I wasn’t *his* boy, so therefore I didn’t have to listen to anything he said.

Ignoring him, I unlocked my bike and grabbed the tubs up in my arms, holding them in a bunch under one arm whilst I began to steer the bike with the other. Okay, it was hard as hell to concentrate and ride at the same time with my head banging and all thoughts of Jay raging through it, but I did it until a big silver truck pulled up beside me.

“You’re one stubborn little shit, you know that?” David hissed.

“I told you,” I snapped and just managed to dodge a lamppost that suddenly popped out of nowhere. “I don’t need a lift home.”

Then just my luck, the heavens started to open up. Big fat drops of water fell over me, drowning me in seconds. The green and white stretch T-shirt I'd worn was now see-through and my jeans were stuck to my legs making it hard to peddle. The rain was so heavy, I could barely see in front of me.

“See.” I could hear the smile in Jay's dad's voice. “Someone up there agrees with me.”

Stopping the bike, I huffed and sent a glare to the man that disliked me with something fierce, plus I didn't feel too dizzy about him myself. “Will you shut up if I get in?”

“No, not particularly.”

Well at least he was honest; you had to give him that!

Huffing again, I gave up. Walking over to the truck, I shoved the tubs at David through the window and walked my bike to the back of the truck, lifted it up and settled it slowly into the bed then ran around to the passenger side and lifted myself up into the seat, slamming the door closed after me.

“See,” David crowed and shoved the tubs back at me. “If you'd have done that in the beginning, you wouldn't be a drowned rat right about now.” He reached into the back seat and grabbed a clean cream-coloured towel and shoved it at me with a grunt.

“I was fine without your help.”

David snorted in disagreement but said nothing else. When we reached town, he asked for directions. I told him to stop a street before my own. Turning to open the door, he grabbed my wrist in a firm grip, making me turn back to look at him.

“I understand, you know,” he said. Now his voice was completely different. His eyes, so much like Jay's, were sincere, I could tell that at least.

My brows drew together as I let my hand fall from the door back to my lap. “You understand what, exactly?”

“You and what you're doing.”

A snort left me then. “I don't think so.”

No one understood. No one ever took the time to understand how complicated, how unfair my life actually was. No, I wasn't dramatic about it. Hell, I didn't need to be. I didn't need people feeling sorry for me, pitying me. I needed nothing, nothing from no one.

“I understand more than you know,” he said with utter conviction.

That just seemed to wind me up even more. I snapped my head towards him, feeling my blood pressure beginning to build along with the coil in my stomach beginning to tighten. “You understand fuck all. People like you have your own life, your own business, your own perfect little family. You people,” I sneered, “don’t give a fuck about people like me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he shouted in my face. “I was you once upon a time. That’s why I can see it.” He rubbed an agitated hand across his shaved head. “I saw it the moment I laid my eyes on you. I’ve been where you are, and I know it’s not a nice place to be, Rudi.”

“Whatever.”

“Don’t even go there,” he growled, his hand tightening on the steering wheel at the same time. “Don’t go there with me; the attitude doesn’t become you, Rudi.”

“Again,” I repeated, “you don’t know anything. You think you know, but you don’t.” I reached for the door and my tubs and pushed the heavy thing open. Sliding off the seat, I landed on the ground—in the middle of a great big bloody puddle that came up over my anklebones. With a groan because my boots were acting like sponges and soaking the water up, I turned to slam the door as I muttered a “thank you”.

With my bike in my hand, the tubs back under my arm and very wet feet, I watched—with a heavy head, a thickly beating heart and a coil in my stomach so strong, it burned like a bitch—David slowly drive away. I watched until his little red lights disappeared from sight before turning around and walking my bike towards home.

“Rudi, come sweep over here,” Barry instructed as he moved to the other black leather seat. I’d already prepped the old guy who sat waiting for Barry to shave him with a cutthroat. The old, worn leather pouch was waiting on the counter, along with his old-fashioned shaving foam, a bowl of warm water and clean, fresh-scented towels.

Moving to do as Barry asked, I grabbed the multi-coloured broom from where it leaned against the wall and began to sweep around the first leather bucket chair he’d used just minutes before. I swirled the brush this way and that way, collecting all the loose hair and gathered it in a pile. As I bent down to

pick up the dustpan and brush, I felt my phone vibrate in my front pocket. It had been like that all morning.

All morning, I'd watched nothing but Jay's name flicker across my phone. I knew why he was calling, and I felt ridiculously awful about it. He was calling to apologise, leaving apologetic text messages for something that wasn't even his bloody fault. It was my own stupid, completely arrogant fault. I knew the polite thing to do was answer the poor guy, put him out of his misery, but I couldn't for some reason.

The main reason was because sorry—the word and the meaning—didn't come very easy to me. The second main reason that was pretty close to the first, was that my balls weren't feeling particularly big today and there was only one person to blame for that.

Giovanni.

Giovanni and Jay didn't belong in the same sentence let alone the same set of thoughts.

My second set of repayment was due tonight, and I could honestly say that I was not looking forward to it. I'd already suffered with an upset stomach for most of last night and the shits due to nervousness. His words from the last time he'd taken me roughly against his kitchen counter kept going over and over in my mind, never letting it settle for more than a minute. All I could see were the old times of me on my knees with his thick cock jutting down my throat, taking my breath away, threatening to choke me...

“Rudi,” Barry barked making me jump.

I whipped around, knocking my shoulder into the leather bucket chair's arm. I grimaced when a dull pain shot through it. Rubbing and flexing my arm, I looked up at Barry who was watching me with plain concern written on his aged, ragged face. “You okay, kid?”

Plastering the fakest smile on my face, I shrugged my shoulders and feigned indifference. I even managed to get a cheeky wink in there too for good measure. “I'm fine, Baz. No worries here.”

His old, wise eyes narrowed on me before he sighed and shook his head. He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a handful of change and motioned me over. “Take this,” he mumbled and stuffed the money into my palm. “Go buy us some food with it.”

“But—”

“Save it,” he snapped. “Ever since you came in here this morning, you’ve been worth shit. Get out, get some food into that body of yours and come back with a better head on your bloody shoulders.”

I wanted to argue with him but deep down, I knew he was right and that just made me feel even more like shit. Shuffling my feet, I grabbed the broom, settling it against the wall by the door and headed outside. The sunshine was bright, well too bright for my sleep-deprived eyes. I slipped the sunglasses down from the top of my head and made my way down to the cafe that made the best hot drinks ever in Southend. I didn’t need food; I needed a good old-fashioned cup of tea. Maybe that would settle my stomach a little?

Opening the door to the cafe, I stopped and inhaled long and deep. I let out a little sigh at the smell that reverberated through me. There was nothing better than smelling a cafe with freshly cooked bacon sandwiches and coffee brewing.

I made my way past the tables, turning to the side here and there until I stopped at the counter and waited in line behind an older woman who had a fussy toddler with her who wanted everything then nothing at all.

Even though I felt like shit, a small smile tickled up on my face. Penguin was exactly the same. When I’d take her out to the shop with me, she’d run to all the sweet jars and buckets and start picking this up and that up, then when I’d ask her what she wanted, she’d say, “Nothing.”

Kids, they were so indecisive.

I stepped up to the counter when she moved out of the way and smiled at the resident waitress, cook and all round do-everything-woman, Lou. She ran the place along with her husband who worked in the back and their daughter, Lacey, who ran around like a busy bee all day.

“Hey, stranger,” she smiled back at me and leaned across the counter to pat my hand once before turning to make my tea, a take-away coffee for Barry and two bacon sandwiches—one with brown sauce and another with red sauce and pepper. Not once did she ask for my order, that’s how well she knew me, but I should have told her I didn’t want my sandwich at least.

“Hey, Lou, how’s it going?”

She set the first polystyrene cup on the counter and shrugged. “A little slow. Tourist season is coming up so things should pick up. Though, I have noticed a couple of builders who look mighty fine coming in for their breakfast every morning.” She leaned in again when she set Barry’s coffee down. “I think one

or a couple of them have the hots for Lacey. I tell you,” she shook her head even though she had a sparkle in her eyes, “those men, their eyes follow her little tush around this place like she was made of gold or something.”

I pursed my lips and nodded. “Lacey is beautiful.” I didn’t do birds and I didn’t do fanny but that didn’t mean I couldn’t appreciate the feminine form.

Lou agreed. “That she is. Oh look.” She glanced at something over my shoulder. “Here they come for their lunch now.”

With my brows pulled together, I looked over my shoulder and sucked in a breath when I saw a bunch of really hot guys—actually fucking hot guys—covered in dust from head-to-foot enter the cafe. Their very nice, much pumped muscles were practically breaking through the holes in their T-shirts and trousers. However, the man that drew my attention the most because he was not only the most gorgeous of them all, but because he was the smallest—was Jay. He was laughing at something one of the bigger guys said to him. His smile looked so good, his lips spread around the shape of his teeth, the small crinkles at the sides of his eyes and—oh God, the colour of his eyes when mirth joined them was just intoxicating.

Needing to take a breath, I did and licked my lips at the same time my eyes drifted down to his T-shirt that was ripped in at least three different places and stretched across his thinly muscled chest. I went down further to his tracksuit bottoms, which showed off a nice package that wobbled and swung a little when he moved. I followed that down to his steel toe-capped booted feet. Even though he was filthy and the clothes so needed to be thrown in the bin, he looked sexy as f’ing hell.

A throat clearing drew my attention back to the counter where Lou stood with a raised brow and a smirk playing at her lips. “See something you like?”

Instead of answering her nosy question, I leaned in and asked, “They the builders you were talking about?”

“Sure are.” She nodded in their direction. “There’s more in the morning. Those five though are regular as clockwork. Which one has got your pick?”

“No one,” I mumbled as I dug around in my pocket for money and handed the correct amount over. Dumping the rest back in my trousers, I picked up my selection and headed for the door.

My mind screamed at me to just look over at him one more time, take his smile and keep it deep in my memory until I had the balls enough to talk to

him... but I couldn't. Guilt—even more guilt than I had already—would eat me alive.

No, I'd deal with Jay after I'd dealt with Giovanni.

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Chapter Nine

I stood across from Giovanni's house listening to the roars and heavy, drug-filled laughter and crude comments coming from the men inside. They were in the back garden no doubt drinking and shooting the night away awaiting their entertainment... me. Part of me was fuming because even though Giovanni had said he'd wanted my mouth, what he hadn't said was that there was going to be company.

My eyes squeezed closed when I remembered the last time he'd made me do something with other men present... no, I couldn't even let my mind open that memory up. I knew if I did, I'd be seeing it for days whether my eyes were closed or not.

Rubbing the goose bumps that had just popped up on my arms, I shifted from one foot to another, debating about what to do. I knew if I went in there, I would never be the same again, but I also knew that if I didn't, Giovanni would hunt me down and make me pay.

The question, and it was a very difficult one, was did I go or didn't I?

Whilst debating, I kept to the shadows of the bushes and paced back and forth. Occasionally, I let my eyes fall back to the house, watching for movement. It was the ringing of my mobile that brought me to a stop. I sucked in a shuddering breath at Giovanni's name that appeared flashing across the screen. Seeing the man's name set my teeth on edge.

Go, or don't go.

Over and over again, those four words rushed through my mind, giving me an intense headache with their forcefulness. My head pounded in time with my blood pressure. My forehead felt like a hammer was banging on the front of it. Dropping down into a crouch, I rubbed my temples as I peered up through the thick bush.

Go, or don't go.

Making a decision on the spot, I screwed my eyes closed and pressed the red button, ending his call immediately. A sense of relief came over me, loosening my tightened limbs. Relief stole through my blood, entered my lungs and freed some more air for me, but it all went to shit when I heard the deep booming voice of Giovanni scream out my name in frustration across the road. All of the tenseness and worry seeped back into me, flooding me with the stuff.

Silencing my phone, I stuffed it back into my pocket, pushed up from my crouch and left. My legs moved quickly and of their own accord. I didn't even bother looking back over my shoulder, I just couldn't. It wasn't until I stopped at the park did I realise where I was. I walked around the pond, two, three, four times trying to clear everything in my mind. All throughout though, I could feel the vibrations of my phone in my pocket. Ignoring it all, I kept walking. I paid no attention to people who passed me, dogs being walked who ran up to me for a little scratch behind the ears, nothing. I walked over to the kids' swings, dumped my backside into the black moulding and swung back and forth, my boots scuffing along the ground.

My eyes narrowed around the park. It was silent all of a sudden. I couldn't even hear the ripples of water anymore. That was what I wanted. Just silence so I could think without something else interrupting.

Dropping my head into my hands, I held it there until tiredness came on, along with a shiver from the semi-cold night. Wrapping my arms around my middle, I made my way home. Hoping that when I got in, I'd claim a bath then hit the sack. My head was killing me.

Fifteen minutes it took for me to walk home from the park. I decided against going the long way so I hit the shortcuts instead.

Eying my bike in the front garden and noting that it was still locked up, I dug through my pockets for my keys and pushed the gold, shoe-shop copy into the front door's lock and went to turn it only for it *not* to turn. Frowning, I slipped the key out, held it up to the streetlight to check it was the right one and slid it back into the lock.

The door didn't unlock. The fucking thing didn't even budge.

Huh, that was strange.

Thinking maybe the bottom lock was on—which was highly unlikely—I put the Chubb key in next and again, that one didn't turn either. Trying both keys again—multiple times—I kicked at the door when they didn't work. Bending down so my knees rested against the concrete step, I pushed up the letterbox and peered through it seeing and hearing the small fourteen-inch portable on. So at least someone was in.

“Mum,” I shouted and slapped my hand against the door. I called her name three more times before she appeared standing on the other side of the door, not

bothering to open it for me. “What the hell?” I mumbled and banged my fist against the door. “Mum, let me in.”

Mum didn't move. “I can't do that, Rudi.”

“What?” What the fuck had she put into her body now? “What do you mean?”

She bent down so she was face-to-face with me. Her eyes were glassy and her pupils were pinpricks, so I knew she'd had a score recently. “You didn't stick to your arrangement, Rudi.” Her speech was slurred a little, too.

My face screwed up in confusion. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Giovanni,” she answered simply.

Swallowing hard, I shifted my knees a little because the pain of them resting on the concrete was actually pretty uncomfortable. Gripping the dirty chrome letterbox tighter in my hand, I leaned into the door and gritted out, “Let me in, Mum.”

“I can't.”

Blowing out a long breath, I told her, “If you don't let me, I'll kick the fucking door down.” And I would too. This was my fucking home for fuck's sake and Penguin—oh fuck, Penguin—was upstairs waiting for me. I needed to get inside; there were no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Mum pushed up onto her feet and moved away from the door enough for me to see the whole length of her. She crossed her arms over her non-existent chest, a smug look on her face. “You do that, and I'll call the police, Rudi.”

“You wouldn't.”

“Oh, yeah I would.” She even tapped her foot for fuck's sake. “Giovanni, see, was very helpful when you didn't turn up tonight. Of course, he was pissed as hell and said you'd pay when he found you. Obviously, I told him I'd send you back because as you know, Rudi,” she said and moved back closer to me and the door, “it's for the best.”

“You're off your fucking rocker, woman. Open the Goddamned door right now.”

“No.”

I pushed myself up and kicked at the door with my booted foot. When it didn't move, I moved a few steps backwards, raised my leg and charged

forward, kicking at the weakened part of the door that had already been kicked in previously by drug dealers and such. On the third kick, I heard my mum's warning of calling the police ring through the PVC.

"You stupid woman," I rolled my eyes. "You're gonna call the police with drugs in the house. Are you entirely fucking stupid?"

That was met with silence.

I smiled smugly and charged at the door again, this time though I kicked and punched it at the same time. A sickening crunch sounded and immediate pain shot through my left hand. I gripped it tight to my chest as I spun around and grimaced, biting my lip when intense pain radiated along my index and middle fingers to gather around my wrist as I moved it a little. Shit, I was sure I'd broken something.

"Open the fucking door," I screamed out through gritted teeth, not giving a fuck about the neighbours or how late it was. I was losing my temper and fast.

"No."

Intense anger burned through me, making my body vibrate with it. I paced up and down the garden path, kicking the shit litter out of the way as I went. My eyes continuously flicked up to my bedroom window, wondering if Penguin was okay.

When nothing continued to happen, as in my mum wouldn't open the frigging door, I moved back towards it and leaned a shoulder against the dirty PVC, trying a different approach with her. "Listen, Mum," I started and eased my voice so it was softer even though I was mad as hell and hurting like crazy. "I couldn't go through with Giovanni tonight, alright? I'll go tomorrow." That lie just rolled straight off my tongue. Like fuck I was going back.

Silence.

"I'll even..." I had to shut my mouth to think about what I could use to lie to her with. "I'll even do him an extra time; get a better deal for you than the one he offered, how's that?"

"You would?"

Bingo!

"Of course," I readily agreed even though my mind screamed that I was crazy stupid for even suggesting the fucking thing.

When more silence met me, nervousness set in. She still hadn't opened the door, and I had no clue what the hell she was doing inside there. Sliding down the door till I landed on my backside, I flexed my hand and decided maybe I hadn't broken it after all. I'd probably just sprained it or something. Pulling open the letterbox again, I peered inside. I eyed her on the phone as she paced back and forth, her eyes continuing to skip to the door every so often. When she caught my eyes, she quickly murmured something into the phone and snapped it closed.

"That was Giovanni, he's on his way."

My whole insides froze. I pushed back up to my knees, gritting my teeth at the pain radiating through them and my hand in conjunction. "Mum, please." I couldn't believe I was begging her for Christ's sake. "Don't do this."

"Too late," she shrugged and fidgeted a little. "You know how this works, Rudi. You made an arrangement, remember?"

How the hell could I forget?

Rubbing the hand that didn't hurt up and down my face, I blew out a breath. "Mum, open the door, eh?"

"No."

Roughly, I rubbed my tired and aching eyes with the heels of my hands. It was just one thing after another, it really was. "Mum," I said tiredly, all the fight leaving me. "Open the door."

"No, Rudi," she screeched.

"You'll regret this, Mother, you really will," I threatened. Standing up, I bit my lip and walked around to the front of the house and peered up at my bedroom window just one more time. It was closed up all tight, just like I had left it. Damn. I walked back around to the side of the house and leaned back a little on my heels, scanning the high fence to the back garden. I could probably climb that, jump over, land in the back garden and climb up the drainpipe, squeezing myself through the bathroom window. It would be a tight fit but I could do it, I was sure.

With a nod because that was a bloody good idea, I glared at the dirty front door and grabbed my bike from the front garden before Giovanni turned up. Steering my bike was difficult with one hand but I managed.

Just as I got to the top of the road, I pulled my bike up against the brick wall and peered around it. What I saw made a shudder run through me. Giovanni's

big, black car—the same car from the other day—stopped outside my house and said horrible fat fucker got out and went to my house. The door was immediately opened for him.

I'd come back when everyone was gone and when none of them was expecting it.

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Chapter Ten

Hours I'd sat on my bike down by the beach, watching the tide roll in and roll back out again, letting the sea-salted air sweep into my lungs and back out again. All the while I did this, I continuously went over my plans front-to-back, back-to-front. I knew exactly what I was going to do and how I was going to do it. I just needed to get in. Once I did that, I could worry about everything else afterwards.

When I thought enough time had passed, I rode back home making sure to park my bike at the top of the road. When it was locked to the green lamppost, I quickly moved down the road, my eyes scanning the area continuously. Part of me actually worried that Giovanni was gonna jump out of the bush and grab me or something, but I waved that thought away. Giovanni wasn't like that. No, he was like a slithery snake. He would wait until it was time to strike before coming.

Slowing my approach, I bit my lip and squeezed my okay hand into a fist as I peered around a set of hedges that belonged to the house next door. My eyes scanned the living room window—all the lights were out. Good. My eyes just had to pop up to the top window. A little breath left me when I saw nothing had changed. That was good, real good.

Taking a deep breath and scanning the immediate area one more time, I moved. I ran down the path on the balls of my feet, praying that my boots weren't sounding too much. Stopping at the front door, I pulled my keys out, holding them tightly in my hand, trying to subdue the clanging of the metals. Once I had them stilled, I inserted the key in the top lock and turned.

It didn't.

Damn.

Withholding the need to bang my screwed-up fists against the door, I gritted my teeth and pocketed my keys again then walked over to the fence. I raised my hands, skimming them along the top of the wood and gave it a little tug, testing its strength. I nodded to myself when it barely moved.

Walking backwards a little, I gave a run and jump and latched onto the wood, levering myself up and on top of the fence. Blowing out little puffs of air, I gripped the wood, squeezing my jaw tight when pain shot through my

injured hand. Ignoring the throbbing, I twisted and swung my other leg over and slipped down until my feet hit the squished grass with a dull thud.

The garden was so dark that I could barely see in front of my face, but luckily, I knew where everything was. I moved quickly to the back door that led to the kitchen. My hand gripped the handle and gave it a little wrench.

The damn thing was locked too.

I leaned backwards with my hands on my hips as I scanned the back of the house. The drainpipes were old, so they hadn't yet been replaced with plastic ones. Thank fucking God. Plastic ones wouldn't have held my weight at all, and then I'd be truly fucked.

Moving towards the pipe that came from the toilet, I gripped it in my hands and gave it an experimental jerk just like I'd done with the fence. Once I was satisfied that it wasn't going to pull from the brackets that held it in place, I climbed my way up the black pipe. My boots scraped against the bricks, no doubt ruining them even more. The skin of my knuckles became sore as they rubbed against the abrasive surface.

Once I reached the bathroom window, I gripped the dirty, sooty ledge, praying that the old thing held out. I just needed to get inside, and I could sort all this shit out.

Crawling up onto the little ledge, I stilled for at least a minute and blew out a long breath. Damn, my adrenaline was pumping, and my heart was throbbing intensely in my chest. Spittle flew from my mouth with every long exhale I took.

Rubbing the back of my hand across my mouth, I got up onto my knees and gripped the top tail window, giving it a little yank. I knew that because the window was so high from inside the bathroom, we couldn't reach it to close the handle, so for appearances sake, the window appeared closed but wasn't locked.

When the fucking thing wouldn't open, I swore a blue streak and pushed myself up against the window for more leverage. The grey T-shirt I wore brushed against the dirty window that seriously needed washing. My poor battered fingers were aching and sore as hell from the pressure against the white plastic moulding.

Eventually, the thing opened. I sat back on my knees very aware of the drop down behind me.

Now I had to figure out how to get through the window.

I stared at the inside of the bathroom and what little I could see of the passage beyond the door. If I could just get in there, then all this could be over. I'd explain—no, I'd shake my mum to death to get her to understand that what she was doing was fucking crazy.

Ten minutes later, I dropped down from the window and landed on my feet. I froze with my hands in the air wondering if anyone had heard me, but then I snorted to myself. If Giovanni had been around then no doubt my mum was high as a kite, and I could have kicked the freaking door in and she wouldn't have heard anything.

That was the story of my life. I probably went through all of that shit, acting like Tom Cruise with the little theme song going round and round in my mind—for absolutely nothing.

It didn't matter now anyhow though. I was in, just like I wanted.

Listening to my mum's heavy snores coming from her room, I rolled my eyes. Wiping my hands on my jeans and sniffing because my nose was running, I walked from the bathroom across the hall to where my bedroom was. I tried the door and noticed it was locked up tight. Good. I felt real bad for having to wake up Penguin, but I had to. I knew for a fact she would have locked herself in.

Knocking our secret code on the door, I waited something like fifteen minutes—my muscles tense as hell, my heart beating frantically in my chest—before I heard the locks disengage, and a sleepy-eyed Penguin appeared with her own stuffed penguin in the crux of her elbow.

The first thing I noticed was that she had that bloody dummy in her mouth and the nappy she had on was around her ankles, soaked with piss.

I growled to myself and berated myself over and over again as I moved into the room, taking her into my arms and closing the door behind us. I should have been here, should have been here to look after her, feed her, make sure she had a bath and change her nappy for her.

“You back, Rudi?” she croaked and buried her face against my neck.

“I'm back, Penguin.”

“You gone?” she whispered around the dummy.

Leaning over to switch the lamp on, I pulled her back a little and inched the dummy from her mouth. "I'm not gone, baby, I've just been really busy." Really, really busy trying to get back into my own home.

Nodding, she tried to burrow back into me, but I needed to change the nappy she wore. The stench of piss was strong. I eyed the nappies in the bin in the corner. Even though I'd been gone all day and I'd cleared yesterday's ones out, today's ones smelt strongly.

Changing her nappy, I gave her a wipe with a couple of baby wipes and whipped another clean nappy on her then picked her up so she clung to me like a monkey. "Is that better now?"

"Yes."

"Are you hungry?" I was starving, but Penguin needed to be sorted first.

"No, sleep." A yawn made her face squish together adorably. When she looked up at me, her blue eyes in the dim light were tired and worried. "Stay with me?"

Damn it all to hell, she just about broke my heart. Forgetting about needing food, I moved back on the bed. Sitting back against the headboard with her on my lap, I squeezed her tight to my chest. Running my sore hand through her hair, I listened to her little puffs of air fanning over my neck.

"I'll never leave you, Penguin. Never."

I just had to find a way to get out of all this shit.

"Coco Pops?" I asked Penguin as she shuffled into the kitchen behind me.

Rubbing her eyes with her small fists, she nodded and moved to where I stood, waiting patiently beside me. I made her a small bowl of the little chocolate balls and walked her to the two-person table that was scratched to hell and barely standing. Lifting her into the chair, I gave her a table spoon. "Try not to spill it, okay?"

"I try, Rudi."

"Good girl." Taking the dummy from her on the quick, I pocketed it and moved to switch the kettle on. As I was getting the bottle of bleach from under the sink because the sinkhole stunk, my mum shuffled into the kitchen and let out a little squeal when she caught sight of me. She whipped her head this way

and that way, eying the doors, obviously wondering how the hell I managed to get in.

I raised my brow at her as I opened the cupboard door and grabbed a cup. I'd need to do the washing up soon; we were beginning to run out of clean plates and cutlery. I'd wait until the bleach settled a little first though.

"What are you doing here?" she finally asked.

With my back to her, I said, "Didn't think you could keep me out, did you?"

"You broke your promise, Rudi."

I whipped around, a glare already on my face aimed directly at her. "I promised fuck all." Promises didn't exist in my world—well, unless you were Penguin that is, but everyone else's promises meant and were nothing, nothing at all.

Her shaking hand came up, a pointed finger jabbing at me. "You promised that if you and Giovanni... did whatever you do then everything would be okay."

My face screwed up in disbelief. "I don't know what the fuck you heard, but you heard wrong."

"I know what I heard," she screamed sounding like a spoiled child. "You had an arrangement and you broke it. I want you out."

A sour chuckle left me as I poured milk in my tea. I dumped the six pints to the side and stirred the tea bag in, watching little clouds of brown infuse with the white. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I want you out, Rudi. You're not welcome here."

I snorted. "I've never been welcome here."

"I'll just call Giovanni, then."

Even though my stomach muscles tightened at that, I'd had enough of the threats. I picked up my tea and settled my hip against the counter, facing her, feigning indifference. "Call him, tell him I'm here." My balls didn't feel as big as I said that. "Tell him I broke in and am feeding Penguin because you can't. Tell him to come and use me, abuse me because I won't take him voluntarily. He'll have to force me."

Her mouth snapped closed and tightened into a thin line. I could see the cogs turning in her drug-induced mind, trying to come up with threats, stories, and all-round bullshit to try to get me out or to do what she wanted.

It wasn't happening.

“For fuck's sake, Rudi,” she screamed again. Her voice gave up halfway through. She cleared her throat and said quieter this time, “I don't want you here.”

“I don't want to be here, but does it look like I have a choice?” I asked incredulously. “You think I want to be here with you?” I sneered and looked her up and down taking in her usual rumped and used state. “You think I want my baby sister to be here where you don't give a fuck about her? I don't think so.”

“Take her then.”

You could cut the silence in the room with a knife. A shocked gasp left my throat, and the tea in my hand spilled and splashed over the rim of the cup, burning my hand. Hissing, I dropped the cup onto the counter and stared at my mother with utter contempt.

“What did you just say?” I asked when I could gather enough breath.

She waved her thin, bony arm towards where Penguin was blissfully eating her Coco Pops. “Take her. She's only trouble anyway. Take her with you when you go.”

“You can't be serious?” Just because I didn't want to be here, didn't mean I wanted to take Penguin away. Okay, I did want to take Penguin away, but only when I had a better, safer place to go. Right now, I had nowhere to go, nowhere safe.

“Oh, I am.” She was shaking now, her hands idling scratching at her scabby elbows. I watched as scabs dropped to the floor one after the other and blood bloomed across her skin as her nails bit harder into her flesh the more she went on. Her eyes were wide and frantic, her jaw working back and forth. She truly was the picture postcard of a true junkie.

The lump in my throat was nearly unmovable. I didn't know why I was so shocked to hear that she could just easily sweep me and Penguin to the side—she'd done that enough to both of us already, but to hear her be so blunt about it, just cut deep like a knife.

“What if—”

My hand whipped up as I moved past her. I'd heard enough. “Save it.”

“Rudi—”

Ignoring her, I moved to where Penguin was. Bless her; she sat patiently with her hands in her lap watching us. There was worry in her crystal-blue depths, more worry than should ever be there. Chocolate milk was all around her mouth and down the front of her bobbed pink nightdress, soggy balls of chocolate had gathered in her lap, too.

“Penguin,” I swept her up into my arms and quickly left the kitchen, hitting the stairs two at a time. “You wanna come out with me today?”

Her big, blue eyes went wide, excitement danced deep inside them taking out the worry. “Can go park?”

I debated this for a minute. “What about the beach?”

Penguin gasped and flung her arms around me. “Love you, Rudi.”

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Chapter Eleven

“Not too far, Penguin,” I shouted and shifted in the sand as I watched Penguin play in the wet muck with her bucket and spade. The little imp had wormed a new pink set out of me as we’d walked down the seafront, but it was worth it to see the smile constantly on her face. She looked like a caged animal that’d been let free.

I watched for a little longer as another little girl came up to play with Penguin. Penguin at first seemed to not like the company. She seemed to shift away from the little girl, as if intimidated. I felt my teeth grinding together as I watched. That was my fault. If she was in school, other kids wouldn’t be an issue. But I knew the moment I took Penguin anywhere near a school, they’d call Social Services on me, and quicker than you could say “abracadabra.” Next thing you knew, they’d be crawling all over me. No doubt about it, they’d want to take Penguin away from me.

That couldn’t happen.

Satisfied when the little girl’s mum came up behind her and gave me a little smile and a nod, I relaxed back into the sand a bit, my elbows sinking into the yellow stuff. I glanced around, taking in the other toddlers with their families, the older couples walking their dogs and just people lounging around in the sand, soaking up the sun that had made an appearance. The sun was shining high and bright, which was a change, and there wasn’t a breeze to be had anywhere.

“I thought it was you.”

My body stilled at the sound of that voice. Slowly, my head lolled to the side and found Jay standing right next to me, his toes wiggling into the sand. My eyes stared at his bare feet then travelled slowly up his bare, hairy legs to the tight jean shorts he wore that ended just above his knees. I continued all the way up to his tight package that made my mouth water a little. My eyes roamed up further to the T-shirt he wore that showed off his trim waist. Then I moved on to his slick, muscled chest that looked oh-so-very-nice under the white stretch top he wore, which just so happened to hug his rounded, sculptured shoulders. Going up even further, I licked my lips when I saw that his jaw had been cleanly shaved and his lips were pink and inviting. His eyes though—guttled—were covered in dark glasses—expensive glasses. His dark-blond hair

was cut to a point and shaved with at least a number two at the sides and by the looks of it, around the back too.

“Rudi?”

My head snapped back. “Huh?”

Jay’s head tilted to the side as he slapped his hands on his hips, his black Dr Martens boots dangling from his wrist where they were tied together. “You’ve been ignoring me.”

It wasn’t a question. No, it was a point.

My mouth opened to deny it, but it was true. I’d ignored the guy because I was a fucking fool and a stupid-arse prick. I’d run from him, his house, his family and why, because I was jealous as hell and couldn’t deal with it. I knew that if I had stayed, I would have either said something that I couldn’t afford to take back or passed out from everything going on in my head.

“You’re right,” I admitted quietly. I hated admitting I was wrong or saying sorry—both hurt like a bitch. Also, it damaged my ego and pride a little. Not having a lot of both as it was, I couldn’t afford to give it away.

Jay pointed to the space next to me. “Can I sit?”

My eyes flicked to Penguin who was still off in her own little world of sea and sand. “Go for it.”

Dropping his boots first, Jay sat down with such grace; I self-consciously shifted and straightened a little. “Nice weather we’re having, huh?” Jay said absently as he scratched his nose and stretched his legs out, crossing them at the ankle.

I nodded and chewed on my lip a little. “I thought you were working?”

“I was,” he answered. “But Dad had some issue with a supplier and that set us back, so he said all of us can have the day off.”

“Huh.”

The silence between us was suffocating. I needed to apologise; I had to. There was a major part of me that really liked Jay. Okay, I didn’t know him very well, not very well at all, but something inside me when I was around him, settled. Something inside me, whatever it was, told me Jay was okay, he was good, but there was a little percent that still held me back and then there was the anger and jealousy I had to contend with too.

“Why’d you run, Rudi?” Once again, my mouth opened but this time it was to tell him the truth, but Jay cut me off by raising his hand. “No, don’t say it; I don’t think I could bear to hear you say it.” Jay’s jaw worked. “You don’t like me. Do you, Rudi?”

What the hell? “What?”

“That’s why you ran, isn’t it?”

“No, Jay.”

“No.” He shook his head and smiled, but it wasn’t one of his bright contaminating smiles. No, it was sad and a tad bitter. “Don’t say that, Rudi. Don’t bullshit me. I get it. I came on too strong. I mean, who saves someone from getting beat up then comes around their house for dinner, puts up with all the shit that you did with regards to my dad, then when I tell you that I like you and show you my room, you run. I understand.” He shrugged. “I came on too strong, I get that.”

Grabbing hold of his arm, I turned him a little so he faced me. “Where do you get all this shit from?”

Jay’s mouth opened and closed a couple of times before he snapped it closed. Snatching his arm back, he said, “You, that’s who. Me, my imagination, who the hell do you think? You’ve been ignoring me for days, Rudi.” He leaned forward and hissed, “Days, Rudi. My mind goes into overdrive. One day it’s your fault, next day it’s my fault, then the day after that, it’s everyone else’s fault.”

“I know,” I admitted quietly. “I’m sorry.” There I had said it.

A snort left Jay. “Sorry?”

My own brown eyes narrowed on him now. “I said I was sorry.”

“And what exactly are you sorry for?” he asked. His chin struck out as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Sorry for running out on me for no reason? Sorry for ignoring me, making me feel like I’d done something wrong? What, Rudi?”

I threw my hands up in the air as I pushed myself up and began to dust myself off. I could feel sand up my crack. *Ugh*. “Everything, okay? I’m sorry for it all.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Jay growled and jumped up with me. He grabbed my forearm and spun me around to face him. “You’re not running on me again.”

“Look, Jay,” I ran my hand through my hair and licked my suddenly dry lips, “I do like you. I just didn’t have time to tell you. The reason I left... Well... uh... that’s my business, not yours. Just know that it wasn’t about you or anything you did. It’s me, not you.”

“Gee,” he said sarcastically. “That helps and makes me feel just flipping dandy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

As I turned away, Jay grabbed my arm again, yanked me forward towards him and slammed his mouth down onto mine. His arms wrapped around my body, holding me tightly to him as his soft lips pressed onto my own. As I opened my mouth on a shocked gasp, Jay went forward and swiped his tongue along the inside of my bottom lip then over the edge of my teeth.

My own tongue moved, consciously seeking his one out. Hesitantly, I let it forward and the tips of our tongues touched. My back arched a little and my hands that had been hanging limply at my sides snapped around Jay’s thinly muscled body and dragged him against me so from the tips of our toes to our noses, we were pressed together.

Moans left our throats when both of our mouths opened wider and our lips sealed together completely. I sent my tongue forward searching out his hot cavern, wanting just this once to taste the man that had been haunting my dreams, my mind, and my body. Just once I wanted to drag his taste into my own body and keep it, hold it, savour it.

The moment my tongue lathed against his lips, I was a goner.

Nothing had ever tasted better than Jay. Nothing I’d ever had in my mouth had tasted this ripe, this delicious, this *right*. A slight hint of mint with some sort of toffee-flavoured sweet, drifted off his breath and fanned against my lips.

Tilting my head to the side so I could go deeper, I thrust my tongue deep into his mouth, sweeping along the tips of his top teeth, feeling the semi-wonky one at the front. I swept my tongue along the insides of his cheeks and may even have felt his tonsils I went so far back.

We pulled apart with hungered groans and laboured breaths, our bodies hard pressed into each other. I could feel hot pressure on my hardened-as-a-rod cock. Glancing down at the small space barely between us, I saw Jay’s cock lying along his hip, pushing into my own.

“Damn,” I whispered as I let my hand drop from around Jay’s back. Smoothing it down to his hip, my fingers danced softly over the intensely hard lump. Thumbing the engorged tip through the thinning denim, I enjoyed listening to Jay’s sexy moan of more, of want, escape his mouth.

Glancing up at him, I bit my bottom lip when I saw that his glasses were missing. He threw his head back on a moan and flexed his hips into my hand. His red, ruddy lips were parted and puffy. I leaned forward and just had to lick at, suckle at his bottom lip, just once.

Jay’s lids opened as I pulled back, his grassy-green eyes were dark gems hidden within dark golden-blond coloured eyelashes. “Hi,” he said. His voice had turned all husky and deep.

I couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped. “Hi.”

“That was...”

A long breath left me then. “That was... damn fine.”

“Would it be strange and weird for me to say that I missed you?” Jay asked hesitantly. His hands ghosted over my bare chest, the tips of his fingers brushing against my taut, budded nipples. Little zaps of lust shot through my groin at the same time small droplets of pre-cum dribbled from my cock, soaking the top of my right thigh.

“No.” I shook my head and stepped back away from him, running my hands through my hair. If he touched me anymore, I was liable to come all over myself, which was... yeah! Bringing my hand back down again, I noticed it was trembling. God, what this man did to me. “That’s not weird at all.”

His face crinkled into a cute-as-fuck smile. “You missed me too?”

My mouth opened to tell him “fuck, yes” I had missed him like crazy even though I barely knew him, but Penguin’s high-pitched scream had me whipping around, frantically searching for her. I’d been so into Jay that I’d completely forgotten about her. How irresponsible was that?

“Penguin!” I shouted, my eyes searching frantically through the throngs of people. Where the hell had they all come from? None of them were here earlier.

“Hey.” Jay’s fingers grazed my arm, his face contorted into worry. “What’s the matter?”

“Rudi?” Her screeched call of my name sent a shiver of fear down my neck. It made all my hairs stand up on end and my heart beat double-time in my chest.

Running towards her voice, I pushed people out of my way, elbowing them and shoving them until I stopped when water touched my feet, splashing over them till it reached my ankles. I glanced down at the wetness watching the foamy seawater splash over my toes.

Water.

We weren't that close to the water. I made sure not to be. Penguin couldn't swim. I'd never taught her. When we'd arrived earlier, I'd taken note that the tide had been out and sat back up on the beach more than usual just to make sure. How the fuck didn't I notice that Penguin had been that close to the water? How could I have not noticed?

"Penguin!" I screamed as I rubbed the tips of my fingers across my forehead. My eyes hurt and burned as they searched for her. There were kids playing, splashing in the water, parents not too far from them.

I looked for the bright red swimming costume and the little, smaller than average five-year-old with honey-brown hair bouncing around in the water, but from where I was standing, they all looked the fucking same.

All the kids looked the fucking same.

Jay appeared at my side. I could feel his intense gaze on me, his questions ready to be fired at me, but he could just bloody well wait. I needed to find Penguin.

With the amount of noise around me and then a helicopter just happened to fly over us at the same time, I screamed out Penguin's name again—

"There." Jay pointed and went off running, me quick on his tail. Jay waded into the water, his legs powering through the rolling waves and seaweed that I could see through the cloudy water. My rolled-up jeans stuck like glue to my legs the moment I got knee-deep into the sea.

A shuddering breath left me when Jay bent down and swept something up into his arms. As he turned, I caught the sight of red and ran towards him as quickly as I could, snatching Penguin from his arms, holding her scared and trembling body to my own. I scaled my hands through her hair and gripped her small skull in the palm of my hand, pushing her head into my neck.

"Rudi," she sobbed, her salty tears dripping down my bare chest. Hacking coughs rattled her back.

Turning her around, I forced her forward as I smacked her stiffly on her small back, watching dribbles of seawater escape her mouth. When she only

dry-heaved, I wrapped her back in my arms again, holding her close to me. I closed my eyes and apologised over and over, mumbling the sorry words into her hair.

“Scared, Rudi.”

“Shhh now, Penguin. Rudi’s here. Shhh.” I repeated those words over and over again as I waded back out of the water. Not caring about the towels and my stuff that I’d left on the sand, I walked all the way through the throngs of people who watched me intently with worry and relief in their eyes but also disgust too.

Shame none of them helped though. Instead of standing there sneering at me for obviously being gay and getting it on with Jay in a public place, they could have gotten to Penguin quicker than I could have... but didn’t.

Sitting down on the wooden bench, I wrapped Penguin tighter to me and tried to temper down her shudders and cries. My own stomach was in knots and my hands shook ridiculously. I held her close, buried my nose in her hair and closed my eyes, trying not to think about if I had lost her.

No, I wasn’t even going there.

The bench moved and creaked when a weight settled next to us. Lifting my head, I turned it a little and caught Jay’s worried eyes. His suspicious, if not curious, green eyes flicked between me and Penguin then back again.

“I think we need to talk.”

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Chapter Twelve

I glared at Jay. “We’ve got nothing to talk about. Did you not just see what happened?”

Jay’s jaw worked as he pushed up from the bench and hitched his hands on his hips, his eyes darkening with what looked like anger. “Yes, Rudi, we do have to talk. We need to talk about that... *kid* in your lap and yes, thank you very much, I did see what happened. I saved her from the water, remember?”

As if I could forget. Never ever would that picture leave my mind.

Not giving a fuck about what he wanted, I got up from the bench, wrapped Penguin’s shivering body tighter in my arms and marched off. My feet scraped along the concrete of the slope as I moved along, reminding me that I was barefooted. I pushed past other people walking up and down the slope, not caring about anyone else or their protestations.

That’s what happened when I did care about others. I took my eyes off Penguin for a minute to indulge in someone that I felt something for, something stupid for, and look at what happened. Whoever the hell was up there above me obviously didn’t like it and punished me.

Well, I knew when to take a hint.

And Jay, God, I didn’t need to explain anything to Jay. I barely knew him, for Christ’s sake. What right did he have to know who Penguin was?

“Damn it, Rudi,” Jay shouted and cursed behind me. I heard his bare feet too, slapping against the concrete as he chased after me.

My legs pumped furiously down the road, my eyes not seeing anything—or anyone—as I continued on. I had no freaking clue where I was going. Penguin still snuffled and cried in my arms, her tiny body shivering.

How could I be so fucking stupid?

“Rudi,” Jay said when he caught up. He appeared in front of me, my bags hanging from his shoulders and wrists, my towels slung around his neck with his boots. His hands popped up, trying to stop me from going any further. “Just wait a fucking minute will you? You and this running lark is ridiculous.” He puffed out much-needed breaths.

“Get out of my way, Jay.”

Jay's eyes narrowed. "No."

I shrugged. "Fine." Sidestepping him, I walked around him, continuing down the road. I felt wetness spread under my feet. Somewhere in the back of my mind, something warned me to stop, to listen to Jay because *again* I was being stupid and arrogant, ignorant and downright childish.

"Just wait." Jay appeared back in front of me, determination etched everywhere on his perfect, gorgeous face.

I stopped, and only then did I look around to see exactly where I was. I'd walked quite a way from the beach and in the opposite direction of home. On the spot, I turned in a circle. Where exactly was I going?

"Good." Jay nodded and approached me warily as if I were a rabid animal. His arms came up and brushed up and down my own ones. Only when he did that, did I realise that I was now cold too. I could feel goose bumps popping up all over my body. I glanced up at the sky to see that the sun was hidden by dark clouds.

Typical.

"What do you want, Jay?" I asked quietly.

"To help you."

My brows scrunched together as I shifted Penguin in my arms. My arms, now I noticed, were beginning to ache with her dead weight. "Why would you do that?"

Jay's eyes flicked between me and Penguin before he answered softly, "Because you look like you need help."

I bristled and stepped backwards. My head darted from one side to the other, scanning the road, imagining a small map in my head. Once I was sure where I was, I began to walk in the direction of back home. Maybe I could persuade Mum to let me back in whilst I sorted something out? "I don't need your help, Jay. I don't need anyone's help." For so long, I'd done it by myself and never needed anyone's help and I didn't need help now either.

"Goddamnit," Jay growled and grabbed hold of my arm, pulling me to a stop. "You're not doing this to me again, Rudi. You're coming with me."

"I'm doing no such thing. Remove your hand right now." I glared at him, promising him that no matter whether I thought he was gorgeous or not, I would hurt him to get him away from me.

“Uh-huh.” He nodded and pursed his lips whilst clamping his fingers more firmly around my bicep. “You’re coming with me whether you like it or not.”

I bared my teeth at him. “You’ll regret this.”

Jay spun around to face me, his own teeth bared, his eyes flaring. “Listen here, Rudi Costa. There are people in this world who need help. Those that need the most help don’t ask for it and do you know why?” Not giving me a chance to answer or say anything at all, he carried on, his voice rising with every other word. “Because they have too much fucking pride, just like when you found me in the park. I had too much Goddamned pride to ask for you to help me, but you did anyway, why? Because you saw I needed it, and I did fucking need it. Right now,” he jabbed his finger at me, “you need it. I don’t know what the hell is going on with you, but I know that it involves the girl in your arms.” His eyes turned soft. I scanned furiously for pity but found none. I could deal with anything else other than pity. Pity was degrading. “Just let me help, please, Rudi.”

Adjusting Penguin again in my arms, I reached up and rubbed at my eyes that felt so bloody tired. All the fight left me just like a stiff wind. I felt nothing but tiredness and the want to cry, which was something I was not doing.

I didn’t cry. Well, only sometimes and that only happened when I was alone.

“Fine,” I garbled out through a tight throat. “Fine.”

“Good.” Jay sounded relieved. He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me into his side, sharing some of his body heat. “You made the right decision.”

That, I wasn’t really sure of, but I damn well hoped so.

“Are you sure about this?” I hissed at Jay who looked too damn controlled and relaxed. He locked the car up and came around to where I stood on the passenger side.

“One hundred percent,” he smiled softly and gently ran the tips of his fingers down the length of my jaw. His fingers felt real good on my sweaty, clammy skin right about then. “Trust me, huh?”

That was asking a lot. I trusted no one... ever. Just the thought of letting someone in, into mine and Penguin’s lives was huge. Admittedly, no one had

ever tried—wanted to be a part of us, so I guess that part was new more than anything.

“Rudi?”

I looked directly at Jay, deep into his grassy-green eyes seeing truth staring back at me. I knew—I *knew* this man didn't want to hurt me or Penguin. Not on purpose anyhow. Blowing out a long breath, I nodded reluctantly. “Okay.”

The thanks, happiness, and relief that danced through Jay's eyes made a weight lift off my shoulders. It seemed, whether I liked it or not, Jay wanted to help. He wanted to help and be there for us.

“Thank you,” he whispered and leaned in close to me, making my breath stutter. He pressed his mouth oh so softly against my own, just brushing back and forth like a whisper. Once, twice and three times he did this before he pulled back and licked his own lips. “Let's get this sorted.”

“Let's,” I agreed.

“Monica?” Jay shouted as he opened the front door. Baloo came skidding to a halt, his nails scraping against the shiny wooden floor as he scrambled for purchase. Jumping up, he launched himself at Jay, making Jay grunt and go back a step as his front paws landed on his shoulders. “Nice to see you too, big guy,” Jay reached round and rubbed the big dog's head then pushed him down.

“In the kitchen,” Monica's musical voice chimed.

I swallowed and licked my lips, closing my eyes a little when I tasted Jay's remnants loitering on my lips. I followed Jay into the kitchen where Monica stood at the counter, chopping what looked like green peppers. Did the woman ever stop cooking?

Turning, she looked over her shoulder, a bright smile on her face. Her eyes flicked to where I stood in the doorway. Her smile stayed in place as her brows rose. “Rudi, it's nice to see you again.”

Not giving me a chance to answer, Jay moved to Monica and gently took hold of her arm and pulled her over to where I stood with Penguin, who was wrapped in an old blanket that Jay had had in the boot of his car.

“What's going on, Jay?” Monica asked, her eyes darting between the two of us. Her smile was gone now, a confused look replacing it.

Jay reached out to take Penguin, but I shook my head and tightened my hold on her, backing away slightly. Okay, I'd agreed to trust him but that only went so far.

The man sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “We need you to help us with something,” he said as he led the way to a room along the passage. We moved on past the dining room, where we’d eaten dinner last week, and past a downstairs bathroom, to another door that was right at the back of the house. Jay pushed the door open, revealing what looked like a semi-made up guest room. In one corner, there were brown boxes stacked up somewhat neatly, whilst in the other corner, sat a small double bed with a mini, three-drawer chest of drawers next to it. A black and chrome lamp had been placed on the top, all alone.

“Why do I have a feeling I’m not going to like this?” Monica asked cautiously.

Jay quickly moved over to the window and pulled the curtains closed then moved to the bed and divested the bed of the covers. Turning, he waved a hand for me to place Penguin down on the bed. The moment my arms let go of her, she let out a high-pitched wail and started to flail over the bed.

“Penguin, shhh, it’s me, Rudi.” I grasped her again and tried to keep hold of her, but she was squirming like a slimy eel.

Monica gasped and moved to stand next to me. Her hand reached out to touch Penguin, but my sister darted back away from both of us, scrambling until she was folded into the corner of the bed up against the wall. Her eyes were the size of saucers on her small, pale face. Her small body was shivering like mad and her teeth were chattering. I didn’t understand why she was still cold, it wasn’t even that cold, not really.

“Honey,” Monica’s soft voice sounded like musical bells. She moved onto the bed, crawling slowly towards Penguin who eyed the woman extremely warily. Other than my mum and strangers that had been in and out of our home—mostly men though, Penguin had never consulted with another woman and never a woman who spoke so nicely and softly as Monica.

Jay’s heat spread over my back, telling me how close he really was to me. Next, his arms snaked around my waist. His hands, I could feel, were hesitant but sure all at the same time. I grabbed hold of them tightly, locking them into place in front of me as I watched Monica with Penguin.

“Who are you?” Monica asked my sister.

Penguin’s head tilted to the side, her eyes scanning Monica’s face, obviously wondering whether she could trust this woman. Her brows pulled

together but soon smoothed out. A small smile pulled up the corners of her lips as she jabbed her thumb against her small chest. "I Penguin."

Monica's brows popped up high on her head. "Penguin?"

"Yep, Penguin."

"You don't have another name?"

Penguin's smile disappeared, a hard glint appearing in her eyes as her mouth tightened into a hard line. "My name Penguin!" she shouted. Her small voice was scratchy from all the coughing and spluttering she'd done earlier. "I Penguin."

"Okay, okay." Jay's step-mum held her hands up in defence. "How old are you then?"

The smile came back on Penguin's face. "I five."

The woman's brows pulled together, a confused look darkened her face but it was gone a second later. "Are you hungry, honey?" Monica asked, instead of continuing with her line of questioning. My sister nodded slowly and her eyes flicked to me as if to ask permission. I nodded and watched both of them intently. I chewed on my thumbnail as my insides quivered.

"I'll grab something," Jay said. Before I could ask if he needed any help, he was gone.

I glanced over at Monica to see her watching me, her face hard and her eyes even harder. I knew this was coming. I could already see the prejudice, the accusations already formed in her mind. She obviously had taken a look at Penguin and assumed I was to blame for the condition she was in. I suppose I was the person to blame. After all, I had been the one to look after her since she was born. However, what I didn't appreciate was that she'd already had me hung, drawn and freaking quartered.

Grinding my jaw together, I said, "I know what you're thinking."

"No." Monica shook her head and shot me a frosted glare. "No, no, you don't, Rudi."

Monica advanced on me, trapping me against the wall, her finger jabbing in my face. "That girl is malnourished, underfed, and underweight. Her teeth are bad and not even properly developed, her body fat is practically zero and she can barely string a sentence together. What the hell, Rudi?"

My heart beat heavily in my chest, and my anger zipped along my skin like an electrical current. “You have no fucking clue what the hell you’re talking about.”

“I know what I’ve seen, Rudi. I’ve looked over that child with a professional eye, and it’s not good.”

I knew this already and that was why I kept her away from people like Monica. Apparently, as Jay had told me just a short time ago, Monica used to work in a domestic violence unit for women and children. I glanced at Jay who stood in the doorway, no doubt blocking my way so I couldn’t leave. I shot him my meanest glare. I didn’t like being hoodwinked or blindsided. He’d told me that I could trust him and look what happened when I did. People came swarming in and started telling me how wrong I’d done this and that when they had no freaking clue how hard things were for me and Penguin.

“I’ve tried my best.”

“Well, let me tell you.” Monica got back up in my face. Her intelligent, warm blue eyes were now cold and distant. Blame lay deep within her depths. “Your best isn’t good enough.”

“Screw you,” I yelled at her, feeling emotion well up inside me, more than I knew what to do with. “You don’t know what it’s like living day-to-day in my life. The day Penguin was born, she came home with my mum and you know what? My mum dumped the baby on the bottom of my bed and left her there to cry, need changing, need feeding. Me,” I slapped my hands against my bare chest, feeling my heart beat heavily and thickly. “I was a fifteen-year-old boy who... who... who had no fucking clue about babies except what I’d read in books, books that I spent trolling through libraries for. I dropped out of school and took care of that child as if she were my own. I fed her, clothed her and taught her everything she knows. Half the time I don’t know how the fuck I did that even.

“I didn’t and don’t have any money for her other than what I earn myself. We don’t know who her dad is, so there’s no help there and my mum’s a drug addict who would rather shoot her Child Benefit payments up her arm than feed Penguin or me for that matter. Each time I go to work, I have to lock Penguin in our bedroom because one, I have no one to look after her, and two—” A thick sob gushed from my chest as hot tears filled my eyes. A single tear strolled down my cheek, settling on the trembling curve of my bottom lip. “And two, because I won’t have the men who my mum mixes with, mess around with

Penguin like they did me. I couldn't let that happen to Penguin." I swiped at my nose angrily, wiping the snot away. "I won't allow what happened to me to happen to Penguin. So now blame me for the state of her and tell me it's my entire fault, Monica. Tell me what I've done isn't good enough."

There, now I'd spilled most of life story out to both of them. Now would they get off my fucking back and back the fuck off?

"Oh, God, Rudi," Monica stepped forward and without warning, wrapped me in her arms. Running her hands up and down my back much like a mother would, she continually whispered, "I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry."

No matter how hard I fought it, I couldn't hold it back. Everything inside me fell away like crumbling bread. My knees weakened and sobs shook my body, making it shake terribly. I gripped Monica's shoulders, holding on for dear life as everything that I'd ever locked up deep inside me, ran away, and left me bit by bit.

"What the fuck is going on?"

We both jumped at the angry sound of Jay's dad. We pulled apart only to see the big, hulking man standing in the doorway just behind Jay, looking extremely pissed.

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Chapter Thirteen

“I can’t with good conscience let you leave with that child,” David Bruins said as he sat across the table from me.

My hackles rose immediately, and I jumped up from the table. “You can’t take Penguin away from me,” I shouted defensively, my throat raw and groggy from how much I’d sobbed earlier.

David rolled his eyes much like Jay had a habit of doing and motioned for me to sit down again. I did after the third wave of his hand and a raised brow. “Boy, we aren’t taking that girl away from you. Have you seen her? That kid worships the ground you walk on. It’d break her in two if you were to disappear. No, what I’m saying is that I think with everything you’ve explained, and Monica’s professional opinion, it’s best she stays here.”

I knew what he was saying was right, even if it was a bastard to admit. I’d watched Penguin over the last couple of hours with Monica, David and even Jay. She was a little quiet and timid, but she looked more relaxed than I’d ever seen her. The scared, worried and lost look in her eyes had dimmed, revealing a light that I’d never managed to garner myself from her. She’d eaten good wholesome food and had had a decent bath and now was in bed, out like a light with Jay’s dog, Baloo, in bed with her, curled around her small body.

“Well, that’s very nice of you but—”

“Rudi,” Jay’s voice from beside me was soft and hesitant.

“What?” I asked on an exhale.

“You know what my dad’s saying is right, don’t you?”

I glanced at him from under my lashes and nodded eventually. “It’s just—” I sighed heavily and pursed my lips. “Even though I used to leave her at home and there were risks with that, hell, I knew that, it’s just I knew she was safe locked up. Here, I know she’ll be safe and she’ll be with people. I know, *I know*.” I raised my hand and nodded a little, eyeing each one of them separately. “That will do her a world of good, but I just can’t get my head around not going home, her not being at home but being somewhere safe. I know I’ll be able to breathe without nearly having a heart attack every bloody minute. It just hurts and is a little weird to know that it’s not me she’s with, it’s someone else—a proper family.”

David tapped his fingers on the table. "I understand, Rudi, I do."

The tone of his voice took me back to when he dropped me home that night I'd run from here—from Jay. David had tried to tell me the same then, and I'd brushed it off because I didn't think he would understand me, understand what was going on. But now, I could see that he did understand and was doing his best. Considering me and Penguin were virtually strangers, he was doing a hell of a lot. Part of me wondered whether it was because he wanted to or whether it was because of Jay.

One would have to wait to find out.

"Okay." Monica clapped her hands together, a tired smile on her face. "Now you, Rudi."

My brows pulled together. "What about me?"

Monica and David shared a look before David sighed heavily and ran his bear-sized hand across his shaved head. "See, we've decided that seeing as today is Friday, you should stay here the weekend in the *guest bedroom*." He looked pointedly at me and Jay.

"Dad, please," Jay groaned and palmed his face. "That is so embarrassing."

David snorted. "Embarrassing it may be," he agreed, "but no funny business, under my roof."

"But we're adults!"

"I couldn't give a fuck if you were the Pope, son. No touching, no petting and... Uh..." The big man shifted in his seat and cleared his throat as his cheeks turned a bright shade of pink. "No sex," he mumbled. "Ever."

"That won't happen anyway," I blurted immediately.

Jay turned incredulous eyes on me. His mouth dropped open in pure shock. "Seriously?"

There was no way on this earth I was having sex with him under his parents' roof. That didn't detract from the fact that, yes, I wanted to rip his clothes off and do him up against the wall, maybe bend him over the back of the couch and eat his fucking arse out—sucking his flavour into my mouth so I'd be able to taste him days later, but Jay was different. He deserved to be worshipped in bed and in an *actual* bed. For one, I wasn't that person who deserved that right to be inside him, and two, I didn't even own a bed.

“Uh, hello,” David waved his hand to get our attention. “Back to the point in question,” he sighed and scratched at his brow with his thumb. “Rudi stays here for the weekend in the guest room with Penguin until Monday. Then when Monday comes, he finds somewhere else.”

“Dad,” Jay sat forward in his seat and leaned into the table. “Rudi has nowhere to go.”

“Jay.” I placed my hand on his arm. “It’s fine.” The most important person here was Penguin, and I had suitable and safe people ready to look after her. Belongs I could see her everyday and be just a phone call away, I would be happy.

Or so I hoped.

“Jay,” David warned.

“No, Dad, you don’t understand. Rudi has nowhere to go. Where is he supposed to sleep?”

“Jay,” Monica interrupted softly. “Rudi’s considered an adult now, as are you and have been for a couple of years. All we’re saying is that he should have his own place. I’m sure he has someone he can share a room with or something like that until he can sort something permanent out.”

I bit my lip to stop from laughing out loud at that. I had no one. With my type of life, friends didn’t come along very often. If and when they did, they didn’t really or truly want to be friends, they were just using me to get what they wanted.

Jay rolled his eyes and banged his fist on the table. “Does it look like he has any friends?”

“It’s fine, Jay,” I semi-repeated and gave his arm a small squeeze. Looking back to Monica and David, I said, “I’m thankful for the weekend you’re giving me. Monday’s good. I can start looking for a place to live and kip on a friend’s sofa.”

“See?” Monica smiled and reached across the table to pat Jay’s hand. “Everything will be okay.”

Jay turned a little in his seat, his eyes hard. He stared at me for a long moment before he nodded and attempted a smile, but it was stiff and made him look like he was suffering with constipation.

“That’s all sorted,” David said with a final nod and polished off the rest of his beer. Over the rim of his dark brown glass bottle, he eyed me. Once he put

the drink down, he leaned into the table and said, “You’re welcome back anytime to come see Penguin. She’d be real hurt if you didn’t come see her, Rudi. Do you get what I’m saying?”

Yeah, I understood the threat in that little sentence. Giving him a stiff nod, I pushed up from the table and made my way to the guest room down the hall, where Penguin slept. If I was going to be away from her come Monday then I wanted to spend as much time as possible with her.

The clicking of the door startled me from sleep. I sat up in bed quickly, my arm automatically reaching over to check Penguin. She was fast asleep, buried up against the wall across the mattress from me.

Nodding to myself that she was okay, my eyes darted back to the door. I couldn’t see who it was, yet because all the lights were out, including the one in the passage. Reaching over to the chest of drawers, my hands tapped the top feeling for something to use as a weapon. When I couldn’t find anything other than my phone, I silently cursed, and instead, slithered off the bed to the floor as quietly as I could. Landing on all fours, I rolled my lips in and crawled across the floor. Stopping just behind the semi-opened door, I sat back and clenched my hands together as a dark figure stepped into the room.

Letting them take one more step towards the bed, I pounced.

“Arghhhh.” The dark figure screamed out in shock and fright. It didn’t sound very manly.

We both landed in a heap on the floor with a couple of dull thumps. Because I couldn’t see anything, I was completely blind. Searching with my hands, I wrapped one hand around the man’s throat, holding him in place, my thumb digging into the pulse point whilst the other went across his mouth. The man scrambled to get up, his hands clutching at me, his legs kicking out. The man tried to speak but couldn’t.

“Keep fucking still,” I growled and shifted my body over his so I could feel for any weapon he may have had. I didn’t recall the clatter of a knife or anything like that from when we went down. I twisted from where I sat on his legs and frowned when I came up with bare skin.

What burglar robbed a house half-naked?

Leaning down to what I assumed was his face, I whispered, “What the fuck are you doing here? Who the fuck are you?” When the man continued to

mumble behind my hand, I realised that I'd need to remove it first. "If I let my hand go, you won't scream or make any unnecessary noise will you?"

His head shook back and forth. Releasing my hand, the man sucked in a deep breath and even coughed a little. "Rudi?" he croaked.

I froze as I straddled the dark figure. One of my hands clutched his wrists above his head, holding him in place whilst the other one stayed tight on his throat. "Jay?" I hissed incredulously. "What the fuck?"

Panting, Jay huffed and attempted to wriggle free. There were several problems with that, the most prominent one being that every time he wiggled, his cock—which was directly underneath my balls—hardened and skimmed along my taint, just brushing against it.

"Jay," I breathed, as my hips just flicked that little bit, feeling his cock poke and rub along my boxer-covered crease. Damn that felt good. Letting go of his wrists, I trailed my hand down over his head, feeling his soft hair and down his face. My fingers touched his lips, fondling the plumpness as I pulled back. My hips moved in tight little circles, as I splayed my hands on his chest, feeling his heart beat quickly under my palms.

"Unh," Jay gasped as his hands landed on my hips, holding me in place as his hips flicked upwards then rolled like a ripple against me. "Feels. So. Good," he panted.

A snuffle from behind us snapped us both out of the moment. Heat that had been overwhelming and exceptional dropped to minus zero in an instant. The boner in my boxers collapsed and shrivelled up. By the softness underneath me, Jay was in the same position.

Pushing up from the floor, I walked over to the chest of drawers and flicked the lamp on, nearly blinding the both of us. When I could actually see without white spots dancing across my vision, I looked over at Jay and saw him standing in the middle of the room with a very nice but embarrassed blush on his face and his bottom lip being attacked by his teeth. His thinly muscled body on display—a little pair of red boxers that were incredibly tight and very fucking nice—covering his important bits.

Hitching my hands on my hips, I asked, "What are you doing in here, Jay?"

Jay swallowed and looked at everything other than me. "I wanted to see you."

I couldn't help but laugh. He looked like a child who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "You could have seen me in the morning."

There went those eyes rolling again. His lips also twitched. "I didn't want to wait till morning." He shifted on the spot a little and jerked his head towards the door. "Can we like go outside or something?"

Nodding, I checked on Penguin and saw that she was still asleep. Flicking the light off so we were back to utter darkness, I held my hands out in front of me and grasped Jay's ones when I felt them. Keeping hold of him and trusting him not to let me fall on my face, he led us out slowly towards what I remembered was the living room where the sliding doors opened up onto the back deck.

The moment the doors opened, the sea could be heard splashing against the seawall in the distance. The moonlight lit up the entire garden, basking it in an eerily white glow. Inhaling deeply, a tang of sea salt hung in the air, along with the smell of dewy grass that tickled my senses. We moved over to the heavy wooden table and chairs. Taking a seat, I shivered a little when my bare back hit the cold—and somewhat damp—wood.

Jay dragged his chair so he sat directly in front of me, positioning his legs in between mine. His hands clasped my knees as he stared at me. Under the almost-white moonlight, he was stunning. His hair appeared virtually golden and his eyes—although sleepy—were stunning.

"So?" I chuckled when he just continued to stare at me.

"God, you're hot," he breathed and leaned forward so he was totally in my space. This close, I could smell a slight hint of aftershave to his skin that did funny things to my body when I inhaled it. A little pit in the bottom of my stomach tingled and made my toes wiggle.

"Thanks." I smiled sheepishly. Compliments like that made me go all funny inside. It was an unusual feeling. "Seriously though, what did you want to talk about?"

"Rudi." He shook his head, stood up and climbed on top of me. His legs slipped through the gaps in the sides of the chair, and he wiggled to get himself comfortable. "I didn't and don't want to talk to you. I admit I wanted to see you, but more than that, I wanted to touch you." He licked his lips slowly. "Correction, I want to touch you."

"Whoa." I grabbed his hips as his bum hit my lap. My head automatically whipped from one side to the other, checking that we were totally alone. The last thing I wanted was for either David or Monica to have followed us out and be hiding in the shadows.

“We’re alone,” Jay assured me and leaned in so we were centimetres apart. This close I could see his full green eyes. They were beautiful, hell, he was beautiful. “Kiss me, Rudi.”

My mouth opened to tell him that the moment we kissed, it would go further. We both knew this. Instead of letting me speak, Jay pushed his lips against mine, effectively shutting me up. His tongue came out and demanded entry, licking and pushing against the crux of my lips, trying to get them to part. On a sigh, because I just couldn’t resist him or his taste or in fact his smell, I opened up and let his tongue sail into my mouth, seeking my own one out. I caught hold of it and wrestled back and forth, our muscles fighting for dominance. My hands squeezed his hips, holding him in place as my own flexed upwards. My cock, which had been lying limp between my legs, hardened up and smeared against the crease of his arse.

Jay pulled away from me, panting. His lips were red and swollen, damp in some spots. His grassy-green eyes were glassy and half-mast from lust. He licked his lips and smiled crookedly whilst blatantly reaching down and adjusting his tenting lump in those *fuck me* boxers.

“Touch me, Rudi,” he whispered.

My breath caught in my chest when he pulled down the elastic of his shorts, letting his cut piece of meat flick towards me. It hit my stomach and bounced back again, dragging a string of pre-cum with it. The red—almost purple head—was damp and shiny, his sap dribbling in small, little teardrops down the underside of his cock. I wanted so badly to reach out, wrap my hand around his beautiful-looking cock and bring him pleasure—so much pleasure—but I couldn’t. I just couldn’t give this man something that I knew he would take and keep close to him when I was who I was. Yeah, in the heat of the moment things happened, but we weren’t really there right now. Actually, we weren’t far from it either. The thing was: when did it stop? When did a hand job stop at just a hand job?

Answer: they didn’t.

Swallowing hard at the sight of his very nice, very succulent cock, I glanced up into Jay’s grassy eyes and smiled a little. Reaching upwards, I slid my hands along his face, feeling little hairs scraping against my palms. I gripped his cheeks and brought him forward so our foreheads touched. “I would love to touch you, Jay, I really would.”

Jay’s eyes slid closed but not before I saw rejection sinking into his depths. “You don’t want me.”

“Oh God,” I cursed and thrust my hard as hell cock against his arse, letting it prod the little starfish I knew that was there, wanting and waiting for me. “Does this feel like I don’t want you?”

“But—” Jay blew out a breath which fanned out against my face. “—you don’t want to touch me.”

“No, I do want to touch you, but I can’t.”

“But why?” he whined. “What’s the matter?”

I didn’t even understand it all myself. I was playing off the bat right now.

“Everything’s the matter. All this is wrong. You deserve someone so much better than me. You deserve someone who won’t let you down, who can give you the world. You, Jay, deserve someone that has less baggage, someone you know better than... than... me.”

“It’s you that I want though.”

A pain foreign to me clung to my chest, making it hurt in a certain place. I let go of one side of Jay’s face and rubbed at the pain absently with the heel of my hand. “I like you, Jay, I really do—”

“Can we work on it?”

I screwed my eyes shut. “What?”

Leaning forward again, Jay gripped my own face in his hands and held it still, whilst his lips skimmed along my cheekbones, along the bridge of my nose, over my brows, then across and over my temples. Planting little open-mouth kisses, Jay’s hot breath fanned over my chin, along my jaw down to my neck, where his nimble teeth nibbled at my tendons, before he sucked at the skin, no doubt leaving little marks on his way. “You’re so warm,” he whispered against my skin. “And you smell so good.” Then the hot sucking kisses came along my collarbone and up to my ears. He sucked my earlobe into his mouth, lathing his tongue back and forth over the fleshy skin.

I just about came in my fucking pants when he did that.

“Jay,” I gasped when he nibbled at my Adam’s apple. His lips travelled back up to my ears, breathing heavily into my skin, sending little tendrils of electricity along the small, tiny hairs that coated my body. He was driving me crazy. My head dropped backwards against the damp wood and my eyes squeezed shut. Intense want and need burned through my body for the man in my lap. How easy it would be for me to rip his pants off, spit in my hand, finger

him a little to loosen that guardian muscle up and slip my cock into his tight, warm cavern. It was all so easy, yet so fucking hard... figuratively and literally.

Moving back down to my neck, Jay bit down on my skin. Not hard enough to pierce or puncture but enough that my cock jerked and dribbled more pre-cum against the bottom of my belly. Jay licked up the sting with his hot, wet tongue then lathed it down into the small point between my collarbones before pulling back. He lifted himself up a tad so he could look down at me. He smiled a little whilst a devilish glint sparkled in his eyes.

“I will have you, Rudi Costa, and vice versa. I want to feel you inside my body, Rudi. I want to feel you days later when I sit down, bend over, whatever. I want your taste in my mouth and down my throat. I want it all, Rudi.” He looked me dead in the eye. “I want you.”

“We can’t,” I told him, but my voice lacked conviction even to my own ears.

“We can and we will.”

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Chapter Fourteen

Thoughts of Jay and Penguin dominated my mind. Jay, because it had been a couple of days since I'd seen his smile, heard his voice and felt his hand in my own, and Penguin, because I hadn't woken up with her small body plastered to my side. I hadn't heard her voice or seen her smile that was crooked and cute.

I blinked rapidly at that and squeezed my eyes closed, begging, praying, telling myself not to cry... again. When I'd left Monday, it had almost killed me. Jay hadn't wanted to go to work at six, but David made him, and me letting him walk out the door knowing that I wasn't going to be there when he got back must have been hard.

If anyone had been watching, they would have waved a hand and told us to stop fucking about. It was as if the world was ending or something, but truthfully, leaving Penguin and Jay felt like that or somewhere near it.

Shaking my head, I blew out a breath and watched them leave my mind like thin wisps of air.

The moment my mind emptied of their beings, I remembered where I was. Immediately, I wished I hadn't. The floor I slept on was hard as fuck and smelt of damp, dirt and worse—piss. I rolled over to my side and wished I hadn't. The man that Parrot had brought home last night and fucked on the sofa just feet from me—had puked all over himself and said puke had dripped from his wide open mouth to the floor, where it lay in a pile—whilst he snored his freaking head off.

Gross.

The smell burned the insides of my nostrils and made even my empty stomach turn over, wanting to expel whatever was left. I pushed up from the floor, kicked the threadbare covers aside and tiptoed from the room, holding my breath at the same time.

Opening the bathroom door, I stepped inside and kicked the door closed after me. I rested my hip against the sink and let my eyes drift closed. I was dead tired and I ached all over. The floor was okay for the first and second night but after the third, fourth and fifth, it was beginning to get to me and my body. My neck was smarting, and places on my body I didn't even know existed complained every time I turned over in my sleep or to get comfortable.

Walking over to the toilet, I lifted the grimy lid with the tip of my little finger and let loose a stream of pee. I thought home was dirty but this was damn-right disgusting. Yawning, I rubbed at my chest with my free hand and tilted my head to the side when I heard movement outside the door. Shaking my cock off, I pulled the chain and walked back to the sink, washed my hands and sluiced my face with the cold water, instantly waking myself up.

“Open up.” The banging on the door made me jump.

Grabbing my toothbrush from the small pot by the sink, I squeezed a pea-sized amount of toothpaste on the bristles and opened the door to see Parrot looking like absolute shit. He grimaced and pushed past me, heading for the toilet. Just as I stepped out of the bathroom, I heard his retching. Someone had obviously had too much last night.

Heading to the kitchen, I filled the kettle and flicked the switch, then leaned against the counter as I brushed my teeth.

Parrot appeared, stumbling into the kitchen. He grunted as he shoved me out of the way to get to the fridge. He pulled the milk out and drank right from the bottle, making sure to burp afterwards.

Well that put me off the tea I was about to make.

Curling my lip, I raised a brow. “Did you have to do that?”

Parrot’s own dark brows popped up, his dark eyes not looking bothered at all. “Do what?”

“Drink the milk from the bottle.” Okay, it wasn’t the freshest of milk but damn, it was the only milk we had and now he’d contaminated it.

Parrot blinked. “Is this your flat?”

I rolled my eyes and immediately smiled when Jay’s face popped into my mind. “No but—”

“Then shut it,” he barked.

“Whatever,” I mumbled and reached for the coffee. My thing was tea. I loved a good old cup of hot, sweet tea, but I also didn’t mind coffee. Coffee without milk however was not in my top five, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. Spitting in the sink, I leaned over and rinsed my mouth out and set my toothbrush to the side, reminding myself to put it back in the bathroom afterwards.

Silence settled like an uncomfortable blanket between us until Parrot broke it. "Giovanni's been dogging you."

My hand froze halfway to my mouth, the almost burnt coffee steam burning the tip of my nose. "Oh?"

"Hmmm." He nodded and reached past me for the bread, only to open the bread bin and see the wrapper empty. He cursed and slammed the plastic lid back down. "He's put out word that he wants you."

I snorted and sipped at my dark drink, grimacing a little at the extra bitter taste mixing with the mint toothpaste. "He can wait on. There ain't no way I'm going back to him."

Parrot eyed me for at least a minute, his dark eyes stayed fixed on my face. If anyone didn't know Parrot they'd have freaked out already with the intense, almost-crazed look in his eyes. The truth was the guy *was* batshit crazy. He was good to have on your side but also as unpredictable as the weather when it came to his moods. I was sure that if the right people got hold of Parrot, they'd lock him away forever in a mental hospital. Oh yeah, for sure. The man was not stupid, he was just plain crazy.

"You know what else I heard?"

Sighing heavily, I rolled my eyes again. It looked like I'd picked that habit up from Jay after all. "What's that?"

"Your mum is in trouble, Tutti."

"Don't call me that," I grouched and shoved past him to sit at the small table.

Parrot smirked. "I like that, it suits you."

"It suits your mama."

A snort left his nose along with a choked cough. "Everything suits my mama just like yours. Anyways, your mum, I was telling you. She in trouble, Rudes." He shook his head and pursed his lips. All his laughter was gone now. "I heard she was all over the shop."

"Why should I care?"

"I didn't say you should. I'm just telling you what I been hearing, you get me? That woman been spouting shit, Rudes, about how you hit her and shit like that. She also been flapping her gums about you breaking some sort of 'greement with Giovanni."

I scratched irritably at the side of my face. The damn woman was more trouble than she was worth. She was the one that caused all this mess, and now I was the one paying for it, as usual.

“Well it’s all lies.”

“Cuz,” he scoffed. “I figured that time ago. Problem we have or you, shall I say, is that Giovanni is out and wanting your arse, you get me? He wants in. To own it, slap it and stamp it down. You in deep, Rudes.”

“Gee, thanks, Parrot,” I deadpanned and pushed the coffee away from me. I didn’t feel like drinking it anymore, not with the burning sensation starting back up in my stomach. “This was all supposed to be different. She told me to go, Parrot, to get the fuck out of her house and to take Penguin with me, and I did,” I said with pure exasperation. “I knew Giovanni would be after me—that was a given, but to hear all the other shit and be blamed for it, it’s just plain wrong. I promised Penguin that I’d sort everything out and get us a nice place where we can be together, you know?” I said, and he nodded, still intently watching me. “But how the fuck can I go out and earn some crust if Giovanni’s wanting me?”

Parrot was quiet for at least a minute before he made a noise at the back of his throat and shrugged. A wild, almost sinister smile spread across his face. “We go to work.”

Over and over again, I practised the words, letting them roll over my tongue to hear how they sounded out loud. I needed to make sure my voice was strong and didn’t sound as scared and as nervous as I actually was inside. Okay, scared wasn’t the right word, maybe fearful of being rejected was better.

I needed to do this right because I couldn’t take sleeping at Parrot’s no more. It was killing my back and neck, and the place was just downright disgusting. The thing that got to me the most was the reminder of it being like back home. There were men in and out of the place whenever they felt like it. Albeit they weren’t druggies or drunks, but they were sex addicts, I swear. The way Parrot went at them made even me want to become a monk, and that was saying something.

Barry walked in from the back, where he’d been sorting through a couple of boxes of mix for his special old-fashioned shaving foam. “Got it.” He grinned with triumph showing off nicotine-stained teeth at the same time.

I smiled back a little and idly played with the broom in my hand. From the corner of my eye, I watched him potter around on his legs that weren't quite so steady anymore. I was always just a couple of feet from him in case he took a tumble.

“Spit it out, Christ!” Barry snapped.

My head shot up to look at him. “What?”

The old man shook his head, dislodging his white hair so it fell over his brow. “All morning you’ve been chewing that tongue of yours off. Spit it out.”

“You’re right,” I nodded.

“Of course I am,” he scoffed and rolled his hand for me to get on with it.

Taking a deep breath, I straightened my shoulders and let it all out. “Well, you see, Barry, I’ve finally left home because... of... of reasons and well you know, I need somewhere to lay my hat. I’ve been staying with... a... acquaintance and desperately need my own place. So I was wondering if I could like... maybe rent out the flat above here. I know it’s empty, and I really don’t care about the state of it, if it is in a state, that is,” I added quickly. When Barry continued to be silent, I took that as my cue to carry on. “I could pay you whatever you wanted and work for free to cover even more of the rent. I mean, it couldn’t be that much though, could it? It has to be a one or two bedroom place and real small because I’ve had a look up at the windows as I cycled here this morning, and they don’t look too big, you know? I’d probably struggle with the bills for a little bit until I could work things out, but I could deal with that. So what do you think?”

When he continued to be silent, I shifted on the spot and licked my lips. Still when he continued to stare hard at me, I waved my hands out and let them drop back to my sides with heavy slaps. “Just forget I said anything.”

“Just wait a bloody minute,” he growled. “Kids these days.” He shook his head and puffed out a heavy smoker’s wheeze. “Always in a bloody rush.”

Hope so big rushed through my body making my head a little dizzy. I reached out blindly to clasp the back of the black leather bucket chair just in case I face-planted the floor. That wouldn’t look good. I’d probably give him a heart attack if that happened.

“You serious?”

I nodded quickly, albeit a little jerkily. “Deadly.”

Barry sighed and scratched at his whiskers that were coming through, even though he only probably shaved this morning. A thoughtful look popped up on his face. “The place isn’t too good.”

“That’s no problem.”

“It needs a lick of paint, probably a couple of repairs, oh and a pest control check, but other than that, it’s fine.”

My brows furrowed. “If it’s been fine, why is it empty?”

A dark, shadowed look swam in his eyes. “Because it is,” he snapped. “Do you want it or not?”

Suddenly confused as hell but still desperate, I nodded quickly and could have kissed the man when he grunted and reached into his pocket, coming out with a small set of keys that he tossed at me. “Rent is due on Thursdays.”

Now, I knew I really needed to get the money sorted otherwise, I was up shit creek.

I glanced at myself in the small bathroom mirror above the sink in Parrot’s bathroom. My scoop-neck T-shirt fitted just right across my chest, tightening a little around my biceps. I turned this way and that way, flexing my arms a little and puffing out my chest. I was due to see Penguin tonight—along with Jay, and I wanted to look my best even though my clothes were old, a little tattered and somewhat borrowed. My hair was shaped just right after getting Barry to trim up the sides and front a little. My sideburns were shaved into small diamond points and my brows had been plucked and tweezed, shaping them properly.

A knock sounded on the bathroom door making me roll my eyes. “What?”

“Yo, Rudes.” Parrot’s voice sounded muffled. Turning, I flicked the lock and pulled down the handle. Parrot pushed his way inside and whistled low, his head nodding slowly as he made me turn in a circle. “Nice. You look buff, Rudi.”

“Thanks.” I smiled a little and took a deep breath. For some reason, I was really nervous about seeing both Penguin and Jay, but especially Jay.

“You scrub up well, Rudes. You sure we can’t get something going on?” he asked as he rubbed the front of his jeans, which showed a noticeable bulge. The dirty fucker was turned on.

I made a face as a shudder ran through me. We'd tried that already—once—and there was no way in hell we were going back there—ever. "Fuck, no."

"Are you sure?"

This guy was something else.

Smacking him across the chest, I walked out the bathroom, leaving him there, and headed to the living room where my stuff was. Dropping down to my knees, I rifled through my small bag of clothing. I had a couple pair of jeans, a few T-shirts and a hoody that I'd grabbed, but other than that, I had nothing, really. Everything was still at home—a home that I wasn't welcomed at.

Sighing, I wrapped my clothes up, trying to make them as small as possible. Parrot came into the room and slouched down on the sofa, his leg swinging back and forth as it hung over the arm, his fingers dancing quickly over the screen of his phone.

"You know, Rudes, I heard something today."

I rolled my eyes. Parrot heard things daily. Most of it was just gossip. Honestly, he was worse than a group of old ladies gasbagging together. "What's that?"

Leaning forward on his elbow, he pointed his phone at me. "It's about Giovanni and your mum."

"That's old news, Parrot, like yesterday."

"Nah-uh." He shook his head and pursed his lips. "This is good stuff, Rudes. I'm talking about top notch."

When I said nothing, Parrot prodded again and again and *again* until I threw my hands up in the air. "Okay, I give," I said with pure exasperation. "What's so fucking important that you feel the need to bug the shit out of me?"

Parrot smirked and tapped his fingers against his thigh whilst his eyes—which were dark pools of black—sparkled with mischievous intent. "You know you had that 'greement with Giovanni about you paying for your mum's tick in three meetings?"

"Not agreement, Parrot, arrangements."

"Whatever." He waved his hand dismissively. "That's just semantics. Anyway, you had that thing with him, and you didn't turn up the second time, therefore you backed out, and as we all know, you do not do that to someone like Giovanni. You get me?"

“I get you,” I sighed and went to rub my hand through my hair but stopped myself at the last minute. “I had the first meeting with him where he reamed my backside till I bled like a fucking pig. Like fuck I was going there again—all for him to do the same to my mouth. You know I don’t spin that shit no more, Parrot.”

“I know,” he admitted and went back to swinging his leg. “But seriously though, after you bailed, I heard not only was Giovanni dogging you, but he was all up in your mum’s shit. ‘parently, they got some shit going on together.”

Now I was interested. I stood up and crossed my arms over my chest. Something inside me didn’t like where this was going. “Is that right?”

The guy rolled his lips in and sniffed loudly. “Oh yeah.” He nodded. “Your mum’s taken your place.”

“What?” I made a face. “What do you mean ‘taken my place’?”

I received a shrug before, “Giovanni was pissed as hell that you’ve hit ground. He been looking everywhere for you as I already told you. Because no one been seeing you, he lost. Anyways, word has it, he took it out on your mum and has bundled her into keeping shit at the house. Thing is, he sees it as his right because you done him over.”

“I didn’t do him over,” I gritted out as I began to pace around the small, untidy living room. “So what you’re saying is that he’s using her as a safe place to stash his shit?”

“Not only that.”

My brows furrowed. “What else?” What more could there be?

A smug smile danced across Parrot’s mouth. “I got news that she’s ripping him off. Skimming from his stash and selling twenty quid wraps from the door, Rudes. She’s running him like he’s running her.”

My mouth dropped open in pure shock. I stared long and hard at the man wondering whether he was doing me over or not, but by the look of seriousness on his face, he was deadly serious.

“Oh, my God,” I whispered and spun around, blowing out a long breath. It was just one thing after another. Nothing this woman—my mum—did surprised me anymore.

Parrot nodded, got up from the sofa and moved to stand in front of me. Squatting a little so we were eye-to-eye, he leaned into whisper, “You know what this means right, Rudes?”

“No. I don’t get what this means.” I wasn’t exactly following. All I had in my head was Giovanni taking whatever shit out on my mum. Okay, the woman had done me over multiple times and treated me like nothing more than shit on the bottom of her shoe, but there was still something inside me that clenched—hard when I thought about Giovanni doing to her what he’d done to me.

“It means,” Parrot said slowly as if I were stupid, “we cash in on the shit, right?”

I reared back as if he had slapped me. “Oh to the hell no.” I shook my head and waved my hands in front of me. “I am not going back there. You’ve got another thing coming if you think I am.”

“Will you just think for a minute?” he snapped and moved back into my space. He gripped my shoulder in his hands, digging his fingers into my flesh. “Think about Penguin. Think about what you promised her and all that shit, Rudes. Think about it, Cuz. We can get in there, be in and out within minutes with a shitload of that fat fucker’s gear. Then when our pockets are full, we go down the Wellington, pawn the lot and bingo!” he boomed, his eyes wild with uncontained excitement. “We be rolling in it, Rudes. At the same time, we do that fucker over and punish him.”

“What you got against Giovanni?”

The excitement bled from Parrot’s eyes. Intense darkness spread, making his eyes chilly and cold all at once. “A couple of things.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing.” His jaw worked and his hands clenched into fists. “So, what do you say?”

My immediate reaction was *no fucking way*. There was no way on this earth I was going back, it was like going back to Titanic—no. However, when I let my mind go and thought of Penguin and everything that I had in fact promised her, there was a little niggling sensation in the back of my mind that told me I could give her those things and more if I just went back that one more time. If I just put everything that had happened to me into a small box and packed it up for the night, I could be a stranger, mute, estranged. If I had myself locked up tight—my feelings and emotions to be precise—then nothing I heard or saw could effectively do anything to me.

But I couldn’t.

Then a voice whispered in the back of my mind that I could, that I could do this. What was the harm? After weighing up the pros and the cons, I really had no choice but to do it.

Huffing out a long breath, I looked up into Parrot's dark, waiting eyes with my arm forced up my back and nodded. "You're on."

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Chapter Fifteen

Damn, I was sweating my fucking tits off. I wiped at my forehead with a swipe of my arm and blew out a fast breath. Parrot, who stood next to me, looked completely and utterly too calm and collected for what we were just about to do. His hands weren't even shaking a little. Mine, huh, they were trembling.

"Give me your money." Parrot curled his fingers in a "gimme" gesture.

I looked down at his palm and back up at him with a raised brow. "For what?"

"For the gear, of course," he said if I were stupid. At my blank look, he sighed and explained, "This is what's gonna happen. I'm gonna go knock on your door and your old bag of a mum is gonna open up, and then I'm gonna pretend I'm a customer coming to get me some of that nice gear that Giovanni's storing upstairs. Whilst that's happening, you're gonna shimmy up the drainpipe, like you did before, and track your way into the house. When you do that, you grab the shit and leg it back out again."

I stared at the man, wondering if he was off his fucking rocker. "Are you fucking serious?" I hissed and glared at the stupid-as-hell man.

"Excuse me," he argued. "Remember I'm the one helping you here."

My eyes narrowed. "And why is that, exactly?"

Parrot licked his big lips and shifted on the spot. He peeked around the wall we were hiding behind then dodged back. "I'm getting something out of all this shit as well."

"Yeah, I know. The Giovanni thing."

"Not just that."

My head began to pound. I rubbed my temples. "What do you mean, exactly?"

"Well, duh, Rudes. When you get that laffy taffy of yours back out here, I take my twenty-five percent and we all even. Then you can be going on your merry old way, find your guy and give him some pump and run. There." He shrugged and splayed his hands wide. "We all be happy."

I stared at the man incredulously. Surely he had to be winding me up? “Seriously?”

“Uh-huh. Of course.”

“You expect me to give you twenty-five percent when I’m the one risking falling from the fucking roof and breaking my Goddamned neck, and may I add, stealing Giovanni’s gear. I think you’ve been bashed over the head a few too many times, Parrot.”

“Cuz, please,” he scoffed. “You’re not *that* stupid and remember Giovanni deserves this. Now hand over the money.”

That hand of his came out again. I glanced down at the palm as I gritted my teeth and reached into my back pocket, pulling out my last twenty-pound note. It was a little grey and rumpled around the edges. “I’m missing seeing Penguin and Jay for all this bollocks. That’s all the money I have. This better work otherwise, I will kill you,” I warned and slammed the purple-headed paper in his palm, wondering if I’d just made a deal with the devil or not.

“Rudes.” Parrot smiled evilly and popped his head around the wall again. He nodded once. “Has anyone ever told you, you worry too much?”

Landing on the other side of the fence, I listened to Parrot work his magic with my mum. Damn, he was a smooth talker when he needed to be. I rolled my eyes when he got a little too fresh for my liking. When he coughed, that was my cue to go. I ran around the back of the house and eyed the bathroom window. I felt myself smile when I saw it was still open from last time I’d been here. Climbing in the daytime was a lot freaking easier than in pitch-black darkness.

My boots still scraped along the brick and my fingers burned as they brushed against the rough surface. My jeans pulled across my bum, and I cursed when I heard my top pull and stretch a little across my biceps. Climbing up onto the mini ledge, I slithered my way through the bathroom window, landing on the floor a lot easier and smoother than last time.

I just took my first step into the passage when I heard footsteps sounding up the stairs. My eyes went wide as my heart beat frantically in my chest. Sweat that was already present—tripled and beaded across my forehead. I was about to get caught if I didn’t get my arse moving. Eying possible hiding places, I saw my bedroom door open and ran towards it. Darting around the wood, I scanned

the bedroom quickly, seeing it a complete and utter mess. I dropped to the floor, rolling over so my body just fit under the bed in time for the door to swing open fully.

Gripping the duvet cover that hung over the side of the bed haphazardly, I moved it aside a little, just in time to see my mum come into the bedroom. I watched her bare, bony feet move across the floor towards my wardrobe, the door opened and then something rustled. Adjusting my body angle a little because I wanted to see better but also because something sharp was digging into my hip, I caught sight of my mum and bit my lip to stop from making a noise. She was covered in dark black, blue and purple bruises. Her hair, that was usually down and greasy, was pulled back into a mess of a bun with little tendrils hanging down. Her wafer-thin body trembled, making the dirty, pink nightdress she wore dance. My eyes travelled down her bare twig-sized legs, and I cringed. From the back, I could see the finger marks pressed into her skin just above her knees. When she turned with a small gear bag in her hands, I caught sight of clear needle and blood marks down the front of her, covering little parts of the pink material.

She was a complete and utter mess. It looked like Giovanni had already had his way with her, and it wasn't good.

Once the door closed again, I listened to her move back downstairs before I rolled back out from under the bed and pushed myself up, kicking shit out of the way. I grimaced when I looked down at the bed that I used to share with Penguin. The off-white sheets were now grey in some places, and in others, there were dried patches of what looked like cum.

Gagging, I moved over to the wardrobe and felt my eyes go wide and my jaw drop open at the stacks and stacks of drugs that had been placed neatly inside. My clothes, that were once hanging up and folded along the bottom, were now gone—all replaced with boxes and packets of Class A drugs. Wrapped up in meshed cotton, the smell permeated my nose, making me turn my head to the side and bury my nose in my upper arm. My hands reached out to touch the bags of sugar-sized parcels but I snatched them back at the last minute. Never once in my life—voluntarily—had I touched drugs. Never would I ever touch them either. I'd seen too much damage done with them and now wasn't any different.

Dropping to my knees, I scanned the packages for anything different than what looked like coke and some smack. I think there was also finely wrapped parcels of brown too—probably ash by the looks of it. The more I leaned in, the

more the smell of drugs filled my nose. I swear I got high just breathing it in. Finally, at the bottom of the wardrobe, in between the bottom of two stacks, was a clear dustbin liner wrapped up with an elastic band around it. Pulling the package out and cringing at the sound it made, I turned and dropped it onto the bed. Busting the band and rolling the bag out, I gasped and could have swallowed my tongue when I saw an obscene amount of fifty-pound notes, all piled up together. On a closer look there had to be something like ten maybe fifteen or even twenty grand staring up at me.

“Holy fucking shit,” I whispered as sweat rolled down the side of my face. Sitting back on my haunches, I annoyingly wiped the salty liquid away and chewed on my lips. I knew that taking this money meant so fucking much, but at the same time, justice and Giovanni’s just desserts rolled through my head, making me smile a little. I knew that fat fucker was loaded, but damn, if he could just leave amounts of drugs and money here then how much more did he have elsewhere?

Also, if he had this much just here, then he wouldn’t really miss it, would he?

Deciding what was best, I grabbed the money, wrapped the bag back up and stuffed it under my arm. I stopped at the door and turned back to look at the drugs that I’d left untouched. If I took what looked like a key from the stack, I could give that to Parrott instead of parting with the cash, even though there was more than either of us had probably seen in our lives.

Again deciding that was the best thing to do, I raced back and grabbed a square parcel of coke which went under my arm too. Chewing on my poor, abused bottom lip, I dipped back into the stash and pulled out a book-shaped package full of pressed ash. Before I left, I quickly searched through the shit that littered my old bedroom floor and found an old duffel bag. It was wrinkled as hell and had a small hole at the bottom, but it would hide what I was holding.

Strapping the bag across my back, I climbed back out the window, landing effortlessly on my feet. My whole body trembled with adrenaline, fear and excitement. I was carrying a shitload of money and a high quantity of drugs, and it was fair to say that I was shitting a fucking brick!

I watched and waited until Parrot left on his merry way before heading in the opposite direction. I needed not only to get to the flat I’d rented off Barry because that needed sorting out, but I needed to get far away from Parrot before

his craziness took over. I'd seen when I'd handed over the two keys of drugs to him, his eyes zeroing in on the money, pound signs dinging over and over again. I knew he wouldn't spare me in his want to take the money from me, no matter what.

Continuing to watch my back, I held the duffel bag close to my chest, my palms sweating like mad and my heart beating ten to the dozen. I could actually feel the sweat pouring from my pores and trailing down my face. I needed to get this money put away before I bumped into someone and either accidentally dropped it—which was very bloody unlikely—or someone just happened to take a fancy to my bag and felt like lifting it, which again was very bloody unlikely because I was not letting the bag go... For nothing.

I darted down the back alley behind the row of shops and up the black metal stairs that creaked a little under my weight. The door was hard as hell to open and squeaked like a good'en, so I knew I'd have to oil it or something when I could.

The moment the door opened, the smell of must, dust and mould assaulted my senses, sending me into fits of coughing and sneezing. I sneezed until my nose ran and was red at the tip, and my throat was raw. Shutting the door after me, I walked slowly through the small flat, grimacing and chewing my lip at the state of the place. The walls were a nicotine-brown colour and peeling in some places, the ceiling just as bad and the floor, oh hell, it looked like a puppy had been let loose, ripping the old musty carpet up and tearing it to pieces. The closer I looked it did seem there was a pest problem just like Barry had said. In the corner of the okay-sized living room, there were big, fat droppings what looked like came from rats.

I stood back and ran my hands through my hair. This was gonna take forever to sort out. The whole flipping place looked like it was ready to be condemned. I walked from room to room, noting the problems in my head, creating lists that continued to grow and grow and grow.

Opening a window because the smell was really getting to me now, I leaned out; my hands pressed against the windowsill and watched people walk by downstairs, cars bibbing and engines rumbling. If I listened real good and hard, I could faintly hear the sea in the distance.

I glanced back over my shoulder to the living room and nodded to myself. Okay the place was a complete and utter mess, but it was my complete and utter mess. I closed my eyes and watched a small movie play out in my head. I

imagined Penguin running into the room, a big smile on her face as she dropped down to the nice, clean floor and played with new toys that she gotten out of boxes and packets rather than from the charity shop. I imagined putting her to bed in her *own bed* and in her *own room*.

Tears gathered in my eyes as I turned and leaned back against the window frame. A huge sob stuck in my chest, taking my breath away at the same time as I glanced around the living room—my living room. Slithering down the stained and dirty wall, I hit the carpet with a dull thud and completely broke down. I'd finally done it. I'd finally done something that I promised not only myself but Penguin too.

Relief, so much relief poured from me, easing off my tired and weary shoulders. Tears, so many of them rained down my face, dripping off my chin, salty and hot. I cried for not only myself but for Penguin. I cried for achieving something that I never thought I would, but also because I now had a chance to make our lives better and be somebody that not only I could be proud of, but Penguin could be too.

I didn't have to be Tutti Fruitti Rudi anymore. I didn't have to duck and dive to make sure we had food in our stomachs. No, I had a shitload of money and a place to lay my hat, somewhere to call home.

“*Home*,” I whispered.

I'd finally done it.

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Chapter Sixteen

“Whoa.” Jay gripped my shoulders as I lifted him up and spun him around, shouting and hooting at the same time. “Put me down, you crazy person.” He giggled and slapped my shoulders. Once I set him on his feet, he tilted his head to the side and eyed me with vibrant, dancing eyes. “What has you so happy?”

I couldn't help but move on my feet, shuffling from one to the other. I wasn't nervous, no; I was excited, ecstatic and damn near to exploding. I wanted him to come see my new place, show him all I'd done in the last couple of days. I'd spent a tidy amount of the money on everything I could think of that the flat needed, along with me and Penguin. The rest of the dosh had been stashed somewhere safe where I could take only small amounts out if and when needed.

“I have a place...” I explained it all to Jay, my hands moving at a fast pace as excitement made my sentences all run together, bleeding into one whole burst of breath. By the time I was finished, I needed to take a couple of deep breaths, but I was cool.

Something flashed in Jay's eyes causing his smile some hesitation. “Oh that's good. Well done.”

Well, that wasn't what I was expecting.

I didn't actually know what I expected, but I do know that wasn't it. No, I did know what I expected. I expected him to throw his arms around my shoulders and tell me how good I had done, how pleased he was that I was sorting myself out along with Penguin, but that didn't come... at all.

Suddenly he quietened and his smile looked a bit too strained now. “You okay?” I asked after silence settled over us like a heavy fog.

“Oh yeah.” He nodded jerkily and shoved his hands in the front pocket of his jeans. “I'm just...” He cleared his throat. “See, I've got to go. I've been working like a dog for the last couple of days and I'm,” he pointed to his car that was parked in the drive, “due to meet a couple of guys from work.”

“Oh.” Disappointment slammed through me at his sudden rejection. “I thought maybe we could do something. You know? Me, you and Penguin.” I had ideas of the three of us going down to the seafront, grabbing some candy floss, hot doughnuts and maybe some Rossi's ice cream, then sitting down on the sand watching the sun go down. Penguin would love that.

Jay shifted on his feet, his dirty work boots scraping against the wood. “Maybe tomorrow?”

I nodded numbly as I watched him move past me to his car. My eyes continued to watch him, my mind silently begging him to look back and give me some sort of smile, but he didn't. He just got into his car, started it up after a couple of turns and backed out of the drive. Seconds later, he was gone, and I stood outside his house all alone wondering what the fuck has just happened.

“Well that went well,” I mumbled to myself as I knocked on the door.

Monica answered it with a huge smile on her face. I didn't miss her eyes quickly darting up and down the length of me, scanning my clothing and the way I looked. I was due to take Penguin out for a couple of hours.

My head tilted to the side, my eyes narrowing a little. I was upset and a little sad at Jay's attitude just now, and the sadness had morphed into anger. Then to stand in front of his mum, effectively, and her to judge me all because she'd looked after Penguin for a little while—just made my blood boil.

“Are you finished?” I snarled and raised my brows. “Or would you like me to take my clothes off, show you my body for any track marks or anything like that? Would that be good for you, Monica? Would that ease the worry I see seeping from your eyes?”

Monica gasped and slapped her hand over her mouth. “Rudi.”

“Save it.” I gave her the hand. “I'm here for Penguin.”

“What on earth's the matter?” she asked, moving closer to me, her hand snaking out to touch my shoulder. “What's going on, Rudi?”

I moved out of her reach and hitched my hands on my hips. Today had been real good. I'd made progress at work by giving Barry my first week's rent. I'd earned respect off the old dude for doing that, and that made my chest puff out with pride that I'd done something good with the drug money. Then once I'd finished work, I'd gone around the shops like a mad person buying as much as I could carry by way of decoration for the flat. I had things on order, waiting to be delivered. Beds had been ordered and were coming on Saturday because I'd paid for forty-eight hour delivery. I had food, plenty of good, wholesome food in the cupboards and shit like that. Hell, I'd even bought a few cookbooks from the charity shop so I could learn to cook better food for Penguin. I'd done more than I had in my life today, and within the last couple of minutes, I felt it all flush down the toilet, leaving me with bitter anger and hurt all rolled together in a brightly wrapped package with a fucking bright red bow sitting on top.

“You, Jay, everyone,” I shouted and clenched my hands into fists. Taking deep breaths, I tried to calm my temper. “Can I just have Penguin, please?”

Monica swallowed hard and rubbed her neck. “Do you think it’s a good idea to look after Penguin in the mood you’re in?”

The glare I shot her way was so hot, it could have melted something. “Excuse me?”

The woman backed up and closed the door a little. “Now, Rudi,” she said as if she were trying to convince Cujo to get away from her. “Taking Penguin out whilst you’re in this mood, isn’t a good idea, is it?”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “I’ve asked you twice if I can have my sister and twice you’ve ignored me. I’ll ask a third time before I come in and get her. What’s it gonna be?”

Jay’s mum’s face hardened, along with her grip on the door. Her knuckles whitened along with her lips. “Listen here, Rudi Costa. I will not be spoken to in that manner. In my opinion, you are not in the right mind to take care of a vulnerable person like Penguin. If you want to go and cool off, then that is fine by me, but I cannot and will not let you have that child. Do I make myself clear?”

I leaned into the door and looked her directly in the eye. “I’ve asked for my sister and you haven’t given her to me. You have no right to keep her from me. I’ve done naff all wrong. Now, again, give me Penguin before I call the police.”

“I’m sorry,” she said as she closed the door a little more. Now all that was left was a sliver. “I can’t let her go whilst you’re being unreasonable. Come back tomorrow, and we’ll talk about it. Goodbye.”

The bitch slammed the door in my face.

Throwing myself at the door, I kicked it first, and then pounded on the thick, rich wood with my closed fists, shouting out for Penguin. I had to see her. I hadn’t seen or spoken to her since the day before yesterday. All I wanted was to see she was okay and hear her voice, maybe feel her in my arms. The woman had no right keeping me away from Penguin. Didn’t she understand the damage she was doing by keeping us away from each other?

I continued to do this until my throat gave out from shouting too much. The palms of my hands ached and stung with how hard I’d hit them against the door, and my toes pulsed with every beat of my heart inside my boots.

I swiped at the angry tears that threatened to fall. "I'll be back," I promised.

Long ago, the music had all bled into one long, boring-as-hell song. I was so drunk that I couldn't differentiate when one ended and another began. All I knew was that the amount of alcohol I'd had, had blurred my mind and everything along with it.

Now, that was a real good thing.

I chuckled at that, earning myself a few concerned looks from the bartender who was watching me closely. I'd seen his look in the beginning when I'd come in. He'd tried his chat up lines on me, telling me my eyes were the colour of coconut shells, told me I was gorgeous, and I had a glint in my eye that asked for trouble. I'd snorted and told him that my asshole was closed up to actual arse lickers. After that, he'd steered clear, only coming close to me when I ordered another drink.

Four pints and a couple of neat vodkas later—because I was a lightweight—did I feel *not* like me, which was good.

"Another!" I shouted and threw a crisp tenner in the general direction of the bartender. I leaned into the wood and waved my hands around in the air when the man failed to look in my direction.

"No more," he said, as he stopped across the bar from me. He sighed heavily and picked the money up, twisted it a little and leaned over to stuff it in the pocket on the left hand side of my shirt. "Go home."

I snorted and splayed my hands on the bar, letting them slide across the thickly painted and polished wood until my elbow slipped off the edge. "I don't have a home."

"Sure you do. Everyone has a home."

"Whatever," I slurred and slipped off the stool only to nearly face-plant the floor. I turned and gripped the bar, holding myself steady until the world stopped tilting on its axis. Damn, that felt wrong. Maybe I should have stopped at my second beer. But then, where was the fun in that?

Chuckling again to myself, I wiped the spittle that had fallen from my mouth with the back of my hand and moved through the throngs of people, bumping into chests and shoulders on the way. I apologised and giggled when in response, I felt hands grope my backside and my cock. I laughed out loud

and pushed my crotch into people's hands, liking the clenching squeezes on my neglected parts.

A heat covered my back and strong hands settling on my hips, holding them hostage. Lips, very hot lips danced over the side and back of my neck. A goatee if I could feel correctly, scraped against my skin, making me sigh and lean into the contact whilst trying to move forward at the same time. The guy stayed with me until we hit the doors, where the stud muffin bouncers smiled, shook their heads and pushed open the dark doors so the street came into view. I stumbled outside and sucked in a deep lungful of air, which seemed to wake me up a little.

I opened my eyes when the big guy spun me around and grasped my hand, pulling me down the darkened almost pitch black alley which stunk of piss and wet cardboard. I grunted a little when I was thrust up against the wall and a mouth with thick—too thick lips—pushed against my own, sucking my tongue into his mouth. Something in the back of my mind screamed at me to stop, to think about what I was doing, whilst another part gave the first part the finger and even made a little *Nernerneener* sound. Then another part—as the guy continued to eat my face—demanded that I open my eyes and look to see if green ones stared back at me.

I did and they didn't.

The eyes that opened were a deep brown, much like my own. They were half-mast, no doubt—again, much like my own. They had little lines in the corners, so the guy was older than me. By the feel of his hands and body pressed up against my own, he was a lot bigger than me too.

Well didn't that just turn me the fuck off? The stranger pulled back from the kiss, obviously noticing that I wasn't feeling it. I wasn't, and there was one reason for that—he wasn't Jay. That thought definitely penetrated my mind. I stumbled back against the brick and held my hands out in front of me when he came closer, signalling him to stop. "Stop, man, stop!"

"Oh come on." He advanced, his hands snaking around my waist, thrusting his hips and hard-on against me. He felt nice and big. I couldn't help the moan when he turned his hips a little to the right and thrust up against my own cock that was half-hard. "There we are," he mumbled and began kissing my neck again as he rubbed me till I was fully hard.

"Arghhhh," I moaned out loud and bit my lip when hands moved from around my back down to the front of me, popping the button fly open and

taking my cock out. I hissed a little when the guy's strong hold gripped it a little tighter than I would have liked, squeezing the head until it darkened and a small dribble of pre-cum slithered out.

"You've got a nice-looking cock, but I don't want that. Turn around, let me fuck this arse."

I smiled and fought at the same time to keep my eyes open. Suddenly, I realised that the night air was making me tired as hell the more I breathed it in. I stifled a yawn. "Who says I'm a bottom?"

The man's dark brows rose, a wicked smile appearing across his face. "You're nothing but. You've got too much of a nice arse not to be. Now do as you're told and turn around. Face the wall and place your hands above your head."

Saluting him, I wobbled as I turned and thrust my jean-covered backside out at him. He growled and attacked my jeans, ripping them down my legs, leaving me bare to the night air. Hands, thick and heavy, moved over my bare skin. "I knew it." He sounded pleased and a little awed too. I knew I had a nice arse. It was round, muscled, hairless and silky smooth all at once. "Gonna fuck this into the wall."

"Do it," I whispered even though I didn't really give a fuck. The hard-on I'd had minutes ago was withering down to nothing very quickly. That little part of my mind still screamed that I was making a huge mistake, that it wasn't Jay behind me with his hands roaming over my body. No, I knew it wasn't. I guess that was part of it all though. I'd gone over to Jay's to spend some time with him and hope to get to know each other better, perhaps be able to take back some of the things I'd said, like me not being good enough for him. I was stupid enough to think that stealing all that money and doing something good with it made me a different person.

How deluded I was.

Fingers pulled apart my cheeks and hot breath fanned over my hole. Then hot spit landed in the middle of my starfish and a rough finger pushed and prodded, trying to break its way through. I pushed out and relaxed—or tried to. I closed my eyes and let out a deep breath—his finger broke through, wiggling and twisting. Another finger joined in, stretching me a little, making me moan when blunt-headed tips stroked against my prostate. I whimpered when he removed his fingers and pulled out. Shuffling sounded behind me over the sound of cars bibbing in the background. The club music I could hear a little, but I could feel and hear the bass more than anything.

“Ready?” he asked. Not giving me a chance to answer, he thrust himself inside me to the hilt. “Fucking hell,” he gasped and gripped my hips tighter in his meaty fingers. His breath fanned over my back as his shirt rubbed against the knobs of my spine.

I gritted my teeth at the quick flash of intense, burning pain. My arsehole clenched rhythmically, trying to close in on itself, but it wouldn't and couldn't, not with the fucking huge cock stuffed up my backside. I breathed out and whimpered, “Move.” I knew the moment he started moving, the pain would change—hopefully.

The guy grunted loudly and pulled all the way out until I thought he had second thoughts, but then he slammed back into me with such force, I fell forward onto the wall, grazing the front of my bare cock. I reached down quickly and grabbed hold of my piece, wincing when my hand moved over the soft, scraped, bared tip. Fuck, that hurt.

I had no clue how long he fucked me, but I did know that the more it went on, the more turned off I became. The constant back and forth woke me up a little more each time, plus the burn of my arsehole, because we had no lube, kept me from relaxing. Spit really wasn't a good substitute.

The big man behind me—who I'd failed to get a name from—gripped my shoulders and thrust even harder against me, his hips smashing against my flesh, his cock jutting back and forth. “Coming,” he shouted and pushed me into the wall, crushing my cheek against the abrasive surface as I felt his cock unload into my arse. What felt like minutes but was probably only seconds later, I felt dribbles of his cum leak out the sides where his cock immediately started to deflate inside me.

Bare.

“What the fuck?” I whispered brokenly and attempted to push away from him. I felt little drops of cum land on the back of my thighs. He pulled out, and my asshole clenched, keeping his shit inside me, when I wanted nothing more than to get the whole fucking lot of it out. “You went bare inside me?” I whirled around on him in time to see him flick the excess cum from his slimy cock and stuff it back into his jeans.

A smug look came over his face. “But you're Tutti Fruitti Rudi.”

I froze and swallowed hard as I felt the blood bleed from my face. My eyes burned and my throat quivered. “What?” I'd never seen this guy before in my

life. I would have remembered someone like him. Through my drink-induced brain, I tried for the life of me to remember, but I couldn't.

“You're the famous Rudi. Every gay guy in Southend and the surrounding areas knows you. Rumours have it that you've got the best arsehole a man could have. Now,” he smiled even bigger than before, all proud of himself and shit, “I can testify to that. Damn, you were well worth the money.” He dug into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. Folding two twenties together, he tossed them at me, along with his card. All three landed scattered at my feet. “Call me for a repeat. I may even pay you more or maybe, you could be *the birthday present* at one of my mate's parties? Yeah, Pete's birthday's coming up in a couple of weeks. You think you could make it?”

I stared blankly at the man as he continued to blabber off about me doing whatever. Finally, he gave up, thanked me and told me to give him a call when I wanted a “good old time fuck”. Then he was gone.

Looking down at myself, I cringed at what I saw. My jeans were still around my ankles and my flaccid cock was swinging in the subtle breeze. I could feel trickles of his cum juice subtly easing its way out of me with every exhale I took. I swallowed past my quivering throat and saw a tear fall from my eye as I bent over to yank my jeans up.

What the hell had I done?

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Chapter Seventeen

The clinic was full, which made this even more embarrassing. Normally I wasn't embarrassed at all. I'd come here once a month to get checked, have a lorry load of condoms shoved at me and probably lift a few things in the meantime, but now was different.

Last night I'd fucked up big time.

After seeing Angela at the counter and booking myself in, I sat down on one of the blue plastic seats and waited. The overhead TV was on, *This Morning's* theme tune echoing around the full room. I glanced around at the sea of faces. Most were my age or younger. One or two were a little older but not by much. I eyed the girls who sat curled up by themselves, their arms wrapped around their middles. They were the scared little ones, worried that they were pregnant. They always came in with the same worried, dejected looks on their faces. Then you had the guys and girls who you could tell were regulars here—more regular than me—and just coming in to have a quick test before they could get going, not really giving a shit overall. The gay guys were different. They had this far away, not quite there look on their faces. You could tell their minds were off wondering what the hell they were gonna do if they found out they were HIV positive... or anything else.

Right now I was in exactly the same place.

The last time I'd gone bareback—not voluntarily—was when I was abused by the men that my mum had brought home. Since then, when I had gained control of my life and who and what touched me, everyone wore a condom. I wore a condom when I fucked someone. It was a written rule amongst gay men—hell with all men but especially the LGBT community. It was pushed, elbowed and downright shoved down our throats by the counsellors, doctors and nurses to use protection each and every time because the outcry of HIV was spreading like nobody's business. Everyone was turning up HIV positive and not knowing about it because they thought they were safe. By then, it was too late. The deed had been done, and it was too bloody late to do anything.

That and the thought that I associated unprotected sex with being abused, scared me into using protection, making sure I was wrapped every time I slid into someone and vice versa. Just the thought that one time of utter stupidity last night would ruin the rest of my life, just about broke me, but at the same time, made me angry as hell.

I was never that stupid. Whenever I bent over for someone, I always watched, made sure they were wearing something. Drinking lowered my inhibitions, my security and made me fucking stupid as hell. In effect, drinking—and drinking too much—could have caused me to contract the HIV fucking virus and whatever the fuck else, too.

Stupidness.

What felt like hours later, my usual nurse, Paul, waved me over, a ready smile on his face. The moment he saw mine—or lack of—he frowned and followed me into the room, making sure to close the door after us with a soft hush.

“Rudi?”

“I need the HIV test, like now,” I said quickly, not being able to stand still. There was no point in beating around the bush. My whole body trembled with nerves. My heart beat ridiculously fast in my chest and my head pounded, not just with a hangover but with overwhelming tension.

Paul nodded and moved over to the sink, where he began washing his hands with the antiseptic stuff. I moved to the long, white bed and hefted myself on top of it and held out my arms, ready and waiting for him.

With purple gloves snapped into place, Paul approached me with a little finger punch thing ready in his hands. I held out my finger, wincing a little at the stab I knew was coming. Placing the device at my forefinger tip, Paul pressed it down, puncturing my skin. Seconds later, a red blob appeared. He reached over blindly for a test strip thingy as he looked up at me, his brows drawn together. “Something you want to tell me, Rudi?”

“No.”

Paul sighed and dropped the puncture device into a grey kidney dish, along with the wrap from the test strip. Placing a cotton wool ball over my finger, he held it in place for a couple of seconds. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Rudi.” The nurse looked up at me again, his icy blue eyes pleading with me. “Talk to me. I see you once a month and have done for the last couple of years. We usually have a laugh and chat about everything that you’ve been doing and who I’ve seen and what funny things have happened during that month.”

“For fuck’s sake, Paul!” I shouted and glared at the persistent man. Did he not understand that I had a hundred and one things on my mind and talking was the last thing I wanted to do? “I don’t want to talk. Is that okay?”

“Did something happen? You can talk to me, you know.”

He just had to keep prodding. “God damn you. I don’t need to talk to anyone, I don’t need anything. No, that’s a lie. All I need is this bloody HIV test and the results. That’s all I want and need, thank you very much.”

Now Paul just sounded hurt when he spoke. “If you don’t want to talk to me, you can talk to the counsellor, you know that. She’s in today. I can make sure you get seen right away, be her first patient.”

Sighing heavily, I dropped my head forward, wishing I had plenty of hair I could hide behind. “I don’t need to talk to anyone. I assure you, nothing happened, nothing like that anyway.”

“Are you sure?”

Rolling my eyes, I looked up at him and nodded. “I’m sure.”

He stared at me for a long moment before he nodded, then held out a white swab for my mouth. “Open up.”

Ten minutes later, I was back outside, even more nervous and worried than I had been before I went in. I knew the test took an hour at the most and that hour made my bum hole clench repeatedly, my gut jump and my heart beat triple time. My stomach churned, threatening to bring up the toast I’d managed to force down my throat earlier. The tea I’d had burned like hot acid in my stomach, creating little regurgitations in my chest.

The phone in my pocket buzzed, alerting me of a new text.

Pulling it out, I opened the phone and saw the text was from Jay. I debated about opening it, my finger just hovering over the little button. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to deal with him or the situation yet. I had too many things on my mind and part of me—even though I knew it was wrong—blamed him for my actions last night. If he wouldn’t have blown me out yesterday for whatever reason, things wouldn’t have turned out the way they did. I wouldn’t have gone to the club and got blind drunk and had unprotected sex in a dirty, filthy piss-stained alley with a stranger. No, I would have spent the night with Penguin and Jay along Southend seafront, maybe taking Penguin into the arcades and giving her some two pence coins for the machines, then maybe fighting playfully with Jay over who could win Penguin a teddy from the grabbers.

Deciding to ignore Jay's text, I closed the phone and set it back in my pocket. Fifteen minutes later, it went off again, buzzing intently against the side of my thigh. I clenched my hands into fists and debated about taking the piece of plastic out and perhaps crushing it in my grip. Maybe that would shut the thing up?

Getting annoyed and frustrated at not only the constant buzzing, but also the waiting, I got up from the uncomfortable blue plastic and paced the length of the clinic, not paying any attention to anyone else or their pained looks. I wrapped my arms around my waist; berating myself over and over again about how stupid I'd been last night. I'd bollocked myself repeatedly but that wasn't enough. I'd been stupid, so incredibly stupid.

"Rudi."

Nurse Paul's voice had me spinning around. I rushed to him and gripped his forearms, my eyes darted back and forth across his face, trying to read it. "It's negative, right?"

Paul gave me a small smile and led me back to the room, where he told me to sit down, but I was too worked up. "Rudi, have a seat."

"I can't." I swallowed and rubbed my forehead with the tips of my fingers that shook. "Just tell me."

"Okay." The nurse nodded and reached over to a sheet of printed paper from his desk. "The results are negative. That means that either it's really a negative, because the person or persons you had risky sex with didn't have the HIV virus, or if they did, had a very low viral load. Either that, or it's a false negative because the virus hasn't had a chance to infect you yet."

Relief so fucking strong swept through me and actually took my legs out. I collapsed to the floor, my hand reaching out to grab the end of the bed, clenching against the soft blue paper that rested on top of it. "Thank fuck."

"It's not one hundred percent, Rudi. I'd suggest you come back in two weeks, have another test."

My head was already shaking back and forth. "I don't need to come back. If the results have come back negative just like the others I've had previously, then I'll be okay." In my head, it had to be okay. I'd gotten the negative news, and that, in my mind, was all that I had wanted. Anything else that could spoil that, my mind didn't want to know.

Paul sighed and pursed his lips. "Rudi," he said sternly, obviously using his medical position to pull rank on me. "In my opinion, I would suggest you come

back in a couple of weeks' time to have another test, just to be on the safe side. You can never be too sure with things like this, especially with... you and everything... else.”

“I’m not doing that anymore, Paul.” I wiped my sweaty hands down the front of my jeans and licked my suddenly dry lips. “I’ll come back in my usual four weeks, okay?”

The nurse’s jaw ticked obviously wanting to say more. Hell, he probably wanted to strangle me and shake me till I gave in, but I was set in my ways on this. I walked over to where he sat and held out my hand. He looked down at it before sighing heavily and pulling me into him. He clasped my hand and held it in between the two of his. Looking up at me, he said, “I don’t like this, Rudi.”

I smiled a little, even though it felt shaky as hell, because no matter how much my mind repeated over and over again that I’d gotten a negative result, my body was still in shock at not only the result but the need to be here, too. “I’ll be fine, Paul. Thanks for everything.”

I’d just opened the door when Paul called my name. I looked over my shoulder at him. “Yeah?”

“You forgot these.” He held up a yellow biohazard plastic bag filled with my usual monthly wares.

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Chapter Eighteen

“You know,” Jay said warily. “I think we need to talk.”

That was an understatement.

We both stood staring at each other. He had dark rings around his eyes, and even though he had a nice new tan from working outside, it only made his face look more tired, especially around his eyes and mouth. He actually looked like he hadn't slept much better than me. His dark-blond hair was messed on top and looked as if he'd run his hands through it a million times today.

Probably what I looked like if I'd have looked in the mirror this morning.

“Okay.” I nodded and adjusted Penguin in my arms. Subtly, I scanned our surroundings in the car park we stood in, watching people drive in and out, park their cars, go to the small black machine before walking off to do whatever they came to do. “You wanna come back to my place?”

Jay nodded back at me and smiled a little. “I'd like that.”

After he locked up and ticketed his own car, he pocketed the keys and waved at me to get on with it. With my place not being far, I carried Penguin all the way, with Jay walking by my side, not saying anything. The silence wasn't heavy or uncomfortable, but I could tell that Jay was silently having a conversation with himself, probably about what he and I were going to say. That was going to be one interesting chat, because I was feeling that there were some crossed wires going on somewhere.

Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the creaky steps that led up to my flat. Going first, I unlocked the door, giving it a quick jerk of my shoulder, because I still hadn't oiled the thing, and held my hand out, waiting for Jay to go in. He hesitated a little, and then seemed to shake himself.

Penguin tensed in my arms, her head burrowing into my neck. “Rudi,” she whispered whilst her hands clutched at my T-shirt, trying to pull herself into me more. It was clear she didn't want to go into the flat.

“Hey, Penguin,” I smoothed my hand up and down her back as I walked with her to her new bedroom, “I've got a surprise for you.”

Hesitantly, her head popped up, her eyes widening a little. “You have?”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded and tickled her, making her squirm in my arms. Damn, it felt good to hold her and have her near. “You wanna see?”

“Yes.” She squealed and wiggled to get down.

Placing her on her feet, I held her small hand in mine and stopped outside the closed door. I looked down at Penguin to see her chewing on her bottom lip and glancing up at me a little nervously. I glanced back at Jay to see that he'd stopped down the passage a little, giving me and Penguin our little time. I smiled at him in acknowledgement and thanks.

Opening the newly painted door, I smiled broadly and flicked the light switch, illuminating the pink and white room. I'd spent a shitload of time and money making the room perfect for Penguin. I knew that I didn't really need to go to any trouble at all. Penguin would have accepted anything I would have given her and if that had been a bed in a small room without anything else, she would have been happy, but she deserved better than that and now with the money—even though it was stolen and came from drugs and God knows where and what else—I could do this for her.

The walls were painted a candyfloss pink that I'd had made especially for her in B&Q. I'd bought small stencils of penguins, teddy bears and hearts and painted them on along the top of the wall as a replacement border. I'd also gotten a new wardrobe set with side table and chest of drawers that I'd also filled with new clothes. Her bed, that sat along the far wall with the window just to the side of it, was a special pink and white, with silver painted swirls and stars along the princess-cut headboard and footboard. The covers were gingham pink with little white bows that looked real girly.

Penguin squealed long and loud when she spotted the bed. Why she did this, I had no clue. My brows furrowed when I glanced at the toys that were stacked up in the corner, waiting for her to rip open and bug me to put batteries in, but she didn't. She instead headed straight past those as if they weren't even there.

Huh.

Climbing onto her bed, she squirmed until she was under the covers and looking up at me, her bright blue eyes shining and twinkling, her cheeks rosy and bunched where she'd smiled so much. “I love Rudi.”

Something inside me settled. Seeing her so happy and so *her age* made me feel complete a little bit more, like I'd done the right thing.

Walking over to the bed, I crawled on top of the covers and curled up around her, against the wall, and pulled her small body into my arms. Burying my nose in her hair, I felt my brows pull in a little when I smelled coconut

instead of strawberries, but then a shadow fell over the door. I glanced up to see Jay standing in the doorway looking way too uncomfortable. His hands were clenching and unclenching, his lips were pursed and his brows were arched.

“Jay, come,” Penguin said into the silenced room. She patted her hand to the other side of her, her blue eyes intently watching the man that had come to mean something to both me and Penguin. “Jay, come,” she repeated when Jay failed to move.

He looked at me I guess for permission. I nodded and watched his lithe form move across the room. He sat down on the bed and bent over, the muscles in his back pulled and bunched, his biceps jerked and rolled as his hands fiddled with something. The tendons in his arms flicked and ticked. Only when I heard the plop of his boots hit the new carpet did I realise he was taking them off. Before I could reach down to my own—because I should have thought of that myself—Jay turned and undone mine, pulling them off my feet before dropping them to the floor. Then he ruffled under the covers, making Penguin scream out loud in fits of giggles, trying to get her sandals—that Monica had bought—off her feet.

When all of our shoes were removed, Jay slipped in next to Penguin. His head rested on one of his bent arms, whilst the other stretched over Penguin hesitantly so it rested on my hip. His fingers curled around my hip bone, his thumb pressing against the soft skin there. “Is this okay?” he whispered, his eyes flicking all over my face.

I glanced down at Penguin to see her blue eyes glazed over and rolling a little, her eyelids becoming heavier by the minute. I didn't answer him until Penguin's eyes were closed and her mouth had dropped open with little snuffled snores coming out.

“It's fine.”

Jay sighed heavily, enough to ruffle Penguin's hair. He swallowed hard, his eyes intently focused on me. “I'm sorry.”

My brows pulled together as I slid my arm across Penguin so it touched Jay's chest. I fanned my hand out, feeling his muscles under my touch and his hot skin. Peace much like when I held Penguin in my arms, settled inside me when this man was close. “What are you apologising for?”

“I was a stupid prick to you the other night,” he said softly. “I'm sorry for that.”

“You were kind of a prick,” I admitted. “Why’d you do it, because I know it’s not your normal persona?”

Jay didn’t answer for so long; I thought maybe I’d missed something. Eventually though, he said, “I... I got jealous.”

I nearly choked on my next breath. “Jealous?” I said incredulously, remembering only at the last minute that we weren’t alone. “Of what, exactly?”

“Of you,” he whispered fiercely, his fingers tightening around my hip. “Of you and this.” He let go of my hip and waved his hand around. “I got jealous that you came to us with practically nothing and the... state that you and Penguin were in then—what days, nearly a week later—you turn up and announce that you have a new place and it’s like this and like that. Then you started going on about what you’re gonna be doing with it and how Penguin’s gonna love it. I got jealous, simple as.”

“I did come to you with nothing but the shit my mum had dealt out. You’re right about that,” I admitted even though it bugged the shit out of me.

Jay nodded. “I know and I feel bad for that, for thinking of you in that manner and assuming that someone like you could never have this because if I admitted it, I did think that. I’m sorry for doing that. I’m sorry for being a prick.”

“We’re quite the pair, huh?” The look on his face just about broke my heart. I shuffled closer and slipped my hand around his back, pulling him in closer still. “You don’t need to be jealous. I understand what you thought and secretly, I wondered when I first met you whether you were like that, but after spending time with you, I realised that you weren’t. That night, I guess you were just feeling something or another really. You’d probably had a bad day at work and came home to something that had upset you further and...”

“I guess you’re right,” Jay admitted quietly. “I’d had an okay day at work, but when I got home, I just wanted to have a shower and go out with you and Penguin. Instead, I came home to Monica having a moan at me about not doing something before heading to work earlier that morning, then telling me that Dad wanted to have a word with me when he got home because he’d been at a merchant’s all day and was pissed about something or another. An hour or so later, you came around and told me about all this, I guess that was my way of exploding.”

I snorted. “I’m glad you don’t get angry or anything like that when you explode.”

“Nah,” Jay smiled, his eyes relaxing a little. “I just kind of go off and sulk much like I did that night.”

Memories, thoughts and snippets of angry men in my life, flashed before my eyes. Men hitting me and my mum when I was younger flitted through my mind. My body instantly tensed at the phantom feel of hands and fists hitting my body, blood rushing to the surface as bruises formed and cuts exploded, the red stuff splattering and dripping from my body.

“Hey,” Jay said softly, his hand reached up and cupped my face, his thumb tracing over the curve of my cheek. “You okay?”

My eyes opened, and I realised where I was and that I was okay. I was okay. I scanned Jay's face, taking in all the little bits of it that I loved and adored, then I looked down at Penguin. I gazed at her sleeping form for the longest time. When I felt my body relax, I looked back up at Jay just in time to catch the concerned frown on his face before it was wiped away. “I'm fine.”

“Are you sure?”

My head dropped to the side as my hand slipped under the hem of Jay's top, feeling his hot and soft skin. I needed to touch something on him even if it was a little part. “Yeah, I am now.”

“You are staying for dinner, right?”

After having our little chat or heart-to-heart, whatever it was called, we'd fallen asleep both curled around Penguin. We'd woken to her complaining about being too hot. Now, I was in the kitchen starting dinner, whilst Penguin watched cartoons in the living room.

Jay eyed me warily as he perched himself up on a stall against the old kitchen counter. The thing creaked under his weight. “You cook?”

I clucked my tongue and shot him a glare, but I didn't really mean it, though. “Of course I cook. I've cooked since I was ten years old.”

“I'm sorry,” Jay said quickly, as if sensing his mistake. “I didn't realise.”

“You're alright.” I sighed and reached for a new saucepan out of a set I'd bought. Settling it on the counter, I moved to the vegetable rack that held the potatoes and fresh veg. I grabbed the bag of spuds and dropped them to the counter too, as I searched through the cutlery drawer for a small knife. “You couldn't have known.”

“I bet you had to do a lot of other things too, huh?” he asked softly, his eyes just as soft and rounded a little.

Damn, I could feel the pity creeping in.

“Don’t pity me,” I warned, pointing the knife at him before I turned my back and began to peel the spuds. The peel dropped to the counter in a long string. “Pity is for everyone else, not me. Anyway—” I cleared my throat and glanced at him over my shoulder “—do you cook any?”

Jay snorted and shifted on the stall a little. “Please.” He snorted again. “Have you seen Monica?”

We both laughed at that. “She does seem to like to cook a lot.”

“If I didn’t work as much as I did and be on my feet all day, I’d be the size of a house. That woman never leaves the kitchen. When Dad brought her home to meet me on their third or fourth date—I can’t remember which—he was supposed to cook her something real nice. He’d sweated about it all day, babbling on about how good it had to be because Monica was this cooking connoisseur or something like that. Anyway—” he waved his hand and smiled fondly “—she came over and completely took over and ended up cooking for us. From that moment, I think Dad fell in love with her.”

I moved to the sink and filled the saucepan with water then turned and grabbed the colander for the raw potatoes that I’d peeled. “What happened to your real mum?”

Jay was silent for a minute or so before he said ever so softly, “She left me and Dad when I was a couple months old.”

So shocked, I dropped the knife and moved to his side, taking his hand in mine. The other slid across his shoulders, bringing him closer to me. I rested my chin on his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey.” He chuckled, but it sounded a little forced. “No pity. Huh?”

I pulled away and swatted him a little. “That’s me, not you.”

“Whatever,” he grumped but ruined it by smiling. “Nah, I’m not bitter. She had her reasons or that’s what Dad told me. He said that things weren’t right when she got pregnant. Apparently, it was just a onetime thing between them, and then she turned up one day when he was at work and sprung it on him. Immediately, he assumed responsibility and took care of her and me eventually. Apparently, after I was born, she suffered with some depression or whatever

and couldn't handle it. One day, Dad came home from work to find me left alone, crying and in a state. Seemed he'd left for work around eight that morning and she'd left—as the neighbour at the time had said—about eleven. He didn't get home till six, maybe seven, that night.”

The way he just rattled that story off, made something inside me break for him. I thought I had it bad—hell I did, but Jay's was bad in a different way. I had a mother who just didn't give a fuck—period. He had a mother who sounded as if she'd gone through some heavy shit and couldn't cope. In the end though, whether we liked it not, I guess we were both fucked up somehow over both women's actions.

To save us having to say anything else, Penguin came bounding into the kitchen and stopped next to me, her eyes dancing over the counter, watching the peel drop from my hands. “What having dinner?” she asked.

“What's this?” I held up the peeled potato.

Her eyes narrowed on the vegetable before she smiled. “Tato.”

“That's right.” I nodded and reached over the counter for the packet of sausages that I'd set aside. “And these?”

“Saus... saus... suesages.” Her pronunciation was a little off and took a couple of tries before she got it right. “Sausages.” She bounced up and down, clapping crazily.

“Excellent. Good girl.” I winked and shuffled her along so I could light the cooker, which had to be done with a lighter, because the flick switch didn't work. I flicked the lighter and held in my swearing—biting my tongue when the flame licked up and caught my thumb, singeing the small hairs.

“We having sausage surprise?” Penguin asked as she moved back away from the cooker when she saw the hot oil beginning to sizzle and pop. I'd taught her well. She went to Jay's side and held up her arms. He swung around on the stool and lifted her into his lap. Settling herself as if she did it everyday, she smiled and curled into his body. “I like Jay.”

My brows shot up, a genuine smile popped onto my face. My eyes flicked between Penguin and Jay. They looked so right. Right there in my kitchen, both of them settled together. Another part inside me clicked and felt even more complete. I could feel the past forty-eight hours being swept away, the more time I spent with both of them.

Before I turned back to the oil, which I could smell was beginning to get real hot, I looked up at Jay as I licked my bottom lip and pulled it in between my teeth, feeling my body tingling a little, especially my groin area. "I like Jay, too."

"That was delicious. Thank you." Jay rubbed his stomach as he stretched against the sofa. The muscles in his chest and stomach cramped together, highlighting the pack through his T-shirt, before he relaxed and they disappeared. I couldn't stop the disappointment that shot through me when he did that, even if I tried.

"You're welcome." I smiled and got up, grabbing the plates from the coffee table. We'd eaten all together on the floor, because I hadn't had time to put the dining table I'd bought up, yet. It didn't matter anyhow, because Penguin got most of the mash and gravy down the front of her and on the floor. Part of me was glad I hadn't gotten the carpet yet.

"I'll help." Jay quickly jumped up and swiped up Penguin's plate. She'd moved from the floor once she'd eaten a considerable amount of food and was now lying on one of the sofas watching TV.

Jay followed me into the kitchen and set the plates on the side. As I turned, he grabbed me and pushed me up against the counter. His hands slid around my waist and slipped down into the back pockets of my jeans, where he squeezed my cheeks in his palms. I sucked in a breath when I felt his hardness rock into the front of me, flicking against my own readiness. "I want you," he whispered against my lips before crashing his down on mine. Again, I sucked in another breath and moaned a little, grabbing back at him when I felt his hot tongue spread against my own. The taste of sausage, mash, gravy and pure Jay flared over my taste buds. Damn, he tasted fucking good.

Rocking both of our bodies together, I grasped at his shirt, pulling him closer yet pushing him away. I found skin and grabbed it, my fingernails scraping against soft, pliable, hot skin. Needing a breath, I pulled away and panted into his neck, sucking in deep lungfuls of much needed air, but at the same time, taking in Jay's unique spicy, yet sporty smell that drove me and my body to want and need more.

"I want you," Jay repeated and cupped my face, holding it in place whilst he pressed his mouth to mine once, twice and three times.

“You can have me,” I whispered and leaned forward to kiss him again, but he moved out of reach. I whimpered when he continued to hold me in place, not letting me move. My hands reached out to slip back under his top. I wanted—no needed—more skin. “Jay.”

“Really?” His green eyes that had clouded over with lust were serious as hell now. There was no messing about. His body, which was hot to the touch, moved out of reach a little so I couldn't touch him. “Seriously, Rudi?”

I swallowed heavily, sensing a lot rested on this little thing that was happening between us. “Yes. Fuck, yes.”

“Thank fucking God.” He finally gave me what I wanted which was his luscious lips. I sucked them into my mouth, laving my tongue back and forth over the plump, swelled damp pillows. Once I did that, I sucked the bottom one into my mouth and bit down on it, making him groan against me, his hips flicking in small ticks against my own; his hands gripped my face harder, his fingers slicked up in my hair.

“Rudi?” Penguin's voice, sounding very freaking close, had both of us jumping apart.

Jay moved to the kitchen counter and pressed the front of his hips into the old wood, groaning at the same time. “Give me strength,” he hissed and thumped his hand against his cock, trying to get the tent out of his jeans, but by how hard and shapely it looked, it wouldn't happen anytime soon.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand just as Penguin came into the kitchen, the bloody pink dummy in her mouth. “I looking for you.”

I scowled at the dummy and held my hand out for it, my fingers curling in a “gimme” gesture. “Give me the dummy.”

Her mouth opened as if to argue, but she huffed instead and placed it in my palm. “I ready for bath time.”

Upon hearing Jay's groan, I busted out laughing and fell against the cabinets. I slid to the floor and reached for Penguin, pulling her down with me. Jay dropped down too and slid across the floor until he sat next to us. “Maybe it'll happen sometime when we're alone, huh?” I managed to get out when I stopped laughing.

“Oh, it will, and when it does, there'll be fireworks.”

The seriousness and intent in his voice made hope flourish inside me. Glancing at him from the corner of my eye, I realised, yeah, there would be fireworks.

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Chapter Nineteen

The music was so loud that I couldn't even hear my own voice as I called for Jay. When he made no move to acknowledge my call, I grabbed hold of his hand just in time before we were separated. I gripped his wrist and yanked him back towards me, knocking into some other people at the same time. They looked over their shoulders at me and Jay with raised eyebrows. I shrugged and shoved my way through the packed club. There were people everywhere. A mix of men, women and some even were in between... I think.

"Drinks!" Jay shouted in my ear. His hot breath wafted over my skin, making me bite my lip and stifle a groan. I'd been on edge all freaking day waiting for this alone time with Jay. My body felt like I was plugged up to a car battery.

I turned at the last minute, caught his lips and pressed a quick kiss to his shocked pillows. "Sure."

Jay smiled, gave me a kiss back and led the way towards the bar. His body weaved from side to side in time with the music, that very nice arse of his wiggling one way then another.

My hands reached out to his lean hips, holding him close to me as we moved almost as one. The bodies surrounding us pulsed in time with Christina Aguilera's "Dirrrty" playing on the overhead speakers. Strobes of varying different colours danced and swished around the black-coloured walls, creating streaks of intense bright light.

The bar area was filled with people shouting and barking out their orders to the overworked and stressed-looking bartenders who were very nicely bare from the waist upwards. They had their hands filled with bottles and glasses but amazingly, nothing was dropped and nothing was spilled.

Jay squeezed himself in between two muscle-eating men who took up way too much space for their own good. One of them gave Jay the once-over. He even had the cheek to lean back a little on his heels and scan that tight little arse that I knew my boy had.

"Oi." I leaned in close to him, my nose flaring and my lip curling. I was not gonna be intimidated by his size one bit. Just because we were in a gay club didn't mean he had the right to fucking ogle what wasn't his. "Move your fucking eyes."

The dude's sharp eyebrows shot up in shock. His eyes that suddenly danced and sparkled looked me up and down. He tilted his head to the side as his eyes narrowed on my face, his lips pursed in thought. "I know you from somewhere?"

Immediately, my stomach dropped. Not this again. When Jay had told me that he wanted to go out for his birthday to a club, I'd agreed. His parents were looking after Penguin for the night, so we could be alone. I'd arranged to come here, some thirty miles away from home, and I was still getting this shit?

I scanned his face, taking in his sharp, shapely brows, to his nicely trimmed beard that coated the bottom half of his face and neck. His thin lips were perky and a deep pink, telling me he'd had *some* action not so long ago. "Nah," I shook my head. I would have remembered someone like him.

He shrugged but looked a little gutted as he did so. "No probs." He then leaned in to whisper in my ear. "Sorry for eying your boy, but you've got to admit he's got a nice arse. However," he chuckled breathily, and I could have sworn I felt his tongue touch the tip of my ear for at least a second, maybe less, "if you two ever get bored." Then he slid something in my pocket, grabbed his beer from the bar and turned. Next minute, he was gone, a nameless person in the already packed crowd.

Jay glanced over his shoulder at me, completely oblivious. "You okay?"

I swallowed at the intense, unwelcome reminder of not so long ago. My mistake at the last club, the reminder of the guy when he'd shoved his card and money at me after he'd fucked me bare. A repulsed shiver worked its way through me, turning over the greasy bacon sandwich I'd eaten earlier.

Shaking my head, I plastered a fake smile on my face and patted Jay's hip. "I'm fine."

Jay opened his mouth to no doubt question me, when the bartender stopped in front of him and called over, taking Jay's attention from me. Talk about divine intervention. Jay was like a dog with a bone sometimes and I didn't want to give him this bone. Tonight was his night, our night. It was supposed to be about just me and him and damn it, I was going to make it happen... even if I had to go about it feeling like shit and looking over my shoulder.

We'd been dancing for what felt like hours but was probably only a half hour. Sweat ran down the back of my neck, soaking my collar and the space

between my shoulder blades. I ran my hands along Jay's back, feeling his muscles under my fingers. They moved as he moved, rolling and tensing. I loved the feel of him under my hands. He felt... right.

Suddenly, everything went black and silent.

It took probably a whole minute of silence for the people dancing to realise that there was no music playing anymore. I'd stopped, immediately on edge. Jay, however, kept on shaking his thing next to me. I raised my hand and gave it a little wave in front of my face but I couldn't see it. I couldn't see a damn thing.

"Jay," I said urgently, my hands scrabbling for him.

"I'm here," he said breathlessly as he wormed his way into my arms. I could feel his heartbeat pumping against my own, his heavy breathing from dancing too much fanning out across my neck. I licked my lips as my hands tightened around his waist. I turned a little, trying to look left and right but again, I couldn't see anything.

"What's going on?" Jay whispered against the sweaty skin on my neck.

I turned my head a little and pressed a kiss to his equally sweaty temple. "I have no clue." Immediately after that came out of my mouth, I had an idea that the place was about to get raided or something. When I saw no torches or indeed lights come back on, I realised I was letting my imagination run away from me.

Around us, I could hear the moans and groans, grumbles and threats to the DJ and owner of the club about spoiling people's fun, interrupting their dancing and good times and just ruining it altogether.

"What the fuck is going on?" I heard a deep male voice not so far from me bark. I turned in that direction, noticing, recognising that voice. It was the guy from the bar.

"Calm down," a voice echoed through the speakers, along with a sharp ting of feedback that made my ears ache and tingle. "I'm Gustav, the DJ for this evening."

"Get the music back on, dickwad," another male voice shouted out, this time somewhere near the front. A few other comments were called out from males and females spread throughout the space.

Suddenly, a light flicked on above where the DJ decks were located, making me blink with how bright it was. A heavy-set man appeared, his white shirt

looked a little skew-whiff and from what I could see, there were a couple of people lumbering things up onto the stage behind him.

Jay stood on his tiptoes trying to see the front, too. My eyes narrowed, but I was too far away to see any fine detail. All I could actually make out were big black barrels being carried onto the stage then set up in a certain round pattern.

The DJ picked the mic back up and spoke into it, his slightly foreign accent pronouncing his words a little differently. "Firstly, I have to apologise. Tonight we had a special event planned, but due to unfortunate circumstances beyond our control, we have had to cancel." A round of boos and heckles rung out. The DJ waved his hands to get everyone to settle down. "Calm down, please. We understand you may be disappointed and will of course be offering one free drink at the bar tonight and a half-price entry voucher for your next visit to compensate you." That was met with a round of applause. He smiled and waved his hands again. "Now, we have something else planned that was supposed to be next week's show, so we hope you enjoy it." He spun around to face the black barrels and boomed into the mic, "Spin that shit."

Before anyone could ask what the hell he was talking about, Far East Movement's "Like a G6" began to play over the speakers, the bass vibrating through the cramped space. Jay immediately started back up dancing even in the dark.

I moved with him, my lips rolling in as I flicked my hips. My hands held Jay's hips still, keeping him in place so I could rub against him. I kissed his sweaty neck, flicking his hair out of the way with my tongue so I could lick at his salty flavour.

All too shortly, the music changed and the overhead lights flicked on, except they weren't normal ones like before. They were a strange purple colour. My eyes flinched as I stared up at them a bit longer than I think I was supposed to.

"UV," Jay whispered and cried out in excitement when Daddy Yankee's "Rompee" started. Pulling away from me, Jay smiled devilishly and turned to the side a little, running his hands over his body, stopping at his nipples to give them a tweak through his T-shirt. I sucked in a breath as I watched him, feeling my cock jerking rapidly in my jeans, making me a tad lightheaded with how much blood I was losing from up top.

With that tempting smile in place and a twinkle in his eye, Jay's hands moved from his chest up to his hair where he ran his fingers through it and

pulled on the ends a little. His hips swirled in time with the music, which meant his T-shirt pulled up slightly, revealing a strip of smooth, tanned skin that glowed eerily under the strange lights above us.

The longer I stood there watching him, the more other people moved in, surrounding him. I felt my teeth grind together as—oh God—bitter, hot jealousy speared through me at seeing, watching other men—good-looking, hot men—move on up to him. Four men, one in front, one behind and one on each side of Jay began to grind in time with him and the music that pulsed much too loudly around us. All four sets of hands landed on Jay's waist, holding tight as they moved in sync with each other. Honestly, even though it made me jealous as hell, it was also a little arousing to watch and a bit fascinating. The longer they danced with each other, the more their moves became more sexualised. From the rolls of all five of their pelvises to the lithe way their hips and chests popped, nothing but sex flittered from those moves.

Just then, Jay looked over at me. His eyes were heavy lidded and glazed over. His mouth dropped open, and his pink tongue peeked out and licked at his plump bottom lip. I sucked my own bottom lip in with a tortured groan as I continued to watch him. He kept his eyes open—even if they were half-mast—spearing me with his gaze. He leaned back into the guy behind him and let him take his weight.

I could feel my hands twitching to go to him and move the guys away from him, warn them to keep their fucking hands to themselves, but the look of heat for me in Jay's eyes, the flushed, relaxed look on his face kept me where I was, just subtly rocking to the music.

“All for you,” Jay mouthed.

All for me.

He shuffled back over to where I stood, finally leaving the hang-all-overs behind. His body undulated like a snake towards me, somehow winding around me. His hot breath blew against my cheek, his lips just brushing against my skin, before he whispered for me to stay in place, while he danced around me.

I didn't know this side of Jay, but I knew I fucking liked it. Fuck, I adjusted my cock that hardened almost immediately at the look in Jay's face, that flushed, pink cheeked, puffy-lipped look just about did me in.

All for me.

I must have said that out loud because Jay got real close. His damp, hot breath fanned out over my ear when he sucked my lobe into his mouth, chewing on the end a little before releasing it with a soft pop. He pressed a too-chaste kiss on the shell of my ear. "You know it," he whispered, before dancing away again.

Suddenly, all the lights went out, plunging us all into darkness again, but it was only for a couple of seconds, before the UVs came back on. Only this time, the strobes hit at the same time as Rihanna's "Rude Boy" blasted through the speakers. Pink, blue, green and yellow flashing strobes moved and danced in time with the beat of the song.

Jay appeared at my back, rubbing all up on me as if he were a cat. I reached back blindly and grabbed at his body, moulding it against my own, feeling his sweat-soaked clothing making my own damper. I could feel his hardness pressing into my butt cheeks, riding the mounds. My hands clasped his wet T-shirt in my fist and gave it a yank, forcing him to twirl around to face me. He laughed in my face, pressed a kiss to my upturned lips and pushed up off my shoulders, sending me stumbling back a little. Before I could right myself he was back, his legs spread across one of my own straddling it. His hands roamed all over the front of me, scrunching against the material of my T-shirt as if he wanted it gone. Again like a cat, he rubbed his chest against my side and trailed his mouth up to my face, giving my cheek a little nip and a lick before retreating.

He was teasing me... and it was working.

I watched his tight backside in those *fuck me* jeans as he moved a few paces ahead of me. I rolled my lips into my mouth, biting down on them as I watched those round mounds, imagining what his hole would be like right now. What it would taste like; smell like, if I was to stuff my face in the crease of his arse. God, it would be heaven. All that damp and sweat, shit! It would be so damned right tantalizing, all riled up and ready to be fucked. I could just imagine my eager tongue delving into that small puckered hole, tasting his mustiness, his true essence. Yup, I could do that and take his taste back with me, leaving it in my mouth all night long.

That sounded like a good fucking idea if I did say so myself.

Groaning, I slapped my hand down on my ever-growing erection, forcing the little fella down, reminding him that later on, me and Jay were gonna get it on. It was happening tonight. I was not waiting anymore. I had a case of blue balls, and they had Jay's name written all over them.

Again, the lights flicked out, taking every piece of light with it. No one complained because they knew what was coming next. I waited, my eyes still trying to see through the darkness, but it was useless.

Ten seconds later, the lights flicked back, but this time they were black, purple and blue coloured. The funky UVs kicked on along with the strobe lights, creating an extravagant and slightly overpowering mix. The intro song turned into George Michael's "Freeek!!!" Then something happened that not only scared the shit out of me but took my breath away too.

Water rained down in a fine spray but not just any water... freezing cold bloody water.

Shrieks and curses could be heard around me as I shook my head from one side to another, flicking the water from my hair. Running my hands up and down my face, I brushed the droplets aside and coughed a little.

"Hell yeah!" Jay screamed in delight and threw himself at me, his legs going round my waist. I stumbled backwards into a couple of people as his weight hit me dead on. They pushed me off them so I went back forwards again. Damn, Jay was heavy. But he felt oh so fucking good in my arms. I gripped his arse cheeks, one each in my hands, and shuffled him a little to make him feel more stable in my arms. Now we were face-to-face. Water dripped from the small tip of his nose and landed on my cheek as he shook it off. His hair that had been perfectly mussed before was now completely skew-whiff and weighted down at the front, giving him a semi quiff. Little pear-shaped droplets hung from the strands, flicking off in every direction as he moved to the music. It was like his body couldn't stop writhing.

Damn, he was gorgeous and all mine.

I couldn't help it anymore. I thrust my mouth at him, snatching his lips in a tight suction and gobbled them into my mouth, where I nibbled along the plumpest parts and chewed the smaller, thinner parts. I licked and laved them all better, well, until he was moaning and writhing more against me. He tasted like pure Jay, mixed with the lemon shots we'd had earlier at the bar. I licked all around inside his mouth, greedily taking everything I could. I loved the taste of Jay in my mouth. I liked knowing that it was him I tasted hours later.

Jay made me feel settled. The taste of him in my mouth reminded me that all wasn't bad; it was good... especially with Jay.

Jay moaned louder in my arms as he fought to dominate our kiss. He could try, but it was never going to happen. His legs tightened around my waist and

his hips thrust harder and thicker against my stomach, as George sang higher and louder in our ears. The deep bass seemed to get heavier and vibrated more in our ear drums. I swear from where we were joined, I could feel the intense beat pulsing through our bodies.

Pulling back, we were both panting, sucking in needed gulps of air. I could have happily carried on kissing him; he tasted delish. As Jay gasped, he smiled sheepishly down at me, his cheeks filling with blossoming red.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” I asked, or more like shouted, as my eyes flicked all over his water- and sweat-covered face.

In response, Jay threw his head back—which nearly toppled us over—and screamed out loud to the music, his voice scratching the lyrics, as his hard cock pressed into my stomach, continually moving up and down, stroking against me. I guess I got my answer? His arms waved around, the long flexed muscles bunching and releasing with each movement. My eyes drifted down his chest, where his hard nipples poked through the cotton, to his stomach, where the soaked cloth stuck to his abs, showing off a tight hard-worked six pack. The more he wiggled and moved, the more his T-shirt rode up showing off those lick-worthy abs, which were tanned and had a little trail of hair that ran down the middle of them and disappeared into his jeans.

What I wouldn't have given to be able to let him go and lick his treasure trail, and at the same time, seeing where it went and licking that too.

More water rained down on us, on everyone, soaking whoever dared to dance. The water wasn't a fine mist anymore, it was a downright drenching. On contact, it splattered like heavy thunderous rain. I glanced around, squinting and noticed that a space had been created around us, people moving to their own little group. I could see under the pink, yellow and bright blue strobe lights that people had striped their clothes off, baring various parts of their bodies.

Now that wasn't a bad idea.

Easing Jay down till he was on his feet—which splashed in the gathering water—I ignored his pouting lips and reached for my soaked-through top. Gripping the back, I pulled it up over my head, only to stop halfway. It was hard as fuck to do, with not only the cotton being soaked, sticking to my skin like Velcro, but Jay found it amusing to tickle my ribs and run his fingers along till he reached my belly button.

I squealed, admittedly like a girl, and just managed to get the top up over my head before I squirmed too much and ended up face-planting the floor.

Once it was free, I looked at Jay with a raised eyebrow and held the top over my head, giving it a little swing at the same time my hips moved to the same beat. Just as I flicked the top in Jay's direction, the music changed again, along with the dancing strobes and water pressured release.

A burst of bass pounded through the hall, nearly blowing the speakers and my ear drums along with it. Then Sunna's "Power Struggle" sounded with a loud sound of buzzing bees. A clap of water exploded as the first beat of the drum came in.

Bright UV, pink, yellow, green and blue water rained down, drenching us in another load of cold, breath-taking water. I reached out to Jay, my hands snatching my T-shirt that rested around his neck. Using both ends, I pulled him towards me, making him stumble.

Nodding to the beat and admittedly shivering a little, I pressed our bodies together, driving our hard cocks against one another's. My eyes slid closed at the electric sensation. With the water storming over us and my bare chest rubbing against the wet cotton of Jay's top, I was ready to burst. I could feel the swirling of tingles starting in my toes, working their way up through my body.

If I wasn't too careful, I'd come in my fucking jeans.

"Yes," Jay moaned and clasped his hands around my neck, plastering his body against my own. The water poured and ran down the space between our noses. As he blew out a breath, droplets flicked onto my lips and dribbled down my chin. I licked them up and reached forward, licking some off his face as we danced close together, and the beat of the music the only conductor.

All around us, everyone drifted out, sounding almost silent in our own little world. It was just me, Jay and the music. Our hands moved over each of our bodies, wanting to touch everything in sight. His hands greedily shifted over my bare chest, flicking my nipples and giving them little taps with the tips of his fingers before those deft fingers drifted down to my waist, where he traced the material of my jeans—teasing me—before his hands slipped down inside, making my stomach muscles quiver in want and need.

The feel of his hands on my body—on any part of it—was like heaven. It was soft and meaningful, wanting and needing. It was everything. It felt so damn good.

My head dropped back on my shoulders, my mouth falling open as a long sigh left my lips when I felt Jay slide down my body with his hands still

fastened inside my jeans. Not touching my pulsing ready-as-fuck cock, no, just touching the sensitive skin around it. Driving me even wilder, he scraped his ragged nails over the sensitive skin surrounding my cock, sending me jerking into mid-air, thrusting my hips up and down, looking for reprieve. I could feel over the soaked jeans clinging to my legs, Jay's body heat moving up and down my legs, rubbing his hard crotch against my muscled quads, making them quiver too.

Jay popped up so we were face-to-face again, and pressed small, hot kisses down the length of my throat, whilst his fingers moved down an inch, then another and another. One hand moved to my hip, caressing the soft skin there, whilst the other moved to the base of my cock. The moment his digits came into contact with me—my hardness—I couldn't help it; I thrust at him like a randy rabbit. I wanted release. Hell, my cock wanted release already, like yesterday.

“Soon,” Jay whispered before moving back down my body. His chest rubbed against my own before disappearing. I gasped and spat out a mouthful of water in a river to the ceiling, when hot breath fanned over my sensitized cock through the fly of my jeans.

I couldn't take it anymore.

Reaching down for Jay, I manhandled him till he was standing in front of me, and then plastered my mouth to his, forcing him backwards. We crashed into the crowds of people, grinding and pulsing to the music. I didn't care about the curses leaving their mouths or the nudges I received in return. All I wanted was Jay, and damn it, I was gonna get him.

Finally, we hit a wall which made Jay grunt at the force. Before he could say anything, I pulled his left leg up, holding it with my hip whilst I reached between us and ripped his jeans open. The button pinged and I heard fabric tear but I also felt something scuff against my fingers. Little dings of pain and a slight burn told me I'd been cut, which must have been the zip, but I ignored it and carried on ripping the material apart, searching for my want.

And there it was.

My hand snaked into the folds of his jeans seeking out the hard pleasure I knew resided there. I gripped his hot, cut shaft in my hand and rubbed it long and hard, pulling the skin till it tugged at the head of his cock.

“Home,” Jay garbled and pushed against me, his hips moving back and forth, wanting so bad no doubt for me to get him off, and needing it.

“What?” I panted, moving my lips down his throat. I nibbled at his skin, taking it into my mouth and laved my tongue repetitively over the small, bite-sized lumps, soaking up his salty, tangy sweat and water. I wanted to mark him—in a good way of course—over and over again. I wanted him to wake up tomorrow morning with my bite-shaped marks all over his body, knowing that we’d had a good night. I moved on down and sucked his Adam’s apple into my mouth, again, laving my tongue over the sharp ridge, back and forth, back and forth. His skin was hot, wet and tasted absolutely fucking delicious.

“Home,” Jay repeated and tried to still my hand on his cock. “Let’s go home.”

I shook my head and forced my other hand deeper into his jeans, seeking out his balls that I knew were tight to his hot-as-shit body. I found the slightly furred sack and gave it a deep tug, making the man in my arms cry out and grind into my hand harder.

“Please, Rudi.”

Stopping at the begging tone of his voice, I opened my eyes not realising that I’d closed them and looked deep into the most gorgeous eyes I’d ever seen. The eyes of the man I was, if I admitted it, falling in love with. “What’s the matter?”

Jay blinked. His eyes were still lusted over and dazed-looking though, as he licked his lips. “Take me home, Rudi.”

I sucked in a breath, my eyes flicking between his green orbs, asking him if he was serious. He nodded and leaned forward, brushing a small butterfly kiss to my lips. “Take me home,” he repeated on a breathy, shaky whisper.

Gathering my wanting need and shoving it back down again, I pulled away from him and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I closed my eyes and sucked in a few deep breaths. I had to get a hold of myself. Never in my life had I been so turned on that I’d wanted to do that, especially not to someone I felt something for.

Only when I stood there for at least a few minutes did I realise the music was still pumping, but there wasn’t really any other sound. Opening my eyes, I turned around and felt my brows pop up and my eyes widen when I noticed that the people who’d been dancing around us, had gathered in one huge group and had made a half circle around me, Jay and the wall I’d been just about ready to take him up against.

The more my eyes flicked over the crowd, the more it came to me—the more I realised that this lot was waiting for me and Jay to get it on, for us to be their show. On some, if not all, I saw that their eyes were intent, greedy and full of lust waiting.

“Not happening,” I said out loud and grabbed Jay’s hand, yanking him out of the club.

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Chapter Twenty

We fell through the front door, our feet catching each other's. I reached back and caught the door with the tips of my fingers, giving it a nudge. With the oil that I'd applied, the thing didn't make a racket like it used to. Just as the door clicked shut, Jay caught me and spun me around, slamming my back against the door and throwing himself at me.

His lips crashed down on my own, his tongue fighting for entrance. With a smirk, I opened up and lifted him up so he could wrap his legs around my waist. Once he was settled in my arms, I stumbled down the passage, using the walls to hold us both up. My shoulder caught on a picture I'd hung up of a bunch of flowers. The frame wobbled, and then dropped to the floor with a dull thud, the glass cracking.

Our breath, hot, wet and panting, was the only sound in the flat, as I led Jay to my bedroom, which he'd yet to see. Kicking the door open with my boot, I stumbled inside and tripped over the corner of the doorframe, sending us staggering.

When he'd come round last week bringing Penguin home with him, I hadn't finished my room and didn't really give a shit about it, but when we'd discussed his birthday, including tonight and possible results of said night, I knew I had to get my finger out and sort it.

So I did.

The bed, wardrobe and side tables were all brand new, along with the covers and curtains. The covers were a soft brown that matched the stone-coloured walls. I did debate about using blue, but thought it might appear a tad immature, and I was anything but, so I went with the soft stone.

Reaching the bed just in time, I dropped Jay down but instead of letting go, he pulled me with him. I landed on top of him with a great big *humph* that made us both giggle and made the new bed groan. I rolled to the side and pushed the huge, white, square, spotty pillows aside. Whilst I did this, Jay got up onto his knees and stripped off his T-shirt. He flung it over his head, and I watched it sail through the air, until it hit the big, square, linen-covered lamps I'd bought from IKEA.

Before we'd driven home, he'd complained about being soaking wet and not wanting to ruin his seat, because damp was a nightmare in a car, or some

shit like that, so he'd changed into a spare pair of cargo shorts that he'd kept in his boot, just in case. Me, I'd taken his picnic blanket. I didn't mind the damp.

Now though, Jay was unbuttoning his shorts, his eyes heavy-lidded as they watched me roll back over and pop my own button. I blindly pushed down my wet jeans so they settled just above the top of my thighs. The damp material was coarse against my hips, and when I looked down, I noticed the top of my legs were red-raw from the cold water. My cock sprang free, eager and wanting—still as hard as ever, which was shocking with how cold the actual water had been.

Rolling back to my knees, I moved up close to him. With my bent legs straddling his, I gripped his face in my hands, holding him still, letting him have his way with me. His hands danced all over my body, the tips of his fingers massaging deep into my skin, leaving goose bumps in their wake. I rolled my hips against his own the minute his cock poked through the wide flaps of his shorts.

“Shit,” Jay hissed as our bare cocks touched for the first time ever.

Looking down, I sucked in a deep breath at the sight of our two rock-hard shafts touching, rubbing against each other. The sight was breath-taking. I watched as his bare, long cock throbbed, a bead of sap dribbled from the ruddy end and rolled down his cleanly cut length. My own fully-sheathed cock rubbed the sap in, my own juice coming to the forefront. It ran from the tip of my exposed cock, pooled around my skin, before falling over the top onto Jay's very nice-looking piece.

“Yes,” he groaned and pushed his face against my own, his lips skimming over my skin. He tried to move, tried to lick and bite at my neck, but I wouldn't let him. I wanted him in front of me, my hands on his face so I could look into his eyes when we both exploded.

As if understanding this, Jay gave up trying to move his face and instead moved his hands until they were pressing against my body, his blunt fingernails grasping over my skin, pulling against my flesh. The calloused, work-roughened points made me shiver as they railed over my back and down to my semi-bare backside.

“Touch me,” I begged, still continuing to flick my hips to a nameless tune in my head. Rounding my pelvis in tight circles, I drove us both wild when our bellies touched, our cocks banged together, trapped against our hot flesh.

Releasing them, they dropped and prodded together again, the juices from both of us dripping and dribbling, not only against the bed covers, but our semi-naked flesh, too. “Touch me, tease me.”

Jay did as I asked. His hands floated over my sensitized skin. They drifted down to my backside, where he slipped them inside my jeans and pulled the material away. His fingers gripped my arse cheeks, and his index finger dipped into my crack, pressing against my puckered starfish.

I growled, “Yes,” thrusting harder against him, feeling his already slightly trembling body beginning to quiver and shake even more. That told me how close he was to exploding, much like myself. Our bodies moved with lyrical movements, our breathing coming out heavier and faster, more like pants than anything else.

Jay moaned and tucked his lip into his mouth as a deep blush stole over his bare, thinly muscled chest, quickly rising up his neck to explode over his face. I grumbled and snatched his lip back with my teeth and nibbled it in my own mouth before laving it with my tongue. Jay opened up on a sigh, letting me inside. That was all it took, the touch of our tongues. Just that small heated touch ignited the spark, and an explosion happened.

The hands on my body grabbed and flexed, blunt nails dug into my flesh almost painfully as Jay moved his hips in an uncontrolled rhythm. Jiggling around on his lap, I locked myself into place and watched, fascinated and gratified as his breathing came hard and fast before he snatched his mouth from mine and threw his head back, his eyes snapping closed and his mouth opening on a silent scream as his cock throbbed quicker and pulsed, rubbing frantically before it exploded against my own.

I watched, my eyes flicking between watching Jay's face and the pleasure rolling off it—to his exploding cock that covered us both in thin milky-white streams. Watching him in that vulnerable, yet ultimate pleasurable position triggered my own orgasm.

The intense pleasure shot from my toes through the soles of my feet, up my calves, to my thighs—which were shaking terribly—and settled in my groin. My hands that still held Jay's soft and hot face tightened and clutched his skin harder. His eyes popped open and his own hands reached up and gripped my wrists, holding onto them. His thumbs rubbed back and forth over my pulse points as his eyes stared deep into my own, green watching brown.

Then I felt it.

My balls rolled in their sack, heavy and full of cum. Cum with Jay's name on it. Whimpering little noises escaped my mouth; encouraged by Jay's whispering words, his steady eyes never leaving mine.

The most intense orgasm of my life pushed through my groin, making my balls bounce and bound up into my body, pulling almost tightly. My pucker clenched repeatedly. The muscles in my backside clamped and cramped against the force of seed pushing its way through my tube.

Using Jay's already cooling and clumping essence as lube, I rubbed furiously. I could feel the foreskin on my cock rolling back and forth, pulling tightly back over the head before pushing back, covering my helmet with each fast forward and back motion.

What felt like hours, but was only probably a few seconds later, my cock jerked violently and a stream of white arced in the air between us before dropping with a splat against our bodies. Another one came, forcing its way through my being, taking everything I had with it. Another and another arced through the air, covering our chests in my juice. The heavy smell of seed filled the air, stringing out another small strip from me.

As the last one left me, my body convulsed. My stomach felt like someone had a fist in my gut, twisting it, but it wasn't with pain. No, it was with intense—the most intense—pleasure I'd ever had. Loosening my hands from around Jay's face, I leaned in to give him a soft kiss before my body dropped to the bed, shaken and sweaty. My breath came out in pants; my heart beat ten to a dozen in my chest and my rib cage hurt from the heavy pressure.

We'd both gotten off and we hadn't even touched each other. I felt a stupid smile pull up on my face. Damn that was good. I could hear the heavy pounding of blood in my ears and the weighted fog pulling me down into darkness that loomed.

Before I finally slipped into a pleasurable state of unconsciousness, Jay gently whispered the words I'd longed to hear: "Rudi, I love you."

The End

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Glossary

Bahookie – Arse

Bollocking – Reprimand

Budgie – Budgerigar

Cujo – Rabid Dog

Dosh – Money

Fella – Man

Fiver – £5.00 Note

Gear – Drugs

Good'un – A Good One

Laffy Taffy – Backside

Naff – Fuck

Nernenerner – Told You So

Sprog – Child

Spud – Potato

Tato – Potato

Tenner – £10.00 Note

Author Bio

I live in London or Essex depending on what way you look at it, but I am defo a Londoner not an Essex girl, no matter what anyone says.

My three babies drive me round the bend with loudness, sticky stuff and smells you don't even want to know about but I love them. Same with my Hubby. He's long suffering and patient with me and has been for a long time. He's my good side and I'm his bad side.

You can find me curled up on the sofa or in bed with my aging laptop trying to keep up with my ideas and characters. I'm a huge bookworm and love to read if and when I can. When I have spare time—which is extremely sparse—I read Lenormand and Tarot cards.

I am officially a nut and am not afraid to admit it. I'm also OCD with regard to lists, packets of any kind and washing. If you see me coming, run. I would!

Just a quick note: if you don't like me, blow me!

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