



DEALING HIM IN

CHARLIE COCHET

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THE KINGS: ROYAL FLUSH
BOOK 1

CHARLIE COCHET



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Content Warning: *Please note this novel contains a scene with a shooting that may trigger some readers.*

FOUR KINGS SECURITY UNIVERSE



Welcome to the Four Kings Security Universe! The current reading order for the universe is as follows:

FOUR KINGS SECURITY UNIVERSE

STANDALONES

[Beware of Geeks Bearing Gifts](#) - Standalone
(Spencer and Quinn. Quinn is Ace and Lucky's cousin.) Can be read any time before *In the Cards*.

FOUR KINGS SECURITY

[Love in Spades](#) - Book 1 (Ace and Colton)

[Ante Up](#) - Book 1.5 (Seth and Kit)

Free short story

[Be Still My Heart](#) - Book 2 (Red and Laz)

[Join the Club](#) - Book 3 (Lucky and Mason)

[Diamond in the Rough](#) - Book 4 (King and Leo)

[In the Cards](#) - Book 4.5 (Spencer and Quinn's wedding.)

FOUR KINGS SECURITY BOXED SET

[Boxed Set](#) includes all 4 main Four Kings Security novels: Love in Spades, Be Still My Heart, Join the Club, and Diamond in the Rough.

BLACK OPS: OPERATION ORION'S BELT

[Kept in the Dark](#) - Book 1 (Standalone series can be read anytime)

THE KINGS: WILD CARDS

[Stacking the Deck](#) - Book 1 (Jack and Fitz).

[Raising the Ante](#) - Book 2 (Frank and Joshua)

[Sleight of Hand](#) - Book 3 (Joker and Gio)

THE KINGS: WILD CARDS BOXED SET

[Boxed Set](#) includes all 3 main The Kings: Wild Cards books: [Stacking the Deck](#), [Raising the Ante](#), [Sleight of Hand](#), and bonus story [In the Cards](#).

RUNAWAY GROOMS SERIES

[Aisle Be There](#)

[To Have and Witthold](#)

THE KINGS: ROYAL FLUSH

[Dealing Him In](#)

[Calling His Bluff](#)

SYNOPSIS

Play with fire, and you'll get burned.

Santos “Saint” Cavallero had his life all figured out when he married his high school sweetheart, joined the Navy, and became a SEAL. After years of being deployed, Saint comes home for good, only to discover his wife has fallen for another man. Now divorced and a bodyguard for Four Kings Security, Saint loves his job and his found family. His dating life? A hot mess, until the spark of an unexpected attraction strikes him like lightning, leaving Saint confused. Why is he feeling hot and bothered over the ruggedly handsome Fire Chief?

After twenty years of service, Valentino “Val” Serrano is passing his fire ax on to the next Fire Chief. His retirement starts off with a bang, literally. Val is saved by the young, hot bodyguard he’s been dreaming of for longer than he cares to admit, but Saint is straight, isn’t he?

Val and Saint get roped into working on Val’s tavern, but Val is determined not to let Saint get under his skin. He’s been here before, and he’s not about to risk his heart, no matter how hot and flirty Saint is. When a killer sets his sights on Val and puts everyone he cares about in harm’s way, there’s suddenly more at risk than their hearts. If Val and Saint don’t stop the killer, their whole world could burn to the ground, and the possibility of a future together will go up in smoke.

CHAPTER ONE

It was one hell of a party.

Instrumental versions of popular songs filled the air as elegantly dressed guests conversed and laughed, a glass of champagne, cocktail, or spirit in hand. The weather was ideal, thanks to the lack of stifling humidity, and a cool, salty breeze came in from the ocean, sweeping through palm fronds and monstera leaves.

Tables with white tea lights and colorful floral centerpieces had been set up on one side of the pool to give guests plenty of room to gather as they waited for the guest of honor. The outdoor space was expansive, with three decorative stone columns on each side, the wooden beams they held up decorated with strings of tiny white lights and twisting ivy, simple yet classy. The venue was packed, and everyone seemed to be having a good time.

So why did Saint feel unsettled?

He couldn't put his finger on it, but it bugged him. Then again, he wasn't a fan of open venues, especially ones that overlooked a public beach. They were a nightmare to secure. Their people had made a risk assessment beforehand, and multiple sweeps were done inside and out before any guests arrived.

Typically, Saint didn't work this type of event. He was mainly EP—executive protection—but his boss had personally asked him to work tonight, so here he was. Saint wasn't as concerned by the number of guests as he was about *which* guests were in attendance tonight.

The luxury hotel's outdoor event space, "The Veranda," was filled to the brim with state and county officials, their families, and high-profile associates, including the Kings and Wild Cards—owners of Four Kings

Security—and their men, two of whom were extremely wealthy businessmen and philanthropists—oh, and one service dog.

Next to Gio, Cookie sat dutifully and cheerfully, sporting his red service vest and a snazzy bow tie around his neck. It made Saint smile every time he saw the Golden Retriever. Usually, wherever Gio's boyfriend Joker went, Joker's best boy Chip was with him, but since Joker and the other guys were here, Chip was with King's sister Bibi. A toddler, a baby, and a sassy Belgian Malinois under the same roof. Saint did not envy her one bit.

Four Kings Security had been hired for tonight's celebration, but the Kings and their silent partners were here due to their long-standing relationship with the guest of honor, the about-to-be retired fire chief, Valentino Serrano. After twenty years of service, Val was passing his fire ax on to the next fire chief.

Saint wasn't surprised by the turnout. Val had created one hell of a reputation for himself. People respected him even if they didn't like him, and *many* people didn't like him. For one, he was an openly gay man in a high-profile position. Saint had learned from a friend how the city had tried to get rid of Val years ago when he first came out.

Instead of going quietly into the night, Val had gone to war. He took them to court, and his lawyers wiped the floor with them. Val had impressive connections and wasn't afraid to call on them. One of those connections was here tonight.

Frank Ramirez was Val's best friend, a former firefighter who'd been part of the same firehouse as Val for years before an injury ended his career. To say that Frank was doing pretty well for himself these days would be an understatement. The guy owned Sapphire Sands, one of the most exclusive members-only gay nightclubs in the state.

Being gay and the company he kept weren't the only reasons Val rubbed people the wrong way. Apparently, Val had never been one to play the politics game. He made decisions based on what he thought was best for his people and the citizens they served. Not that Saint was interested in Val or kept up to date on the guy.

They traveled in the same circles and knew many of the same people, so it made sense that Saint would have heard things. Val was best friends with Frank, whose boyfriend Joshua was Colton's executive assistant, and Colton was married to Ace, who worked in executive protection with Saint. Ace was also the biggest gossip at the company, next to his cousin Lucky. Between the

two of them, they knew everything about everyone.

“Do you think he’s a boxers or briefs guy?”

Saint didn’t move from his position near the huge terracotta pot housing some tropical fan palm, something else that made security at the venue a pain in the ass.

A whole host of greenery and shrubbery surrounded The Veranda. Everything from palm trees and bushes to flowers in giant pots were placed around the expansive space. Then there were the trees and hedges surrounding the venue, providing ample shadows for someone to hide in, particularly at night.

Ryden hummed, and Saint side-eyed his friend. *Here we go.*

“What are you talking about?” What was Ryden even doing here? He worked risk assessment with Red, so his job had ended long before tonight.

“The sexy fire chief,” Ryden replied, wriggling his eyebrows. “Or rather, the sexy, newly retired fire chief. I bet he’s a boxer briefs kind of guy.” Ryden shimmied his shoulders a little, and Saint did his best not to laugh.

Over the last few years, Saint’s friendship with Ryden had grown unexpectedly. They’d become close, spending a lot of time together on and off the job. The guy was a Marine, but Saint didn’t hold it against him.

It had been rough for Ryden when he’d first joined Four Kings Security, but working for a company made up primarily of former military personnel, Ryden had plenty of support. Once he stopped being so damned stubborn about accepting help, he started to settle in.

“You’re an ass,” Saint grumbled. “I don’t know. And I don’t care.” He didn’t. Why would he? Casting another glance at Ryden, Saint groaned. Why was his friend so annoying? “What? And what are you doing here?”

“King wanted a little extra support tonight. Mostly I’m here to back up your ass. You didn’t answer my question.”

“Because it’s a ridiculous question,” Saint grumbled. “I don’t—”

The crowd broke off into cheers, whistles, and catcalls as everyone turned toward the doorway leading inside the hotel out onto The Veranda. Val appeared, wearing his black dress uniform with his white bell cap under his arm.

Something inexplicable slammed into Saint, stealing his breath away. A shiver went through him, and he swallowed hard. What the hell just happened?

Fuck.

What was it about Val that made him feel so off-kilter? Saint had found men handsome before. Not a big deal. He was secure enough in his masculinity to admit when a guy was good-looking, and sure, on occasion, he might have admired a little longer than necessary and...wondered, but he'd never felt...*this*. He'd never closed his eyes and imagined what another man might smell like, taste like...feel like.

Until Val.

The frustrating part was that Saint didn't know what *this* was. Never had he been fixated by another man's square jaw or stubble, yet Saint could not take his eyes off the ruggedly handsome fire chief.

Val was a big guy, tall, broad-shouldered, and solid. A patch of silver ran through the right side of his thick dark hair, and his eyes were a beautiful silver, but his smile did the most damage to Saint.

Ryden slowly leaned into Saint until he was pressed against his shoulder. "Yeah," he drawled, "You don't care at all."

Saint's face heated, and he cleared his throat. "Don't you have a job to do?"

"I'm going with boxer briefs. Bet they fit nice and snug around that firm, round ass. I mean, look at it. It's just there, in your face. All perky. Must be from sliding down all those poles."

Saint gritted his teeth. "If you don't go somewhere else, I will shove you into this planter." A wicked grin came onto his face. "Better yet, I'll tell Jay you were the one who put that rubber mouse in his desk drawer."

Like Jay didn't know exactly who the culprit was. The only one Ryden was fooling with his "loathing" of Jay was himself, and he was playing a very dangerous game. No one messed with King's executive assistant.

Ryden snorted. "The only thing scary about Jay is his bow tie collection."

"And King," Saint replied, smiling at how Ryden's eyes went huge.

Jay might not be scary, but he was looked after by King, who very much was. It also didn't help that Ryden had accepted a bet made by Joker and walked into King's office to call him "daddy." Worse than taking the bet in the first place was the fact that King had been on the phone with a client at the time. King had sent them all to the mats shortly after and kicked their asses.

Val moved through the crowd, and all thoughts of Ryden vanished. Saint did his best to avoid following Val's movement as he stopped to greet guests, offering thanks as he shook hands or bowed his head. Saint's efforts were for

shit because, as if sensing he was being watched, Val lifted his gaze, and their eyes met. Everything around him seemed to fade away, and Saint couldn't stop the sharp inhale of breath. He could have sworn Val's smile got a little brighter.

A "pop" startled Saint, and he cursed under his breath. Thankfully, it had just been a champagne bottle being uncorked. Shaking himself out of it, he turned to face forward and caught Val's eye again. And the knowing smile.

"I'm going to make my rounds," Saint grumbled, ignoring Ryden's amused laugh. Thank goodness it was still early enough in the year that being booted and suited didn't have him feeling like he was about to combust. For these events especially, security needed to blend in with the crowd. As far as the guests were concerned, Saint and his team weren't even there.

A group of guests to his left burst into laughter. Ace stood among the group, his husband, Colton, at his side, joining in the laughter as Ace regaled them with one of his stories in his usual animated fashion. Never a dull moment around that guy.

Scanning the crowd, Saint spotted his boss, King, with his boyfriend, Leo, over by the long table offering an assortment of fancy appetizers. Never in a million years would Saint have guessed an intimidating, grumpy former Green Beret like King would fall for a cute computer nerd with fastidious snack tastes.

Leo shoved his glasses up his nose and frowned at the tiny plates. Something told Saint that prosciutto-wrapped figs with goat cheese did not make the list of Leo's approved snacks. King reached into his tuxedo jacket pocket and pulled out what looked to be a packet of something. With a huge smile, Leo threw his arms around King and hugged him tight, making the bigger man chuckle. Saint had to admit, the two were very sweet together.

Saint turned and bumped into someone. *Shit*. "I'm so sorry." He threw a hand out to steady the man he'd accidentally stepped into and froze. "Val. I mean, fire chief. Shit, no, former fire chief." *Holy hell*.

Val chuckled, little laugh lines forming at the corners of his eyes. "I said you could call me Val, remember?"

"Um." Saint's eyes dropped to Val's mouth. *Oh my God, why are you looking at his mouth?* Moving his eyes up, he swallowed hard at how Val's pupils seemed to dilate. Only then did Saint realize Val's hand was on his bicep. He squeezed Saint's arm and opened his mouth to say something when someone slapped Val on the back.

“Congrats, Serrano!”

“Thank you.” Val dropped his hand, and Saint took advantage of the distraction, quickly slipping around Val. He smoothed down his suit jacket and let out an unsteady breath. It wasn’t his first encounter with Val, but every time he ended up in front of the guy, Saint couldn’t stop himself from short-circuiting. What the hell was wrong with him?

Shaking himself out of it, Saint focused on his job. He probably just needed to get laid. It had been a while. After his divorce, he’d taken his time getting back into the dating scene, but once he had, he came to the conclusion that it sucked, and not in a good way. The women seemed genuinely interested, and a few encounters had been promising, but other than some okay sex, there wasn’t anyone he’d connected with. There was no spark, no...heat. His gaze instinctively went to a certain tall, broad-shouldered man who knew a thing or two about heat. And he was thinking about Val again.

Something moved in his peripheral vision, and Saint stilled. He peered into the darkness, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end as he inched closer. No one seemed to be on high alert. It could just be a bird or something. Then again....

Not seeing something didn’t negate its presence. As a former SEAL, he was all too familiar with hidden dangers. Steadying his breath, he slowly moved closer to the farthest edge of The Veranda and the cluster of shrubbery.

A burst of sand hit him in the face, and he growled, brushing it away as he jumped over the hedge and took off after the black-garbed hooded figure that bolted from behind the giant palm tree. Something red made Saint skid to a halt. He turned, his stomach dropping at the blinking red light. Years of training kicked in. He leaped back over the hedge and hit his PTT button, though his supervisor and fellow team members were already on the move, having seen him spring into action.

“Bug out! Possible IED,” Saint shouted into his com.

Everything moved in a flash. The Kings, the Wild Cards, and every security agent in place went into military/bodyguard mode, taking their positions. Agents alerted hotel security while Mason called 9-1-1. The rest of the team and their bosses rushed guests toward the emergency exits. They hurried everyone along, ensuring no one fell in the pool or got trampled.

Neither Val nor Frank had coms, but their voices boomed over the crowd, ordering everyone to move as quickly and calmly as possible. A woman

twisted her ankle, and Frank scooped her up without missing a beat and carried her out the exit. Saint turned to follow his team members when he saw Val helping up a guest who'd tripped right in front of the trees concealing the device.

“Val!”

The man Val helped up ran for the exit just as Saint bolted in Val's direction. If that thing *was* an explosive device and it went off, there was no telling how far the devastation would reach.

The world around him seemed to slow down, and somewhere in the distance, Ryden shouted his name, but Saint had to get Val away from the damned trees. Seeing Saint running, Val took off, reaching for Saint's hand just as everything went to hell.

Saint threw his arm up over his face as he soared through the air. Scorching heat whooshed over his body, and his lungs felt like they were on fire. He gasped for breath as something sharp struck him, and all at once, icy cold replaced the heat.

Cold water swirled around him, and he forced his eyes open. He was in the pool. Chunks of debris speared the water as he tried to figure out which way was up. Not panicking, he stilled, floating. Looking around, he spotted a chunk of one of the stone columns had fallen into the pool, pinning an unconscious Val to the bottom.

Fuck. There was no way he would be able to move it on his own. Then someone dove into the pool. Ryden. *Fuck yeah! Oorah.*

Ryden motioned to the pillar, and they each grabbed one end. Saint gritted his teeth. Air bubbles rushed to the surface as they grunted, using all their strength to move the stone. Red mist floated around Saint.

Blood.

Someone was bleeding. He couldn't worry about that now. The chunk of pillar hit the bottom of the pool with a muted thunk, and Saint quickly wrapped an arm around Val's waist. He swam with the bigger man, gasping and sucking in air when he broke the surface. The Veranda had been reduced to rubble, the palms and bushes on fire, smoke filling the night air.

“Saint! Hand him over.” Ryden was already out of the pool. He kneeled on the ledge, reaching for Val as Saint hoisted his limp body. Quickly, Saint climbed out, wincing at the sharp pain in his side, but he was too busy helping Ryden check Val to pay it any attention. Probably just pulled something.

“No visible injuries,” Saint confirmed.

Ryden was about to perform CPR when Val woke and started choking. They rolled him over onto his side as he coughed and spat water. He gasped for air, and Saint ran a soothing hand over his back.

“We need to get out of here,” Ryden said, grabbing Val’s arm.

His friend was right. There was no telling if there were any more devices. Saint helped Ryden get Val to his feet.

“Come on, Chief,” Saint growled as they each wrapped an arm around Val and hurried him out of the emergency exit...and into a complete circus. The street was blocked at each end and lined with ambulances, police cars, and other emergency vehicles.

“Saint, wait,” Val croaked, his fingers digging into Saint’s shoulder.

Before Saint could respond, Mason stormed over. “What the fuck! You assholes couldn’t answer your damn coms?” When he reached them, he realized they were soaking wet. “Shit.”

EMTs ran over to take Val, one trying to put an oxygen mask on him, but he brushed them away.

“Chief Serrano, please,” the EMT said, only to have Val move his face and shove the mask away.

“Saint,” Val growled. “Hospital.”

Saint frowned. “You want me to go with you to the hospital?”

“No,” Ryden said through a gasp, his eyes lifting to Saint’s. “He means you need a hospital.” He carefully peeled Saint’s jacket away from his side, and Saint’s world tilted off its axis. “Fuck.”

Mason started shouting, but Saint couldn’t make out the words as shadows and colors swirled around him. Darkness encroached, and Saint felt multiple pairs of hands on him. Was that King?

“Boss?”

“You’re going to be okay. You hear me, Cavallero?”

Saint nodded, or at least he thought he did. He couldn’t tell. Then he was lifted off his feet, his back against something soft, the night sky above him. What the hell was happening?

A calloused, firm grip on his hand had him trying to focus, but he couldn’t make out who it was. The touch was nice. Comforting. Saint thought maybe he’d said Val’s name, or maybe he just thought it. Before he could figure it out, the darkness took him.

CHAPTER TWO

“Here.”

Val opened his eyes to find a paper cup filled with coffee before him. He took the cup from Frank with a mumbled, “Thanks.” His body ached, and his lungs still burned. He also couldn’t shake the cold despite changing into dry clothes.

All he could think about was how damned lucky they’d been. How lucky *he’d* been. If that slab of stone had hit him in the head, or if Saint hadn’t alerted him in time and he hadn’t run when he did? Fuck, there were a hundred ways he could have died back there. Saint....

Val dropped his gaze to his hand. He could still feel Saint’s hand in his, his strength and warmth. Instead of warning him, Saint ran to him and reached out. Val had felt eyes on him the whole night, and whenever he looked up, their gazes met. Was it interest or something else? Every time he thought there was something between them, Saint retreated. Was Val reading too much into the looks? Wishing thinking on his part? Why couldn’t he get Saint out of his head? For fuck’s sake, he was too old to be pining after straight guys.

“He’s going to be okay,” Frank assured him.

His best friend knew him too well.

“What happened?” Frank asked, taking a seat next to him in the brightly lit waiting room.

“It all happened so fast. The force of the explosion sent us into the pool, and the only reason we didn’t get burned was because of a pillar between us and the bomb. Of course, when it went off, a huge chunk of the damned thing slammed into us. I got pinned by it. Ryden saw us hit the water. He dove in

and helped Saint get me out.” Val shook his head. “Saint got impaled by something, and whatever it was must have come out when we hit the water. He was bleeding out and didn’t even know it.”

Frank cursed under his breath. “With all that adrenaline pumping through him, he probably didn’t even feel it.”

Val grunted. The two of them knew a thing or two about adrenaline and pushing through the pain. They might not be former military like Saint or most of the guys at Four Kings Security, but Frank had been a pipeman, along with Val, at the same firehouse back in the day. They’d had their fair share of near-death experiences and life-threatening injuries. One of those injuries had put an end to Frank’s firefighting days.

Frank took a sip of his coffee and grimaced, making Val smile. His Cuban friend had always been a coffee snob. Frank got up, tossed the coffee in the trash, and resumed his seat. “Any word on how he’s doing?”

“Last I heard, he was in surgery,” Val said with a sigh. “Ryden’s been sending me updates.”

“Ryden?”

“He’s Saint’s emergency contact.”

“Right. You got any updates on what the hell happened tonight?”

Val scrunched up his nose. “Retired, remember? I offered my services to the new fire chief and was informed he was...handling it.”

“Why did you say *handling it* like it should be in air quotes?”

“Let’s just say the mayor and I had a few words over who should be appointed my successor, but it’s all about re-elections and making the right people happy, so he went with someone who fits the ‘American hero’ narrative.”

“What the fuck? And you don’t fit the American hero narrative?”

“I’m the gay son of Italian immigrants, Frank. So no, I do not. Never did.”

“Fuck that bullshit. He knows how many lives you’ve saved, how many times you risked your life. What about when you almost died saving that fucking asshole who left a gas generator running in his closed garage after the hurricane?” Frank cursed in his native Spanish tongue, making Val chuckle. His friend had never been the type to mince words.

As the only two openly gay firefighters in their house at the time, they’d stuck together, watched one another’s backs, and quickly became best friends over their propensity for being grumpy-ass, miserable fucks who liked good

food, great coffee and telling the status quo to go fuck itself.

“What’s he know about being a hero? Asshole couldn’t even change his flat tire. He had to call you guys. Because *that’s* what the fire department is there for. To be his personal auto club.” Frank shook his head. “What about King? Anything from him?”

If anyone could find out what was going on, it was King and his band of merry mischief makers. “Mason’s using his contacts inside the police department to get whatever information he can, but I doubt they’ll give him much. You know what they’re like. Whoever Saint saw was long gone by the time the search started. Hotel cameras got nothing. They knew what they were doing. With so many city officials in attendance, hell, even the Kings being there as guests, it’s not going to be easy to figure out the intended target.”

Frank leaned back in his seat and laced his fingers over his chest. His all-black suit, shirt, and tie looked out of place in the bright white and sky-blue waiting room. “Do you think King’s gonna use his secret weapon?”

“Considering King’s secret weapon was placed in harm’s way along with his brothers, I’d say there’s a good chance he’s going to do whatever it takes to track down the bastard.”

Frank scratched his chin. “I kinda hope King finds the asshole before the cops do.”

The former Green Beret was not a man to be trifled with. That was for sure. Val had worked closely with the Kings when he’d been Chief. The Kings had their ways, and Val had quickly discovered that as long as they didn’t get in the way of him doing his job or break any laws—at least not in front of him—then working together would benefit both of them. He’d also learned that you did not mess with any of the Kings and their family. Something told him the new “Let’s get back to good old-fashioned family values” fire chief wouldn’t be so accommodating, considering none of the Kings were straight.

“You sure you don’t want to head home and get some sleep?” Frank asked. “It’s been a rough night.”

Val shook his head. “I want to see him. Make sure he’s okay.” He swallowed hard and frowned down at his hand. “Thank him for saving my life.” Just as he’d said the words, a tired-looking Ryden walked through the double doors and headed his way. Val sat up, hating the ball of lead in the pit of his stomach.

“Hey, fellas. Fuck, what a night,” Ryden drawled, his Texas accent getting heavier the more tired he got. He rubbed his left eye, leaving his right open, drawing attention to it. Val felt for the guy.

Ryden’s left eye was half amber and half gray, and his right was a foggy gray due to an accident that had taken his vision while he served. Val had heard that the Marine pilot had taken his honorable discharge really hard. These days, he seemed to be doing a lot better.

“How is he?” Val asked.

“He’s out of surgery and doing good. They said he was real lucky. It’s a big ass flesh wound, mostly. He has a bunch of stitches, so he’ll be put on leave for a while, but he’s a big, strong boy. He’ll be on the mend pretty quick. Gonna drive us all out of our fucking minds, though.”

“What do you mean?”

Ryden blinked at him. “You got a former SEAL with nothing to do. Getting him to sit still is gonna be about as easy as pissing up a rope.”

“I think Val can help with that,” Frank said, grinning wide as he thrust a thumb in Val’s direction.

Val and Ryden exchanged confused looks before Val turned to his friend. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The tavern.”

“Tavern?” Ryden frowned. “What tavern?”

Val snorted. His friend needed more caffeine. “The man has a hole in his side, and you want me to put him to work?” He shook his head. Besides, the last thing he needed was to have Saint hanging around him all day, sweating, using those strong arms and hands to.... No. Abso-fucking-lutely not.

“What tavern?” Ryden asked again.

“A few years ago, I realized there wasn’t a local watering hole for our first responders. Somewhere they could grab a few beers and some burgers. So, I decided that when the time came, I’d retire and open one up. It would give me something to do and keep me connected to the community.”

Ryden’s face lit up. “That’s awesome! Saint loves building shit. Not that your tavern is shit, but you know what I mean. Opening a tavern’s a great idea too.”

Before Val could stop this nonsense, a nurse emerged from the double doors. She stopped in front of them and smiled.

“Mr. Cavallero is awake. He’s asking for you.”

“Let me know how he’s doing,” Val told Ryden, surprised when the nurse

shook her head, a mysterious little smile on her face.

“He’s asking for the Chief.”

“Oh.” Val ignored his best friend’s obnoxious grin and stood. He followed the nurse through the doors and down the long corridor, turning this corner and that, walking past the nurses’ station and occupied rooms. He thanked the nurse and opened the door, slipping inside and closing it quietly behind him. It looked like Saint had fallen back asleep.

Val walked over to the side of the bed and stood there for several heartbeats. What was it about Saint that enthralled him so much? Of all the men in this city, in this damned state, he had to be interested in the straight guy. What was wrong with him? Saint wasn’t the first straight guy Val had been attracted to, but he was the only one Val couldn’t move on from.

Man, he was something. Younger looking than his thirty-something years. His brows were dark and thick, as were the lashes now resting on his cheeks. Stubble covered his jaw already, and his full lips were slightly parted.

Despite just having come out of surgery, he looked big and strong. His skin—a rich tan, a combination of his Latino heritage and the unforgiving Florida sun—sporting bruises and scratches from the explosion. His dark brown hair had lighter brown strands and stuck out all over the place, which made Val smile.

He never felt this kind of want, and he’d get hurt if he didn’t stop these feelings. Bad.

Saint opened his eyes, and his smile stole Val’s breath away. Yep, he was screwed.

“Hey,” Saint said, sounding groggy. “You came.”

“I was in the waiting room. Ryden’s kept me updated.”

“You’ve been waiting for me?”

“Well, yeah. I was worried.”

“You were worried about me?” Saint smiled again, his eyes closing. He was so out of it. “That’s nice.”

Oh boy, he was stoned big time. “Of course I was worried,” Val replied. “You were hurt saving me.”

“Are *you* okay?” Saint asked as he forced his eyes open.

“A little banged up, but good. Thanks to you.”

“Couldn’t leave you.”

Val smiled. The guy was in the hospital, injured after risking his life, but he was worried about Val. It said a lot about the kind of man Saint was.

Chances were, Saint wasn't going to remember any of this. He'd have to thank the guy when he wasn't lost in a fog of painkillers.

"Hey." Saint reached up, and Val wasn't sure what to do. He leaned in a little, and Saint motioned for him to come closer. Bending over, Saint surprised the hell out of him by cupping Val's face. He ran his thumb over Val's cheek, stroking, then across his bottom lip, his whiskey-colored gaze fixed on Val's mouth.

Val held his breath, afraid Saint would let go and, at the same time, afraid he wouldn't. His pulse shot up, and heat shot through his face when Saint moved his hand, sliding it behind Val's neck and tugging until their faces were so close that Val could feel Saint's hot breath against his skin. What was happening? Maybe he was dreaming. He'd fallen asleep in the waiting room, and this was a hot, torturous dream.

"Saint, what are you doing?" Val asked, his voice quiet. He couldn't tear his gaze away from Saint's gorgeous mouth. All Val had to do was lift his chin, and their lips would touch.

"I don't know."

"You're straight," Val murmured, moving his gaze to meet Saint's.

"Am I?"

What? What the ever-loving—*What?*

"Aren't you?"

"Aren't I what?"

"Straight."

"I am." Saint's brows drew together in a frown. "At least, I think I am. Or was? I'm not so sure."

Val needed to sit down, but he didn't dare move. "Maybe now is not—"

"I mean, can you really be straight if you think about kissing another guy?" Saint asked softly, his fingers stroking the back of Val's neck. "What if you think it but don't do it? Can you still say you're straight? What if you don't want to kiss other guys, just *one* guy in particular."

Val opened his mouth, but Saint kept going.

"I've thought about kissing you. *A lot*. Like, all the time. Why can't I stop thinking about you?"

Sweet Sandra Bullock, Saint was going to kill him.

Val had known a couple of guys who would argue that kissing a man—or getting a blow job from one—didn't make them gay. It sure as hell made them delusional.

“Saint....” Whatever the hell was going on, Val couldn’t let Saint do anything he’d regret because he was high on pain meds. This was a big deal, and as attracted as he was to Saint, *because* he was attracted to Saint, he couldn’t be his experiment. He’d never survive if he had Saint and then had to let him go.

“What if you kiss me? Maybe then I might know.” Saint turned his face into Val’s, his lips brushing against Val’s skin.

Val sighed and closed his eyes. He reached up and lay his hand on Saint’s, giving it a gentle squeeze. “You should rest.” Val moved Saint’s hand away and pulled back.

“Okay,” Saint replied, clearly unaware of the admission he’d just made. “Will you stay?”

“Sure.” Val took a seat in the chair next to the bed. By the time he sat back, Saint was softly snoring. He was so damned sweet. Val couldn’t even be mad at the guy. Eyes on the ceiling, Val cursed under his breath. He’d been right. There was something between them. As glad as he was to have his suspicions confirmed, it didn’t change anything. Saint had a lot to think about. Or maybe he didn’t. For all Val knew, when Saint woke up, he’d return to the way he had been before, pretending there was nothing between them, that he was straight.

Whatever the outcome, it was up to Saint, and Val respected that. Saint was the only one to decide who he was and what he wanted to do with his life. Whether he came out or not was up to him. All Val could do was offer support if Saint wanted it. What he couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—do was complicate things further by giving in to whatever this was between them.

Coming to terms with his sexuality had been some of the roughest years of Val’s life. He might not have been kicked out onto the streets like Frank had, but Val hadn’t been much better off with a father determined to beat the gay out of him.

Raised in an extremely conservative home where men were manly breadwinners and women were wives relegated to the kitchen and raising the children, Val had buried who he was for years, forcing himself to be the man his family expected him to be.

High school had been a self-loathing nightmare where he’d become someone he barely recognized in order to fit the mold. Then he went to college, stayed on campus in an all-male dorm, and joined a fraternity. His roommate had been exploring his sexuality, too. So yeah, all bets were off by

the end of his first year. He might not have come out, but he wasn't hiding who he was.

Saint let out a little groan in his sleep, and Val ran a hand through his hair. It was fine. He was fine. All he had to do was treat Saint the same way he treated everyone else in his life, like a friend.

Keeping Saint at a distance would be much easier now that Val was retired. He'd keep himself busy with the tavern, fixing it up and getting it ready to open, and if he got a little lonely, he'd go to Sapphire Sands and hook up with someone, same as he'd been doing for years. Unless Saint was on a job at the club or Val attended one of the Kings' charity events, it was unlikely they'd see each other.

Before he retired, they'd kept getting pushed into each other's orbit, mainly because the Kings had encountered some trouble a little while back. When Fitz's salon had been set on fire, Val had been called in, and Saint had been assigned to protect Fitz. Soon after, someone tried to kidnap Gio, so Saint was assigned as his executive protection.

Things were different now. Val would no longer be called in to any situations involving the Kings. That was that, then. All he had to do was stay away. Initially, it might be a little challenging, but they'd eventually move on. Saint would undoubtedly realize Val wasn't the one for him. He was young, gorgeous, and a good man. Once he figured out what he wanted for himself, Saint would forget whatever he thought he felt about Val.

CHAPTER THREE

This was torture. Absolute torture.

When had he become *that* guy? The guy who checked his phone constantly in case he'd missed a text from a certain someone. And since when was that certain someone a guy?

Saint was a hot fucking mess, and he hated it. He was in his thirties, for fuck's sake. Shouldn't he have had his shit together by now, or at least have figured out his sexuality? Apparently not.

Instead, he kept thinking and dreaming about the damned fire chief. *Former* fire chief. Being at home with nothing to do and nothing to occupy his thoughts meant Val was on his mind constantly. It probably wouldn't have been so bad if he'd been at work because he'd have to focus on his assignment. But being home with nothing to do but recuperate?

The first week Saint had been home recovering, he'd been happy to spend most of his time in bed sleeping. Not that he would have been able to do much else, considering all the meds he'd been on. It went by in a blur. He appreciated the guys at work taking turns checking up on him. His freezer was full of delicious home-cooked meals, thanks to Red, who'd brought him enough to feed an army.

By the end of week two, Saint had been smothered within an inch of his life by what the Kings affectionately called "The Boyfriend Collective." Personally, Saint had never come up against The Boyfriend Collective. He'd been around long enough to see its inception and watch it go from its initial three members to six, the head of the Collective being Ace's billionaire husband, Colton Connolly.

Before Gio got together with Joker and became part of the Collective, the

Collective had decided Joker was a sweet puppy that needed feeding and coddling, which, quite frankly, Saint had found hysterical, considering the former Green Beret was the scariest and most volatile of the bunch. But Joker had soaked it in and loved every minute, often using it to his advantage to drive his brothers up the wall.

The Boyfriend Collective was a force to be reckoned with for sure. They *always* got their way, and they'd set their sights on Saint. Thankfully, they used their powers for good. Even their meddling was done out of love.

Colton, Laz, Fitz, Leo, and Gio, in particular, didn't care that Saint had been a SEAL or that he'd suffered worse throughout his military career. The Boyfriend Collective had been activated, and Saint knew better than to put up a fight.

Gio had insisted on getting him a nurse, at least for the first week, despite Saint's protests that he'd be fine on his own. Colton hired someone to clean his apartment and do his laundry. Fitz "freshened everything up," whatever that meant, though Saint had to admit the place looked and smelled nicer. Throw pillows and cozy blankets had appeared on his couch, a vase of fresh flowers on his kitchen counter, and several outlets now had air freshener plug-ins with soft scents like Cherry Blossom or Summer Day.

An essential oil diffuser and several little bottles of oils and incense sticks had appeared on his dresser, courtesy of Laz, along with Epsom salt in his bathroom and little canisters of loose-leaf teas in his kitchen cupboard. Saint had been a little skeptical of the teas at first, but once he'd tried them, he found them pretty tasty.

Leo had created movie playlists for him and filled his pantry with snacks. He'd programmed Saint's phone to remind him when to take a pill. At night when he fell asleep, his TV turned itself off and a little speaker turned on to play soothing spa music. It had scared the shit out of Saint the first night he'd heard it. He'd been too out of it to figure out where the music was coming from.

It was sweet, but if Saint spent one more day in his apartment doing nothing but watching TV and eating, he would lose his shit. He'd had a follow-up appointment with his doctor a couple of days ago and had been given the all-clear to resume normal, non-strenuous activities, which, unfortunately, did not include returning to work. Though technically, he could have been assigned desk duty, Jay had called to notify him that King insisted he take some personal days. Apparently, Saint had gone on long

enough without taking time off. Saint had never had a boss who wanted him to take time off.

“Are you sure he didn’t say anything?” Saint asked before stuffing a forkful of noodles into his mouth. His side was a little tender, but it was far from what it had been three weeks ago.

Ryden shook his head, amused. “What were you *hoping* he’d say? Because you keep asking me that, and the answer hasn’t changed. He gave me his number to give you in case you needed anything since you passed out before he could give it to you. You were *so stoned*, man.” He frowned at the navy pillow next to him. “Are these new?”

“Bro, they’ve been here for three weeks, and you only just noticed them?” Saint snickered. “Fitz brought them. And I don’t remember most of my time in the hospital,” he muttered, which meant he had been very out of it. “Fuck, what if I said something weird to him?”

Ryden barked out a laugh. “Weird?” His eyes suddenly went huge. “Shit, what if you told him you wanted to touch his fireman’s pole?”

Saint almost choked on his food, and he smacked Ryden’s hand away when his asshole best friend tried to pat his back. The laughing didn’t help. “For fuck’s sake! Are you trying to kill me?”

“So you *have* been thinking about his pole.”

“Stop referring to his dick as a pole, you juvenile.”

“Still not denying it.”

Saint clenched his jaw, his face feeling like it was on fire. He opened his mouth when Ryden put a hand up.

“Whatever you’re about to say is bullshit, so don’t bother.” Ryden put his food container down on the coffee table. “You’ve been thinking about this *and him* for a while now. Since you met him. You’re questioning things. What’s the problem?”

Saint wiped his mouth and put his plate down on the table. Ryden wasn’t wrong. Saint had been battling with this since he’d met Val. Then again....

“This isn’t the first time I’ve had certain...thoughts about a guy. Of course, it never felt like *this*.” Like he couldn’t breathe, like he was on the verge of something life-changing but couldn’t quite figure it out.

Ryden didn’t seem surprised, but he didn’t reply.

“In school, I just brushed it off as my hormones being all over the place. After I married Alicia, I’d been attracted to a few guys over the years. It was just....” Saint shrugged. “Easy to ignore, you know? That’s really shitty, I

know. Like, hey, I won't choose to be bi when you never had a choice."

"First of all, ignoring it doesn't mean you're not bisexual. Not having had a relationship with a guy doesn't mean you're not bisexual. I'm the last person who's gonna judge you. Hell, I grew up in Texas and joined the military, so I get it. It was easy for you to ignore because you were in love, happily married, and not a cheating asshole. But what if you hadn't been married? Can you say nothing would have happened with any of those guys you were attracted to?"

Ryden wasn't wrong. Saint might have wondered about the men he found himself attracted to, but he never would have acted on it. He'd loved his wife, and until she fell in love with someone else, he'd thought that was it for him.

"What if...what if I am bi?"

"I don't think there's a what-if, buddy."

"Right. No, you're right. What if I'm not ready to come out?"

Ryden's expression softened. "Then you're not ready. Look, some people explode out of the closet like a glitter bomb, dressed in a sparkling unicorn onesie, waving a rainbow flag, and singing Lady Gaga. Some people are more reserved about it. In between those two are a million other ways to come out, none of which are right or wrong. It's about you and *your* experience. No one gets to tell you what that is."

Saint nodded. He sat back against the cushions. He'd recently had a similar conversation with Gio about how everyone's experience differed. Not everyone had it all figured out by the time they hit puberty. It had been a confusing time for him, but he hadn't exactly had anyone in his life then who would have understood or helped him through it.

"Come with me to Sapphire Sands tonight," Ryden said, surprising the hell out of Saint.

"What?"

"You know. Club. Dance." Ryden did a little shimmy on the couch, making Saint laugh.

"You're such a dork. I don't know. Besides, I'm not a member." The Kings had company-wide membership since they held a security contract with Sapphire Sands, but the club was exclusively for men in the LGBTQ community, so Saint had never registered as a member.

"You can come as my guest and decide if you want to register for your membership. What are you afraid of? That you might get hit on by a bunch of dudes, or that you might like it?"

Saint arched an eyebrow at his obnoxious friend. "I've worked jobs at Sapphire Sands. I've been hit on plenty."

"Ooh, look at you, stud muffin." Ryden squeezed Saint's bicep. "I mean, what do you expect? You strut around the place with your big Navy SEAL muscles in that tight uniform, and the sharks are gonna circle."

"First of all, I do not strut. Second of all, my uniform is not tight."

Ryden hummed. "Okay." He stood and stretched. "Well? What do you say? Might give you some of those answers you're looking for."

Maybe Ryden was right. What better place to find some answers than Sapphire Sands? He'd worked enough jobs there to be familiar with the place, and he'd always felt comfortable. Even in the beginning, before the club members knew he was a bodyguard and hit on him, he hadn't felt weird. And maybe his eyes had roamed on occasion. He'd told himself he was just being vigilant, but....

"Why not." Saint stood and started clearing off the coffee table. Once he'd put the leftovers in the fridge and put the dishes in the dishwasher, he headed for his bedroom, calling out over his shoulder. "Gonna take a shower and get dressed. Be right out."

"Okay. We have to swing by my place so I can get all prettied up," Ryden replied, dropping back onto the couch.

Was he going to do this? What if it was too much too soon? Then again, he didn't need to do anything with anyone. He could have a good time without hooking up with someone. He'd never done anything like this, so he'd have to play it by ear.

It didn't take Saint long to get ready. Showering was easier now that he didn't have stitches to worry about. He was still sore, but the bruising had gone down a lot. In time the scar would fade just as the others had, but it would never disappear entirely.

Dressed in a three-quarter length sleeve, navy button-down shirt with the top button open, and charcoal gray pants, he finished getting ready and headed into the living room. The stop at Ryden's apartment was quick, and then they were off to Sapphire Sands.

Since Four Kings Security provided the bouncers at the club, Saint knew the two guys at the main entrance beneath the awning. They gave him curious smiles but didn't ask, just let him and Ryden in. The nightclub was packed, what with it being a Saturday night. The music was loud, but not enough that you couldn't have a conversation without shouting.

As far as clubs went, it was the nicest Saint had ever been to, but then again, it catered to a wealthy clientele, and if Saint hadn't worked for Four Kings Security, he would never have qualified for membership.

The ambiance was great, and just from stepping inside, you could tell it was an exclusive club. Everything was black with silver accents. The neon lights in Sapphire Sands's signature blue had been tastefully and strategically placed around the club to give it an edgy look without being tacky.

The space was huge, with plenty of seating in the form of booths, some of which were more private than others. Today, the black plinths were up, supporting the club's beautiful go-go boys in their sparkling blue shorts and sneakers as they danced provocatively. Saint's gaze had wandered over to a dancer or two while on duty, his face getting hot when one of them noticed and blew him a kiss.

Servers moved expertly among the crowd carrying trays of cocktails and spirits. Ryden found them a table, and it didn't take long before their drink order had been taken.

"It's weird," Saint said, taking everything in. When he was here on the job, his focus was on his client and any possible threat that might present itself. He took nothing for granted, not even the fact that they were in an exclusive members-only club. He'd been doing this job long enough to know that a threat could happen anytime, anywhere. Even if the members might not be a threat, the members were allowed guests, just like Saint was a guest of Ryden's tonight. And although advance notice had to be given, there wasn't enough time for Sapphire Sands to vet every guest who might be showing up for a few hours any given night.

"What's weird?" Ryden asked, snapping Saint from his thoughts.

"Being here as a guest. Everything looks so different." Like he was seeing the place for the first time.

Their beers arrived, and Saint thanked the waiter. "How often do you come here?"

"Not as often as you think. You know how it is with our schedules."

True. Ryden might not work in executive protection, but like the rest of them, he could be on sight doing a risk assessment any day and time of the week, depending on when their clients needed them and how urgent it was. Clients liked to spring last-minute changes on them, leaving everyone to scramble, and that didn't even take into account any unforeseen circumstances that might pop up.

“See anything you like?” Ryden asked, his smile wide.

Saint scanned the crowd. So many men. Some younger than Saint, some older, taller, shorter, leaner, more muscular.... How was he supposed to know which of these men would do it for him or if they even would? He found plenty of them attractive.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, why don’t we get out on the dance floor, bust a few moves, and see where the night takes us?”

Saint chuckled and shook his head. “No one says ‘bust a move’ anymore.”

“I do. I just said it. I’m bringing it back.”

“Good luck with that.” Saint took another swig of his beer, then got up and followed Ryden to the packed dance floor. He was determined not to do what he always did and overthink the hell out of things. Just go with the flow. If something happened tonight, it happened. If it didn’t, it didn’t. No big deal.

Techno music wasn’t something he’d typically listen to, but it got everyone pumped and dancing. Lots of sweaty bodies in various stages of undress surrounded him, some belonging to men who looked at him with interest. A couple of guys flirted with him, one running a hand down his arm, and he liked it.

And then a tall, broad-shouldered man with salt-and-pepper hair dressed in an expensive-looking suit appeared before him. He had a chiseled jaw full of stubble and was several years older than Saint. A shiver ran through him. The guy reminded him of Val, but his eyes were blue instead of intense gray. He leaned in close.

“Are you here with someone?”

Saint shook his head, his stomach filling with butterflies at the man’s wide smile. Apparently, Saint had a type. He let himself get pulled into the bigger man’s arms, his breath quickening at the feel of the guy’s leg between his as they danced together.

It was certainly...different, being pulled into big, strong arms against a solid wall of muscle. He liked it. A lot more than he thought he would. Is this what it would feel like to be in Val’s arms? It would probably feel better because he knew Val. Trusted him. Wanted him. The man leaned in, and Saint took in the subtle scent of his cologne.

“Why don’t we get to know each other better?”

“Sure.”

The guy was hot, and Saint enjoyed his firm but gentle touches as he led Saint off the dance floor and toward one side of the club. The guy stopped next to the wall and turned, maneuvering Saint so his back was against the wall.

“Nervous?”

“A little.”

“Why?”

What was he supposed to say? That this was his first time doing anything with a guy? That he had no idea what the hell he was doing? He didn't want to play games, but if he didn't try, how would he know?

The man tilted his head. “I've seen you here before.”

“I've been here with clients. I work in executive protection.”

“Sexy.”

Not really, but okay.

“So, you protect people with your body?” He asked, his voice low and husky as he ran a hand around Saint's waist to his ass.

Zero points for originality, but A-plus for effort and making Saint feel hot and horny. The more time he spent with...? He should probably at least ask the guy his name.

“What's your name?”

“Vic.”

Of course it was. The Universe was fucking with him. Had to be.

The more time Saint spent with Vic touching and feeling him up, the more he thought about Val. If he closed his eyes, he could easily imagine Val's hand squeezing his ass, his lips brushing against Saint's jaw. Lips touched his neck, and Saint groaned. What did Val taste like? Were his lips soft or firm? He always smelled amazing, so Saint didn't need to wonder about that.

“Fuck, you're sexy,” Vic grumbled, rubbing his erection against Saint's leg.

“Oh, god.” Well, there was no mistaking his sexuality. He was most certainly *not* straight.

Maybe he'd never been with a guy before, but his body was pretty sure what it wanted. His brain might be a few steps behind, but Saint wouldn't overthink it. He gave himself over to the sensation, aware of Vic moving with him until they reached the thick black curtains separating the club and the private rooms out back.

It was decision time.

CHAPTER FOUR

Val had great intentions when he woke up this morning. He was going to have a long, productive day working at the tavern.

“You know what they say about good intentions,” Val muttered to himself as he lined up another nail. Speaking of hell, maybe he could stop putting himself through it and focus on the damn task at hand.

After getting up nice and early, he’d had his coffee and a nice breakfast at his kitchen counter, where he put together a list of all the things he planned to have done by the end of the day. The list was ambitious, but Val had a plan, damn it, and he was going to stick to it. So, he gathered his supplies, put some music on, and got to it. Except somehow now it was dark outside, and he’d barely gotten anything done. Why?

Now that he was officially retired, he could work on his tavern full-time rather than a few hours here and there.. He’d gotten a lot done in the three years since he’d bought the property. If he wanted to get it ready in time for the opening night he’d worked out, he needed to get his ass in gear.

The place had been gutted completely, giving him a blank canvas to work with. Once his business plan had been approved and funded, he’d worked on the layout, configuring locations for booths and tables, the bar and bar seating, and everything else. He’d researched materials and fixtures.

It was time for him to get to work. He could lose himself in his work and forget about Saint, forget about that sexy body and beautiful smile, forget about those dark eyes and the way Val could get lost in them.

An image of Saint at the hospital came to mind and Val paused. He thought about how close Saint’s lips had been to his, how warm his breath had felt, and how if Val had just leaned in—

“Motherfuck!” Val dropped the hammer and shook his hand. At this rate, he was going to lose his damned thumb. No matter how many times he told himself to pay attention and be careful, he’d end up causing himself some bodily harm. “Get your shit together,” Val growled at himself. “You are not new at this. How are you going to finish this place if you can’t even hammer a fucking nail into the wall?”

Of course, his brain promptly came back with a different type of nailing. For fuck’s sake! It was like he was a horny teenager.

“This has to stop,” he told himself. “You need to stop thinking about him, his mouth, his ass, his everything. Enough.” He picked up the hammer. “It’s fine. You’re fine. Tavern. Work.” Maybe he should call Saint, check up on him? He’d told Ryden to give Saint his number in case he needed something. It’s not like he couldn’t just be a good friend and call to see how his friend was doing. Maybe a text, and—*Oh fuck, that hurt!*

“Fuck this.” Val tossed the hammer onto the table. “Okay, so today’s a bust. We can just pick up where we left off tomorrow.” He frowned. He’d probably be thinking about Saint tomorrow. “No. Nope. You know what you need? Other than to stop talking to yourself? You need to get laid. That’s what you need.” That’s what he’d do. Go to Sapphire Sands, hook up with someone, get all this pent-up need out in one of the back rooms, and get back to work.

Leaving the tavern, he headed back home to take a shower and get dressed in something a little more appropriate. He called Frank on the way to the club to let him know he was coming. This was good. Tonight, the club would be packed as hell with single men looking to have a hot time. Val could let go of some steam in the one place he knew Saint wouldn’t be. Don’t think about Saint and stay away. That’s all he had to do.

So much for staying away.

When Val had first met Saint, he never expected that he’d be hung up on him all this time later. It had him at a loss. He’d never taken this long to move on from a guy. At first, his looks had gotten Val’s attention, but he hadn’t thought much of it.

Saint had seemed so serious, barely speaking while on the job. And then Val had been invited to a party celebrating the unveiling of Gio’s new K9 charity. That night, he’d quickly learned there was a whole other side to Saint. When Saint wasn’t on assignment, he laughed, joked, and teased. He danced, got hilariously tipsy, and could be painfully adorable. Val had been

captivated. He'd also had a fun night with Saint at that party. It had been Val's first hint that perhaps Saint wasn't straight.

What the hell was Saint doing at Sapphire Sands? As if the guy wasn't already monopolizing Val's thoughts. Now there were visuals. Very hot, sexy visuals. Saint wearing his tight Four Kings Security uniform was a mouthwatering sight, but seeing him dressed the way he was tonight was enough to make Val sweat.

Before tonight, it had been easy for Val to focus his attention elsewhere because Saint had always been here in a professional capacity. He wasn't out on the dance floor looking like a wet dream, his pants hugging him oh so beautifully in all the right spots, his shirt accentuating his slender waist, broad chest and wide shoulders, and those arms....

No matter how hard he tried, Val couldn't keep his eyes off Saint or the sinful way he moved his sleek, muscular body, his breathtaking smile lighting up the room. It was genuine and drew in the men around him. Saint didn't seem to think anything of it as he laughed at something some guy said in his ear. If he felt any discomfort from the sweaty men pressed up against him, he didn't show it. Instead, he looked like he was having a good time.

For fuck's sake. Why the hell was Val doing this to himself? Sure, he could leave, but he wasn't going to because he was too old for this lovesick puppy bullshit. He'd made a career of standing his ground; he wasn't about to change that now because of one guy, no matter how sexy or sweet he was. Why did he keep doing this to himself? Saint was not the only sexy guy around. Hell, this club was full of them.

"Why do you look like you ate something foul?" Frank asked as he slipped into the barstool to Val's right.

"Just giving myself a good talking to."

When Frank arched an eyebrow in question, Val motioned over to the dance floor. Locating the source of Val's displeasure, Frank shook his head, amused.

"In all the years I've known your miserable ass, I've never seen you so obsessed over a guy."

"What? Fuck off. I'm not obsessed. Also, I'm not miserable."

"Oh, right. Sorry, I forgot this is what you always look like. Whatever this is." Frank waved a hand in Val's general vicinity. "It's not the look of a man who's moved on, and considering how damned stubborn you are, it's not because you can't, but you don't want to."

“Whatever,” Val grunted. He took another sip of his beer. The last thing he needed was for Frank to be the voice of reason. What was the world coming to?

“Now, here’s an idea.”

Val cast him a sideways glance.

“No, no. Just hear me out. What if you...just talked to him,” Frank said, looking too damned pleased for his own good as he leaned against the bar.

“Yeah? And say what? ‘Hey, I know you think you’re straight, but I think my penis could change that.’”

Frank barked out a laugh. He shook his head. “Why not? Maybe it’ll work.”

Val took another sip of his drink. “Doesn’t matter. Even if he’s not straight, there’s plenty of reasons it wouldn’t work.”

“Like?”

“He’s too young.”

“You have a problem with Joshua?”

“What?” Val was so confused. “What the hell are you talking about? Why would I have a problem with your boyfriend?”

“Because Saint isn’t much older than Joshua, and you’re my age.”

Shit. Val had forgotten about that. “Yeah, but it’s different. You two just fit.” Joshua had fallen head over heels for Frank from the moment they’d met. He’d then made it his mission to show Frank they were meant for each other.

“What about King and Leo? Red and Laz?”

Val peered at Frank. “I’m sensing a pattern here.”

Frank laughed. “Fuck off. Listen, when it works, it works. Don’t make the same mistakes I did. Joshua is the best thing that ever happened to me, and I was an asshole for trying to push him away because of *my* insecurities.”

“You’re missing one key factor,” Val said.

“I know you’re not about to say that Saint is straight. Because you and I both know he is *not* straight. It’s also not his age, so what is it?”

His friend was right. Val was grasping at straws, thinking up excuses that had nothing to do with the real reason he kept his distance. “I don’t want to be his first.”

Frank sighed. “I get it. But you need to ask yourself, are you prepared for someone else to be his first?”

“What?”

Frank motioned behind Val, and Val couldn't stop himself from looking. He cursed under his breath while a host of emotions flooded through him. Anger. Concern. Jealousy. Annoyance. Anger again.

Some guy had his hands—and mouth—all over Saint as he led him toward the heavy black curtains. It wasn't like Saint didn't know what went on back there. He'd worked jobs at the club plenty of times and had clients who used the backrooms.

Jaw clenched, Val turned back to Frank. "Not my problem. He's a big boy. He can look after himself and make his own decisions." Though it annoyed the fuck out of him that Saint had found himself a guy who looked to be around Val's age and who suspiciously resembled Val, just with more salt and pepper. Not that he blamed Saint. The guy was free to do whatever the hell he wanted.

"True," Frank said. "Though if a friend of mine were not thinking straight—no pun intended—and might be about to do something he'd regret, I would feel obligated to at least say something."

Was Saint a friend? Val kept telling himself he was. "The guy did save my life," Val conceded. It's not like they'd just met. They'd known each other for years, even if they didn't spend much time together.

"That's right. The least you could do is check on him."

Frank wasn't wrong. Even if nothing happened between them—no, *despite* nothing happening between them—Val could still be a friend.

"Fuck it." Val threw back the shot of whiskey and stood. He might regret this, but it was better than sitting at the bar all night overthinking his life choices.

The closer he got to the two, the more annoyed he became. Whoever the fuck this guy was, he was all over Saint, though Saint didn't look uncomfortable. However, he seemed hesitant to let the guy kiss him on the mouth, which told Val all he needed to know.

"Sorry to interrupt," Val said gruffly, clearly not sorry, as the guy pulled back. "But I need a word with my friend."

The guy looked him over, then met his gaze, eyes narrowed. "He's busy."

Val turned to Saint and waited.

With a sigh, Saint gently pulled out of the guy's embrace and stepped back. His smile was apologetic.

"Sorry, Vic."

Vic? For fuck's sake.

Jaw clenched, Vic stormed off, and Val grabbed Saint by the arm, dragging him through the black curtains and into the first empty side room. He wasn't about to have this conversation out in public.

Closing the door, he turned, only for Saint to put a hand on Val's chest and push him back against the closed door. His pupils were dilated, and he looked a little out of breath.

"What are you doing?" Val asked, aggravated.

"I don't know. You're the one who brought me back here." Saint stepped closer, his eyes dropping to Val's mouth. "Thought maybe you were finally making a move."

The only move Val was making was moving Saint's hand off his chest. He ignored the spark that shot through him when he touched Saint. "I brought you back here to talk some sense into you."

Saint hummed. "Sure. Talk." He stepped closer and slipped his hand around Val's neck. "I can think of something we could do that's much better than talking, Chief."

"I'm not doing this," Val warned, despite the shiver that went through him at the nickname. He'd been called that for years, but coming from Saint, the way his voice went low, practically dripping with sex, was unlike anything he'd ever experienced, and his pants suddenly got tighter. No. Nope. He couldn't—*wouldn't*—do this.

"Not doing what?"

"Whatever it is you think is going to happen in here. Especially not like this."

"Like what?"

"With you drunk."

Saint's lips quirked in the corners as he caressed Val's skin with his thumb. "I had one beer. I'm not even buzzed. Admit it. You want me."

"I think you know damned well I want you." As if that was ever in question.

"So what's the problem, Chief?" He moved in to kiss Val, and Val put a hand up to stop him. Was he serious? How had they even gotten here? Then again, Saint had asked Val to kiss him in the hospital, and yeah, he'd been out of it, but that only meant Saint had been thinking about it long before then.

"Really? You don't see a problem with going from Straight Guy to getting fucked in the back of a club?" His words clearly burst Saint's bubble,

and he blinked at Val.

“I wasn’t going to let him fuck me.”

“Suck your dick?”

Saint opened his mouth, then closed it, his face flushed.

“What exactly did you think was going to happen back here?”

“I don’t know. I just...I wanted some answers.” Saint took a step back and dropped his arms to his sides.

“And that’s how you’re going to get them? With some stranger in a club? Did you think *Vic* was going to give you the answers you’re looking for?”

“Well, if the guy I want won’t give me answers, then I have to get them from someone else, don’t I?” Saint said, belligerent as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Wait, how was *he* the bad guy in this? “Are you fucking kidding me? I’m trying to help you, and you’re being an asshole?”

“I’m being an asshole? You want me, but you won’t do anything about it.”

“Because I won’t be your experiment.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Patience.

This was all new to Saint. And maybe the only way Saint would get the answers he was looking for was to find them with someone, but Val couldn’t be that someone, which meant Frank was right. Val had to come to terms with the fact that Saint wasn’t meant for him.

“Listen. I care about you, Saint. And yeah, I want you, but it took me a long time to figure myself out, and I’m not going to be the first guy you fool around with only to decide you made a mistake.” Getting his heart broken was one thing, but going out and looking for heartbreak? He wasn’t going to do that to himself.

Saint threw his arms up, clearly frustrated. “How do you know if it’s a mistake if you don’t even give me a chance?”

“Because I’ve been here before.”

“Really? You’ve been in this exact situation with me before.”

“Don’t be a smartass. You know exactly what I mean.”

“I’m not an adolescent who’s trying to figure himself out. I can handle this. I can have a relationship with a guy.” Saint seemed very sure of himself, but Val knew better.

“Yeah? So let’s say we start dating. What then?”

“What do you mean?”

Val folded his arms over his chest as he leaned against the door. “Are you going to introduce me as your boyfriend?”

“Well, yeah.”

“To your coworkers?”

“Of course.”

“Your parents? Your family?”

Pause.

And there it was.

“Like I said. I know who I am, and I’m not going back in the closet, Saint. Not for you, not for anyone.” He pushed away from the door. “Nothing can happen between us.”

“Then why did you come here?” Saint demanded. “You don’t want me, but you don’t want me with someone else, right? You can’t have it both ways, Chief.”

“Fuck this. Do whatever the fuck you want.” Val turned and opened the door, storming out of the room. He didn’t need this shit. The door slammed behind him, and it took everything Val had not to turn around. He had never come across anyone so fucking stubborn and frustrating.

Well, this night was a complete disaster. The thing was, Val wasn’t sure if he was pissed at Saint or himself. Both. Definitely both. Saint wasn’t wrong. Val couldn’t have it both ways. That didn’t mean he had to like it. And he didn’t like it at all. His heart kept telling him to go back, but what the hell did his heart know? It had gotten him into plenty of trouble in the past.

Val made his way through the club, stopping by the bar to see Frank on his way out. When Frank saw him, his smile faded.

“I’m leaving.”

“Went that well, huh?”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay.” Frank wanted to say more, but his friend knew when to back off, which said something because Frank was just as stubborn as he was and rarely backed off.

Tonight was not the night to get into it. Val was tired, pissed, and his dick was arguing with him to go back and end Saint’s questions. Not what he needed. Saint wanted answers, but Val wasn’t the one to give them to him, he couldn’t be.

Having parked behind the club, Val took the back exit out. By this time of

night, the parking lot around the club was packed. He headed for his car, more determined than ever to get his shit together. He'd been looking forward to working on his tavern for years, and now he could. The last thing he needed was to get distracted by a guy who didn't know what he wanted.

As he neared his car, he thought he heard a noise. It sounded like a groan. He stopped and scanned the parking lot, but all he heard was the usual sound of cicadas chirping and the breeze ruffling palm fronds. He'd just hit the button on his key fob to unlock his SUV doors when he heard something. This time there *was* something. He heard a garbled but distinct cry for help coming from the end of the parking lot.

Locking his car, he hurried toward the end of the parking lot near the dumpsters. He didn't like that the place was shrouded in shadows, but if someone was in trouble, it was his duty to help.

"Is someone there? Do you need help?" he asked as he drew closer.

"Please," someone rasped.

Shit.

Val carefully got closer when something moved in the shadows. Not something—*someone*. Three figures lunged from the darkness, tackling him. Val hit the dirty asphalt of the parking lot hard but managed to keep his head protected so it didn't slam against the ground. Three men dressed in black with hoodies wearing masks over their faces kicked him.

"Fucking cocksucker," one man spat, his voice low and harsh as he kicked Val in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

Val tried to fight them off while doing his best to protect his head at the same time. He had to find a way to get up.

A punch to the side of one guy's knee sent the asshole stumbling sideways as he cried out. The other two hesitated just enough to give Val the chance he needed to get up. And good thing he did because one of the men pulled a knife, swiping it at Val. He managed to get out of the way, a sharp sting making him hiss. He'd been cut but, thankfully, not stabbed.

Val smacked the guy's fist away when he tried again to stab him, and Val swiped his leg from under him. The guy hit the ground, knife skidding, but the other two tackled him to the ground again before Val could grab it. One tried to hold him down while the other punched him. Val was not a small man, but neither were these guys.

"What do you want?" Val growled, sucking in a sharp breath when someone's boot made contact with his side. What the hell did they want from

him? If they'd wanted to mug him, they would have done it already. This was something else, something worse. If he didn't do something, they were going to kill him.

CHAPTER FIVE

What the hell was he doing?

Saint closed his eyes as he leaned against the closed door he'd slammed like some petulant child. His heart pounded fiercely. When was the last time he'd gotten this worked up over someone? Never. Not even with Alicia. With a frustrated growl, he pushed away from the door and left the room. He went through the crowd to Ryden, who stood talking to some guy near their table. His expression must have said it all because Ryden excused himself and came over.

"Hey. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just tired. I'm going to head home."

"Okay. I'll catch you later."

Saint nodded and headed toward the back exit to the parking lot. What if Val was right? He certainly had a hell of a lot more experience than Saint did. He'd been an openly gay man for a long time. Saint didn't even know what he wanted. Other than Val.

Watching gay porn didn't exactly prepare him for sex with another man. What if they fooled around, and Saint wasn't ready? Val cared about him and considered Saint more than some guy he could screw around with. Maybe Saint needed to slow down.

What the hell had he been thinking? Letting some stranger lead him into the back rooms. Shaking his head at himself, he walked out into the parking lot and headed for his truck when he heard a shouted curse. Peering toward the darker end of the parking lot, he could see a group of guys doing something. Stepping closer, he realized they were beating someone.

"Hey! What the fuck are you doing?" He shouted as he got closer.

“Saint!”

Holy shit, it was Val!

“Son of a bitch. Get the fuck away from him!” Saint bolted toward the hooded men, one of them cursing under his breath and taking off, the other two cursing at him for leaving them. As Saint shoved one of the hooded figures, the other pulled a knife and made a swipe at him, but Saint jumped out of the way. He punched the guy in the solar plexus, and the guy gasped for breath as he doubled over.

Seeing they weren't going to get the drop on Saint, Knife Guy grabbed his friend, and they hauled ass. Saint wanted to go after them, but Val was more important. He quickly dropped onto one knee next to Val, who groaned and coughed as he propped himself on his elbow. His face was dirty, his lip bloodied from where it was split, and his cheek was red. It would no doubt turn into a bruise. His clothes were a mess, and Saint didn't want to know what the stains on his pants were from.

“Are you okay? Were you cut or stabbed?” Saint asked, checking Val over for any puncture wounds. His sleeve had been sliced, and Saint checked to find a fine red line. “Looks like you were cut, but you won't need stitches.”

“I'm okay,” Val growled, and Saint helped him to his feet. “Assholes came out of nowhere.”

Saint lifted his gaze and saw that the lamppost light was out. “Were they trying to rob you?”

Val shook his head and hissed when he touched his arm. “I don't know. They didn't ask for anything. One of them called me a cocksucker, which is weird considering I'm one guy out of dozens leaving a gay club.”

Saint opened his mouth to reply when a couple of the guards from the club ran over.

“You two okay? One of our guys heard shouting.”

“Tell me you caught that on camera,” Saint said.

The taller of the two guards shook his head. “The camera's out.”

Was it possible the attackers knew that? The parking lot of Sapphire Sands wasn't small, and after someone tried to kidnap Gio a couple of years ago, Frank and Jack had added some extra cameras to the club's high-end security system. Before he could ask, Frank rushed out of the club.

Val groaned. “Great.”

“What the fuck happened?” Frank demanded as he thundered over. He

took hold of Val's shoulder and looked him over. "You okay? Do we need to call 9-1-1?"

"No, for fuck's sake, no. I'm fine. Just a little cut."

Frank nodded and looked at Saint. "What about you? You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Again," Frank growled at Val. "What the fuck happened?"

"I got jumped by some assholes," Val replied. "Three of them. They were masked and hooded. One of them had a knife. I managed to dodge it, but two of them tackled me to the ground and started punching and kicking. Saint got here quickly after, and they ran off."

Frank's eyebrows shot up, and he whirled toward the guards. "And why the ever-loving fuck did no one see this?"

"The camera went out in that sector, remember? Ignacio called us, and we were on our way out when we were told about a brawl out front," the taller guard replied.

Frank cursed under his breath.

"Pretty convenient," Saint said.

Everyone turned to him.

"What if we were wrong? What if there's a connection? I mean, first, the explosion at Val's retirement party, and now a bunch of hooded and *masked* thugs jump him in an area of the parking lot where the camera just happened to be offline? They didn't ask for his wallet, phone, or anything."

"Maybe we should go inside and discuss this," Frank said, returning his attention to Val. "You sure you don't want to call the cops? Report this?"

Val shook his head. "I just want to go home and take a shower. No offense, Frank, but I don't want to be covered in whatever was on the ground over there."

"Why were you even over there?"

"I heard someone call for help," Val frowned.

"Again," Saint said. "Probably not a coincidence."

"Okay." Frank nodded. He met Saint's gaze. "Why don't you take Val home? It might be a good idea for you to crash there tonight just to be safe."

Val opened his mouth, but Frank's glare stopped him cold. It was impressive.

"I don't need a babysitter," Val grumbled.

"No, but you might need a bodyguard, so just for tonight—and I know this is gonna be a stretch for you—but maybe don't be a stubborn asshole."

Val flipped Frank off, but Frank ignored him and continued.

“Let Saint provide some backup. I’ll drop by in the morning, and we can discuss this.” Frank turned to Saint. “Would you mind? I’d appreciate it.”

“No problem. If Val’s okay with it.”

“Fine,” Val grumbled. “Whatever. Let’s go. I need a shower.”

Frank shook his head as he turned back toward the club, the guards on his heels. On the way to Saint’s truck, Val touched his side and winced.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the hospital?”

“I’m fine. Just bruised.”

Definitely stubborn. If it were anyone else, Saint would have insisted, but Val had been classified as an EMT. He knew better than to refuse medical attention if he needed it.

Once inside Saint’s truck, he unlocked his phone, opened his GPS app, and handed it to Val.

“Put your address in.”

“Are you always this bossy?”

Saint held back a smile. “Bossy bottom. That’s me.”

The phone went tumbling out of Val’s hands and fell to the floor. He stared down at it like he wasn’t sure what had just happened, and Saint couldn’t help his bark of laughter.

“You’re such a shit,” Val growled, reaching down to grab the phone. He entered his address, then whipped the phone in Saint’s direction. Wow. Saint had never considered he’d find anything about Val adorable. But the man was too cute, though it was probably best not to provoke the grumpy bear.

Once his phone was plugged in and the GPS coordinates were on the screen, he turned over the engine, the familiar and comforting rhythm of one of his favorite musicians filling the cabin. He got them moving when Val spoke up.

“Carlos Santana?”

“That’s right. You familiar with his music?”

“Oh yeah. I used to listen to his Supernatural CD all the time in college.”

“Me too! Well, not in college. That album’s one of my favorites. My dad gave it to me for my birthday.”

“And which birthday was that?”

Saint cast Val a sideways glance and held back a smile. “Um, my tenth.”

“Oh, god.” Val groaned and dropped his head into his hands. “Fuck, I’m getting old.”

“You’re not old,” Saint assured him. He paused. “Mid-life crisis age, but not old.”

Val’s head shot up. “Mid-life crisis? Fuck you very much.”

“What?” Saint laughed as he made a left turn at the light. Val’s house was only about twenty-five minutes from Sapphire Sands at this time of night. “Nothing wrong with buying yourself a Ferrari or dating a guy half your age at this stage in your life.”

“Is this you comforting me?” Val asked, eyes narrowed. “Because I have to say, you’re doing a piss poor job of it.”

It took a lot for Saint not to laugh at Val’s grumpy expression. He was about to tease Val again when he glanced in the rearview mirror. Was that the black van he’d seen a few lights back?

“What? What’s going on?” Val made to turn in his seat, but Saint stopped him with a subtle hand on his arm.

“Don’t turn around. I think we’re being followed.”

“Are you sure?”

“They’ve made a few of the same turns, but I can’t be sure. I’m going to take a different route; see what happens.” He ignored the GPS and drove several blocks into a more populated area before making another turn. The van stayed behind them. Not a good sign. He drove for several more blocks and made two more turns, ending up on the main stretch of highway lined with fast food restaurants and shops when the van finally turned into the drive-thru of a burger joint. Saint relaxed.

“False alarm.”

Val visibly relaxed. “Do you really think the two incidents could be connected?”

“I don’t like coincidences,” Saint replied.

“I appreciate you humoring Frank. If I refused, he would just bitch about it forever.”

“I’m not humoring him. He’s right. After what happened tonight at the club and that van that might have been following us, it’s a good idea for you not to be alone. Tomorrow we can talk to Mason and update him.”

When they reached Val’s house, Saint was leaving nothing to chance. He backed into the garage and turned off the engine.

“Stay here.”

“Where are you going?”

“To do a quick check of your front yard.”

If Val objected, he didn't do so out loud. He stayed in Saint's truck while Saint grabbed the flashlight from the tool bag on Val's workstation table. He quickly and silently went around to the front of the house and checked the area. Val's home might not be surrounded by a small jungle like the one around Colton's, but there were bushes, palms, and lots of greenery.

Saint scanned both ends of the quiet residential neighborhood and returned inside. He closed the garage door, and on his way to return the flashlight to its place, he signaled for Val to get out.

"Well, that was...weird," Val muttered as he unlocked the inner door that led into the house.

"What was weird?"

"Seeing you in bodyguard mode. I mean, I've seen you in bodyguard mode. You being all serious and intense, but not like that."

"Really? You've seen me with clients before."

"Yeah, but I was never one of them. Not that I am now, but you know what I mean." Val switched the lights on, and Saint followed him down a short corridor.

"I get it." They rounded the corner, and Saint was pleasantly surprised by Val's ranch-style house's neat, open-concept layout.

"Guest bedroom is all yours, and you're welcome to use the guest shower. I can grab you some clean clothes to sleep in."

"Yeah, that would be great. Thanks."

"I'll be right back."

Saint took a seat on the soft, brown leather couch. It was way more plush and comfortable than his, and each end had a recliner, which was awesome. He could easily picture Val watching the game on a Sunday. Everything was tidy, which didn't surprise Saint. Val struck him as the kind of guy who liked order.

"Here you go. If you need anything else, just let me know."

Saint stood and took the clothes from Val. "Thanks. Do you mind if I grab a glass of water first?"

"Go for it." Val walked off toward his bedroom, and Saint left the change of clothes on the couch's armrest before entering the kitchen. It was bright and spacious, with matching stainless steel appliances.

There wasn't a single dirty dish in sight, not one crooked hanging dishtowel or a fingerprint on any of the sleek appliances. It was spotless. Checking the cabinets, Saint found the glasses and got some ice and water

from the fridge. This was certainly not how he'd expected tonight to go.

Saint took a couple of gulps and stood at the kitchen counter, looking out at the place, smiling when he saw the bookshelves in the wall filled with books, mostly paperbacks. The spines on some of them were so cracked and worn that he couldn't read the titles. Curious, he walked around the counter and took a big gulp of water as he headed into the living room...which, of course, was the exact moment when Val walked past his open bedroom door in nothing but a towel, his body glistening with water and his wet hair slicked back.

Oh my god.

Saint didn't just spit out a mouthful of water. He *sprayed* it like a water hose. *Oh shit!* He gasped and started choking. Then he started coughing. *No, no, no!*

"Are you okay?"

No, he was not okay, but he couldn't communicate that he was not okay. And on top of everything, a mouthful of his spit and water was all over the coffee table and floor.

"Saint?"

Saint darted back into the kitchen, put the glass down, and grabbed a handful of paper towels, all while he coughed out a lung and tried to reply. Quickly he ran back and wiped the water off the table and then the floor.

"I'm okay," he rasped. Jumping to his feet, he returned to the kitchen to dispose of the evidence.

"Are you sure?"

"Where's the trash can?" he whispered to himself. Why did people hide their trash cans? Shit, Val was coming this way. Oh, this wasn't good. Having no time to find the trash can and not wanting to get caught going through Val's cabinets, he opened the nearest drawer and shoved in the wad of paper towels. Also, if there had been any doubt that Saint was physically attracted to Val, it was gone now. Eviscerated. Because he had the Biggest. Fucking. Boner. Ever.

"Hey." Val stood on the other side of the counter, his expression a mix of concern and confusion. Then Saint locked on to the fact that Val was almost naked. In front of him. Just there, like nothing. Like his broad, muscular chest wasn't covered in little drops of water, or his biceps weren't flexing. Did he know he was flexing?

"Hello?"

“Shit. Yeah, um, sorry. Shit.” *Real smooth.*

Val chuckled and took a step forward. “You sure—”

“Yes!” Saint threw a hand out to stop him because *that* wasn’t weird. “Sorry. I mean, yes, I’m sure.” He edged toward the opposite end of the counter as Val rounded it. “I should, um, go now. To bed.” He motioned to the hall behind him—in case Val wasn’t sure where his guest room was. “So tired.” He fake-yawned, pulled the front of his t-shirt down to cover the bulge in his slacks, spun around, and power-walked to the guest room like a cardio-crazed mall-walking granny. Inside, he spun around and shut the door *waaay* harder than he intended.

What is wrong with you?

“In my defense, I’ve never sprung a boner in front of a guy before,” he whisper argued with himself. “That was very unexpected.” He closed his eyes as he paced the room. “Think unsexy thoughts. Think unsexy thoughts.”

A knock sounded at the door. “Saint?”

“Hm?”

“I’m going to ask you one more time. Are you okay?”

“Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I be?” he dropped his gaze down to the bulge in his suddenly too-tight pants. He was fine. *Fine*. Totally fine.

“I don’t know. Maybe because you sounded like you were dying a minute ago, your face was all red, and then you semi-ran to the bedroom?”

What was he supposed to say? Saint cracked the door open. “You gave me a boner, okay? That’s what that was. I’m a guest in your house and I sprung wood.”

Val’s eyebrows shot up, then a slow smile crept onto his face.

“No. *Nope*. You wipe that smug smile off your face.”

“Don’t think I can. Am I your first? I’m your first, aren’t I?”

“I’ll have you know that I’ve gotten hard for guys before. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. You...I’ll have you know that...Put a shirt on!” Saint slammed the door in Val’s face, doing his best to ignore Val’s fading laughter as he walked away. The man was so frustrating!

“Everything’s fine. Just breathe.” He inhaled deep through his nose and released it through his mouth. A nice shower was just what he needed. He dropped his gaze to his crotch. He needed to do something about this. No thinking about Val. None. Shower. He needed a shower. A *cold* shower. Wait, the guest bathroom was out in the hall. Damn it!

Hopefully, Val had gone back to his bedroom. Saint cracked the door

open and peeked out into the hall. Val's bedroom door was closed. Oh, thank goodness. Quietly, Saint slipped out into the hall and dashed for the bathroom, where he found the change of clothes he'd left in the living room on the closed toilet lid. A little smile came onto his face, and he shut the bathroom door behind him.

What a weird freaking night. Shaking his head, he got undressed and turned on the shower. He was not going to think about Val, and he certainly was *not* going to jerk himself off in the man's shower. Not that Val would know if he did. Saint stepped into the shower and let the cool water envelop him, making him shiver. It was fine. This was fine. All he had to do was shower, get dressed, and go to bed. Easy.

CHAPTER SIX

This was going to be a very long night.

As amusing as Val found Saint's reaction to Val seeing his hard-on, he couldn't stop worrying about the guy. Getting hard while watching porn was one thing. Getting hard for Val right in front of him was a whole other thing. Was Saint panicking? Was he angry, confused, scared? Unable to help himself, Val got up. He wouldn't be able to get any sleep if he didn't at least check in on Saint.

Dressed in a T-shirt and pajama bottoms, he left his bedroom and stopped in front of Saint's door. He stood there for several heartbeats, contemplating his life choices. The last thing he wanted was for things to be awkward between them. Maybe he should just leave Saint alone? But what if Saint could use someone to talk to? To hell with it. He knocked on the door.

"Saint? Are you awake?"

"Maybe."

Val held back a smile. "You're not sure?"

"I could be sleep-talking."

"Are you sleep-talking?"

Long pause.

"No."

The door opened a crack, and Saint appeared, eyes narrowed at Val like Val was the source of all his woes. What did he do?

"What?" Saint grumbled.

"I, um, was just checking in on you. In case you, I don't know, wanted to talk?"

Saint frowned. He seemed to think about it. "Thanks, but I'm fine."

“Really? Because you didn’t seem fine when it happened.”

“I might have panicked. Took me by surprise. I wasn’t expecting you to be half-naked and wet.”

Damn, he was cute. “So you’re okay with why you got hard?”

“Yes.”

“Then what made you panic?”

“That you’d think I was some weird pervert. I mean, you invite me to stay in your house, in your guest room and then just looking at you makes me hard, and.... Why are you looking at me like that?”

Val shrugged. “Like what?”

“All smiley.”

“I think you know why.”

Saint took a step back and opened the door wider. He arched an eyebrow at Val. “Well, aren’t we cocky?” His gaze dropped to Val’s crotch, then shot back up, his eyes wide and his face crimson. Val couldn’t stop himself from laughing. He leaned against the doorframe.

“You just thought about my cock.”

“Fuck off.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Are you always so blunt?”

“Yes. If just the thought of my cock makes you blush, how will you do anything with it?”

Saint blinked at him, his mouth dropping open. He seemed to shake himself out of it and glared at Val. “Who said I was going to do anything with it?”

“You said you wanted me.”

“And you said nothing was going to happen!”

“True, but hypothetically, if I said yes, which I’m not going to, let’s make that clear right now, how could you do anything with my dick if just the thought of it makes you blush.”

And just like that, something changed, and Saint narrowed his eyes, determination in his gaze. Fuck, it was hot. Saint stepped up to Val, and before Val knew what he was up to, Saint cupped Val through his pants and squeezed just enough to send a jolt through Val.

“Oh, *fuuuuck!*” Val gripped the doorjamb, his eyes all but rolling into the back of his head before he closed his eyes and did his best not to embarrass himself by coming in his pants. He hadn’t gotten this hard, this fast in *years*.

Saint leaned in, his hot breath against Val's skin as he tightened his hold on Val's cock.

"I think with the right guidance, I could do plenty, but it's never going to happen, right? Too bad." Saint turned his face, his lips brushing Val's stubbled cheek. "Have fun with your hand tonight while you picture me sucking your dick."

Val opened his eyes, but before he could get a word out, he was pushed back into the hall, and Saint closed the door. He marched up to the door. "Or maybe you'll be the one jerking off at the thought of *me* sucking *your* dick!"

"Maybe I will," Saint shouted back from the other side of the door.

What...what was happening right now?

Val turned and walked back to his bedroom. He closed the door and climbed back into bed with a raging hard-on. This was quite the turn of events. He stared up at his ceiling.

"You're an asshole," he muttered to himself.

No, he was doing the right thing. Whatever Saint *thought* he was doing, he clearly hadn't been thinking straight.

"Definitely not thinking straight. He had your dick in his hand, so obviously, he hadn't been thinking straight." Val groaned. "What is wrong with you? He's right there, and he wants you."

But does he?

And now he was arguing with himself. Out loud. Again. Great.

"I'm not doing it," he told himself. He was not going to give Saint the satisfaction. Or himself, it seemed. For fuck's sake, it's not like Saint would know. All he had to do was keep quiet....

Closing his eyes, Val slipped his hand under the waistband of his pants and sucked in a sharp breath, his body shivering with need. He rubbed his thumb over the tip, feeling the precome, and used it to ease the friction as he jerked himself off. He forced himself to go slow, his mind conjuring up a vivid image of Saint and what would happen if he walked in right now.

Would Saint remove his shirt, tossing it to one side, revealing all that gorgeous, tanned skin and sculpted muscle? He'd pull the blankets off Val and lay between his spread legs. His pupils dilated as he moved Val's hand away. Then he'd wrap those strong fingers around Val's cock, and *fuck*...Val thrust his hips up at the thought of Saint gripping him tight. His tongue would poke out, and he'd lick a pearl of precome, teasing Val and making him squirm.

“Oh, hell yes.” Val groaned. His hand moved quickly as he envisioned Saint bringing his lips down to suck in the tip of Val’s cock, those plump lips wet with precome and saliva. Val threw his head back, the image of Saint swallowing him whole so clear in his mind that he almost cried out.

In his mind, Saint sucked him hard and fast. He’d wet his finger and circle Val’s hole before gently pushing in. Val used the pointer finger of his free hand to help with the visual, his orgasm building and swirling inside him, ready to be unleashed.

“Val? I just wanted to—”

“Please, Saint. Make me come.”

“Are you...? *Fuck.*”

It was almost as if he could hear Saint’s pleasure-fueled groans, hear his panting breath as he jerked himself off.

Wait a minute....

Val’s eyes popped open, and he scrambled out of bed. He rushed to the door but didn’t open it.

This was nuts. Surely Saint wasn’t....

“Saint?”

“Don’t stop.” Saint sounded breathless, his voice hoarse.

“Oh fuck.” Val let his head rest against the door. What the hell were they doing? Fuck this noise. Val palmed his erection again and jerked himself off fast and hard. “Saint.”

“Oh, damn. Just don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

“Are you jerking yourself off?” Val asked.

“What do you think?”

“Such a smartass,” Val growled, slamming his hand against the door as his orgasm rolled through him, his muscles growing tight as he came. Hard. “*Fuck. Fuck.*”

On the other side of the door, Saint cried out, a loud thump sounding against the door like he’d fallen back against it. Saint had just come to the sound of Val jerking off, to the *thought* of Val jerking himself off. It grew quiet, but Val knew better than to open the door.

“Saint?”

“Good night, Chief.”

With a sigh, Val nodded, even though Saint couldn’t see him. “Good night.” Shaking his head, he walked into his bathroom to clean himself off. What the hell was he doing? A little smile spread onto his face. Maybe Saint

did know what he wanted.

Val shook his head again. He was *not* going to do this to himself. Closing his eyes, he must have been more tired than he realized because the next thing he knew, it was morning. He rolled over, hissing when he extended his arm. His side was probably bruised to all hell. Forcing himself to get up, he went to the bathroom, going through his usual morning routine.

When he undressed, he inspected himself and all the new purplish-blue blotches. His left side had the most bruising. He looked like he'd been in a bar fight, but other than that, he was okay. As he got dressed in jeans and one of his old firehouse t-shirts, he tried to recall everything about last night and the men who'd jumped him.

Was someone truly out to get him? Why? Sure, he'd pissed off many people during his career, but he couldn't imagine any of them coming after him like this. He needed some painkillers and coffee before he could think about this anymore. When he reached for the doorknob, he stilled. Shit, what was he supposed to say to Saint this morning?

Had it been anyone else, Val would have expected them to be gone, but Saint would still be here. He'd never abandon anyone he thought was in danger, no matter their encounter. And the last thing Val wanted was for things to be awkward between them.

Screw it. Val had never been one to shy away from anything. He opened the door and headed to the kitchen. Saint's bedroom door was closed, so he was probably still asleep. Well, the least Val could do was cook the man breakfast. He removed the bacon and eggs from the fridge and got the espresso going.

When Saint appeared, Val had two plates piled high with scrambled eggs and bacon. He had another dish with toast and some butter. Saint was still in the pajamas Val had given him, and it took everything Val had not to laugh at how sweet he looked with his sleepy expression and hair sticking out in every direction.

"Good morning," Val said cheerfully as he buttered his toast.

"Morning," Saint muttered, avoiding Val's gaze as he sat at the counter.

This was what Val had been afraid of.

Actually....

"How'd you sleep?" Val asked, taking a bit of his toast as if he were asking about the weather. "Want milk for your espresso? I can heat some up for you."

Saint stared at him.

“I don’t know about you, but I slept like a log,” Val said, taking a big bite of bacon. “So good.”

Saint let out a snort and shook his head. And just like that, the awkwardness vanished, much to Val’s relief. Saint grabbed a piece of bacon off his plate and shoved it in his mouth.

“I bet you did.”

“Are you saying you didn’t?”

Saint arched an eyebrow but didn’t respond.

“How about we avoid all the weirdness and just be friends? Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what? Like you’re delusional? Because you are. After what happened last night, do you really think we can be just friends?”

“What happened last night was....”

Saint met his gaze. “If you say it was a mistake, you’re going to be wearing those eggs. And then I’m going to eat your bacon. No bacon for you.”

Val held back a smile. “I don’t regret last night, but it can’t happen again. I like you, Saint. A lot. I would like it if we could be friends.”

Saint let out a heavy sigh. “Yeah, okay.”

“You don’t have to sound so excited about it.”

Saint seemed to think about it and then nodded. His soft smile eased Val’s worry. “Okay. Just friends.”

It was the best decision for both of them, and Val was glad Saint agreed. Having Saint in his life as a friend was better than not having him at all. That’s just how it had to be. Taking his plate to the other side of the counter, Val sat next to Saint, who made small talk as he ate. When he needed something, he just got up and got it. It should have been strange, having someone moving around his kitchen.

Very rarely did Val bring someone home, and when he did, they didn’t stay to have breakfast with him, which was fine. They were hook-ups, not dates. When Val finished eating, Saint carried his plate to the sink.

“Why are you doing the dishes?” Val asked when Saint started washing up.

“Because you cooked. That’s how it was in my house growing up. Mom cooked, so my dad and I were in charge of cleaning up.”

“I have a dishwasher.”

Saint laughed. “In my house, the dishwasher is used for storage, not washing.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Tell that to my Cuban mother.”

“If she’s anything like Ace’s mother or Lucky’s, I value my life too much.”

Saint laughed. “Ah, yes. Then you’re well prepared for the day you meet my mother.”

“Do you have siblings?” Val had never heard Saint mention any.

“I’m an only child. I was sort of the miracle baby.” He put the dishes in the dishwasher to dry since there wasn’t anywhere else to put them. It was most likely what he did at his mother’s home.

“Oh? How so?”

“My mom’s parents left Cuba to come to the US back in the sixties. She was about sixteen at the time. My grandparents tried to convince their families to leave Cuba, but few did. They were adamant that the unrest going on at the time would pass. It didn’t. It got worse. A few family members came over in the eighties, but most still held onto the hope that things would change for the better.” Saint shook his head as he dried his hands.

“Anyway, my mom and grandparents were living in Miami. It’s where she met my dad. He was in the Navy and on leave. They fell in love and got married. Not long after, doctors told my parents that it was unlikely she could have children. My mom was forty-two when she got pregnant with me.”

“She spoiled you, didn’t she?” Val teased.

“Oh hell yeah, and I was a little shit when I was a kid. Way too smart for my own good. I took full advantage. Then my dad retired from the Navy and was around all the time.”

“Let me guess. That’s when you went from spoiled to Sailor.”

“You bet your ass.”

Val wanted to know more about what had prompted Saint to join the Navy. He opened his mouth to ask when a knock sounded at the door. Turning to head for the front door, he found Saint already there. How...? Damn, the man was fast. And quiet.

Saint carefully peeked through the blinds of the window beside the door. “It’s Frank.” He opened the door with a bright smile. “Morning, Frank.”

“Morning. Man, it smells good in here,” Frank said as he walked into the kitchen. “Don’t suppose you troublemakers left me any?”

Saint snorted. “Are you kidding? It’s bacon. We left you the grease.”

“Assholes.” Frank shook his head and went straight to the kitchen like usual. He got himself an espresso cup, added his normal two teaspoons of cane sugar from the silver sugar canister, and poured some espresso. “I talked to King this morning. Jack’s gone through all the club’s footage and found when one of the bastards who jumped you cut the wire on the camera facing the end of the lot.”

Val frowned. “Your guys said they were on their way but got held up.”

“Yeah.” Frank took a sip of his espresso. “Jack showed me the footage. The brawl out front was a diversion.”

“What?” Saint took a seat next to Val. “The fight was a fake?”

“Oh, it was real. Some asshole in a black hoodie and mask walks up to a group of guys standing out on the sidewalk and punches one of them. It was a shitshow.”

“And the cameras didn’t get any of their faces?” Val asked, liking all this less and less.

Frank shook his head. “They knew where the cameras were. They’d staked out the club. This was a planned attack.” He met Val’s gaze. “What the hell have you gotten yourself into?”

“Me? I didn’t get myself into shit.”

Saint placed a hand on Val’s shoulder. “Is there anyone who might be holding a grudge against you or want to do you harm?”

Frank snorted, and Val grunted. Yeah, plenty of those. “I was an openly gay fire chief and a hard-ass who refused to back down.”

“In other words, the list would be too long,” Saint replied.

“Bingo. But why now?” That was what Val couldn’t understand. Well, one of the many things he couldn’t wrap his head around. “I was the fire chief for years, and yeah, I had a bunch of altercations, but no one ever tried to blow me up. Speaking of which, why would someone go from planting a bomb to sending a group of thugs to beat the shit out of me? It makes no sense. Don’t suppose King’s found anything?”

“Other than confirmation that the new fire chief is a dickbag?” Frank finished his espresso and washed out his cup. “The man won’t even take King’s calls. Which, of course, meant King showed up at the fire station. Bless his little cowboy heart, Mason thought it would be a good idea to tag along. Now everyone in this room knows that if someone is going to lose his shit and punch out the fire chief, it isn’t going to be King.”

Saint cringed. “Don’t tell me Mason punched the new fire chief.”

“He would have if King hadn’t grabbed him. I would have let him, considering the asshole had made a snide remark about gay first responders. He knew exactly who Mason was and let his distaste be known.”

Quite frankly, Val was surprised King had bothered to go down there. They knew the asshole wasn’t going to be any help. Then again, if anyone could get someone to come around, it would be King. The guy had a way about him. Like he always knew what to do or say. In this case, it was to keep Mason from getting his ass thrown in jail.

“You need to watch your back,” Frank said, concern filling his gaze. “The police haven’t found anything, or we’d have heard about it. Maybe the two incidents aren’t related, or maybe this guy’s got a bigger plan, but you’re the common denominator in both instances, so please. Be careful.” His face lit up, and Val braced himself. “Hey, I have an idea.”

Val managed not to groan. He didn’t need any of Frank’s bright ideas. Despite his scowl, Frank ignored him and turned his attention to Saint.

“You’re on leave for a while, right?”

“Um, yeah.”

“What if you help Val out with the tavern?”

No, he did not. Fucker.

“It’ll give you something to do, you can keep an eye on Val until we have some answers, and it’ll help Val out.”

Val did his best not to talk through his teeth. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

“Sure.”

Frank followed Val down the hall into his bedroom, where he closed the door.

“Are you out of your damned mind?”

“What? It’s a great idea. You get help, and he’s not bored. Win-win.”

“No. Not win-win,” Val hissed. “It’s a horrible idea, and you know it.”

Frank’s shit-eating grin told Val he knew precisely why it wasn’t a good idea.

“You mean because he’d be around you for hours, sweaty, wielding power tools and using those big muscles to move things. Is that why?”

“Fuck you.”

Frank laughed. “Why are you so wound up? You need to get laid. Maybe find yourself someone younger and hotter who’s good with their hands.”

Val opened his mouth and then closed it. He thrust a finger at Frank. “I know several ways to get rid of a body. No one would ever know.”

“Ooh, ouch.” Frank put a hand to his heart.

“Everything okay?” Saint called out.

Val glared at Frank some more before opening the door and marching back to the kitchen. If he refused, Frank would insist he talk to the Kings about protection, and Val wasn’t about to hire a bodyguard. Which was worse? Having a stranger following him around all day, every day, or having Saint around, sweaty, breathless, and wielding a hammer.

“Maybe Frank isn’t wrong,” Val conceded. Not because of the sweaty, breathless, hammer-holding part but because Val didn’t want the alternative.

“Wow.” Frank shook his head with a laugh. “You can’t even say I’m right, can you?”

“Never.” Val turned to Saint, hoping he didn’t regret this. “Feel like helping me work on the tavern? I can pay you.”

Saint tapped his chin and looked like he was giving it a lot of thought when Val knew he was full of it. “Only if I’m paid in food.”

“Deal,” Val said, holding out his hand to shake. The moment Saint’s palm touched his, Val knew he was screwed, and not in a good way.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Tell me I’m doing the right thing,” Saint said as he stuffed clothes into his duffel bag. His phone lay on the bed in speaker mode.

Ryden had called to check on him, and Saint had brought him up to speed on everything that happened the night before. Everything except the whole masturbating with Val thing. Well, not *with* Val, but... He wasn’t ready to share that with his best friend just yet. Mostly because he still couldn’t believe he’d done that. He had intended to knock on Val’s door and apologize. He hadn’t expected to hear Val’s moans as he pleased himself. Just the memory of it had his face burning. Now was not the time to be thinking about it.

Saint cleared his throat. “I mean, he said he wanted to be just friends. Working all day in an enclosed space with him while he walks around in a sweat-soaked T-shirt and his ass-hugging jeans, bending over...”

“Ass-hugging jeans, huh? Aw, my little gay bird has realized he’s an ass man. Spread your wings, little bird. If you intend on spreading anything else, make sure he at least buys you dinner first.”

“Fuck off,” Saint said, ignoring Ryden’s cackles. “And yes, I’ve realized a lot of things. Like this might be the worst idea ever.”

“Or the best,” Ryden offered. “Maybe spending some time together is what you both need. What if it turns out that you two don’t get along all that great when you’re alone? I mean, you’ve only really spent time with him when you’ve had friends around, right? Or when you’ve been on the job. This is good.”

“Hm, I hadn’t thought about it that way.” It was true that until last night and this morning, they’d never really spent any significant time together

alone. What if they annoyed the hell out of each other? What if they didn't get along or were too different to have made things work anyway?

"That's why I'm the brains, and you're the—No, wait. I'm the brains *and* the brawn. What does that make you, then?"

"The one who's never been arrested?"

"*Oh!*" Ryden barked out a laugh. "You motherfucker."

This time it was Saint's turn to cackle. He loved being the only one who could joke with Ryden about his arrest. It had been a dark time for him. He'd hit rock bottom and couldn't find a way out, making him a danger to himself and others, especially Mason.

If Lucky hadn't stopped Ryden when he had.... Saint shook his head. He didn't even want to think about it. Ryden had been arrested. But Mason had refused to press charges. Instead, Mason decided to do everything he could to help Ryden.

Part of Ryden's recovery had been to talk about his past and everything that led to that night on the yacht with Mason. Saint had been the first person Ryden had opened up to about it. He still had no clue why Ryden had chosen him, but he was grateful because from that day on Ryden had become the brother Saint had never had.

"So you think I'm making the right decision?" Saint asked.

"I do. Hold on a sec." It sounded like Ryden had moved his phone away from his face, but Saint could still hear him. "You look like one of those tiny bananas. With a bow tie."

What the hell? Who was he calling—*oh no*. Saint pressed his lips together and waited. This would not end well.

"Ow! What the hell, Jay! I can't believe you threw your book at me!" Pause. "Yes, it fucking hurt! It has pointy edges. But you knew that, didn't you? You can't just throw books around like weapons!" Pause. "Excuse me?" Pause. "Yes, I know what a book is! Just for that, I'm keeping this."

It was so hard not to laugh. So. Hard.

"Sorry," Ryden grumbled, coming back on the line. "Can you believe that little fucker threw a book at my head? Like, what the hell? I think he drew blood."

"You called him a banana. With a bow tie."

"If he's going to wear bright yellow to work, he needs to accept that he looks like one of those little Chiquita bananas. I was only stating the obvious."

Saint hummed. “Is that what that was? Or is it because you’re attracted to him, and much like an adolescent, you don’t know how to express it, so you tease him.”

“What?” Ryden’s laugh sounded a wee bit forced. “He is so far removed from being my type, he’s on another planet. And even if he *was* my type, there is no way I would be attracted to *him* and his ridiculous bow tie ensembles. Again, I ask, who the hell owns that many bow ties? Not if he were the last gay in the galaxy.”

“Last Gay in the Galaxy. Sounds like sci-fi porn. Also, I don’t think it’s a good idea to keep Jay’s book.”

“I’ve been injured and deserve compensation.”

“And you’re going to take that in the form of a book you’re never going to read?”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is the point?” Saint asked with a chuckle as he finished packing his bag. Before Frank left, he’d suggested that maybe Saint should stay at Val’s for a few nights, just in case, and because Val and Saint had been too speechless and lost in their own thoughts to reply, Frank had taken that as their agreement. Sneaky bastard.

“Don’t you sass me. I get enough of that at work.”

He wasn’t wrong. Saint zipped up his bag and swung the strap over his chest. He grabbed his phone off the bed. “Okay, I’m heading out. Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need luck. You have those biceps. And if there’s any ass-hugging, I want to know about it.”

“There isn’t going to be any ass-hugging,” Saint said on his way to the door. “Give Jay his book back.”

“Whatever. Bye.”

“Bye,” Saint said, mimicking Ryden’s raspy drawl.

“Fucker.”

With a chuckle, Saint hung up. He left his apartment and descended the two flights of stairs like he always did. Unless he had a load of groceries, he tended not to use the elevator. When his job often required him to stand in the same spot for long periods, he got his steps in any way he could. Hitting the gym when he could and training sessions at work helped keep him in shape.

He pulled out his car’s key fob and hit the button to unlock his truck. Sometimes he considered parking in one of the guest parking spaces since

they were farther than his assigned one, but then he remembered the crushing humidity and came to his senses. Of course, that was mainly in the summer months. There was a lovely breeze right now, and—What the hell?

Saint frowned at the piece of paper in his windshield. For a moment, he thought he'd gotten a citation for parking in his own damned spot. Never knew around here. As he approached, he discovered it was folded. His neighbors left him a note. Their cat probably got out again.

Taking the white piece of paper from the windshield, Saint unfolded it, his heart slamming in his chest.

“What the fuck?”

STAY AWAY FROM SERRANO OR YOU'RE NEXT.

Saint remained close to his truck as he quickly but cautiously hurried to the back and peeked out, scanning the parking lot for movement. Nothing. There was no one around. Whoever had put this on his windshield was long gone. The note looked like it had come from an inkjet printer. He could go to the police, but he'd been working private security long enough to know turning this in would get him nowhere.

The state of Florida classified written threats as a second-degree felony, but technically, the note didn't say they would kill him or hurt him. He also had no idea who'd placed it there. The chances the local police could track down what printer this came from were slim. But Saint knew someone—or rather someone's boyfriend—who could.

Saint folded the note and stuck it in the zippered pocket of his duffle bag, and after a quick scan of the underneath of his truck, he quickly got in and drove off. No way in hell was he leaving Val alone now. Thank goodness Frank had volunteered to stay with Val until Saint returned. There was no longer any doubt that someone was targeting him, and they weren't done.

Tapping the button on his steering wheel, his truck's Bluetooth connected to his phone, and he gave the command. The line rang, and Mason picked up.

“Hey, Saint. How are ya feeling? Better, I imagine, since you're gonna be helping Val with his tavern.”

“Damn. News travels fast. I only agreed to help this morning.”

“Yeah, but Frank told Joshua, who told Colton, and what Colton knows, Ace knows.”

“Which means everyone and their mother knows. Great. He's turning into his mother.”

Mason chuckled. “I'll let you tell him that. So, what's up?”

“Someone left a note under my windshield wiper. I found it a few minutes ago. It said, ‘Stay away from Serrano, or you’re next.’”

Mason cursed under his breath. “Well, guess we have our answer. I don’t suppose Val’s gonna let us handle this in an official capacity?”

“He’s made it clear he doesn’t want a bodyguard.”

“But he’ll let you fill in unofficially?”

“Looks like it.”

“Okay, then do that. Whatever you need, let me know. I’ll send Jack over to pick up the note. Send me the tavern’s address.”

“Um, can you send someone more discreet? I don’t want Val to know.”

“Saint....”

“Just until we know a bit more. All that’s going to do is worry him. I’m going to be there, keeping an eye out. If I feel like I need to tell him, I will.”

“I don’t like it, but I get it. I’ll see what I can do. Stay safe.”

“I will. Thanks.” Saint hung up and did his best to get to Val’s tavern as quickly and safely as possible. He hoped Val wasn’t against having him around longer than planned. He’d have to get Ryden to bring him more stuff from his apartment, but he’d worry about that later.

It wasn’t until he was getting closer that he realized the address Val had given him was in St. Augustine’s historic district, just off Charlotte Street.

“Holy shit.” Saint pulled into one of the parking spaces. The only other vehicle there was Val’s SUV. Where was Frank? And how the hell had Val snagged himself a property in this district? Some of the buildings around here were worth millions. Saint grabbed his duffel bag and got out. He closed the door and set the alarm as he took in the one-story structure that resembled a house, much like most of the shops and restaurants in the area.

There was no sign yet, and although it still looked abandoned, Saint could see the incredible potential, especially with the wrap-around porch. He could easily picture strings of tiny bright white lights decorating it as people enjoyed a beer or a cocktail outside in the cooler months.

Val had texted Saint the address to the tavern this morning and told him to meet him there for a tour. Saint had no idea what to expect, but he was excited for Val. He walked up to the door and knocked.

“Yeah?” Val called out from inside.

Saint smiled. “It’s me, Chief.”

A lock was unlatched, and the door opened. Saint almost swallowed his tongue. Man, had he called it or what? Val stood in a faded black Ramones

T-shirt, well-worn jeans, and work boots.

Saint snickered. “You got something in your hair.” He stepped in and ruffled Val’s hair, removing the drywall dust particles.

“Yeah, that shit’s everywhere,” Val said. “Hope you’re not wearing any of your good clothes.”

Saint closed the door behind him. “Nope.” He looked around. “Where’s Frank?”

“I told him he could head out since you were on your way. Knowing him, he sat in his car on the side of the road and waited until he saw you.” Val shook his head in amusement. “Stubborn.”

Like Val wouldn’t have done the same for Frank. “Wow. This place is bigger on the inside than it looks.”

“It’s pretty spacious, but that’s because there’s nothing in it right now. Once the bar goes in, the stools, booths, tables, and chairs, it won’t look so big.” He turned to his left to a walled-off section with an open doorway. “That’s the kitchen.” Turning, he pointed to another smaller walled-off area. “Those are the bathrooms.” He turned and pointed. “That’s where my office is going to go.” He turned again. “That’s a wall.” Once more. “That’s another wall, and wait for it...” He turned to the front. “That’s also a wall. Thanks for joining me on this tour. If you’d like more information, you can visit our gift shop.”

Saint snickered. “Ass.” He dumped his bag in the corner where there seemed to be less dust. There were drop cloths everywhere, along with several gallons of something. On one side, Val had set up a long workbench that had a toolbox and more supplies. He’d also brought a mini fridge that he’d plugged into the wall. “So, how long have you been working on this?”

“I’ve worked on and off for three years.”

“Must have been expensive as hell.”

“Not really. This had been a donut place for decades. One day, one of the thermostats malfunctioned and a deep fryer started a fire. Thankfully, no one was inside at the time. The whole place went up in flames. We were able to save the structure, but the inside was a complete loss. The owner was an older gentleman, really sweet. Anyway, he didn’t have it in him to start over. He just wanted to retire and spend time with his grandkids.

“When we were outside, he jokingly asked me if I was interested in buying a slightly singed building, and I said yes.” Val shrugged, the genuinely happy smile squeezing Saint’s heart. “I don’t know what made me

say it, but once I had, it felt right. So, he sold it to me for far less than it was worth. I tried getting him to accept more, even in its state, but he patted my cheek and said, 'It's yours now. Make good memories.'"

"That's amazing. What a way to start your business, huh?"

"Yeah. I spent a lot of weekends here. It took a long time to get it cleaned up. Luckily it was winter then, so we could get some good work in without getting baked. Some of the guys from the firehouse helped me. Then the time finally came when I could start. I tore down the curtain walls that weren't needed and did the kitchen area and the bathrooms, but I had professionals come in to do the electrical installation, plumbing, and the floor since it's a special cement flooring. AC was at the top of my list. You couldn't even walk in here in the summer, much less work."

"So what comes next?" Saint asked, holding his arms out. "Use my body."

Val blinked at him before smiling and shaking his head. He motioned to the many gallons near the wall, several of which had a stack of sandpaper sheets. "I've already applied all the fiberglass mesh tape to the seams and the paper tape to the corners. Now it's time to mud, sand, mud, sand, hot mud, and then the final sand."

"Okay. Just tell me where to start."

"Grab yourself a four-and-a-half-gallon tub and a putty knife."

With a little salute, Saint grabbed his supplies and picked a wall. He'd been about to start applying the first coat of drywall mud when someone knocked on the door.

Saint put a hand up to stop Val from going to the door. "I got this."

"You think someone will try something here, of all places? There are security cameras all over. And it's broad daylight."

"I'm not taking any chances."

It wasn't like the guy hadn't managed to evade cameras before. The bomber hadn't been afraid to plant a device in a busy hotel. Who's to say he wouldn't do something in the middle of the busy historic district? Especially after the note that was left on his truck.

Saint left his putty knife on the tub's lid, then quickly approached the door, standing to one side of it.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah? I hope that's not how this establishment will greet its customers," Fitz said through the door.

Nice one, Mason. So much for being discreet.

Saint opened the door and arched an eyebrow at Fitz, who stood in one of his many fluffy, oversized cashmere sweaters. It was like seventy degrees outside, but they were all used to it. The man ran cold. Well, his temperature did.

No one was warmer than Fitz. His pout broke into a huge smile, and he threw his arms out. Saint had learned long ago that Fitz did that to give whoever was on the other end the choice of whether to walk into the hug, but who would turn down a hug from someone who genuinely looked so damned happy to see you? The answer was no one.

“Hey, Fitz.” Saint walked into his arms and hugged him. He pulled back and smiled at Laz. “Hey, man.”

“Hey, Saint.”

Val came over to greet them, smiling wide. “Hey, fellas. What’s the occasion?”

“Just checking in on Sailor Stud Muffin over here.”

Saint let his head hang. “You’ve been talking to Ryden, haven’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Fitz slipped past him, and Laz followed, clearly amused. He had his camera bag with him.

“You brought your camera?” Saint asked.

“Yeah, I thought maybe Val might want to document his progress. Might be cool to have before and after pictures.”

Val grinned wide. “That’s a great idea. You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. I think it’ll be fun.”

“Okay.”

While Laz and Val walked off to take pictures, Fitz leaned into Saint, murmuring out of one corner of his mouth.

“Where’s the package.”

“I really hope you’re referring to the note for Jack.”

Fitz laughed and slapped him playfully on the arm. “Yes, obviously.”

“You’d make a terrible spy,” Saint said with a chuckle as he walked over to his bag.

“Please, I would look fierce in a catsuit. Emma Peel style.”

“Yeah, I can see you rocking the sixties go-go boots.”

“You know Emma Peel?”

“My mom used to love that show.” Saint glanced at Val, making sure he was busy with Laz, before picking up his bag and taking out the folded note.

He handed it to Fitz, who swiftly tucked it down the front of his sweater.

“What are you wearing under there that you can hide that?”

Fitz winked at him. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Okay, Trouble.”

“How’s Val doing?” Fitz asked, his expression becoming one of concern.

“I heard about what happened at the club.”

“Is there anything your boyfriend doesn’t tell you?”

“He tries, but I can be pretty persuasive.”

Poor Jack never stood a chance.

“He says he’s okay. He was a little banged up, but nothing serious, thankfully. I’m so glad I got there when I did.” Saint hated to think about what could have happened had he not arrived in time. What he hated even more was the fact Val didn’t seem to think anything of it. Like he was used to it. What the hell was wrong with people?

“And what about you?” Fitz asked softly. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m good. A little sore, but okay.”

“And what of...?” He cast a not-so-subtle glance in Val’s direction.

“What of what?”

Fitz arched an eyebrow at him. “Really?”

“What?” Saint laughed. “We’re just friends.”

“And that’s what you want?”

Saint let out a sigh. “It’s what he wants, so....” He shrugged. “It’s better than nothing, right?”

Fitz hummed. “If you say so, sweetie.”

“Look, he doesn’t want to be my first, and I get that. I don’t want to screw things up between us.”

“All done,” Laz announced, walking over with Val.

“We’ll leave you to it then,” Fitz said. He kissed Saint’s cheek and hugged Val before he and Laz disappeared.

Val cocked his head to one side; his lips quirked in amusement. “Well, that was...interesting.”

“You get used to it. Let’s get back to work, and I’ll tell you about the week The Boyfriend Collective invaded my apartment.”

“The what?”

Oh, poor sweet Val. He had no idea what he’d just gotten himself into.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Maybe this hadn't been a mistake after all.

When Frank suggested that Saint help Val with the tavern, Val hadn't known what to expect. Mainly he'd worried things might take an awkward turn, and they'd end up working in silence, straining their newfound friendship. That was most definitely not the case with Saint. Val couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed this much.

Val wiped a tear from his eye. "Holy shit."

"I thought I was back in the middle of Hell Week! I started doing push-ups and expected a mouthful of sand." Saint laughed and shook his head. "It took me a solid minute to realize I was on my bedroom floor, and the ocean sounds were coming from a Bluetooth speaker on my nightstand. When I realized it had been Leo—because let's face it, who else could program my TV to shut itself off and my phone to start playing Spa Radio—I had to laugh."

"You were so high on meds. It must have scared the shit out of you."

"Um, yeah. That's how I ended up on the floor." Saint shook his head, amused. "I've also got enough fish-shaped snacks to get me through the year." He motioned over to his bag in the corner. "Brought a bunch with me."

Coming from Leo, it was sweet. "Bet he doesn't do that for everyone."

"No, he doesn't," Saint said, his smile wide. "If you get snacks from Leo, it means he likes you. If you get more than one fish-shaped snack, it means you're family. Never thought I'd be so moved by a pantry full of Swedish Fish and Goldfish crackers."

Val chuckled. He understood Saint's need for camaraderie. Val had been a part of the same kind of fellowship when he'd been a firefighter and then

the fire chief. The people you worked with weren't just coworkers. They were family. You had to be able to trust one another because having someone's back meant the difference between life and death.

"You're lucky to be a part of such a diverse and inclusive company," Val said as he applied mud to a seam. "Not enough of those around."

"It must have been rough for you at work after you came out. How did they take it?"

"Not well. It was pretty volatile at first. Some of the guys felt betrayed. I talked to them individually and told them I was the same guy I'd always been and that what I did outside the firehouse and with whom had nothing to do with how I did my job."

Val had done his best to remain calm and objective. To pretend it hadn't hurt like hell when men who had been so close to him looked at him with disgust or disdain.

"We'd been together a long time, and after a while, most of them came around. Even if some of them couldn't accept I was gay, they agreed I was good at my job. The few who wanted nothing to do with me were transferred. I had a few incidents with a couple of the guys that turned into investigations. It was a mess."

"Holy shit, actual investigations?"

"Yeah. And it wasn't just the people I worked with who had issues. There were other incidents."

"Other incidents?"

"Let's see. There was the time some guy paid a couple of thugs to follow me." Val snorted. "It happened to be the night Frank and four of his guys from the club were waiting for me. We were going to a bar for a few drinks. It didn't turn out so well for the thugs, and they gave up the guy who hired them in a heartbeat. Then there was the guy who took a baseball bat to my truck. Another guy threw chocolate milk at me during a press conference, and at a charity event for children, a woman threw eggs at me. Like I said, it's a long list."

"Unbelievable." Saint shook his head. "Wait, do you think it could be one of them?" Saint asked. "Maybe the guy who sent those goons after you is the same one behind all this?"

Val shook his head. "That was years ago. I think he's working construction now or something."

"Maybe we should let Mason know, just in case." Saint removed his

phone from his pocket and called Mason.

Val didn't think it was necessary, but he wasn't going to keep Saint from doing what he thought needed to be done. Security was his job, after all.

"Hey, Mason....Yeah, good, thanks.... Listen, I was just talking to Val, and there were several incidents a few years ago around the time he came out. Could you have Jack look into it? See where those people are now and what they've been up to.... Great. Thanks." He hung up and returned his phone to his pocket. "Worth a shot, right?"

"You're right. Thank you."

After a beat, Saint spoke again. "I'm sorry you went through that."

Val shrugged as he continued to apply mud to the wall. It didn't hurt as much anymore. "I knew what coming out meant, but I couldn't keep pretending to be something I wasn't. The time that followed was the hardest of my career, but I refused to stand down, no matter the shitshow that came my way, and when things got really bad, and they wanted to force me out, I called Frank. By then, he'd already made a name for himself with Sapphire Sands and had one hell of a client list. He called in a few favors, and I got a team of fierce lawyers that wiped the floor with them."

"I heard about that. It was impressive."

"You know what else is impressive?" Val said as he took a step back to admire their work. "How much we got done today. I didn't think we'd get as far as we have." He smiled brightly at Saint. "We've done good." Val removed his phone from his pocket and brought up his food delivery app. "I think it's time for your first payment. What are you in the mood for? Pizza? Subs? Steak?"

Saint let out a sigh. "So this is what it's like to have a Sugar Daddy."

Val snorted out a laugh. "Don't think my pension qualifies me for Sugar Daddy status." He motioned around him. "Especially not with all the money I've poured into this place."

"What about Splenda Daddy?"

"*What?*" Val barked out a laugh. "That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"Is it, though? I mean, you've been around Ace."

"You are absolutely right." Val shook his head as he scrolled through their options. "I know he was a Green Beret, but it's also Ace. How does he work executive protection when it requires so much standing still in silence?"

"I guess that's part of the mystery that is Ace," Saint chuckled.

“Hm, mystery? Is that what we’re calling it?”

Saint laughed as he wiped his hands on one of the wet cloths, which was funny considering he had white smudges from the mud all over him.

“So, what are you in the mood for?”

“I’m good with anything. Probably something that would be easy to eat without a table.”

“Duly noted. How about Philly cheesesteak subs? There’s an amazing place nearby that delivers.”

“Sounds good.”

Val put his order in on his phone, then handed it to Saint. “Their cookies are also insanely good. I always order one.”

“Well, don’t mind if I do.”

While Saint put in his order, Val cleaned up a little. The floor was covered in tarps to protect it from all dirt, dust, and grime. It might not look like much yet, but it had come a long way.

“Here you go.” Saint walked to him and handed him his phone back. They washed up at the sink in the kitchen, and twenty minutes later, they had their food. They sat on the lids of the huge mud gallons. Not exactly the most comfortable, but Val was pretty sure they’d both faced far worse in their careers than uncomfortable seating.

“So, Hell Week,” Val said before sipping his beer. “I’m guessing it’s called that for a reason.”

“Oh yeah. The Navy isn’t spending money on SEAL operational training without knowing you’ve got what it takes, which means making it through Hell Week. It’s where the majority of candidates drop out. It’s brutal. Five and a half days of freezing your ass off in cold water with little to no sleep while performing under heavy physical and mental stress.” Saint shook his head.

“Were you ever worried you wouldn’t make it?”

Saint snorted. “All the time, especially in the beginning. It’s a shock to the system, and you have to ask yourself, ‘How badly do I want this?’ Because you *think* you know what it will be like, you hear stories, but experiencing it is a whole new level.” He took a sip of his beer and smiled. “Making it was one of the proudest moments of my life. I didn’t know what I could do until that week.”

“You must have really wanted it.”

Saint’s expression turned sinful. “I can be pretty relentless.”

Val cleared his throat and sipped his beer, pretending he didn't know what Saint meant. "This is better than I remembered," he said, motioning to his sub. Good grief, he was such a dork. "Thanks again for helping me out."

"You're helping me just as much. I'm not great at sitting still and doing nothing." Saint finished his sub and stood, the napkin on his lap falling to the floor. He bent over to pick it up, and Val couldn't stop staring at Saint's ass.

Just friends. Friends. We're friends.

His friend had a *really* fine ass.

Throwing his trash into one of the empty food bags, Saint grabbed the other bag and looked inside.

"Shit."

"What?"

Saint frowned. "There's only one cookie."

"Oh."

A mischievous look came onto Saint's face as he pulled the cookie out of the bag. "Guess you don't get any."

"What? You're not even going to offer to split it with me?" Val chucked his wadded-up sandwich wrapper at Saint, who expertly batted it away with a laugh. Then he sobered up and stared at Val.

"No. No, I'm not."

"Wow."

"I would if this were an average cookie, but it's not. It's a warm, gooey, chocolate chunk, macadamia nut cookie, so...sorry bout ya luck."

"And who said *you* get the cookie?"

Saint shrugged. "I did. I got to it first."

"Is that so?" Val stood and held back a smile; his gaze locked on Saint, who quickly stepped back.

"What are you doing?"

"You think because you're pretty, I'm just going to accept you stealing the cookie for yourself?"

"Aw, you think I'm pretty?" Saint blew him a kiss. "Thanks, Chief. You're still not getting your hands on this cookie."

Then he'd have to get his hands on something else.

Val moved in fast, and because Saint had no idea what Val was up to, Val saw his chance and took it, grabbing Saint and picking him up in a fireman's carry.

"Holy shit!" Saint cried out in surprise, then laughed when he found

himself draped over Val's shoulder. "Fuck, Chief."

"I've carried guys much heavier than you."

"Oh yeah. Forgot about that."

"Give me the cookie, Sailor."

"I guess you deserve a piece for creativity." Saint broke off a piece and held it out in front of Val's mouth. He took it and chewed it with a happy hum. "You planning on putting me down?"

"I'm thinking about it."

"Ass. Speaking of...."

"What are you doing?"

"Staring at your ass."

"You shit." Val dropped Saint to his feet, not realizing Saint would end up almost pressed against him. He had his hands on Saint's waist, and the thing was, it felt right. So right. Not that he'd thought it wouldn't. He'd never felt comfortable so quickly with someone as he did with Saint.

As if holding one another, being this close, was nothing new, Val didn't think anything of it when he pressed his lips to Saint's without a second thought. His heart leaped in his throat because Saint didn't hesitate. He closed his eyes and parted his lips. Holy hell, it was even better than he'd imagined.

Despite Val's overwhelming desire for Saint, their kiss was slow and sweet. Val cupped Saint's cheek, rubbing his thumb against his stubbled jaw, smiling when Saint slipped a hand behind Val's head to keep him close. No other thought entered Val's mind other than to savor this moment, to enjoy the softness of Saint's full lips and the warmth of his mouth.

"Mm, you taste sweet," Val murmured against Saint's lips.

"I'm always sweet," Saint replied, his voice low and husky before he pressed his lips to Val's once more.

"You didn't kiss Vic."

Saint brushed his lips over Val's. "He wasn't you."

Well, damn. What the hell was he supposed to say to that? Nothing. Instead of talking, Val kissed Saint again, deepening their kiss, heat exploding through him at the feel of Saint's obvious erection against Val's leg. The low moan Saint let out told Val he wanted more, reminding Val of his words. With a sigh, Val stopped kissing Saint and let their heads rest together.

"I'm sorry. I told you nothing could happen between us, and then I kissed

you.” He couldn’t be that guy. What was wrong with him? He’d been in Saint’s place, been the one to get strung along, hoping for something that was never meant for him. He could never do that to Saint. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was a kiss, Chief,” Saint said with a smile and a shrug. “No big deal.”

Val pulled away and blinked at him. “Yeah?” Relief washed over him. Saint’s smile was genuine. “I wouldn’t blame you if you told me to fuck off for giving you mixed signals.” *Can’t have it both ways.*

“It’s fine. Really. Not a big deal.” Saint stepped back. “You’ve kissed guys before that you haven’t hooked up with, right?”

“Well, yeah, but they were strangers.” Val frowned. Saint was unlike those guys in so many ways.

“True. But neither of you thought it was a big deal. It was a let’s-have-fun-no-strings-attached moment.”

Saint wasn’t wrong.

“So we’re good,” he said. He waggled his eyebrows at Val, then stuffed the rest of the chocolate chip cookie in his mouth and moaned in pleasure.

“You little shit,” Val laughed.

Saint shrugged, returned to his bucket, and picked up his putty knife. “Come on, Chief. Time to get to work.”

If Saint said they were good, Val would take him at his word. They were both adults. A little kiss wasn’t a big deal. Just because they both wanted more didn’t mean they had to act on it. They got back to work, and a few minutes into the silence, Saint removed his phone from his pocket.

“How about a little music?”

The familiar beat of drums and a guitar riff accompanied a Latin rock beat, and Val smiled. “Santana.” He remembered the song’s popularity back when he was in college.

“Ooh, yeah.” Saint spun on his heels and started dancing, his footwork impressive.

“Is that salsa?” Val asked.

“Yep.” Saint shimmied his shoulders, and Val laughed.

“Where did you learn?” It’s not that he hadn’t seen Saint dance before. Val had seen him enough times to know he was a very good dancer and knew various styles. But there was something about Saint dancing to Latin music that mesmerized Val. He couldn’t help but watch.

“My mom and various family members. I knew how to dance salsa and merengue by the time I was in junior high.”

“Really?” Val wasn’t about to mention the dances he did in junior high, namely the Running Man and the Sprinkler Dance. He wanted to cringe just thinking about it. Although, as ridiculous as he and his friends had looked doing the dances, they’d still had a hell of a lot of fun.

“Are you kidding? Do you know how many quinceañera parties I participated in growing up? A terrifying number, that’s how many.” He sang along as he swayed his hips and moved with the beat.

“I’ve never been to one. How did you participate?” Val had a general idea of what the parties were. Sort of a sweet sixteen, a coming-of-age celebration with a long history steeped in the Latinx tradition. He remembered one of his firefighters asking him for overtime because his daughter’s quinceañera party was coming up. Val knew they were expensive, but he’d had no idea some of them cost almost as much as a wedding until the man had told him.

“There are usually three traditional dances,” Saint said. “The father-daughter dance, the waltz, and a surprise dance. The surprise dance most often involves choreography. You have a certain number of couples, usually friends of the quinceañera, sometimes cousins or family members of roughly the same age. It’s a whole thing.”

Val studied him. “Is there video evidence of you participating in any of these?” Once again, Val was grateful social media hadn’t existed when he was a kid. So grateful.

“There is, and you will never, ever, *ever* see them.” Saint gave him a pointed look.

“Okay, but you gotta tell me something. Come on.”

“Fine. I once participated in a choreographed dance number of *Dirty Dancing*’s ‘Time of My Life,’ wearing a tuxedo with a pink bow tie.”

Val blinked at him. “I need to see this.”

“No, you don’t.” Saint turned back to the wall and started mudding again.

“Yes. Yes, I do. I need to. I might not survive if I don’t.”

“You’ll live.”

Val put a hand on his chest. “Saint, help. Please.” He gasped. “Need. To. See. Video.”

“You’ve been spending way too much time around Ace. Also, not going to happen.”

“So you’re just going to let me expire?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. Harsh.” Val chuckled and turned back to his wall. If he *really*

wanted to see the video, all he had to do was ask Ace. He'd probably have it within seconds. Hm....

"You're not asking Ace for it."

Val peered at him. "How did you...?"

"Because if there is any embarrassing video evidence out there of anyone he knows, Ace will suddenly become Liam Neeson, develop a particular set of skills, and find it."

Val snorted. "That sounds about right."

"So what comes after the mudding and sanding is done?"

"The bricks."

Saint looked confused. "Bricks?"

"Yep. Brick veneers. I found a company that sells thin bricks salvaged from buildings demolished in New York. It's a pretty ingenious system. The metal panels, bricks, and supplies get delivered tomorrow morning. I'm going for an old New York City firehouse look."

"That's going to look so cool."

"I think so. It's gonna be a lot of work, but it'll be worth it."

"I'm happy I can help."

Val was happy Saint was here, though he decided it was best not to say anything. They continued to work until it got dark, and Val was done looking at these walls.

"Okay, I'm done. How about we go home?"

"You still need to feed me," Saint said, grin wide.

"How about I make you some pasta? Oh, and I ordered these mint chocolate brownies that are incredible."

"Didn't figure you for a chocolate mint person."

"You found my Kryptonite."

"Really? Chocolate mint."

"Yep."

"Good to know."

They put everything away and cleaned up as best they could before heading outside. Val locked up, and before Val climbed into his car, Saint made sure to check it over. He really wasn't taking any chances.

"Meet you at mine. Tomorrow we can carpool," Val said.

"Sounds good. Right behind you, Chief." Saint climbed into his truck, and Val got into his SUV.

Was it silly to get excited about having dinner with Saint at his house? It

wasn't like he hadn't made dinner for friends before. No big deal, right? He'd made pasta for Frank before. Who was he kidding? Making dinner for Frank was nowhere near the same as making dinner for Saint.

"Holy shit, I kissed him." Val sat at the red light at the end of the block and glanced in his rearview mirror at Saint behind him. He was drumming his steering wheel and singing along to something. Why did he have to be so damned cute? And holy shit, they'd kissed. He did exactly what he'd said he wouldn't do. But fuck, Saint had tasted so good, and the way he felt in Val's arms...like he belonged there.

Nope. No thinking about it. It was a one-time thing that wouldn't happen again. Saint was a friend, a good friend, who was helping him with his tavern. They'd shared one kiss, which was no big deal, they both agreed and now it was time to move on. No problem. He could do this.

At least that's what he'd thought before he had Saint moaning and making all kinds of sex noises in his kitchen. When he'd offered to make Saint dinner, he hadn't expected it to test his resolve, but he should have known better. Because the more time he spent around Saint, the harder it was to ignore everything about him that Val longed for.

"Fuck, Chief. This is the most amazing thing I've ever tasted."

Val shook his head and chuckled. "It's just gravy." He finished up rinsing the container and stuck it in the dishwasher, then took a seat next to Saint at his kitchen counter.

"Gravy? What?" Saint looked down at his plate. "It's pasta sauce."

"Yeah, we call it gravy. Or at least that's what my nonna used to call it. Never really figured out why." He shrugged and twirled a forkful of spaghetti. Sometimes he wondered what his nonna would have done if she'd still been alive when he came out. She'd been an amazing lady, and the only one who'd been able to put his father in his place. Val liked to think her love for him would have kept her in his life.

"Oh. Well, it's the damned best gravy I've ever had. I can eat a bowlful of this all on its own with just bread."

Saint did love his bread, though it had to be good bread. Otherwise, he had very strong opinions about it, which Val found hilarious. How did a guy who ate that much bread stay so fit?

"It was my nonna's recipe," Val replied. "She taught me how to make it when I was little. I make it in big batches and freeze it so I can have it for dinner any time I want."

“You a meal prep kinda guy?” Saint asked before shoving another forkful in his mouth.

“I got used to it from my days at the firehouse. We worked long shifts, so everyone took turns bringing in food or cooking, which meant making a lot of food. When I made chief and was taken out of the cooking rotation, I kept doing it for myself and just freezing stuff. Made dinner a lot easier, especially after a long day.”

Before Val knew it, they’d both polished off their plates. Working at the tavern all day must have made him hungrier than he thought. Saint cleared their dishes, and once again insisted on washing them himself rather than using the dishwasher. Val shook his head and went along with it, taking the clean dishes from him and drying everything off so he could put it away.

“Watch your head,” Val said, reaching over Saint who ducked so Val could open the cabinet and put away the dry glasses. His arm was still up when he closed the door and Saint lifted his head. *You know, you could have just waited to put the glasses away.* If he had, he wouldn’t have Saint pressed against him, his back to Val’s front. Fuck, he smelled so good.

Val put his chin on Saint’s shoulder and slipped his arms around Saint’s waist because he just wasn’t strong enough not to. “You’re going to fucking kill me, Sailor.”

Saint turned his head slightly, his lips quirked in a smile. “Me? I was just standing here washing dishes.”

“I know,” Val groaned. He needed to step away, and yet he didn’t move. He brushed his lips against Saint’s temple and closed his eyes, his body thrumming with how badly he wanted Saint. His bedroom was just down the hall. Because that made sense. *You kissed the guy once, tell him nothing can happen, and now you’re going to ask him to join you in your bedroom?*

“Hey,” Saint said softly, moving Val’s arms so he could turn in them. His sad smile broke Val’s heart. “It’s okay.” He cupped Val’s cheek, his thumb stroking his skin. “You don’t need to overthink this.”

Val sighed and covered Saint’s hand with his. “But I do, because I don’t want to hurt you, Saint.”

“Then don’t.”

“I’m sorry.” Even if Val had no intention of hurting Saint, he couldn’t say the same about Saint not hurting him. Not that Saint would do it intentionally. He wouldn’t. But unintentionally? It was a huge risk. And if Val felt like this now, how would he feel if he let Saint all the way into his heart?

“Don’t worry about it, Chief.” Saint dropped his hand and moved out of Val’s arms. “Come on. Let’s watch some TV for a while. I’m not quite ready to turn in.”

Val ran his hands over his face and sighed. What was he doing? How long could this go on? Something told Val that no matter what he did, his heart was still in for a world of hurt.

CHAPTER NINE

Saint couldn't believe how much they got done in the past two weeks. At first, it was hard to tell because the walls pretty much looked the same, but mudding required several steps before they could do the final sanding. Since the cement flooring was one of the first things Val had installed before he started the drywall, once the mudding was done, they could start installing the system that would hold all the bricks in place. It was pretty ingenious.

With both of them working on the wall, it went quicker than if Val had been doing it on his own. Val marked the wall with a pencil, showing Saint where the bricks should join. Each slim brick was unique, some pieces shorter than others, some faded, chipped, or discolored. Speaking of walls.... They'd hit one where Val's assailants were concerned.

It was like the assholes had vanished off the face of the earth. Jack had called last week with news on the note, and unfortunately, they were back to square one. The note had no fingerprints, other than Saint's, obviously, and no other traces of DNA. Leo managed to track down where the note was printed, but whoever printed it knew what they were doing, and they were extremely careful. The printer belonged to a library two counties over. And, of course, that day, the cameras happened to be out. So again, they had nothing.

As much as they hoped that maybe the bastards had given up, they all knew better, and the more time that passed, the more concerned Saint became. Which was why he never let his guard down, no matter where they were.

His phone buzzed, and Saint removed it from his pocket. It was Mason. Talk about perfect timing. "Hey. Tell me you got something."

“Jack’s been looking into the incidents you mentioned and tracked down the people involved. A couple of the guys have criminal records, but one’s been in prison for the last seven years for assault with a deadly weapon, and the other guy’s up in Detroit and hasn’t been back to Florida. One of the firefighters who lost his job for gross misconduct moved to New Jersey and hasn’t left since, and the one who was investigated left the state after he lost his family in a car accident. He’s staying at a property in South Carolina owned by his mother. The woman who threw the eggs at Val is living in Georgia. Jack’s diving a little deeper, but so far, he hasn’t found evidence to suggest any of these people have returned to Florida. I’m sorry, man.”

“Okay. Thanks, and tell Jack I said thanks.”

“Will do. Watch your back. I don’t like any of this at all.”

“Same.” Saint hung up with a sigh. He’d been hoping Jack would find something but wasn’t surprised he hadn’t. It would have been too easy.

Time to get back to work. One of the issues Saint faced with being around Val all the time, was the fact that Saint was enjoying their time together far too much.

When they went home to Val’s, they were usually exhausted, but it was nice, comfortable. And maybe that was the problem. No matter what they were doing, they seemed to gravitate toward each other, like their bodies couldn’t stand to be apart. Being so close to Val in the kitchen and not being able to wrap his arms around him, kiss him, feel him, was driving Saint nuts. Every night, they had dinner together, watched TV, and one of them usually fell asleep on the couch. A couple of days ago, Saint fell asleep in the recliner and woke up with a blanket draped over him. He never thought he’d get so used to having someone around this quickly.

The second issue Saint faced, was his growing need to kiss and touch Val. He’d lost count of how often Val caught him staring. Saint usually blushed, which Val found amusing. If Val knew the kind of thoughts Saint had about him throughout the day, he’d be the one blushing.

Saint couldn’t help it. He might have told Val they were good after their kiss, but that didn’t mean Saint could stop thinking about it and wanting more. He’d done pretty good at pretending it was no big deal because he didn’t want Val to regret having him here. Kissing Val had felt so, so right. Saint hadn’t known what Val would feel or taste like. He hadn’t known if he’d hesitate when the time came, but when Val pulled Saint into his arms, the world fell away, and all that was left was a feeling of belonging, of safety.

Focus. Bricks. That's what he needed to be thinking about. Not that there was much to think about there. Pick up brick, apply glue to brick, place brick in steel slot, repeat.

While Saint placed the bricks, Val brought in boxes and put them in what was going to be his office. He'd set up a makeshift desk to have a place to put everything until the official desk arrived next month when the furniture started coming in. An hour later, he emerged from the room looking very grumpy.

"You okay? I was about to go in there. Thought maybe you fell in a box."

Val's lips quirked at the corners. "I hate paperwork. Always have."

"Maybe I can help." Saint dusted his hands off on his jeans and walked into the office, where he reeled back at the sight before him. "Holy shit, what is this? Besides the place where trees go to die?" Saint shook his head in disbelief. He'd never seen anything like it. Apparently, Val's tidiness did not extend to paperwork.

The stacks of paper and folders were truly terrifying. Somewhere underneath it all was the desk; he was sure of it. "You do realize that not even Ace is this bad, and we're talking about the guy who told King he couldn't do his paperwork because he'd developed an allergy to short-fiber cellulose."

"What the hell is that?"

"What our office printer paper is made of."

Val snorted. "What did King say?"

"It's King. He didn't say anything. He walked away and returned two minutes later with a pair of gloves."

"Sounds about right."

Saint picked up the first stack of documents clipped together and looked through it. He picked up the one underneath. "Um, why haven't you filed for your liquor and food licenses? That's kind of important if you want to open a place that serves both alcohol and food."

"Funny. Because there are a few requirements I'm unsure of and haven't had the chance—or patience—to look into it."

Saint arched an eyebrow at him. He tapped his lips and hummed. "Gee, if only you knew someone who owned an establishment that sold alcohol and food. Perhaps even a close friend you've known for decades."

"Yeah, all right, smartass," Val grumbled as he poked at a stack of documents. "I'll ask Frank. Did you have to say decades?"

Saint held back a smile. "Well, I mean, you have known him for

decades.”

“I’ve known him for over twenty years, okay.”

“Yeah, that’s over two decades.” Saint waggled two fingers at him. “Tell me something. Do you still think the eighties was twenty years ago?”

Val laughed. “Kiss my ass.”

Saint made kissing noises, making Val shake his head. “Also, you know you can file most of this stuff online, right?”

“You know I don’t need any of your millennial crap, right?”

“Okay, Boomer.”

“Fuck you,” Val said through a laugh. “I’m not a boomer.”

“Oh, shit. That’s right. You’re Gen X.” Saint put a hand to his chest. “Sorry. In my defense, the rest of us kind of forget about you guys.”

“Because you know we will fuck your shit up.”

“What? Please.” Getting a rise out of Val was just too easy and too much fun.

“If I took your phone away right now, you would not survive.” Val left the office, and Saint followed him.

“Judgmental much? Also, I was a Navy SEAL. Surviving is what I do. I can be naked in the woods with nothing but a toothpick and survive. Can you?”

“I survived playgrounds in the eighties, so I’m pretty confident I can.”

Saint laughed. “Really?”

“You have no idea how many injuries I sustained from playgrounds as a kid. I lost the majority of my baby teeth on playgrounds. When I was seven, I fell off the top of a metal jungle gym onto hard, solid ground, and my dad told me to walk it off. It wasn’t until my arm had swollen to twice its size that my parents realized I’d broken my arm. Don’t even get me started on the merry-go-round and the metal slides in the summer.”

Saint blinked at him. “I forgot how terrifying the eighties were.”

“We had great music, though.”

“If you say so.”

Val turned, eyes narrowed at him. “Mock the eighties all you want, but you say one word about my music and things are gonna get ugly.”

“Is that so?” Saint calculated his chances of getting away from Val. They were pretty high. He eyed Val. “Bon Jovi’s overrated.”

Val gasped so long and hard that Saint couldn’t stop himself from laughing, then he took off, Val on his heels.

“You take that back, you little shit!”

“‘Livin’ On a Prayer’ sucked,” Saint shouted as he turned and jogged backward.

“That’s it.” Val lunged at him, and with the manliest of screeches, Saint dodged him and took off again.

The only obstacles Saint could use were the palettes of stacked bricks, but they weren’t exactly much of an obstacle, and the rest was just one big, empty floor. Running into the kitchen or bathroom area would ensure his immediate capture. He managed to evade Val’s grip for several more minutes, all while insulting the man’s music.

Eventually, Saint was caught, pinned against the wall by Val, a hand on both sides of his head.

“I was kidding! I’m kidding! Of course, Bon Jovi is awesome. Everyone knows that.”

“Bon Jovi’s music was the soundtrack of my youth.”

Saint dropped his gaze to Val’s lips and quickly caught himself. He moved his eyes back up to Val’s. “You ever have a mullet?”

“No, I did not.”

“Suspect. Long hair?”

Pause.

“Maybe.”

“Have any pictures?”

“Yes, and you will never see them,” Val whispered as he leaned in.

“Oh, come on. Do you have a picture of you wearing a fanny pack?”

“I *never* wore a fanny pack.”

Saint hummed. “Out of curiosity. Are these photos stored somewhere in your home?” Damn the lack of digital evidence. “It’s unfair, really, that the majority of my life has been documented on some kind of digital device while you got away scot-free.”

“Sorry bout ya luck.”

“They’re in your closet, aren’t they.”

Val narrowed his gaze, and Saint laughed. How did Val not see how easy it was for Saint to read him? He was an open book. If he didn’t bluntly come out and say something, his face did.

“You think you’re funny?”

“I think I’m hilarious.”

“Maybe I’ll ask Ace to get me some videos of you. He knows your mom.

Bet he can be very persuasive.”

Saint gasped. “But it’s only funny when it happens to you!”

“Oh, is it?” Val dropped his gaze to Saint’s mouth.

Did he know he’d leaned in closer?

“Hey,” Saint said softly as he placed his hand on Val’s hip, then crooked a finger into the loop of his jeans, giving it a little tug.

“Hey.” Val let himself be pulled closer. “You like getting me all worked up, don’t you?”

Saint nodded. “You make it too easy.”

“Okay, yeah. Maybe I do.”

Val’s smile was stunning, sending the butterflies in Saint’s stomach fluttering wildly. Man, he smelled so good. Why was he so damned gorgeous? His T-shirt stretched across his broad shoulders, and his jeans encased his long legs and perfect ass. It was sinful. Everything about Val was so damned enticing.

Saint wanted to rub his face against Val’s stubbled jaw and purr like a cat. He wanted to run his fingers through Val’s hair, grab a fistful of it, and kiss the fuck out of him. No one had ever made him feel this desperate.

Just when he thought that maybe he might be able to stop thinking about their kiss, they ended up mere inches from each other again. And again. And again.

“We should go,” Val said, voice rough.

Saint hummed. “Sure thing, Chief.”

“Why do you have to say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“You know like what. Like sex.”

Saint couldn’t help his smile. Knowing how much Val wanted him was both a blessing and a curse. Considering they shouldn’t do anything about it, probably more of a curse.

“We should go,” Val repeated.

“You’re probably right.”

Neither of them moved.

Saint dropped his gaze back to Val’s lips. If one of them didn’t move in the next five seconds....

Fuck it. Saint kissed Val, melting against him when Val closed his eyes with a groan and parted his lips. This time there was more urgency behind their kiss. Saint wanted more. Fuck, he wanted so much more he could barely

stand it, and Val wanted the same. Saint could feel Val's barely restrained desire, and he wished Val would just let go.

Saint wrapped his arms around Val's neck, their bodies pressed together as they kissed hungrily. This time, Saint took the lead, their kiss wet and sloppy as he did his best to show Val just how badly he wanted this, wanted *him*. He thrust his hips forward, his hard erection rubbing against his jeans and Val's leg. Fuck he was hard. That was until Val slid his hands around Saint's waist and down to his ass to grab it just as he punched his hips forward.

"Fuck," Saint groaned into Val's mouth. Their erections rubbed together, and Saint was dangerously close to coming in his pants. It should have scared the shit out of him, but it didn't because he'd never wanted anything so badly in his life.

Val shook his head and pulled away, his breath panting. "Saint. We have to stop doing this."

"Or we can do more of it," Saint suggested hopefully as he brought a hand around and slid it down Val's chest. Val took hold of it and held it over his heart, a heavy sigh leaving him.

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"Why can't we just see where it goes? You want me, and fuck, Chief, I want you."

"Saint...."

The rejection hurt. Even if Saint knew why Val was doing it, it still stung.

"You don't trust me to know what I want, except I know what I want, and that's you, Val. Not for a fling, not for a fuck, for more. But you aren't willing to give me a chance."

"Saint, please. You have to understand, it's not that simple."

"It's fine," Saint said, pulling away. "I get it. You're afraid of getting hurt, and I've never been in this position before, so who am I to say it won't happen? You're the last person I'd want to hurt." He shook his head and shrugged as he averted his gaze, his heart aching. "So, yeah. I guess I just need to accept that it is what it is. You deserve better."

Val rubbed a hand over his face and growled. What did it say about Saint and how deep he'd gotten himself into with Val that he found Val's growl endearing? Man, he was such a sucker.

"Let's go," Val grumbled, heading for the door.

"Go?"

“Home.”

“Oh.” Hopefully, he hadn’t sounded as disappointed as he felt. Despite his words, Saint remained hopeful. Maybe it was time he stopped kidding himself. Nothing was going to happen between them.

Saint made sure to check the SUV over before they climbed in. The car ride to Val’s house was quiet, neither of them saying a word. Saint could feel the tension in the air and did his best to keep his focus outside the passenger side window. He remained alert when they pulled into the driveway and did his usual perimeter check before heading inside and closing the garage door. Val had disappeared inside, and Saint didn’t blame him.

Closing the door that led from the garage to the house, Saint walked inside, surprised to find Val in the living room pacing.

“Hey, everything okay?” Saint asked, hating that he was most likely the cause of Val’s distress. “Look, I’m sorry—”

“No.” Val crossed the distance between them, and before Saint could figure out what the hell was going on, Val cupped his face and kissed him, and holy fuck, what a kiss! The heat that poured out of Val was enough to set Saint on fire, and he didn’t bother to think—*couldn’t* think—just returned Val’s kiss with all the ardent desire exploding through him.

Saint couldn’t get enough, so he gave in to the scorching desire and let Val take the lead. His skin felt too tight, and he was so fucking hard. He grabbed the hem of Val’s T-shirt and shoved it up his torso, grateful when Val reached up and finished pulling it off, dropping it to the floor.

“Damn, Chief.” Saint ran a hand up Val’s stomach to his pecs, his skin smooth and his muscles defined. He slipped his fingers into the soft hair on Val’s chest, a new sensation for Saint, and he moaned. “You’re so fucking sexy.”

Val groaned. He took hold of Saint’s shirt and pulled it off him, then kissed him again, leading him back to the couch where he turned them. The back of Saint’s legs hit the couch, and a gentle nudge had him falling back onto it. He lifted his gaze to Val, his dick twitching in his pants at seeing those gorgeous eyes filled with so much want. His pupils were dilated, leaving only slivers of that gorgeous liquid silver.

Val stepped up to Saint and dropped to his knees.

“Fuck.”

With a wicked grin, Val spread Saint’s legs and moved between them. He kept his gaze locked on Saint as he unfastened the button of Saint’s jeans.

“Lift,” Val ordered.

Saint didn't hesitate. He lifted his hips, his face growing heated as Val jerked down his jeans and boxer briefs, his hard cock springing from beneath his clothes, the head of which was leaking with precome. Saint wrapped his hand around his cock and slowly stroked himself, his smile cocky.

“Still think I don't know what I want?”

Val dropped his gaze to Saint's dick, and when he licked his lips, Saint thought he'd come right then and there. Then Val moved Saint's hand away and swallowed him whole.

“Oh fuck!” Saint jumped, his hips thrusting before he could stop himself, but Val didn't falter. He moaned and started sucking Saint off. “Holy shit. Oh fuck.” Saint threw one arm out, but with nothing to hold on to, he put his hands on Val's head. He let his head fall back, his eyes all but rolling into the back of his head while he received the best fucking blow job of his life.

This was next level. Was it always like this? Why the fuck had he waited so long? The pressure and wet heat from Val's mouth were unlike anything he'd ever experienced, and he never wanted it to end. Val moaned, and Saint cursed under his breath. He was *not* going to last.

“Val,” Saint pleaded. He had no idea what he was begging for, but he needed more, needed *everything*. Nothing had ever felt this right, and for the first time, he understood Val's fear because Saint was on the verge of falling hard and fast for the hot as fuck fire chief.

CHAPTER TEN

This wasn't how he'd intended the evening to go, but now that he was on his knees, sucking Saint's dick, seeing how close Saint was to losing it, Val wanted nothing more. This was a far cry from just friends, but the more Saint pleaded, the harder he tightened his grip on Val's hair, and the more he writhed beneath Val, the more Val let himself fall. He popped off, smiling when Saint begged him not to stop.

"Easy there, Sailor." Val pulled Saint's boots off, then pulled his jeans and boxer briefs the rest of the way down and off. "Lie down."

Saint quickly lay down, and Val climbed onto the couch between Saint's legs. He was even more grateful now that he'd gone with the plusher, wider seating option. There was just enough space for both of them.

"You are so damned beautiful," Val murmured, loving how Saint's face flushed pink. It was another reminder for Val to take it slow. It was easy for them to get lost in the moment and let their desire take them where it wanted. Val took in Saint's toned, sleek form. His tanned skin was soft and smooth, with faint scars peppering his body here and there.

"Val, if you don't suck my dick in the next five seconds, I will finish myself off."

"So bossy," Val chuckled.

Saint arched an eyebrow and moved to grab his cock, but Val caught his wrist.

"And so impatient."

"Val," Saint growled, sending a shiver up Val's spine.

Ooh, he liked this side of Saint. What kind of sounds would Saint make with Val buried deep inside that gorgeous ass? Was it even something Saint

would want? That was a question for another day.

Deciding it would be too mean to torture Saint this soon, he swallowed Saint's cock again, loving how Saint's hips jumped off the couch as he cried out. Val hummed at the salty precome as Saint's hard, thick length filled his mouth. Yeah, Saint wanted him badly, and that sent a shiver through Val.

Their gazes met, and Val gave Saint exactly what he wanted, expertly sucking him until he was writhing beneath Val and ready to fall apart, the sound of his panting breath filling the otherwise silent living room.

"Are you jerking yourself off?" Saint asked, breath panting.

Val nodded, and Saint threw his head back. "Oh fuck! Val, I'm gonna come," Saint warned, but Val only sucked harder, his hand moving quickly on his own cock, his precome easing the friction until Saint cried out.

And that was it. Val couldn't last any longer, and he spilled himself all over his hand, his orgasm exploding through him as Saint came hard inside Val's mouth. Val swallowed every drop, his eyes never leaving Saint, who lay panting and shivering. Then he slowly pulled off Saint.

"Fuck." Saint panted. He looked down at Val. "Did you come?"

"About the same time you did."

"Holy shit." Saint let his head fall back and ran a hand through his hair. "That was.... Wow."

Not wanting to give Saint the chance to feel awkward about what just happened, Val wiped his hand on his jeans and crawled up Saint's body, relieved by Saint's smile.

"Hey," Saint said softly.

"Hey," Val replied, then kissed him, loving how Saint moaned into his mouth. It was a slow, sweet kiss, and he could have stayed like that forever, which meant it was time to move. He pulled back, smiling at the blissed-out, sleepy look on Saint's face. "We should probably shower."

Saint was suddenly very awake. "Together?"

"Is...that something you want?"

Saint shrugged. "Nah, I'm good."

Val arched an eyebrow at him, and Saint chuckled.

"Yeah, okay, that's a lie. Yes, it's something I'd like."

Although Val had no idea what came next, he decided that tonight, he wouldn't overthink it, and go with the flow, let Saint set the pace with what he was comfortable with.

Val got up and held his hand out to Saint, who took it, an almost shy

smile on his face. He was so damned sweet. Val couldn't stop himself from kissing him again. He could kiss Saint forever. Before it could get heated, he led Saint into his bedroom.

"Why don't you get the water running," Val said as he kicked off his boots.

"Sure thing, Chief." Saint sauntered to the bathroom, throwing a wicked look over his shoulder. The little bastard knew exactly how fucking gorgeous he was. And damn that ass.

"You're asking for trouble, Sailor," Val called out just before the shower water came on.

"Yeah? What are you going to do about it?"

Oh, Val wanted to do plenty, but he told himself to take it easy. They'd already done more tonight than he'd intended to do with Saint. Hell, he'd never even meant to kiss Saint. Clearly, he'd been kidding himself, thinking he could resist. *Just friends, my ass.*

After chucking his jeans, underwear, and socks into the hamper, Val entered the bathroom and almost swallowed his tongue. Saint was in his shower, water sluicing over every sculpted muscle as he lathered himself up. How was this possible? How had Val gone from deciding he couldn't be involved to having the man naked and in his shower?

"Watching is fun, but touching is better," Saint teased, his voice dripping with sex. It sent a shiver through Val.

Val didn't waste any time. He hurried into the shower, grateful it was big enough for the both of them. There wasn't a lot of room left over, but it was spacious enough that they could move around. Saint turned to face Val and laid his hands on Val's chest.

"You sure this isn't moving too fast for you?" Val asked, holding Saint close.

"I'm sure. Showering naked with a guy isn't new, and neither is getting a blowjob. Yes, it was different for obvious reasons, but it was still the best blowjob I've ever had." He slid his hand down Val's chest to his stomach, then lower, his eyes never leaving Val's. A playful smile came onto his face when he wrapped his hand around Val's dick, and Val sucked in a sharp breath. "This is uncharted territory for sure."

Val moaned as Saint slowly moved his hand, jerking off Val until he was rock hard.

"Saint...."

Saint pressed his lips to Val's skin, trailing kisses over his chest. He made Val jump when he poked his tongue out to lick his nipple. With Saint's mouth on his nipple and his hand on Val's cock, Val needed to lean against the tiled wall of the shower for support because holy fuck.

"You don't have to," Val promised, reminding Saint he didn't have to do anything he was uncomfortable with.

"I know that," Saint said, kissing Val. "But I want to. I *really* want to." He hummed against Val's lips. "Do you know how hot it is knowing that I do this to you?" He applied a little pressure to Val's cock, making him groan.

"Fuck. Do you know how many times I dreamed of this?"

"How many?" Saint nibbled on Val's jawline.

"A lot many. I mean, a lot. Fuck, I can't even talk."

"Then don't talk," Saint said with a chuckle. He moved his hand quicker, and Val cupped Saint's face, kissing him with all the hunger and want inside him. It was like his body was on fire, and the more Saint kissed him, the more the bathroom filled with the sound of their panting breaths and moans, the more Val felt like he was going to lose it. He needed more.

Val palmed Saint's cock and brought their erections together. He put his hand over Saint's, and Saint followed his lead, wrapping his hand around both their cocks. He hesitated for a heartbeat. Then he moved his hand and cursed under his breath as he bucked his hips.

"Oh, fuck, Chief." Saint jerked them both off, and Val saw stars. He slid his hands around Saint to his ass and grabbed hold of those firm cheeks with a groan.

Neither of them lasted long, with Val coming first and Saint seconds behind. Saint dug his fingers into Val's shoulder as he came, kissing Val wet and sloppy until they were both too tender. Saint let them go and let his head rest on Val's shoulder.

"You okay?" Val asked, concerned Saint might be regretting what they'd just done.

"No. I came so hard I don't think I can move."

Val chuckled. He wrapped his arms around Saint and kissed the top of his head.

"Let me help." He moved Saint under the shower and grabbed the soap. He lathered Saint up, and Saint hummed happily.

"This is nice."

Saint had no idea how happy Val was right now. If he knew, he'd

probably run off. This was what Val had wanted for so long. This intimacy with someone. Both of them on the same page wanting the same thing. It struck Val then. Shit. They both wanted the same thing. Then he reminded himself that the problem wasn't them together like this. The problem was them, out there in the world.

Blowjobs and hand jobs in the shower were great, but that didn't mean Saint was ready for a relationship with him. Okay, enough overthinking. He was way too tired and he felt too good. They finished showering and dried off. Saint kissed him sweetly before telling him he was going to grab his pajamas from the guest room. Val dressed in his own pajama bottoms and T-shirt before heading back out.

"You still need to feed me," Saint said as he walked into the kitchen, lowering his T-shirt. "Don't think you can distract me with your sexiness."

"Is that what I'm doing?"

Saint nodded as he stopped in front of Val and kissed him as if he'd kissed Val countless times before. Like none of this was new for them.

"What can I make you?"

"Something simple."

"Steak sandwiches?"

"Deal." Saint sat at the counter while Val moved around the kitchen, rounding up the ingredients he needed to make their sandwiches. Luckily, he had a baguette from the groceries he'd had delivered yesterday.

"What do you want on yours?"

"Onions and mayo," Saint replied. "Oh, and cheese if you got it."

Val scoffed. "I always have cheese. Swiss or Gouda?"

"A man after my own heart. Swiss."

"You got it." Val got to work frying up the steaks and onions when Saint's phone rang. Saint quickly answered.

"Hey, Jack. How's it going? Oh. Okay. I'm going to put you on speaker so Val can hear." Saint tapped his screen and placed his phone on the counter.

"Hey, Val. Sorry for interrupting your evening."

"Not at all. What's up?" He kept his eye on the steaks as he listened.

"Okay, good news and bad news. The good news is that the guys who jumped you have been arrested."

"That's great news," Saint said. "How?"

"The night you got jumped, Leo set up an algorithm on his computer to

scan local security camera footage for these guys. They broke into a pawn shop several blocks away from Sapphire Sands. Leo then had his computer call in an anonymous tip that led the police to where the bastards were hiding out. He also mentioned that they might have been involved in the explosion at the hotel.”

“And the bad news?” Saint asked.

“They had nothing to do with the explosion. Mason had one of his detective friends question them. He asked them about your assault that night, and one of them confessed that they’d been hired by someone through an online message board to jump you and rough you up. Apparently, it’s not their first time. They were told where and when and paid cash. The detective was able—with a little anonymous help—to connect them to a violent crime spree.”

“And the person who paid them?”

“Leo’s been trying to follow the money, but so far, it hasn’t led anywhere. Whoever’s responsible for this has been really careful not to leave a trail.”

Val sighed. “So that asshole is still out there.”

“Yeah. We’ll keep working on it.”

“Okay,” Val said. “Thanks for your help. And please thank Leo for me.”

“Of course. You guys stay safe.”

“We will. Thanks.”

Saint hung up and sat back. “At least those assholes are off the streets. I spoke to Mason earlier, and none of the people you had incidents with panned out. Most of them aren’t even in the state anymore.”

“I figured as much.” Val finished putting their steak sandwiches together and placed Saint’s plate in front of him. He grabbed a couple bottles of water from the fridge and motioned to the living room. “Time for a little vegging in front of the TV. Grab a couple paper towels.”

Saint jumped out of his seat, tore a few paper towels off the roll, and followed him into the living room. He took the recliner on the left side of the couch like he always did, and Val took the one on the right. They’d fallen into a comfortable routine when they got home, one that Val looked forward to, which was dangerous because soon Saint would return to work and the house would be empty again. Not that it was a problem. Val loved his house. He had it just the way he wanted. He just liked it more when Saint was in it with him.

Saint turned on the TV. Somehow he always managed to get to the remote first. A screen filled with streaming apps appeared, some of which Val wasn't subscribed to.

"What do you want to watch?" Saint asked as he moved through the apps.

"Did you add apps?" Val asked.

"Yeah. I have subscriptions to these. Thought you might want to watch something from one of them. It's cool because we both have different subscriptions, so we've doubled our binging options." Saint's smile faded, and his eyes went wide. "Shit, I'm sorry. I should have asked first."

"No, it's fine. That's a really great idea, actually."

"Cool. So, what'll it be? Movie or show?"

"Show." That way, he wouldn't miss too much if he fell asleep, which happened pretty often.

"Okay. I know you don't like anything too close to home. I feel you on that. Ooh, I know a great one. It's about this group of kids in the eighties and their friend who has powers, and there are monsters, and it has a great eighties music soundtrack. Anyway, it's amazing and right up your alley."

Val chuckled at Saint's excitement. "Well, now we have to watch it. Let's do it."

"Aw yeah." Saint bit a huge chunk out of his sandwich as he got the first episode of his show playing. Val was behind on his TV- and movie-watching. There hadn't really been much time for it when he was on the job. Most of the time, he worked late, and when he got home, he'd shower and then usually crash. If he had the energy, he'd go to Sapphire Sands and hang out with Frank or hook up with someone. But this...sitting here with Saint, eating dinner, and watching TV together....

Val shook his head. He needed to stop thinking of this as anything more than hanging out with a friend. Okay, so he was definitely deluding himself because what they did earlier on the couch and then in the shower was not something you did with a friend. Well, he was sure somewhere someone did those things with their friends, but for Val there was most certainly a very clear distinction. Maybe he'd talk to Saint about it tomorrow. Tonight, Val would enjoy this time he had with Saint.

"Hey."

Val opened his eyes and looked down to find Saint lying on the couch with his head resting on Val's leg. "Hey."

"Did you know you snore? But it's really quiet and very cute."

“Shit, I fell asleep?”

“Middle of the third episode.”

“Sorry. It’s a great show, I’m really enjoying it.” Val yawned. “Guess I was more tired than I thought.” He let his head fall back and closed his eyes. “We should probably get up.”

“Hm, we probably should,” Saint said with a yawn of his own. “But that would mean moving, and I’m pretty comfortable right here.”

At some point in the middle of the night, Saint woke Val up. They were both groggy, and Val was pretty much still half asleep when Saint pressed the button on Val’s recliner to lower the footrest. He held his hand out, a big yawn escaping him.

“Come on, Chief.”

Val didn’t question it. He took Saint’s hand and shuffled behind him as Saint led him to the guest room.

“My bed,” Val said through a yawn. “It’s bigger.”

Saint walked past the guest room and into Val’s bedroom, pulled back the comforter, and flopped down on the bed on his stomach.

“This is comfy. Memory foam?” Saint asked but was out before Val could answer.

“Cute,” Val murmured as he climbed into bed next to Saint. He pulled the comforter over them. The bed was nice and cool from the AC hitting it. He’d just about fallen back asleep when Saint shimmied closer. He threw an arm over Val’s chest and hooked his ankle over Val’s leg. Smiling, Val covered Saint’s hand with his.

Maybe this was a mistake, maybe he was heading for heartbreak, but there was nothing Val would change about this moment right here. Having Saint in his bed felt right. Like he belonged there. What if Val gave this a chance? What if he went all in and did his best to support and guide Saint when he needed it? Was he overthinking? Trying to prepare for a worst-case scenario when there might not be one?

“Sleep,” Saint grumbled, his cheek pressed against Val’s shoulder, making Val smile.

“Okay.” Giving his thoughts a rest, Val closed his eyes. Whatever happened, they’d get through it. It would be okay.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I can’t believe it.”

Val shook his head as he scanned the main tavern area. Over the last few days, the booths along the walls arrived and were installed. Then the actual bar came. Before he’d started, he’d had an image in his head of what he wanted his tavern to look like, but seeing the brick walls, the black leather seating and dark wood tables, and the black, vintage-style bar gave it new life.

There was still so much to do, more of the tables and chairs to arrive, the decor, the kitchen appliances, and everything else, but his vision was finally starting to come together. Opening night had seemed like a faraway dream, and now it was within reach.

“It looks amazing, Chief,” Saint said, standing beside him.

“I also got all my paperwork filed online and got my licenses.”

“I’m so proud of you,” Saint said, throwing his arm around Val’s shoulders.

“Smartass.”

“What? All teasing aside, I am. I mean, this place is going to kick ass. Upscale and classy-looking but still down to earth. The vendors you have lined up are fantastic. Betcha, the Four Kings Security crew are gonna be in here *all* the time.”

“Hm. Good thing I have an excellent insurance policy.” One thing he most certainly had not skimped on. He’d seen too many businesses go up in smoke, leaving the owners bankrupt because of shitty policies with loopholes big enough to drive a Mack truck through.

Saint blinked at him before letting out a loud laugh.

“You think I’m kidding? Chaos and mayhem follow those guys, so I intend to be prepared.”

There was a series of rapid knocks on the window, and they both turned. They weren’t expecting anyone, but since Saint had been hanging around, the Kings and their significant others had dropped by on various occasions to check in on them. It was sweet. Val wasn’t used to having a large group of friends like this. He kept in touch with some of his friends from college and his firehouse days, but their lives had taken such different paths with many of them now busy with their kids and even grandkids. Another quick series of taps snapped him out of his thoughts.

“Is that Fitz?” Val asked as someone in a fuzzy pink sweater with windswept hair waved cheerfully outside the window.

“Yep.” Saint walked to the door and opened it, jumping to the side in surprise. “Holy shit.”

Val stared at the parade of people that came through the door, all carrying bags and trays, except Ace and Lucky, who had what looked like a folded-up table, and Jack and Joker, who carried a giant cooler.

“The place is looking sweet,” Joker said. “Love the bar.”

“Holy cow,” Laz said, taking pictures with his camera as he walked in. “It’s going to be awesome!”

“Thanks,” Val replied. He exchanged glances with Saint, who just shrugged. He had no idea what this was about either.

“Um, hey, guys,” Saint said, closing the door after the last person entered. Or rather, the last furry guest. “What are you doing here?” He smiled at Chip, who barked and wagged his tail so hard his whole butt moved. With a chuckle, Saint scratched Chip behind his ears. “Hello, handsome boy. Where are Gio and Cookie?”

“Gio’s sorry he couldn’t make it. He has a charity thing going on tonight. As for what’s going on…” Joker motioned to Fitz.

“Well,” Fitz said, putting down the shopping bags he carried so he could hug Saint. “You’ve been so busy that you forgot it’s been five years since you joined Four Kings Security. Normally, they’d throw you a party at the office, but since you’re on leave, Leo thought it would be nice to throw you a little party here.”

“Aw, thanks, bud.” Saint beamed at Leo. “That’s really nice of you.”

Leo shrugged. “Everyone gets a party. You should too.” His face lit up, and he held up a large white box. “Wait until you see the cake!”

Val held back a smile. Considering Leo's excitement, Val had an idea of what it might look like. "Where's King?" Next to Gio, King seemed to be the only other person missing from this band of merry mischief-makers.

"He'll be here later," Leo said. "His meeting with a big client ran over. Some government contract." He shrugged like it was no big deal. Then again, Leo was a computer genius who occasionally freelanced for the military and was the son of an Army general, so government contracts were probably nothing new for him.

"Your BFF will be along shortly," Ace informed Saint. "He was detained."

Saint eyed Ace. "By detained, you mean...?"

"I mean, locked in the supply closet by Jay."

Saint doubled over laughing. "Oh, my god! What is it with those two?"

"Right?" Ace shook his head. "They need to just screw and get it over with."

"Wait, Jay and Ryden?" Jack said, confused.

"Oh, honey." Fitz stroked Jack's hair and kissed his cheek. "You're adorable."

"And clueless," Joker pitched in with a snort.

Val followed Saint to the long folding table Ace and Lucky set up. Colton threw a white tablecloth over it and helped Fitz arrange it. It was good that neither he nor Saint had eaten yet because the guys had bought enough food to feed an army.

"Those two have been circling each other since Ryden joined the company," Saint said. "They're clearly attracted to each other."

"I wondered about that at first," Jack said, "but then it looked like they were just trying to annoy the hell out of each other."

"Foreplay," everyone said simultaneously, making Val snicker. He forgot how much fun these guys could be. Val might not know Jay well, but from what he'd heard, it was clear even to him that there was something going on between Ryden and Jay.

While Laz snapped photos of everyone, Ace set up a Bluetooth speaker, connected his phone, and got some music going. Mason flipped open the cooler lid and grabbed some beers, handing one to Saint and one to Val. Half of the table was filled with snacks and finger foods, while the other had silver trays covered with aluminum.

"Damn, guys. Thank you," Saint said, clearly touched. "I don't know

what to say.”

“Say you want cake,” Leo said from the corner of his mouth, motioning to the table.

With a laugh, Saint went to the table, and Val followed him, stopping beside him as everyone gathered around. Ace did a drumroll on the table while Fitz took hold of the lid.

“May I present,” Fitz said. “Sailor Goldfish!” He opened the box, and Saint laughed at the orange fish-shaped cake with a little white Navy sailor’s hat on his head sitting at a jaunty angle.

“Oh my god, that’s amazing!”

“Really? You like it?” Leo asked, smiling wide.

“I love it,” Saint said, throwing an arm around Leo, another sign of how comfortable Leo was around Saint because he did not like to be touched by strangers.

Leo leaned in, whispering loud enough for all of them to hear. “Don’t worry. The orange isn’t cheese. It’s buttercream.” He wrinkled his nose. “A cheese cake would just be weird.” He realized what he’d said and snickered. “Well, obviously not a cheesecake because that’s not weird. Technically, cheesecake is made from cheese, so maybe it is?” He shook his head and waved a hand in dismissal. “A conundrum for another day.”

“Before we start on dessert,” Ace said, “How about some dinner.” He and Lucky unveiled the trays, and Saint groaned. It was one hell of a spread.

“Is that your mom’s pernil recipe?” Saint asked Ace, inhaling deeply. “So good.”

“Of course it is,” Ace said with a snort. “Like I would bring you anything else.”

“It always smells so amazing,” Val said as he picked up a large, heavy-duty paper plate off the stack. He’d had Ace’s mom’s famous pork shoulder before, and it was so good. There were several more Cuban dishes, some of which Val couldn’t remember the name of but sure as hell remembered the taste of. Mouthwateringly good.

“Oh my god, it’s that yummy vegetable thing. What’s it called again?” He served himself several pieces.

“Yuca. Don’t forget the mojo that goes with it,” Saint said, placing several pieces on his plate.

Val scoffed. “Please. As if I would forget what gives it that extra special yumminess.” He served himself a heaping plateful of food and shoveled a

forkful in his mouth, groaning at how good it was.

Saint leaned into him, his voice low so only Val could hear. “Damn, Chief. If I’d known that was all it took to get you revved up, I would have cooked for you weeks ago.”

Val almost choked on his food. He grabbed his beer and took a sip. “Are you trying to kill me? More importantly, do you know how to cook this?”

Saint snickered. “I do. It’s not as good as this, but it’s pretty damn good.”

“Can’t you just ask for the recipe?” Val asked.

“There is no recipe,” Ace replied. “My mother learned from her mother, and it follows the ‘little bit of this, little bit of that’ cooking method. No measuring utensils needed. She just knows how much to add.”

Val was familiar with that method. His nonna had been the same. “Probably why it tastes so damned good.”

They all ate and talked, music playing in the background. When they finished eating, Saint cut his cake, taking the fish’s sailor hat for himself and giving Leo the cute little fishy head. Laz took photos of them, many with the guys making faces or stuffing their mouths with cake. Val was going to have to get some of the photos printed and framed on his wall. The thought gave him an idea. He should have a photo wall of friends and patrons, get them in different sizes and frames. He’d talk to Laz about it later.

Saint hummed cheerfully around a big bite of cake. “This is delicious.”

“It is,” Lucky said, then narrowed his eyes at Saint. “You know what else was delicious? My flan.”

“Your what?” Saint asked, puzzled.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about my flan.”

Saint blinked at him, then seemed to remember what Lucky was referring to. “Dude, come on. It’s been *five* years.”

“A flan that delicious is unforgettable, you flan thief!”

Val did his best not to laugh at Lucky’s indignation. He turned to Saint. “You stole his flan?”

“I didn’t steal his flan,” Saint replied with a groan, then glared at Lucky, “Tell him I didn’t steal your flan.”

Lucky glared at Saint some more before turning his attention to Val. “So, Graciela’s abuelita makes the most mouthwatering flan de coco, and I had waited and waited for her to bring me some, and when it finally happens, Graciela gives it away!” He thrusts a hand at Saint. “To him! Can you believe this?”

“Why?” Val asked, taking another bite of cake. He might need to have seconds. This really was a good cake. Val wasn’t big on sweets, but he could appreciate a tasty dessert.

Lucky waved a hand in dismissal. “Because he was all sad like a big puppy or something.”

“My divorce was finalized that day,” Saint explained.

“Ah. So he didn’t really steal your flan,” Val said.

Lucky scoffed. “Of course you would take his side.”

“Graciela was just trying to make me feel better,” Saint told Lucky. “And since it was your flan, technically, *you* were making me feel better.”

Lucky was not impressed by Saint’s answer and shoved a forkful of cake in his mouth. While the two debated whether the flan had been indeed stolen, Val couldn’t help but think of what Saint had gone through. The whole ordeal must have been rough. Val understood that being a military spouse wasn’t for everyone. Same as being the spouse of a firefighter or law enforcement officer. Any position that put a loved one in harm’s way was difficult, especially if they had to be away for long periods of time. Sadly, Val had seen many a marriage fall apart during his time at the firehouse.

Val didn’t know Saint’s ex-wife, and although he could understand why she’d fallen in love with someone else while Saint had been deployed, he couldn’t understand why she’d waited so long to tell him.

From what Saint had told him one night at a Kings’ event, she’d waited an entire *year* to tell him and ask him for a divorce. She’d been with another man for a year while Saint was abroad, believing all was well with his marriage. Val hadn’t asked any questions because Saint had been tipsy that night, and they hadn’t known each other very well then. Afterward, he seemed to have forgotten he’d told Val anything.

“You better not steal my cake,” Lucky warned Saint, eyes narrowed as he walked away.

“Technically, it’s my cake,” Saint called out, laughing when Lucky flipped him off.

“He has very strong feelings about food,” Mason chuckled.

Val snickered. “I can see that.”

“Wow. I still can’t believe it’s been five years.” Saint shook his head as he took a sip of his beer. “It seems like a lifetime ago.”

“Yeah. Time flies,” Mason agreed. “So much has happened in the last few years. I sure as hell never imagined I would have ended up here. With

him.” His gaze softened as it landed on Lucky. “Funny how sometimes life gives you what you need, even if you had no idea it’s what you needed.”

The door swung open, and Ryden stepped through with flair. “Fear not, for I have arrived!” He promptly got smacked in the head with a bread roll. Ryden caught it and bit a chunk off. “Crunchy, but needs butter.” Shutting the door, Ryden greeted the guys, some by flipping them off, some with hugs, and some with a playful fist bump.

A wicked smile came onto Saint’s face when Ryden approached.

“Heard you had a date with a closet.”

“Yeah, and no one bothered to let me out.” Ryden chucked what remained of his bread roll at Ace, who caught it with a waggle of his eyebrows. “Dicks.” He grinned at Saint. “Happy anniversary, man.”

“Thanks. Eat. I know you’re wasting away to nothing.”

Ryden patted his flat stomach. “It’s only been an hour since I’ve eaten anything. I don’t know how I survived.” He walked off, and Mason shook his head.

“Where the hell does it all go?”

“It’s his mouth,” Saint said. “All the talking burns calories.”

“I heard that, you shit,” Ryden called out.

Saint snickered. “Love you.”

“Love you more,” Ryden teased, patting his chest over his heart and pretending to make it beat.

With a snort, Mason excused himself and went over to Lucky, kissing his cheek before murmuring something in his ear.

“You think someone is putting something in the water at your place of work?” Val asked Saint.

“Why?”

Val motioned to everyone here. “Because it looks like anyone who joins Four Kings Security ends up in love.”

“Oh yeah,” Saint laughed. “We tease King about it. Call him King Cupid.”

“I bet he *loves* that.”

Ryden called Saint over, and Saint excused himself. It appeared that Jack had been waiting for Saint to walk away, and Val had an idea why that might be, considering Fitz and Ryden had Saint flanked. Val did not envy him.

“Hey,” Jack greeted. “So, how are things going between you two?”

Right to the point. Val eyed Jack. “Who said anything was going on

between us? Nothing's going on." He heard Fitz laugh and glanced over to see Saint whispering to him. "Your boyfriend told you everything, didn't he?"

Jack took a sip of his beer. "Yes, he did. And whatever Saint just told him, I'll probably know by the time we leave here." He shrugged, a big lovesick puppy smile on his face. "Fitz loves love. And if he sees the potential to bring two people together who he believes belong together, he will meddle because he's always right. *Always.*"

Val sighed. "I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I told him nothing could happen between us, and I had every intention of standing my ground."

Jack didn't even bother to hide his smile. "How'd that go for you?"

"I folded like a house of cards, Jack. It was like I didn't even try. I kissed him, and he kissed me back, and then that led to other things...."

"Other things." Jack gave him a knowing smile. "And how did he handle those...other things?"

"Like it was no big deal."

"Maybe it wasn't."

"He'd never been with a man before. Hell, he'd been with the same woman since high school. Before any of this happened, I pushed him. Asked him if we were dating, if he'd introduce me to his family as his boyfriend, but he couldn't respond."

"Maybe he just needs time to think about it, figure it all out."

"That's what I'm worried about. That he'll realize he's made a mistake or that he's not ready for a relationship with a guy." Val swallowed hard. "And that by then, it'll be too late. I'm already falling for him."

Jack's smile was sympathetic. "I get it, and if it were anyone other than Saint, I would have told you to tread lightly, but Saint is a good, level-headed guy. He's not the kind of person who rushes into something without having thought a good deal about it, especially when there's a possibility he might hurt someone he cares about."

His friend wasn't wrong. Deep down, it was probably the reason he'd gone with his gut and not put a stop to things from the beginning. Val cared about Saint and trusted him. As if he knew Val was thinking of him, Saint lifted his head, a gorgeous smile spreading across his face. He winked at Val, then went back to listening to Ryden.

Jack patted Val's shoulder. "I have a feeling things are going to work out."

“Thanks.”

“Now, if you’ll excuse me. I’m going to go rescue your not-yet-boyfriend from my nosy-yet-beautiful boyfriend.”

Val chuckled as Jack went off, though Val suspected it wasn’t so much about saving Saint as it was about getting to wrap his arms around Fitz and sneak in a kiss.

A loud boom went off, and glass shattered, but it wasn’t until Saint shouted for everyone to get down that Val hit the floor, along with the other guys who covered whichever civilian was closest to them. Val could see Saint had Leo covered from his position on the floor.

The windows exploded, bullets pinged off the brick walls, pieces of brick shot off, and dust and debris fell in all directions. The food on the table went everywhere. What was left of the cake exploded. The gunfire was followed by shouts and the screeching of tires. Then silence.

“No one get up,” Ace ordered as he ran in a crouch to one of the windows. He peeked out. “Clear.”

“Is everyone okay?” Val called out as he got to his feet, his heart pounding in his ears. What the fuck had just happened?

“Oh god. No.”

Val turned, his blood freezing to ice at the distraught words. Both relief and horror flooded Val at once when he met Saint’s gaze.

Everyone was not okay.

Leo had been hit.

CHAPTER TWELVE

This couldn't be happening.

"No, no, no." Saint shook his head, unaware of the shouting around him as everyone scrambled into action. He pulled Leo into his arms, his hand covered in blood as he pressed it against Leo's side and the bullet wound. Leo cried out and grabbed hold of Saint's wrist.

"Call 9-1-1!" Red dropped to his knees beside them. He said something, but Saint could only focus on Leo as he gasped for breath, his big brown eyes filled with tears.

"It's not your fault," Leo told Saint.

"Don't—" Saint shook his head. Fuck, why? Why hadn't it been him? *This can't be happening.* The words repeated in his head.

"Saint, lay him down!"

At Red's order, Saint snapped out of it and quickly did as Red asked. His vision blurred from his tears as Red took hold of Leo's T-shirt and ripped it open to keep it away from the wound. He slid his hand underneath Leo and cursed under his breath.

"The bullet is still in there."

Fuck. Things had just gone from bad to worse.

Ace handed Red the first aid kit from Val's office, and Red quickly got to work while they waited for the paramedics to arrive, but there wasn't much he could do. Unlike in the movies, Red couldn't just go digging around for the bullet.

"Leo, stay with me, buddy," Red said gently. "Come on."

Fitz kneeled beside Leo and gently lifted his head to place his folded-up sweater underneath. Then he took hold of Leo's hand and laced their fingers

together, smiling through his tears.

“You’re going to be okay, sweetheart.”

Leo’s lips trembled, but he smiled anyway. “In about seven to ten minutes, I’ll most likely bleed out and go into shock.”

“Why do you have to be so smart?” Fitz asked, running his free hand over Leo’s head.

“Why do you have to be so pretty?”

Fitz sniffed and laughed. “That’s why you’re my favorite.”

Time seemed to slow as they waited for the ambulance. What had felt like hours had only been minutes, but every second counted. The ambulance finally arrived, with the police close behind. Paramedics ran in, and Red explained in his medical jargon what had happened and the extent of Leo’s injuries. Officers rushed inside, several seeming to recognize Mason as they headed straight for him and began talking to him.

Saint stood, barely aware of Val wiping the blood off his hand. He watched with his heart in his throat as they placed Leo on a gurney, an IV in his arm. Leo was terrifyingly pale, his lips a purplish color. Saint shook his head as he paced and ran a hand through his hair.

Fuck. This couldn’t be happening. Saint had grabbed Leo and dropped to the floor the second he heard the *pop*. So had the rest of them. They were all too familiar with the sound of gunfire, so there’d been no hesitation. But Saint hadn’t been fast enough.

“How?” Saint asked softly, not really addressing anyone. “I used my body to shield him.”

“Sweetheart,” Val said, cupping Saint’s face and rubbing away the wetness. “The bullet missed you by millimeters.”

“What?” Saint frowned, then followed Val’s gaze as he lowered it to Saint’s T-shirt. There was a hole in it. He lifted his T-shirt, revealing a very thin red line. The bullet had grazed him.

“We’ll meet at the hospital,” Ace said as the paramedics loaded Leo into the back of the ambulance.

“The question now is, who’s going to tell King?” Colton asked worriedly.

“I should do it,” Saint said, removing his phone from his pocket only to have it snatched away by Ace.

“The fuck you are. He has to hear this from me. No one else.”

Saint had never seen Ace look so deadly serious. He quickly nodded as Ace shoved his phone back at him and then ran out. Everyone hurried out,

and Val handed the tavern keys to Mason. He took hold of Saint's elbow and led him to his SUV.

"Come on."

As Saint sat in the passenger seat of Val's SUV, he felt numb. None of this felt real. He glanced over at Val, whose jaw was clenched so tight he might break something.

"What am I supposed to tell King?" Saint asked, his voice coming out as an unsteady whisper.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Val said as he sped through a yellow light. "You heard the shot, your instincts kicked in, and you protected Leo."

"Protected him? Did you *see* him? What if he'd bled out?"

"That never would have happened. The second we realized Leo had been hit, Lucky ran out to grab Ace's fancy, fast-as-fuck sports car. If the ambulance hadn't arrived when it did, you bet your ass Ace would have broken the damn sound barrier getting Leo to the hospital."

"What if—"

"No." Val shook his head. "No what-ifs." He grabbed Saint's hand and squeezed his fingers.

The ride to the hospital was a blur, and Saint tried his hardest not to think of worst-case scenarios. He knew better. Normally, he would lean on his experience, on his training, but all he could think was... *it's Leo*.

With the exception of Mason, who'd stayed behind with the police, the rest of the guys were there in the emergency room waiting area when Saint and Val arrived. He could tell that the Kings, Jack and Joker, were keeping it together for the sake of their partners. Laz leaned against Red, his dazed stare on the floor. Colton was speaking with the nurses at the front desk, no doubt doing what he could to ensure Leo got the best care possible, no matter the cost.

Ryden stood leaning against the wall at the other end of the room, his gaze fixed on nothing in particular. Jack sat comforting Fitz, who was in tears. When he saw Saint, he jumped to his feet and hurried over, pulling him into a fierce hug. When he pulled back, he looked determined.

"It's not your fault, you know that."

"Fitz...."

"I know you. You're like them. Always trying to shoulder the weight of the world on your own. You risked your life to save him."

"But he was still hurt."

“Again, not your fault.”

Ryden appeared beside Saint and squeezed his shoulder. “Listen to him.”

Val’s phone rang, and he quickly removed it from his pocket. He held it up to Saint. “It’s Mason.” Excusing himself, he walked away to take the call. Over Fitz’s shoulder, Saint spotted Ace. He was talking to Colton, shaking his head about something, and Colton nodded. With a visible sigh, Colton walked over.

“Saint, you should go home,” Colton said gently.

“What?” The words were like a lead pipe to the stomach. He was being kicked out? “I can’t go home. I...I need to stay here. I need—”

Fitz cupped Saint’s face. “Sweetheart, you can’t be here.”

“Why?”

Colton sighed again, his expression sympathetic. “King is on his way.”

Saint’s blood turned cold. Fuck.

King.

With everything going on, Saint hadn’t even thought about how King might react when he got here. He was probably beside himself.

“But it wasn’t his fault,” Val said, joining them again.

“We all know that,” Colton replied. “Saint saved Leo. If he hadn’t shielded Leo when he did....” He shook his head. “All King knows is that Leo was rushed to the hospital with a gunshot wound. We don’t know how he’ll react. Ace is worried, and if Ace is worried....”

“I can’t be here,” Saint conceded. The last thing he wanted to do was make a shit situation even worse. “I understand. If anyone needs *anything*, please let me know.” He turned to Ryden. “Please let me know how he’s doing.”

Ryden nodded. “You got it.”

“What did Mason say?” Saint asked Val as they turned toward the exit.

“They’re going to have a squad car parked outside the house for a few nights while the investigation gets underway, just in case.”

The doors to the emergency room slid open, and a lump formed in Saint’s throat. Everyone got to their feet, and a room filled with former military personnel and badass bodyguards looked on in panic because the one man who *never* lost it was about to go nuclear.

Saint was so fucked.

King thundered through the double doors like a hurricane ready to level everything in its path. His blue eyes were like ice, the pain and rage in them

squeezing Saint's heart until he couldn't breathe.

"King, wait!" Ace darted in front of King and put his hands up to stop him.

"Stay the fuck out of my way, Anston," King snarled, shoving his friend to one side.

"Damn it, King. Please."

Saint shook his head. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have—"

"You son of a bitch!" King lunged forward, and the other Kings appeared out of nowhere, throwing themselves at their brother.

Saint flinched and stepped back as King shouted and struggled against them. When it looked like Red, Lucky, and Ace wouldn't be able to hold him, Jack, Joker, and Ryden joined the fray. Saint had never seen anything like it.

It took five former Green Berets and a Marine to stop Ward Kingston from getting his hands on Saint.

"You're done," King roared, his skin flushed red. "Do you hear me? You're fucking finished! Get the fuck out of my sight!"

"King," Ace pleaded when King grabbed a fistful of Ace's shirt and practically lifted him off his feet.

"You get him the fuck away from me," King ground out through his teeth, "Or I promise you I will beat the living shit out of him and put *him* in one of those fucking rooms!"

"And you think that's what Leo would want?" Ace asked quietly, wrapping his hand around King's wrist, his gaze never wavering.

King gritted his teeth and shook his head, tears in his eyes. "Don't you fucking dare."

"Am I wrong?"

King inhaled deep through his nose and released Ace. He rolled his shoulders and shrugged his brothers off him, a tear that he seemed unaware of rolled down his cheek. Meeting Saint's gaze, he thrust a finger at him. "So help me, if he...." Pressing his lips together, King shook his head and stormed out, leaving a heavy silence in his wake.

Saint looked down at his hands, only just then realizing they were shaking. He dropped onto the closest chair, leaned his elbows on his knees, and dropped his head into his hands. What the fuck had he done?

"Hey."

The soft word made Saint jump, and he lifted his head to find Ace

kneeling in front of him.

“Give him time.”

Saint shook his head. “He’s right. I don’t deserve to be here.”

“Save me from stubborn assholes,” Ace said, shaking his head. He met Saint’s gaze, his expression brooking no argument. “Now, you listen to me, Cavallero. What happened was not your fault. We all know that, and deep down, so does King. He’s not himself right now. Just give him time. He’ll come around.”

Saint opened his mouth to argue, but Ace put a hand up.

“This isn’t up for debate. I’ll extend your paid leave, okay? We’ll keep you updated on how Leo’s doing, but for now, take care of yourself.” Ace looked up at Val. “Can you keep an eye on him?”

“Of course.”

“I’m sorry, Saint.” Ace squeezed Saint’s shoulder, his eyes glassy. “I really am. No one should be in this position.”

Saint nodded. He stood and headed out with Val at his side. He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to run into King outside or not, but he was glad he didn’t. What could he possibly say that would alleviate any of King’s pain right now? Nothing.

In the parking lot, Saint reached for the door handle but stopped. “I’m going to stay at mine tonight.”

Val walked around the front of the car and took Saint’s hand. “Please, don’t pull away. You shouldn’t be on your own right now. None of us should be.”

“I know, I just...I need some time alone.”

“Saint....”

“Please.” Saint’s voice broke, and he cleared his throat. “I appreciate your concern, but I’ll be fine. I’ll see you later, okay?”

Val was clearly reluctant, but he released Saint. “Okay. Please, be careful, and if you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks.” Saint kissed Val’s cheek, then headed back to order himself a ride. Just when the car arrived and Saint got in, someone else climbed into the backseat next to him. “What the hell?”

“Hey, Bestie,” Ryden said, smiling wide. “Where are we going?” He buckled his seatbelt, and Saint frowned.

“What are you doing here? Go back inside.”

“I don’t think so. The guys have this covered. I’m here for you.”

“Val called you, didn’t he? What are you, my chaperone?”

Ryden side-eyed him. “Do I need to be?”

“Ready to go?” The driver asked, looking between Ryden and Saint.

“Yeah, fine. There’s no getting rid of him,” Saint grumbled.

“That’s right,” Ryden said. “I’m like one of those lovebugs. Once I’m on your ass, I don’t let go.”

Saint stared at his friend. “That’s disturbing.”

“No less true. Where are we off to?”

“A bar.”

Ryden nodded but didn’t say anything, which Saint appreciated. Right now, he just needed some time away from everything. Fuck, why, when he thought he was finally getting his shit together, did his life unravel into a hot mess? He stared out the window as the car drove toward St. Augustine’s Historic Downtown, where even on a weekday, the bars and restaurants would be filled with tourists and locals. He could get lost in the crowd and have a few drinks.

A few drinks somehow turned into several. At least for him. His best friend was suspiciously sober. Was Ryden even drinking alcohol? Had he ordered any alcohol? Not that it mattered. Saint was the one who didn’t know which way was up.

Saint leaned an elbow on the bar. They’d taken a seat at the end because even though the place was super busy, Saint wanted to be away from people. Maybe a bar in the Historic District at this time of night wasn’t the best place to get away from people.

“What am I doing?” he asked Ryden.

“You mean other than getting shitfaced? I don’t know. What *are* you doing?”

“I’m asking you.”

“If you don’t know, how am I supposed to know?”

“You’re no help.”

Ryden chuckled. “Okay, how about we start with what you’re referring to? What are you doing about what?”

“Everything. My life. I tried dating, you know. That was a fucking disaster. I thought, maybe I just haven’t met the right girl. I never even considered that maybe I just hadn’t met the right guy.”

“Or maybe you *had* met the right guy, and that’s why none of those dates worked out.”

Saint gasped. “Holy shit. You’re right.” Why hadn’t he thought of that? Wait, hadn’t he just thought that?

“See. I’m not just a pretty face.”

“You do have a pretty face,” Saint agreed. “Jay is prettier, though.”

“Um, what?”

“Jay. He’s pretty. Well, he’s cute. I always thought so. With his perfectly coordinated outfits and those cute little bow ties. And his lips. You ever notice how full his lips are or how soft his hair looks, and why are you *glaring* at me?” Saint reached out to poke the crease on Ryden’s forehead, but Ryden moved his hand away. Rude.

“Why are you talking about Jay?”

“I’m not talking about Jay. You’re the one who likes him.” Saint put a finger to his lips. “Sorry, is that a secret?”

“What is happening right now? We’re not here to talk about me. We’re here to talk about you.”

“I think I might love him,” Saint murmured, staring down at his glass and frowning. “There’s no mint in my drink.” What the hell? “I’m mint-less.”

“You’re something all right. You don’t get mint with brandy.”

“Brandy? Why the fuck am I drinking brandy? I don’t even like brandy.”

“You ordered it,” Ryden said.

Saint took a sip of his drink and cringed. Gross. “Brandy,” he snickered. “Like the song. It’s a sad song, isn’t it? I mean, she loves this sailor, and he can’t be with her because he loves the sea more, and oh my god, that’s why my marriage fell apart.”

“*Ooookay*, I’m just going to take that glass from you, buddy.” Ryden reached over and took Saint’s drink.

“I don’t like it anyway,” Saint said. “There’s no mint.”

“Have some water.”

Saint took a sip from the bottle Ryden handed him and cringed. “Ugh, it doesn’t taste like anything.”

“Because it’s water.”

“Can I get mint in my water?”

Ryden hung his head and laughed. “Sure.”

“I think...I think I’m falling in love with him,” Saint said. Or at least he thought he said it. What time was it? Val. Oh. Val was home, all alone. Saint had left him alone.

“You *think* you’re falling in love with him?”

Saint sighed heavily. "I know."

"Pretty sure he feels the same way, so what's the problem?"

"That night at Sapphire Sands, he was there. He asked me if I would introduce him to my family as my boyfriend."

"And you said...?"

"Nothing. I said nothing."

"Which said it all."

"Yeah."

"You're afraid of what your family will do?"

"I mean, it's not like I don't have gay cousins and stuff, and my parents accept them and love them."

"But you think it will be different because you're their son."

Saint leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. "When did you get so smart?"

"I don't know whether to be touched or offended." Ryden shook his head. "I wish I had the magic answer for you, my friend. I really do. But this is a decision only you can make. What I can say is that with a guy like Val, you're either all in or all out."

"I know." And Saint did.

A decision was looming, and Ryden was absolutely right. Saint had to decide whether he was all in or all out. How much was he willing to sacrifice to have a future with Val? Did Val even want a future with him? Saint sure as hell hoped so.

There was only one way to find out.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Weren't things supposed to be slowing down? Val had retired for a reason. To put this kind of shit behind him. His life was supposed to be more peaceful and relaxing. He should be working on his tavern, catching a game on the weekends, and attending barbecues. The danger was supposed to be behind him, not on his doorstep.

Even with everything going on, Val couldn't help but worry about Saint. He hadn't expected to feel this deeply about the guy this quickly, but everything about Saint just felt right. Val was happier when he was around, lighter. He laughed a hell of a lot more. With a heavy sigh, Val sat back on his couch, only then just realizing he'd been sitting here worrying in silence for hours.

No doubt Saint was annoyed with Val for sending him a chaperone, but Val didn't care. Saint shouldn't be alone. He was taking what happened exceptionally hard, and it wasn't even his fault. Everyone knew Saint had done the best he could. He'd reacted how he'd been trained to do and protected Leo. There was no way any of them could have prevented what had happened.

King's arrival at the hospital had made a bad situation worse, but Val couldn't fault the guy. The man he loved, the man who King would do anything for, had been shot. All King knew was that Saint had been the one protecting Leo and therefore had failed. Something told Val there was more to it. King was a rational man. His rage may have been justified, but his reaction to seeing Saint spoke of something deeper.

Guilt.

Val wiped a hand over his face and sighed. The guilt was probably eating

King alive. Because of all the nights to have worked late, he'd been away when Leo had needed him the most.

"Fuck." No wonder King was a fucking mess.

Val checked his phone again. Nothing. Exactly how long was he going to sit on his couch and stare at his phone? All night, apparently. He'd tried calling Saint but got nothing. Not even a text. Then again, no one seemed to be answering their phones, and Val couldn't blame them, though with that murderous son of a bitch on the loose, they should all be in communication. The only message he'd received that night was from Ryden, letting him know they were at a bar.

A knock at his door scared the shit out of him, and he jumped to his feet. He darted to the door and peeked out the window, letting out a sigh of relief to find his best friend. He opened the door and threw his arms around Frank, hugging him tight.

"Frank. Thank fuck. No one's answering their goddamn phones." He pulled back, his heart in his throat at Frank's grim expression.

"They're all still at the hospital. Leo..." Frank closed his eyes and shook his head. "They almost lost him, Val."

"What?" Val moved to one side so Frank could come inside. He saw the patrol car and put a hand up to let the officers know everything was okay.

"He was in surgery, and they almost lost him. The bullet did more damage than they thought. It was a delicate procedure, and there were complications. That's all I was able to learn from Joshua. He's with Colton, helping out."

"Fuck. Is he going to live through this?" Val could barely get the words out as he closed the door and joined Frank on the couch. He didn't want to consider the possibility. King wasn't the only one feeling guilty as hell. If King lost Leo because someone had been after Val? Val would never forgive himself.

Frank's phone pinged, and he removed it from his pocket, letting out a sigh of relief. "Talk about timing." He showed Val his screen.

Leo is out of surgery. He's going to be okay.

"Thank goodness. Fuck. I can't believe this is happening. How's King?"

"Not good." Frank pressed his lips together. "I mean, the guys are devastated, but King...they're worried. They've never seen him like this. He's the glue that's always held them all together. Ace has stepped in for the

time being.” Frank ran a hand through his hair. He seemed to have noticed something and frowned. “Where’s Saint?”

“He needed some time to himself. He’s at a bar with Ryden.”

Frank nodded. “Poor guy. Shit position to be in.”

“He blames himself.”

“Lot of that going around. He probably thinks everyone else is blaming him.”

“If anyone’s to blame, it’s me. Whoever the fuck is after me has upped their game, and now people we care about are hurting. If King wants someone to blame, he should blame me.”

Frank cursed under his breath. “I know it’s easier said than done, but you have to stop blaming yourself. The only person at fault here is the asshole who shot Leo. It could have been anyone of you who got hit tonight. Hell, if it hadn’t been a room full of soldiers and bodyguards, the casualties could have been devastating. That son of a bitch is the one to blame. Not you, and sure as shit, not Saint.”

Frank was right. But how was he going to get through to Saint so he understood that when Val was finding it difficult to accept it himself?

“One thing’s for sure,” Frank said solemnly. “The police better find that guy before King does.”

Val cursed under his breath. “Ain’t that the truth.”

“Don’t suppose you’ve heard anything from the police?” Frank asked.

“Mason called earlier. There were some witnesses, and they gave a description of the vehicle, but no one got a good look at the driver. The police found the truck abandoned on the other side of the bridge. It had been reported stolen two nights ago.”

“Great.” Frank shook his head. “Who would be *that* pissed at you?”

“I don’t know, man. I’ve pissed off a lot of people over the years.”

“Yeah, but enough for someone to commit murder? To kill you and anyone who gets caught in the way?”

“Who knows? It’s a crazy fucking world these days.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Frank grumbled.

Though Frank had a point. Yes, Val had pissed off a lot of people. He’d fought back when they expected him to give in or go away peacefully. Most of those incidents had happened out of bigotry and hate, but for someone to try to kill him? He wasn’t even the fire chief anymore. The doorbell rang, and Val rushed to answer it, his heart in his throat when he opened the door to see

Saint hanging off Ryden's shoulder, his head hanging forward as his friend struggled to keep him upright.

"Got a present for you."

Frank hurried over and helped Val carry Saint inside.

"Hey." Saint's crooked smile broke Val's heart. He poked Val's cheek. "You're so handsome." His words were slurred, and his eyes—glassy and red—were barely open.

"Bedroom," Val said, grateful for Frank's help. They lay Saint on the bed, and Val pulled off Saint's boots.

"I managed to get a bottle of water down him," Ryden said. "Fair warning, he's been obsessed with mint tonight for some reason."

"Chocolate mint," Val murmured.

"What?"

"I told him how much I love chocolate mint."

"Ah, that's probably it." Ryden clapped Val on the back. "Maybe you can get through to him. He's being too hard on himself."

"We'll leave you two alone," Frank said. "Call me if you need anything."

"Thanks. Let me know if either of you hear anything about Leo?"

"Will do," Ryden said, leaving with Frank.

Val walked them out, making sure the front door was locked once they'd left. He checked the windows and the rest of the house. As much as he appreciated the officers in the patrol car out front, he wouldn't put anything past the bastard who shot at them tonight.

Once he was sure everything was secure, he headed into the bedroom and kicked off his shoes. He'd showered and dressed in jeans and a T-shirt in case he needed to head back out. Saint lay on Val's side of the bed, head on his pillow. His eyes were closed. Was he out?

"I fucked up."

Nope. He was awake.

"No, you didn't."

"King fired me."

Val frowned. "When?"

"At the hospital. You were there. He said I was finished. Ace said not to listen to him, but King's the boss, right? I mean, everyone listens to him. It doesn't matter. I don't deserve to work there. My job is *protection*. I failed. I failed to protect someone important to me, and Leo almost *died*."

Val sat on the edge of the bed next to Saint and ran a hand through his

hair, smiling at the soft sigh Saint released. “Baby, you didn’t fail. The moment you were aware of the danger, you protected him. It’s not your fault.”

“King doesn’t think so,” Saint said with a hum as Val stroked his hair. “That feels nice.”

“King is hurting very badly right now.”

“Leo’s an amazing guy.”

“He is. He’ll be okay. Joshua texted Frank, Leo’s going to be okay.”

“Oh thank goodness.”

Val nodded. “He’s strong. Stronger than a lot of people give him credit for.” Leo might not have the brawn that the rest of them had, but he was a genius. He’d gotten himself out of deadly situations before using his smarts. From what Val had heard, he’d even saved King’s life.

“He *is* strong.” Saint opened his eyes, his lips pulling into a smile. “You called me Baby.”

Val hadn’t even realized he’d done that. “I did?”

“Am I?”

“Are you what?”

“Yours,” Saint said, his voice quiet.

Val ran the back of his fingers down Saint’s stubbled jaw. “Why don’t we have this conversation in the morning?”

“Is that a no?”

“If we talk about this now, you’ll forget all about it by morning.” Like when he’d been in the hospital and asked Val to kiss him. Saint’s pout was adorable. Val leaned in and brushed his lips over Saint’s. “What if I tell you that I don’t want to be just friends anymore?”

Saint stared up at him. “What do you want to be?”

“More. Move over.” Val waited for Saint to shimmy back to the other side of the bed, then climbed in and lay on his side facing Saint. He was so damned beautiful and amazing. Val would be lying to himself if he said he didn’t want more at this point. “You mean a lot to me, Saint. I love being around you, with you. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, and sure as hell, not this quickly. If I give up the chance to see where this goes, I’d be making a terrible mistake.”

“I’m ready to be all in,” Saint said softly, and Val’s heart almost beat out of him. Was Saint saying what he thought he was saying?

“You are?”

Saint nodded. "I can't promise that everything will be smooth sailing or that I won't make mistakes or do something that'll make you feel shitty, but I'll always do my best to make things right." He slid his hand over Val's and laced their fingers together.

"I understand that there will be moments when you might not be ready for a certain step, and I'll be patient," Val promised. "You can always come to me, talk to me."

"This is all very serious grown-up talk."

Val couldn't help his smile. "It is, isn't it? What did you drink tonight?"

"Brandy, and it was gross." Saint wrinkled his nose. It was cute. "There was no mint in it."

"You don't get mint with brandy."

Saint's eyes went huge. "That's exactly what Ryden said." He leaned in, eyes narrowed. "Were you there?"

"No," Val said with a chuckle.

"I think I love you."

Val stared at Saint. Had he just...? No. Surely, he hadn't.

"I know it feels fast, but I've been kind of obsessed with you for a long time now, so I've been thinking about you for a really long time, and so for me, I guess it doesn't feel too fast, and I probably shouldn't have said anything."

Val leaned in and kissed Saint. He wrapped an arm around him and pulled him close. "I think I love you too."

The smile that lit up Saint's face stole Val's breath away, and he really hoped Saint remembered this moment in the morning, but if not, Val would happily remind him.

"Get some sleep," Val said gently. It was obvious Saint was trying really hard to keep his eyes open. He opened his mouth like he was going to argue, then clearly decided against it.

"Okay."

Val lay there for a few heartbeats watching Saint, the way his lips were slightly parted as he slept, his dark lashes resting on his cheeks. His hair was a mess, probably from him running his hands through it all night. How had Val not seen what was right in front of him all this time? Why had he waited so long? What good did it do to protect his heart if that meant giving up the chance at something amazing?

Closing his eyes, Val felt like he was finally able to breathe. He lay his

hand over Saint's and let sleep claim him.

He opened his eyes, wondering why Saint had turned on the lights, only to discover it was morning. He tilted his head, finding Saint sitting up against the headboard, reading a book. One of Val's books. It made Val smile.

"Good morning," Saint said cheerfully, closing the book and placing it on the nightstand. He lay down and faced Val. "I remember."

Val blinked at him. "I'm sorry?"

"You said I wouldn't remember, but I did."

"You brushed your teeth." Val could smell Saint's minty-fresh breath.

"I also showered and put on some clean clothes." He wrinkled his nose. "I did not smell good."

"What do you remember?"

Saint smiled, his eyes filled with mischief. "You said you were crazy about me, didn't know how you'd managed without me all these years, and how if there's ever another one cookie scenario that you would show your affection by letting me have the cookie."

"Is that what I said?" Val pretended to think back. "I remember talking about brandy and how it doesn't come with mint."

"You did say that. Why is everyone so brandy savvy all of a sudden?"

"There was something else...something important."

"You ass." Saint flicked the tip of Val's nose.

"Ow! Why are you inflicting pain on me so early in the morning? I haven't even had my coffee yet."

Saint arched an eyebrow at him. "Coffee is for boyfriends, not for non-boyfriends who pretend they don't remember what they said the night before."

"Oh, I did say something, didn't I? The thing about me and you."

"I'm going to smother you with your pillow."

Val rolled onto his back and laughed. He got smacked in the face with a pillow for it, but it was worth it. "Okay, okay! I surrender!" The pillow got pulled away, and Val turned back to Saint. He propped himself on his elbow.

"I said, I love you."

Saint eyed him. "You said you *thought* you loved me."

"Yeah, well, I either do or don't, right? I mean, this relationship is new, but like you said, it feels like we've known each other for so much longer."

I've been a little obsessed with you too."

Saint shrugged. "I didn't notice."

"You shit."

Saint laughed and lay down to snuggle in close, his head under Val's chin. "You know, when I first saw you, I was terrified."

"Really? Why?" Val knew he could come off as intimidating, but surely he wasn't that scary.

"I was terrified because I'd never looked at a man the way I'd looked at you, and it brought to the surface a lot of feelings I thought I'd buried for good. Then the more time I spent around you, with you, the more I realized a piece of myself had been missing, and I'd done a pretty damn good job of carrying on like I was okay without it, but I wasn't."

"And now?"

"And now, I'm ready for a new chapter." He chuckled. "Without the dragons. Never took you for a fantasy and paranormal fan."

"It's as far away from real life as possible," Val said. "Plus, dragons."

"Well, I mean, when you put it that way." He went quiet for a moment, and just when Val thought maybe Saint fell asleep, he spoke up. "I know it's not going to be easy, and some things will change. Some people won't accept that I'm in a relationship with a man, and maybe I'll...lose some people, but if they don't want to be a part of my life because I'm not living my life how *they* want me to live it, then that's on them, and I deserve better."

Val kissed the top of his head. "I'm sorry."

"For what? That I'm happy? That I found someone amazing who loves me? I can't control other people's actions or thoughts, only my own."

"Very true."

Saint lifted his face and kissed Val's neck. He turned and placed kiss after gentle kiss on Val's skin, trailing up his neck. Val hummed, his entire body suddenly very awake, especially when Saint slid a hand under the waistband of his pants. He wrapped his hand around Val's dick, and Val bucked his hips, letting out a groan.

"I love how hard you get for me," Saint murmured, poking his tongue out to lick a stripe up Val's jawline.

"Coffee is overrated," Val said, rolling them over so he lay between Saint's legs. "Also, don't think I forgot about the whole cookie forfeit thing."

"No coffee and no cookies? Now you're just being silly."

Val chuckled and kissed Saint slowly at first, nipping at his bottom lip,

and sucking on his tongue. Saint moaned, his hands moving to Val's ass where he squeezed, a finger slipping between Val's ass cheeks. A shiver went through Val, and he rubbed his erection against Saint's hard cock.

"Val," Saint pleaded, thrusting up as they rubbed against each other. "I want...I..."

"Say it." Val groaned as Saint's finger touched Val's hole. "Tell me what you want."

"I want to be inside you," Saint said, breath ragged.

Val smiled and nipped at Saint's jawline. "There's lube and condoms in the nightstand drawer."

"You..." Saint stared up at him. "You'd really let me do that?"

"Not let you. Want you to." Val was so hard at the thought of Saint filling him, his underwear was soaked from his precome. "I want you to fuck me."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Saint could have come in his pajamas from the words alone. He nodded fervently, getting up the moment Val moved away. He grabbed the lube and a condom from inside the nightstand drawer. Was he really going to do this? No, he wasn't going to overthink. Fuck, he wanted Val so badly.

They switched spots, both of them quickly getting rid of their clothes. Then Val got on his hands and knees, and Saint knelt frozen for a heartbeat. His nerves started to conspire against him, but he pushed through. He wanted this. He'd dreamed about this. Pouring some of the lube on his finger, he gently pushed the tip inside Val, his cock twitching at the sound of Val sucking in a sharp breath.

"More," Val pleaded.

Saint pushed his finger in down to the knuckle, then back out. Slowly he fucked Val with his finger; his gaze fixed on the way the muscles in Val's back and arms flexed, his head thrown back as he begged for more.

"Add another finger," Val pleaded, and Saint made sure to use plenty of lube as he did what Val said, his cock leaking precome as he readied Val, unable to believe the delicious pressure would soon be wrapped around his dick. Unable to help himself, he palmed his cock and moved his fingers inside Val until Val couldn't take it anymore.

"Fuck me, Saint. I need you inside me."

Saint grabbed the condom packet and carefully tore it open. He rolled it down over his hard length, then lined himself up and breathed. He hesitated, but then Val looked at him over his shoulder, and Saint's heart skipped a beat. This beautiful, amazing man was his. Saint gently pushed the tip of his cock into Val's hole, pausing when Val hissed.

“Are you okay?”

Val nodded. “Keep going.”

Saint gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, and he pushed in slowly, the tight heat so damned amazing around his cock. How long had he dreamed about this? Of being buried inside Val, and oh fuck, now he was. Saint’s groin was against Val’s ass. Saint pulled out part of the way and had to stop.

“Oh fuck.” Saint doubled over.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. If I move right this second, I’m going to come, so give me a minute.”

Val looked over his shoulder at Saint with a smug smile. “Is that so?”

Confident he wasn’t going to come, Saint straightened, determined to knock the smug smile off that handsome face. He pushed back in and started a steady rhythm of pulling out and pushing in.

“Oh fuck, yes,” Val groaned. “Come on, Baby. Fuck me.”

Saint cursed under his breath. He dug his fingers into Val’s hips and started fucking him in earnest, and it was the most mind-blowing sensation he’d ever experienced. The bed moved and creaked beneath them as Saint pulled Val back into his deep thrusts, his hips moving faster and faster. When he realized Val was jerking himself, Saint chased his orgasm as it built inside him.

“Change your angle,” Val said through his panting breath.

Saint did as Val asked, his body shuddering when Val cried out, his ass tightening like an iron grip on Saint’s cock.

“Holy shit, I’m going to come,” Saint said through a gasp.

“Fuck yeah.”

Saint’s hips thrust wildly as his orgasm ignited, his muscles tightening as he pounded Val’s ass and spilled himself inside the condom. He continued to fuck Val until he was too tender, and slowly he pulled out.

Tying the condom, he got up on shaky legs and threw it in the trash. When he returned to the bed, his heart all but imploded at the sight of Val stretched out on the bed on his stomach. He was such a ruggedly handsome man.

Whom he’d just had sex with.

Val lifted his head, his expression soft. He held his hand out to Saint. “Come here.”

Saint took his hand and climbed into bed, facing Val, who propped

himself on his elbow. He cupped Saint's face and kissed him, sweet and slow. Saint melted against him. He loved the way Val kissed him and could easily do it all day.

Val pulled back and ran his thumb over Saint's bottom lip. "Talk to me."

"I'm good," Saint lied. Why, he didn't know. "Just catching my breath."

"You sure?" Val asked, his voice laced with concern. He clearly wasn't convinced.

"Yeah." Saint smiled, doing his best to hide his nerves. What the hell was happening? He *loved* Val. Wanted him. The sex and everything that had come before it was so fucking hot, so why was he about to have a panic attack?

Val's sad smile broke Saint's heart. "Do whatever you have to. I'll be right here."

Why was he so damned good? Saint kissed Val, a quick but sweet kiss. "I love you." Then he got out of bed, quickly dressed, and walked out the door. He felt like an asshole, but he was on the verge of having a panic attack. Had he moved too quickly? Had he not been as ready as he thought he'd been? Why was he freaking out?

Just as he climbed into his truck, his phone rang. It was Fitz.

"Hey, Fitz, now is not a—"

"Leo's awake, and he's asking for you."

The pressure in his chest eased some. "I'm on my way. Are you at the hospital?"

"I was. The guys have been taking shifts, so Red is there now. I'm going home to freshen up."

"You mind meeting up with me after I see Leo?"

"Of course not, hon. Just text me."

"Thanks." Saint headed for the hospital. He turned on his radio, hoping the music would help calm him or give him some clarity. An idea occurred to him, and he made a quick pitstop before getting back on the road. His thoughts were racing and since no clarity or calm was forthcoming, he decided to focus on Leo. At least that's what he told himself, but like usual, his brain did whatever the fuck it wanted.

By the time he'd parked, he was no closer to an answer. Putting that thought aside for now, he grabbed his little gift, went inside, and informed the nurse at the front desk that he was there to see a patient. Once he was signed in, he headed for Leo's recovery room. A huge weight lifted off his

shoulders, knowing Leo would be okay. Logically, he knew he wasn't to blame for Leo's injuries, but his heart still gave him a hard time.

In the five years since he'd started at Four Kings Security, he'd become part of a family, and he knew a big part of that was down to The Boyfriend Collective, especially Fitz and Leo. They had a way of seeing something in people. Like they could see into someone's soul. Saint had never encountered anything like it before.

The door was closed, so Saint knocked before he let himself in, making sure to close the door behind him.

"Hey, buddy." He froze when he saw King. Why he was surprised, he had no idea. Of course, King would be here. He probably should have thought of that before he showed up.

King jumped to his feet; his hands balled into fists at his sides. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, um—" Saint quickly backed up, ready to get out of Dodge, when Leo spoke up.

"I asked for him," Leo said, staring at King, confused.

"When?"

"When you went to the bathroom."

"Why?" King growled. "He needs to leave."

"Ward," Leo scolded. "Why are you being mean to Saint?"

"Because he's the reason you almost died!"

Leo narrowed his eyes at King. "Why are you shouting?"

"Because I'm pissed."

"I can see that." Leo moved his gaze to Saint. "Did you shoot me?"

"What? No, of course not."

"What did you do when you heard the gunshot?"

"I grabbed you and pulled you to the ground."

"And shielded me with your body," Leo added. He moved his gaze back to King, his eyes narrowed again. "I remember everything. Saint did what he was trained to do. Why are you mad at him for it?"

Saint's jaw almost hit the floor when King's face turned red.

"I, um, because he could have done better." King sat down again and took Leo's hand in his. "Sweetheart, you could have been killed."

Leo eyed him. "But I wasn't, and if I had died, it still wouldn't have been Saint's fault."

"Geez, love. Can you not talk like that?"

“Is there a problem with the way I talk?”

This time, it was King who looked mad. “You know damned well that I love you exactly how you are.”

Leo smiled. “Good. And I do know.” The frown returned to his face. “You did something because no one will tell me what happened when you got to the hospital. I was worried and wanted to know you were okay.”

King glanced at Saint, and Leo poked a finger in King’s direction.

“Ha! I saw that. What did you do, Ward?”

Saint quickly stepped in. “It’s fine, Leo. He was just upset. No big deal.”

Leo was not buying it for a minute. For an adorable nerd, he had a pretty terrifying glare. Cute. But also terrifying.

King let out a heavy sigh. “I let my grief and temper get the better of me and tried to take it out on Saint verbally and physically. Also, I fired him.”

Leo gasped. “Ward Kingston, you unfire him right now!”

“Sweetheart, I—”

“No.”

There was that glare again.

“Leo—”

“I said no.”

Wow. It took everything Saint had not to laugh. Leo was not messing around. Oh, but he had King wrapped around his little finger. The thing was, King knew it, and something told Saint his boss was perfectly happy with it.

“I didn’t mean it,” King said with a sigh. He met Saint’s gaze. “You were never really fired. I know it wasn’t your fault.”

“I didn’t hear an apology anywhere in there,” Leo said, one eyebrow arched at King.

Saint waved a hand. “That’s not necessary.”

“I think it is,” Leo said. “When we hurt someone we care about, we apologize. How else do they know we’re sorry and that we do care?”

“You’re right,” King said. He stood and came around the bed to stand in front of Saint. He held out a hand to Saint. “I’m sorry I was such an asshole. I know you did everything you could to keep him safe, and I won’t forget that.”

A lump formed in Saint’s throat, and he shook King’s hand, laughing when he was pulled into a tight bear hug.

“That’s better,” Leo chirped.

King released Saint, and he walked to the bed. He handed Leo his gift.

“Goldfish crackers!” Leo took the bag, his smile huge. “Thanks.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been shot.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that Saint couldn’t help but laugh.

“That sounds about right.”

“If you mean emotionally, I’m fine. Well, not fine because there’s bound to be some psychological repercussions, but physical recovery comes first, and then we’ll work on the rest. Also, I was worried about my family and didn’t know if anyone else had been hurt or worse. And I was worried about Ward because I knew he would be hurting, *though he shouldn’t have been mean to you.*” Leo threw another narrowed gaze at his boyfriend before turning back to Saint as if nothing had happened. “Then I woke up a bunch of times but was so out of it.” He snickered. “Oh man, I had some *weird* dreams.” He blinked at Saint. “You were in them! Well, everyone was in them. I think we were in the Lego Batman movie, which is weird because I don’t usually have DC dreams.”

As opposed to...Marvel dreams?

“Let me guess. King was Batman?”

Leo snorted. “No, *I* was Batman. Though I would have preferred to be the Flash.”

“So if you were Batman in your dream, that made King...Robin or Cat Woman?” He was dead. Saint was dead. But he couldn’t help it. When was he going to get another opportunity like this? Plus, he had Leo to protect him.

“Well, Robin, obviously.”

“Obviously.” Saint nodded and fought back his laughter. “Are we talking original 1960s Robin, nipple-suit Robin, or...?”

“I’m about to undo your unfire,” King said. “Thanks for visiting. Goodbye.”

Saint laughed as he inched closer to Leo. “Who was I?”

“Aquaman. But like the cool new badass Aquaman, not the guy in the green tights who rode a white seahorse and talked to fish.”

“Thanks, man.” He glanced at King and wanted to laugh so hard. Moving his gaze to Leo, he put a hand to his heart. “I’m so glad you called. You just made my week.” His expression softened. “I’m happy you’re on the mend, Leo.”

“Thanks. Thank you for risking your life for me. I know why you felt bad. I would have felt awful if you’d been hurt or killed trying to protect me.”

“No sense in worrying about what didn’t happen, okay? You get better.”

Leo yawned and let his head rest on the pillow. “I’m sleepy.”

“Okay.” Saint went to the door, King joining him.

“I sincerely apologize for my behavior. I know better than anyone what this job is, and I never should have blamed you.”

Saint glanced at Leo, checking he was asleep. The poor guy was out. Saint turned his attention back to King. “It wasn’t your fault either. We’re all a bunch of stubborn asses, so I get wanting to blame yourself, but you’re no more at fault than I am.”

King nodded, but Saint was sure his friend and boss didn’t honestly believe that. Saint hoped Leo would be able to knock some sense into him.

“Thanks for coming by,” King said.

“Let me know if you need anything.” With that, he left the hospital and called Fitz. “Hey, you free to meet up?”

“Sure. There’s a cute little coffee and pastry shop downtown. You can buy me a Chai latte and a pain au chocolat.”

“You got it. Text me the address.” He hung up, and his phone pinged with the address. Sure enough, as Saint suspected, the coffee shop was a fancy little French place with lots of gold accents, mirrors, gilded signage, and expensive coffee.

Fitz was already inside, and he waved cheerfully from one of the booths at the back. Today’s ensemble was a trendy cropped denim jacket with sleeves rolled up to the elbows over a white V-neck T-shirt.

Saint slid into the booth. “How are you wearing a jacket? It’s like eighty degrees outside.”

“It’s like you don’t know me. I recommend le café viennois. It’s delicious.”

“Be right back.” Saint went to the counter and put in their order. He also ordered a chocolate croissant for himself because they looked so good. Then he carried their tray to the table and sat down. He sucked in some of the whipped cream on his coffee. “Damn, this *is* good.”

“Told you.” Fitz took a sip of his latte.

“Val and I had sex this morning.”

The coffee in Fitz’s mouth was now on Saint’s shirt.

“Oh my god.” Fitz grabbed several napkins and shoved them at Saint. “I would apologize, but I’m not sorry. Are you trying to kill me? Why would you say that while I’m drinking?”

“Sorry,” Saint muttered as he wiped his shirt. Good thing he was wearing a dark T-shirt.

Wiping his mouth with far more finesse than Saint possessed, Fitz comported himself. “Care to elaborate?”

Saint eyed him. “Like, details? Because I’m not comfortable with that.”

“No, not details,” Fitz hissed, his gaze narrowed at Saint. “I mean, care to elaborate on how it went? Like emotionally, where are you at right now?”

“Emotionally, I’m a hot mess right now. I ran out on him, Fitz. We had sex, and I ran out on him.” Saint groaned and dropped his head into his hands. “I can’t believe I did that to him.” He lifted his head and met Fitz’s sympathetic gaze. “Last night, I told him I was all in, I told him I wanted him, and when he gives me exactly what I ask for, I freak out and run away. I’m such an asshole.”

“Honey, you’re not an asshole. It wasn’t great, but I’m sure Val will understand.”

“I told him I loved him.”

Fitz leaned forward, eyes wide. “And?”

“And, he said he loved me too.”

An excited squeal escaped Fitz, and he did some kind of happy shimmy in his seat. Flipping his hair away from his face, he put a hand on his chest. “I knew it was meant to be. I’m so happy for you.”

“I’m happy for us too. Except for the whole me-running-out-after-sex thing.”

“Right. Do you think maybe having sex with him made it too real? Not that it wasn’t real enough before. You don’t need sex to have a meaningful relationship. What I mean is that maybe by having sex with him, it sank in that you were in a relationship with a man.”

“I thought that was it, but...I don’t know. It doesn’t quite feel right.” It made sense, but it also didn’t. Being with Val made him happy, excited. He was also comfortable and never hesitated when Val kissed him or touched him. With Val, his thoughts were never about what he was doing with a man. They were about Val and how he never wanted the amazing feeling to end. “Why am I such a mess?”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. Talk to Val. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“I know he will. He’s so good, and so patient, and just....” He sighed. “He’s so amazing. And I’m....” Old insecurities flooded back, and he frowned into his fancy coffee.

“What? What’s going through your head right now?” Fitz asked.

“What if I’m not enough for him? What if he thinks I’m not worth the trouble and leaves?”

Fitz sat up. “That’s it.”

“What’s it?”

“Oh, hon.” Fitz reached out and placed his hand on Saint’s. “You didn’t run out on Val because of the sex.”

“I didn’t?”

“No. Think about it. When were you last in love?”

Saint frowned. “With Alicia. My ex-wife.”

“You thought you’d found your happy ever after. And what happened? She left you. She fell in love with someone else. How did you feel after that?”

Saint arched an eyebrow. “Not great. I felt really shitty.”

“I mean, what ran through your head when she told you she was leaving you because she fell in love with someone else?”

Saint thought hard about that day and how it felt like his world was falling apart. He’d known their marriage wasn’t perfect and that his being away for extended periods of time had often been the source of their arguments. Still, when he returned home, the last thing he’d expected was a confession of an affair, followed by divorce papers.

Realization set in. “The thought that kept running through my head was that I hadn’t been enough. That I must not have been worth it.” A lump formed in his throat. “Holy shit, you’re right.”

The only time he’d ever been in love, he’d thought that was it for him. Then when his wife left him, he’d blamed himself. Because if he’d been enough, if he’d been worth it, she wouldn’t have fallen for someone else, right?

“I can see spending the rest of my life with Val. But I thought I had the same thing with Alicia and look how that turned out.”

“Val is not Alicia. Sometimes we have to lose something to make room for something even better. We might not know it then, and it hurts like hell, but we see the truth later. I thought my ex and I were going to get married. We’d been together ten years. And as painful as that experience was, I’m grateful because the Universe put Jack in my path, and Jack is a good man who loves me and wouldn’t change anything about me. When I moved, he saw how many clothes I had and told me to take the guest room closet. He

had no idea I would fill it with fluffy sweaters, but he didn't bat an eye. You know what he did?"

"What?" Saint asked, unable to help his smile.

"He reinforced the closet rod."

Saint chuckled. That sounded like Jack.

"Also, my ex hated dogs, and Jack *loves* dogs." Fitz narrowed his eyes. "Never trust a man who hates dogs."

Saint chuckled. "Duly noted. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Let me repay you."

Fitz waved a hand in dismissal. "Don't be silly. Besides, you already bought me a coffee and a tasty treat."

"How about some tea?" Saint arched an eyebrow, and Fitz gasped. He leaned in.

"Tell me everything."

"So, Leo had this dream...."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“What are you doing here?”

Great. Just what Val didn't need, his best friend growling at him. Val shot Frank a look but didn't answer. Before stating the obvious, he cleared the packaging from the new window he'd installed this morning. “I'm working.”

Frank was not impressed. “No shit. My question referred to what you're doing in a place that was a crime scene up until early this morning.”

“I'm not going to let that son of a bitch control my life,” Val growled. “I have a schedule to stay on top of if I'm going to get the tavern ready for opening night.”

“There is a killer on the loose. A killer who wants *you* dead.”

“And what, Frank?” Val straightened and threw his arms out. “I'm just supposed to hide in my house until the police get this asshole? The guy set off a bomb in a hotel filled with city officials, and they got nothing. You think they're going to find something now?”

“You're pissed.”

“Yes, I'm pissed! This fucker is hurting people I care about. We came so close to losing Leo, so close.” Val shook his head, still unable to believe what happened. Any one of them could have been hit and killed. The bullet that hit Leo had missed Saint by a hair. He'd already been hurt saving Val. What if this time he'd been killed?

“What's going on? You're pissed about the shooter, but this is different.” Frank leaned against the wall, his eyes narrowed. Something seemed to occur to him, and Val braced himself. “I'm guessing it had something to do with Saint.”

“Who says this has anything to do with Saint?” Val looked around. All things considered, the place didn’t look like it had been the scene of a drive-by shooting. That bastard was out there somewhere, no doubt waiting and regrouping.

“He’s not here,” Frank pointed out, snapping him out of his thoughts.

“And what? We’re attached at the hip now?”

Frank pushed away from the wall. “Wow. That bad, huh?”

“Fuck off.” Val grabbed some more packaging and stomped over to the growing trash pile. He chucked it on top and sighed. “Sorry. I’m being a dick.”

“You are. What happened?” Frank slid into one of the booths and grinned. He bounced and nodded his approval. “This is nice. Comfy. They did a great job.”

Val snorted. “They have a contract with you. Of course, they did a great job.”

“Okay, what’s going on.” Frank motioned to the seat across from him. “Come on.”

With a heavy sigh, Val slid into the booth. “I’m worried Saint is having second thoughts.”

“About?”

“Being in a relationship with me.”

“Wait a minute. You’re in a relationship? Since when? And why didn’t I know this?”

“Because it hasn’t even been twenty-four hours.”

“Ah, okay.” Frank sat back, and Val could tell that he was barely containing his smile. “So why do you think he’s having second thoughts?”

“Well, Dr. Frank, we had sex this morning. He freaked out, pretended he was okay, then left.”

Frank cringed and sat forward again. “Okay, I can see why you’d be worried. You think maybe he wasn’t ready for sex?”

“I don’t know,” Val sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “He said he was ready, that he was all in, and maybe I wanted to believe it so badly that I didn’t question him. In his defense, I told him to do whatever he had to before he left. That I’d be here, and I will be. I knew the risks.”

Frank hummed but didn’t respond.

“That’s it? That’s your sage advice?”

“Oh, you want my advice? Because normally, when I give you advice,

you make a face.”

Val glowered at him. “I do not.”

“You’re making it right now,” Frank said with a laugh. “It’s the ‘I know you’re right, but I’m too stubborn to listen to you’ face. I’m very familiar with it.”

Val would have argued, but Frank wasn’t wrong. “So, do you have advice for me or not?”

“My advice is to let him set the pace. You care about him, don’t you?”

“I love him.”

Frank blinked at him. “Well, holy shit! Stop the presses. Valentino Serrano has fallen in love.”

“You know, I think our friendship has run its course.”

“Never. You’re stuck with me for life. We’ll grow old, even grumpier, and we’ll have to take up golf because we’ll drive our husbands so nuts that they’ll kick us out of the house.”

Val laughed. “Husbands, huh?”

Frank shrugged. “Why not? We can even get one of those little golf carts, spruce it up, put a cooler with beers in the back.”

“You’ve been thinking about this way too much.”

“Maybe.” Frank sat back and threw an arm over the backrest. “Hey, I’m looking forward to those days. Where the only work I have to worry about comes from a honey-do list.”

“You realize you’re wealthy and can retire any time.”

“Yes. But I don’t have a project like you do.” He motioned around them. “This is going to be amazing. What the fuck am I going to do? Hang out here all day and bug the shit out of you?”

“Please don’t.”

“See?”

There were countless things Frank could do, but really what it came down to was that he didn’t want to do them without Joshua, and Val got that. What was the point of having all that money if he couldn’t share it with the man he loved?

“It’s fine,” Frank waved a hand. “I’ll figure it out. Maybe I’ll ask Joshua to marry me.”

Val almost choked on his spit. “What?”

The sly look Frank gave him made Val laugh.

“You’ve been thinking about it for a while, right?”

“Yep.”

Val stared at him. “Have you bought a ring?”

“I might have.”

“Holy shit! Do you know when you’re going to propose?” Val was so damned happy for Frank. His best friend had one hell of a rough youth, having been kicked out onto the streets when he was a teen by his homophobic parents. He was a good man who’d done so much to help others who’d been in the same situation he’d been in during his youth. Frank deserved to be loved, and Val was so grateful Joshua had found him.

“I’m still working on that, but soon.”

“Man, I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. Don’t worry. Things will work out. I can feel it,” Frank said, smiling wide when the door opened. “Well, that’s my cue.”

Val turned, his heart leaping to his throat when Saint stepped inside. He quickly slid out of the booth. Frank nodded at Saint in greeting and patted him on the shoulder as he walked by and out of the tavern, closing the door behind him.

“Hey,” Saint said quietly.

“Hey.”

“I dropped by the hospital this morning to see Leo. Fitz called. Leo had been asking for me.”

Val shoved his hands in his jeans pockets so he had something to do with them. “How is he?”

“On the mend.” Saint chuckled and shook his head. “He gave King hell for what happened at the hospital. You should have seen it. King apologized. Said I was never fired.”

“No shit, really?” Val couldn’t help his laugh. “I knew Leo was fearless.”

“That and King loves him so damned much. Speaking of love....” Saint met Val’s gaze. “I’m so sorry I ran out on you. That was a shitty thing to do.”

“Nothing to apologize for. I made you a promise. I told you I’d understand there would be moments when you might not be ready and that I’d be patient. I want you to feel like you can always come to me, talk to me.”

Saint nodded. “The thing is, I ran because I panicked.”

“Too much too soon?”

“No, actually, the sex was fucking amazing, and I’m looking forward to doing that again.” Saint’s cheeks went pink, and he licked his bottom lip. “Real soon.”

“Uh, okay. Not what I expected. Go on.”

Saint motioned over to the booth, and they both took a seat. “I panicked, and at first, I thought maybe it *was* the sex, you know, with a guy thing, but it wasn’t. I mean, the sex brought it all home. That I was in love with you, and you loved me, and that’s when it hit me. What if you decided I wasn’t enough for you?”

“What?” Now *that* Val had not been expecting.

“What if you decided I wasn’t worth it and found someone else?”

“Why would you think—Oh.” Val’s heart squeezed in his chest. He wanted to say so much, but Saint wasn’t finished, so Val listened intently.

“The only person I was ever in a committed relationship with, who I loved and thought would be my forever, left me. And for the longest time, I believed it was my fault, that I wasn’t enough. Wasn’t worth the wait.”

“And you thought it might be the same with me.” Val understood. Something that cut as deep as what Saint had gone through wasn’t something someone just walked away from unscathed. He’d been carrying around those feelings of inadequacy for years.

Saint shook his head. “I didn’t think you were the same, but it didn’t stop the fear from resurfacing and filling me with doubt.”

“And now?”

“Now I see that Alicia and I weren’t meant to have forever because the Universe had something different in mind for us, something better.”

“You believe that?” Val asked softly, reaching out to take Saint’s hand in his.

“I do.” Saint laced their fingers together on the table. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Saint released Val and sat back in his seat, mischief in his eyes. “See, your tavern is already providing therapeutic services.” He slid out of the booth. “Come on. I want to kiss you.”

Val didn’t have to be told twice. He slid out and pulled Saint into his arms, kissing him sweetly. Damn, he smelled so good. He tasted even better. Val couldn’t get enough of Saint, of the feel of Saint’s body against his. Which reminded him....

“You know, there’s a real desk in my office now. It’s very sturdy.”

Saint pulled back; his pupils dilated and a wicked gleam shone in his eye. “You sure? Maybe we should test it. Wouldn’t want it collapsing under the weight of all that paperwork.”

“You’re so right.” Val motioned to the bathroom first. “I don’t know what you were doing before you arrived, but you don’t want what’s on my hands right now touching certain sensitive areas.”

Val had been handling dirty boxes and needed clean hands for what he had planned for Saint. He’d barely let Saint dry his hands before he’d grabbed his arm and hauled him into his office, loving the sound of Saint’s laughter. He closed the door behind them and locked it in case any of their friends decided to drop by. The last thing he needed was their friends walking in on his boyfriend fucking him. Boyfriend. Val really liked the sound of that.

“There’s a box of condoms and some lube in the bottom drawer on the left.”

Saint winked at him. “Damn, Chief. I like your preparedness.” He walked to the drawer while Val unbuckled his belt. So he was a little eager. Who could blame him?

Unlike the last time Saint had been here, Val’s new desk was clear of precariously stacked paperwork. He shoved his pants and underwear down and leaned over the desk. Somewhere behind him, the small metal trashcan went rolling.

“Shit. Sorry!”

Val chuckled. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“Oh, so that’s how it’s going to be, huh?”

Val hummed. “My ass is getting cold. You plan on fucking me today, Sailor?”

Saint leaned over him to whisper in his ear. “Not only am I going to fuck you, Chief, but you’ll be feeling it for days.”

“Less talking, more pounding.”

Saint cursed under his breath, and Val chuckled. He heard the click of the lube cap opening, then the tear of the condom packet. When Saint’s finger slipped in between his cheeks, he jumped.

“Fuck, that’s cold.”

“Sorry, Chief,” Saint laughed.

“You’re not fucking sorry at all.”

“Nope.”

Val was about to remark when Saint slid his finger inside Val to the first knuckle. His words were gone, replaced by a slew of unintelligible sounds. Saint parted his cheeks, his finger expertly gliding in and out of Val. He crooked a finger, and Val jumped again. He let his forehead fall against the

desk's top and gripped the edges. Saint stretched him out until Val couldn't take it anymore.

"You need to fuck me now, Sailor, or I will come without you."

"We can't have that, can we?"

The tip of Saint's cock pressed against Val's hole, and he relaxed, wincing at the initial sharp pain that soon gave way to fullness. Val groaned.

"You might want to hold on to something, Chief."

Val grabbed the edge of the desk in front of him as Saint pulled out almost all the way, then plunged back in.

"Holy fuck!" Val gripped the desk so tight his knuckles were white. Saint meant what he'd said, and the sound of Saint's groin smacking against Val's ass filled the room as Saint fucked him hard and fast. He held on to Val's shoulder with one hand, the other gripping Val by his waist as he pulled Val back against him.

"You feel so good, Chief," Saint said through his panting breath, his fingers digging into Val's skin. "Fuck." He angled his hips, and Val cried out. "That's it, huh? The special spot." Saint pegged that sweet spot repeatedly, and Val was ready to come without laying a hand on himself.

"Saint."

Saint bent over him, his hips thrusting wildly until Val heard him cry out and felt the heat as Saint filled the condom. He carefully pulled out. Val needed to come badly, he was so damned hard. Turning, he almost swallowed his tongue when Saint dropped to his knees and sucked Val's cock into his mouth.

"Holy *fffuck!*" Val grabbed Saint's head, and it took everything he had not to thrust into Saint's mouth. He bit his bottom lip, his orgasm building inside him, ready to explode. Saint lifted his gaze to meet Val's, then moaned as he sucked harder, his hand wrapped around the base of Val's dick. "Saint, I'm going to come." He gave Saint the chance to stop, to let Val take over with his hand, but Saint sucked harder.

Val slid his fingers into Saint's hair, grabbing a fistful as his orgasm slammed into him, and he doubled over. A shiver went through him, his muscles tight as Saint swallowed every last drop. Holy hell. Val leaned back, letting go of Saint's hair and gripping the desk again to keep himself up.

Saint stood and stepped in between Val's legs. He wrapped his arms around Val and kissed him. Val moaned, tasting himself on Saint's tongue. When he pulled back, he cupped Saint's cheek.

“Seeing you on your knees with my cock in your mouth is the hottest thing I have *ever* seen.”

Saint hummed and kissed him again. “I don’t know. Seeing you come like that was pretty damned hot.”

They kissed until Val’s ass started hurting from leaning against his desk. “How about we go home, and I make you some dinner?” He brushed his lips over Saint’s. “And then maybe a little dessert after?” He waggled his eyebrows, and Saint laughed.

“I do *love* dessert.” Saint opened his mouth to say something else when his phone rang. While he answered, they both pulled up their pants.

“Hello?” Saint frowned. “Hi, Mrs. Alvarez. Really? Oh, man. I’m so sorry. Yeah. I’m not there, but I can head right over. Okay. Yep, I’ll let you know.” He hung up and sighed. “I gotta go.”

“Everything okay?”

“That was my neighbor downstairs. There’s water leaking from my apartment down to hers, and the landlord isn’t answering his phone.”

“Want me to go with you?”

“Nah, it’s fine. I needed to grab some more clothes anyway. That’s if you still want me hanging out with you at yours.”

Val pulled Saint against him and kissed him. He sounded so hopeful it was adorable. “Hm, do I want you in my house where I can feed you, hold you, kiss you, and do very naughty things to you...? What do you think?”

“You’re terrible, and I approve. I’ll be back soon. I can pick up some dinner on the way to yours.”

“Hey,” Val cupped Saint’s face. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Saint looked confused. “Okay?” Realization dawned, and he nodded, his smile reaching his eyes. “I am so very much okay. Promise.”

“Okay. See you in a bit.”

Saint kissed him, just a peck on the lips, and then he was off. This time he wasn’t rushing out in a panic. He was genuinely happy, and that made Val all but melt.

“I’m such a goner,” Val said as he returned to the boxes that needed to be broken down. He had some time before Saint returned, so he might as well get more work done. Then he’d head home. He was going to miss working with Saint like this. Val expected him to get called back to work any day now. And once the tavern opened, his schedule would be pretty hectic at first, but he was confident they’d work it out. He should make Saint a copy of his

house key.

Val stood there a moment as everything sank in. He ran a hand over his face. Holy shit. When he'd first met Saint, he might have wished for a relationship, but he never thought it possible. He certainly hadn't expected *Saint* to be the one to pursue *him*. It should have felt like things were moving too fast, but it didn't. Damn it, Frank had been right. When it worked, it worked.

Almost an hour later, he'd just about finished when his phone rang. Maybe Saint was on his way to pick up dinner. With a smile, Val removed his phone. He frowned at the "Unknown Caller" message on his screen. Maybe it was Ryden. Val needed to add him to his contacts list. He was shit at doing that. Then he'd end up scrolling a bunch of texts trying to find the person and number he was looking for when with the click of a button he could just add them to his contacts. Saint would tease the shit out of him if he knew.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Chief."

Val frowned at the familiar voice he hadn't heard in years, and for good reason. "Adrian?"

"So you haven't forgotten me."

How could he? After what Adrian had put him through? No. Val wouldn't forget him. Ever. Unfortunately.

"Why are you calling me?"

"Why? Thought I'd forget about you ruining my life?"

"Are you kidding me? *I* ruined *your* life? You accused me of sexual assault to get me fired! You took me to court and tried to get me sent to prison." What the hell? Val might not have forgotten Adrian, but he'd put the whole ordeal behind him. This had been years ago. Why the hell was Adrian harassing him now?

"You deserve to rot in jail, you son of a bitch."

"For being gay? Are you for fucking real? What the hell do you want, Adrian." Val hadn't heard from this asshole in years, and suddenly.... It struck him then, and Val froze. "Oh shit."

"There it is. You must be slowing down in your old age."

"Adrian, tell me you're not the one behind all this."

"You took everything from me. Now I'm going to do the same for you. See you soon, Chief."

“Wait! Adrian, what did you do? Adrian!”

Adrian hung up, and Val couldn't believe this was happening. That mess had happened so long ago. Val might have put it behind him, but obviously, Adrian hadn't. But why now? Shit, okay. Adrian was planning something, and considering what he'd already done, it could be anything. Val should call—His phone rang. It was Ryden. Val quickly picked up.

“Hey, is everything okay?” Val asked, his heart in his throat.

“Is Saint there with you? I've been trying to call him but can't reach him. Please tell me he's with you.”

“Ryden, what's going on? Saint's not here. His neighbor called him about a leak in his apartment.”

“Oh fuck.”

An icy shiver went up Val's spine. “Ryden, talk to me.”

“Saint's apartment building is on fire.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Forty-five minutes earlier.

Saint was flying high, and his heart was about to burst from his happiness. Man, he never thought he'd meet someone who made him feel like this. He turned up his music as he sang along at the top of his lungs and drummed his hands on the steering wheel. He was giddy and didn't even care.

Holy shit, he'd just sucked Val's dick.

How had he gone from denying his attraction to a man to getting on his knees for one? Then again, Val wasn't just any man. He was sexy as fuck, funny, sweet, and refreshingly honest. Saint didn't have to worry or wonder what Val was thinking because Val just told him. No secrets, no lies, no pretending, no *games*. Saint hated mind games. If Val was mad at him for something, he would say it.

Val also looked after him, which was nice. Saint never knew he needed that sometimes, to be taken care of, have someone looking out for his needs. And the sex....

When Val had turned around, his cock thick, the rosy tip leaking with precome...Saint had never wanted to taste something so badly in his life. He hadn't even stopped to think about it, just dropped to his knees and swallowed him. Admittedly, it had been a little strange at first. The feel, the taste, the unfamiliarity, but Val turned Saint on so completely that Saint was ready for round two a heartbeat later.

The more sounds Val made, the more he moaned, gasped, sucked in his breath, and panted, the more Saint wanted from him. He wanted to see Val's gorgeous naked body, muscles twitching and moving, as Val begged him for

more. The way his lips parted as he made those sinful sounds.

“Woah, easy there, stud.” Saint had to adjust himself and calm down. He was *not* going to see Mrs. Alvarez with a damned boner. His phone rang, and he hit the button on his steering wheel to answer. “Hey there, Marine.”

“Well, someone sounds chipper,” Ryden said, then gasped. “Ooh, did you diddle the fire chief?”

Saint barked out a laugh. “What? What does that even mean?”

“Oh, you know what it means, Sailor. Did you slide down his pole, or did he slide down yours?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“But there *was* pole sliding going on.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m wrong. So, everything is good between you two, then?”

“Yeah, it is. It’s more than good.” All he could think about was getting home to Val, jumping into bed, and having as much sex as possible.

“Hello? Earth to Saint.”

“What?”

Ryden broke into laughter. “Oh my god, you were thinking about sex, weren’t you? Hot, sweaty man sex.”

“Is this really happening?” Saint asked, shaking his head as he turned onto the road that led to his apartment building. “I mean, it feels like we were just at his retirement party, and I was still straight.”

“Oh, sweet summer child. You were never straight. You’re about as straight as a Slinky. You ever have one of those growing up?”

“I had several. Couldn’t keep them from getting tangled.”

“You were one of those kids who took their toys apart to see how they worked, weren’t you?”

“Guilty as charged. And I bet you were one of those kids who stuck firecrackers in their toys to see how high they could fly.”

Ryden laughed. “Oh shit! How did you know?”

“Lucky guess.”

“Anyway, I was calling because the word is you’ll be returning soon. Heard King talking to Mason. It looks like you’ll get to enjoy my glorious company in person.”

“I don’t know about ‘glorious,’ but sure. Let’s go with that.”

“Dick.”

Saint chuckled. "I'm glad King made me take some vacation time. Didn't even know I needed it."

"That's why he's King. I guess you can thank him for your new boyfriend. Oh shit, King Cupid strikes again!" Ryden laughed loudly. "This is amazing!"

"Please call him that to his face."

"Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, it ain't gonna fuckin' happen. I'll tell you that much."

Saint had to laugh. Hearing Ryden scream and take off running from King's office like a bat out of hell had been the funniest shit Saint had ever seen. Then he'd made the mistake of hiding behind Mason's desk, while Mason sat there. Seconds later, Ryden fell out from behind the desk. Well, more like he was pushed out.

"I gotta go," Saint said. "Picking some stuff up at my apartment and checking in on a possible leak."

"Cool. Talk to you later."

Saint hung up just as he pulled into the parking lot. He sighed. "Really?"

The damned streetlamp was out again. He'd lost count of the times the electric company had been out to repair it. Why wouldn't they replace the thing? It was older than dirt, the wood cracked, and full of holes everywhere, and every year, it leaned a little more to the right.

Shaking his head, he parked in his spot and turned the engine off. He'd call later. Getting out of his truck, he set the alarm and headed inside the building with a bit of a skip in his step. Maybe he'd swing by the shop that had those mint chocolate chip cookies Val loved so much. He took the stairs two at a time to his apartment while thinking about Val and how freaking sexy his man was. He stilled.

His man.

A dopey grin came onto his face as he hurried the rest of the way up. Good grief, he was like some lovesick teenager. With a shrug, he took his keys out and entered his apartment. The sound of running water got him moving.

"What the hell?" Saint's bathroom door was closed. He opened it, cursing as he stepped into about an inch of water. He hurried over to the tub and shut the water off. He never would have left the bathtub running or plugged up. Especially since he didn't use his tub, only the shower. What the hell was going in? "What a fucking mess." As the water drained from the tub, he went

into the small closet in the kitchen to grab the mop and bucket. He'd soak up as much as possible before throwing towels on the floor. The bedroom carpet just outside the door was soaked. His landlord was not going to be happy about this.

Saint walked back to the bathroom when his phone rang. It was probably Mrs. Alvarez to check in on him. He tapped the screen and held the phone to his ear.

“Hey, Mrs. Alvarez. I'm here, and the water's off. I'm so sorry, I didn't —”

“Hello, Saint.”

“Who is this?” Definitely *not* Mrs. Alvarez.

“This is the guy who's going to kill your boyfriend.”

Saint's blood turned to ice. It was *him*. “You stay the fuck away from Val. Do you hear me, you son of a bitch!”

“Valentino Serrano ruined my life, so I'm going to take his. But first, I'm going to let him watch you burn.”

“What?”

Saint's heart leaped in his throat when the call hung up. *Fuck*. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and something told him to get the fuck out of there *now*. Listening to his instincts, Saint took off, throwing open the apartment door and darting through it. He'd just made it out into the hall when an explosion rocked the building, sending Saint stumbling forward. He hit the floor and covered his head as heat and fire whooshed over him. Debris and burnt pieces of his belongings rained down, along with chunks of wall and ceiling.

Something landed next to him, and he lifted his head. One of Fitz's throw pillows was singed and on fire. Shaking his head, he quickly got moving, scrambling to his feet. The explosion might have been contained to his apartment, but who knew how many more bombs that psychopath had planted in the building? He had to get everyone to safety.

The shrilling sound of fire alarms filled the air, and to his relief, people were leaving their apartments with children, pets, and family members in tow. Saint went to each door on his floor, checking that everyone had vacated. He knocked loud and shouted to make sure he could be heard.

His apartment building was the smaller of two buildings, each with only three floors and not many apartments. When he'd first moved in, he made sure to introduce himself to everyone so he knew who lived where, and so

they knew who he was, so that in case of emergencies just like this, they'd be more open to listening to him.

Moving onto the second floor, he was glad to see the familiar faces of the tenants as they hurried toward the stairs.

"Everyone out! It's not safe," He ushered a couple toward the stairs and continued to check inside open doors, knocking hard on closed ones. It was just past seven in the evening, the sun had recently set, and many of the tenants in his building were retirees. Once the second floor was clear, he moved onto the ground floor. He helped Mr. Philips, an Army veteran from the Vietnam War who walked with a cane. "I got you, Mr. Philips."

The good news was that everyone was out. The bad news was that they were all hanging around right outside the building.

"Okay, we need to move away from the building," he said, motioning across the lot.

"Santos!" Mrs. Alvarez cried when she saw him. "¡Ay dios mío! ¿Que está pasando?"

"There's been an explosion, Mrs. Alvarez." He addressed the crowd of confused tenants again. "Everyone, there's been an explosion. The building is on fire. We need to move as far away from the building as possible."

That sure as hell got everyone moving.

Saint helped those with mobility issues and directed others to assist. They quickly got everyone across the lot near the apartment building across from them.

In the distance, Saint could hear fire engines and police vehicles approaching. Now that everyone was safe, it sank in. The fucker had blown up his apartment! And he assumed the intent had been for him to be in it. Now, more than ever, he was grateful that he'd listened to King when his boss had advised him to get a safety deposit box for all his important documents, including his passport. Everything else in his apartment was just things. Anything of sentimental value was at his mom's.

But he couldn't say the same about his poor neighbors. If the fire department didn't put the flames out, all these people would lose everything. This bastard had to be stopped. Another explosion went off, but this one was different. It was related to the fire. Wait. The fire was spreading fast. Way faster than normal. Fuck. That bastard had used an accelerant.

What could have happened between this guy and Val to make the guy commit murder? And why hadn't Val mentioned him? Or had he? Could it be

one of the firefighters who'd been fired back then? It made sense. He turned around and spotted a dark figure beside the burning building near the pond.

No way. That son of a bitch!

Had he waited around to make sure Saint had been caught in the explosion? To watch his handywork?

"Wait for the police," Saint told the others before he took off. Whoever the bastard was, he wouldn't wait for Saint to get to him. The moment Saint bolted in his direction, the guy darted off.

Saint broke into a full run, surprised that the guy was fast. Really fast. When the guy got to the fence behind the building, he jumped over it. Saint cursed under his breath and did the same. He landed on the grass on the other side and took off again. They sped down Clipper Street, weaving between houses and through people's backyards before the guy cut through someone's lawn to get to Schooner Court. Where the hell was he going?

It soon became clear. Saint knew the area well; although most of it was residential houses and apartment buildings, there were also businesses. The guy was heading toward the inn. Around the small inn were several small businesses, including a self-storage place, which meant lots of places for him to hide.

As Saint suspected, the guy disappeared into the shadows in the self-storage lot. Saint slowed down. He needed to be careful, especially since he was unarmed. Damn, his gun. Good thing his safe was fireproof. Though he wasn't sure how well it held up against explosions.

Some of the lampposts and lights were out, and Saint was sure that wasn't a coincidence. He slipped into the shadows, making his steps as light as he could as he moved. The guy was close. Saint could feel it. He couldn't underestimate his opponent. This man's grudge was so fierce he'd planted explosive devices and shot at innocent people. He had no problem with killing and couldn't care less who got in the way.

Saint considered turning location tracking on in his phone, but if he did, his phone would light up and tell this guy exactly where Saint was. Speaking of giving his position away, he reached into his pocket and flicked the button to silence his phone. It wasn't ideal, facing this guy without using his phone, but if the guy couldn't see him, Saint had a better chance of getting to him first.

I know you're there. Saint crouched between the fence and the self-storage facility's back wall. He listened intently, hearing sirens in the

distance, the traffic on A1A, and the usual sounds of frogs and crickets. Val had mentioned having several altercations, two of which had been with firefighters who'd lost their jobs. It made sense that one of them could be behind this, considering how quickly his apartment building had caught fire. What didn't make sense was how Jack hadn't found anything about this guy returning to Florida. There had to be more to this.

Saint moved closer to the end of the self-storage unit and peaked out. He could see the inn's parking lot from here, but there was no movement. Scanning the area, he saw nothing. Was the guy hiding, or had he run off? Saint had just rounded the corner when a bright light burst on, hitting him in the face and blinding him.

"Fuck!" He threw his left hand over his eyes and quickly stepped back, swinging when he felt someone near him. Blinking repeatedly didn't help. All he saw was white. So he closed his eyes and backed up, his fists in front of him, not that it would help if he was shot at.

Feeling someone moving in behind him, he whirled around and swung, satisfied when his fist connected with a body.

"You cocksucker!"

Well, guess it was obvious who'd sent those thugs after Val. Although his vision was bright and blurry, Saint could see movement and jumped out of the way when something came toward him.

"Okay, enough!" The guy shouted, and the distinct sound of a gun cocking had Saint going still. "Move, and I'll shoot you. Do you think I'm going to fight you?" He snorted. "Please. I know you were a SEAL. Now turn around. Or this time, I won't miss."

Smart. The guy stayed far enough away so Saint couldn't grab the gun.

"Turn around."

Saint turned, his hands up at his sides. His vision was starting to return to normal. "What now? Have you even thought this far ahead? I assume you were expecting me to die in my apartment."

"I didn't assume anything. Like I said, I knew you were a SEAL. Now move." He shoved the gun into Saint's back.

"I heard you," Saint growled. "Where exactly am I moving to?" He walked into the lot and paused again. This time when he stopped, he whirled around and grabbed the gun with his right, twisted it, and swung with his left. The guy went reeling back. It had been easy, which should have been his first warning.

Something sharp struck Saint in the arm, and he cursed, his hand automatically going to the source of the pain. He glared down at the object sticking out of him.

“What the fuck?”

Oh shit. He was suddenly nauseous and dizzy.

“You fucking shot me with a tranq gun?” Saint could hear his slurred words as the world around him spun. He aimed the gun in his hand, but suddenly multiple figures appeared before him. Had more men appeared, or was it his vision? Screw this. He fired and ran as best he could, forcing himself to push through the haze. It didn’t matter if he hit anything as he fired. He just needed a chance to get somewhere he could hide and maybe make a call.

A few feet away was a small parking garage, and next to it was a small shop. Saint dove behind the large tree surrounded by bushes and greenery. He remained perfectly still, the gun resting against his leg. Fuck, whatever they shot him with was determined to knock him out.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” someone whispered hoarsely.

“Shut the fuck up. You owe me. After what you did? I should have put a bullet in your fucking head.”

“This has gone too far.”

“Why the fuck didn’t he go down?” The man hissed at his friend.

“I don’t know. The guy was a Navy SEAL. Adrian, you have to stop. Please. Let my family go. They had nothing to do with this.”

So, whoever was working with the man—Adrian—wasn’t doing so willingly.

“Shut up,” Adrian snapped.

Saint was fading fast, but he couldn’t just sit here waiting for Adrian to find him. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and, despite his blurred vision, managed to unlock it. Thank goodness for facial recognition. Somehow he managed to get to his setting and turn his location tracking on. Returning his phone to his pocket, he did his best to stay awake, but his body was heavy, and darkness crept into his vision.

“There you are,” Adrian growled.

Saint tried to lift his arm but couldn’t manage it in time. Adrian grabbed the gun from his friend and shot Saint again. Saint couldn’t fight it this time, and as he slipped into unconsciousness, his last thought was of Val and how much he loved him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Please, pick up.”

Val lost count of how many times he'd called Saint, but it went to voicemail. Regardless he kept doing it, each time hoping that would be the call Saint picked up. In his gut, he knew Saint was in trouble, but he refused to believe worse. The man he loved was fucking smart and resilient. He'd been through so much and survived. Val wasn't going to lose him, not at the hands of that asshole.

Adrian Floyde.

Never in a million years would Val have thought one of his firefighters would go to such lengths to get rid of him. Adrian had never warmed up to him, but before Val had come out, he'd at least been respectful, taking orders and doing his job. Everything went to shit with him after Val came out, but he never would have thought the guy was capable of murder.

What Adrian had done back then had been bad enough, but something must have happened to send him over the edge like this. Val's phone, connected to the car's Bluetooth, rang, and he hit the answer button.

“Mason.”

“Dammit, Serrano. I've been calling your ass for the last twenty minutes!”

“Sorry, I've been trying to get a hold of Saint.”

“I'm guessing you've had no luck?”

“No. You know what's going on?”

“Ryden brought us up to speed. Me and the guys are almost there. Where are you?”

“About to turn onto 16th Street.”

“We’ll see you soon.”

Val hung up, his stomach feeling like it was full of lead at the sight of the black smoke filling the sky, a glow coming from Saint’s apartment building. He turned on Atlantis Circle and into the parking lot. It was filled with flashing lights from the various first responder vehicles. It was all hands on deck as they tried to put the fire out, but it would take at least another hour or two for a three-story apartment building of this size.

Quickly parking, Val jumped out of his SUV and cursed. Flames shot up into the night sky, and the entire top floor of the building was engulfed. Adrian had used an accelerant. There would be no saving the building. As he got closer, he saw a large group of people outside near the second apartment building, some talking to officers. They had to be the building’s residents.

Police tape had been set up across the lot, keeping pedestrians and neighbors from getting any closer. Val moved through the crowd that had gathered, most likely from the apartment building across the lot, along with neighboring homes. He excused himself as he pushed through, looking for Saint. Damn it. Saint wasn’t there, but then he hadn’t expected him to be. When he reached the police officer near the tape, he was thankful he recognized the man.

“Hey, Carter.”

“Hey, Chief. Sorry, I mean, Val. Still getting used to that.”

“I need to get through.”

Carter worried his bottom lip. “I don’t know. You’re a civilian now. I don’t think the new chief would—”

“Please, Carter. This is my boyfriend’s apartment building, and he’s not answering his phone.”

“Shit.” Carter hesitated but lifted the tape, and Val thanked him as he ducked under it. He spotted his former lieutenant and ran over.

“Martinez!”

Martinez flipped his visor up, his frown deep. “Chi—I mean, Val. What are you doing here? You shouldn’t be here. The building isn’t safe.”

“This is my boyfriend’s apartment building. Talk to me. Please.”

“We believe the fire was caused by an explosion in one of the apartments on the top floor. We have no idea if there are any more devices, but my guess is they would have gone off by now if there were. There was a second smaller explosion, but we don’t believe an incendiary device caused it. An accelerant was likely used from what the tenants described and how fast the

fire spread.”

Val ran a hand over his face. “Okay, um, my boyfriend. Have you seen him? He’s over six feet tall, brown hair, wearing a black T-shirt and gray cargo pants.”

“I haven’t seen him, but the building was cleared before we arrived. One of the tenants said her neighbor helped everyone out. Former military?”

“That’s him. Who did you speak to?”

Martinez turned and pointed into the crowd. “The lady with the white hair and gray shawl.”

“Thanks.” Val hurried over, stopping in front of the older woman. “Hi. I was told you saw Saint.”

She blinked at him.

“Santos?”

“Oh, yes! Such a good boy. He helped everyone get out of the building.”

Val had no doubt Saint had risked his life to get everyone to safety. He just hoped he’d managed to do the same for himself.

“Are you Mrs. Alvarez?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“After Santos helped us, he moved us here, away from the building. He said it was not safe. Then he told us to wait for the police and left.”

“Do you know where he went?”

She pointed to the side of the burning building. There was a small pond and lots of greenery, shrubs, and trees. He could just about make out a white fence at the back.

“Thank you.” He took off in the same direction Saint had gone in. If he’d run off and left his neighbors, it had to be because Adrian had been here. Had he stayed to admire his handy work? To make sure Saint had died? The bomb had most likely been placed in Saint’s apartment since it was on the third floor. Val had no idea how Saint knew or how he’d managed to get out when he did, but Val was extremely grateful.

As much as Val knew Saint could handle himself, Adrian was dangerous and unpredictable. Who knew what else he had planned? He’d put so many lives in danger, and for what?

When Val arrived at the fence, he frowned. Well, shit. He’d bet his tavern that Saint had jumped over. Val grabbed the top of the fence and one of the fence posts. He propped his foot on a horizontal slat and pulled himself up

with a groan.

“I’m too fucking old for this bullshit.”

“Hey there, Chief. Need help?”

Val blinked at Joker and Jack standing on the other side of the fence. What the...?

“You know the fence ends over there, right?” Joker pointed to Val’s right, and from his position at the top, he could see that, sure enough, the damned fence stopped because of some trees.

“Son of a bitch.” Val glared at Joker. “How long have you two assholes been standing there?” He finished climbing over the fence and jumped down, landing on the grass.

“Long enough to hear you questioning your life choices,” Jack replied with a big grin.

“Fuck you,” Val growled. “I’m not questioning my life choices, but I might be questioning my choice in friends.”

The pair of mischief-makers laughed when a shadow sped out from the trees, scaring the shit out of Val. That made Joker laugh even harder.

“Holy shit! You jumped so high I thought you were going to end up back on the other side of the fence.”

“Can’t you put reflectors or something on your demon dog?” Val asked, a hand over his heart. “Fucking hell.”

“If I did, then you’d see him coming.”

Chip was practically invisible. With his all-black fur and dark eyes, he almost vanished in the shadows. He sat perfectly still, his gaze on Joker. It looked like Chip was in work mode because he was waiting for orders. With Chip here, their chances of finding Saint faster had vastly improved. Chip was a bomb-sniffing dog, and Val would guess that either Saint or Adrian reeked of smoke and chemicals.

“Hey.”

Val turned at the familiar drawl, glad to see Mason. He wasn’t surprised Ace and Lucky were with him; he was surprised to see King. But then, after what Adrian had done, he should have known. The guys were dressed in all black. Black T-shirts with black tactical pants and boots. If they were armed, their weapons were concealed.

“What are we dealing with?” King asked, right to the point.

“His name is Adrian Floyde, and he was one of my pipemen.”

Jack shook his head. “That can’t be right. He was one of the guys I

looked into. He moved into his mother's house in South Carolina shortly after he was fired. He hasn't left the state since. There's a digital paper trail of him working at the local grocery store."

"Was there footage? Did you actually see him working at the store?" Mason asked.

Jack frowned. "The town is so small, the only building that has any surveillance is the bank, and it's nowhere near the grocery store. I checked his credit card statements and bank records. There were no charges made outside of his town."

"He could have paid cash," Ace said. "That's what I would do if I didn't want someone keeping tabs on me."

"I thought of that, so I called the store, and the manager said Adrian was in the back stocking shelves. Son of a bitch lied to me." Jack shook his head, frustrated.

"Don't beat yourself up. Adrian is smart. He's either been planning this for a while or thinking about it."

"Who is he?" Mason asked.

"He was behind the sexual assault charges several years ago. The big court case."

"I remember," Mason pitched in. "It was before I made detective. The case was dismissed after another firefighter submitted evidence showing the whole thing had been a set-up."

"Yeah. Pete wasn't a bad guy," Val said. "He let his best friend rope him into that mess, convincing him it was for the good of the firehouse, but in the end, Pete couldn't go through with it. The recording that was supposed to have incriminated me ended up showing the truth and getting the case dismissed."

"Recording?" Jack asked, confused.

Val sighed. "Yeah, Adrian thought if he came onto me that I would incriminate myself, Pete would get it on film, and I'd get fired. When I didn't take the bait, he accused me of sexually assaulting him. He pressed charges, convinced they'd take his word over mine. He'd thought the accusation alone would be enough to get me to step down, but I fought it, and Pete had a change of heart. The case was dismissed, the charges dropped, and Adrian got fired."

"Why?" Joker asked. "Wait, you said Adrian came onto you."

"He wasn't gay. Just disgusted that I was."

Jack stared at him. “This guy did all that just to get rid of you because you were gay?”

Joker threw an arm up. “The fuck? Unbelievable. If those assholes put in half as much effort into shit that matters, the world would be different.”

“Given,” King growled. “But that’s a conversation for another day. Jack checked the cameras in the area. A couple of doorbell cameras caught a guy dressed in a black hoodie running and, shortly after, another guy who was clearly Saint. There were no signs of any cars leaving the neighborhood, so they’re likely still in the area.”

Ace pointed to his left. “There are some businesses over there. That’s where I would start. If this guy is hiding somewhere, it won’t be in a residential neighborhood. None of these houses back here have fencing, so you can see straight into the backyards.”

Val agreed. “The problem is, if he’s hiding, then Saint is in trouble because if Saint lost him, he’d have called.”

“Let’s start looking,” King said. “Everyone, watch your sixes and keep in communication. Ace, you go with Lucky; you’ve got the hotel and surrounding businesses. Jack, you’re with Joker and Chip; you’ve got the resort and the buildings around that. Val, you’re with Mason. You take the inn and the buildings around it. If we don’t find anything, we’ll meet back here in an hour.”

“What about you?” Val asked King.

“I’m fine.”

Val and Mason exchanged glances. Mason’s lips were pressed together in a thin line, but he didn’t respond.

“Let’s go.” King took off and disappeared into the shadows.

“Is he going to be okay?” Val asked the guys.

“King?” Joker waved a hand. “Of course.”

Ace sighed. “No, he means is King going to be okay if he finds Adrian first.”

“Oh.” Joker wrinkled his nose. “That I don’t know. I suggest we find Adrian first.”

They all agreed though Val’s priority was Saint. He’d leave Adrian to the rest of the guys. Everyone agreed to stay in communication and meet back in an hour if they didn’t find anything. With that, they split up in pairs as King ordered. Val joined Mason as they hurried off toward the small inn.

The night was cool, with a slight breeze since they were near the beach. It

was still early evening, so local restaurants and tourist shops were pretty busy. They needed to make sure they kept a low profile. The last thing they needed was to get arrested or for some asshole to take matters into their own hands because *Welcome to Florida*.

“You okay to hop on over another fence?” Mason asked Val.

“Sure, why not. That’s what health insurance is for.”

Mason chuckled as they neared the fence between the hotel and the adjacent property.

“We can cut through the parking lot of the seafood place to the inn. Otherwise, we’ll have to climb a bunch more fences because walking down A1A is out of the question.” He laced his fingers together to hoist Val up. As soon as he was on the other side, he reached up to help Mason, but the cowboy didn’t need help. He dropped down with ease and grinned at Val. “Just like on the ranch back home,” Mason drawled.

“Of course it is,” Val said, amused.

They hurried through the parking lot of the seafood place. It was a weekday, so it wasn’t too busy. They walked through the lot casually, like they were taking a stroll, and keeping their faces turned away in case the restaurant had security cameras. When they reached the lot of the inn, they used the trees and the shadows to hide themselves as they made their way toward the back of the lot.

“You think he has Saint in a motel room?” Mason asked as they stopped across from the inn.

Val hated the thought of Adrian having Saint at all. But if he did, what was he doing with him? The only reason he would keep Saint would be to use him against Val, but he’d yet to receive any word from Adrian.

“I highly doubt it. It would mean getting caught on camera, and even if he got inside through the back, there’s no way Saint would have gone along quietly. My bet is he’s in one of the closed businesses. No witnesses, no one to get in the way.”

“Okay, but which one?”

That was the million-dollar question. Seeing as no one had yet to call, Val would guess none of the others had found anything. They kept to the shadows, listening for any indication that either Adrian or Saint might be nearby. There were over a dozen cars parked in the lot of the inn.

“Don’t worry,” Mason assured him. “If anyone can find him, it’s us and the guys.”

Val just hoped Saint was alive and well when they found him.

They swiftly headed for the end of the lot and were about to jump the fence when Val heard something. He threw a hand out to stop Mason.

“Did you hear that?”

Mason stilled and listened. “Did that...did that sound like glass breaking?”

“Sounded like someone using something to break glass, like a shirt or something.”

“They’re breaking into a building,” Mason said. “Shit, but which one?”

There were several small structures around them, businesses that looked like houses.

“It came from somewhere that way,” Val said, motioning to their left and the general vicinity. “What have we got over there?”

Mason climbed partway up the fence and peeked over. “Looks like some storage units and a few other small buildings. I can’t see what’s over to the right.”

“Okay. Let’s do this.”

They climbed over the fence, landing behind one of the self-storage structures across from what looked like a house and, most likely, the main office area for the self-storage place. The two units behind them had closed doors secured with locks.

“I don’t see any cameras,” Mason said. “But just in case.” He removed a thin black box from his pocket.

“What’s that?” Val asked. The Kings always had the most fascinating gadgets.

“Signal scrambler. Let’s go.”

Val hurried after Mason, running toward the storage units. There weren’t many, which made it more accessible. There was the one they’d landed behind and five more buildings with units on both sides. They started with the row containing three sections. All the doors were padlocked from the outside, meaning Adrian and Saint weren’t in them.

They quickly moved to the other side of the same three structures, again all the doors were padlocked. Once they were done, they checked the back two—same thing. Everything was locked and secured. Val motioned ahead to a larger double unit, and they hurried over. Both doors were locked.

Mason gestured to Val, and they ran behind the main building, shrouded in shadows with a large tree and plenty of greenery. Carefully, Val looked

through one of the windows. The place looked empty, all the lights were turned off, and the blinds were drawn in most of the windows. They listened but didn't hear anything and saw no movement inside.

"Damn it." Val shook his head. "Nothing."

They continued to move forward, stopping when they got to the small fence behind the self-storage office. On the other side was a dirt lot with junk lined across the fence. It looked like pieces of broken furniture, stuffing, springs, and discarded materials.

"It looks like the back of a furniture repair shop or maybe an upholstery business," Val said. The place was dark, the awning at the back casting a long, dark shadow. They edged along the fence, crouched low in case someone hid in the darkness. Val had no idea why, but he got the feeling that maybe they'd found what they were looking for. "I think they're in there."

"You sure?" Mason asked as they drew close to the opening in the fence.

"No, but my gut tells me this might be the place."

"Okay. I'll notify the guys."

Val nodded. His pulse raced, and he itched to charge into the damned building, but he knew better. If Saint was in there, they had to do this right. The last thing they needed was for Adrian to feel trapped.

Hold on, Sweetheart. Just hold on.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Why did he feel like crap?

Saint groaned, his stomach rolling. Ugh, his head was fuzzy, and he felt like he wanted to throw up. He knew this feeling and hated it. Breathing in deeply through his nose and releasing it through his mouth a few times helped ease some of the nausea. He tried to move his arms but couldn't.

"What the...?" Damn. His arms were behind him and tied with some kind of...was it wax? It was some kind of wax thread. He tested its strength and frowned. Not impossible. Where the hell was he?

Everything came flooding back. Adrian. He and his friend had shot Saint with a damned tranq gun. They must have dragged him in here and tied him up. Wait, was he sitting in an office chair? Yep, he was. The brakes were on, but the thing had wheels. Not Adrian's smartest move, but then all the other chairs in the place were armless office chairs, so not much of a choice. Something told him Adrian hadn't thought this far ahead.

Saint discreetly took in his surroundings. It was dark, but there was enough moonlight coming in through the windows that he could see pretty clearly. Wherever they were, it was pretty spacious, with sewing machines and several long wooden tables containing giant rolls of fabric underneath. There were rolls of fabric and materials everywhere.

Two of the walls were lined with metal racks containing more rolls of fabric, and multiple stacks of chairs and cushions. Pieces of furniture were also strewn about the place, along with stuffing, measuring tapes, and bottles of chemicals. Tabletops were covered with all kinds of tools, from hammers and staple guns to scissors and pliers. Upholstery. It was some kind of furniture upholstery factory.

At the far end of the room, Saint spotted Adrian and Pete. They were arguing quietly. It was obvious Pete was still trying to get through to Adrian, and Adrian just didn't give a fuck. Poor Pete. The guy was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Adrian had Pete's family somewhere. Had he kidnapped them? Or did he have someone working for him? Maybe Saint could get some information from Pete somehow.

"I told you to shut up," Adrian snarled loudly. "If you try anything stupid, I swear Brianna and Theo are next."

"Listen to yourself! You *know* them, have known them for years. Our kids used to play together! How can you do this?"

"One more word about it, Pete, and I'm calling my associate. Do you want that? You want him to put a bullet in your wife's head?"

"No," Pete replied through his teeth.

"Good. Then do as you're told. Now, come on."

Saint closed his eyes and hung his head as their footsteps grew closer. He had to figure a way out of this or at least buy himself some time. His thoughts went to Val. By now, Val was probably worried as hell. Knowing him and the guys, they had to know about Saint's apartment, which meant Val, and maybe some of the Kings were nearby, so yeah, he just needed to buy himself some time. He had faith in the man he loved and their friends. If he could get his hands on any of the tools on that table, he'd be set.

"Now what? What are you going to do with him?" Pete asked.

"I'm going to use him to get Serrano."

"And how are you going to do that? Call him up and say, 'Hey, I have your boyfriend. Walk through the door so I can shoot you.'"

"I don't need any of your lip."

Someone kicked Saint's boot.

"I know you're awake."

Saint opened his eyes, lifting his gaze without raising his head. Pete took a quick step back, but Adrian just scoffed.

"What are you gonna do, tough guy? You're tied to a chair." He waved the gun. "And I'm the only one here with a gun."

Not for long. "Your pal, Pete, has a point. Do you really think Val's just gonna walk through that door? Whatever he did, it can't be worth killing for."

The indignant fury in Adrian's gaze said he disagreed. "He set all of this in motion. If he'd just gone along with it, everything would have turned out great. For me, at least. He'd be in jail where he belongs."

“Gone along with what?” Saint asked, looking from Adrian to Pete and back. “Am I supposed to know what you’re talking about?”

Adrian’s laugh sounded a bit unhinged. “Of course not. He didn’t tell you, did he? That’s because he’s a liar and fraud, and no one had the balls to do anything about it. My plan was perfect. The guys were all out on call, leaving me, Pete, and Serrano. I knew exactly what I had to do, so I cornered him in the locker room. He was supposed to take the bait so Pete could get it all on video. I’d accuse Serrano of sexual harassment, he’d be disgraced and go to jail. No more gay fire chief.”

Saint stared at him. What the...? Was this guy for real? “Hold on. I want to make sure I’ve got this right. Val comes out as gay, and you’re so enraged by this that you decide you’re going to set a trap. You come on to Val, thinking—because he’s gay—he’ll obviously try to have sex with you right then and there. You have your pal hide, recording everything. Things don’t go your way, and Val doesn’t fall for it, making your video evidence useless. Am I getting this right?”

“Which meant I had to improvise. He wasn’t going to get away with it, so I called the police and told them I wanted to press charges, that I was assaulted. It was his word against mine. I gave him a chance to step down, and he refused. So, I moved forward with the charges. No matter what happened in court, he’d have to step down. The city wasn’t going to allow a fire chief who’d been accused of sexual assault to stay.”

“So you accuse him, it goes to trial because Val didn’t do it, and he’s a fighter. Obviously, things didn’t work out quite the way you wanted because you got fired instead.”

“Because this spineless son of a bitch,” Adrian growled, waving his gun at Pete, “grew a fucking conscience, testifies in court that it was all a ploy set up by me, and presents the video he recorded.”

“Which is evidence that it was all a setup. The charges are dropped, an apology is issued to Val, and the city sweeps everything under the rug because, yikes, who wants to be on the news for setting up a gay fire chief and trying to send him to prison for a crime he didn’t commit? Talk about bad publicity. So, naturally, you’re fired. I think that sums it up, right?” Saint had heard of people doing some outrageous things, but wow. His heart hurt for Val and all the bullshit he’d been forced to put up with at the time.

“That was just the beginning.”

Oh, yay, there was more. Saint let his head fall back. “Ugh, just kill me

now.” He dropped his head forward. “Look, whatever happened, you obviously need help. You can’t go around killing people because *you* fucked up your life. Own up to it, man. You planted a *bomb* because you didn’t get your way. Who does that?”

“Don’t you belittle my pain! It’s more than that. Serrano’s the reason I lost everything! After that mess in court, I got fired. Rumors spread among the men I’d worked side by side with, brothers.” He glared at Pete accusingly. “They joked that I was probably gay too and that I was just pissed that Serrano turned me down.”

“And...were they right?” Saint asked, curious.

“Fuck you! Those rumors got back to my wife. Our marriage was already struggling. She was just looking for an excuse to leave me, and she did. She took my kids.”

“I’m sorry, man, but you can’t blame Val for your marriage falling apart.” Considering what he’d been willing to do to get Val fired, including risking his career, Saint wasn’t surprised the guy’s marriage hadn’t made it.

“No, but I can blame him for their deaths,” Adrian spat, eyes glassy and filled with rage.

“What?” Saint gaped at him and then looked at Pete, who nodded, his gaze dropping to his shoes.

“They were killed on the way to my mother-in-law’s house. Truck driver fell asleep at the wheel.”

“I’m sorry.” And Saint meant it. No matter what Adrian had done, his family didn’t deserve what had happened to them. “I really am sorry. But you can’t blame Val for that.”

“The fuck I can’t.”

Saint let out a heavy sigh. Nothing was going to change Adrian’s mind. He’d been through a huge loss, and it was easier to blame a man he hated than himself. “Why now? That was years ago.”

“Last month was the anniversary of the night my family died. Every year, I come down to visit their graves. I was in my shitty little motel room ready to drink myself into oblivion like I always do when the news comes on. They were going on and on about the big send-off they were going to give the fire chief after all his years of brave service. I lose everything, and that son of bitch gets to fucking retire with a pension and a fancy party to celebrate?” Adrian started to pace nervously. “Then I find out he’s going to open a local tavern, has a boyfriend, and a whole goddamn family of friends.” He shook

his head. “No. No fucking way. He doesn’t get to have it all while I have *nothing!*”

“Adrian,” Saint pleaded gently. “You have to stop this. Innocent people are getting hurt.”

“I’ll stop when he’s dead.” Adrian continued to pace, moving farther away from Saint. He grew more agitated by the minute.

Saint glanced over at Pete, who was watching him closely, fear in his eyes. He checked to make sure Adrian wasn’t looking their way, and he quickly nodded to the table. *Do the right thing, Pete.* All Saint needed was just one of those tools on there, any one of them.

“Let’s say you get away with it, and you kill Val, most likely me as well. You’ve murdered two people. What then? What about your friend Pete?”

Adrian frowned. “What about him?”

“You’ve taken his family hostage.”

Adrian hadn’t thought about that either. He waved the gun and shook his head as he paced some more. “It’ll be fine. I’ve been waiting too long for this. That bastard isn’t going to win this time. No. Nope.”

Pete grabbed something off the table and shoved it in his pocket just before Adrian whirled to face him.

“You wouldn’t make the same mistake twice, would you, Pete? You’re not going to betray me, are you?”

Pete shook his head, feigning sympathy. “Of course not, man. I mean, that would only implicate me, wouldn’t it?” He walked around Saint’s chair and slapped his hands on Saint’s shoulders. “But that means no witnesses. If I’m going to help you do this, I don’t want any of it coming back on me.”

Adrian nodded. “Exactly. Now you’re getting it, Pete.” He paused and narrowed his gaze at his friend. “Why the sudden change of heart?”

“Not so much as a change of heart as accepting the facts. What will it do me to refuse? I could end up dead, and then what? I have to think of Briana and Theo.” Pete dropped one hand, and a pair of wire cutters touched Saint’s palm. He closed his fingers over it, and Pete patted his shoulder. “I’m sure our friend here understands. There’s just no other way.”

It took some uncomfortable and awkward maneuvering, but Saint managed to start cutting the wax thread. As he did, a faint sound caught his ear. What was that? It definitely hadn’t been there before. Was that...static?

Adrian stilled. “What is that?”

“What?” Pete asked, walking around Saint.

“Don’t you hear that?” Adrian slowly walked around, listening. “It sounds like...radio static.”

Saint listened intently. Adrian was right. There was radio static coming from somewhere. A blue glow appeared across the room, and they all turned their attention to what looked like a small black digital radio sitting on one of the workstations.

“The fuck?” Adrian headed toward the radio, and it started beeping.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

It stopped.

“What the fuck?” Adrian bent over to peer at the radio. He very cautiously poked it, then picked it up, his frown deep as he inspected it.

“Maybe it’s on a timer or something,” Pete said. “Or like an alarm that was set by mistake.”

Beep.

Pause.

Beep. Long Beep. Beep.

Pause.

Beep.

Well, I’ll be damned. Saint was so happy he wanted to throw his arms up and shout, but obviously, he didn’t. Fucking Jack. Okay, he had to hand it to the guy. That was damned smart. How he did it, Saint had no idea, but he did it. Could digital radios be hacked? Guess so, seeing as how Jack was sending Morse code through one. The beeping started again.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. H.

Beep. E.

Beep. Long Beep. Beep. R.

Beep. E.

Here.

Saint had never been so happy over one word.

“The batteries are probably dying,” Pete said, and Adrian pressed buttons until it shut off. Didn’t matter. Saint had gotten the message loud and clear. He’d also finished cutting through the restraints. He took a quick look around him.

“I don’t think you’re going to get what you want today either,” Saint said, his eyes never leaving Adrian as he slowly inched his chair back. He stopped when Adrian started to turn his way.

“What are you talking about?”

“See, when you shot up Val’s tavern, you had no idea who you were shooting at.”

Adrian shrugged. “Your point?”

“My point is that you shot one of our friends. And our friend, well, his boyfriend is a former Special Forces Green Beret. Now, those snake eaters are a hardcore bunch. Not as badass as us SEALs, of course, but still pretty hardcore. A few of them are a little off the rails, but they’re good guys. Always handy to have around.”

“Am I supposed to be scared?”

“Yes. Yes, you should be. Because the man you pissed off?” Saint cringed. “Oof. He isn’t the kind of guy you want to piss off.”

A red dot from a laser sight appeared on Adrian’s chest over his heart.

“I would suggest you put the gun down, Adrian.” As scary as the guys were, he knew this was a scare tactic because if any of the Kings wanted Adrian dead, he’d have been on the floor in a pool of blood by now. Now King on the other hand, Saint wasn’t so sure about. Adrian had almost killed Leo. There had been rumors about King hunting down a guy who’d hurt Laz and making him pay, so....

Four more lasers joined the first, all converging to make one large red dot on Adrian’s chest. The guy dropped his gaze and cursed.

“Looks like the gang’s all here,” Saint said, grinning wide. “Just put down the gun, Adrian, and you can walk away from this unscathed.”

Adrian lifted his gaze, and at that moment, Saint knew surrendering wasn’t in the cards. *Fuck*. Why did they always have to do things the hard way? Saint dove out of his chair just as Adrian fired and dropped to the floor. Pete smartly ducked behind one of the tables, while Saint scrambled behind another.

“You come in here, and I’ll kill him,” Adrian bellowed, firing a shot into the ceiling.

Silence followed.

Taking Adrian in alive might not be an option, though he knew the guys would give it their best. Saint slowly got into a crouched position and started moving. He couldn’t see through to the other side because of all the damned rolls of fabric. Listening, he tried to figure out where Adrian was. No one had run for the door, so everyone was still inside. Saint had to do something because the guys were going to make a move soon, and Saint didn’t want anyone getting shot.

A window shattered somewhere, and Saint looked up in time to see a black torpedo fly through the window. Make that a furry black torpedo.

“What the fuck was that?” Adrian spat. “Where did it go?”

Since there was no screaming yet, Saint would guess that Chip was hiding. Or hunting. Saint had just about made it to the end of the table when Chip popped out from under it, scaring the ever-loving shit out of him. He put a hand to his chest, thankful his spirit hadn't left his body. As much as Saint wanted to glare at Chip, it was hard to do with that cute face and huge ears.

Why was it suddenly so quiet out there? Adrian was up to something, and that could only mean bad things for him and Pete.

Chip crawled the rest of the way out, stood, and poked Saint in the chest with his pointy snoot. What the hell? Chip turned, and Saint scratched him behind the ear, whispering, “Good boy.” He pulled the Glock from the holster Velcroed to Chip's tactical vest and quietly took the safety off.

Time to get moving.

Saint hoped Chip knew what to do because Saint was a little rusty on his German commands. Taking a deep, steady breath, Saint readied himself. And then he caught the scent of smoke.

Are you kidding me?

That's what Adrian had been up to. He was setting the whole fucking place on fire, and considering all the harsh chemicals in here, this place could blow any minute. Saint pulled out his phone and sent a quick text to Joker. This was bad, very bad.

Recall your dog and get everyone away from the building. Now!

Saint readied himself, and when Joker shouted in German, Saint jumped to his feet, shooting Adrian in the shoulder as Chip leaped from table to table toward the window he'd come in through. Adrian's shot went wide, preventing him from shooting Chip as Saint suspected the asshole would try to do. He ducked, a shot ringing out over his head.

“Give up, Adrian. This isn't going to end well for you,” Saint said, getting ready to make his next move.

“You're right. It's not going to end well for me, but at least I'll take you with me. Stand up, or Pete gets a bullet in the head.”

Pete made a whimpering noise, and Saint cursed under his breath. Damn it, why hadn't Pete stayed hidden?

Something popped at the end of the factory, and Saint had a decision to

make. If he didn't make his move, none of them were going to make it out of there.

"Stand up!"

Saint slowly stood and put his arms up, gun in hand. "Just let him go, Adrian. I'm the one you want dead, remember? Leave Pete out of this."

"If I can't kill Serrano, at least I know he'll suffer at having lost you."

Everything happened in a heartbeat.

Instead of pulling the trigger, Adrian's head snapped back, a hole appearing in his forehead. His body seemed to float before he crumbled to the ground. Saint spun around to find King standing there, still as a statue, gun in hand. It seemed like time had stopped until King met his gaze.

"Grab Pete. We need to get out of here."

Saint nodded. He put the safety back on his Glock and tucked it into the back of his waistband. Jumping over the table, he hurried to grab Pete, who sat on the floor staring at Adrian's lifeless body.

"Come on, Pete," Saint said, grabbing his arm and pulling him up. He was about to ask King about Adrian's body when another explosion sent a huge iron shelving unit falling forward, blocking their path from Adrian.

"Let's go, Sailor. Move," King ordered, and Saint hurried after him as they ran toward the front entrance of the factory. Bottles of chemicals exploded behind them as they ran. Even once they were outside, they didn't stop running, and it was a good thing they hadn't. A blast knocked them off their feet, and Saint landed hard on the grass several feet away. He rolled, then curled himself into a ball, shielding his head as debris and pieces of the building rained down around them.

When it seemed to have stopped, he heard someone call his name in the distance. Moving his arms and opening his eyes, he saw Val running. Saint pushed himself to his feet, opening his arms in time for Val to run into them.

"You're okay," Val murmured against Saint's hair as he hugged him close. He pulled back and cupped Saint's face. "You are okay, right?"

Saint nodded. "I am now." His heart swelled at the love in Val's eyes and the beautiful smile on his face.

"I'm so sorry," Val said, letting his brow rest against Saint's.

"No." Saint lifted Val's chin so their eyes could meet. "There's been enough blame going on. You're not responsible for the choices he made."

"You're right. I'm so happy you're okay." Val kissed him, and relief swept through Saint's body.

It was finally over.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

All Val wanted to do was get Saint home, but they couldn't leave the crime scene. The owners of the upholstery factory had been notified of the fire when the fire truck arrived, and the crew got to work putting out the fire. Officers questioned them, taking their statements and confirming details. They were lucky Mason still had some connections at the police department from his former detective days.

Thankfully, Pete had witnessed everything, and his story matched up with the information the officers had gathered from Saint and the rest of them. The first thing Pete told the police about what the man Adrian had hired to take his family hostage, and the police called it in immediately.

SWAT officers arrived at Pete's house to find a man holding Pete's wife and son at gunpoint. Poor Pete was beside himself, pacing while SWAT tried to de-escalate the situation and get his family out safely. An hour later, they were informed the gunman was in custody and had confessed to being hired by Adrian Floyde.

Saint refused to press charges against Pete, and the police let Pete go home to his family. While the police wrapped things up, Val stood to one side with Saint, who'd told him everything that happened inside the factory.

"The guys didn't say it," Val said quietly, "but I could tell they were worried. When you told Joker to get everyone away from the building, we did, and when we turned around, we realized King was missing."

"I have no idea how or when he got inside," Saint said, frown deep. "But he got there just in time. Took Adrian out with one shot."

Val cocked his head to one side in thought. "Do you think he could have taken Adrian alive?"

Saint met his gaze but didn't reply, which was answer enough. As far as the police were concerned, Adrian had taken hostages, and King had the shot, so he took it, saving both Pete and Saint. Pete confirmed that if King hadn't taken Adrian down, he would most likely have died in that explosion along with Saint. The kill was justified.

Would King still have taken Adrian out if he hadn't taken Pete hostage? Guess they would never know.

Several hours later, they were all free to go home, and Val couldn't be more relieved.

"I can't believe it's over," Val said as he walked with Saint and the others to the parking lot where they'd left their vehicles. The fire department was still there, but the fire had been put out. He tried not to think about how Saint had been in there. Val stopped and turned to face their friends. "Thank you for everything. I hate to think how all this might have turned out without you all."

Ace patted Saint's shoulder, his smile warm. "Of course. You and Saint are family." He looked at King, who nodded, his expression grim.

"That's right. And we take care of family," King said.

Val was grateful and lucky he was considered a part of this nutty yet wonderful family. He could tell Saint was moved by King's words, and Saint smiled wide when King stretched out a hand. Saint took it, and King pulled him into a fierce embrace, patting his back before letting him go.

"What are you going to tell Leo?" Saint asked quietly. "You know he's going to want to know."

King's lips quirked in the corners. "The truth. You know he won't accept anything else."

"And he's going to be okay with that?" Val asked, concerned. Leo wasn't a soldier. He had a very different way of looking at things.

"Leo understands difficult choices," King replied. "He's had to make some himself. He might not like it, but he'll understand it. And he'll be happy that you two are no longer in danger."

Val couldn't disagree. They reached the parking lot and parted ways, Saint opting to go with Val in his SUV. They'd pick his truck up tomorrow. Everything felt surreal. Even as he drove them home, Val couldn't believe everything they'd been through tonight.

Neither of them spoke on the ride home, each one lost in his own thoughts. When Val pulled into the garage, he turned off the engine and just

sat there.

“Hey,” Saint said softly and covered Val’s hand with his. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” Val admitted. “I almost lost you. *Twice* in one night.”

“But you didn’t. Remember, no what-ifs.”

Val chuckled. “I remember. Come on. Let’s go inside. It’s been a long night.” He locked the car and closed the garage door on their way inside the house. It was so good to be home.

“I need a shower,” Saint said as he walked into the hall. He turned and waggled his eyebrows. “Yours or mine?”

“Mine.” Val’s reply was so quick that it made Saint laugh. They started undressing on the way to the bedroom, dropping their clothes into the hamper. Val would have preferred to burn them in the hopes of forgetting tonight and how close he’d come to losing Saint.

Shower running and both of them naked, they got in, and unlike other times, neither jumped into initiating sex. They didn’t say a word at first, but they didn’t have to. Val had a feeling they were both on the same page. Tonight could have ended so differently.

“I’m here,” Saint said quietly as he lathered up Val, his soapy hands slowly running up Val’s arms, then over to his pecs and down his chest. They took the time to caress each other, to let it all sink in. It was okay, they were safe, and they were together. Once they’d finished showering and dried off, they headed into the bedroom.

Before they climbed into bed, Saint took hold of Val’s hand and turned him around. He smiled sweetly and brushed his lips over Val’s.

“You know, I get tested at work quarterly and just had one done recently. I can bring the results up on my phone.”

Val blinked at him. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying? Because I can bring up my results in a heartbeat.”

“No condoms, then?”

“No condoms.” Val kissed Saint, moving him toward the bed until the back of Saint’s legs hit the mattress. He dropped down onto it with a chuckle, and the look he gave Val was sinful.

“Ooh, that look means I’m going to like whatever comes next.” Val knelt on the mattress between Saint’s open legs and leaned in for a kiss.

“I want to try,” Saint said, and Val pulled back, noticing the flush on Saint’s face. What was he talking about?

“Try what?” It took Val longer than it should have for him to realize what Saint was asking. “Are you sure?”

Saint nodded and slipped his hand around Val’s neck, tugging him close for a kiss. It was slow, sweet, and Val could have stayed there all night just kissing, but Saint had other ideas. He stopped kissing Val and motioned toward the nightstand.

“Let’s go, Chief.”

With a playful growl and a kiss to Saint’s lips, Val got up and grabbed the lube from the nightstand, turning and almost coming right then and there at the sight of Saint on his back, his knees drawn up as he slowly jerked himself off.

Val groaned. “You started without me.”

“Better hurry up then,” Saint teased.

This guy. Val shook his head and jumped onto the bed, making Saint laugh. He crawled over Saint, between his knees, and kissed him, their tongues tangling as their kisses grew heated. All of Val’s emotions over tonight poured through him as he kissed Saint. He moved his lips to Saint’s neck, loving the sound of Saint’s panting breath.

Saint thrust his hips up, his erection trapped between them. He let out a moan as Val nipped at his skin and then trailed kisses down his neck to his collarbone. He made his way down Saint’s body, stopping at his nipple where he sucked it in between his teeth, loving the way Saint sucked in a sharp breath.

Val continued his sweet torture, caressing Saint’s body while licking, sucking, and nipping at first one nipple, then the other. Saint threw his head back, his fingers grabbing fistfuls of the sheets.

“Val...”

“Not yet,” Val said as he kissed his way down Saint’s torso. He was going to make sure Saint knew he was loved and cherished. He licked a stripe up the crease between Saint’s groin and his leg, smiling when Saint cursed under his breath. Before Saint could say whatever he’d been about to say, Val swallowed Saint’s cock.

“Holy fuck!” Saint looked down at Val and groaned. “Fuck that’s so hot.”

Val replied by sucking harder, chuckling around Saint’s erection when Saint dropped his head back onto the bed. Everything about Saint was beautiful, every curved muscle, every scar, every inch of tanned skin. Val couldn’t get enough of him.

Placing some lube on his finger, Val kept his gaze on Saint when he pressed the tip to Saint's hole. Saint jumped, his knees instinctively tightening around Val.

"Keep going," Saint pleaded, and Val did as he asked, slowly pushing his finger against Saint's hole until he'd breached the tight ring. He continued to suck Saint, his erection having softened slightly. Saint nodded, and Val pushed his finger in. He slowly moved it in and out so Saint could get used to the feeling a little, then he pushed in and crooked his finger.

Saint cried out, and he punched his hips up. Confident that Saint wasn't uncomfortable, Val added a second finger and slowly fucked Saint's ass. The noises Saint made spurred Val on, and he was already leaking precome, knowing he would soon be inside Saint.

It took some time and gentle coaxing, but soon Val had managed to stretch Saint enough. He took more time than he normally would, even with Saint writhing beneath him and begging him for more. He didn't want to overwhelm Saint; wanted to make it as good for him as possible. When Saint looked as if he might come apart, Val popped off him and lined the tip of his cock up with Saint's hole.

"Put your hands behind your knees and pull them to your chest," Val said. Saint did as Val instructed, and Val groaned.

"Fuck, you're beautiful." Val moved slowly at first, his eyes on Saint to make sure it wasn't too much too soon. When Saint winced, Val paused.

"No. Don't stop," Saint pleaded. "Keep going."

"It'll get better," Val promised as he gingerly pushed himself inside Saint inch by inch. "So fucking good," he groaned. He buried himself inside Saint, the tight heat unlike anything he'd ever experienced.

"Move. Please," Saint groaned as he palmed his cock and started jerking himself off again.

Val pulled out almost all the way out, then slowly pushed back in, and Saint growled.

"Fuck me, Val. Please."

If that was what Saint wanted, Val would give it to him. He took Saint's left leg and put it over his shoulder as he covered Saint with his body and pulled almost all the way out, then thrust in deep and hard.

"Oh fuck! Yes, fuck, yes!"

Val couldn't help his ridiculous grin or the way his heart swelled. He pumped himself inside Saint, sweat beading his skin as he thrust over and

over again, pushing in as hard and as deep as he could, his groin smacking against Saint's ass.

Saint's hand motion became quicker, just like his panting. His brow was beaded with sweat, his skin flushed as the sinful sounds of his jerking off and Val's body smacking into Saint's filled the room.

The fire inside Val ignited, turning into a scorching inferno that exploded through him as he lost his rhythm and he thrust wildly, pegging Saint's prostate. Saint screamed his name, his body tightening around Val and nearly pushing him over the edge as ribbons of come hit Saint's chest.

Unable to hold back any longer, Val's thrusts became short, fast, and hard. He came so hard he almost doubled over. He filled Saint, his body wracked with shivers as he pumped himself inside Saint a few more times, then slowly pulled out, his dick twitching at the sight of his come leaking from Saint's hole.

"Fuck, Baby." Val was breathless as he dropped onto his side next to Saint. They both lay there staring at the ceiling as they caught their breath. When Val thought he could move again, he rolled onto his side to face Saint. "You doing okay?"

"I'm not sure. My brain was just fucked out of me."

"Is that a good thing?"

"As long as you don't need me to, like, do any math or anything."

Val laughed. "Math after sex? I could never be so cruel."

Saint rolled onto his side to face Val, his smile wide and eyes filled with so much love. "I think I like the butt sex."

"That so?" Val tried to hold back his laughter. "You like the butt sex, do you?"

"Yes, very much. We should do more of that. Butt sex for both of us."

Val couldn't hold it in anymore and laughed. "Is that what you're going to call it from now on? Butt sex?"

"I mean, it's sex. In the butt."

Val snickered. "You're ridiculous."

"Must be a side effect of the butt sex," Saint teased, his eyes alight with amusement.

Val hummed. "There's a pill for that, you know."

Saint fell onto his back with a laugh. It quickly faded, and Val placed a hand on Saint's stomach.

"What's wrong?"

“I may need to borrow some clothes.”

“Oh shit!” Val sat up, a hand to his mouth. “Baby, I am so sorry. Fuck, I feel like such an asshole. You just lost everything, and I haven’t even said anything.”

Saint sat up and shrugged. “What is there to say? It’s gone. But I’m not worried about it. I mean, it sucks, but it’s just stuff. I have renter’s insurance, and all my important documents are in a safety deposit box at the bank. Anything with sentimental value is at my mom’s.”

“So why do you look so sad?”

“The same can’t be said about my neighbors. Some of them have been living there for decades. They’re older, and I’m sure everything they owned was in their apartment.”

Val’s heart went out to those poor people. An idea occurred to him. “What if we have a charity event to help them? Raise some money to get them back on their feet?”

Saint lit up. “That’s an amazing idea! I could ask the guys, maybe talk to Gio. He’s an expert at putting together charity events. I bet he’d help.”

“I don’t think you’ll be short on people who’ll want to help,” Val said. He thought of something else. “Also, you’re welcome to stay here until you find another place.”

“Thanks,” Saint said, taking Val’s hand and kissing his palm. “I appreciate that.”

“And if time passes and you haven’t found anything, and you decide maybe you want to stay, you’re welcome to do that too.”

Saint stared at him, a slow smile spreading on his face. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re amazing,” Saint said, kissing Val. It was a sweet, slow kiss. When he pulled back, he wrinkled his nose. “I need to wash up.” He motioned down to his chest, and the dry come on his skin.

Val didn’t blame him. “There are hand towels under the sink.”

With a quick kiss, Saint got up and groaned. He looked at Val over his shoulder, a wicked gleam in his eye. “I’m gonna be sore tomorrow, Chief.”

“Guess you’re just going to have to return the favor.”

Saint’s pupils dilated, and he licked his bottom lip. “Just remember you said that.” He sauntered off to the bathroom, and Val fell onto his back with a big smile on his face. How had he gotten so lucky? He’d almost drifted off to sleep when the mattress dipped. He moved his arm so Saint could snuggle up

close.

“You’ll be back at work soon,” Val said through a yawn.

“Yeah. But I can help you with the tavern on my days off.”

“You sure you don’t want to be doing something fun on your days off?”

Saint placed his hand on Val’s chest, and Val covered it with his. “Are you kidding? Working on the tavern with you *is* fun. I love it.”

“Me too,” Val said. “I can’t believe how close it is to being ready. I mean, I’ve been thinking about it for so long that opening day always felt so far away.” He tapped his fingers on Saint’s hand.

“What’s wrong?”

“A part of me worries no one is going to show up.”

Saint lifted up onto his elbow. “What?”

Val shrugged. “I don’t know. Isn’t that every businessperson’s fear? That no one will show up for the thing you’ve poured your heart and soul into?”

“Babe, I can guarantee the place is going to be packed on opening night.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so.” Saint kissed him and lay back down. He was so quiet that Val thought maybe he’d fallen asleep until he spoke up. “I’m going to visit my parents tomorrow.”

Val held his breath. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I think it’s time.”

“Whatever you need, just let me know,” Val said, rubbing Saint’s arm. Knowing Saint had cousins who were gay and accepted by his parents said a lot about the kind of people they were. Better than Val’s parents, for sure. But he understood Saint’s worry.

“Thanks.”

Val kissed him and held him close. Whatever happened, Val would be right by his side. There were so many firsts waiting for them, good and bad, but Val had faith in them. They were going to be good together. He could feel it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

You can do this.

Saint took a deep breath and stood on the sidewalk in front of his parents' house. The house was a cheerful blue with white accents and a gray roof. His mother loved bright colors, and both his parents loved to garden, which was why his parents' front yard resembled a small botanical garden. There were all kinds of native Florida flowers, plants, and palms. The lawn was always a perfect lush green, and the hedges around the house were expertly trimmed.

He'd walked down this pathway countless times, yet today, it was almost like he was seeing it for the first time. So much had changed since he'd last visited his parents, and he felt guilty for not having come sooner. Walking up to the front door, he knocked and then used his key to let himself in. Usually, he called or texted ahead, but this early in the morning on the weekend, he knew his parents would be home. They tended to sleep in on the weekends since they were usually out and about the rest of the day.

"It's me," Saint called out as he closed the front door behind him.

"In the kitchen," his mother, Olivia, replied over the old-school Latin ballad. Growing up, his house had always been filled with music, and it was usually accompanied by his mother dancing in the kitchen. It always ended with her pulling him into dance with her. She'd twirl him and make him laugh.

A lump formed in his throat. He had so many happy memories growing up. Would it have changed if he'd come out sooner? He could almost hear Val's gentle voice in his head. *No what-ifs.*

Saint swallowed hard. During his military career, he'd gone on countless

missions, faced unknown deadly forces, and done it without hesitation. But now? Facing his mother? He was *scared*. Breathing in deep, he headed for the kitchen, smiling at his mother as she stirred scrambled eggs at the stove.

“Hola, Mami.” Saint stopped next to her and kissed her cheek.

“Hola, querido.” She kissed his cheek and motioned to the frying pan. “¿Quieres?”

“No, thank you. I already had breakfast. Is Dad home?”

“Dad is home,” his father, Juan, said as he emerged from the hallway and walked into the kitchen. His father was a big man, and Saint always thought it was amusing that his mother was so much smaller yet fiercer. He patted Saint’s back on the way to the dishwasher to grab his coffee mug. Saint shook his head.

“Are you ever going to use that dishwasher to actually wash dishes?”

His mother looked at him like he’d sprouted antennae. “Where would I put all the coffee mugs?”

“Um, in the cabinet?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “The cabinet is for dinnerware and glasses.”

“Of course it is,” he said, amused.

His father poured some milk and two sugars into the mug and stuck it in the microwave. “You eating?”

“No. Thank you. Already ate.”

Olivia served the scrambled eggs onto plates. They were her famous tomato, chorizo, onion, and cheese scrambled eggs, and they always smelled amazing. Okay, he needed something to do with his hands.

“You know, I think I will make myself un café con leche.” He grabbed one of his mugs, because in their house everyone had their own designated mugs, and added a couple teaspoons of brown cane sugar and then milk. He popped it in the microwave for a few minutes. His mom’s favorite song came on, and he smiled because he knew what was coming next. He turned and laughed as his mom salsa’d her way over to him.

Saint let her take his hand and pull him into a dance as Juan Luis Guerra’s “Burbujas de Amor” played from the music app on their TV.

“You remember when you were little, we used to dance to this in the kitchen? You would put your little feet on mine?”

“I remember,” Saint said, laughing when she put her feet on his.

“And now I can do the same with you,” she teased. With a kiss on his cheek, she went back to her seat.

While they ate and his mom chatted about the latest news from her book club that was clearly not a book club and just an excuse for her and her friends to get together, drink wine, and gossip, he finished making his latte. He sipped it and listened, pretending he hadn't noticed his father eyeing him.

"What's wrong?" Olivia asked as she handed the empty plates to him to put in the sink. "You're very quiet."

Saint laughed. "That obvious, huh?"

"A mother knows," Olivia said. She pointed to one of the chairs at the counter, and he took a seat at the end, then got back up.

"I'm just gonna get some water."

"That bad?" His father asked.

"Nothing bad," Saint said as he grabbed a glass and filled it with some ice and water from the fridge door. He didn't sit. Instead, he went back to standing on the other side of the counter across from them. "It's really good. Amazing, actually."

"Oh, good news! Tell us, tell us," Olivia said. She studied him and frowned. "Why are you so nervous if it's good?"

"I need to talk to you both about something."

"Is everything okay?" Juan asked.

"Well, it's been an eventful few months. I should probably start with that. Wait, have you seen the news lately?" Saint asked, realizing that if his apartment building fire had been on the news, his mother would have been blowing up his phone with phone calls.

"We were down in Miami for a wedding. Spent a couple of extra days there," Olivia said. "We got back late last night."

Ah, that would explain it. Saint and his parents had always had an honest and open relationship, and he'd always been close with his mother. She'd helped him through his divorce, coddled him, and fed him. Saint hadn't minded being spoiled for the first few days while he tried to come to terms with his new life.

Saint filled his parents in on everything that had happened over the last few months, from the explosion at Val's retirement party to him helping Val with his tavern while he was on leave, Leo getting shot, his apartment getting blown up, and then Adrian finally being stopped.

"¡Ay, mi cielo! You could have been killed!" She crossed her arms over her chest. "How could you not tell us? Santos, you know better than this."

"I know. I just didn't want to worry you."

“You were in the hospital and didn’t call us.” Olivia looked hurt, and Saint reached out across the counter to take her hand.

“I’m sorry. I am. But Mami, you’ve spent so many years worrying about me. First while I was in the Navy, then when Alicia left me, then when I joined the Kings. I didn’t want to give you one more thing to worry about.”

“¡Santos Ignacio Suarez Cavallero!” Olivia smacked her hand on the counter, and Saint cringed.

“Ooh, you got the full name,” Juan said before taking a sip of his coffee. “You’re in trouble.”

“You be quiet,” Olivia scolded her husband before returning her attention to Saint. “You’re never to do that again, you hear me? I am your mother. My job is to worry about you.”

Saint wanted to say it shouldn’t be, but he knew his mother. No point in arguing about it. She would worry about him no matter how old he was. “I’m so sorry. I should have told you.”

Juan eyed him. “That’s not what you sat us down to tell us, though, is it?”

“No.” Saint cleared his throat.

“What’s wrong, cariño?”

“The, um, the fire chief I was telling you about?”

“Oh, yes. We know him. We’ve seen him on TV. Very handsome man.”

“I’m glad you think so because um...” Saint took a deep breath. “He’s my boyfriend.”

His parents blinked at him. They were so still that Saint waved a hand in front of them.

“Did I break you?”

“Your boyfriend. As in, you are dating a man?” Olivia asked, confused.

“Yes. You know, like how cousin Remito is married to a man?”

“You’re gay?” Juan asked, his frown deep.

“Bisexual. Um, you know. Men and women.” He remained quiet, letting his parents process this new information. It was hard to tell what they were thinking. His mother’s eyes teared up, and she looked heartbroken. Oh fuck. Saint swallowed past the lump in his throat. “I’m still the same. Nothing’s changed. Well, except the boyfriend part.”

“Why would you keep this from us?” Olivia asked. “Did you think we would be terrible to you? That we wouldn’t love you?”

Saint opened his mouth and then closed it. “Wait, are you hurt because I’m bisexual or because I didn’t tell you?”

“You break my heart because you didn’t feel you could trust us.”

Saint let out a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank god.”

“¡Santos!”

“No, no.” He held his hands up. “I didn’t keep it from you. I didn’t know. Well, I might have, but I just pushed it down and tried to ignore it, pretending it wasn’t there. Then I met Val, and I realized I couldn’t hide anymore.”

“Is that true?” Olivia asked, getting off her chair and coming around the counter.

“Of course, Mami. You know I’ve always told you everything. I didn’t tell you this because I didn’t know, and now that I do, that’s why I’m here.”

“¡Ay, mi cielo!” She threw her arms around him and hugged him tight. He returned her embrace, laughing when she planted kisses all over his face. “You’re my heart, you know that.”

“Sí, Mami.” He lifted his gaze and worried his bottom lip. His dad still hadn’t said anything. “Dad?”

“Is he a good man?”

“He’s amazing. I love him.”

Juan met his gaze. “And this man loves you? He makes you happy?”

“Yes. He loves me, and yes, he makes me happy. Like, really, *really* happy.”

Juan nodded. “Then that is all that matters.”

Saint sniffed and wiped at his eye. “Thanks, Dad.” He didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath. Really, he should have known better, but he’d seen and heard so many heartbreaking stories that even *he* had struggled not to fear the worst.

“When will we meet him?” Olivia asked.

“Well, you can meet him now if you want.”

Olivia stared at him. “He’s here?”

“Yeah, in the car out front. He wanted to come and support me.”

“And you left him out in the car?” Olivia smacked his arm. “I taught you better manners than that.”

“You did. I’m sorry.” He glanced over at his dad. “You okay with that?”

Juan nodded.

Saint didn’t take his father’s quietness to heart. His dad has always been the more serious one of his parents. Once he’d had time to properly process everything and spend some time with Val, he’d open up.

Saint excused himself and went outside to his truck. He knocked on the

passenger window, smiling when Val lowered it.

“Hey, so how do you feel about meeting my parents?”

Val’s eyes went huge. “Now?”

“Yep. I have to warn you, at some point, my mother will get your entire life story out of you.”

His stunned expression gave way to a huge smile, then a chuckle. “I can live with that.” He rolled the window up, reached over, and turned the ignition off. Grabbing the keys, he got out of the truck and set the alarm. “Do I look okay?” he asked, smoothing the front of his navy button-down shirt. The sleeves were rolled up to his elbow, and he had on black jeans.

“You’re lucky we’re at my parent’s house. That’s all I gotta say.”

Val chuckled. He followed Saint inside the house, closing the door behind them before heading into the kitchen.

“Mami, Dad, this is Val,” Saint said.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Val said, holding out his hand to Saint’s father. Juan took it and gave it a firm shake, then Val turned to Olivia. She put her hands together, her smile huge.

“Oh, you’re so handsome!” Olivia said as she opened her arms wide.

Val chuckled and walked into them. He had to bend over to hug her, but something told Saint he didn’t mind.

“Oof,” Val laughed.

Saint probably should have warned him that his mother might look small, but her hugs were bearlike. The rest of the morning couldn’t have gone better if Saint had planned it. His mother was besotted with Val, and Saint would bet anything she was dying to get on the phone so she could brag to the rest of the family and to her friends about the handsome former fire chief that her son was dating.

By the time they’d left, his mother had invited them to several parties and family gatherings. She took a picture of them sitting together on the couch and smiling. About an hour in, Saint’s dad opened up and started chatting with Val. He was genuinely fascinated by Val’s career and also what it took to open a tavern.

By the time they got back in the truck, Saint was a little breathless.

“Holy shit.” He glanced at Val. “Be honest. Are you rethinking being my boyfriend? Because I know it can be a lot.”

Val leaned over and kissed him. “The only thing I’m thinking is about how good your mom’s scrambled eggs smelled. Tell me you know how to

make them.”

“Oh, pft. Yeah. Easy.” Saint eyed him. “Really?”

“They were amazing, Sweetheart. You’re very lucky.”

Saint’s heart swelled. “Yeah.” He turned on the engine and got them moving. As much as he would have loved to spend the rest of the day doing something far more exciting than shopping, he’d lost everything in his apartment fire, and as awesome as Val was, Saint needed his own underwear. “You sure you want to go shopping?” Saint asked.

Val shrugged. “Why not? We can get what you need, then have some lunch. It’ll be good.”

“Okay.” Saint couldn’t help his dopey smile. It was just running errands, but he couldn’t help it. When they reached the store, Saint wasn’t prepared for the amount of ridiculous the two of them shopping would result in. He loved that he could tease Val about his age, and Val would just tease him right back.

Saint put some more toiletries in his basket. He’d been scanning the shelf for his preferred deodorant when Val plucked it off the shelf and handed it to him. How...?

“I thought your generation just ordered everything online.”

Saint arched an eyebrow at him. He grabbed a bottle of Old Spice and held it up. “For the distinguished gentleman.”

“Fuck off. Also, your dad wears that.”

“Because he’s a man of a certain age.”

Val snorted. “I’m gonna stop this conversation right now before it gets weird.”

“Too late. Holy shit.” Saint gasped and grabbed a box off the shelf, showing it to Val. “I need to get these for Ace.”

“Are those...bath bombs shaped like grenades?”

“Yep, for when your bubble bath doesn’t feel manly enough.” He laughed and dropped the box in his basket.

“You think Ace needs manly bubble baths?”

“No, I think Ace needs grenade bath bombs for his Green Beret rubber ducks.”

Val stopped and turned. “I’m sorry, did you say Ace has Green Beret rubber ducks?”

Saint laughed. “He does. Gio had them specially made for him for Christmas one year. There’s a whole story behind it, though. The military

sometimes calls training rifles rubber ducks. Ace had an incident with one back when he first started his Army training. You'll have to ask him to tell you the story, it's hilarious. Anyway, hence Green Beret rubber ducks."

Val shook his head with a chuckle. "Why am I not surprised?"

They finished shopping, and Saint had to admit that was the most fun he'd had buying toiletries, underwear, and pajamas. By the time they'd left the shopping center, Saint was past done with shopping. He could only do it for so long, and he wasn't about to replace his wardrobe in one day. A few pairs of jeans, some T-shirts, socks, and a couple of dressier shirts were all he needed for now.

Inside the truck, he'd just turned the engine on when his phone rang. "It's Fitz." He answered with a smile. "Hey, Fitz."

"Hey, sweetie. How are you and Val doing after last night's insanity? Jack told me everything when he got home, and I couldn't believe it. Actually, I could, which is the sad part."

"We're good. Actually, we went to visit my parents this morning."

Silence.

"Fitz?"

"How did it go?" he asked, almost hesitantly.

"Great. My mother's probably already planning the wedding."

The squeal Fitz let out had Saint quickly moving his phone away. Next to him, Val laughed as he leaned in.

"Hey, Fitz."

Saint chuckled and put the phone on speaker. "You're on speaker."

"I'm so happy for you two! That's so amazing. Did I mention I knew you two were meant to be?"

"You might have," Saint teased.

"Smarty-pants. Oh, I almost forgot the reason I called. Well, I called to check in on you, but I also called because Leo will be released from the hospital today, and we're planning a little party for him at Colton's tonight. Can I count you two in?"

"Like you have to ask," Saint said with a snort. Val nodded his agreement. "We'll be there. Want us to bring anything?"

"Everything's covered. See you tonight at seven."

"See you then." Saint hung up. "I'm so glad Leo's coming home, though I'm sure no one is as relieved as King. Do you think he told Leo about what happened with Adrian?"

“If he hasn’t already, I’m sure he will,” Val said, taking Saint’s hand and squeezing it. “So. What do you want to do until the party?”

Saint cast his boyfriend a wicked glance. “I have a few ideas, Chief.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

TWNETY ONE

So this was what it was like to be part of the Kings family.

Val sat on the couch, his arm around Saint's shoulders as he observed the boisterous group. So many different personalities, yet so much laughter and love.

Colton and Ace's mansion seemed to be the gathering place for all their get-togethers and parties, which made sense because no one else owned a place big enough. Plus, it didn't hurt that their Ponte Vedra mansion had a huge pool, an outside barbecue area, and a private beach.

Red was in the kitchen with Mason, both cooking and never once running into each other as they moved around. Whatever they were cooking smelled amazing and made Val's stomach rumble.

Laz documented everything, and no one batted an eye at him, snapping photos with his fancy digital camera. In fact, Fitz sat on Jack's lap, blowing kisses at the camera and posing. Jack and Joker both watched something on Joker's phone, and they burst into laughter at the same time. Val couldn't help but shake his head and chuckle. They were like a couple of schoolboys, those two, always snickering and getting into mischief together.

Colton was setting the extremely long and expensive-looking wood dining table. Did he and Ace have to get a new table every few years to accommodate their growing pack? Speaking of pack...Chip and Cookie chased Duchess around the house, probably trying to commandeer the stuffed squeaky frog in her mouth. Did the frog have a crown? It was nice to see Chip and Cookie off-duty and just being dogs.

Val missed having a dog. He'd never had one himself, but the firehouse always had dogs, usually ones rescued from fires. Maybe he'd talk to Saint about getting one.

Gio and Saint chatted about Saint's charity idea, and from the looks of it, Gio seemed very excited about it. Something told Val plans would soon be underway. Ace and Lucky were.... Val wasn't sure what they were doing. They each had a handheld game console and were *very* absorbed in whatever they were playing. It was obviously some kind of driving game because Ace moved his console like it was a steering wheel.

"Yes!" Lucky jumped to his feet, arms thrown in the air. "Yes, I did it!" He thrust a finger in his cousin's face. "Ha! Take that! That's what you get for throwing that red shell at me! Malviviente!"

Ace glared at Lucky. "You only got lucky because I got distracted by my husband's ass."

Val glanced at Colton, who paused as he was putting a plate down and looked over his shoulder at Ace.

"Don't use my ass as an excuse," Colton said. "Face the music, darling. You lost at Mario Kart to your cousin."

"Never!" Ace said, getting to his feet. He thrust a finger in Lucky's face. Someone was going to lose a finger eventually, Val was sure of it. "I beat you at Rainbow Road," Ace growled. "So that's, like, a hundred extra wins right there." The two promptly started arguing in Spanish.

It was a shame Ryden couldn't be here, but with everyone here tonight, someone had to man the Four Kings Security building, and according to Saint, Ryden was happy to be that guy. He'd quickly become a trusted member of the Four Kings crew, and that meant the world to him.

When Ace received a text from King that they were on their way, Val was astonished by how the room got quieter. Not quiet, because this was a lively bunch, but the volume lowered, and Val wondered if it was because of Leo. They'd all spent so much more time around him than Val, so obviously, they knew him at a much deeper level, but Val had come to notice how attuned everyone was to Leo.

As much as everyone at Four Kings Security would have loved to welcome Leo home, Val knew Leo would find it overwhelming. So instead, the employees had a giant Goldfish cracker-shaped card made, and they all left him little messages and signed it.

The party was orange and white themed, and of course, there were bowls

filled with Leo's favorite fish-shaped snacks, along with fish-shaped sugar cookies and.... Val stood and hurried over to the table.

"Are those...?"

"Fish-shaped pastelitos, yes," Colton said, his smile wide. "Don't worry, Leo doesn't actually want his fish-shaped food to taste like fish. They're guava, guava and cheese, beef, and shredded chicken."

"That sounds amazing," Val said, practically salivating.

"Which one?"

"All of them." Val patted his stomach. "I'm going to have to join a gym if I'm going to hang around you guys." Between Red's Southern cooking, Lucky and Ace's Cuban food, Mason's barbecue, and Colton's and Gio's catering, there was always so much delicious food around.

The dogs charged into the living room. All three skidded to a halt, ears perked and tails wagging so hard there were three butt wiggles.

"Guess who's home," Colton said with a chuckle.

Everyone got up and turned to face the door, so Val joined Saint and did the same. The door opened, and everyone cheered as King walked in with Leo. They all chimed in, welcoming Leo home, and Leo's smile couldn't get any wider. His cheeks were pink, and his eyes glassy.

"You did all this for me?" Leo asked, walking into Fitz's arms first to give him a hug. Val didn't blame him. Fitz always had on the softest-looking sweaters. Then Leo went down the line, making sure to hug each and every one of them. He even hugged Val.

"I heard you and Saint are dating now."

Val nodded. "We are."

"Good. That's a very sound decision." Leo spotted the table and gasped when he saw the spread. "This is amazing!" He picked up a fish-shaped pastelito and bit into it. "Oh my God, this is so good." It took Leo three bites, and he'd finished off his fish pastry. "Thanks, guys. I love it all so much."

Leo walked into the living room, the three dogs trailing behind him and looking up at him adoringly. Val marveled at how sweet and gentle the dogs were with him, and it was easy to guess who their favorite person was. They didn't jump on him or knock him over. Chip jumped on the couch and put his head on Leo's lap while Cookie lay down at his feet, while Duchess gracefully hopped up on Leo's other side and sat next to him. She leaned against him and daintily licked his cheek.

Everyone went back to conversing until Red announced it was time to eat.

Then they got up and took seats at the table with Colton at the head and Ace at his side. King sat at the other end of the table with Leo beside him. Then everyone else took their seats. Everything was served family-style, passing huge plates around with various protein and side dishes.

Saint leaned into Val and whispered in his ear. “Don’t worry, I have an idea how we can work all this off later.”

Val shivered and then glared at his boyfriend, who laughed knowingly. “Little shit.”

“Not sorry,” Saint said as he served himself a heaping spoon of cheesy hash brown casserole.

Damn it, now all Val could think about was Saint in bed. Ooh, the things he was going to—

“King and I are getting married.”

The room plunged into silence, and everyone’s head shot up, all eyes on Leo. It was so quiet and still that when Ace opened his mouth, his fork fell and hit his plate, scaring the shit out of everyone.

Val put a hand on his chest. “I’m going to end up on blood pressure meds around you guys. I just know it.”

And then Ace screamed.

“What is happening right now?” Val asked, grabbing Saint’s arm as Ace flew from his seat and started running laps around the dining room. Occasionally he’d stop next to King, thrust a finger in his face, and yell, “Ha!”

Val was so confused.

Colton ignored his husband. “That’s incredible! Congratulations!”

That broke whatever trance everyone seemed to be in, and they all cheered and congratulated the pair. Leo beamed at them, and Val couldn’t help but ask.

“How did it happen?”

King chuckled. “Well, Leo asked me.” He seemed to think about it. “More like told me.”

“Told you?” Saint asked.

Leo shrugged. “King was helping me get dressed, and I realized that I’ve never felt as happy and safe and loved as I have with King, so I told him we should get married.”

King’s smile reached his eyes. “He literally said the words, ‘We should get married.’”

“To which you replied....” Joker prompted.

“Okay.”

Fitz sighed dreamily. He knew the two very well. “Aw, that’s so romantic.”

Everyone laughed because King and Leo, despite seeming like such complete opposites, could not have been more perfect for each other. They were both so direct and to the point, and they were in sync like no couple Val had ever known.

Joker flipped a hand out at Jack and tapped his palm. “Pony up, loser.”

With a grumble, Jack reached into his pants pocket and removed his wallet. He grabbed a bunch of bills and smacked them into Joker’s hand.

“What was the bet?” Saint asked.

“I bet him that Leo would ask first.”

King sighed, and that was when Val noticed Ace was hovering over his friend. “Get it out of your system.”

Ace hummed and put a finger to his lips. “Hold on. I’m recalling a memory. It’s way, way, way, way back in the recesses of my mind.”

“We could be here all night then,” Joker said, laughing when Ace flipped him off.

“Wait, it’s in there somewhere,” Ace said. “Searching, searching. Going way back to—”

“You have until I finish chewing this piece of chicken,” King said, placing a forkful of food in his mouth.

Val had to press his lips together not to laugh.

“Found it!” Ace swept an arm out dramatically. “The year was 2006. George Clooney was named Sexiest Man Alive, Pluto was reclassified as a Dwarf Planet, and Microsoft launched Zune.”

Colton shook his head. “He can’t remember to take out the trash, but he remembers when Zune was launched.”

“What’s Zune?” Saint asked.

“Exactly,” Leo said with a snicker.

Ace cleared his throat. Loudly. Everyone quieted down again.

“As I was saying, the year was 2006, and we were in a hole-in-the-wall bar in the middle of sandy nowhere, throwing back a few beers and sharing our relationship—or lack thereof—woes when Ward Kingston said he was never getting married.”

“Why?” Leo asked, sounding more curious than anything.

King shrugged. "I believed that life wasn't for me."

"But why?" Leo asked, studying King.

"Because I didn't think there was someone out there who would love me as I was." He took Leo's hand, his smile warm and eyes filled with adoration. "Never thought someone like you might be out there."

Everyone *aw'd* then cheered and catcalled as Leo threw his arms around King and kissed him. Holy crap, King and Leo were engaged! Of all of them, Val had to admit he had not seen that coming. He would have expected Jack and Fitz to be next. They all congratulated the pair again, and although Leo had no idea *when* they'd be getting married, King confirmed it would be a small intimate affair with only their closest friends and family.

Ace sat down and stilled, his head slowly panning toward King. When he spoke, his voice was almost a whisper. "Bachelor parties."

King's eyes went comically wide. "No."

"Yes!"

"Isn't the best man in charge of the bachelor party?" Jack asked.

"Exactly," King said. "And since neither of us have thought that far ahead, no bachelor party plans are to be made."

"Yet," Ace said as he shoveled a forkful of food into his mouth and waggled his eyebrows. It was pretty clear Ace had already begun to scheme.

They went back to eating and talking, and Val enjoyed himself greatly. When he and Frank first joined the firehouse, they used to hang out with the guys all the time. Once Frank had left and Val become chief, he'd get invited to barbecues and such, but the get-togethers stopped. He didn't realize how much he'd missed that until now.

When dinner was over, they helped Red and Mason clean up, and then Val had an idea. He took Saint's hand and pulled him to one side.

"You know, it would be a shame if we didn't take advantage of the private beach. How about you come for a walk with me?"

Saint's smile stole Val's breath away, and again he asked himself how he'd gotten so lucky.

"We're gonna go on a little stroll down the beach," Val told Colton, who nodded and smiled knowingly.

"Towels and flip-flops are in the cabana if you need them."

"Thanks," Saint replied, following Val outside.

There was an incredible breeze coming in off the ocean that felt amazing. They grabbed a couple towels just in case and traded their shoes and socks

for flip-flops.

It was a beautiful night, nothing but the sound of waves crashing in the distance, the night sky filled with stars, and the moon shining its glow on the water's glittering surface. They headed down the wooden walkway that led from Colton's mansion to the beach and headed for the shore.

The sand was cool beneath Val's feet as he walked with Saint's hand in his. They'd just reached the wet sand by the shore when Saint spoke up.

"He left a note on my truck."

Val frowned. "What?"

"Adrian. That day I went back to my apartment to get an overnight bag after Frank suggested I help you with the tavern. He left a note on my windshield."

"Saying what exactly?" Val asked, annoyed that Saint had kept this from him.

"To get away from you, or I would be next."

Val stopped walking and turned to meet Saint's gaze. "Are you telling me Adrian threatened you, and you're just telling me this now?" He shook his head in disbelief. "What the hell, Saint?"

"I know. I'm sorry. I just didn't want you to worry."

"Damn right, I would have worried, and with good reason. Sweetheart, the man tried to blow you up. *Twice*. And you didn't think to mention it to me?"

Adrian had been unpredictable, and he'd been growing increasingly paranoid. It had been bugging the hell out of Jack, and he couldn't let go of the fact that Adrian had somehow gotten back into Florida without him knowing. And although Adrian hadn't pre-planned to murder Val, he had paid cash on his drive down to Florida. He'd even paid cash at the motel where he'd stayed. Jack had spoken to several people who knew Adrian, and they'd all said the same thing. Adrian was not mentally stable, and he was starting to worry them. Val just wished things hadn't turned out the way they had, or that Adrian had been able to get so close to Saint.

"I don't suppose you reported it to the police?" Val asked.

Saint arched an eyebrow at him, and Val hated that Saint was right. The police wouldn't have been able to do anything.

"I reported it to Mason, and before you get mad at Mason, I was the one who told him not to say anything. He was going to get Leo to try and find the printer it came from. Anyway, it doesn't matter now. I'm sorry." Saint pulled

Val close. "I thought I was protecting you."

Val sighed. "I know." He cupped Saint's face and rubbed his thumb over his stubbled cheek. "No more secrets. Promise me. If something happens at work, if you're hurt or in danger, I want to know. You have a dangerous job, and I get it. I just don't want to have to be wondering if I'm being left out of the loop."

"I added you to my emergency contact list as the first to call."

Val couldn't help his dopey smile. "You did?"

Saint nodded. He wrapped his arms around Val's waist. "I really am sorry."

"You're forgiven," Val said, brushing his lips over Saint's. "Maybe you can make it up to me. You know, there's no one on this beach."

"There isn't," Saint said, his voice low as he started unbuttoning Val's shirt. He kissed Val, and heat exploded through him. They quickly undressed, leaving their clothes with their towels. In just their underwear, they ran for the water. Saint dove in as Val waded in, the water cool but not cold. When Saint's head popped out of the water, Val spoke up.

"You know, the last time I went to the beach was the last party Ace and Colton invited me to."

"Really? Not much of a beachgoer?"

"Actually, I love the beach. Well, the water. Not a big fan of the sand. But I was always so busy at work—long hours and unpredictable schedules—that I never had time. Never made time."

"And now you have all the time in the world," Saint said, smiling.

As expected, Saint was an exceptional swimmer who moved through the water like it was a part of him. He swam backstroke to Val, floating when he reached him, a beautiful smile on his face.

"I do. And I have someone to enjoy the beach with." Val couldn't help but lean in and kiss him. Saint turned and stood, his arms wrapped around Val's neck. He brought their bodies together and kissed Val, the taste of salt on his tongue.

Outside, the cool ocean water enveloped them, but inside, a fiery heat swept through Val. He couldn't get enough of Saint, the feel of his body, the taste of his lips, and the need he had for Val. When he stopped long enough to think about it, he still couldn't believe Saint was his. Val had come so close to losing this, to losing Saint. Never again would he take what they had or this amazing man for granted.

“I love you,” Val murmured against Saint’s lips. “And I will make sure you feel loved every day.”

Saint smiled. “Damn, Chief. How’s a boy supposed to keep his head on straight with a declaration like that?”

“Baby, there is nothing straight about what we’re about to do in this ocean. I suggest you use those Aquaman powers to warn those fish swimming around our ankles that things are about to get frisky.”

Saint threw his head back and laughed. “I am so glad I told you about that!” He met Val’s gaze and smiled sweetly. “I love you so much.”

As they kissed underneath the gorgeous night sky, the sound of waves crashing on the shore, Val was lost in the magic of it all. His heart belonged to the amazing man in his arms, and he couldn’t wait for the adventure that was their life together to begin.

EPILOGUE

“I hate to say I told you so this soon in our relationship, but....”

Saint waggled his eyebrows, and Val shook his head with a laugh. It took a lot of late nights and busy weekends to get The Red Ax Tavern ready for opening night. Even the Kings had pitched in, taking turns helping them get everything stocked when the supplies started coming from the vendors, while Saint helped Val hire employees, several of which were out-of-work first responders or firefighters with injuries that no longer allowed them to do the job they loved and who were struggling to find work.

Once the staff was in place, uniformed T-shirts ordered, and all of the systems installed that Val would need to keep track of everything, they started to look for a manager. That had turned out to be one hell of a challenge. Val had a very specific idea in mind, but he couldn't really put his finger on it, which made the hiring process extremely difficult. No one seemed to fit.

Until former paramedic, Casimir “Cas” Shaw, walked in.

Saint had known some pretty optimistic and cheerful people in his life, but he had never met anyone like Cas. The guy was like a puppy wrapped in a ball of sunshine in a bubble factory that was giving away free candy. That level of optimism should have come across as either annoying, too much, or too forced, but Cas was just a genuinely warm and funny guy. How the hell someone who used to be a paramedic could be so cheerful was beyond Saint, but his interview had turned into an informal chat, with the three of them laughing so hard they were in tears. Cas was hired on the spot, and so far, he was a star at managing the tavern.

Everything had turned out great. The black, red, and gold chrome accents

gave the place a classy, elegant feel, but the atmosphere was warm and laid back. Leo had used his computer skills to track down all kinds of cool vintage firehouse items in great condition to line the walls, and he'd even found Val a vintage fire truck that everyone had chipped in to get Val as a gift. It was parked outside the tavern to one side and was a hit, capturing the attention of anyone who walked by.

Val wrapped an arm around Saint's shoulder and squeezed him. "In this case, you can say it as many times as you want. This is incredible."

His sweet man had been unable to believe the number of people who showed up to pack the place to full capacity. Val had really believed the only ones who'd show up would be employees from Four Kings Security, and although it looked like the whole company here, plenty of others had shown up too, like the majority of his former firefighters.

"You underestimate how important you are to people," Saint said softly, kissing Val's cheek. They stood to one side of the busy bar as the pint glasses filled and the servers delivered all kinds of gourmet yet simple bar food, from several types of burgers to fries, a multitude of flavored wings, and lots more.

"Maybe."

"Nope. Everyone here is here for you, babe."

"And for the fancy beer," Ace said, raising a glass. "To the chief!"

Everyone raised their glasses and shouted. "To the chief!" They whooped and cheered, and Saint could tell Val was moved, even if he just sniffed and shook his head at them.

"I'm so proud of you," Saint told Val. "A lot of people talk about maybe one day doing this or that, but you followed through and made it happen."

"Thank you, and thank you for everything you've done to help. I wouldn't have managed to get it all done in time without your help."

One of Val's former firefighters called him over, and Val excused himself, which was perfect timing because Saint needed to know why his best friend was brooding from his stool at the other end of the bar while everyone was celebrating and having a good time.

Saint stepped up beside Ryden, amused that his friend hadn't even noticed he was there. "What's the scuttlebutt, Marine?"

Ryden gave a start and glared up at him. "What the hell you sneaking up on people for?"

Wow. That bad. "Since when does anyone sneak up on you?"

Ryden eyed him. "Fair point." He took a sip of his soda, and Saint

followed his line of sight. What could possibly have—*Oh*.

Jay was holding court at one of the booths. He sat on the table dressed in a particularly snazzy royal blue paisley vest with matching pants and bow tie, a fuchsia button-down shirt underneath with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. His blond hair was perfectly coiffed, and his cheeks were almost as rosy as his lips.

“Look at him. He’s such a diva.”

Saint shrugged. “He’s just having a conversation.”

“Oh, bless your heart. Saint, those three men right there are what we call bears, and that in the middle is a sweet little pot of honey for those bears.”

“I know what a bear is,” Saint said, amused by how annoyed Ryden was. The guy was practically vibrating with how worked up he was, which said a lot since very little got to Ryden.

The three large, muscular men sat around Jay, enraptured by whatever story he was telling. And, yeah, okay, maybe they might also be looking at him like they wanted to eat him with a scoop of ice cream.

“Why don’t you just tell him?” Saint asked, snatching up the stool next to Ryden that someone had just vacated. Seating was a little scarce at the moment.

“Tell him what?” Ryden asked, his frown deep. He seemed genuinely perplexed by whatever Saint could mean.

“That you’re interested in him.”

“But I’m not.” Ryden narrowed his gaze. “He’s annoying.”

Saint let out a heavy sigh and let his head hang. Had he been this stubborn? Yeah, he had been, but at least he’d gotten his head out of his butt. Why couldn’t Ryden admit he liked Jay? What was the big deal? Was he afraid of being turned down, or was he afraid Jay wouldn’t feel the same?

Ryden stood. “I’m going to say something.”

“Oh, great! It’s about time.”

“I’m going to tell him he needs to stop before he gets himself into trouble.”

“Oh, no. No, no, no. Please don’t do that,” Saint said, hurrying after Ryden. Oh, this was bad. Why did Ryden go looking to antagonize Jay? Why? It wasn’t like he didn’t know Jay by now. They’d been working in the same office for years, and Ryden spent more time at the office than the others since he worked risk assessment. In that time, Jay had thrown everything but his desk at Ryden. Something had to give.

Ryden moved through the crowd, and Saint followed, needing to be there for his friend in case the three bears decided Ryden was a pesky bee that needed swatting.

“Excuse us, fellas,” Ryden said when he stopped in front of Jay. “But I need to have a word with Glee over here.”

Off to a great start. Great.

The three men looked up at Ryden but didn’t move until Ryden dropped his gaze to one of the guys, and that terrifying Marine stare had them all practically falling over themselves to get out.

Jay folded his arms over his chest and arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow at Ryden. “Do you live to torment me? Do you get up every morning and think of all the ways to make my life miserable?”

“Yes, it’s my favorite hobby, along with getting my balls waxed and chest hair plucked. My sole purpose in life is to annoy you.”

Jay sighed. “Delightful.”

“This isn’t the place.”

Saint’s groan was ignored. Why? Surely his friend had enough experience with dangerous situations to know when the best course of action was to retreat. *Abort, abort!*

Jay narrowed his gaze, and Saint said a few solemn words in his head for his former soon-to-be eviscerated best friend.

“Place for what? Talking?”

“Picking up men.”

“First of all, I was conversing. You know? That thing that mature adults do. Second of all, whether or not I pick someone up is none of your concern.”

“It is when you’re causing a scene.”

Jay looked around, then moved his narrowed gaze back to Ryden. “Yes, I can see everyone is absolutely up in arms about it. Oh, wait, no, they’re not.” Jay leaned forward. “Because they’re not all up in my business like you are.”

“You keep teasing men the way that you do, and you’re going to get yourself into more trouble than you can handle.”

Oh fuck. Had Ryden just said what Saint thought he’d said?

Jay’s bright blue eyes went icy cold. “I’m sorry. Did you just say I’m asking for it?”

Ryden had the decency to look ashamed when he realized what he’d said. His cheeks went pink. “Um, I didn’t mean.... What I meant....”

Jay’s eyes welled with tears, and the smack to Ryden’s cheek was heard

over the music and chatter. “Ryden Foster, you are the biggest asshole I have ever met!” He shoved Ryden with a strength Saint had no idea Jay possessed, and Ryden stumbled back.

“Jay—”

Jay jumped down off the table and turned to go when Ryden caught his arm.

“Jay, I’m sorry. I—”

“Go to hell!” Jay jerked his arm away from Ryden and disappeared into the crowd.

“I should go after him,” Ryden said, his voice rough.

Saint caught Ryden’s arm. “Let him go. I don’t think that’s a good idea right now.” Something told him that Ryden wasn’t going to let it or Jay go.

“I fucked up,” Ryden admitted. “I need to go after him.” He pulled away, and Saint let him go. He watched as his friend disappeared into the crowd after Jay. There was a good chance Jay had left. Saint just hoped Ryden didn’t make things any worse than they already were.

“Everything okay?” Val asked, coming up beside him.

“I don’t know. Ryden stuck his foot in it. Again. Only this time, I think it’s serious.” Saint had a feeling there was a story behind Jay’s reaction.

“As much as I know you want to help, this is between Ryden and Jay. All you can do is be there for him if he needs you.”

Val was right, and Saint knew that. Ryden would come to him if he needed help or wanted someone to talk to. They had each other’s backs. Didn’t mean he couldn’t feel like shit about it at the moment.

“Maybe I can distract you,” Val murmured in Saint’s ear. He took Saint’s hand in his and led him to his office. Saint closed and locked the door behind him. When he turned, Val sat propped on the edge of his desk, his long legs encased in dark denim, and the wine-red dress shirt rolled up his muscular arms.

With a groan, Saint stepped up to Val, who spread his legs so Saint could stand between them. He slipped his arms around Val’s waist and leaned in to brush his lips over Val’s.

“Why are you so sexy?”

Val slipped his hands around Saint, moving down to his ass, gripping it tight and making Saint moan. Nipping at Saint’s jawline, he licked a line up to Saint’s ear.

“Want to go for a ride on my fireman’s pole?”

Saint threw his head back and laughed. “Oh damn, Chief! You did not just say that.”

Val chuckled. “I did, and I immediately regretted it.” He stood and pulled Saint with him around the desk. Turning, he unbuckled his belt, and Saint felt his pants tightening as his cock hardened.

“Ooh, you meant it,” Saint said, mesmerized as Val pushed his pants and underwear down and sat on the overstuffed leather chair. “Wait, is that why that chair has no arms?”

Val waggled his eyebrows, and Saint snickered. No time to waste. While Val grabbed the lube from the bottom desk drawer, Saint kicked off his shoes and pulled his pants and underwear off, a little shiver going through him from the cold air hitting his bare ass. The cold quickly gave way to scorching heat as Val pumped his erection, the tip already leaking with precome.

“Oh fuck.”

Val held a hand out, and Saint walked up to him, his body trembling with anticipation. Riding Val’s cock like this was a first, and Saint was already wet from the need to get Val inside him.

“Turn around,” Val said, making Saint groan.

Saint did as Val said, bending over and gripping the desk. He bit down on his bottom lip as the first lubed finger pressed against his entrance. Not wanting to come too quickly, Saint tried not to touch himself. Val stretched him, and by the third finger, Saint was sweaty and writhing.

“Baby, please.”

“Come here,” Val said, and Saint wasted no time. He climbed onto Val’s lap, his hands on Val’s shoulders as Val lined himself up. Biting down on his bottom lip, Saint closed his eyes and carefully lowered himself down, the now familiar burn soon giving way to a delicious feeling of fullness as he sat with Val buried inside him. “You look so damned sexy riding my dick.”

“Oh, fuck.” Saint couldn’t take it anymore, and he started moving, his panting breath filling the room as Val palmed Saint’s cock and started jerking him, using his precome to ease the friction. Saint started slowly at first, but then he found his rhythm, and it felt so fucking good.

“Jerk yourself off,” Val told him, and Saint took over, sucking in a sharp breath when Val took hold of his cheeks, spreading him wider. Then he punched his hips up to meet Saint’s downward movement, their bodies smacking together as Saint rode Val. Oh, fuck. He was going to be doing this again really soon.

They moved together, and Saint was never more grateful for sturdy chairs with wheel brakes. Saint bounced on Val's lap, his hand moving furiously as his orgasm built.

"Fuck, I'm gonna come," Saint said. Val took hold of Saint's hips, fingers digging in as he punched his hips up, thrusting deep and hard inside Saint, who felt like he might lose it with how damned turned on he was. Then his orgasm exploded through him, and he doubled over, coming over his hand. Val kissed him, muffling the sound of his cry as he punched his hips, his muscles tightened, and he brought Saint down hard against him, liquid heat filling Saint.

They both sat there catching their breath, the room smelling of sex. Saint didn't want to move but knew he had to because, at some point, everyone would wonder where the guest of honor was. But before he did....

Saint kissed Val, sweet and slow, enjoying his taste and the warmth of his mouth. He slipped his clean fingers into Val's hair, holding him close as they kissed for what seemed like forever. With a groan, Saint pulled back and winced when he got up off Val. Ooh, boy. He was gonna be sore tonight.

Val opened the drawer and took out a packet of wipes, making Saint laugh.

"You thought of everything, didn't you? Just how many times were you planning on having sex in this office?" He grabbed a few wipes and cleaned himself off.

"As many as I can," Val said, kissing Saint before grabbing a few wipes for himself. They dressed, straightening out their clothes and attempting to look like they hadn't just had sex, but no one was going to buy it. Shrugging, Saint unlocked the door and headed back outside, Val on his heels.

They slipped over to one of the standing tables, and Cas brought them each a beer, a knowing smile on his face. He didn't say anything, just returned to the bar.

"Cheers," Val said, tipping his beer toward Saint, who took his own and clinked it against Val's.

"Cheers."

They stood there, quietly sipping their beers as they watched everyone laughing, talking, and eating, all of them having a good time and here to celebrate what mattered most.

Family.

Whether it was through blood or bond, they knew how lucky they were,

and Saint was honored to be a part of it. This was a new chapter in his and Val's life together, and Saint had meant it when he said he was all in. It was going to be one hell of a ride.



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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you so much for reading *Dealing Him In*, the first book in The Kings: Royal Flush series. I hope you enjoyed Saint and Val's story, and if you did, please consider leaving a review on Amazon.

[*Calling His Bluff*](#), Book 2 in The Kings: Royal Flush series (Ryden and Jay's book), is now available for preorder. Coming soon on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited.

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Thank you again for joining the Runaway Grooms. We hope to see you soon!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlie Cochet is the international bestselling author of the THIRDS series. Born in Cuba and raised in the US, Charlie enjoys the best of both worlds, from her daily Cuban latte to her passion for classic rock.

Currently residing in Central Florida, Charlie is at the beck and call of a highly opinionated sable German Shepherd and a rascally Doxiepoo bent on world domination. When she isn't writing, she can usually be found devouring a book, releasing her creativity through art, or binge watching a new TV series. She runs on coffee, thrives on music, and loves to hear from readers.

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