

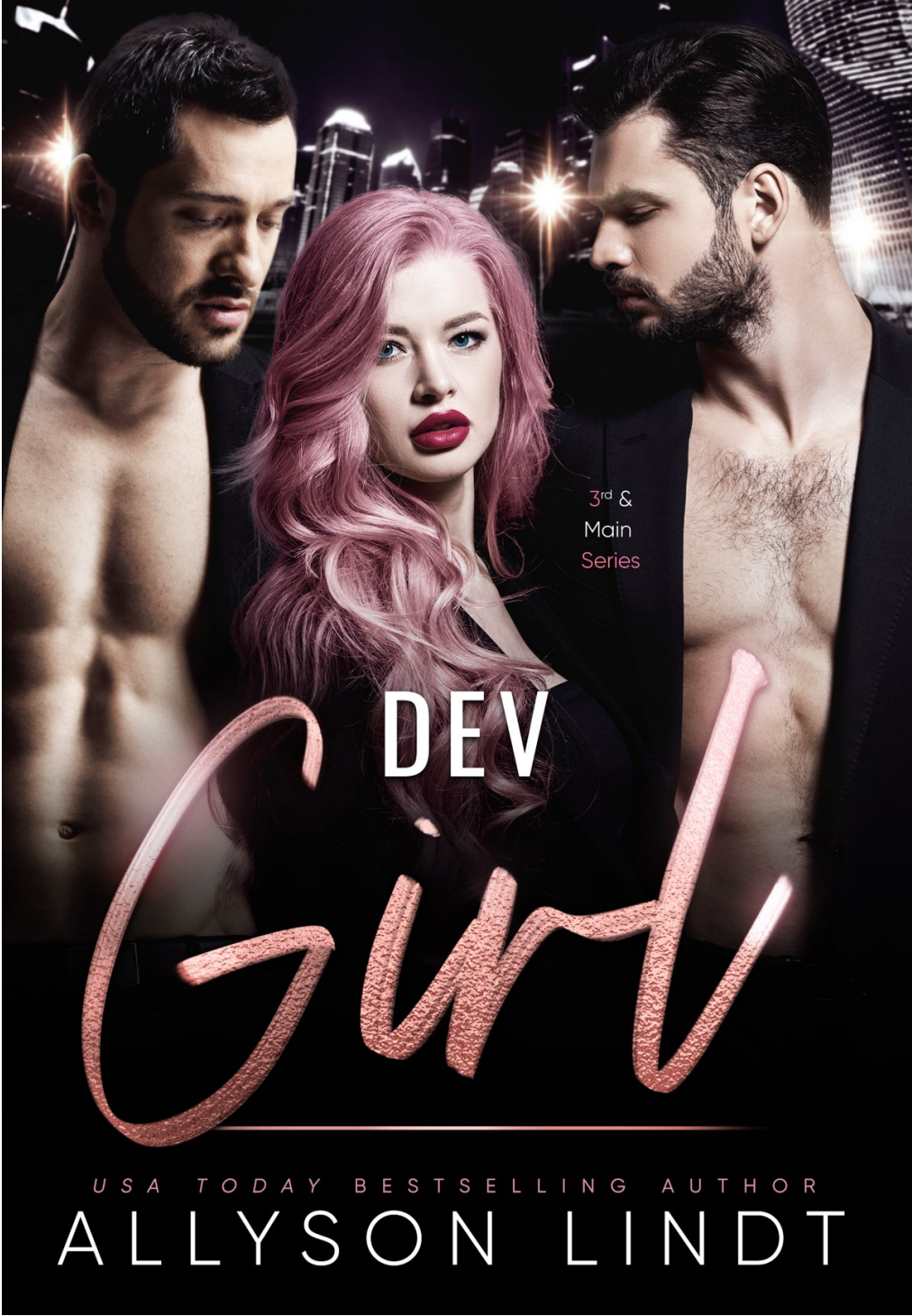
3rd &
Main
Series

DEV

GURU

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALLYSON LINDT



3rd &
Main
Series

DEV
Girl

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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dev girl

Third and Main

Book One

allyson lindt

acelette press

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Epilogue 2

For my eternal dragon

And everyone who's excited to return to Haddarville

When the memories are gone, it's not home anymore.

Beck said that.

Okay, not quite, but I was taking creative license with the lyrics to *Walking Light*.

My record store might look like it was full of memories. Over the years I'd turned it into the kind of haven that made most music fans wet-and-or-hard, including me. From the signed album covers and photos with bands, to the collections of vinyl and 8-tracks that rivaled any collector.

The front door swung open, and Alys and Maddox walked in. My best friends. The memories I'd been losing for years, as they drifted away into their own lives.

And now it was time for me to move on and make new ones.

Not that I wouldn't miss them—I would. But I already did, and it was easier to do so from another state than knowing they were only an hour away. It was too hard to see this place every day, this store that had as much of their influence in it as mine, without them in it on a regular basis.

Not that they knew any of this, and for now I shoved the mopey thoughts aside. They were here, and it was likely they

would be a lot over the next couple of weeks, so I was going to enjoy our last hurrah together.

A tiny smirk played on Alys's full, always kissable lips. A familiar look that said she was pleased with what was about to happen, and she was trying not to let that show. She tossed her hair—which was currently Hello Kitty Pink—with a flourish. “Excuse me, good sir.” Her accent was posh, loosely British, and *bad*. “I would like a selection of your finest mew-zik.”

Maddox pointed at the wall behind me. “I think we're in the wrong place. It looks like all they sell here are dinner plates.”

I assumed he meant the records and CD's. Smart ass.

He was a couple of inches taller than me, where Alys was four or five inches shorter. Maddox's jet black hair was naturally that color, and mine was intentionally dyed a similar shade. Not because of him, but to keep up the appearance that I was the grumpy goth music store owner.

“They're not *dinner plates*.” Alys's huff was exaggerated. “They're what people used to put music on.”

Maddox frowned. “Like... to eat?”

“How do you eat music?” Had I seen that in some long lost Bakshi cartoon? Like, animated fairies with their dicks and tits hanging out sampling the local 'shrooms and supping on a fine meal of hallucination, heavy metal, and sex?

Maddox fixed me with a look of pure frustration. “I don't know how it's done. I was promised food, and we came here, which has dinner plates on the walls. If you're the proprietor of this establishment, *you* should explain how it works.”

He was six years younger than my thirty-nine, and had a brother older than me. Alys fell between us age-wise and had

been coming in here since the first summer after she started college.

Neither of them was confused about what was going on here, but whatever inspired them to act like this today, it was a fun distraction. “Back when dinosaurs roamed the earth, our tribal elders entertained themselves with these fine specimens of history.” I gestured broadly at the room.

The way Maddox wrinkled his nose was adorable. He was the kind of creatively carefree and gorgeous that would’ve earned him patron after patron four hundred years ago. “By eating them? Dinosaurs weren’t alive when people were.”

“Don’t listen to his logic. He’s just hungry.” Alys playfully slapped Maddox’s arm. “The entire drive up here, he talked about how he was getting *everything* on his burger. Or his pizza. Or a burger on his pizza.”

“*Oh.*” Maddox’s eyes grew wide. “The things on the wall are pizza stones, right? The shiny ones are personal sized? Wait. Tiny pizzas... This is a library.”

All hail the king of tangents.

“Do you see any books?” I asked with authority.

Alys cleared her throat and pointed to the section where I kept books on CD.

“You win. You both win.” I shook my head in amused disbelief.

Maddox grinned. “*Yay.* Senpai noticed me.”

Fuck I’d missed them. “Did you feed the kid sugar on the way up here?” I asked Alys.

“*I didn’t.* I like my fingers intact.”

I grabbed Alys's wrist and nibbled on her index finger. "They are pretty sweet."

Maddox draped his arms over my shoulders and hers, and urged us toward the door. "It's possible I've been living off energy drinks and potato chips for the last two weeks."

"Crunch time," Alys said. Was that a hint of a frown?

Not that I needed a reminder of where they'd been. She was a developer and he was the composer for a newer idea game company, and the most recent reason I hadn't seen them in weeks was because they were pushing hard for another deadline.

"When do you not live off potato chips and energy drinks?" I'd rather tease them than miss them while they were still here.

Maddox tried again to urge us toward the front door. "When Gage's is nearby."

I let him lead, with a short pause to grab the phone and call into the back. "Stepping out, keep an eye on the store." My voice would carry over the speaker phone back there.

"*On it.*" A shout drifted up from the storage room.

"Seriously. Starved." This time Maddox succeeded in pulling us out of the shop. "Why are we fucking around with stupid jokes?"

"They were *your* jokes." I'd missed this. I missed it every time they vanished for weeks on end because of busy work schedules, and I was going to miss them even more when I was gone.

They didn't need to know any of that yet, because they'd try to talk me out of it and I'd let them. Then it would be more

of me missing them. At least this way, with me selling, moving out of state to take over another store and do the same thing to it that I had to mine, I was the one choosing when and how to make the break.

We walked up Main Street, passing the handful of other shops between my place and Gage's Grub. Unlike a lot of the business owners here, I hadn't inherited my store from family.

I'd worked at Cat's in high school, and helped the original owner keep the place relevant. I saw the end of the various medias coming, but there was always a desire for nostalgia. I made sure we had enough of a presence, enough of a reputation, to keep people filtering in from miles away. The right kind of merchandise and collectibles helped too.

And when the owner decided he wanted to retire to Arizona, I bought him out.

We reached Gage's and pushed inside what was still an empty restaurant. It wasn't quite eleven in the morning on a Saturday, and this sleepy small town was only starting to wake up.

Inside, it was easy to see which parts Gage had remodeled and which he was still working on. The overall style was the same everywhere, but some parts of it were newer. Shinier.

Our food was waiting at the counter when we approached, and so was Gage.

I was impressed. "You fucking psychic, man?"

Gage snorted and shook his head. "Yeah, that's it. So psychic I knew..." He trailed off with a frown. "Yeah. Let's call it that."

So psychic I knew my wife was sleeping with another man. That was where the sentence was going. The divorce was what

brought Gage back to town after so many years. Haddarville wasn't quite the kind of place that sucked people in and never let them go, but it did have a way of drawing them back.

Not Alys and Maddox though. And in a few months, not me.

“App is working then?” Alys asked.

“Like a charm. Drinks are on the house.” Gage popped the tops off three bottled Cokes and set them on our trays.

Alys nudged us toward one of the tables outside. “We’ve been locked indoors for weeks. It’s summer, it’s not too hot yet, I want to sit in the sunshine.”

“They’ll revoke my goth card for sitting in the sun,” I joked. “But okay. Just for you.”

Maddox dropped into one of the iron seats and stretched out his long legs. “Pretty sure they revoked your goth card years ago, for selling Ozzy.”

“Man cannot live on The Cure alone.” Though, I had a few customers who would argue that point with me.

“Pretty sure there’s a strange sort of metaphor in there.” Alys grabbed a few fries and dipped them in the small chocolate shake on her tray.

Maddox took a large bite of his burger, and the next sounds out of his mouth might have been words, but they were completely unintelligible.

Ridiculous. I loved it. “Swallow first.”

Maddox made a show of chewing, then swallowing loudly. “That’s what he said.”

Dork.

“What did *you* say?” Alys asked.

Maddox repeated the mumbled, unintelligible words, this time with an empty mouth, and stuck his tongue out at us.

Okay. Whatever. I gave Alys my attention instead. “When did you have time to write Gage an ordering app?”

“I was waiting on QA feedback and didn’t have anything else I could do.”

Alys was one of those people who never stopped. She was a developer at AcesPlayed, a drummer for a local band, Plaid Peanut Butter—Maddox was their bassist—and her writing ordering apps for people seemed like her latest distraction.

Her need to never stop was at least partly driven by her upbringing. Her mother was forever on the go. But for Alys, things had gotten more severe over the past few months. She brushed off all my questions and told me she was fine. Over and over. *I’m fine* in the kind of way someone only repeats when they’re really not.

I nudged her occasionally, but for now it was her secret.

I was just glad they were here today. The three of us had been best friends for years. Maddox came into the shop for the first time ten years ago. He needed help with some scavenger hunt for the radio station. Alys and I had helped him, and since then we’d been The Wonderland Crew year round, and competed in the hunt every year.

Which was what we were prepping for now. Soon we’d have the news on how to qualify for this year’s contest. Once we had that information, we’d have until Friday to turn in our entries, a couple of days to see if we made it in, and then two weeks after that to compete. I was excited about stealing most of Alys’s and Maddox’s time.

They knew and loved music as much as I did, and this would be one hell of a last ride.

Walking away from them would be hard, but I wasn't going far, and I suspected I'd still see them. It would just be once every couple months instead of...

Once every couple of months.

This is what I came back to every time I started to question my decision to leave—they were already gone, and it was time for me to move on too.

I shoved the thoughts aside and let myself enjoy the banter and food instead, until my phone rang. "I need to get this, be right back." I wandered away from the table. It was Jericho, the man I was buying a new store from in Arizona.

Not a conversation I was ready to have in front of Alys and Maddox.

"Hello," I answered when I was far enough away to avoid being overheard.

"Hey. How's it going, man?" Jericho was friendly.

He always had been. I'd bought, sold, and traded with him for years. Any time one of us had something rare come through that the other might enjoy. I'd been to his shop several times, for the same reason. About two years ago, when he mentioned retirement, asked if I might be interested in taking his place to the next level, I'd had to think long and hard about the possibility.

"Same old stuff," I said. As much as I would love to talk music with him, now wasn't the greatest time to dive into any sort of conversation. "What can I do for you?"

“We’ve got a music festival coming up in a couple of months—end of August. I always have a big presence there, and I was thinking if you’re interested, it’d be a good time to let everyone know about the changeover.”

He had been fine with keeping the entire transaction a secret up to this point, because he hadn’t been ready to tell his employees or customers either.

A lump formed in my chest at the thought of making the news public. This was it, it was really happening. I’d planned to tell Alys and Maddox soon—since my sale here would go through in the next month I couldn’t put it off much longer—but this drove home that the moment was here. “That sounds great.” I kept my tone bright. Friendly.

“Fantastic. I’ll send you the details of the festival, and we’ll figure things out.”

We chatted for another minute or two, with me casting frequent glances in Alys and Maddox’s direction.

I disconnected and headed back to the table. This was going to suck. It was exciting. It was an incredible opportunity, but telling my friends I was leaving...

Alys and Maddox had moved on to talking about the movie that was filmed here a few months ago.

“You just want to watch it because the guy made porn before this,” Alys teased.

Maddox raised an eyebrow. “Not all of us have to pay for it.” He was cute, geeky in that accessible kind of way, sweet, and he was in a band. Oh, and bisexual. Maddox had no problems getting laid. Hell, I frequently wondered why he and I had never... “Besides, my brother knows him—Andrew Newton—he’s not that big a deal.”

“Your brother knows everyone.” Alys didn’t sound impressed.

“Not Robert Smith,” I said.

Maddox crossed his arms and sank in his seat. “He might. You don’t know.”

Was he upset that Xander knew so many people or that there might be one he didn’t?

Maddox was complicated when it came to his relationship with his older brother.

“Anyway, the porn isn’t the point. Dude backpacked across the fucking world. How cool is that?” Was that actual awe in Alys’s voice?

I loved the idea, but not the practicality of making a transatlantic trek. “So he didn’t have a job.”

“He did odd jobs for cash wherever he went,” Alys said. “That’s part of the movie. And then there was the porn thing. He found what he loved and made a living at it.”

“I thought the porn wasn’t the point.” My retort was dry.

“You want to make porn, we can make porn,” Maddox said. “I have a camera. I have multiple cameras.”

“Who are you going to film?” Alys asked.

Maddox looked between her and me. “The two of you. You never let me watch when you do it.”

Alys and I hooked up a lot when we were younger, but life and other relationships meant that over time we slowed down the *with benefits* part of our friendship. “We don’t *do it* that often anymore.”

The way Maddox screwed his face up was comical. “You probably have to if you want to be in porn. That’s a staple of the business—*doing it.*”

I wasn’t interested in porn. But the idea of watching Alys with Maddox...

Wow, my head was going places today it shouldn’t.

“I don’t want to do porn.” Alys threw a wadded up napkin at him. “That’s not the point.”

“What is the point again?” I asked.

Alys laughed. “I don’t even remember anymore.”

The next few weeks, spending more time with them, acting like we used to, were going to be a blast.

And one last chance for me to enjoy the fuck out of their company before I told them I was leaving.

Some days the past hit harder than normal. Running into my asshole ex for the second time in six months, just a few days ago, had nagged me since.

Add to that the maybe-maybe-not-baby...

Yeah, I might be pregnant. The home test said *yes* and Planned Parenthood said *no*, and I was in a holding pattern until I could see a doctor on Monday. If I was knocked-up, it was the result of a one-night stand that was definitely more about the physical connection than the intellectual one. Only Maddox knew, because he'd seen the box for the home test in my trash.

I'd rather not tell anyone if there was nothing to tell, and I had no idea how I was going to deal with raising another life. I couldn't even keep my own head screwed on straight. On top of that, the flashbacks to my break-up with Don from more than a decade ago were painful.

We hadn't seen Onyx in a few weeks though, and talking online wasn't the same, so I refused to let the negative and the unknown ruin tonight.

It did bum me out a bit that I couldn't drink with Onyx and Maddox when they couldn't decide which small batch summer

beer flavor they wanted to try at Joystick's, so they had them all.

The day as a whole was good though. After breakfast—lunch?—at Gage's, we'd spent the day planning. Or, we called it that. It was hard to plan for what was coming, so really we were silly, and it was great.

The tail end of the day was wings and beer.

Now Onyx, Maddox, and I were walking the longest route possible back to Onyx's. Not his shop, which shared a wall with Joystick's, but his home a few streets away from Main Street.

Maddox was in the middle with his arms draped over both our shoulders. One of his more endearing traits was how easy it was for him to be this kind of friendly, and I loved the warmth and familiarity in his touch. Tonight the gesture wasn't quite so sweet because it was an excuse to hold himself upright.

"Dude, dude, dude." Onyx pulled away from Maddox and swerved in front of us. "You're knocking me over."

"Nuh-uh. You can't walk cuz you're drunk." Maddox made the words sound like an official proclamation.

Onyx stumbled to my other side, leaned into me, and hooked his arm through mine. "My Alys knows what I'm talking about. You've got my back like always, right Bunny?"

"Like always." And I did, just like he did for me. The nickname and the possession both helped keep me here, despite the fact that my mind had been trying to drift all day.

My guys. My safety blankets.

We reached Onyx's, and he wiggled the doorknob. "Locked." He laughed.

"Keys?" I asked.

He let go of my arm and juted his hip toward me. "Pocket. Probably. Unless I traded them for beers."

"You tried. Joystick has his own house." I fished out his keys and let us inside.

Maddox tripped over the large rug covering the hardwood, and landed on his side in the nearest chair.

Onyx roared with laughter, as if it were the funniest thing ever. I didn't remember them being this silly when I was drunk with them. Perhaps sobriety was good for more than one reason tonight.

"You should probably both sleep," I said.

"You should probably make me." Maddox leaned toward me, wrapped his arms around my legs, and pulled me into him until I tumbled into his lap.

I squealed in surprise, and lingered longer than I needed to, feeling him wrapped around me. This would land differently if he were so sober. Better. Hotter. Harder to resist with his strong fingers digging into my hip and his hot breath falling on my neck.

One of the most important things my mother wanted me to learn when I was younger—sex was for fun, not a weapon.

I hated that I'd encountered people in my life who didn't think the same way. Don for instance. I was grateful that was never an issue with these two.

"Group grope." Onyx fell without warning, draping himself over us like a blanket.

This was too fun. Exactly the kind of escape I needed. But I should probably be the designated grown-up for the night.

“No, really.” Despite someone’s hand being on my breast and another wedged between my legs, I managed to extract myself from the pile. “Bed. Come on.”

Onyx slid onto the ground and landed on his ass with a scowl. “Aww.”

“Both of you.”

“Yes, Miss Alys.” Maddox climbed to his feet and pressed his lips to my cheek. “You really are the best.”

“Kiss up.” Onyx shoved him toward the guest room, before stumbling to his own.

Joining Maddox would be uncomfortable. He wasn’t used to sharing a bed, and tended to sprawl.

Joining Onyx would just be a mistake. I wanted comfort, and with the walls between the past and the present being thinner than I’d like, I wanted the kind that came with nakedness, and possibly orgasms. Though, the latter was optional.

Running into Don reminded me of the clingy, sad child I’d been. The girl who thought that crappy sex equaled love. And if the bad stuff was romantic, the good stuff—like with Onyx—would be an eternal commitment.

Nope. Sex was sex. Nothing more.

Though, Onyx and I didn’t fuck much these days, and never when one or both of us was drunk.

The third option was for me to sleep on the couch, but now that my guys were gone and my mind had the freedom to wander, it was sliding into the pit I’d tried to avoid.

No one would care if I stepped out for some fresh air and to walk off this feeling.

I locked Onyx's house behind me, pocketed his keys, and followed the same path back to Main Street that we'd taken to get here.

And there it was, the memories were back. It wasn't as though anything extreme had happened to me. It wasn't assault or anything, and I hated myself for being unable to shake this after so many years.

I'd been the good girl through high school, studied, gotten the best grades. And when I hit college, I realized I was missing out on a lot of things I wanted to explore.

I just didn't know how.

I came back to Haddarville that summer, feeling burned out and lost. Walking into Onyx's record store was like flipping on a light switch. It was a place I never wanted to leave. It hadn't been his yet, but it was about to be, and his influence was already everywhere.

I knew who he was from school. Who Don was. They were the cute, I-don't-give-a-fuck seniors when I was a sophomore. And they were hanging out with me.

My new best friends.

Late nights every night frequently led to Onyx checking out early because he had to work the next day, and Don and me staying up until dawn. Talking. Then kissing. Then fucking.

He hadn't wanted me to tell anyone we were together. *They're going to think you're a slut. And, you want people to like you for you, right? Not because you put out?*

And so many other things he said that tore down lost little Alys who just wanted to fit in.

It turned out I wasn't the only one he was doing that to. Another woman their age, Evie, had recently finished her time in the Marines, and he was feeding her the same bullshit.

Then there was the pregnancy scare. My period was a week late, I was nauseated in the mornings, and I was certain...

When I told Don, he'd freaked out. Called me so many names. When the pregnancy test came back negative, his mood didn't improve much. And I'd tried too hard to prove to him I was still worth loving.

Looking back, the way I'd acted made me ill. I'd begged and cried and pleaded for him to not leave me. I thought I loved him, and that he loved me. He eventually caved, telling me no one else was going to take a slut like me, so he'd better do it.

It wasn't long after *the scare* that Evie and I figured out he was cheating on us with each other. We both kicked his ass to the curb, and these days she and I were best friends. If I were a stronger person, all those scars would be gone. But no, some of the trauma lingered, more than fifteen years later.

When I'd run into Don a few months back, and again a few days ago, and he made a point of mentioning how I was creeping up on forty and hadn't done anything with my life, I let it get to me.

Because he was a lying, cheating asshole, but he was right. I was a mid-level developer for someone else's idea, and now I was going to be a single mom at thirty six, and I had no idea what I was doing with my life beyond tomorrow.

I really didn't want to be in this place. It always reminded me I could be stupid. I wasn't capable of handling myself. I was nothing like the strong, independent woman my mother tried to raise.

When we passed Evie's hardware store earlier, I'd seen a light on in back, and as I neared her place now, that soft glow was still there. The kind of dim light that looked like the reflection of streetlamps and nothing more, unless one knew where to look.

I wasn't surprised to see hints that she was still working—late nights were typical for Evie. As I approached I sent her a text that said *knock, knock*.

The glow inside grew then faded again, and a moment later, Aubrey let me in and locked up behind me. "She's in the middle of a complex problem, but she muttered *meeting time* so you should join us."

In other words Nerd Herd meeting. Excellent. "I'm in."

Aubrey hooked her arm into mine, and we headed toward the back of the store. Once upon a time, I'd had a similar friends with benefits relationship with her to what I'd done with Onyx. Separate times, separate types of sex and fun. Unlike the way things surged and ebbed with Onyx, I'd stopped them with Aubrey.

She'd been in love with someone else. She still was, but the problem was, he loved two people who weren't her.

As we neared the back room, I caught the whiff of burning metal. That meant Evie was soldering something. That was a much better *complex problem* for her to be working on than her trying to make social media ads work for her for the billionth time.

We found her putting away her goggles and setting aside her soldering gun.

“I’m glad the smoke wasn’t you thinking,” I teased.

Aubrey dropped into a nearby seat and pulled me into her lap. The table was covered with a crumpled chip bag, a full one, a two liter of cola, and plastic cups. They’d been at this for at least a few hours.

“It might’ve been, you don’t know.” Evie stepped away from her workbench to join us.

Whatever she—they—were doing—was guaranteed to be more interesting than my never-ending self-flagellation.

Evie pinched together the two plastic pieces she held, and when they clicked I realized it was a small digital camera. She handed it to Aubrey. “Battery was showing dead, but I fixed it.”

“You’re the best, I don’t care what anyone else says.” Aubrey winked. She powered the device on, pressed a button, and leaned back enough to almost get me in the frame. “Say *cheese*.”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “Not without wine or crackers.”

She snapped a picture, checked the screen, and showed me the photo.

Yup, that was me. Frizzy pink head, bloodshot eyes, and new freckles from too much sun. I’d tell her to delete it, but after more than fifteen years of friendship, I knew she wouldn’t listen.

Instead I pulled my phone out and flashed it at her. “We have these nifty devices now, that take phone calls and

pictures. And that don't have to be soldered to keep them alive."

"Because they die regardless," Aubrey said.

"Besides, fixing that thing every few years is fun," Evie added.

Aubrey tucked the camera into her purse with the kind of reverence typically reserved for sacred relics. "This is vintage and won't end up in a landfill in a year when the next model comes out. Besides"—she grabbed my phone before I could stop her—"yours is probably full of pictures of your boys."

Aubrey was convinced I was secretly in love with Maddox and Onyx, and just refused to admit it to anyone, including myself.

Arguing that not everyone in this town was like her with Deacon didn't do any good. And trying to get my phone back would have similar useless results.

Instead, I slid into my own seat. "It's not. No more than normal."

"Uh-huh." Evie took the phone from Aubrey. "You didn't show up here at midnight to just see us." She muttered numbers as she jabbed at my screen.

Evie understood my ghosts better than most anyone. Considering we'd each been the other's *other woman*.

I could tell them both *I ran into Don*, but there was no reason to spread the misery.

I couldn't tell Onyx because after the first time, he'd been ready to sterilize Don with a pair of bricks. I wouldn't let Onyx go to jail on my behalf.

“I changed my passcode after the last time you guessed it. I’m not dumb.” Okay, sometimes I was dumb.

“How are Cat and The Hatter?” Aubrey asked.

Like our team name, The Wonderland Crew, we were Alys, Mad Hatter, and the Cheshire Cat. I didn’t mind the comparison, though I did occasionally wish the rabbit holes we tumbled down were more *magical unexpected adventure* and less *that burger says Eat Me, and we shouldn’t ignore the burger*. “Hungry. Silly.”

“Sexy,” Aubrey added.

I rolled my eyes. She wasn’t wrong, but agreeing would give her fuel and she didn’t need that. I didn’t need that.

Evie muttered another string of numbers, and I couldn’t hide my wince. “I’m in.” She grinned. “Seventeen-oh-one oh-four. Really?”

“What?” We were all Star Trek fans here.

Aubrey’s look of distaste matched Evie’s. “But Enterprise *D*?” Aubrey said.

“Here we are.” Evie turned my phone toward us, and flipped through pictures from the last few hours.

“I didn’t take those.” It was true. Maddox was the one who loved the cameras, but his phone battery had been dead.

“How’d the *planning* go?” Aubrey leaned in to flip through more images, lingering on the ones outside her vintage clothing store, and the antique shop next door.

I took my phone back. “As well as it ever does.” Over the last ten years, we’d sucked more and more people in town into helping us with our scavenger hunt tasks.

Evie and Aubrey were as aware as I was that no matter of planning could prepare us for the surprise of what each year's task would be. *Planning* was a tradition rather than a reality these days.

I hung around a bit longer and the three of us talked about business and life and whether it was a mistake to mix blue Kool-Aid and coconut rum. When Aubrey and I were yawning so much we were swallowing all the oxygen in the room, Evie sent us home.

Haddarville was the kind of place where it didn't feel scary to walk down the street alone at two in the morning, but it was nicer to make most of the trip with Aubrey. We strolled in silence until we reached her clothing store—she had an apartment above it. I wished her good night and finished the walk to Onyx's alone.

I let myself in, and paused in the entryway, letting the darkness wrap around me.

“Where were you?” Onyx's soft question startled me. He stood near the kitchen, barely more than a shadow.

“Couldn't sleep. Went for a walk.”

As he moved toward me, and my eyes adjusted, details came into view. He'd lost all of his clothing except the boxer briefs between when I sent him to bed earlier and now. His dark hair was mussed, and the ink on his chest slithered and danced with the shadows around us.

“You doing better now?” His voice was clear. Most of drunken Onyx was gone.

If by *better* he meant my brain was still a jumbled mess, then sure, I was great. “Yeah. Tired enough to crash on the couch.”

“What? No you’re not.”

“Tired? I really am.”

“You’re not crashing on the couch.” He caught me and tugged me toward his bedroom.

I could protest, but his heated grip was comforting and familiar and seared away my thoughts.

Onyx nudged me to sit on the edge of the bed and knelt at my feet. “You can’t sleep in your shoes.” He unlaced one and removed it, then the other. He set both aside. “Pants next.”

I did hate sleeping in my jeans, and being closer to him sounded nice right now, so I did what he said.

Onyx climbed over me to lay in bed on his side, and patted the mattress next to him. “Well?”

I was already convinced. I curled up with my back to him, and he draped his arm around my waist.

“Are you going to tell me the real reason you didn’t drink tonight?” His question confirmed he’d sobered up.

I couldn’t. It was too embarrassing. “Not yet.”

“Okay. You know I always have your back, right Bunny?”

“I do.” And I wished like hell it mattered this time. He couldn’t make the past go away any more than I could.

Onyx rested his head against the back of mine. “You smell good.” Or maybe he wasn’t completely sober.

“I smell like beer and ozone.”

“Yummy.” He nuzzled my hair aside and drew his nose up my neck. “I missed you. A lot.” His tone shifted to serious.

The words hit me harder than I expected. Mixing with a confusion I didn't want to confront. "Me too." I squirmed playfully against him.

The groan Onyx let out was low and tantalizing, and he rested his palm against my stomach, under my shirt. "Are you trying to start something?" he asked.

"Who, me?" I wiggled my ass harder against him. Shifting the mood to playful and sexy was far better than wondering why *I missed you* clenched around my heart the way it did. "I'm absolutely not. You're drunk."

"I'm not, but we can stop if you want." Despite the words, he glided his hand higher, to brush the bottom of my breasts.

"I didn't say that. I just don't want you to regret this when you sober up." I shouldn't have said that, because it tugged loose an insecurity I rarely acknowledged. That little voice that sounded distinctly like Don, from long ago, and insisted he was going to regret me regardless, someday.

Onyx pressed his entire body closer, his hot breath brushing my skin and his erection digging into my ass. "I'm sober enough, and I regret a lot of things in my life, but you've never been one of them. I want to be inside you."

Sex was far easier than considering his words, and with him wrapped around me, it was easy to fall into the physical. "Okay."

He pulled away, but not far, and I heard the nightstand drawer slide open, followed by the tear of foil—a condom. *Inside you* didn't always lead to fucking, though it frequently did. It was always incredible, though.

I tugged my panties off, leaving me naked below the waist.

Onyx glided slippery, coolly fingers between my legs, spreading lube along my skin, then nudged my opening with the head of his cock. He'd made us both slick enough that he pushed inside me easily, but still stretched me out.

We lay there, him holding me, penetrating me, and neither of us moving, aside from the occasional twitch of his cock against my inner walls. I could fall asleep like this, and we both had in the past.

But my pulse quickened with anticipation and need when he glided a hand up my chest again. This time moving higher, under my bra, to tease one nipple.

This wasn't a fast, hard, *get off now* kind of touch. It was more of a slow, playful thing. He rolled the swollen nub between his fingers, staying still inside me, rather than thrusting.

While Onyx twisted and pinched, he kissed along the edge of my neck, then sucked on the tender flesh, until a sharp sting rolled through me. He kept up both actions until my breathing was shallow and I was squeezing my thighs together.

With him inside me, the action enhanced my desire rather than doing anything to mute it, and with the darkness enveloping us, I could pretend nothing else existed.

Just when I thought I couldn't take anymore, he slipped his hand down my stomach, and over my mound. When he brushed my clit, I jerked against his touch. The way he rested his arms against me, he held me in place, held himself in place.

He danced a light touch over my clit, enough to tantalize and torture in the best way possible. The more he stroked, the deeper his touch grew, until he was stroking and I was

grinding into him. There was an incredible intimacy with him already inside me, sheathed but not thrusting, that enhanced the feeling of my swelling orgasm.

When I came, it was abrupt, like a switch flipping, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out. To not wake up Maddox in the next room. I clenched around Onyx, his girth drawing out my pleasure. Pushing me further into climax.

As I slipped over that peak, as the pressure eased back, he gripped my hip, and pushed inside me. Deep. Hard. Fast. He was hammering now. Hitting me at that perfect angle and drawing out the moment. Making me come again. Burying himself in me. Fucking me like nothing else mattered but the way we felt at this moment.

I recognized his grunts. His stuttered breathing. The tightening of his hand as his fingers dug into my skin, and he came as well. The pounding didn't let up right away. The way he slowed was drawn out. As delicious as the rest of the connection.

When he stopped, we stayed close. He stayed inside me, the franticness gone, but the nearness lingering.

On nights like tonight, when the rest of the world fell away and it was just the two of us, I wondered if Onyx and I would ever be more than friends.

But I wasn't the kind of girl anyone wanted long-term. Not for love. Just for sex. As much as I hated to admit it, Don had been right about that. No one was going to fall for a geeky nobody like me, especially when I was willing to put out without a commitment.

But Onyx was one of my best friends, and I was happy with that. With the way we clicked, with the way we fucked, with the fact that he wanted me around regardless.

I couldn't ask for more.

maddox

I stood in Onyx's open doorway.

Don't stare. It's super creepy to watch people sleep..

Telling myself that didn't make it any easier to pull my gaze away from him wrapped around Alys.

It wasn't that I was jealous. Not *like that*. They were my best friends and I adored them. I'd do anything for them, and I knew they felt the same. Sometimes though, the reminder that they were closer to each other than to me hit harder than I wanted it to.

They had a bond I couldn't touch.

They also both had bodies I'd love to touch more often, and in more intimate ways.

I gave my head a hard shake. The physical action might jar something mental loose, right?

Because that was all this was—me being mental. There was no reason to get hung up on the fact that even though Alys sent us each to bed alone last night, somehow she'd wound up sleeping next to Onyx.

Fuck it. I finally dragged myself away.

I wasn't even in the mood to jerk off in the shower. This sucked. I'd better not be getting old. Next thing I knew, I'd

have to ease up on the drinking and stop eating whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted.

Nah.

I'd go get coffee and breakfast instead. That way we could make sure we were ready at noon.

My stomach growled at the thought of having to wait for food, and I headed to the appropriate shelf in Onyx's kitchen.

Strawberry Pop Tarts. *Yes.* I grabbed a package, pulled one out, and bit a third of it off. Sugar and love to start my morning.

The radio station did their announcements for the contest on Sunday every year, because it was alternative and defiant. Or whatever. So many things closed down in this town—in this state—on Sundays. In fact, the bakery and coffee shop would be one of the only places open today.

That was fine.

I grabbed my keys. Wallet. Phone. Dick was still attached—thank fuck. Not that I ever really had a problem there, but a guy never knew.

I'd moved my Land Cruiser from Onyx's shop to Onyx's house yesterday afternoon, when we realized we were probably doing beer flights last night. The Beast was one of my favorite things that I owned. It was big, blue, and created in 1963, just like The Beast from X-men.

My Aunt Rosie had restored it for me, and given it to me as a gift a few years back. Based on some of the odd things we discovered on The Beast, I was pretty sure my truck had a similar scattered and random history to the comic character.

The coffee shop, Kingu Kafe, wasn't busy, but a handful of friends-slash-fellow-heathens sat at tables in the back, near the window, and outside.

I was grateful it was empty. So often when I came in here, the gossip was impossible to ignore. There was a lot to love about Haddarville, but people whispering behind other people's back wasn't one of them.

"What are you drinking?" The kid behind the counter asked.

I started to spit out our typical order, and stalled. Pregnant people weren't supposed to drink coffee, were they? Or just caffeine?

Alys may or may not be, but she didn't drink last night, just in case. I should get her decaf this morning. Or just cut the joy completely out of her life.

"What do you have that tastes like coffee but isn't?" I asked.

He fixed me with a blank stare. "I can put coffee in it and tell you it's magical fairy juice? Coffee tastes like coffee."

Smart ass. I liked it. "Give me a large house blend, black, one with room for cream, and, I dunno, one of those flavored sodas. Like, cherry and lime." Alys would like that.

"No cherry."

Who didn't have cherry flavor? Who drank soda for breakfast? I should start drinking soda for breakfast, that sounded good. "Whatever tastes like cherry then. And three cinnamon rolls." They had big rolls here. Not as big as my head, not like the ones at that twenty-four-hour waffle place in Salt Lake, but they were still big, and they were good.

The kid fixed me with that same blank stare. If he made a quip about *cherry tastes like cherry*, I wasn't leaving him a good tip.

Did Alys taste like cherries?

Random.

"You got it." He finally finished ringing up my order.

He got a good tip after all. It didn't take long before I had my order, and I was headed home. The image of Alys and Onyx cuddled together was back.

It wasn't like I'd never seen that before. She and I crashed at his house a lot, especially since the two of us moved to Salt Lake. But it hit differently today. He didn't even know she was pregnant.

Maybe-pregnant. Did I let something slip last night when I was drunk? I vaguely remembered...

If I couldn't grasp the thought, hopefully it didn't stick in Onyx's head either. Speaking of ifs... I hoped Alys realized that if she had a baby, I was going to be the best uncle ever and spoil the fuck out of that kid. Kids were smart and creative and fun and no one was going to squash those things in that child.

I wouldn't let them.

Alys wouldn't either. She had her life together. She knew what she was doing and where she was going, and she'd be an amazing mom.

I'd never dare try being a father. There were already enough Haddars running around this state, and the last thing I needed was to add to the list. It was why I'd gotten snipped when I was in my twenties—I wasn't risking it. Considering

that nearly ten years later, I still had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up, I considered that one of the better decisions I'd made in my life.

When I got back to the house, Alys and Onyx were stirring, but only enough that she gave me a heavily-lidded smile and a weak wave when I walked in.

I set the coffee and food on the table, grabbed the second Pop Tart, and dropped into a seat to enjoy my appetizer. As I was about to enjoy the last bite, Alys wandered out. She was only wearing a T-shirt and panties, and I couldn't help but drink in an eyeful. I'd be an idiot if I didn't notice how gorgeous and smart Alys was.

Best of both worlds.

She looked at the little bit of pastry in my hand, looked at me with raised brows, then smiled and shook her head. She continued her journey into the guest room, and a moment later, I heard the shower running.

Several minutes later, Onyx joined me, still stretching and rubbing sleep from his eyes.

I slid him the black coffee when he sat down.

He took a tentative sip before drawing out a longer swallow. "You rule." He sat the cup down with a light *thunk*, then furrowed his brow. "What is that?"

I followed his gaze. "Blackberry lime soda."

"Why?"

Good question. Why didn't I buy Alys whatever her coffee flavor of the week was? Or rather, what was I supposed to tell him?

“It’s what I’m drinking these days. It’s a mood, you know?” Alys saved me from having to come up with a reply, when she emerged from the guest room wearing something she’d left here at some point in the past.

Onyx looked between us. “Is it good?”

Fuck, I hoped so.

“I like it.” Alys took the third chair at the round table, and grabbed the soda. Without hesitation, she took a long sip. “Be kind of weird for Maddox to get me something I don’t like.”

“Of course.” Onyx didn’t look convinced.

“Did you know they don’t have cherry flavor at the coffee shop?” I asked. “Who doesn’t have cherry flavor?”

Alys sipped her drink some more. Good. “Oranges.”

Onyx twisted his mouth in what I knew by now was frustration. “Fine. Keep your secrets. But if I find out either of you hid an alien invasion from me, I’m gonna be pissed.”

“I promise no aliens are invading,” Alys said. “Don’t believe me? You’re down a package of Pop Tarts, which means Maddox was *not* body snatched.”

“Fair point. Everybody knows body snatchers don’t eat strawberry Pop Tarts with coffee and cinnamon rolls.” Onyx still wore a look that said he didn’t like being cock blocked.

Too bad. “Right? I bet the weird fuckers eat blueberry or something. Everyone knows blueberry goes with steak dinner, not breakfast coffee.” Time to change the subject. “You two slept too late. Announcement is in five.”

Onyx glanced at the clock over the stove and grunted. “*Hey, Xerxes,*” he called to the nearest smart device. “Turn on *Broadcast from Heck.*”

There was a countdown playing. The same one they had every year. Even when that was done, the DJ stretched things out with banter. It was meant to build anticipation—and probably also account for people who would tune in late.

The first few years, I thought it was funny. Now it was more like the hard wax around a good cheese, that you had to saw through and peel away to get to the good stuff.

Then it was time. This contest was one of those rare moments when I felt like I was in my element. There was a direction, but not a restrictive one, and I got to do the most random and creative shit.

I used to think it was too bad I couldn't do this full time, but then it would get boring.

“...if your team were a band, what would your name be?” The DJ said. “What would your cover song playlist be, and what would your album cover look like?”

Ooh, my mind was already whirring, and a glance around the table said Onyx and Alys were thinking too.

My phone chimed with a new text. They could wait.

“We're going old school on this one.” The DJ must have some idea that his entire audience was only half-paying attention at this point. We weren't the only ones whose brains were flying off the hook. “Playlists must be submitted on tape, CD, or some other physical media, and must be in a real case. Cover art must be created in a physical medium. Crayons, pencils, paint, film photography... Nothing digital. It doesn't have to be pretty. We expect some stick figures.”

He went down a list of a few more highlights and wrapped things up with a URL for the official rules. “There it is, Heckians. Go forth and create, and we'll announce the

qualifiers next weekend. Same heckin' time, same heckin' station."

"Yes." I let out a whoop when the talking stopped and the music started. "Fucking. Epic."

Onyx was grinning too.

Alys was looking at her phone. "It's from Reese. To both of us."

Reese was the lead singer in the band Alys and I played in. We weren't big enough yet to be doing things like going on long tours or devoting our time to the band, but we were pretty good.

I grabbed my phone, and sure enough the text I'd ignored was from Reese. "*It would be sweet if you named your fictional band Plaid Peanut Butter.*" I read the message aloud.

"Could we?" Alys bit her bottom lip.

Because she didn't want to tell Reese *no*.

"We're always The Wonderland Crew." Onyx didn't need to remind us.

Or maybe he did.

Alys scowled in a way that meant she agreed, but didn't look forward to passing that answer along.

That was fine with me. "I'll tell her." I was already typing. "*PPB is a real band, they don't need to be made up,*" I said the same thing I was writing. "*And we already have a team name.*"

Reese: Had to try. Let us know what you need.

Easy peasy. No muss, no fuss. Though I did have an idea.

Me: Would love your permission to put Glass Slipper on the list of cover songs

Reese: Done.

Just like that. “Name sorted.” I set down my phone and gave Alys and Onyx my full attention. “What kind of music does our *pretend* band make?”

No one asked why that was the first decision. Everything else would ride on what genre we picked.

“Alt progressive,” Alys said.

Onyx shook his head. “Disco.”

Fuck no. “Classic rock.”

“I want to change my answer to new wave.” Now that the announcement was done, Onyx dug into his breakfast.

That looked good.

“Maybe punk?” Alys reached for my coffee, then stopped herself and grabbed her soda instead.

“Is that your new vote, or are you asking?” I kept a mental list as we talked, and started on my food as well.

“Depends.” Alys picked at her roll. “Are we actually listing genres we want, or are we just going to list them all in the next five minutes?”

“We could toss them all in a hat and pick one.” Onyx looked around the room. “Or a mixing bowl. I can grab one.”

We were *not* getting stuck with new age electronic opera because he wanted to be random. “Don’t think about this, just answer. What song is stuck in your head right now?”

“Freak on a Leash,” Onyx said.

“Smells like Teen Spirit,” Alys chimed in.

Easy enough. “Alternative it is.”

Onyx narrowed his eyes and studied me. “What’s your answer?”

“Baby shark. Doo doo,” I sang.

Alys scowled, but Onyx chuckled. “To live in your head, dude.”

He had no idea.

We moved on to constructing a playlist, which really was more a matter of listing all the songs. The first few came easier, because we each had favorites we felt defined the genre and us, but the number of titles grew quickly, and none of us wanted to let go of a single one.

We finally agreed to leave it alone for now, and narrow things down when we’d had a chance to think about it.

And somehow, it was after seven at night. We really spent half a day listing songs? Yeah, that sounded like us.

“Do you really have to go home?” Onyx asked.

It did kind of suck. We’d be up here every day for the next week anyway. “I bet Judith would let us work remotely if we asked. And Link will definitely tell Alys *yes*. No one is better at their job.”

The pink that dotted her cheeks was an adorable contrast to the way she pursed her lips. “A lot of people are better at their jobs than me. And that doesn’t mean it’s appropriate to ask.”

Because she was scared of Judith, the woman who ran the company we worked for.

I never understood people's fear of Judith, but I also realized not everyone had memories of learning how to make grilled cheese with her when they were kids. "I'll ask for both of us."

"Not tomorrow, though," Alys said. "We'll go into the office tomorrow and come up tomorrow night."

Right. I almost forgot, and that was shitty of me. Alys's appointment was tomorrow, to see a doctor who had the time and equipment to give her a more definite *yes* on her pregnancy.

Or no, I supposed. "Okay."

Onyx's suspicious frown was back.

Hopefully she'd be able to tell him tomorrow. I trusted that she had a plan for everything.

What would it be like to be one of those people? The kind of person who could think past *I want Pop Tarts with my breakfast?*

Maddox not only got us permission to work remotely for the next one to three weeks—everyone assumed we’d make it into the contest, and we always did—he must’ve given Judith the biggest baby brother puppy-dog-eyes ever. He got himself out of work early Monday to go to my doctor’s appointment, too.

“I just told her we wanted a little extra driving time,” he said, as we climbed into his truck.

I wanted to be amused. To joke and laugh about the entire thing.

I was too focused on what came next. On the entire reason for this visit. Finding words was difficult, and doing nothing but staring out the window as Maddox drove was maddening.

“Are you thinking about baby names?” Maddox asked.

“No.” Should I? Crap, I had to name the baby... If there was one. The sick pit in my stomach grew. I was so not ready for any of this.

“Do you want to be? Because I came up with the perfect one.”

“The perfect name for my baby?”

“Yeah.”

Maybe his suggestion would be a good starting point. Maybe it would be the perfect name. With a little luck he wouldn't suggest *Tweedle Dee*. "What is it?"

"Sir Tiberius the Twenty-Fourth." The way Maddox announced the name, it sounded regal. Serious.

He couldn't be serious.

Where to even start? "That would imply there were twenty-three other Sir Tiberius's before him," I said.

Maddox wrinkled his nose. "Nah. I say we rewrite that rule, and make it the year he was born instead."

"*Sir* implies knighthood, at least in this instance. And what if it's a girl?" Why was I arguing? I didn't have a better idea. I didn't want—

Damn it.

"Then Dame Tiberius the Twenty-Fourth." Maddox navigated us through city streets with ease.

I wasn't naming a baby Tiberius anything. Or Janeway. Next thing I knew, he'd suggest *The Sisko*, like some sort of title. "No."

"Baby?" Maddox asked.

This was ludicrous. Why was it making me feel better? "You want to name a baby *Baby*?"

"Lots of people are named *Baby*."

My huff of a laugh slipped out in spite of me. "Name two."

"Baby Spice. Baby from Dirty Dancing. Bonus round, Emily Browning's character in *Sucker Punch*."

He had me there. I was out of arguments, but I was going to push him to keep suggesting names because this distraction

was so much better than being stuck in my own head.

The rest of the trip, Maddox's suggestions ranged from Daenerys to Bluey. By the time we reached our destination, we were laughing.

The instant we walked into the office, Maddox's expression went serious, as if a switch had been flipped. "Sit. I've got this," he said.

I was surprised enough I didn't think to argue, and instead picked a pair of chairs and claimed one.

"Hi." His greeting to the woman at the front desk was a wicked combination of smooth and firm. "Two-thirty for Alys Riddel."

She gave him a warm smile, checked her computer, and handed him a clipboard. "Of course. Have her fill this out, and we'll be right with you both."

I never understood why I had to fill all the information out online for a doctor, and still write it by hand on a piece of paper once I arrived, but I did it anyway.

The entire time, Maddox was still aside from the occasional squeeze of my knee. It was more comforting than it had the right to be.

By the time my name was called, I couldn't think about anything but what I was hoping to hear. Was I pregnant? Wasn't I?

Why didn't I know which I wanted? Still?

Not that it mattered. It would be what it would be, but I should know. I should at least be leaning in one direction or the other.

Should I ask Maddox to come with me or wait here?

There was a new thought.

It was a decision I didn't have to make, because he was on his feet before me, offering me his hand, and staying by my side as we were shown back to a room.

The nurse handed me a plastic cup and explained how the test worked. "When you're done, come back here. We don't need you to get undressed yet. The doctor will be with you once we have your results."

Right. She obviously said this a million times a year, the way the words rolled off her tongue like a script, but this entire thing was terrifying. "Thank you," I forced my voice to stay steady.

Maddox gave my hand another squeeze before I headed into the bathroom to pee into a cup. I stuck my *sample* into the little metal box I assumed also opened on the other side, and joined Maddox in the exam room.

I was surprised when the nurse was back less than ten minutes later. "We're just going to do a quick blood test, too." She was already prepping her kit.

"Why?" Should they have led with this?

"It's more accurate, and since you've already done this a few times, we want to make sure."

"Shouldn't you have led with this, then?" Maddox mirrored my thoughts with his question.

She gave him a tight smile. "We're covering our bases. Nothing is wrong."

"Which makes it sound like something is wrong," he said.

They hadn't looked at me yet. We couldn't jump to conclusions. I tangled my fingers with his. "It's fine," I said.

The nurse took a new sample, and left us alone again.

This time we were alone for what felt like an eternity. Maddox was still at first, but it didn't take long before he was bouncing his leg. Humming something he was likely making up on the spot.

Not that I blamed him. I'd provide a beat if I had anything room for that in my head.

At the sound of a soft knock, we both jumped.

The doctor poked her head in. She barely looked older than me. Did I need someone with more experience? My regular doctor wasn't available, but this one had come highly recommended by Adrienne. She must be good.

She introduced herself as Martha, which was far friendlier than *Dr.* anything. Was that comforting or too casual for my liking?

"You're probably only interested in one thing right now." She logged into the computer and angled the screen toward herself. "We have both test results back, and you're not pregnant."

Oh. What was I feeling? "Are you certain?" Why did I ask that? I needed to be taking her answer. Processing. Saying *thank you* and yanking Maddox out of here. "Why would it say *yes* if it's a *no*? Is there another way you can check?"

Her smile was either sympathetic or condescending. Both?

I wasn't capable of processing my own feelings at the moment, let alone guessing someone else's.

"There are a lot of reasons it could happen, and most of them aren't bad reasons," she said. "If you take the test at a

certain point in your cycle. If the test is expired. Certain medications—antihistamines even. Fertility treatments.”

“I’m definitely not doing those.”

“We can do an ultrasound and I can show you. Lay back.” She grabbed supplies from a nearby cupboard.

I situated myself on the exam bed, pulled my shirt up and the waist of my pants down enough for the jelly.

She was patient as she walked us through the entire thing. Sliding the sensor around my stomach while Maddox pointed at the screen and asked questions.

The longer she talked, the more reality sank in. I wasn’t pregnant.

I didn’t have another person growing inside me.

I was just me.

It took entirely too many paper towels to wipe the jelly off my skin, and I didn’t say more than five words the entire time. When we were done, I thanked the doctor, straightened out my clothes, and left with Maddox.

He kept a tight grip on my hand as we walked out the parking lot.

I was relieved. The moment I put words to the feeling, my nausea ebbed and surged in waves. How could I be relieved? My mother did this with me when she was just a little younger than me.

Why couldn’t I face the thought of raising a child?

I wasn’t prepared. I wasn’t... This wasn’t where I wanted to be in my life.

There it was. Fuck.

Where did I want to be?

“Where are you?” Maddox asked as he opened the passenger door for me. “Can I join you? What are you thinking about? Are you all right?” He snapped his mouth shut.

I searched his face. “You were excited.”

“I get excited about a lot of things. Like when Onyx remembers to buy strawberry Pop Tarts.”

Was he really comparing...? I didn't know how to respond beyond a scowl.

“I realize a baby isn't the same as Pop Tarts.” He nudged me into the truck and rested his hands on my knees. “The point is, it doesn't matter how *I* feel. This is about you. If you're relieved, that's okay. If you're disappointed, that's okay. And I can be happy for you either way. I'm a complex person like that.”

“Thank you.” I wanted to pour everything into my response, and wasn't sure I managed.

Maddox took his spot in the driver's seat, and we were on the road again.

It only took me a few minutes to realize, “We're going in the wrong direction to get to Onyx's.” Though, eventually most roads in the valley led out of it, we were definitely heading the opposite way of where we should be.

“We're going for ice cream first.” Maddox made it sound like the most obvious thing ever. “Preferably Irish coffee ice cream, since you abstained this weekend.”

Was I allowed to feel better? I was a horrible person, being relieved. “I don't think it actually has either of those things in

it, regardless of the name.”

“Then we’ll stop and pick both up when we’re done with ice cream.”

I was already going to be up all night, but I appreciated the sentiment. “We’ll see.”

At the ice cream parlor, I wasn’t sure if I could stomach anything, but Maddox told the waitress we were sharing a brownie sundae. When she brought it out, my stomach grumbled.

Maybe I could eat a little.

Maddox plunged a spoon into the melty, gooey vanilla and hot fudge mess, and held it out for me.

Yup, I wasn’t passing that up. I accepted the offer. He gave me the spoon and grabbed the other one, and we dug in.

We were quiet as we ate.

“Are you all right?” Maddox’s low question startled me.

Was I? I still didn’t know. “Does it make me a bad person if I say *yes*?”

“No.” His answer came quickly. “Why would it?”

“I just...” It was too hard to put into words.

“I don’t think I would’ve handled the news nearly so well in your shoes. Not that I would’ve had to, but let’s say for hypothetical reasons that it could’ve been me. I’d have been freaking out. I don’t even know what I’m doing with my life; how am I supposed to help a little, mini-me figure it out?”

He put into words so well the thoughts I hadn’t been able to.

“I know you always know what you’re doing and where you’re going,” Maddox said. “But that doesn’t mean the unexpected won’t catch you off-guard.”

That should make me feel better. I’d focus on letting it make me feel better.

We hit the road again, and the conversation shifted to the list of songs we’d come up with yesterday for our playlist. We pulled up one after another and sang along at the top of our lungs, ranking each one when we were done, based on random things like sing-along value and feel-good-scream value.

I tried to ignore the repeated *why wasn’t I prepared for this?* That bounced in my thoughts, but I didn’t succeed.

When we reached Onyx’s and knocked, he answered the door with a scowl. “Are you both all right? Where have you been?”

It wasn't as though Alys and Maddox being late was a big deal, but it was also unusual for her. For as long as I'd known her, she'd been a *I'm running two minutes behind and I wanted to let you know* kind of person.

As the three of us brought their bags and laptops in from Maddox's SUV, he said, "Sorry we're late. We stopped for ice cream and lost track of time."

Alys winced.

I was missing something.

That was fine. It was between them.

But I couldn't let it drop. First she was keeping something from me, and now she lost track of more than two hours because they stopped for ice cream?

"Can I talk to you?" I asked Alys after we'd deposited everything in the living room.

The ping in my chest wasn't jealousy or anything along those lines. Couldn't be. But I was worried about my friend. I was willing to draw down on anyone who hurt her.

She nodded. "Sure."

Maddox opened his mouth as he reached for her.

Alys gave a quick shake of her head. “We’ll be right back.”

She fell into step with me as we headed through the sliding glass door that led to the back yard. The sun sat on the mountain that made up the horizon, casting my deck in yellow and long shadows.

I walked up to the small koi pond that sat a few yards away from the porch, and settled onto the ground next to the rocks surrounding the water. Light bounced off the glassy blue, and two bright orange fish swam underneath.

Alys settled next to me.

How was I supposed to start this conversation? “You can tell me anything. You know that.”

“I do.”

I waited for more. That should’ve been her opening. She was silent. I glanced at her, to see her rubbing her thumb over her fingernails one at a time.

“Alys?”

“I-had-a-pregnancy-scare.” Her words tumbled out. “I-was-late-I-freaked-out-it-turned-out-to-be-nothing-and-that’s-that.”

I had to slow the words down in my head, figure out where some of the syllables were supposed to break, to piece together what she’d said. “You thought you were pregnant.”

“Yes.”

The way my insides twisted was painful. “But you’re not.”

“No.”

“And Maddox knew.”

“Yes.”

“Did you think it was his?” I didn’t have a right to ask who she did and didn’t fuck, but Maddox...

The look she gave me was pure shock. “What? No. We’re not— He and I aren’t— No. He found the box for the test in my trash. I didn’t do a good job of hiding it.”

So this was nothing.

Obviously not *nothing*. It had to have been rough on her. I clenched my jaw, madder at myself for how I’d reacted than anything. “You know you can always...”

“Tell you anything, I know.” She splayed her hands out palm down on her legs, stretching her fingers. “What was I going to tell you? I didn’t know for sure, and it turned out to be nothing. It’s been all highs and lows for me through this.”

And I wasn’t there for her. I added to the stress. “I’m sorry. How are you now?”

“Relieved. Guilty. Confused. Relieved.”

I scooted closer and covered her hands, to stop her fidgeting. The sigh she let out was the kind of thing that expelled souls, and she leaned against my shoulder.

“Are you going to be all right?” I asked.

“Yeah. I think I need to distract myself for a while. Are you okay with diving into more brainstorming?”

“Of course.” Despite the exchange, it took a moment before either of us pulled apart.

I stood, offered her a hand, and pulled her to her feet.

When we stepped inside, Maddox had all of our computers at the kitchen table, but he was watching the door we walked

through.

“Does everyone know everything now?” He asked.

Alys nodded. “Yes. We’re doing distracting things because I need to have my mind on anything else.”

“Deal.” Maddox gestured to the empty seats.

“Album titles.” Alys opened her laptop. “Go.”

It wasn’t weird to see her dive into brainstorming, but today it felt different. There was more behind her desire to keep working. One thing she and Maddox had in common, and I wasn’t sure either of them saw it, was how they measured who they were.

Alys loved her mother and thought the world of her, and Maddox worshiped his older brother. In both cases, there was a bar that Maddox and Alys thought they’d never reach. This standard they wanted to live up to. They weren’t those people, though. They were so much stronger as themselves.

Inspiration struck. I should’ve seen it sooner. Before I left, I was going to help my two best friends understand how incredible they were, and this competition was the perfect way to do it.

Cheesy? Maybe.

A little bit *After School Special*? Perhaps.

But at least it wasn’t some sort of weird fucked up plan to make them fall in love so they wouldn’t miss me.

Nope. Didn’t like that idea at all.

“Funhouse mirror.” I tossed out an album title.

And like that, the floodgate was open.

“Cracked Mirror.”

“Mirror Mirror.”

“Alice Cracked.”

“Jabberwock.”

We tossed out the titles so quickly that no one kept track of who was suggesting what. The more we suggested, the more an image in my head grew. “Okay, hang on. It’s a cover album, right?”

Alys and Maddox stared at me with expectation.

“And we’re grabbing songs from multiple eras.” I wasn’t trying to drag out the suspense, rather, I needed to solidify the idea enough to explain it.

Maddox gestured with his hands, prompting me to keep talking.

“Picture this. Album title—Alice Covered. We grab the albums from my stock that go on the playlist—CD’s, vinyl, tape... a whole assortment. We have Aubrey pull together a similar wardrobe—top, gloves, skirt or pants, from different decades. And if we need to, we toss in a little bit of furniture from Deacon.”

“Oh my God, yes. I’ll call Aubrey.” Alys grabbed her phone.

Maddox pushed away from the table, muttering something about *pen and paper*. A moment later he returned with a sketchpad that had battered corners and random designs scribbled on the back and front cover. “We can go with black and white film, and hand paint it, almost in gradients. A little color in the middle, and then full color by the time we get to the right.”

“Yes.” I wasn’t the visual guy, so all I saw was random shapes and images in my head, but the way Maddox sketched a series of layouts, it was all coming together.

“You’re the best,” Alys said to Aubrey. “We’re probably going to be here for another hour or two. I’ll be over there after that... See you soon.” She hung up and looked at us. “Aubrey says she’ll get some clothes together, and we can use her *studio* whenever we need.”

Aubrey had a space set up in her back room for photography, since she sold vintage clothing and needed good fashion shots for use online.

That wasn’t the part that caught my attention, though. “And you’re going over there tonight?”

“Yeah. She’s letting me crash in her guest room while we’re up here.” Alys made it sound like her answer was obvious.

Nope. I was going to be selfish about this. Aubrey could see them any time. “Why wouldn’t you stay here?”

“You only have two beds,” Alys said.

“And there’s room in my bed. Always.” Why was I making a deal out of this?

Because I was.

“Wait. Why does Onyx get you?” Maddox asked.

Alys scowled. “No one *gets* me. Why are we even having this conversation?”

“I missed you both. We’re finally back together for the next few weeks. I figured...” What? I was being weird, and I didn’t care. “Maddox can sleep with me, and Alys can take the guest room.”

“Fine with me.” Maddox agreed like *that*.

“Okay.” I’d pushed the issue and now I had to live with it.

Alys shook her head and sighed. “Yeah, okay. Let me tell Aubrey.” She swiped her phone screen. “Staying here tonight,” she read as she typed. “Probably be there in a day or two when Onyx realizes Maddox hogs the bed.”

“I won’t,” I said at the same time Maddox said, “I don’t.”

Alys smirked and set her phone down. “Uh-huh.”

We kept planning long past the point where our ideas were more silly giggles than good ideas, but when we were done, we had a plan for Maddox to start photographing Alys tomorrow when they were done with work.

I was conflicted, watching Alys walk into the guest room at the end of the night. I shouldn’t think it was a big deal, but I wanted her closer.

This was still good, though.

Until I climbed into bed next to Maddox and he said, “Better not try anything while I’m sleeping.”

“I never have.”

He pouted. “Why not? I’m not pretty enough for you?”

“Dork. You’re as pretty as can be.” I started to pull the blanket on, then thought better of it. I got up long enough to grab a second quilt from the linen closet. “If I was going to do anything, there would be no *try*, and I wouldn’t keep it a secret. I’d make you moan.”

Maddox grinned. “Promise?”

I shook my head, but I was entertained... And more than a little turned on at the thought of what making out or sex or

anything physical would be like with Maddox. “Cross my heart.”

We both laid down.

“When did you know?” Maddox’s question seemed to come out of nowhere.

“I need a little more context, dude.”

“That you like dick as much as pussy.”

At least he was direct.

“I don’t know that they’re equal. It’s not a sliding scale of *as much as*,” I said.

“You know what I mean.”

I did. Hadn’t I ever told him this story? Alys knew because the whole school knew back when it happened. She and I weren’t friends yet, but everyone had been talking about it. Not the more personal details, but they’d made up their own, so it didn’t matter to them.

“It’s not a super exciting story.” As far as memories went, it fell in the *pleasant surprise* category. “We had one male cheerleader in high school, and pretty much everyone assumed he was gay.” He wasn’t, though he was pansexual. “He asked me to study with him, and I had no idea he thought it was a date until he kissed me. I didn’t think I’d be into it, turned out I was.”

He and I had dated for a while, and stopped talking for at least as long after we broke up. Unlike on TV, even though half of everyone had hooked up with half of everyone else in this town, really most of us hadn’t ended up in couples.

It made for both some close friendships and some awkward frenemyships and a lot of single thirty and forty

some things.

“Huh.” Maddox huffed out the sound.

“Not impressed?”

“It’s not that. Your story is your story, but you could’ve added a little more flourish and angst.”

Why? “It’s not really an angsty story.”

“You figured out you were bi. Besides, it’s all about the delivery. Describing the kiss. The desire in your throbbing rod,” Maddox said.

I gave him a look of disbelief. “Throbbing rod?”

“Pulsing man sword? Ooh, what rhymes with *sword*?”

My brain was too tired for this. “Board? Ward?”

Maddox hummed a few notes. “*He was stiff as a board, with his pulsing man sword,*” he sang softly. “*That was the day, he found out he was gay.*”

“I’m not gay.” I *was* entertained.

“It rhymes. What rhymes with *bi*?”

“Die. As in, that song should probably die in a fire.”

“You don’t like my song?” His hurt would’ve come across stronger if it weren’t for the amusement in his voice.

I didn’t mind it. “Your song is fine, it just hits too close to home for my young, tender heart.” I let out a melodramatic sigh.

“Ah, the woes of an angsty bisexual goth. Alas poor Yorick, I blew him well.”

I laughed and sat up long enough to smack him with my pillow. “Go to sleep, Shakespeare.”

maddox

I was warm. Safe.

It was a strange thought to drift toward consciousness with, but I liked it.

Something hard dug into my ass cheek, though. Did I fall asleep with my phone in my pocket?

“You keep squirming, you’ll make it worse.” Drowsiness filled Onyx’s voice.

Not a phone. An erection. He was playing big spoon, and less awake than I was.

How much longer could I lay here, wrapped up in him, enjoying the warmth? If men like Onyx fell for men like me, I would’ve entertained fantasies like this on multiple occasions.

No, wait, I did anyway. Except in the fantasies, I didn’t pull away reluctantly and get ready for the day. I made sure Onyx woke up, pinned me to the mattress for being a squirmy brat, and fucked me until we were both spent and the sheets had to be changed.

I liked that daydream. Too bad this morning I picked climbing out of bed before he finished waking up.

While Onyx and Alys were getting ready, I went out long enough to grab coffee and breakfast—Alys was getting full-

on, coffee-flavored coffee, after yesterday's news. I was back in time to make sure they were caffeinated for their days.

I didn't work full time. Rather, when it was needed, I put in the long hours for composing, and game sound effects, but there wasn't a constant call for me to be available at AcesPlayed. Onyx and Alys were working today, him at the shop and her at a makeshift office she'd set up in his kitchen, and the last thing either of them needed was me hovering around, being bored.

That left me with a couple of options—watching the clock like a kid waiting for the school bell to ring, so Alys and I could go take pictures, or getting the space at Aubrey's ready for our afternoon session.

Not really a tough decision to make. After I wrapped up morning admin tasks and made sure Alys ate lunch, I headed to Deacon's Derelicts and D'Art.

I was borrowing a few pieces of furniture that Deacon promised would set the eclectic music mood. Adam was waiting to help me bring it to Aubrey's, and set things up.

Aubrey and Deacon were close for years. Best friends and all that, except that Aubrey wanted more and Deacon loved other people. Ever since she told him how she felt, the two seemed happier to keep their distance. She would fake her way through gatherings where we were all there, but the tension tended to run high when she did that.

I'd be sad forever if a rift like that grew between me and either Alys or Onyx.

This entire town was like a soap opera sometimes. I liked to call it *The Days of Main Street*. I'd floated a few variations

past a panel of me—*The Mains of Our Streets* and *The Streets of Our Lives*—but I had a clear favorite.

My prop furniture was gathered together near Deacon's back door. As we assessed where to start, I heard murmurs from down the street. Snatches of muttering. *Back in town... With... Ridell... She led him... Spader... Slut.*

Fucking hated rumors. Especially the ones about Alys and her asshole ex, Don Spader. I'd never met the guy, but half the town talked about him like he was their savior and the other half knew him for the piece of shit he was.

But I hadn't heard people talking about him and Alys for years.

I followed the sound, to tell off whoever was spreading the bullshit, but the owners of the voices were gone.

"We doing this, man?" Adam called.

Yeah.

He helped me haul it next door. There was a set of chairs that were all plastic and metal and curves that screamed 1960's modern, a teal vanity with gold trim that I was pretty sure I'd seen in pictures my parents had, a disco ball, and a couple of other random pieces.

We saved the best for last, though. A gorgeous full-length mirror with a gilded frame and hand carved roses around it. It wasn't modern, but it had the perfect Alice in Wonderland vibe to it.

"Are you recording all of this as you go?" Adam asked as we rearranged furniture again and again, trying to get it to frame the shot well. "Or just film photos?"

“I *could* record it. Do you want me to?” That would be fun—documenting the contest creation process.

Adam nodded. “I was thinking if you had the footage anyway, I could stick it on my channel.”

“Sure. Cool.” One of the things I liked about Adam was he appreciated the randomness as much as I did. He was still looking for a long-term flavor for his YouTube channel, and in the process, he tended to feature the most awesome stuff.

“Actually, wait here.” I jogged out to my truck and grabbed both of my cameras and their tripods. Now was as good a time as any to get them in place.

The cameras were probably my most prized possession. Sure, I had my truck, my bass, and my mother had gifted Xander and I both with her last name and sizable trust funds, but these had been hers before she passed away. She loved taking pictures. Making movies.

Sure, I could upgrade either one—the Fuji took 35mm film and the Sony used micro discs. There was much better technology out there now. I didn’t want any of it though; not for this. Evie helped me keep the cameras from dying, and I was going to use them until someone pried them from my cold, dead hands.

When I returned to Aubrey’s back room, I set up and started recording video, while Adam and I finished rearranging.

I had the hardest time figuring out where I wanted the mirror, because what it reflected would be so key. Sure, we could move it once I got into taking pictures, but it would be nice to have something inspiring to start with.

“You’ve got a whole Warehouse 13 vibe going on here.” Adam stepped back to admire it all when I decided I was satisfied.

I saw what he meant. “With one exception. My Alys is already fun. I don’t have to pull an evil version of her out of a mirror.”

Adam cocked his head to the side, still studying the layout. “Does that mean a good version might come out of the mirror? What if your Alys trapped a good Alys?”

“I’m not evil, I’m just spicy.” Alys’s comment startled me.

I grinned that she was here. “Spicy like that really good salsa Gage has?” I asked.

“Why is everything food with you?” Alys stepped up next to me.

Adam looked at her like she’d just asked the dumbest question. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

She sigh-laughed. “I didn’t walk out of a mirror, I promise.”

“Exactly what an Evil Alys would tell us,” Adam said.

I shut off the video camera. The thing had limited batteries and no one on the internet wanted to hear our silly banter. “Don’t worry. I solemnly swear not to tell anyone you’re evil.” I leaned closer to Alys. “Even if you are,” I said in a stage whisper.

“Got your clothes.” Aubrey stepped into the room, and paused at the doorway.

Adam moved toward the rear exit. “Call me if you need anything else.”

Yeah, that was almost as awkward as with Deacon.

Aubrey crossed the room, her arms loaded with clothing. “I think I have the perfect set-up, based on your instructions. And”—she nodded at a threefold silk screen leaning against a wall—“I can help you change behind that.”

“Aww. I wanted to watch.” I was only half joking.

Aubrey shot me a raised eyebrow look. “Keep you and your cameras on this side of the changing wall.” Her tone was light.

I did as ordered, but that didn’t stop me from hearing *everything*. Including several things I was pretty sure were meant to be taken out of context.

“Is that too tight?”

“No. It feels good tight.”

And.

“I didn’t expect it to get so big.”

“Yeah, it does that. But don’t you love it?”

“*So much.*” Alys practically moaned.

“Oh, come on,” I shouted.

“Maybe I am a bit evil,” Alys called back. “Check that mirror out there for good me?”

I grinned. “Nah. She can stay there.”

When the women moved into view again, Alys looked better than I’d imagined when I thought this whole thing up. She wore red Converse, knee-high white socks, and an honest-to-God poodle skirt, complete with the poofy petticoat underneath.

It really was big.

On top of that, she had a black lace and satin, Madonna-style corset under a flannel shirt, and lace gloves. Her hair was teased up and out. Combined with the pink color, she'd make Cyndi Lauper jealous.

I made a kissing motion with my fingers and my lips. "Perfection."

Alys blushed.

Correction. *That* was perfection. When I did the hand painting on the photo, both her hair and her cheeks were going pink, regardless of what part of the image they landed in.

Maybe she'd let me help her out of everything when we were done.

Just because I'd never crossed that line with her didn't mean I hadn't fantasized about it.

"I have to get up front again, but holler if you need me," Aubrey said.

Alys pushed her toward the main shop. "We will. Thank you." She turned to me when we were alone. "What's with the video setup?"

I explained what Adam asked for, and her smile froze.

"Is that okay?" I wouldn't force her into it.

Alys nodded. "Totally. It might take me a minute to warm up to the idea, but I'm in. Where do you want me?"

I pressed record, and stepped behind the Fuji to focus it. "Right there." I guided her toward the right spot in our makeshift stage.

“What do you want me to do?” She fiddled with her fingers and tugged at her skirt.

“You don’t have to do anything fancy. Twirl. Show off the outfit. Sway your hips. Blow kisses at the camera.”

Alys did each thing, like she was checking off a mental list. The more she moved, the more the jerkiness of her motions coincided with her growing scowl.

I didn’t want this to frustrate her, and if we kept going like this, the feeling would become contagious.

I grabbed the remote control I had hooked up to the shutter, and joined her in front of the camera. When I stepped behind her and gripped her hips, her entire back went ramrod straight.

“Relax.” I pulled her closer, to press into her back.

“I’m trying.”

“No pressure.”

She barked a laugh. “Okay. Whatever.”

“I’m serious.” As I talked, I swayed my hips slowly, and moved her to the same beat. “It doesn’t matter what happens here.”

“It does. Getting into the contest rides on this.”

“No. These photos will look incredible if you’re up for it, because you look incredible. But the world won’t end if we need to switch directions. We always make the qualifying round, and we will this year, too.”

“I guess.” Despite the doubt in her voice, her movements were becoming more fluid.

The way she felt, pressed into me, was more tempting than I expected. Her heat. Her weight slightly leaned against me. Thank fuck there were about five billion layers of skirt between her ass and my half-hard cock. “You just have to flow with the movement,” I said. “Supermodels take hundreds of photos to get one good one. We’re allowed to do the same.”

“I’m not a supermodel.”

“You’re prettier.” Time to take this up a notch. I glided my hands up her sides.

She let out an almost imperceptible moan when I teased along the sides of her breasts.

If I pinned her to the wall, bunched those skirts around her hips, and fingered her to orgasm, would that help her relax?

Bad Maddox.

Maybe. But my brain couldn’t make me take the thought back.

I lifted her arms in the air, and let them fall slowly to her sides again, never stopping with the slow dance. Every few seconds, I clicked the button on the camera. With the first few snaps, she went rigid again, but the longer we moved, the more she ignored the sound of pictures being taken.

I hummed, and she snapped her fingers, providing a beat. Before long, we were dancing to our own singing.

When I stepped away, my cock strained against my jeans in protest, wanting to stay close to her. But watching her move was its own pleasure. I kept the a cappella song going, and took my place behind the camera again.

She was captivating. Lost in the beat, and moving with a light abandon that was so perfectly Alys.

I could watch her like this for hours.

A loud bang, more potent than a gunshot, shook the floor, and she and I both jumped.

The lights went out.

What the fuck?

We moved quickly into the main store, and out onto the street, to see several others on the block doing the same.

“What happened?” I asked Aubrey.

Alys yanked my arm. “Onyx.”

There was smoke rising from the back of his shop.

Alys and I broke into a hard run.

Smoke billowed from my storage room, heavy and dark and suffocating. I pushed through it, fire extinguisher in hand, as I headed from the bright glow of flame coming from the far wall. Hissing and foam and pressure erupted from the canister in my hands, and the smoke grew thicker.

But the fire was out.

“*Onyx.*” Alys’s shout carried through the curtains of black.

I half-fumbled, half-felt my way toward the rear entrance. “Meet me out back,” I called.

When I pushed open the door, the fire alarm blared, loud and piercing. I fumbled with my keys for the one that would shut it off. “Too little too late, asshole.”

Dark clouds billowed outside, and slowly floated away in the afternoon sunshine. I looked up that power pole near my shop, and the scorch marks on the transformer.

“What happened? Are you all right? Power’s out on the whole block. Was there a fire?” Alys’s and Maddox’s voices overlapped, and I couldn’t figure out who to answer first.

Instead, I nodded up at the electronics. “It blew. I think something shorted inside and started an electrical fire.” I wasn’t looking forward to seeing the damage done.

“But you’re okay,” Alys said.

I nodded, and finally focused on her. The outfit was eclectic and adorable and made for a delicious distraction from the fact that I was covered in soot from the lungs out. Aubrey outdid herself.

“Did I interrupt?” I asked.

Alys looked down and let out a strained laugh. “I think we’re done for the day. No power and all that. I’m more worried about what happened here.”

“Best guess? The wiring didn’t like the power surge or something.” That was the extent of my knowledge about the subject—not that we could see anything anyway. *Please don’t let there be stock or structural damage.* I had a building inspector coming in less than two weeks, as part of the sales process, and I needed to make sure he didn’t find anything that would keep the transaction from happening.

“Everyone all right back there?” That was Levi calling back from the front of the shop. He was the fire chief.

That was the last thing I needed—the fire department hosing down my stock. “We’re fine. Fire’s out.”

“You sure?” His voice was closer now, and a bright beam of light cut through the dissipating smoke. A moment later, he joined us. “Cute dress.” He glanced at Alys.

I stepped between him and her. “Electrical, I think. I shut the breakers off, not that it matters right now.”

“I’ll take another look. Entire block is out,” Levi said. “You sure everyone’s okay?”

“We’re fine,” Alys assured him.

After a bit more conversation around what to do next, Levi left to check on the stores that weren't spewing smoke, and Alys headed back to Aubrey's to change. When she got back, Adam and Deacon were with her, along with a couple of battery powered lanterns.

I thanked them profusely, then Alys, Maddox and I spent the next few hours figuring out the best way to clear out smoke without electric fans.

The best we came up with was opening every door, and hoping the wind blew it all out.

When the air cleared, I was able to assess the damage. My stock was okay, though it would take a few days to see if the smoke smell lingered in the album covers. The wall where the fire happened was toast, though. Evie came over to give me time and cost estimates.

Money-wise, it wouldn't break me, but I muttered an audible *oh thank God* when she said she could fix the wiring in the next couple of days. She'd have to rip out some walls, which meant replacing the same next week, but she'd have me open again soon. "Thank you. Make it happen."

Alys, Maddox, and I spent the next few hours cleaning up as much as we could. The street's power came on a little after the sunset, but my store would be dark and closed for business until Evie finished. We headed home a short while later, too exhausted to spare a single thought for the competition.

Wednesday, I served as Evie's helper with the wiring, while Alys worked and Maddox developed the prints from their photoshoot back at my house. Years ago, I'd let him convert a portion of unused space that was too big to let sit empty, but too small to be useful for much besides storage.

Running here and there and wherever I was needed let me separate my mind from the stress of the fire and its aftereffects. Because thinking about the damage made me think about if I could delay the inspector or not, and how long I should wait to tell Alys and Maddox I was leaving.

After the competition.

There. It was decided.

A little before noon, Maddox stopped by. “Leaving lunch and photos up here,” he called from the front of the store. “Dropping off the same for Alys and I’ll be back.”

“Thank you,” I shouted.

“Go look at the pics.” Evie didn’t look up from her work. “I’m almost done with this part.”

I headed out to the cash register area, to find things exactly like Maddox said. The smell of grease and fries wafted from a large paper bag, but the stack of black and white images caught my eye and refused to let me go.

The image on top was one of Alys looking like she wanted to be anywhere but in front of the camera, with her skirt fisted in her hands and her gaze pointed at the ground. I was torn between feeling her discomfort, and captivated by her. There were several more that were similar, and the protectiveness that surged inside me caught me off-guard.

When I reached one with her and Maddox, it was like a switch had been flipped in Alys’s attitude. Despite the images being still, I swore I could see them moving. They were fully-clothed, but the way they touched, the way they pressed together, radiated intimacy.

Desire spiked through me. These were hotter and more innuendo-filled than any pornography.

The end of the stack was just Alys again, and she looked so much more at ease. As sexy as she had with Maddox. Bright. Carefree.

I flipped between the three contrasting sets of images, and found myself lingering longer each time on a few of her with Maddox, and a couple with only her, smiling and flirting with the camera.

Fuck, she was captivating. Full, pouty lips. Mischief in her eyes. A playful smile...

It was too easy to fall into fantasies of pushing her onto one of those tables in the photo, or pulling her onto my lap. It didn't matter if the room was packed, no one would see what we could get up to under those skirts. I could leave her squirming. Sighing. Biting back cries of pleasure as she—

“Earth to Onyx.” Evie’s voice yanked me back to reality. “Good pictures?”

Good enough I’d been about to jerk off to them. In the middle of my fucking music store. My cock strained against my jeans. Thank God there was a counter in front of me to hide the reaction. “They turned out all right.”

“Cool.” Her tone was subdued. Did she know...? “I’m gonna run next door to Joystick’s and grab us drinks.”

And I was going to will away my erection in the meantime, rather than texting Alys and telling her if she wanted to sneak in an afternoon quickie with Maddox, she could send me pictures. “Thanks.”

After lunch, Maddox was back to get my vote on which picture to use. Alys’s only request was *promise me you’ll pick a good one*. We narrowed it down to a couple of favorites

between him and me and Evie, and he headed back to Onyx's to paint on the photos in question.

The rest of Wednesday, all of Thursday, and Friday morning were a harried combination of working on the contest piece and putting up new sheetrock in the back room, to replace what was damaged or had to come down for electrical repairs.

We were all ready to go on Friday afternoon, aside from pushing the songs to tape. Alys had the rest of the day off, and she was in the back room with Maddox, Evie, and me. It looked like a demolition site back here, with large patches of wall missing, and a growing pile of construction debris in one corner.

Alys would transfer the songs to tape while Maddox, Evie, and I put sheetrock up.

I had an old boombox set aside that was perfect for the tape-making task. When we went to start it up, it made a horrible squawking sound, and died.

Fuck.

“We could burn it to a CD, instead,” Alys said.

We could. We had ten hours before we had to hand our album in. “Do you have a burner still? And media?”

Alys frowned. “Someone at work might. Adam probably does.”

He didn't. He'd lost any equipment like that in a fire a few years ago, and never replaced the burner because *who uses those things these days?*

We did.

“What about Brandon?” Maddox asked.

Alys shook her head. “Brandon’s in Cabo with Reese and Danny this week.”

“I’ll hit up chat at work. See if anyone can help.” Maddox already had his phone out.

“I’ll search through my stock, see if I have any CD blanks.” Once upon a time I wouldn’t have had to look, but I’d been clearing out some things, packing others up, in anticipation of my move.

Evie set down the spatula she was using to spread mud along tape seams. “Or you could hand me the boombox and see if I can fix it.”

“Yes. Definitely.” Alys pointed Evie toward the device in question.

We all set about our tasks, figuring whoever made headway first was the answer we would go with.

“Do you ever clean this thing?” Evie grumbled as she looked over my tape deck.

I didn’t pull my attention from the boxes I was sifting through. “Probably not in a few years.”

She huffed and walked out of the room.

Okay then.

I was on box number four when she came back with a plastic canister of some sort of cleaning wipes in her hand. She wiped down different components that I couldn’t even begin to name.

“Elliot has a burner,” Maddox said. “But no blanks. He says if we send him the playlist, he can go pick some up, and have the disc waiting for us.”

I didn't like the idea of letting someone else do the transfer. It didn't matter to the competition in the long-run—it was unlikely we would be judged on whether or not the songs we turned in were perfectly balanced, sound-wise.

But it mattered to me.

Still, the clock was ticking, and a basic, boring disc was an entry, where no play list was not.

“Got it,” Evie announced. “Give me a tape.”

Thank fuck. “Thank Elliot profusely, send him the playlist, and let him know he's a back-up,” I said. “Let's make a tape.”

Evie's fixes worked, and between her and Alys, we had the tape deck hooked up to Alys's laptop in a few minutes, to record.

We wrapped everything up with three hours to spare. It seemed like a lot, but Salt Lake was an hour's drive, even at full speed.

Still, plenty of time.

Evie squeezed Alys's hand and waved to Maddox and me as we climbed into the Land Cruiser. “We're all rooting for you,” Evie said.

There was something extra reassuring about knowing that all my neighbors wanted us to succeed as much as we did. It was a kind of familiarity and comfort...

Nope, that felt like a mopey rabbit hole to fall down.

A few minutes later, we hit the freeway with Maddox behind the wheel. This was it, we were on our way.

Half an hour into the drive, on a dark stretch of highway, the landscape in front of us lit up with an endless row of red

taillights.

“Construction?” I already had my phone out.

“Not that we’ve seen,” Alys said.

There was the news, bright as day. “There’s a semi jackknifed up ahead. The entire freeway is closed.”

“Do we wait it out?” Maddox drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

Uncharacteristic for him.

“We don’t know how long until it’s open again. We could be here all night.” I didn’t like that idea at all.

Alys leaned forward between the seats. “Flip it around. We’ll take the other route.”

“That adds at least forty five minutes to the trip,” Maddox argued.

I had to side with Alys on this one. “Sitting here could add a lot more.”

Fortunately, it was late enough at night that when we hit the alternate route, traffic was light, and it was smooth sailing. We took a downtown exit with fifteen minutes to spare.

And we ground to a halt again, with a new glut of cars.

“God damn it,” Alys muttered. “That concert was tonight.”

“The one with...” I didn’t need to finish the thought. We all knew, the pop star with the massive audience who was overfilling stadiums everywhere right now.

We didn’t have a choice but to inch a long, watching minutes tick away faster than meters.

Our destination was only two miles away. We'd park, but there was no room on the streets. One of us could get out and walk, but the foot traffic was so heavy with people milling in giant packs to their cars, even if we were capable of sprinting that distance in the limited amount of time we had.

We didn't pull into the radio station parking lot until nearly twelve-thirty in the morning.

It didn't matter that we were late, we had to try anyway. We ran up to the entrance and tried the door.

Locked.

"Fuuuuuuck," I shouted into the night sky.

The tears that pricked my eyelids were the kind that landed after a fast-paced week of high stress, punctuated by that balloon of anticipation being popped.

We didn't make it.

I dragged in a deep breath and forced myself to be calm. Despite the downs, there were a lot of ups, and we had fun.

Still... The competition was a tradition for us. To not even have a chance to play... Mom would've made it work.

Onyx's phone rang. "It's Markus."

The DJ who hosted the contest? Onyx knew him because Markus was in his shop a lot for obscure albums.

"Hey." Onyx answered.

"Is that you screaming outside my front door?" Markus's question echoed through the tiny phone speaker.

Maddox rolled his eyes. "You think?"

"Are you in this year or not?" Markus asked.

What? My heart dared do a half-flip.

Onyx shook his head. "We're late."

"Everyone was and will be late. You're not listening to my broadcast?" Markus sounded hurt. "We extended the deadline

another four hours. Get your asses in here and hand me the tape.”

As if by magic, I heard the latch on the front door click. When I tried it this time, it pushed open.

Markus was waiting in the lobby with a young woman sitting at the reception desk. I handed her our entry and gave her our information, keeping half an ear on Onyx’s conversation.

“How’d you know it would be a tape?”

Markus chuckled. “Because I know you, man.” He moved behind the woman I was talking to and looked between the case and me. “Love the cover art.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “It’s all on Maddox, really.”

“Nah. I had a perfect model,” Maddox said.

Was I blushing? I was pretty sure I was.

Onyx settled a hand at the small of my back. “Anyway, thanks for staying open.”

“We didn’t do it just for you, but I’m glad you made it.”

We wrapped up, and Maddox, Onyx, and I headed back to Haddarville. We spent most of the trip singing along to our not-abbreviated playlist, at the top of our lungs. It was the ultimate release after everything we’d gone through.

The accident on the freeway was cleaned up, but it was after two when we finally made it to Onyx’s.

We were too wired to sleep, or so we said. But the instant we settled on the couch, my energy evaporated. All three of us leaned into each other, and one yawn became a contagious chorus.

“Come sit on my lap, Bunny.” Onyx pulled me into him. “You might find a carrot in my pocket.”

Yup, this was the level of silliness we’d achieved.

“Why do you call her that?” Maddox asked. He looked at me. “Why does he call you Bunny?”

It wasn’t a strange question, but it was a little odd that he’d never asked before now. “You’re only just wondering?”

“Well, no. But I used to think it was a wonderland reference and then I realized there’s no Wonderland Crew without me, so why would Onyx give you that nickname before he met me, and then every time I remembered to ask, it wasn’t the right time.”

Onyx chuckled. “Your logic, as always, is impeccable. It’s because Alys is a bunny rabbit.”

“That’s too obvious,” Maddox said. “And it feels like it’s missing some details.”

Onyx wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his head on my shoulder. “Say you’re looking at a den of lions. They’re all big and tough and strong, but you really can’t tell just by looking which one is the toughest. And then you notice a little bunny rabbit in the middle of the room. The lions all know she’s there. None of them will hurt her.”

“Still not quite following.” Maddox furrowed his brow.

“The point is, out of all those bad asses, the bunny rabbit survived. And that makes her the baddest ass bitch in the entire bunch. Do you want to take on the bunny rabbit who walks out of a den of lions on her own two feet?” Onyx sounded pleased with himself.

Maddox shook his head. “I do not. Bunny sounds like a perfect name.”

My phone rang, jarring me, and I glared at the screen. Why would...? “It’s Xander.”

“Ung.” Maddox grunted and leaned in to push the *Answer* button. “Wrong number.” He sounded drunk.

“I didn’t call you numb nuts, I called Alys.” Xander didn’t sound like he was having nearly as much fun as we were.

Once again, why was Maddox’s older brother calling *me* in the middle of the night on a Friday? I doubted it was to ask about our contest entry. I pulled away from Maddox and Onyx, letting them tumble into each other, and I walked across the room, to help wake me up.

“Hello,” I said into the phone.

“I’m sorry to call now,” Xander’s tone was rushed and lacking apology. “I have a project I’ve invested in, and they’ve hit a critical snag. I need a top notch developer. Tonight.” He was a venture capitalist with an angel firm that took on a lot of technology investments.

I still didn’t know why he’d called me. “There are other people who are better—”

“There aren’t.” Xander talked over me. “Everyone else I work with tends to specialize. I need you, because you have a broad scope of knowledge, and this tech is... it’s obscure. If you can’t fit this in, tell me now. If you can, I’m paying a top rate plus a completion bonus. I need this fixed tonight. Dominic swears on... something holy probably... that the contract is fair to you.”

The longer Xander talked, the more my brain perked up. I loved challenges like this—it was why I’d built Gage’s

ordering app. The way I got to exercise my brain muscles was always fun.

“Send over all the details, talk me through anything that doesn’t translate well to paper, and I’m on it.” I grabbed my laptop from the kitchen table and relocated to the guest room. Hopefully that would diminish the distraction for Onyx and Maddox.

I spent the next few hours sifting through code, hunting down a critical error, and making changes. I went through multiple rounds of testing with Xander and a programmer he brought on the line.

We were waiting for another round of testing to come back when Xander said, “Did you ever do anything with that algorithm you were working on?”

“The music one?” I had a project I pulled up off and on that dissected songs and compared them on a tonal and beat level. It was kind of a version of *people who listened to may also enjoy...* but it wasn’t driven by sales data. It was all based on the core components of the songs themselves. “I still have it.”

“But you don’t do anything with it.”

“Like what? I use it to find new songs sometimes. But it’s not like there’s a practical application for it.”

Xander scoffed. “You just said otherwise.”

I rolled my eyes at the empty room. “Yeah, but you ever switch music apps? Then you have to train a new one to know what you like, and you have to move your playlists over, and convincing thousands of people to do that with an unknown app? Like I said—no practical application.”

“Hmm.” Xander’s grunt was familiar. But it would be, since it was Maddox’s too.

I was going to ask him to expand on the thought, but our test results came back, and we were on the clock again.

When I finally got sign-off and a solid *we’re good*, the sky was turning from black to gray outside the window.

“I see why Maddox worships you,” Xander said. “Get some sleep. See you Sunday.”

Because a lot of our friends would be gathering with us at Joystick’s to listen to the radio station announce who made it past the qualifying round. “Sounds good.”

“Thank you, Alys.” Xander hung up.

Now that the crisis was over, exhaustion sank in again in an instant. I was barely aware of setting my computer and phone aside, and laying down in bed. But what a great way to end a week like I’d had—getting our qualifying entry handed in and then fixing a random and challenging problem with a new-to-me platform.

When I woke up, Maddox and Onyx were laying on either side of me. I had no memory of them climbing into bed with me. I tried to move, and Maddox draped an arm over me without opening his eyes.

Onyx was watching me though.

“Why are you in here?” I whispered.

“We missed you.”

I didn’t have a reply, and I was too comfortable to remove myself from the three-person pile. The heat and comfort that enveloped me made it easy to drift in and out of dreams filled

with hard bodies pressing in on me, and a reality that was a lot the same.

When consciousness finally slipped in and lingered, I didn't want to move. The week started on a stressful note and never really let up, and now that we had a day of nothing ahead of us, my brain didn't know what to do.

Aside from focusing on how good this felt and that at some point in the last few hours, I tossed and turned enough that I was facing Maddox now, with Onyx behind me.

And Maddox was awake. The way he studied me made my breath catch.

Onyx held me tightly, reminded me of almost a week ago, and climbing into bed with him. The way he'd stayed buried inside me, penetrating me without fucking, while he fingered me...

My desire swelled, tugged to the surface from two directions, making it impossible to ignore.

"You know..." Maddox's tone was playful and too casual given the way my pulse hammered in my ears. "If you two wanted to fuck, I wouldn't mind helping."

I should laugh at the same joke he always made.

Except this wasn't the same.

"Helping, not watching?" Onyx's reply mirrored my thoughts.

Maddox slipped into a sexy, I-don't-give-a-fuck grin that could melt panties—specifically mine right now. "The more I think about it—and I have been thinking about it a lot—the more I realize I'm not much of a *watching* kind of guy. I'm more of a front-and-center person," he said.

Should I question the direction this conversation was taking? I didn't want to. Not to the point where I overthought anything or made the moment vanish. "I'm gonna need a few details. Thinking about what, exactly?"

Maddox dragged his finger down the middle of my chest, holding my gaze and stealing my thoughts. "How good it would feel to bury my cock inside you. To make you come over and over again. To hear you whimper and scream."

Onyx groaned.

Maddox's words flipped a switch in me. The one connected to every erogenous zone in my body.

He trailed a path up my torso again, to lift my chin. "You in?"

I was *so* in.

With one exception, and I hated myself that I needed this assurance. I pressed two fingers to his lips, but didn't push him away. Onyx and I had already talked about this to death, but I needed to know Maddox understood the rules too.

"If we keep doing what we're doing," I said, "You have to promise me that sex doesn't change our friendship. That it doesn't magically change what we are to each other." Because I couldn't lose him.

Nope. That wasn't a sexy thought, and I definitely wanted sexy.

Maddox kissed the tips of my fingers, then nipped along the same path. "Cross my heart, nothing will change the way I feel about you."

His phrasing tried to stick in my mind. Tried to distract me. But the way his mouth pressed to mine erased my

rambling thoughts. There was a playfulness in the way he grazed his teeth over my skin and danced his fingers along my arms.

Having Onyx behind me—strong, warm, and nuzzling my neck—amplified Maddox’s touches.

Maddox trailed his mouth across my jaw and down my neck. Past my collar and over my shoulder. I let out a light laugh when he kissed my bicep, and the tattoo I had of a patch of cherry blossoms.

“I always wondered if these tasted like cherries,” he licked the image.

What an odd and wonderful thing to say. “Do yours taste like anything?” I asked.

“Don’t know. There aren’t many of mine that I can reach to lick. But I’m pretty sure....” He leaned past me, trapping me between him and Onyx in a delicious press, and licked Onyx’s neck. “Yup. Salty.”

I giggled in spite of myself. Onyx’s laugh was drier, but he was still amused.

Maddox resumed kissing me. My mouth, my neck, and my ears. The palms of my hands. Anywhere there was exposed skin. “I’m torn.” His voice was muffled.

“About what?” I was sucked into the way he made even this a game. I loved it.

“It would be so much fun to spend the day exploring you,” Maddox scraped his teeth along my bottom lip. “Seeing what makes each of you grunt and groan and scream.”

He meant Onyx, too. The notion cranked my desire up, rather than muting it.

“But...?” Onyx prompted.

Maddox’s chuckle sent shivers of anticipation racing up my spine. “I really want to know what it feels like to fuck Alys.”

Yes, please.

Onyx teased his fingers along my hips. “It’s pretty incredible.”

“See? That’s what I’m talking about.” Maddox traced a light line with one fingernail over my shirt, along the top of my breasts.

Heat flooded my face, and, well, everywhere, at the combination of their touches and words. “I’m just me.” They were acting like I was something special.

“She gets so wet when she’s turned on.” Onyx dipped his fingers under my waistband to brush a more sensitive patch of skin.

“What turns her on?” Maddox asked.

Pretty much everything about this moment was going on the list. A part of me said I should be bothered, the way they were talking like I wasn’t here. But the fact that each of them kept touching me. Teasing me...

Onyx tugged down the neck of my shirt, to lightly bite my shoulder. “If I just start listing things, you don’t get the fun of exploring.”

“I do like exploring. And fun.” Maddox caught one of my earlobes between his teeth and tugged, drawing a gasp from me. “You like that.”

“I do.” To be fair, neither of them had done something I didn’t like.

“You like your breasts played with?” Maddox cupped both and kneaded lightly.

I’d like it more if there wasn’t clothing in the way.

Before I could say anything, Onyx tugged up on the bottom of my shirt. “Not like that.” He pulled the clothing over my head, while Maddox unhooked my bra.

Maddox’s touch on my bare skin, his tongue flicking over my nipple, zinged through me like a lightning bolt.

“That’s pretty good too.” How I managed to form a full sentence, with him licking and sucking on my skin, was a mystery. “There is something I’m not fond of, though.” I was teasing, and also desperate to feel more of both of them. Their bare skin on mine. The heat of all three of our naked bodies pressed together.

“What’s that?” Maddox asked.

“You’re both still dressed. You should fix that.”

maddox

It was fun to strip away our clothes, especially since we took our time. I kept pausing to kiss new bits of Alys. To let her tease her fingers over my skin. To admire how fucking incredible Onyx looked. But eventually, all three of us were naked.

Not that I was complaining about drawing out the fun.

I trailed my mouth along Alys's body, memorizing every sigh and gasp my touch elicited.

Maybe it was because we were running on adrenaline and fumes, but earlier, I'd wilted when I saw her walk away talking to Xander. We were supposed to be celebrating, and she was going to go do contract work in the other room?

Onyx had tugged me to bed, but when I heard Alys hang up I had to see her. He hadn't argued.

And the longer I'd laid next to her, next to both of them, the more the heat and desire sank in. It wasn't all because of the photoshoot the other day, but those lingering memories intensified a need I'd barely held back for a while now.

I pressed my bare skin to hers and leaned into taste Onyx's kiss. Thank fuck we weren't doing that whole *hands off* thing tonight. Kissing him was as fun, but in an entirely different way than kissing Alys.

I lost track of whose hands were where. I was brushing my fingers over Alys's skin and teasing between her thighs, or stroking Onyx's cock just enough to draw a moan. Heat pressed into my legs. My hands. We ground against each other. I loved the blur of naked desire and playfulness. Loved that everyone was allowed to touch everyone. That the connection between all three of us was a heavy cord that bound us.

The colorful flowers on the outside of Aly's thigh called to me, and I dipped my head to take a lick of the tattoo. I loved that most of her ink was bright and cheery, compared to the stark black of Onyx's band images. Regardless of what she believed, every single one had its own flavor.

I slid my mouth from her leg to Onyx's, then back to hers. This wasn't the first time I'd had sex with two people at once, but it had never felt *free* like this. I could do this with both of them forever. Have friendship and great sex. These people I could say or do anything with or to.

Kissing up Alys's thighs, I memorized every bump and dip and the sounds each new touch plucked from her. I wanted to make her come with my mouth, my fingers, and anything else, and then I wanted to bury myself inside her.

And probably immediately nut.

Which was why I would make sure she enjoyed all of this, before then.

When I reached her pussy and dragged my tongue over her slick core, she purred and bucked against my face.

I was already hard, my cock brushing the comforter each time any of us moved. If she kept reacting like that, I was going to drill a hole in the mattress while I ate her out.

Onyx was behind her, playing with her breasts while he sucked and bit her shoulder. He'd left at least a couple of marks, and those would be delicious to examine and kiss better in the morning.

Tonight I had a more immediate goal. I liked Alys's skin, tasting her juices and dragging along her slit, until she was squirming and whimpering and knotting her fingers in my hair. She was yanking tightly enough to hold my head in place—a good indicator to me that I should keep doing what I was doing, but crank it up.

When I drove my tongue inside her, she gasped. That was a good sign. I stroked my fingers around her clit while I licked her inner walls.

“Oh, fuck, Maddox. Please don't stop.” Her whimper was as yummy as she was.

I had no intention of stopping. I licked and sucked and stroked and pushed until she was writhing and gasping. When she pulled my hair, a new zing of desire filled me, and when she clenched around my tongue, when she came, my dick jerked with every movement of her body.

And when she finally let me go, and I pulled away, Onyx was there, urging me up her body. Claiming my mouth and kissing me, while he licked Alys from my lips. He dove his tongue into my mouth, hungry and controlling. The entire time, Alys was pressed between us.

Onyx released me, seeming reluctant. I moved Alys enough to lay her on the bed and straddle her legs. To bury my face in her neck and lick away the salty drops of perspiration while I inhaled her scent and listened to her catch her breath.

Onyx broke away from us to get condoms and lube. I was happy to make sure Alys stayed warm by covering her with more kisses, my cock pressed into her thigh and grinding while I worked my mouth over her upper torso.

We were both enjoying it, but I had to stop or I was going to come from dry humping her leg.

Fortunately, Onyx wasn't gone long.

I rolled on a condom and rolled onto my back, tugging Alys toward me. "I want to watch you ride me." I guided her to straddle my legs. "I want to see as much of you as I can."

There was more to the request than that. I wanted Onyx inside her at the same time I was. Plus, this gave me direct access to her clit, to make her come again, and maybe I could hold out a little longer if I didn't hammer inside her the moment she wrapped around my cock.

And that was way too many thoughts for now. When Alys slid down me, her tight, wet opening enveloping me, my mind switched to *so good*.

I reached up to tilt her gaze to mine. To lock my eyes on hers. "Do you think you can take us both?" I asked.

Her flush deepened, pink spreading across her pale, smooth skin. "I won't know unless I try."

Fuck. Yes. I slid my hands up her back and pulled her into me.

Onyx's touch slipped along my cock as he coaxed Alys's opening. Between the two of us, we teased and stretched.

She grunted and gasped.

"Is it too much?" Onyx asked.

Alys shook her head. “It hurts, but it feels *really* good.”

He kissed her shoulder. “That’s my Bunny.”

It took a lot of lube and some finger gymnastics, and then Onyx was buried inside her too, his cock resting against mine.

Officially also incredible.

There wasn’t much thrusting like this, and what there was took timing. Fortunately, Onyx could keep a beat. We built to a slow rocking, while I teased my thumb over Alys’s clit. The faces she made, the sounds that tore from her throat, were as much a feast as the way she felt.

Her gasps stuttered, and her breath caught, and she let out a long cry when she came again, clenching around both of us. The new spasms were enough to push me over the edge. I came hard, jerking inside her. Friction built as I rubbed against Onyx. Against Alys.

This was so fucking good. Right. The way Onyx reacted, his groans and grunts and the long stall before he resumed rocking, told me he was coming too.

As we all slowed to a stop, the world slowed with us.

We were part of each other in a way I didn’t think there were words to describe. It didn’t matter where we’d come from, what our pasts or our families were—they were the two people in this world who were mine. Who I belonged with.

After passing out for many hours, we spent our Saturday relaxing. Playing music. I made up some random tunes and Alys played along on whatever was nearby to use for drums. Onyx would make suggestions, then sing along with us.

I loved every second of it.

Joystick's was filling up rapidly when we got there on Sunday. Normally he was closed today, like almost everyone on the street, but most of our friends had come out for the announcement and to celebrate-slash-mourn with us.

Not that there would be any tears—we'd make it through the qualifying round like we always did.

Joystick had a buffet set up, and had pushed all of the tables and chairs into big islands in the middle of the dining room. I would foot the bill at the end of it all, and that was great with me. As long as we all had fun.

I was mildly surprised to see my brother here, and far less surprised to see his partners weren't. It wasn't that he wasn't supportive, but the three of them were like a match made in a little workaholic corner of heaven that I could admit existed, but that I never wanted to visit.

There was too much world out there to spend life chained to a non-stop schedule.

Xander approached us with a wave. He gave me a nod, and I returned the gesture.

"Alys, thank you again for yesterday," he said. "Can I borrow you for a minute?"

"Sure." She followed him to a quieter corner of the room.

I didn't like the spike inside that threatened to choke me. What the fuck was my problem? Why did I care that Xander and Alys stood a few feet away, talking and laughing?

"Dude." Adam smacked my arm. "You're gonna glare a hole in the wall."

I rubbed my eyes and turned toward him. "I'm fine."

“So is she. As in, I guarantee you, she doesn’t see him that way.”

What way? My gaze drifted toward Alys again. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Onyx joined us. “Why are we glaring at the corner?”

“Fuck off. I’m not glaring.” Was I?

“I can help if you want,” Onyx said. “Make them feel *really* uncomfortable.”

“Or, you could hear me out about something entirely different.” Adam stepped in front of me.

I looked past him, still watching Alys. “Like what?”

Onyx grabbed my shoulders and turned me ninety degrees.

Right. I was being weird. Not even in a fun way.

“I posted that video you gave me,” Adam said.

That video? The one with the incredible footage of Alys and me... But I’d cut that part out of what Adam got. “Cool.”

“It got so. Many. Hits. Like, a thousand views.”

I knew that was nothing, but for Adam it was big. “Way cool.” I should be more involved in this conversation.

“Exactly,” Adam said. “You’re filming tonight, aren’t you?”

My brain caught up to everything he’d said. People watched us. People might want us to be ourselves. That was pretty wicked, to be honest. “Yeah. We really should.” I was more enthusiastic now.

“*Exactly.*” Adam sounded excited.

Onyx looked between us. “I’m a little worried you two might be starting to share a brain.”

I snorted. “More like jealous.”

“Who’s jealous?” Alys rejoined us.

“Maddox.” Adam sold me out, and like that, his idea was no longer brilliant. “Of how much Xander wanted to eat you up.”

“Not even close. It was all business stuff,” Alys said.

Good. Rather, of course it was. And I was getting my camera so we could film tonight. “I’ll be back.” I headed out to my truck to grab my gear, and was back a moment later, setting up the tripod.

There were so many people here. Aubrey and Evie of course. And if Evie was anywhere, there was a good chance Gage was, though he was here to cheer us on, too. His business partner, Knox, sat with them. Cash, who owned the garage. Rohde, Camden, and Neil. Brooke, Eli, Lyndsay, and Kandace.

And a dozen more.

Deacon and Aubrey were even acting friendly tonight.

I may not like sharing my name with this town, but the people were fucking awesome.

Half the people. There was a divide in Haddarville between those who belonged to the local religion and those of us who didn’t. Over the last couple of years, the *not* crowd had grown and gotten more vocal.

I didn’t care who anyone worshiped, as long as they had the same respect for my beliefs, or lack thereof.

I stood behind my camera, watching what it was recording and making sure it was set to just *go* for the next little bit.

“You seeing what I’m seeing?” Adam asked.

I looked through the viewfinder at the biggest group in the middle of the room. The three tables shoved together. The group of friends gathered around, with Onyx in the middle. “I hope not, because that would mean some serious Last Supper vibes.”

“Exactly.”

I shook my head. “First of all, Onyx isn’t anyone’s savior—not a cool analogy—and second, no one’s going anywhere.”

“Yeah, no. I didn’t mean that. Just the visual is all.”

“Maddox, come on,” Onyx shouted. “It’s starting soon.”

I shook aside the weird feeling that lingered with Adam’s observation, and we joined everyone rather than hanging out on the fringes. I stole Alys from Aubrey’s lap to tug her into mine.

“We have more chairs,” Joystick said.

Alys squirmed in my lap. “I’m good, unless this one gets too hard.”

We all chatted for a few minutes, but when the radio countdown stopped, and Markus came on the air, all conversation stopped.

Markus read through the team names who had qualified, giving a little bit of information about each, and talking about their entries. Some names were familiar and others were brand new.

Most everyone hissed when he read last year's winning team. Not that we had any issue with them, but they stood between us and victory.

And then he was done.

"Was that twenty?" Aubrey asked.

Aubrey grabbed a napkin and pulled a pen from her purse. "I think so?" She scribbled names. "Help me remember them all."

"That was only nineteen." I was certain. Because I hadn't been counting, but our name hadn't been in there.

And we had to have made it.

Didn't we?

"Last but never least." Markus started talking again as if he wasn't obliterating our world, and several people in Joystick's *shushed* each other. "A crowd favorite every year—The Wonderland Crew."

There was a heartbeat of silence in the bar, and then a deafening roar of cheers erupted in the room. Everyone high-giving us. Hugging us.

It didn't matter that us getting in was basically a given—we were that kind of creative—the celebration was still fun.

"Shush, everyone." Alys's voice didn't carry above the bedlam. "Quiet please." She couldn't shout loud enough.

I urged her to her feet, "just for a second," climbed on my chair, and shouted, "*Hey.*"

Every pair of eyes in the room turned toward me. "Shut the fuck up, so we can hear what the actual contest is."

There was a wave of laughter, but most everyone faded off, and Markus's voice was distinct again coming from the sound system.

He was explaining that the challenge was to recreate six album covers per team—our choice. The rules were similar to what we'd just done—nothing digital. There were some exceptions to which albums we could choose—for instance nothing Beatles, because those were too iconic, and also because they didn't want dozens of White albums and Abbey Roads to have to ignore.

The goal was to make them as creative as possible, and that was where the scavenger hunt part of things came in. Finding locations. Finding props for the pictures. The albums had to be recognizable still, and points were awarded for creativity over artistic talent. The idea mattered most.

As always, we had two weeks, and the prize was a thousand bucks. Not a big deal, but it was the trophy that we wanted. The same trophy that got passed around every year, and always looked tackier than the previous year by the time it made it to each new winner.

Alys had big plans to decorate that gaudy thing and make it ours. She deserved that chance.

Best of all though, the winner got bragging rights and to pick the playlist for the radio station for an entire week.

This was going to be the most epic three weeks in history. I was so excited.

We were at Joystick's for a few hours after the announcement, but things slowly wound down and people headed home, until it would've been rude for us to make Joystick keep the place open any later tonight.

We thanked him for letting us take over for the evening, and Alys, Maddox, and I loaded camera equipment into Maddox's SUV. As we were getting ready to climb in ourselves, a familiar voice stopped us.

"Maddox." It was his father. "I didn't realize you were in town."

All three of us stalled and turned, like some sort of exaggerated encounter in a movie. Alexander Sr—who I was pretty sure would die before he shortened his name—looked like an older, gruffer version of Xander, minus the tattoos.

"It's competition time." Maddox's voice was tight.

I stepped closer, half angling myself between him and his father. The way Senior tended to talk to Maddox, I wouldn't have it most nights, but especially not this one.

Maddox's father raised his brows. "You're still doing that? Aren't you a little old for that?"

“Yes. We’re still doing that.” All of the cheer was gone from Maddox’s voice.

Senior let out a tight sigh. “Well, good to see you.” It didn’t sound like he meant it. “Have a good night.” He stepped around us and walked away.

Maddox clenched his fists. If this was anything like most of the pair’s encounters, he was wondering if there was anything he could say that would give him the last word.

Not really. Not that would land with the desired impact.

I was close with my own Mom and Dad, even though they’d moved out of state when they retired. But Maddox’s father treated him like the family shame, and I loathed it. I grabbed his keys from him and nudged him into the passenger seat. “We should get home.”

The best thing to do now was to distract him. Over the years I’d learned that he’d talk if he was ready, but for the most part, he preferred to *get over the inevitable* as he put it, and move on.

Alys climbed into the back seat, I pointed us toward my house, and drove. “What are we thinking, cover-wise?” I asked.

“Beck. Loser.”

I couldn’t hide my wince at Maddox’s response. It was unusual for him to crash this hard with such a short exchange.

Alys leaned forward between the two front seats. “Do you really want to work with that much red? How about Nirvana’s Nevermind?”

“Naked baby?” Maddox wrinkled his nose. “Besides, that’s almost as iconic as Abbey Road.” He made it sound like a bad

thing.

“I was thinking Naked adult,” Alys said.

“I’m pretty sure Weird Al already did that.” I didn’t know if it mattered though. “And are we allowed to do nudity?”

“I didn’t see anything against it in the rules.” Of course Maddox had checked for that.

And if we could get risqué... “What about Blood, Sugar, Sex, Magik?”

Alys’s let out an amused huff. “Fuck yeah. The two of you would look pretty good in nothing but strategically placed socks.”

“That’s true, we would.” The frustration in Maddox’s voice was fading, replaced with amusement. “Are you going to wear socks on your tits, Alys?”

Interesting visual. I liked it.

“No.” She didn’t hesitate. “You’re going to have to recruit for the other half of the band.”

I pretended to pout as I parked the vehicle in front of my house. “That’s no fun. You’re one of the crew.”

“I vote with him.” Maddox hopped out, as energetic as usual. He opened Aly’s door.

She *tsked* and handed him his camera equipment before climbing out. “You vote with him for me to wear socks on my nipples. Uh-huh.”

“Sock pasties—it’ll be the newest BikBok trend.” Yup, Maddox was back to himself.

Alys laughed. “They can have it.”

Inside, we spent a few minutes putting away things like camera gear and kicking off our shoes.

“You know, if we drifted into the bedroom now, we could just conveniently forget to go our own ways before we fell asleep tonight,” Maddox said.

I glanced at Alys, who shrugged. “Hard logic to argue with,” she said.

And now my mind was drifting back to yesterday. Sex with Alys was always fun, but that had been different. *More* in a way I couldn’t define beyond that. Not that the three of us would make a habit of it, but I also wouldn’t mind if it happened again.

We got comfortable on my bed, with me sitting cross-legged, Alys tucking her legs to the side, and Maddox stretching his out in front of him. It wasn’t an idyllic painting of people in the park, or Norman Rockwell, but to me, it was a pretty good sight.

“Album covers.” It seemed Maddox was going to keep brainstorming, which was fine with me. “We could go with a naked theme.”

Alys frowned. “Or, we could not.”

“But... But... Naked.” Maddox made it sound like that was all the reason he needed.

Though I suspected he was having fun more than being serious. “Or we could save the naked time for the three of us.” That wasn’t where I meant to go with my response, but I did like the sound of more of that level of intimacy.

Maddox scrunched up his face, then relaxed. “I guess. As long as I get to play either way.”

Yeah, I'd definitely repeat the fun we had yesterday. "I'm not taking it off the table, unless we don't come up with our six covers."

"Let's decide then." The way Maddox shifted, his posture straightening and the teasing vanishing from his voice, was like a switch had been flipped. This was the Maddox who took the topic at hand seriously, and it wasn't just because of the vague promise of nakedness.

This meant something to him.

"Nakedness is novel, but it's not super creative," Maddox said. "What about Follow the Leader?"

Painted image of a hopscotch dirt path up a cliff side with a girl at the edge? Definitely distinct.

"Intriguing." Alys tilted her head. "We'd need to recreate the path."

"We could paint it." Well, *we* couldn't. But we knew artists.

Maddox pulled his phone out. "Taking notes. "We could build it, either full-sized, or probably scale model, and do a sort of double exposure with Alys at the end."

"I'm not modeling for all of these."

I understood where Alys was coming from, and I wasn't going to push the issue, as much as I enjoyed watching her as a general rule.

"I agree." Maddox jabbed at his phone. "I want to be on at least a few."

A few as if we were doing an entire collection of them. Still, "You could shave your head and do Journeys' Frontiers with the right makeup," I said.

Maddox raked his fingers through his hair. “I’m not cutting off this amazing mop. I’d wear a skullcap though. Are we voting for those two?”

Were we? I exchanged a questioning look with Alys.

“If we list all the covers we think are cool, it’ll take us a century to narrow them down,” she said.

I tended to agree. “So long as we have ideas, let’s go with the first we think of.”

“Then we have our first two.” Maddox made a note of it.

Within the next hour or so, we had our full list. The other four albums were Rush, Exit Stage Left. Beastie Boys, Paul’s Boutique. The Rascals, Once Upon a Dream. The Motels, Shock.

I was disappointed we had to end there—we had so many more great designs to pick from—but that proved Alys’s earlier point. We had to stop now, or we’d be doing this for years.

We spent more time getting together rough ideas for how we’d make each one happen, and relaxed more and more until we were laying on each other and next to each other as the buzz of the day faded, and exhaustion sank in.

I could get used to waking up next to Alys and Maddox.

Except that I couldn’t, because in less than a month I was leaving.

The thought jarred me in a way it never had, and I shook the reaction aside as I climbed out of bed. I was wiping the

sleep from my eyes when my phone rang.

“Come in,” Maddox called in a drowsy voice, never opening his eyes.

My chuckle died when I looked at my screen and saw my realtor’s name. Not a call I could take in front of my friends, and not one I felt comfortable ignoring if she was calling this early.

I wandered from the room and closed the door behind me as I hit *Answer*. “Hello.”

“Hey. What’s your schedule like today?” Helen got right down to business.

“Same as most days. Why?”

She let out an abbreviated sigh. “The buyer wants to send his own inspector.”

What? “Where did this come from? Why?” The financing agreement was based on an independent third party. Sending someone in this late in the game wouldn’t change anything. And why today? *Now?*

“Their agent said they want some extra information. That’s all I have. Their guy is going to be in your part of the state today and wants to know if he can stop by this afternoon.”

At least they didn’t ask to stop by last week, while my back room was torn apart and an electrical hazard. Still, the timing could be better. I’d have to come up with a reason for Alys and Maddox to stay away this afternoon that wouldn’t make them question anything.

As if summoned by my thoughts, Alys and Maddox wandered into the kitchen.

I didn't like the idea of lying to them. I was already keeping this secret, and that was devouring me now that they were here. Judith was making Alys work a light-slash-half-day schedule all week, and having her take next week off. Apparently Alys had been stockpiling vacation, and was being *forced* to use it and take a break.

Judith wanted most everyone to believe she was one step away from being the Wicked Witch of the West, but I'd seen her with Maddox. She was basically Big Sister—a nice one, not a mean, overbearing one.

I'd have to play this afternoon by ear. If I over thought what to say, it'd become a production and make things more complicated than they needed to be. Maybe I'd tell them this was an inspector for Evie's electrical work, or...

I'd figure it out.

Right now, Maddox was pouring himself a bowl of cereal and Alys was putting on coffee. The three of us navigated around each other without much conversation, as we grabbed mugs, cream, sugar, and food. They'd been here a week, and it already felt normal, having them be part of my morning.

Maddox dropped into a chair at the table. "I was thinking about the Follow the Leader cover."

"What about it?" Alys leaned against the counter and sipped her drink.

"Cousin Ravyn moved to town a few months ago..." The way he trailed off made it sound like he expected us to know exactly what he meant.

I knew that Maddox's *cousins* rarely were. Rather, they all shared the founder of this town as a relative, five generations

back, but *cousin* usually meant third or fourth, rather than first cousin, including Ravyn Miller.

I hadn't realized Maddox knew her though. "You've met Ravyn?"

"Once or twice. Sort of." Maddox shrugged. "I know enough to call her and ask if she's willing to talk to us this afternoon."

"About...?" I was still waiting for the *why* of it all.

Alys scoffed. "You've seen her art, right? If she could do the backdrop for us, that would be so amazing."

Logic I couldn't argue with. Plus it meant they'd be occupied this afternoon when the inspector came by. "Cool. I'm in." Or out. Or whatever.

I headed to my record store, and most of the day passed like any other.

The inspector showed up on time, and we exchanged names and a handshake.

"I'll let you know when I'm done." He stepped toward the back room.

I followed. "I made sure I could join you."

"Why?" His question held a hard edge.

I'd walked through with the mortgage's company's inspector, and they hadn't flinched. "I'm curious to see how it goes."

"I don't want to waste your time. I can come get you." The words were obliging, but his tone wasn't.

I might be reading too much into the brief exchange, but his response to my reasonable request set me on edge. "I

cleared my schedule for you. It's not a waste."

"All right. Let's get started." His frown was solidly in place.

He made his way through a similar process that the previous person had, checking various portions of the structure, walls, flooring, and ceiling. Nothing was new about the process until we walked into the back room.

He looked at the freshly sheet-rocked wall. "What happened?"

Why would he assume anything happened? Maybe I just wanted to replace a portion of my wall. Still, I wasn't going to lie about the incident. "A nearby transformer overloaded, and there was an electrical fire. All the wiring has been replaced by a licensed electrician."

"I see." He snapped several photos of the area. "So that's an ongoing risk—this building catching fire due to faulty wiring."

"As much of a risk as it is anywhere. As in, it was a random occurrence, and it's only ever happened once."

"Uh-huh. For now." He made a note on his phone.

I wanted to argue further, but I was a step away from calling the man an idiot, and it wasn't as though I knew how to do his job.

We wrapped up, and he promised that I and the buyer would have his report in the next couple of days. I couldn't ignore the ill-ease inside, as he left.

Since Saturday, every time I'd let my mind drift, it wanted to rush back to sex with Maddox and Onyx. To how incredible it felt for all three of us to be exploring each other.

Now, as Maddox drove us to Ravyn's house, at the edge of town, was one of those times. What would normally be comfortable silence with his playlist of the day as background music was my brain remembering every touch and kiss and moan of pleasure.

My skin flushed thinking about it, and my pulse raced, and I was as terrified as I was aroused. Casual sex with Onyx had never been a hang-up. Why did the other day feel different? Why did it feel like I was letting my defenses down?

Why couldn't the three of us be more than friends?

The thought came out of nowhere, and the instant my mind formed the words, fear sank in.

"Are you all right?" Maddox glanced sideways at me.

Fuck. I didn't mean to whimper out loud. I summoned an air of calm. "I'm good."

The part of me who remembered being hurt in the past was trying to sabotage the bit of me who just wanted some

incredible sex with my friends, but that was fine. Nothing to worry about there.

Right?

Just because Maddox was so sweet when I thought I was pregnant, and then when I found out I wasn't... Just because Onyx was always there for me...

I wasn't looking to declare my love for either one of them. Nope. Not now. Not ever. Because I couldn't lose either of them. I definitely couldn't choose between either of them, and that felt like it would make things worse.

There was no reason for me to risk the incredible friendship we all had—even the great sex—by wanting *more*. They were incredible friends, and I was happy I got to keep them that way.

We parked in Ravyn's driveway and I forced off the faucet of thoughts in my head. Like most of the houses out here, this had been a farm at one point, but over the decades, the family who owned it moved on to other things, and sold off portions of the land. Now it was mostly a cute old house surrounded by a little land, with a large barn sitting back from the road a little ways.

Maddox couldn't find a doorbell so we knocked on Ravyn's door, and she answered a moment later. She was a little taller than me, and her hair was a natural auburn that seemed to mock my own fading pink. She was about the same age as us.

Maddox handed out official introductions, and her handshake was warm and firm.

"Now that you're here in person, explain better what you're looking for," Ravyn said.

Easiest request I would handle all week. “The album cover, Follow the Leader?”

“We’re looking to recreate it for a scavenger hunt. We’re looking for *you* to recreate it. We’ll pay you for your time.” Maddox finished my thought without missing a beat.

“Oh yeah, that radio station thing. Wicked.” Ravyn closed the front door behind her and stepped off the porch. “Follow me.”

Okay. She led us down a packed dirt path that ran along the side of the house and toward the barn. “How big are we talking?” She asked. “Because you need to take pictures in front of it, right?”

How big was too big? “We’re not sure.”

“In other words, magical made-up size? Sure. I can do that.” Her tone was teasing and light. She unlocked a giant padlock on the double barn doors and swung one open. The outside looked like every other barn in this town, but inside was a whole different story.

She’d put in a floating wood floor, and paint-splattered drop sheets decorated different sections. There was an easel with a canvas on it, but the pencil lines didn’t mean anything to me. They hadn’t taken a shape yet that I recognized.

Several narrow stalls lined the walls, stacked with more canvases and paintings. “I love it in here.”

“Isn’t it the perfect workspace?” She grinned. “And when I blast the music, the neighbors don’t complain.”

“We need something like this for the band.” Maddox looked around the room. “Or... I could set up so many scenes here.”

That probably sounded bad to someone who didn't know Maddox.

Ravyn raised her eyebrows. "Scenes? As in..."

"Photography." If Maddox caught her confusion, it didn't show in his expression.

"So, not like bondage scenes," Ravyn said. "Because the rafters are probably strong enough for ropes."

I liked the visuals, but I shook the thought aside to play with later. "Photography for now."

"For now." Ravyn smirked. "In that case, check these out." She pointed us toward what looked like an older pair of barn doors, leaning against a far wall. "I pulled those when I remodeled. Do you think that'll work, size-wise, for your cliff?"

Maddox approached the giant wooden structures. "Fuck me, they're perfect. But..." He faced us with a frown. "There is a small catch. I hope it's small? It might not be small. How quick can you do it, because entries are due in two weeks."

That was no time at all for what we were asking.

Ravyn screwed up her face. "Give me a couple of days to rough out a mock-up, and if you like it, I can wrap it up by the end of the weekend."

"Are you serious? Are you sure?" I shouldn't question it, because that was awesome news.

"Positive. Come back Wednesday afternoon to sign off, and I'll make it happen."

"You are awesome, thank you." I'd hug her if I was the kind of person who initiated hugs.

The three of us talked about a few more details, then Maddox and I were on our way. As we were driving back to Onyx's, Xander called me. A shadow crossed over Maddox's face when I said his brother's name, but the look vanished behind an impassive mask as quickly as it appeared.

"Have you got a minute to talk?" Xander asked when I answered.

When I talked to him last night at Joystick's, he'd asked me more questions about my music-matching algorithm. I hadn't shown nearly as much restraint as I probably should have, as I assaulted him with so many technical details. "Sure. What's up?"

"I've been thinking a lot about this thing you wrote."

He had?

"And I have an offer for you," Xander said.

"Okay?"

"Your idea has a lot of potential. If you build it up, make a couple of additions based on my specifications—if you're interested—I'll help you sell it."

He couldn't be serious. He thought someone might be interested in my little project? "For real?" That wasn't the brightest question I could've asked, but it was the best I could come up with while I was in shock.

"Of course *for real*. Do I strike you as the kind of guy who makes up offers like this for fun?" Xander said.

No. Not even close. "I'd love to. That sounds awesome." Much better answer. "What do I have to do?"

"I'll email you the details. You've got something good there, Alys. I'm excited about this."

“Me too. Thank you.” I tried to keep my voice cool and calm, despite the fact that I was freaking out inside about what an awesome opportunity this was.

As I hung up and looked at Maddox, the news lodged in my throat. He was scowling at the road.

“Are you all right?” Did I miss something while I was talking to Xander?

“Yeah, totally good.” He gave a brief shake of his head, and a smile snapped into place. “That sounded like an exciting call.” He parked behind Onyx’s shop. “You should tell us both about it.”

“Yes. Totally, yes.” I’d never known Maddox to hide his feelings, and I had to take him at face value that he wasn’t doing so now. Besides, once he heard, he’d be excited too. His encouragement had kept me going on this project when I started it.

We found Onyx in back, staring at the new spot of wall from last week, and wearing a scowl.

“Is it haunted?” I asked.

He jumped, looking startled as he focused on us. “Possibly. Thinking of getting out the Ouija board later and asking the spirits to commune with me. How’d it go?”

“Ravyn’s in,” Maddox said before I could. “And Alys got some awesome news from Xander.”

Was that sarcasm?

No. Why would it be?

“What kind of news?” Onyx sounded genuinely interested.

Giddiness bubbled inside. “He wants me to develop music match some more—not the final name, we’ll probably have to come up with a better one. He thinks he can sell it.” I tried to keep the explanation short, but couldn’t help an excited squeal at the end.

Maddox’s frown and Onyx’s pursed lips were far from the excited answers I’d expected.

“Isn’t that awesome?” Maybe I hadn’t conveyed my excitement properly. “Something I wrote, this thing you both helped me design, and he thinks it can be for more than just us.”

“So you’ll be working with him a lot for a while,” Maddox said.

“And that means a lot of extra work, on top of the job and the contest,” Onyx added.

Which meant keeping my mind busy and a chance to prove I wasn’t a failure with no direction or purpose. “Probably. It’s not like the contest will suffer, if that’s what you’re worried about.” My joy was souring.

“It’s awesome news.” Onyx relaxed. “I mean it. I’m just worried about you.”

Why? “Because I get to do something I’m excited about?”

He clenched his jaw. “Because...” His nostrils flared as he let out a long exhale. “I don’t want you to burn yourself out, like you did after...”

After I broke up with Don, I’d thrown myself into work hard. So much so that I crashed a short while later. Burned out. Not wanting to do anything but watch reruns and eat chocolate. “That’s not what this is. I’m talking about a huge opportunity.”

“I know.” More of Onyx’s scowl faded. “And I really am happy for you, as long as you promise to be careful.”

“Of what?” How was I getting shit for such exciting news?

“I think it’s awesome.” Maddox gave me a hug, but his tone didn’t match his words. “Congratulations.”

This wasn’t how things were supposed to be at all. What was I missing?

maddox

Standing in Onyx's back room, surrounded by records and tapes and all the things that were typically so awesome, the only one that mattered at this moment was Alys, and her scowl was devouring me.

I was being shitty about her news, and I needed to stop.

It wasn't like I thought Xander was going to steal her away. He was *very* devoted to the people he loved, and Alys wasn't interested in someone big and bossy and grumpy like him anyway.

The way she lit up when she was talking to him today, though, and the smile she wore last night in Joystick's... I wanted to do that for her. I wanted to be the reason she beamed like she'd just gotten the best news in the universe.

Instead, I'd made her scowl, like she'd found a worm in her apple.

"It's fantastic news." I made sure my enthusiasm was clear. "I really do think it's a great chance."

"Yeah?" Alys seemed to relax.

"In case you don't know, we think you're brilliant." I never wanted her to think otherwise. "I support anything and everything you do."

Onyx pushed away from the counter that supported his weight, and moved closer to us. “I’m worried about you overworking yourself, but that doesn’t make your news any less amazing. Then again, Xander would be an idiot to pass up an idea like yours. Anyone would.”

Pink spread across Alys’s cheeks, and one corner of her mouth tugged up. “I didn’t expect the two of you to go from grumpy to an Alys circle jerk so quickly. Thanks, both of you.”

Alys circle jerk? Probably not the part of her words I should focus on, but my brain being what it was, I ran with the thought. I knew better than to say so—talk about a tacky and insincere transition—but that didn’t stop the mental images.

Of Alys naked, parking her thighs and exposing her slick, glistening pussy as she ran her fingers along her skin.

“Did you leave us, Maddox?” As Alys spoke, so did the one in my fantasy, but I was pretty sure real Alys’s question didn’t have anything to do with my imagination.

I shook my head, but it didn’t rattle the vivid thoughts away. “I’m still here.”

“You said *circle jerk* and now his mind is stuck in one,” Onyx teased.

Fuck it. If he was going to out me, I’d own it. “Only half my mind is stuck there, and I kept that half quiet, thank you very much.”

“I’ve always appreciated your honesty.” Alys’s scowl was gone.

“The question is, were you the one masturbating or was Alys?” Onyx asked.

Why not both? “I assume we both would’ve eventually, but she started it.” I really didn’t intend to make the conversation sexy. I didn’t mind, but the way Alys clucked and let out a tiny sigh told me I’d fucked up.

“I hate to kill the mood...” she said.

Yup. Here it was.

“We should talk about the other night.”

Not what I expected her to say. “Which one?” *Duh*. “The one with the incredible sex? That’s not a mood killer.”

Onyx huffed, but he was almost smiling. “What about it?”

“Can it happen again? All three of us?”

I’d never considered there was another option. Not that I’d devoted a lot of brainpower to *what next*. Mostly because I assumed if we were all on the same page, why not? “Why wouldn’t it? We all agreed to the same rules—no strings. And it was good for me. You both seemed to enjoy yourselves.”

“It *was* good,” Onyx said.

Alys’s blush was back. “Really good.”

“See? That leaves so many reasons to not stop after one. Otherwise it would be like saying you want to learn to play the bass, but only picking it up once?”

Onyx furrowed his brows. “How so?”

“Each time you pluck those strings, you learn better which ones make the best sounds.” I gave Alys my full attention. “If we don’t ever fuck again, how will we figure out which of your strings makes the best sounds?” I gripped her hips as I stepped closer to her.

The tiniest whimper—barely loud enough to hear—escaped her throat. “You have a point.”

I lifted her enough to set her on a wooden counter, and slid between her legs. “We can start to get a feel for each other’s likes at the same time. If you like your ears nibbled, or your nipples sucked until they’re swollen and puffy and you’re ready to come. Or maybe you just like a face buried between your legs until you scream with pleasure.”

“How did this all become about me?” Alys’s voice was soft. So tempting.

I couldn’t stop staring at her lips. Couldn’t help but think about how easy it would be to lean in and kiss her. Have her, even for just a little while. “You’re the one who wanted to masturbate.”

“Yeah, that was me talking about circle jerks.” One corner of her mouth pulled up.

“Tell me this is okay.” I didn’t beg for sex, but I was willing to make an exception tonight.

Her smile grew. “This is better than okay.”

Thank every single god and goddess of sex in every pantheon ever.

I brushed my lips over hers, which were soft. Yielding. Better than I remembered.

This was going to be incredible.

I dug my fingers into her hips and crushed my mouth to hers as I pressed closer to her. It was impossible to see a downside to doing this again and again. Every time I touched Alys, electricity raced through me, and she made the most delicious noises.

Hell, Onyx did too, from his perfect vantage point of the two of us.

I dragged my mouth along her jaw, and moved one hand to her hair to yank playfully. At her gasp, I pulled harder, exposing her neck. Kissing up her ear, to draw my tongue along the shell. “Where do you want me to start?” I whispered.

She shivered against me, and somehow my dick got harder. “I’m open to suggestions. There’s a long list of what I like.”

Fuck yes. I nipped her earlobe and kissed down her neck again, mixing in licks and kisses. “If there’s a list, we’re going to have to do this a lot more.”

“Oh, damn.” Alys smirked and squirmed against me.

“When do we get the sexy music? When does the dialog turn bad?” The levity in Onyx’s questions lightened the moment, rather than shattering it.

I nipped Alys’s shoulder. New sound. Fun. “With us, the dialogue is never bad,” I said.

“We could give it a shot.” The teasing in Alys’s voice mingled with a husky, breathy sound. “Um... I need your long, hard meat in my lady pillow.”

Onyx and I laughed.

“That’s pretty bad,” Onyx said. “Possibly hard-on killing.”

He could speak for himself. I pushed Alys’s T-shirt up her stomach. If I made her squeal or scream, would they hear it out front? There was something tantalizingly naughty about the thought. “My man meat is even harder now.” I kissed the tops of her breasts, along the edge of her bra. “But I do want clarification.” I pressed her breasts together, and teased my thumbs over her nipples.

She arched her back and pressed into my hands.

So. Good.

“Are these the lady pillows in question? If so, impaling them might be bad.” I tugged down her bra, exposing her, lowered my head, and drew one of her nipples into my mouth.

This was so much fun. So fucking hot. And Alys’s gasp made it even better.

“What were we talking about?” Her question was breathy.

“Successfully distracted.” Gravel rolled through Onyx’s reply.

That he was watching us—watching me sample delicious bits of Alys while she squirmed and gasped—made this entire experience that much sexier. My dick strained against my jeans to get to her heat, and the way she squeezed her legs around my hips made me think she’d be wet when I stripped her clothes away.

Before that, I wanted to hear her whimper again and again, as I sucked on her nipples. If I nibbled and teased her long enough, would she come from my playing with her breasts?

Best not to leave it to chance. I fumbled like a horny teenager as I tried to undo the button on her jeans. I needed more of Alys. More of a show for Onyx. More of everything.

I tugged at her pants, and she lifted herself on her hands enough for me to slide the clothing down to her ankles, where it got stuck on her shoes. That was fine. I could get to my destination—her slick, wet pussy. When I dipped my fingers near her opening, she scooted closer, and I slipped two fingers inside her.

Each time I penetrated her, she moaned. She thrust her hips into me. She grabbed my wrist and tried to coax my touch higher.

My cock was desperate now. To be buried inside her. To be fucking her. I wanted to see her come first. I pressed my mouth to the hollow behind her ear. “Ask for it,” I murmured against her skin.

“Please.” Her begging was delicious.

But I wanted to hear something filthier from her lips. “Be specific,” I coaxed.

“Finger my clit. Make me come.”

Onyx groaned and I didn’t blame him. My pulse roared in my veins. I wanted to hammer Alys at the same pace.

I inched my fingers higher, to her clit, to stroke and circle the swollen nub. She pushed her whole body into my touch, and I pushed back, letting her grind against me as her breathing grew faster. Her panting was more punctuated. Until she was clenching and jerking in pleasure.

I eased away as her shudders became more pronounced, and moved one hand to her hip. The other hand dropped to my zipper.

Alys nudged me back with her full body, and I swore I nearly came at the friction, as she hopped to her feet.

A glance at Onyx confirmed he had his dick out, and stroked slowly as he watched us.

Alys knelt at my feet, her pants still around her ankles, and looked up at me with a captivating gaze that threatened to pull me in and drown me in intensity.

Before I could lose myself completely, she tugged down my zipper with her teeth.

Fuuuuuuck I couldn't bite back my groan when she wrapped her fingers around my cock to free it. When she took me in her mouth, I had to grip the table to keep from swaying.

The time for teasing was gone. I wrapped my fingers in Alys's hair and built to a frantic thrust as I fucked her face. I needed to feel her. Her warm heat around me. The way she knelt in front of me. And when I hit the back of her throat, she took my entire length.

I could lose myself in this connection.

The thought was abrupt and delicious and I couldn't let it go.

Desire built inside me, tingling in my toes and fingers. Flowing through me. Tightening in my balls. "Fuck, Alys, I'm so close. If you keep that up, I'm gonna come."

As if spurred by my words instead of deterred, she moved one hand to my sac. I tightened under her touch.

Onyx was grunting too, making similar sounds to my own. There was no way someone out front didn't hear how close we both were to climax.

I spilled in Alys's mouth, and she met my gaze again while she swallowed. *God*, why couldn't I come twice. That look. The mischief that sparkled in her eyes as she licked me clean. My entire body shuddered as she dragged her tongue along my now too-sensitive cock, when she pulled away from me.

It was a good thing the table was there to lean against, or I would've collapsed on the ground next to her.

She glanced at Onyx as I did. A sticky mess coated his hand and softening cock.

“You made a mess.” Alys purred.

Fuck.

Onyx’s laugh was short but light. “I guess I did.”

She crawled toward him. It should be ridiculous that her pants were still around her ankles, but all I saw was filthy, yummy Alys, with her bare ass in the air. When she reached Onyx, she licked along his shaft and hand. Not stopping until he was mostly clean too.

I couldn’t... Who was this woman? Seeing this side of Alys didn’t make me like her more, but it did make me like her in entirely new ways. Did I mention, *fuck?*

When Alys was done, she pulled away. “Better.”

“You’re telling me,” Onyx said.

Alys shifted her weight to sit, to lean her head against his inner thigh. When his fingers met her hair, when she relaxed visibly under his touch, I expected a surge of jealousy similar to the one I always felt when I saw how close they were.

The feeling had been replaced with a contentment. I liked that I got to be with them. That they were so good together and with me.

I liked the way the threads connected us. I liked all of it.

The three of us headed back to Onyx’s a short while later. To order pizza, to talk more about album covers and music, to eventually retire to Onyx’s room.

I was already addicted to sharing a bed with the two of them, even without the sex. It felt right.

I'd never imagined things could be like this with Alys and Onyx. It was a next-level connection. I was used to casual sex, but that wasn't what I felt here.

These were my best friends. Fun during the day and puppy piles at night. It was so much more than good sex.

And I'd do anything to make sure we never lost this.

The best and simultaneously worse thing about having Alys and Maddox here was it reminded me just how much I loved them being around. How much I already missed them and how much worse it would be when I moved away.

The sex amplified those feelings. It shouldn't. I was supposed to keep the physical separate, but everything was fun with them. Even fucking.

Especially the fucking.

And Alys sitting on the floor yesterday evening, resting against my leg... Maddox looking pleased and content...

How was something so simple also so good?

I stashed the thoughts, and finished getting ready for the morning, making as little noise as possible. Alys and Onyx were still asleep, though they'd both be up in the next hour or so. Her for work and him to meet me at Aubrey's.

I need to be there earlier though. Aubrey had been happy to do my makeup, to turn me into a radiant, blue-faced guy, for our version of Frontiers. She'd asked me to come over before anything opened, though. The work would take a couple of hours, and she wanted to get things done before she had to open her store.

That wasn't as big a concern for me. For the past few months, I'd been letting my people do more and more of that work, so they were ready to take over when I moved away.

As I headed out, Haddarville was waking up. The small handful of people on the streets was growing. I drove the short distance to town, in case I needed my car today, parked in the lot behind my shop, and walked across the street to the coffee shop.

Aubrey walked in while I was ordering, and I paid for her drink too. I'd have to do more to thank her for her help today, but this was a good start.

How many mornings had I done things like this? Not gotten ready for Aubrey's makeup chair, but the rest of it. How many of my days had been filled with this routine? This familiar comfort? Sometimes the people changed, and I was about to be one of those casualties.

Was I feeling nostalgic for home before I left?

Seemed that way.

Best to get it out of my system now.

Aubrey and I crossed the street again to her place, and headed into the back. She situated me in a chair in front of a little mirror, put a bib on me, and got to it.

Neither of us had much to say as she slicked my hair back and made sure it was all tucked under a latex skull cap. We were content to sip our coffee—mine through a straw—and work in silence.

Watching myself change as she did her thing was a surreal experience. My brains stayed mine, but the man I watched in my reflection became someone else.

Life was like that though—we all changed, we all grew into people we didn't recognize, even if in our heads we thought we were the same.

Wow, deep thoughts. I took a long sip of coffee and focused on letting the caffeine clear my mind.

“Ready for the paint,” Aubrey said. “While I do this, I need you to be as still as possible, so I can keep the lines straight.”

“Will do.” I settled my expression into the most neutral, relaxed posture I could manage, and watched in the mirror as Aubrey began to put the first lines in place.

“Does Alys know, and you asked her to keep it a secret, or are you hiding it from her too?” Aubrey asked.

I raised my eyebrows. She couldn't be talking about...? No. “Does Alys know—?”

“No talking.” Aubrey clipped the words.

“Then no questions.”

“Yes or no questions. I promise,” she said. “Does Alys know you're selling?”

“How do you—?”

Aubrey pressed a finger to a portion of my lips that weren't currently lined. “Shh.”

Why did I feel like I'd been set up? I sighed to convey my displeasure. Seriously, how much did she know and where did she hear it?

“I was talking to Brooke when she got the remodel request from your buyer.” Aubrey switched to a new brush with a

broader surface, and started filling in the circle closest to my fake hairline.

The best response I could manage was to flat my nostrils and open my eyes wider. Did that come close to conveying *you were talking to Brooke*? I'd assumed the buyer request was coming, but didn't expect it until after the sale was final. The city council had to approve any major remodels on Main Street, since the block had been declared a historic district about a year ago.

"Yes, I'm on speaking terms with Brooke." Aubrey almost sounded smug. "It's awkward because yes, she stole my guy. But she didn't really because I'm not an idiot. Deacon was never mine."

Great. Swell. Good for her.

Despite the mental sarcasm, I was glad Aubrey was dealing well with the whole situation.

I still didn't like that she had this information about me, though.

"Does Alys know?" Aubrey asked again.

I gave a grunt that should convey *no*. My mind was already jumping several steps ahead to how hard I'd need to beg Aubrey to keep this quiet. Would I be able to convince her to hold onto the information for another week?

Considering she was much closer to Alys than she was to me, I doubted it, but I plucked through various options anyway.

"Will she know soon?" Aubrey asked.

Soon was a matter of opinion. I gave her a grunt that I hoped sounded like *uh-huh*.

Aubrey filled in another circle in a new shade of blue, and went back to blend the gradients. “I don’t want to be the one to tell her. I don’t have anything against you, so that feels petty, and if it comes from me rather than you, it’s going to hurt Alys a lot.” She pulled her hands from my face. “But I won’t keep it a secret for more than a day or so. Give me your word, say it, that you’ll tell her.”

“I swear. The last thing I want is to hurt Alys. But there’s nothing to tell until there’s more of a deal. The guy Brooke talked to is jumping the gun.” Not the total truth, but it was close enough.

I hated adding another deception to the growing stack.

Aubrey studied me for a moment, then leaned in with a different shade of blue. “Okay.”

Maddox showed up a short while later, ready to get to work. The photos themselves took an embarrassingly short amount of time given how much work Aubrey put into the make-up.

It was a shame to wash it off so soon.

Maddox couldn’t develop the color photos himself—the process was different—so we’d have to wait for the drugstore to get through his rolls of film. I was excited to see the results.

“Leave it on,” Maddox said. “At least until we’re done talking to Adam. It’ll look really cool on camera.”

I had no idea if my confusion would convey in my expression when I looked like this. “That’s why you just took a hundred pictures. Talking to Adam?”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot to tell you. He wants all three of us on camera... somewhere... when Alys gets here, to talk about the competition. Maybe also film us going through some of

Deacon's things and figuring out what we want to use for The Rascal's cover."

"Cool. I'm in."

Alys joined us a short while later. As we were leaving to head next door, Aubrey caught my eye and looked between me and Alys.

I couldn't keep my secret as long as I wanted. Time to figure out how to break the news.

Adam met us back at my shop.

It was impossible for me to ignore the rush of heat when I ran my hand over the counter Alys had sat on last night, while I watched Maddox bring her to orgasm. And now we were pulling up four tall stools in that same back room so we could use that as our spot to sit and talk, in front of the camera.

Was everyone but Adam coping with the same memories I was? The hint of pink on Alys's face said *yes*.

Thank fuck for my face paint making my expressions harder to read.

When we were all in our positions, including the camera, we chatted for a few minutes to warm up, then Adam said, "Talk to me like I have no idea what this contest is. The fifty or so people who watch my videos are probably local, but maybe there are one or two viewers who don't know what you're up to."

We explained the concept of the competition to him. The making album covers, how it was like a scavenger hunt that had evolved over the years, and a few of the rules.

"Which album covers are you working on?" Adam studied me for a moment. "Besides the obvious one."

“Can’t tell you that.” Maddox’s good natured reply came before Alys or I could answer.

Adam didn’t look fazed. “Or you’d have to kill me?”

Maddox smirked. “Maybe. But more because what if one of the other teams steals our awesome ideas?”

I doubted anyone was looking for that kind of espionage, but the rapid-fire exchange between Adam and Maddox was light and fun.

“In that case, let’s talk discarded album covers instead,” Adam said.

“In general, or specific to our choices?” I couldn’t even imagine how long the list of the former was.

Alys fiddled with her microphone base. “It would be amazing to have that kind of information from the actual artists.”

Maddox seemed to consider this. “Not sure Aerosmith’s Pump would’ve had the same impact if the cover had a picture of a bicycle.”

“Maybe we would’ve gotten Love on a Teeter Totter instead,” Adam said.

I tried to picture how that would work. Big mistake. “That sounds unsafe.”

“I think you mean *sexy*,” Maddox corrected me.

I know I did not. “I meant *unsafe*.”

Adam scoffed. “I always knew you were the grown-up of the group. Way to prove it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” As in, should I be offended? Something else?

Maddox nudged me playfully with his foot. “He just means you’re the guy who makes the smart decisions and keeps us in line.”

Alys caught her bottom lip between her teeth and looked up at me through her lashes. “Does that make you Daddy?”

“Spank me, Daddy?” Maddox’s voice rose an octave.

Before I could come up with any sort of reply, Adam shook his head. “Not sure if we can say that on the internet.” He didn’t sound remotely serious.

“It’s the internet.” Maddox let out the heaviest of heavy sighs. “Pretty sure we’re allowed to say anything except *nipples*.”

Adam huffed. “Damn it. You just said it.”

“You can beep him, right? You’ll edit this later?” This was ludicrous. I loved it.

Maddox’s grin was broad. “Can you imagine if there was a loud *beep* sound every time one of us said nip—”

Adam made an obnoxious honking noise.

“I want to try. Nip—”

Adam *beeped* out Alys, too. “Female nipples are evil,” he said. “You can’t just go around talking about them like no one is going to notice.”

“Right. I forgot about how evil my...” Alys searched our faces. “...lady buttons are.”

“Are we going to talk about rejected album covers, or has the focus of this episode shifted?” Not that I minded, but the grease paint was starting to itch.

Adam shook his head. “We don’t do that here.”

“Do what?” I was confused.

“Focus.” Maddox offered. “We don’t focus here. That’s for other people.”

And we proved exactly that over the next hour or so of rambling thoughts and eternal tangents that were mostly driven by Maddox and Adam.

After we wound down and wrapped up, Maddox and Adam worked on packing up the gear, and Alys helped me peel off my skull cap. Finally.

I headed into the back bathroom to wash off the paint. Scrubbing my face had never felt so satisfying, even if the sink was now tinged a pale blue.

As I was wandering out to join the others, my phone rang with a call from my real estate agent, Helen. A glance around the room told me it was empty, but who knew when someone would wander back in. “Hello.” As I answered, I headed into my office.

“Afternoon. How’s it going?”

As much as I was okay with little bursts of small talk, I didn’t need to stretch this conversation out with Alys and Maddox around. “Great. What can I do for you?”

“We may have a small hiccup.”

Fuck. “How small?” Or rather, how large?

“The buyer isn’t happy with the private inspector’s results.”

Of course that would come back to bite me in the ass. Instead of sitting I paced the room. “The contract isn’t contingent on a personal inspector.”

“He can still walk away from the sale, it just costs him a little.”

I bit back my growl. “He knew he was buying a more than hundred year old building. The wiring is all up to code, and so is everything else. This is bullshit.”

Helen sighed. “Whatever it is, he’s still allowed to do it.”

“Great. There’s no law against being an asshole either, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.” I raked my fingers through still stiff hair. “I want to cover my bases. If he decides not to buy, can we go back to another offer and see if they’re still interested?”

“We can. I don’t know if it’ll work.”

“I’m not the only one who’s fucked if I can’t sell. You don’t get your commission either.” Not that I needed to remind her of that. As I turned, my heart stopped at the sight of Alys standing in my office doorway, watching me with a blank expression. “I need to call you back.” I disconnected without waiting for an answer.

“What are you selling?” Alys’s tone was as neutral as her face.

A billion answers raced through my head in a single clump, and vanished just as quickly. It was time to stop hiding this. “The record store.”

A frown whispered across her brow. “Why?”

“I’m moving out of state, to take over a different shop.” That was harder to say than I expected. Then again, I’d put it off for a year for a reason.

The creases in her forehead were deep now, and there was no mistaking her scowl. “You started your remodel months

ago. You said it was because the place needed an update. You've known for at least that long."

"I'm surprised you noticed." The retort slipped out without my permission. This was where I should stop, but the words weren't done. "You don't spend any time out here. You work. You have another life. It's not like you're going to miss me, and this is a huge opportunity for me. There's more for me there than here."

The hurt that splashed across Alys's face ripped me in two.

What did I just say? *Why* did I say it?

It was happening again.

I'd started to fall. To believe I could let my guard down, and maybe, possibly, see Onyx as more than a friend. To feel more for Maddox.

There's more for me there than here.

Onyx might as well have slapped me and told me to fuck off. It wasn't just that he was going, or chose a less than delicate way to say so, it was that he'd lied about it—kept it a secret—for the last year.

Because the one thing my mind was doing for me was filling in the blanks. All the remodeling. Selling the building next door. Making sure certain things were modernized. He *lied* about why. Looked me in the eye over and over and said the extra work was *just because*.

And I refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing how much this hurt. I wiped the shock away, and gave him a tight smile. "Okay. Good luck with that."

Nope, this was harder than I thought. Why did it hurt so much? I turned away and ran smack dab into Maddox's chest.

"Hey. What's going on?" he asked.

I glanced back at Onyx, who gave the slightest shake of his head.

“Fuck you,” I said to Onyx. I looked at Maddox again. “Onyx is leaving. He’s been planning it for months, but didn’t think we were important enough to tell.” How I said any of that without my voice cracking was beyond me.

“What?” Maddox’s mouth dropped open. “Why would you...? Leaving? You lied?”

Onyx clenched his jaw. “I didn’t—” He cut himself off with a low growl. “Yes.”

There it was.

I couldn’t think, and most certainly wouldn’t lose my shit. “I’m going.” Looking at Maddox should’ve been easier, but his disbelief mirrored my hurt. “I—” *I’m sorry.*

I most definitely wasn’t going to say that. The number of times I apologized to my ex, though he was the one who cheated. He was the one who told me again and again that fucking me was a mistake. That I’d destroyed our friendship that way.

I hadn’t owed him the billions of apologies I’d cried out, just to hold onto him, and I wouldn’t apologize now for Onyx’s decisions.

“Alys.” Onyx’s call hit my back as I walked toward the door. “Listen to me.”

The time for talking and listening was apparently a year ago.

Maddox was with me. Uncharacteristically quiet, with an impossible to read expression.

I was two stores down in the alley when I had to stop, because I didn't know where I was going.

"Aubrey's? Or I can get us a motel room? We can go back to Salt Lake." Maddox always seemed to know what I was thinking.

How did he do that?

"I don't know." *Go home* was the right answer, logically. So why did it feel like a mistake? I leaned back against the wall with a soft *thunk*.

"Are you quitting the contest?" Maddox asked. "Are we?"

That was what we were worried about? *Now*? What was I supposed to say to—

"That's not what I'm worried about." Maddox stood toe-to-toe with me, his dark eyes reflecting hurt and concern. "Fuck the contest if that's what it comes to. But I'm trying to figure out how serious this is."

"I don't know. Am I overreacting?"

Maddox shook his head. "Friends can't lie to friends. If you go to Aubrey's, think she'll let me sleep on your floor like a guard dog?"

"I think she's going to let you sleep where you want. Why don't I know what to do or think or feel?" I meant to keep the string of questions to myself.

Maddox pressed his lips to my cheek. The gesture was so simple and sweet and pure that my heart cracked.

"You're allowed to take the time to figure it out," he said. "You don't have to forgive him. You don't have to resent him. You can refuse to talk to him ever again, or you can decide to hear him out and agree that you understand why he did it. You

can do anything in between, but you don't have to do any of it until you think about all of it."

"What about you?" I wasn't the only one hurting, yet Maddox was giving me all the comfort.

Maddox shrugged. "I just feel like even though this sucks right now, it won't always, as long as you promise me one thing?"

"What's that?"

"Don't shut me out."

Why would I...? "Okay."

"No. Don't give me a quick answer. Think about it first. I'm asking for a promise between you and me that has nothing to do with anything else. Promise me we're still what we were this morning. Swear to me."

It felt dangerous to make a promise like that, like a straight shot to pain and hurt. This was Maddox though. Good, sweet, really fucking sexy, and always there.

"I promise," I said.

He slipped his hand into mine and tugged me toward him. "Good. Let's go to Aubrey's, so we have a place that's private, while we process. Depending on what we decide, in the morning I'll go get our stuff if we want, or will sit Onyx down and torture him until he explains himself."

The only way I could picture Maddox torturing anyone was by smothering them with positivity and kindness. "Okay."

We stepped into Aubrey's back room, and I left Maddox alone long enough to catch her attention. She was with a customer, so I wouldn't interrupt. Instead, when she looked at

me I jerked my thumb toward her second floor, where her apartment was. We'd wait up there for her.

Maddox and I headed upstairs, and I let us in. I had keys to a few of the houses here, and when I'd lived in my mom's place, after she moved, Aubrey, Evie, Onyx, and Maddox all had keys to my house.

The excuse was *in case you lock yourself out*, but it was really because we had a *your place is mine* kind of thing going on.

But Onyx didn't think it was worthwhile to tell us that his place wouldn't be anyone's soon enough.

I settled on the couch, and my thoughts started to thaw.

Maddox paced.

This was hitting him harder than he wanted to show, and I was making it about me. That wasn't fair. I'd known Onyx longer, but the three of us were The Wonderland Crew. We didn't work without one of our members.

Don kept popping into my head. Taunting me. Shredding my thoughts. I thought I'd had an amazing relationship with him—the kind of friendship that spanned universes—only to find out he didn't feel the same. That to him, us *dating* didn't equal him not fucking around.

That he would initiate.

Our connection hadn't made up for the things we never did.

Because he never told me he wanted to.

When he left he blamed me for so much.

That he never bothered to mention up to that point. I would've given it all to him. I knew now that his laundry list of things we did wrong wasn't the root of the problem, but back then I would've given him all of it.

And if Onyx had said something now...

Except what I had with Onyx. His friendship meant more. He'd been a part of my life for so long. Even when he and I weren't fucking...

He was supposed to be one of my best friends.

Sure, Maddox and I had moved, but we lived an hour away. We'd never lied about the fact that we were going, and we came back here to visit as often as we could.

I fiddled with the loose threads on the cushion next to me as my mind spiraled.

Onyx was selling his record shop. While his name was on the deed, that place wasn't his alone. Maddox and I had helped him build it over the years. We'd contributed to the way it looked, the way it felt, and Onyx was going to dump it and walk away from us.

A year. He'd been planning this for a year. He never said a word. Did our friendship mean that little to him?

My phone buzzed again and again. I knew without looking that the messages would be from Onyx, but I didn't dare look.

I couldn't.

Aubrey joined us a few minutes later. She sat on the couch next to me and pulled me into a tight hug. "Did Onyx tell you?"

What?

“You knew.” The accusation in Maddox’s words was unlike him. He stared at her with a narrow-eyed gaze.

“I found out yesterday. We’re not children—we don’t tattle on each other—so I told him Alys should hear it from him, but I also told him to grow a pair and stop waiting, or I’d tell on him anyway.”

That should make me feel... better? It didn’t. “I don’t know if he planned on saying anything. I overheard him talking to someone else.”

“I’m sorry.” Aubrey gave me another squeeze.

I leaned into her with a heavy sigh. “Promise me you’ll never do that to me?” I hated myself for asking, but my heart needed to hear it.

“You know I wouldn’t.”

“I do know. Promise me anyway.”

“I swear it,” Aubrey said. “Speaking of, maybe we should swear off boys altogether, and go get married and be everyone’s favorite aunts, living in the country.”

Her teasing was thinning the sludge inside. Did I want that? “You’d hate being married to me.”

“Probably. But at least we trust each other.”

“Can I go with you both?” Maddox asked. “I’ll be your harem.”

The feeling that rushed inside was new and potent. Possessiveness? Aubrey couldn’t have Maddox.

Super weird thought that I didn’t need to have.

“That’s the opposite of how a harem works,” I said to Maddox. “Besides, Aubrey said she was swearing off boys.”

Aubrey huffed. “I only said I was thinking about it. Boys are dumb. Present company excluded.” She looked at Maddox.

He shrugged. “I’m not always the brightest bulb on the taco platter, but I own that.”

“What are you both going to do?” Aubrey’s question echoed the one that hadn’t stopped bouncing in my head yet.

What could I do? Tell Onyx I’d hate him forever if he left? We were adults with lives outside of each other. If he had a chance somewhere else... *There’s more for me there than here.*

But I’m here. We’re here. The unspoken response echoed in my head.

“We’re going to take the night to think about it.” Maddox answered when I didn’t. “Onyx has had months to ponder what to say and he still hadn’t figured it out. I think a night is fair for us.”

“You’re both welcome to stay here tonight.” Aubrey stood. “I support whatever you decide.”

“Thank you.”

“Go finish closing up,” Maddox said. “And we’ll order pizza and watch movies.”

“Nerd Herd meeting?” Aubrey looked at me.

In other words, should she call Evie?

There was safety in numbers.

Weird thought. It wasn’t like we were in danger... But I was feeling a little battered.

“Then I’d have to leave.” Maddox made the conclusion sound like the only one.

Aubrey wrinkled her nose. “You can be our mascot. Maddox the tattooed golden retriever.”

The way Maddox scrunched up his face was adorable. “I really see myself as more of a border collie. But are you doing each other’s nails and makeup?” He held out his hand. “Because I haven’t had a good mani in way too long.”

“If you let me put you in guyliner,” Aubrey said.

Maddox grinned. “When have I not?”

This was making me feel better. Was I allowed to do that? Nothing had been resolved. I was still torn between thinking I was the asshole for walking out on Onyx before he could explain, and being so hurt I never wanted to see him again.

Or maybe I was just pissed that I’d been lied to again. That he thought this kind of secret was okay to keep.

maddox

I left Alys and Aubrey to figure out what they wanted to watch, and I walked down the street to grab pizza and—in Alys’s words—*all the garlic knots in the known universe, and then some.*

I was waiting for my order, when Onyx walked past the front window. His gaze met mine, and he turned into the pizza place instead of continuing on the sidewalk.

What was I supposed to say? The last thing I wanted was for Alys and Onyx to be fighting, and I wasn’t too fond of the idea of taking sides, either. I understood exactly why Alys was upset, though.

“Hey.” Onyx stopped close enough to be heard.

“Yo.”

“Are you going to walk away from me?” He asked.

“Don’t know yet.” I wanted this to be a mistake. A misunderstanding. Something other than what it looked like. “Is it true?”

“That I’m selling and moving? Yes.”

I blew out a noisy raspberry. “And you kept it a secret for at least a year?”

“I couldn’t figure out what to say.” Not a confession, but close enough.

The delivery driver skirted past us, to get to the kitchen. At least no one else was out here to hear this conversation—I didn’t mind much, but being the subject of small town gossip ranked up there with Onyx and Alys fighting, on the sucky scale.

“Maybe you couldn’t tell us because you don’t really want to go,” I said.

Onyx leaned against a nearby chair, resting his ass on the back. “The new store? I get the chance to do it again. What I did here.”

“What *we* did here.” Yes, a lot of it had been Alys and Onyx before I came along, and even more of it was Onyx alone, but it wasn’t all him.

“Do the math for me,” Onyx said. “Turn this into a situation where no one loses.”

I was trying to. “I need time to come up with a solution.”

“I’ve been thinking about it for months. There’s no *everyone wins* answer, and the two of you already have great things.”

“The *three* of us already have one of the best things, and you aren’t giving anyone a chance to save that.”

“You’re being—” Onyx snapped his mouth shut.

“*Maddox.*” The owner called from the counter, and set a large pizza box and a full plastic bag on the counter.

I gave Onyx one more glance. “If you missed us, you could’ve said so. If you don’t give a fuck, you should’ve just gone. I’m going to let Aubrey do my make-up. We’ll finish the

contest. I don't know how, but *I'm* going to find a way. If you've already given up, I can't do anything about that."

Onyx clenched his jaw and his nostrils flared.

I paused for him to say something. Anything. When he didn't, I grabbed the food and walked out. What else was I supposed to do?

It kind of sucked a whole lot leaving Onyx behind, especially on a sour note, and heading to Aubrey's without him.

Evie and Sawyer were in front of the vintage clothing shop, and the two were so engrossed in their conversation that they didn't look up until I was close.

When Evie did see me, her grin grew. "Pizza Man. My new favorite person."

Gage huffed. "You're replacing me with a younger model?"

"Only for the night. Extra sausage is one thing, but your meat is always best." Evie smirked at Gage.

And I had no arguments for her logic.

"Besides." Evie screwed her face up in thought. "Alys isn't going to let me keep Pizza Man long term."

I summoned my best fake *I'm offended* face. "I have a name. And I get a say in who *keeps* me."

"It's cute that you think that," Gage teased. He gave his full attention to Evie again. "Just remember, if you put a bunch of holes in the walls, you're the one who has to fix them."

"I know and we won't. Go. Shoo." Evie pushed Gage, and he walked away, waving over his shoulder. She took the bag of

breadsticks and sauces from me, and we headed upstairs.

I had to know. “Holes in walls? Are we mad enough to punch things?” I was upset with Onyx, but not to the point of violence.

Evie gave a short snort. “Not quite. And seriously, *oh. My. God*, this smells good. Did you get—”

“All the garlic knots in the known universe and then some?” I finished for her. “Yes, plus extra garlic sauce.” I pushed into the apartment.

Alys and Aubrey were already waiting for us in the living room, with soda and plates on the coffee table.

Evie handed Aubrey the bag, and jerked her thumb at me. “He wants to know why we would put holes in walls.”

Alys blushed and Aubrey laughed. “*God* that was a billion years ago,” Alys said.

“And the best part of that relationship. Besides you and me,” Evie added.

So, “We’re talking about *him*.” I knew the details of the idiot who thought he could fuck both Alys and Evie and lie to everyone about it, but it was rare for anyone bring him up, and they *never* laughed when they were doing so.

“Not quite.” Aubrey unpacked the contents of the sack and laid them out on the coffee table.

I set the pizza in the middle of it all and opened the lid. Extra-large for four people, because Alys and Aubrey would only want a couple slices each, but Evie would eat as much as I did.

Evie grabbed the first slice, and struggled with how much stringy, gooey cheese there was until I severed the strand with

a plastic knife. “We had a *we hate boys* party,” she said. “Which consisted of a lot of drinking—”

“The underage kind for me, and the first time I’d ever been drunk.” Alys cut in.

Aubrey looked amused. “The underage kind for both of us. Evie was a criminal, buying us beer.”

“*Cheap* beer.” Alys was emphatic.

Evie shook her head. “You can’t start with the good stuff. It sets unrealistic expectations. It’s like having incredible sex your first time.”

“Oh yeah, no one would want that.” I was playfully sarcastic. “Wouldn’t want to set a bar or anything.”

“*Anyway.*” Evie talked over all of us. “We decided the best way to celebrate how much we hated cheating, lying, underhanded, gaslighting assholes, we played darts with some pictures we had of him.”

“And we added in some photos from a stack of teen magazines,” Alys said.

Aubrey sniffled, as if she was sad, and picked a piece of green pepper from her pizza to nibble on it. “Those may have been vintage one day.”

Alys smacked her with a paper napkin.

I felt like I was missing something. “Even drunk, Evie’s a good shot at darts. And you two aren’t bad either. Where do the holes in the walls come in?”

They all exchanged looks, and dissolved into a sea of giggles.

Alys got herself together first. “We didn’t have a dart board, so we pinned the photos to the wall in Evie’s back room.”

“We threw a *lot* of darts.” Evie looked smug.

The story was fun, and it was wonderful to see Alys smiling again, but what Onyx did wasn’t exactly a throw-darts-at-his-picture-until-it’s-confetti level offense.

The light mood kept up as we decided what to watch. Which apparently was Star Trek Two, Four, and Six, with the emphatic reminder to me that Chris Pine was *not* their Captain Kirk, no matter how sexy Karl Urban was.

My brain kept shifting back to the Onyx topic though.

Onyx was our friend. Whatever decisions he’d made about selling, about leaving, it couldn’t be the end of our friendship. If that was what he wanted, he could’ve cut us off at any time. Told us he was going. Stopped talking to us.

He hadn’t been acting like he hated us or wanted us gone. Gorgeous guy like him? He wasn’t sticking around for the sex.

Though, with Alys...

Sex with Alys, with either of them, was worth a lot of sacrifices.

Unless he didn’t like us. Then what was the point?

If he was some stranger on the street, it wouldn’t be worth it to give him the time of day, but he was our friend. One third of The Wonderland Crew, and we owed him the chance to explain.

I got why Alys was upset, and didn’t want to take that from her. Even though I didn’t personally know them during

the Don incident, I could still see today how much that asshole left scars.

I didn't—couldn't—believe that was Onyx.

When the whales were safe and *The Voyage Home* was complete, I pulled Alys into Aubrey's kitchen, to talk.

"You're going back to Onyx's for the night," she said before I could figure out how to tell her.

I nodded. "How did you know?"

"I know you. You don't want to pick sides." She sounded hurt.

"I'm going to hear him out. If his reasons aren't good, then fuck him." I didn't realize I was reaching for her, until my fingers brushed her face as I tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. The shock that raced through me was high voltage.

Touching Alys had never felt like that before. "I don't blame you for staying here or for how you feel. Plus, our stuff is there, and I can bring you your computer in the morning," I said.

Alys covered my hand with hers, and leaned her cheek into my palm. "I get it. Don't let him take you with him."

Not unless you're coming too. That wasn't a comforting response. "I'm not leaving you behind." I kissed Alys on the forehead. On the way through the living room to the front door, I wished Aubrey and Evie *good night* and headed down to the street.

I probably should've messaged Onyx first to make sure this was all right. Oops. When I grabbed my phone, there were

a handful of messages from him already. All along the lines of *Hear me out. Get Alys to hear me out.*

I sent one of my own.

Me: I'm coming over.

He answered almost immediately.

Onyx: I'm here.

When I walked into his house a few minutes later, he was in the living room perched on the edge of the couch. His smile wilted when he looked at me. "Just you?"

"I'm one hell of a prize on my own." I was a smidge offended, but Alys and Onyx and that bond...

...that apparently wasn't as unbreakable as I thought.

Onyx huffed and shook his head. "You're certainly one of a kind, and I'm glad you're here."

Might as well get the tough stuff out of the way first. "Why are you leaving?"

"A colleague is retiring. He doesn't want to see his place flounder, and he offered me a chance to give it new life like I did here."

"Like *we* did here. We helped." Though if I had to be logical, he started the project, he led the project, and it made sense he'd want to do it again. "But you don't have to be there full time to do that. He asked and you just said *sure, I can leave my life and my friends behind. Why not?*"

Onyx clenched his jaw. "I don't have to be here full time to see you and Alys, either."

"Oh." The reality sank in fast and hard. Technically he was right, but... "Why didn't you tell us?"

“Because I knew it would take a lot of planning and I didn’t want us to fall apart while I was still here. I’ve been trying to figure out how to say something for months.”

A barrage of pieces slotted into my head all at once. “Xander knows. He’s been helping you sell.” My fucking brother. That was why he made so many trips down here, especially around the holidays last year. He hated this place—no way he was coming back so often without a good reason. “How many people did you ask to lie to us?”

Onyx scrubbed his face. “Only him. I promise.”

“Yeah.” I gave him a wilting look. This was too much, and I sank onto the couch, leaving a few feet between us, to drop my head into my hands. “You’re one of us. We’re not the Wonderland Crew without you.”

“It’s the next state. Less than a nine hour drive, where I’m going. Way faster flying. It’s not like I’m leaving forever and cutting off all ties.”

It wasn’t the same. Sure he would still just be a text away. Or a few hours’ flight away, but... *Sigh*.

There was no one I’d miss as much as him, except Alys, if they weren’t here. “You’re one of the best people I’ve ever known, and if you’re gone, I’ll be more lost than I already am.” I shouldn’t admit that out loud, but it felt good to finally say it to *someone*.

Onyx gave a dry chuckle. “You’re not lost.”

“I am.”

“You might feel that way, but I’ve never met anyone on a course more true to themselves than you.” Onyx scooted closer. “I wouldn’t be me if I didn’t know you. Alys would be

different. Even if you think you don't have a clear direction, the one you're taking is all you, and that's so enviable."

I didn't know how to respond to that. I spent a large part of my life hearing how bad it was to be me, and while I disagreed, it was weird to hear someone else back me up. "I still don't want you to go, but if life says you need to be in Flagstaff, and you're feeling the tug... I get it."

"Thanks."

It was late, and there wasn't much more conversation before we headed into separate rooms. It was strange sleeping in here alone, after a few days of being wrapped up in Onyx and Alys. I was already addicted to them being so close. To being a part of what they shared.

Not that I slept much. My mind was a non-stop flood of *how do I make Onyx and Alys better*, and when I did doze, my dreams were half rage-filled and half sensual and erotic. Both were intense.

When I gave up on trying to sleep, my skin buzzed with need, my mind hummed with frustration, and my cock was hard.

Fuck.

Angry, exhausted, solo orgasms were rarely as much fun as most alternatives.

I was going to take a shower, work on the contest, and hope I wasn't doing so with Alys and Onyx refusing to talk to each other. My toothbrush was in Onyx's bathroom though.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes and resisting the urge to rub the horniness from my dick, I didn't completely register the sound of running water. I pushed open the master bath door, and my brain caught up to what my eyes saw.

Onyx's reflection was in the mirror, water sliding down his hard, naked form, while he fisted his cock.

Waking up to an erection after a night of shitty sleep was another frustration to add to my growing list. Especially since it refused to go away or be ignored as I tried to get ready for the day.

Fine. I knew how to get rid of it. Unlike the fact that my buyer might be falling through or the reality of one of my best friends shutting me out, I could jerk this away and wash the aftereffects down the drain,

Except when I stepped into the shower, hot water spilling around me, nearly scalding me, and fisted my cock, an unwelcome wash of memories flooded my mind. Alys's fingers there instead of mine. Maddox pressing his naked body into my back.

I tried to shake the vivid images—half-memory and half-fantasy—away, and opened my eyes.

Maddox was in my bathroom doorway, his gaze locked on mine in the mirror. He was here, *not* a part of the fantasy.

When his hand dropped below his waist, to the distinct bulge in his boxers, I gripped my shaft harder. I couldn't look away from my reflection.

The fantasies flooded in with no way for me to stop them. Not that I had any desire to do so. Of Maddox at my feet,

sucking my cock. Of me sliding into him from behind, while he was inside Alys...

Fuck. I stroked my cock slowly, watching Maddox rub himself through his boxers, while images assaulted my mind and overlapped with now.

Maddox worked himself free, and matched my rhythm beat for beat. It was hypnotic. He looked tantalizing and I felt at least that good.

It was easy to get lost in the heat of fantasy. In letting the extra sensations wash over me along with the shower. The water flowed around me in warm rivulets, running down my body like the fingers in my mind.

I didn't want to look away from Maddox, and the way his face contorted in pleasure. He leaned against the doorframe, and kept jerking. Harder. Faster. While I worked my shaft at the same rate.

My eyes drifted shut as orgasm crept up and filled my veins. I tumbled into the sensations fueled by waking dreams, and my every nerve ending danced in response to the stimuli. I couldn't hold back. The tightening in my toes, in my grip, was too much.

I came hard, a new warm, wet sensation hitting my hand, again and again, as I yanked until I was spent.

I leaned my head against the cool tile of the shower wall, catching my breath. When I opened my eyes, Maddox was gone, and the bathroom door was closed.

That was unexpected. And incredible. I had no idea what to think, but fortunately my post-orgasm brain didn't want to think any more than it wanted answers to how Maddox jerked off in my doorway without leaving a mess behind. It left my

thoughts silent enough for me to finish my shower, and get dressed.

In the kitchen, I put coffee on while I heard the sounds of Maddox moving around in the next room. My mind muddled quickly. What happened in the bathroom? Was it the kind of thing we talked about?

I scrambled a few eggs and heated up some bacon. How was I going to make things right with Alys? She had to listen to me long enough for me to explain. To apologize for waiting so long to let her know.

Then there was my ambivalence every time I thought about the sale of my shop falling through. I should be stressed out. Scrambling to make things right or find a back-up buyer or simply calling my agent to see if she'd heard anything.

When Maddox emerged, I was sitting at the table picking at my food as if it had any more answers than I did.

“Just so you know, as hot as that was, it doesn't change what happened yesterday.” He stopped next to the table and held my gaze.

Direct. To the point. I shouldn't have expected anything less from him. “No, it doesn't,” I said.

“I'd do it again, though.” Maddox moved past me, grabbed a plate, and piled it full of food. “Not when everything is up in the air like this, but I'd totally do it again.”

I should make sure he meant the same *it* I thought he did. “Mutual masturbation?”

“Yes, but no. I think I'd rather we were both hands-on...” Maddox furrowed his brow. “With each other I mean.”

After the fantasies I'd entertained this morning? "Me too." That wasn't at the front of my mind, though. "Where do we stand, non-masturbation-wise?" Had anything changed since we talked last night? Was he leaving when he was done eating?

Maddox sat across from me. "Reluctant acceptance? I hate that you're going. Still. I understand why. Still."

"That's fair."

He shoveled food into his mouth, while I ate at a more sedate pace.

"I'm going to bring Alys her computer and some of her stuff this morning," Maddox said, after a swallow of coffee. "She's planning on staying with Aubrey."

I shouldn't be surprised, but that didn't mean I could stop the news from hurting. "I'll come with you."

"No." His refusal was sharper than was typical for him. "I'm not taking sides in this, or getting between you in any way. She knows where to find you when she's ready."

I couldn't wait for Alys to come to me. The fact that she wasn't speaking to me already hurt too much. That I'd betrayed her trust... "In that case, I'll follow you, and you can say you told me not to."

Maddox rolled his eyes.

"I'm only asking you to tell her I'm downstairs when you get there. You don't have to ask her on my behalf to talk to me, just say I'm there. If she comes down she can see me, and if one of you tells me to fuck off..."

"You will?" Maddox looked skeptical.

Probably not. It was good to have Maddox back, even if we weren't quite *friendly*, and I needed Alys in my life too. "I'm going with you or I'm following you. One or the other."

The scowl that splashed Maddox's face was a look typically reserved for running into his father. But he let me drive us to Main Street, and he didn't say anything when I waited outside of Aubrey's back door while he went up to her apartment to see Alys.

How long should I wait until I followed Maddox up to Aubrey's?

Not that Aubrey or Maddox would let me in if Alys told them *no*.

I needed to see her. The ache growing in my chest, the longer I thought about not talking to her... How did I think this situation was going to turn out?

Right—badly. Which was why I'd put off telling her for so long. That thought led me to the one I'd asked myself over and over again yesterday. How was I going to move that far away and not see her? Not see Maddox?

Because I was supposed to be able to talk to them after I—

"What do you want, Onyx?" Alys's question came from behind.

I turned to see her standing in Aubrey's doorway, watching me with a drawn expression. Shadows hung under her eyes.

I was shitty for doing that to her. "I'm sorry." The words tumbled out easily.

She crossed her arms and leaned into the frame, away from me. "For which part?"

Not for the decision to sell here and buy in Arizona. That was the right thing to do. “That I kept the secret. I’m sorry I lied. You deserve better than that.”

“You of all people know why it hurts. *How much* it hurts.”

It wasn’t like I’d fucked around behind her back, but I did know why she was upset. “I tried to tell myself this was different, and I’m sorry.”

A breeze chased down the shadowed alley, and goosebumps raised on her arms. It would be warm later, but right now the morning chill hung in the air.

I shrugged out of my hoodie and draped it over her torso. The jacket was too big, and she looked adorable. The one thing that would make the sight better would be her smile.

“You’re still planning on leaving.” Alys didn’t slide her arms into the sleeves, but she did twist the hoodie so it draped over her more like a cape.

“Yes,” I said.

“If I hadn’t overheard, would you have told me—us? Or would you have slipped out in the middle of the night with a note? With no note?”

‘I was going to tell you.’

“When?”

“As soon as I grew a bigger pair of balls.”

She twisted her mouth, as if trying to hide her amusement. “Not a great answer.”

“The truth.” It was about time I got back to that. “Is this it? Are you and I done?”

Alys sighed. “Part of me says we should be. It’s a lie, but it’s not the same as... him.”

“I wasn’t fucking your friend.”

“You were, but I was there for that, and it’s not what we’re talking about.”

That was almost a joke, which meant she wasn’t as upset as before.

“What now?” I hated the idea of walking away without a resolution.

“We’re not better, but I can’t”—she bit her bottom lip—“I can’t ask you to put your life on hold for me. If this is a good opportunity for you... We’re grown adults and you should go where the chances are.” A thread of pain ran through her words. “I hate the idea of you leaving, but I get it.”

This didn’t hurt as much as her being mad at me, but her resignation stung.

What did I expect? “I still want to spend the next week and a half with you.”

“We’ll keep doing the contest, and wrap it up.” Alys shrugged out of my jacket and handed it back.

Not quite the answer I was looking for. “I’ll see you when you’re done working today?”

“Probably not.” She took a step back. “I’m going to do some work on Xander’s project this afternoon. Might head up to Ravyn’s to check out her art if she calls.”

So you’re going to work yourself into numbness, instead of — It wasn’t my place to say anything about how she did her job. “All right.”

Alys didn't so much turn away as fade into the shadows, before the door to Aubrey's closed behind her.

I walked down the street to my shop, to make sure everything was in order before I opened, and maybe make a dent in the inventory count I'd been putting off for ages.

When I stepped inside, my gaze was instantly drawn to the picture above the register of Plaid Peanut Butter. Maddox made me take the photo in December, when they played at RinCon. *Our biggest show ever*. He'd been so happy. Alys was grinning too, as they stood with Reese and Danny. The photo radiated the energy from that night.

And the memory settled in my gut like a stone. The feeling didn't lift when I looked away. Partly because the two closest pictures were more favorites—Maddox with Corey Taylor and Alys with Dave Grohl.

The three of us would always have those memories, regardless of what came next. I needed to stop being mopey.

I turned my attention to inventory, but even the albums reminded me of them. The dozen limited edition vinyl copies of Metallica's black album that Alys said wouldn't sell and Maddox insisted would. I sided with Maddox and the things were still taking up space on my shelves.

Then there was the exclusive mini-disc edition of Friday I'm in Love that Maddox got for me for my birthday one year. I wasn't selling it, but keeping it under the glass up front was the perfect way to share it.

So. Many. Good memories.

I opened the store an hour or so later, and Maddox walked in a few minutes later. He strolled toward where I sat at the register. "You know what I've always wondered?"

“How many licks it takes to get to the center of a Tootsie Roll Tootsie Pop?” Why did I go with a flippant answer?

Because I was tired of wallowing.

Maddox scoffed and set a large box on the floor, on the other side of the glass from me. “No. I figured that out years ago.”

“*You* figured it out?”

“I kept licking until I had the answer.”

“No wonder people love fucking you.” The words almost died in my throat, but I managed to keep my tone steady. I would’ve said that without a second thought a few days ago, and now I was sad that things had changed.

Nope. I wasn’t falling back into that place.

“That and I have a big dick.” Maddox grinned.

I snorted. “That too. What’s in the box?”

With a flourish, he pulled off the white cloth that covered the crate in question, to reveal a random assortment of knick-knacks, including a couple of vases, a Buddha, two iron birds, and a phone receiver.

“Rascals,” he said.

The Once Upon a Dream album cover. I was curious, “How do you plan to make them mostly white? Or are you going to leave them as-is?”

“I thought I’d wrap the vases in tea towels like this one.” Maddox dangled the cloth that had been covering the box. “I might use white-out or something on a couple of them, and I’ll leave others as-is.”

“I like it. Let’s do it.”

The crate he'd brought everything from Deacon's in was big enough for carrying, but didn't have enough space for the actual picture. We grabbed four of the wooden crates I used for records, and stacked those in a cube on their side.

While we rearranged everything over and over, to get the right effect, there wasn't much conversation. Had things always been this quiet between me and Maddox when it was just the two of us?

No. Despite my brain's desire to question everything, Maddox and I had a friendship beyond Alys.

Was this lack of conversation what I had to look forward to with both of them for the duration of the contest?

I hoped not.

"Give me your hand and make a wish." Maddox grabbed my wrist without waiting for me to respond, and heat seared through me.

I didn't want to pull away. "What are you doing?"

"Did you make a wish?"

I wished this would turn out in a way that everyone got what they wanted and no one got hurt.

Yeah, right.

"Yes," I said.

He used my hand to rub the Buddha's belly.

"I don't think that's for wishing. Pretty sure you do that for luck." I still hadn't pulled away from his grip. The way his fingers dug into my skin was deliciously tempting, and summoned this morning's shared moment when I was in the shower.

Maddox rubbed his free hand over the statue's belly as well. "Having your wish granted is good luck. I bet we wished for the same thing."

Probably. "Is the lighting in here good for you, or do you need to set something else up?"

Maddox looked around my back room, and his gaze landed on the counter. He dropped my wrist as his line of sight lingered on the spot where he'd teased Alys to orgasm a few days ago.

"It's good." Maddox moved to his camera, which was already set up on a tripod.

Maddox spent a while taking photos. The bulk of the conversation was him telling me how to rearrange lights or figures or tea towels. I expected the stilted conversation though—when Maddox was focused, he visited his own world.

He shot a few rolls each of color and black and white. When he wrapped up, we put everything away.

"I'm going to drop the stuff at Deacon's." He nodded at the crate. "Color film at the pharmacy and home—your place to do the other rolls."

My phone rang, and I held up a finger. "Hang on." Shit. It was Helen. Though, it wasn't like I had to hide these calls anymore. "Hey," I answered, while Maddox watched me expectantly.

"Hey. Buyer's interested still after all, but they're talking about changing their offer," Helen said.

What? "It's already all in the contract."

“They just want certain guarantees. Maybe a couple of small updates to the property. Their words.”

“I don’t like that,” I said. “Do you know what they want?”

“Not yet.”

“If it means selling, I’ll consider it.” As I spoke, I glanced at Maddox.

His lips were drawn in a tight line. He shook his head and walked out.

I wanted to chase him, but what was I going to say? It wasn’t as if I was changing my mind, and we all had to get used to the fact that this was happening. “Get back to me with their list and I’ll let you know if it’s doable.”

“Will do. Talk soon.” Helen hung up.

I should be more concerned about the conversation with her, but my mind was already sliding back to Maddox. That scowl. The fact that Alys wasn’t talking to me.

Damn it.

I was slowly forgiving Onyx, or at least accepting that he was about to be gone, but that didn't make me any less bummed about it. I hated the idea of him being so far away.

To keep me from thinking about him, I poured my mind into the work for Xander. When Maddox sent me a few digital hints from the Rascals photoshoot, I was both happy and sad.

Me: They look great

Maddox: We missed you though.

Me: Next time.

I tossed my phone on the bed, in silent mode, so I wouldn't wait for his reply. Why did I skip the shoot today? To spite Onyx?

To spite Don.

I'd almost convinced myself his words didn't bother me, when I ran into him a few months ago. This entire thing with Onyx had me comparing and contrasting the two men, though. The longer Don the Douche stayed in my head, the more his words drilled into me, until it was a struggle to keep from spiraling.

My working late wasn't because I was avoiding Onyx—or not much anyway—it was because this was a chance to prove I

was more than Don said. Not for him, but because *I* needed to know it.

I plowed into the project and pushed through the evening, losing myself in code.

A short while later, Maddox texted to see if I wanted to go to Ravyn's, and see what she'd done on our project. I let him know I was in.

It meant not seeing Onyx today. There were a lot of days where I didn't see him, and I already told him *no* for today, but the thought hit me hard now. Soon, seeing him wouldn't be an easy option.

Damn him.

I had a little bit before Maddox stopped by, so I gave Xander a call to talk about the notes I sent over.

"You're not working on this in all of your free time, are you?" He sounded concerned.

What was I supposed to say to a man I knew spent more time than he had on his own work? "Mostly."

"You're supposed to be doing competition stuff," Xander said. "Don't get me wrong—I'm not complaining about what you sent. It's fantastic. But I have to answer to people if I'm the reason you burn out."

"I pick what I do, that makes me the reason I burn out." Which I wouldn't, because I was good at what I did, damn it. "Besides, this is fun, and the competition doesn't take *all* my time."

"That's fair." He dove into questions about the existing work, the fact that I didn't have much left, and what kind of prospects he had. When we were done, he asked, "What do

you have in that brilliant head of yours that no one knows about?”

“No one?” Because there was one thing, but Onyx used a basic version already and Maddox was familiar with it too.

Xander gave a short chuckle. “No one who’s going to pay us millions for it.” He sighed. “I don’t care if Maddox knows about it. Not for these purposes. What do you have?”

“It’s like a buy-sell-trade app, but specifically for albums. Records. CD’s. Onyx has a setup on his website, to help people connect who are looking for something specific, but I could see it being so much bigger.”

“Love it. Write something up and we’ll talk,” Xander said. “But only because it’s good. Don’t expect me to jump on everything just because you had an idea.”

“Of course not.” I was excited that he liked this one, though. I felt good about what I was working on, and like I was making something bigger. It was an exciting feeling.

I headed downstairs to grab the dress Aubrey found me for the *Follow the Leader* cover, in case Maddox decided to take pictures today. Though Ravyn wasn’t done with the art, Maddox might photograph me anyway, for a number of reasons.

Aubrey was helping a customer with a fitting, and Maddox wasn’t here yet, so I took a seat behind the register to wait.

When the door swung open, I sat up straight and prepared to play shop girl. When Don walked in, my gut soured and I had to swallow back the surge of bile in my throat.

What was he doing here?

Every mistake I made last time I saw him rushed back to taunt me. How shy, defensive, and withdrawn I'd been. How much he tore me down with the fakest bullshit niceness, and how I let him.

Why did I give him any leeway to do that to me? I couldn't stop him from saying what he was going to, but I didn't have to give a fuck about any of it. He didn't have that kind of power over me, and I wasn't going to let him destroy the good mood that talking to Xander left me in.

In fact, last time I saw him, he pointed out I'd never be more than a code monkey, because I didn't have the skills to go further, and I knew he was wrong.

"Honey Pot, hi." He was warm and bright the instant he saw me.

I hid a cringe at the name, and painted on a bright smile. "Hey. How are you?" *God* that tasted foul.

His eyes grew wide, but his pleasant expression returned in a blink. "I didn't expect to see you in here."

"Aubrey's one of my best friends. I'm here a lot."

"It's cute that you still use terms like *best friend*. And it's sweet that she lets you stick around."

I couldn't do this. "Get out."

"This isn't your establishment." He looked unfazed.

I could stay that way too, at least on the surface. But that didn't mean he could be here. "I'm speaking on behalf of the owner." And where the fuck was Aubrey, anyway?

"I'd rather speak to her about that. How've you been, by the way?" He leaned against the counter, putting him closer to me.

I wanted to recoil in disgust, but I stood my ground. “Fantastic. I’m working on a great project that’s going to rock the technology world.”

“Okay.”

I clenched my jaw at the brush-off. I shouldn’t care what he thought. There was no reason to push for him to understand, but part of me needed him to get it. That I wasn’t what he said. “It’s true.” *Walk away. Now. Go.*

I couldn’t follow my own insistent instructions.

“I believe you,” he said in a voice that implied he very much didn’t. “Or I believe that you believe you. If the ideas live in your head, and you can’t make them real, it doesn’t matter how good they are, Honey Pot.”

I clenched my fists until my nails dug into my palms, and tried to focus on the pain.

“Seriously, though. Would you let Aubrey know I’m here? I have business to conduct,” Don said.

If I punched him, no one in this town would bat an eye. “You’ve already been asked to leave.”

The door opened again, and Maddox walked in.

Thank the gods.

Don glanced over his shoulder, then shrugged and turned back to me.

Maddox didn’t give him any more attention. Instead he walked around the counter, wrapped an arm around my waist, and kissed me so deeply it radiated to the tips of my hair. When we broke apart, he kept his gaze on me. “Sorry to keep you waiting. You deserve better.” His tone was light and self-

effacing. “Are you ready to go, or are you waiting on Aubrey?”

Don cleared his throat with a loud cough. “I don’t believe we’ve met. You’re Xander Haddar’s little brother? He and I went to high school together.”

Maddox glanced over his shoulder. “You have me at a disadvantage. He doesn’t really talk about people who didn’t leave an impact on him.”

“Don Spader.” He extended his hand, but his smooth reply didn’t hide the twitch of his jaw at Maddox’s comeback.

Maddox looked at his hand but didn’t take the offer. “I see.”

“Hey. Sorry to keep you—” Aubrey’s voice reached us before she stepped into the room, but she stopped when she saw Don. “Get out.” Her tone was ice.

“Is that how you greet an old friend?” Don’s reply was kind and warm.

Aubrey scowled. “No. That’s how I treat you. Get out.”

“I’d like to talk to you about—”

“Get. Out.” Aubrey bit off the words.

Maddox moved out from behind the counter, and stepped closer to Don. “You’ve been asked to go multiple times. You can comply, or I can make you.”

“No wonder this entire block is about to go under.” Don scoffed. “Not a single one of you knows how to run a business.” But he turned on his heel and strode quickly from the shop when Maddox took another step toward him.

“What did he want?” Aubrey joined us.

Besides to make me feel small? “He wouldn’t tell me. Kept asking for you.”

“He can go suck his own dick. Fuck that asshole,” Aubrey said.

Her response and Maddox stepping up without hesitation made me feel better, but Don’s words nagged me. They always did and I hated that. I hated that I let him get to me.

I relaxed a little as Aubrey grabbed the dress for me, but I couldn’t completely shake the encounter.

“We’re going to head out,” Maddox said to Aubrey. “Are you okay here if he comes back? We can stay if you’d rather.”

He was so sweet. Night and day compared to Don.

“I’ll be fine. You can’t camp out in my store front forever. Besides, I’ll remind him there are cameras everywhere. He’s never liked negative attention. And if he pushes things, I’ll scream so loud he’ll regret ever returning to town.” Aubrey was my hero.

I was still worried though. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.” Aubrey pushed us toward the door. Go. Have fun. Forget about Don the Douche.” She pulled me into a hug, and whispered, “focus on the much better guy next to you.” Her voice was so soft I barely heard it.

My face went hot.

I had the best friends ever.

Aubrey nudged us out the door, and Maddox and I were on our way.

I swore he glanced at me as much as he did the road as we drove to Ravyn’s.

I couldn't lose him.

The thought came out of nowhere and gripped me so hard it hurt.

Onyx was leaving, I couldn't lose Maddox too. Seeing Don again drove home how much it hurt to be betrayed by a friend. Not that Maddox was anything like him. Neither was Onyx.

And that's why no matter how much Onyx's reasons for going made sense, I ached at the thought of him not being here. At the idea that the same might happen with Maddox—he'd find something better, and walk away.

When did I start feeling more for them than friendship?

And what if Don was right? What if I wasn't good enough to be anything to anyone?

When Ravyn showed us the rough-out of our cliff, on the barn doors, I was blown away. The basic outline was there, along with some painted in bits to show colors. The finer details were missing, but Ravyn had assured us those were still coming.

“I love it.” I let my enthusiasm shine through. “It’s going to be perfect.”

“Agreed.” Though Alys was still quiet, it was clear she liked what we were looking at.

I just wished I could pull her away from her thoughts of that asshole, Don.

I’d seen pictures of him here and there, because the guy was the kind of real estate developer who liked his photo plastered everywhere. So when someone said *Don Spader* it was easy to look up who they meant.

After spending five minutes talking to him today, I wanted to bathe in bleach. I saw exactly why no one liked him. Aside from the whole deal of he fucked Alys and Evie at the same time and lied to both of them about it.

And I’d love to distract Alys from those thoughts this afternoon.

As we finished making arrangements with Ravyn, my gaze drifted around her barn. Partly to see if I wanted to photograph Alys in here, and partly because there were so many glimpses of neat things.

“Is that a Frank Frazetta style Bowie?” I asked when the conversation lulled, and I wandered toward the hint of painting that had caught my eye.

“What? Where?” That had Alys’s attention.

Ravyn ducked her head, but didn’t hide her smile. “It’s just a thing I was working on.” She followed me, and pulled out a four foot by four foot canvas. It wasn’t just Bowie—it was Bowie fighting Ozzie in front of a decimated stone castle.

Onyx would love this. Every bit of it was a flowing, stylized homage to all the artists involved.

“Ozzie would never fight Bowie,” Alys said.

There was that.

“Think of it like Dracula versus the werewolf.” Ravyn lifted the picture to rest it on the wooden pegs that held her canvases. “Sure, they’re going to give each other their space most of the time, and there’s a lot of mutual respect there. But if the werewolf sniffed and then howled at Dracula’s bride...”

It all made perfect sense to me. “I can see that.”

Ravyn grinned. “So, yeah. I’ll wrap up the cliff by this weekend, and if you want to use the barn tonight, or the yard... the farm, any of it for pictures today, go ahead. I keep Bowie and Ozzie inside, so they won’t get in your way.”

She named her pets after the picture? Cousin Ravyn was officially my coolest not-really-a-cousin ever.

“You have dogs? What kind?” Alys asked.

Ravyn tucked the fantasy painting away again. “The cat kind. Why would you name a dog Ozzie? He’s a Siamese and Bowie is a calico.”

Which also made perfect sense.

We finalized a few more details with Ravyn, and she headed inside.

Alys had gone quiet again, and her pensive look was back.

“Are you up for being a model today?” I asked.

“We’re already here.”

That was less than an enthusiastic *yes*. “Come on.” When I grasped her hand, it fit perfectly in mine. I tugged her out of the barn and toward an old wooden swing that sat a few hundred yards away, nestled in a small grove of trees.

When we reached our destination, we discovered the bench was battered, warped, and covered with splintered wood. “This might not have been the coziest place to go to after all.”

“It’s okay.” Alys picked at a loose piece of paint on the frame.

What now? “What’s your ideal rock star death match?” Good one, Maddox. *Not*.

Alys furrowed her brow and studied me. “Believe it or not, I never really thought about it.”

“Me neither, but now that I am...” Who would I pick?

“Yours, then?” Alys mirrored my question to myself.

Um. Fuck. “Kurt Cobain and Axl Rose.”

“I think they were already mortal enemies.”

“Which is why they’re fighting to the death.”

Alys screwed up her face. “In that case... Barbra Streisand and Robert Smith.”

Far be it from me to shoot down a good suggestion, but... “One, she’s not a rock star, and two, South Park already did it.”

“Your rules are confusing.” The wind gusted around us, blowing Alys’s hair into her face.

I brushed the long strands of pink aside, lingering with my fingers on her cheek. “They’re not my rules, they’re the universe’s rules.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not true.” She was almost smiling.

I tugged at one corner of her mouth. “That’s closer.”

“As in, I’m prettier when I smile?”

“You’re always gorgeous, no matter what. If you’re smiling though, maybe you’re feeling better.”

Alys’s posture relaxed, and more amusement slipped onto her face. “You’re trying to distract me from the bad feels?”

“Of course. And also, I feel like this is a really important question. One of those mysteries of the universe things, and you haven’t given me your answer yet.”

She made a sound that was almost a laugh. “You mean my rock death match pick?”

“Yes.”

Alys studied me for a moment, then stuck out her tongue. “You and Reese.”

“Reese would slaughter me.” That just wasn’t fair.

Alys shrugged. “Then I guess you have to call the death match off. I don’t make the rules, the universe does.”

This was much better.

“Besides, I wouldn’t let anyone take you away,” Alys said so quietly, the words vanished in the breeze.

I grasped her hand again. “I promise.” I brushed as much debris from the bench as I could, sat, and pulled her into my lap. The chains might break and then we’d regret this, but for now it was perfect. “Do you have to be anywhere this afternoon?”

“Just here.”

Good. Because this was perfect. Being this close to Alys wasn’t new for us. She’d been sitting on my lap or laying on me or holding my hand for almost as long as we’d known each other.

Today it hit me harder than normal, or it felt like it meant more, or something.

Then again, so did last night, talking to Onyx, and there was no physical contact there.

Or maybe I was just thinking more about the two of them now that Onyx was leaving.

Whether the feeling was new, or I’d never noticed it before, there was an ache in my heart whenever I thought about Alys or Onyx. But it was a good kind of ache.

Was that a thing?

I didn’t have any answers, so I was going to sit here with Alys and focus on how good it felt to have her resting against me.

We sat there for a while, appreciating each other’s company, until we finally decided it was weird to hang out and hide on Ravyn’s property. I dropped Alys at Aubrey’s, though

I hated letting her go for the night. She should be going back to Onyx's with me, and she wasn't.

It made perfect sense that Maddox and Alys would go to Ravyn's alone this afternoon, especially since I had work to do. That didn't stop me from missing them or the experience. It was different when Alys was upset with me.

I stopped by the grocery store on the way home, to grab dinner. We had a butcher who did fresh cuts of great meat, and that might brighten Maddox's mood.

When I walked in the door, Maddox was on a kitchen chair he'd dragged into the living room. He was strumming an acoustic guitar, and scribbling chords on a piece of paper on the coffee table. It took him a moment to look up, he was so engrossed in his music.

He looked one-hundred percent fuckable. If he were any other guy I'd be tempted to climb in his lap and stick my tongue down his throat the moment he set the guitar aside.

Why did the fact that it was Maddox stop me?

Because Maddox wasn't just a random guy.

When he looked up, I held up the grocery bag. "Steak?"

He gave me a lopsided grin. "Brilliant. You start the grill and I'll prep the potatoes."

Either the food was enough of an apology, or he'd moved beyond being upset about the call earlier. Regardless of which it was, I was happy to have him acting like himself.

The two of us worked in tandem in the kitchen, because this was how we worked together. Easily. Efficiently. Like we had when we set up the shoot earlier. Like always.

A pang echoed in my chest at the reminder.

Not much later, I tossed two steaks on the grill, next to two huge potatoes wrapped in foil, and Maddox and I pulled up patio chairs to wait for the food to cook.

“Can I hear what you were working on?” I asked Maddox. Sometimes he was willing to share as he went, and other times he wanted to hold his musical creations close until he felt like they were in a good shape. He was insanely fucking talented, obviously since he composed for a living.

But on top of that, I meant what I said to him last night. He wasn't adrift, even if he was drifting. He was at his best when he got to be him.

“Of course.” Maddox pulled out his phone, and a moment later the light strains of acoustic guitar blended with his deep, soulful voice, and filtered from the tiny speaker. The music was only about a minute long, and stopped abruptly.

The lyrics themselves weren't sad—they were about a boy making a kite. Needing string, and a ribbon for the tail. Watching it soar. But the delivery, the way he sang, was heartbreaking.

I'd heard enough of Maddox's music to expect there was a metaphor in words. “Do you know what happens next?” I asked.

He frowned. “I was thinking about the string coming loose. The kite breaking away. But the lyrics aren’t working for me.”

“Maybe the breaking away is more about freedom than loss?” Or maybe I was reading too much into things and the song wasn’t about the three of us at all.

Maddox raised his eyebrow. “It’s just a song about a kite.”

“Uh-huh.” I went to check the food.

“You ever fly kites when you were little?”

I flipped one steak then the other. “Once or twice. Just those cheap ones they sold at the grocery store.”

“My mom used to make kites.” The shift in Maddox’s tone was subtle. Sad. It was rare that he went into details about his mother, and when he did, it was always clear how much losing her when he was little had impacted him. “They were works of art—fabric and plastic and wood and aluminum. They didn’t only look pretty, they flew, too.”

“I never knew...” Of course I didn’t, but what else was I supposed to say?

Maddox shrugged. “Dad boxed up a lot of her stuff and stashed it out of sight, but Aunt Rosie wouldn’t let him hide those. She has them on display at her place, with some of Mom’s other art. It’s like its own mini museum...”

Maddox stared at something I couldn’t see, then shook his head, and focused on me. “You know, if you cut the string on a kite, it’s free for a little while—it soars and dips and climbs wherever the wind takes it,” he said. “But it always crashes back to the earth eventually.”

“But it does that even with the string attached.”

“Good point.” Maddox furrowed his brow.

I studied him, and in the evening sunlight he was cast in something I usually didn't let myself see. Desire pulsed through me, but it wasn't carried on lust. I felt a potent need to let Maddox walk through the world the way he saw it. It was almost a... protective feeling?

Maddox didn't need to be protected.

But he did deserve to soar, and have someone there to catch him during those times that gravity won out. Even if the kite fell back to earth every time, it didn't have to be a rough landing.

The rush of impulse inside wanted me to be the one who kept him from crashing.

Except I'd already destroyed that chance. I wouldn't be here, and I didn't have a right.

maddox

I sat at the bar that ran the length of the front window in the coffee shop, the morning sunlight striking building tops and teasing a gorgeous day. I couldn't stop thinking about my friends. I was falling—had fallen?—for Alys. For Onyx.

Looking back, it was clear that my world had revolved around them for a while. But with the threat of Onyx leaving, and Alys pulling away, go figure that would push me to figure out how much I wanted them.

How much I needed them, each for different reasons and in different ways.

I wanted to tell them both. Together. Apart.

Speaking of, that was where the idea fell apart. Telling one or the other how I felt bordered on that whole *taking sides* thing I wasn't doing. Or rather, I would hate for one of them to see it that way.

The only solution was to get them saying more to each other than one to two word sentences before going their separate ways again. Which meant getting them together in the same room. Which meant getting Alys to look away from her work for Xander—

That wasn't fair of me. What she was doing was for her, and she deserved it. But that didn't mean I had to like that he

was involved.

She'd mostly agreed to meet at Gage's this afternoon, though, to look at the proofs from the Rascal's photo shoot, and she knew Onyx would be there. With a little luck and at least as much nudging, maybe we'd all be back in the same house soon.

And figuring out how to make Onyx stay, without asking him to give up a great opportunity.

As I sat there, pondering the confusions of life and love, conversation assaulted me from every direction in the packed coffee shop. It was hard to make out what any one person was saying, but the instant *Don Spader* hit my ears, they had to follow the voice.

"I hear that Alys girl... unhinged... with the Haddar kid... sure gets around..."

Goodie. They were talking about me and Alys. I didn't care what they said about me, but if they were back on their bullshit rumors about her, they got to have words with me.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" Adam dropped onto the high stool next to mine, yanking me from my eavesdropping.

I scanned the shop around me, but couldn't figure out who the owner of the gossip was.

"You okay?" Adam asked.

I shook the gossip aside as best as I could. He'd asked me what I was looking at. I had no idea. "I'm good. Mysteries of the universe?"

He pushed his shoulder into mine and his head moved into my space. "That's Joystick's. He only serves mystery meat on Saturday night."

“It’s tofu. It’s not mysterious or a meat,” I countered.

“Toe-may-toe, toe-mah-toe.” Adam straightened into his own seat and put his phone on the counter in front of me. He tapped the screen. “Viewer numbers on the show we did a few days ago.”

It took me a moment to make sense of the video thumbnails next to statistics. One stood out over the others. “Does that say five-hundred thousand?”

“Yes.” Adam was excited.

“Watching us bullshit?”

“Yes.”

I couldn’t even imagine. “Brain fellated.”

Adam took his phone back. “You mean *mind blown*?”

“If you want to be crude about it, I guess.”

“I almost always want to be crude about things,” Adam said. “Speaking of things... We could make this one.”

His words were gibberish, yet I had a good idea what he meant. “You mean like a podcast or something?”

“Or something. Exactly.”

Did I have to be the adult now? Gross. “I hate to be the one to tell you this, dude, but you and I aren’t exactly do-things-long-term people. Besides, the contest ends in less than two weeks.”

“But what if—and I think you’re going to like this—we talk about whatever we want?” Adam said.

“We do that anyway.”

“In front of a camera.”

I loved it. “Would people watch that?”

Adam set his phone down again and jabbed the now-dark screen. “Apparently, yes. And worst case scenario? If they don’t, fuck those guys, and we’re not any worse off than we were before.”

“Where are we going to do this?” This was the best kind of distraction.

“Will Onyx let us use his back room?”

Sigh. My enthusiasm evaporated. “Probably, but not for long.” The words stuck in my throat. “He’s leaving. Like, out of state.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” Rather, I knew what Onyx told me, and I got it, but I didn’t want to talk about it.

“Oh. Bummer. We should do another show anyway.”

I agreed.

We made the loosest version ever of a plan, and Adam took off, leaving me to think about Onyx and Alys again.

About how Alys’s go-to excuse for not seeing us had rapidly become *I’m busy with this project with Xander. It’s such a great opportunity.* How Onyx had switched to *I need to put more energy into packing the things I’m not selling with the store.*

Good for both of them, but...

Sigh.

I grabbed the rest of my coffee to head out. As I was leaving, my feet stalled at the sight of my dad walking in.

“Maddox.” He gave me a curt nod.

Wonderful. “Hi, Dad.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

Was he fucking kidding? The question bristled over me like a scrub brush. “I’m between projects right now.”

“Ah.” Dad’s tone was flat.

Fuck this. “I’m going to get back to being a bum.” I brushed past him. As the door swung shut between us, I swore I heard him say *wait*, but when I looked over my shoulder, he was walking toward the front counter.

The fact that I had a job I loved, that didn’t work me to the bone, did not make me a bad person. I was torn between chasing him down to tell him that, and the reminder that I shouldn’t care what he thought. My old man had never had a good opinion of what I did with my time.

Talking to Onyx about kites two nights ago had brought back memories I thought I’d lost. Not so much full scenes as snippets, and they played in my head now as I crossed the street to his shop.

I would wonder if the colorful images in my head were real, but they were backed up by photos I’d seen in albums stuffed away at my Aunt Rosie’s place. Photos of Dad having fun with me when I was little. Of flying the kites Mom made.

I’d been so young, the images in my head were more color and emotion than shape, but in the pictures, Dad was smiling. Holding up one of Mom’s latest creations while she took photos of him and me. She was in a couple of the shots too, so I assumed Xander had been there behind her camera.

The past mingled with the present, gripping me hard. When we lost Mom, it was almost like losing Dad too.

And now Onyx was leaving. Alys was pulling away. Not that they were Dad and Mom, but they were people I loved.

Loved. The word hit me as hard as the loss did. I couldn't let go of the family I'd built for myself. I wouldn't.

I t'd been less than two full days since I'd seen Alys. As I headed to Gage's to meet her and Maddox, my body hummed with the kind of anticipation usually reserved for a kid on Christmas morning. How was I going to survive not seeing her for months at a time?

Once she was talking to me again, more than just single word text answers, I'd feel better. I wasn't missing Maddox.

Then again, he currently lived in my guest room.

I wanted to be doing this at my record store or house or anywhere that didn't make it feel like *we need to go somewhere to meet that's neutral territory*. Maddox said we should do it here because it was early afternoon and he wanted food.

Sure. That was the only reason.

I stepped into Gage's Grub, and the heady scents of burgers and fries hit me. My stomach grumbled in response. There were worse places to be.

Gage was behind the counter near the register, with Evie. They stood so close, anyone who didn't know them would think they were a couple. I didn't know how they were so oblivious to each other's—to their own—feelings. They'd

been in love since they were kids, and neither of them had ever figured it out.

Evie saw me first, and stepped away, erasing the frown from her face. “You have customers, I’ll let you go,” she said.

Gage grabbed her arm. “You sure you’re all right?”

“It’s a free country. He’s allowed to walk around town if he wants. But if he comes in my fucking store, I’m going to kick him in the nuts.”

“That’s fair,” Gage said.

I assumed she was talking about Don, and her reaction was mild in my opinion. I held up a hand. “Don’t leave on my account. It’s just us.”

“I should.” Evie wrinkled her nose. “If there’s yelling, I’d rather hear about it after the fact.”

I raised my brows.

“Kidding.” She headed toward the door. “Probably.”

If she was making jokes about Alys still being mad instead of getting upset at me for it, especially after a conversation about Don, I’d take it as a good sign that this would go well.

Maddox and Alys showed up a moment later. I wasn’t surprised that Alys was quiet, but Maddox’s subdued mood was unexpected. What happened between when I saw him this morning and now?

We ordered, and grabbed a table in the back of the dining room. It was the middle of the afternoon, and no one else was here except us, Gage, and his business partner Knox, who was currently manning the grill.

Our food was ready fast, as if they were used to our orders. We picked one table to put our lunch on, and spread the photos over the one next us.

As Maddox laid the images out, I was in awe. Sure, I'd seen him take them, but things always looked different in the final result, and this was no exception. Even though the objects were the same in every photo, the way he'd staged them, the lighting, all of the little extras, made each shot stand out.

Alys and I muttered our appreciation. I only saw one issue. "How are we supposed to pick?"

"Um... not darts," Maddox said. "How about each of you choose your top three, and then we'll vote and let Gage and Knox vote."

Alys studied him. "What about you?"

"I already picked." Maddox waved his hand over the table.

"So, you get to pick your favorite twenty or so, but we have to narrow it down to three? Cheater," I teased.

Alys and I had two favorites in common, so it made sense to pick between those two. When we all voted, we still didn't have a clear winner, so Maddox flipped a coin, and we had our selection.

The entire process only took a few minutes. As we settled back in front of our food, the conversation died again. Fun was gone and an oppressive atmosphere hung in its place.

I poked at my milkshake, watching the melty bits pool around the side then vanish as I stirred them in, and Alys nibbled on fries with no sauce.

This was fun. *Whee*. How was I supposed to get us back on track?

Maddox set down a burger he'd only taken a bite out of, and grabbed some of Alys's fries.

"Hey. You have your own." She smacked his hand lightly.

Maddox dipped the fries in my milkshake, which I covered too late to stop him, and he held them in front of Alys.

"Open your mouth or they'll drip everywhere," Maddox said.

Weird thing to be bossy about, but now I was curious.

"And?" There was defiance in Alys's retort.

"I'll drip them on the photos."

"Are you really forcing me to ea—"

Maddox shoved the fries in her mouth, cutting her off.

She scowled, but the expression faded as she chewed.

I wasn't sure I appreciated that this felt fun. "You're such a dork," I said to Maddox.

"And yet, I'm not the one being childish." Maddox looked at me. "Are you both going to sit here ignoring each other for the rest of the day? Aren't you supposed to be the grown-up of the group, Onyx?"

"I never asked for that." No, really. I wasn't sure I wanted to be anything that he said with that level of disdain.

Alys swallowed. "You give the best spankings." Her playfulness was lined with hesitation.

I did miss that. Not the spankings—okay, those had their place—but Alys being playful. After only a couple of days, I

missed it terribly. “Do you want to watch? I’m pretty sure Maddox just earned one.”

Alys gave a half smile. “I’m not the one who likes to watch.”

The front door swung open, and one of the nurses from the clinic stood there, scanning the room. Her gaze landed on us. “Maddox. Thank goodness. Someone said they saw you come in here.”

“What’s wrong?” Maddox’s playful mood is gone.

“Your father... He doesn’t have any emergency contact information on file. We needed to get a hold of one of you...”

No. My gut soured.

“What’s wrong?” Maddox repeated, this time with more force. “Is my dad okay?”

“He had a heart attack. He’s on his way to the hospital in Ogden.”

That meant he was still alive.

Maddox had stalled. He wasn’t saying anything or moving, only staring at the nurse.

“Give me your keys.” I didn’t wait for his reply, but reached into his pocket.

Gage was already at our table, grabbing our trays. “Go. I’ll wrap this up until you get back. Call me with news?”

“Yeah. Thank you.” Alys tugged Maddox to his feet, and he stood like he was a zombie.

I unlocked the doors on Maddox’s Land Cruiser, and Alys urged him into the passenger seat. Within a few minutes, we were on the freeway, heading toward the nearest hospital.

Alys leaned forward between the seats, and rested her hand on Maddox's arm. "You should make sure Xander knows."

He nodded slowly, and sent off a text, before letting his phone drop into his lap.

Alys kept her hand on him the entire drive.

Longest thirty minutes ever. I didn't know what to say. Did he want comfort? Distraction? Yeah, his relationship with his father was antagonistic, but this was more serious than some terse words exchanged in passing.

At the hospital, we were directed to the right waiting room and told that Mr. Haddar had just gone into surgery.

Maddox sank into a seat. "I just saw him this morning," he muttered.

Alys and I took spots on either side of him. If this were my dad, I'd be crushed. Freaking out. If I'd gotten the call, I'd probably be screaming at every person I met, to get me on a plane to where they were, so I could be there when he got out of surgery.

But I'd always had a great relationship with my parents.

Xander showed up about fifteen minutes after we did. Considering he'd been more than an hour away, he must've lead footed it to get here so fast.

I shared the same update with him that we'd been given, and he nodded and took a seat as well.

"Does anyone want any soda or coffee or anything?" Alys offered a short while later.

Both Maddox and Xander shrugged her off. They'd never looked more alike than they did in this moment, both men with their hands clasped, elbows on their knees, and heads bowed.

The woman at the desk called them up after about an hour or so. She let them know surgery would be at least another two to three hours, but the doctor wanted them to know Mr. Haddar was alive. He was stable. The doctor would come talk to them as soon as he could.

Maddox and Xander thanked her in unison.

Judith showed up a short while after that, and I repeated the news. She told Xander that Dom was getting them a hotel room at the nearest place he could find, because she assumed Xander would want to stay close.

The way Xander pulled her into the chair next to him and clung to her hand was subtle but potent.

A month ago, I would've guessed that Alys and I would do that for each other, even though we weren't dating. Weren't in lo—

But apparently she and I didn't have what I thought we did.

Dominic showed up a short while later, and sat with his partners, while Judith repeated what I'd told her.

The silence stretched on, only broken up by thunder outside and the occasional blip from someone's phone, with a friend checking in.

A loud rumble reached my ears, and Maddox scowled. His stomach was growling.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered.

"You have to eat. We all have to eat." Alys sounded concerned.

Alys stood. "Fine." She pulled me to my feet as well. "We're going to go get food, and you're all going to eat

something.”

“Thank you.” Judith looked up with a tired smile.

Alys crouched in front of Maddox, putting herself in his eye-line. “Okay?”

“Yes, miss Alys.”

That would’ve been cute and sweet and normal under almost any other circumstance.

We headed to the cafeteria on the main floor, to find a sign out front stating they were closed due to appliance issues.

Without any words, we turned toward the hospital exit instead. There had to be something nearby. The moment Alys and I walked out the front doors, the rain drove into us. We huddled under the awning.

“Where to?” I asked.

“I saw a taco truck parked at the edge of the property when we drove in.” Alys nodded in that direction.

I didn’t need to ask if she wanted to walk that far in the rain—for as long as I’d known her, Alys had loved being out in a storm.

We made our way in the direction she indicated, the sounds of the weather stopping us—saving us?—from talking.

The little orange food truck with an awning and short menu was like a beacon of color on the dreary landscape. “Afternoon.” The man at the window greeted us with a smile. “What can I get you, and can you wait an extra ten or fifteen minutes? I shut everything down because of the weather. I’m still hoping it clears up soon so I can stay out here the rest of the night.”

“No worries.” At least about waiting for food. There were plenty of other things to worry about. “We’ll take, uh...” It didn’t matter that no one had given us orders; we knew this group well enough to guess. “Ten rolled tacos, four crisp burritos, and a chicken salad.”

“Sounds great. Give me fifteen or twenty.”

I paid and thanked him. There was a pavilion a short distance away, with a single picnic table underneath. Alys and I sat across from each other, listening to the rain hammer on the metal above our heads.

This was so fucked.

“I don’t know what to do. Inside, I mean.” Alys glanced toward the hospital.

“You did more than anyone else. That’s why we’re out here.”

She shrugged. “It won’t change anything.”

“It will. Not the thing everyone wants changed, but it will make a difference.” Was I being comforting? I had no idea. But I was feeling as lost as she was.

Alys tucked dripping wet strands of her hair behind her ear, and wiped the excess water from her face. “Yesterday I was so stuck in the things Don said to me...”

Wait, what? “When did you talk to Don?” My mind grasped the thing I understood my feelings about.

“...And today... The world puts things in perspective in a cruel way sometimes.”

Now I could feel anger at something besides the concept of *heart attack*. This was a thing I could react to. “You don’t drop a bomb like that and then keep talking like it’s nothing. When

did you talk to Don?” *And where can I find him, to beat his face in?*

Alys’s smile was flat. “Maddox didn’t tell you.”

“No.”

Maddox knew?

“He—Don—was looking for Aubrey yesterday.” Alys sounded like it was the most natural thing in the world, aside from the hint of tension that cut through her words. “And also... I ran into him a couple of months ago, in Salt Lake.”

Which was why she’d been withdrawing even before the pregnancy scare. “So he’s around. I could go find him and clock him.” My mind skipped ahead to those details.

“Would that make you feel better?”

“Yes. Wouldn’t it make you feel better?”

She glanced up at me with a hooded gaze. “Maybe. Probably. Okay, there would be a lot of satisfaction in seeing you beat him up.”

“You want to do something here. You wish you could help beyond *taco run*. I get it. I wish I could erase Don from your life. I hate that anyone did to you what he did—what he continues to do.” I struggled to keep my voice even, but fury was slipping in.

That almost-smile of Alys’s was back. “You know, you’re one of the best things that ever happened to me. Maybe the fates decided to introduce me to him at the same time for balance or something.”

That was a shitty concept, but still believable. “Fuck the fates. Fuck balance.”

“Fuck any and all character building moments,” Alys added.

I smiled wryly. “Exactly.”

She rested her hands on the table. “I’m sorry we don’t see each other more.”

“You have a good opportunity. A great job. I’m sorry I’m moving so far away.”

“You have a good opportunity,” Alys mimicked me.

I moved to sit next to her, on her bench, and she leaned against my arm. I covered her fingers on the table between us, letting the chill radiate from her hand through mine.

“You’ll always be my Alys, Bunny.” I needed that to be true.

She rested more weight against me. “Always.”

It was going to hurt to leave. Me. Her. Maddox. I didn’t want any of that. I hated that anyone caused her—them—pain, and now I was going to be guilty of the same.

I still didn’t know how to make it so all three of us won, though.

maddox

Feeling something would be bad.

Except I was already feeling everything, and I wanted more than anything to be numb. Fear. Confusion. Frustration. Rage. Impotence.

All of it beat down on me until my mind was flooded with the onslaught.

After more than five hours of eternity, someone called, “Haddar.”

I jerked my head up to see a man in scrubs and a surgical hat standing in the waiting room doorway. A glance at Xander confirmed he was moving, and I mimicked his actions, falling into step beside him to join the doctor.

We were assured that Dad made it through surgery all right, but he wasn't out of the woods yet. He'd be here for at least a few more days while they monitored him. He was in a recovery room now, and a nurse would come and get us in about half an hour. But we wouldn't be allowed to stay long tonight. We could come back tomorrow for a real visit.

The doctor left, and Xander told the others what was going on. His expression barely shifted the entire time. He was cool and in control.

I hated him for it.

I almost lost my dad today. The thought bounced in my head as I sat with Alys and Onyx again. It repeated and hammered and refused to go away.

I was about to lose Onyx. Not in the same way, but he was still leaving, and I couldn't...

There was nothing I could do about it, the same way I couldn't do anything about Dad. Or Mom.

The last thing I needed was to spiral into a pit of despair, so I settled for focusing on the pressure and heat of Alys resting her hand on my leg.

And then we waited. Time ticking away. Stricken. In the land of confusion. Stupefied. Trying to ignore the voices, as we drifted into the night, listening to the voices with a prayer to not be haunted...

Great. My stress was a Disturbed discography.

“Haddar.” A new person in scrubs called out the name. Had it been half an hour already?

Xander and I joined him, and he shook his head. “Only one of you can see him,” the nurse said. “He asked for Xander.”

Fucking... Of course. Why did I expect anything else? I turned away.

Xander grabbed my arm, and forced me to look at him. “You showed up. That’s what matters.”

Why the fuck...? “Is it? Would he have shown for me?” Not the path I wanted to go down, but I’d set foot on it, I might as well keep going. “History says *no*. Or maybe if I had a fucking heart attack it would prove I was worth—”

“You are always worth it.” Xander talked over me.

“Fuck you. Don’t after school special me.”

Xander handed me a hotel key card. “Dom got an extra room, in case you want to stay close. If Alys or Onyx needs a ride back, he can drop them off and come back here.”

“Does it make you feel better?” I asked before I knew what the question meant.

“What?”

“Pretending you’re in control, even now? Because you’re not.” I shouldn’t take this out on him, but he was the closest thing I had to a target.

“I’m as pissed-off and as stressed out as you are.”

Uh-huh. “Funny how your pissed-off face and your cool and collected face look so much alike.”

Xander pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Do you want to see your father now?” Hesitation filled the nurse’s voice.

Xander nodded, but gave me another look. “I get it,” he said. “I actually do understand, and I’m sorry.”

I could count on one hand the number of times I’d heard Xander apologize as an adult, and that wasn’t just to me. That didn’t make his words any easier to swallow.

He followed the nurse into the other room, and I went back to my seat. There was no reason to repeat anything—the entire waiting room heard my mini-tantrum.

“You should take the hotel room tonight,” Alys said softly. “So you can see your dad in the morning.”

It didn't matter. I could go back to Haddarville and go back to my life and wait for news.

But it did matter, and I wanted to see him. I wanted to be here in the morning to confirm with my own eyes that he was back to his old self. Maybe I shouldn't care, but I did. He was still my father.

"Are you both..." *going back to town?* I couldn't push the question out.

Alys shook her head. "We're staying with you."

I hadn't seen them discuss it, but Onyx didn't argue. Thank fuck for the best friends ever.

Xander rejoined us about ten minutes later, looking as stoic as when he left. "He's still Dad. We should call it a night."

I could ask for more details, but really that said it all.

Onyx took Dom up on the offer of a ride, to head back long enough to grab us clothes and his car. Alys texted Aubrey to tell her to let Onyx in when he showed up. Onyx and Dom went in one direction, Xander and Judith left together, and I drove Alys to the hotel.

Was it childish that I was grateful our room was on a different floor, on a different side of the building, than Xander's?

The room was generic—beige, white, and shades of gray—with a single king sized bed in the middle. I didn't know if Dom had done that on purpose or not, but I was grateful for it. I could keep Alys and Onyx close tonight without any stupid conversations about who would sleep in the spare room or at someone else's house.

Alys rested her arm against mine, as we stood at the edge of the room. “I’ve been telling myself all night not to ask, but now I have to,” she said. “How are you doing?”

“Honestly? I have no clue.” I could try to put it in words, but if the jumble felt unhinged in my head, it would be worse out loud.

“Okay.”

The way she said the word, with so much sincerity and simplicity, made me ache. There was no pressure or expectation, but simply acceptance.

All of that from the word *okay*.

Impulse snaked through me, bringing clarity with it. The most I’d had all day. “That’s not completely true. There’s one thing I know about how I feel.”

“What’s that?”

I spun and tilted her head up with my finger, to search her eyes. *Fuck* she was gorgeous. Salvation and beauty and security. I crushed my mouth to hers.

Alys pressed into me, gasping and groaning.

Desperation flooded me, to be closer to her. To be part of her. I kissed her until my lips ached, and then kept kissing.

When I pulled my mouth from hers, I didn’t let her go. Instead I tilted her head again, and dragged my thumb along her swollen lips. “I can’t lose you, Alys. I don’t want a no-strings physical relationship with you. I want hard, passionate, all-consuming sex, and I never want the late night conversations to stop and I never want to give up the chaos and the fantastic fucking insanity and I never want to let you go. And maybe this isn’t the best time to say anything, but I

have to tell you because waiting... Waiting means maybe not being able to tell you.”

“I’m not going anywhere. I promise.” The way she said it was like before. Acceptance and understanding.

I kissed her again, with a hint more control this time. It was still incredible. This was never going to get old. We kicked off our shoes and made ourselves comfortable—me with my back to the headboard and her leaning against me.

This didn’t solve the fact that my dad was lying in a hospital bed just a couple of miles away, having narrowly escaped the results of mortality. But it did mean I had Alys. I could hold onto her. She could hold onto me.

We turned on the TV, but I barely registered what we were watching. Some cringy nineties teen movie that was on more for the nostalgia than the plot.

When Onyx got back, he gave us a raised brow look.

“You gonna join us?” I asked.

He set our bags by the closet. “What are we doing?”

“Enjoying each other’s company. Mourning the fact that you’re leaving us,” Alys said.

I couldn’t hide my wince, and Onyx opened his mouth.

“I’m not trying to make you feel guilty,” Alys added before he could talk. “But if we only have a couple more weeks before you move, we should enjoy it, right?”

My point exactly.

“Right.” Onyx nodded and joined us on the bed.

This didn’t change anything, and it wouldn’t last, but I liked all three of us being here like this again. Close. Cuddled

together. More than friends.

I wasn't sure what yet, but Alys and Onyx were my world, and I wasn't letting that go.

In the morning, I was up before Alys and Onyx, and headed back to the hospital. The muddled mess of yesterday was gone. I wanted to see my dad, make sure he was okay, and hear him grumble about something insignificant so I knew he was going to keep being all right.

I should've checked the hospital visiting hours before I came. Were those really a thing? It was after eight on a Friday, and the place was already busy. It should be fine.

I approached the woman at the front desk with a warm smile, and gave her my dad's name and mine.

"Let me check." She turned to her computer. As she typed, a frown slid onto her face. "I'm sorry, it's outside visiting hours for the ICU."

What? "Should I come back in an hour? Two?" I could grab coffee and go wait with my friends until then.

She shook her head. "For the ICU, hours are from four to seven in the morning and at night."

What? "Do you get a lot of visitors at 4 am?"

"For ICU patients? More than you might think would be up that early." Her voice and smile were kind. She gave a soft huff. "Are you alone?"

I looked around me. "Yes. Unless you see someone I don't."

“I don’t.” She gave a short laugh. “Promise to not make a disturbance, and I can let you go back there now. We can make exceptions,” she added the last bit in a quiet voice, only meant for my ears. “As long as it’s not going to disturb other patients. And promise you won’t bother him if he’s sleeping.”

“Shh.” I pressed my finger to my lips and whispered, “I promise I’ll be so quiet, no one will ever know except you, me, and Dad—if he’s awake.”

She gave me his room number, and pointed me in the right direction.

An uneasiness grew inside me as I got closer to my destination. Would he be in the mood to talk? Would he be the man I knew? What was I walking into? I pushed the thoughts aside as I knocked on his door.

“Yeah.” That certainly sounded like Dad.

I pushed into the room, to find him lying in bed, looking a bit like in a TV show, but in a more cramped room. He was pale, like the sheets. Though, without the blue flowers on his skin. Tubes and wires ran from him, and a hint of heavy bandages showed on his chest, above the blanket.

The way he stared at me for a moment made me think he was having trouble focusing. They must have him on painkillers, right? They’d pried open his rib cage less than a day ago to cut into his heart.

“Hi, Dad.” I forced a friendly tone.

“Maddox. Why are you here?”

Not quite what I was hoping for, but not surprising. “You had a heart attack. I was worried.”

“Idiotic boy.” His voice was slurred. “Don’t you have better things to do? That contest?”

“We thought you were dying.”

“I’m obviously still here. You didn’t answer my question.”

Because there was no way things were unfolding like this. “I figured it was rhetorical. I’m here to make sure you’re all right.”

“You shouldn’t be. Go home.”

I stared at him in disbelief, slack jawed. Seconds ticked by, and his words sank deeper. Deeper.

What the fuck?

I wasn’t going to pick a fight with a man in ICU, but *God* I wanted to scream at him for being an asshole. “Good point. See you around.”

It was the best I could manage without letting my anger out. I’d spent half of yesterday worrying about him. Dived into some serious self-discovery last night because of it. Just wanted to see this morning that he was doing all right.

Yup. He was fine. Same asshole he’d always been.

As I stalked out of the hospital, his words echoed in my head. *Don’t you have better things to do? That contest?*

The exchange played on repeat as I reached my SUV. Bounced around and around as I drove back to the hotel. Mocked me as I let myself into the room.

“Are you all right?” Alys asked the moment she saw me.

“Never better.” *Fuck you old man.* “We’re going back to Onyx’s.”

“Your Dad—” Onyx snapped his jaw shut when I shot him a look.

I shook my head. “Fine. Same dad as always. Let’s go.” Dad thought that I thought this stupid contest was more important than him? Fine. It would be.

Onyx took his own car. Maddox drove me and himself back to Haddarville. I was worried about him. The kisses last night were incredible. It wasn't like we were a couple, but there was a promise...

This morning, though, his usual Maddox cheer was gone. He'd only said whatever words were necessary to pack up and leave since he returned from visiting his dad.

I wanted to ask him over and over *are you all right? What happened?* I wanted to push the issue until he gave me an answer, but that wasn't practical. Each time I nudged him, his response was, "I'm fine."

Finally, I couldn't take the brush-off anymore. "You're obviously not fine."

"Sometimes I forget how big an asshole Dad is. Can we leave it at that?"

No. But I couldn't force Maddox to talk. I wouldn't. "Okay."

We parked at Onyx's, and Maddox loaded his arms with his laptop bag and mine, as well as grabbing a suitcase.

"I can't believe we made Onyx drag all this shit half an hour away, just to turn around and bring it back. Fucking

idiotic of me.” As Maddox hauled everything inside, his grumbling continued. “Seriously—what was I thinking?”

“You made the decision you thought was best at the time.” I doubted that was comforting.

He shook his head and waited for Onyx to join us. “We should do The Motels cover today.” Maddox switched gears in a blink, but his tone was still gruff. His expression sour. “Any chance Aubrey is free? Do we need her? I don’t mean that in a cruel way. Can we do it without make-up? I don’t want to bother her if she’s busy. Everyone has already given us too much of their time.”

What? “They’re our friends. They do this because they love it as much as we do.” I had no doubt of that—there wasn’t any reason to keep helping us year after year if they didn’t all think it was fun, too.

“What did you have in mind, picture-wise?” Onyx asked.

“Crayon background.” As Maddox talked, he never stopped moving, putting each bag where it belonged. “High contrast black and white of Alys, overlaid after the fact, and paint your hair and lips on the photo itself. Let’s do it. Call Aubrey and ask if we can use her studio.”

Decision made apparently. Not that I disagreed, but the tone and pace of the conversation had me on edge. “I’ll head over there now and talk to her, if you want to get your gear together.”

“I’ll meet you both there with breakfast,” Onyx said.

Good point. Maddox had skipped eating this morning—that was how bad this was hitting him.

I took off for Aubrey’s. As I hit Main Street, I swore I heard my name, but whispered rather than called. I glanced

over my shoulder to see two women about my age, pushing strollers and dressed in tracksuits. They stood outside the coffee shop, drinks in hand and children looking absolutely bored.

Both women stared at me, mouths clamped shut. I was pretty sure one of them was the woman who was at Aubrey's when Don came in the other day.

There was no one else on the street, so if I had heard my name it was from them. Did I go to high school with them? No. They were probably a decade younger than me. Maybe I imagined it all.

I turned back on my trip, and heard snatches. *Don Spader...slut...lied...pregnant.*

Fuck. I hated that rumor. One of my least favorite. Not that I liked any of them that involved me and Don. Though, how I'd managed to avoid overhearing any of the gossip since I'd been back was beyond me.

Why did it have to be today, though? I wasn't emotionally equipped to shut out the whispers on top of everything else.

When I got to Aubrey's, she was sifting through a series of twenties-style flapper dresses with Ravyn. They both looked up, and their smiles were a warm contrast to the cold women outside.

"Hey, how are you holding up? How's Maddox?" Aubrey asked.

Broken. Or at least a little cracked. "He's been better."

"Is it true, then?" Ravyn asked. "About his dad?"

Who the hell knew what she'd heard? "He had a heart attack. He's okay though. I mean, I guess not totally okay, but

he survived. He's recovering in the hospital."

"Good," Ravyn said. "I was going to call, tell you your painting is ready, but I didn't know... The timing seemed bad."

"That's cool. Seriously, thank you." Good news I could give Maddox. If he wanted to distract himself with the contest, this would help. "We might want to come by later today, or tomorrow."

Ravyn shrugged. "I'm *super* busy shopping for a dress for a fundraiser." She nodded at the assortment Aubrey had out. "Which means I'm *super* tied up— Kidding. Whenever you want is fine." She grinned.

"Which one are you thinking about?" I needed a little more levity in my day, and talking dresses with Ravyn and Aubrey would be a nice, short distraction.

"I love this one." Ravyn held up one that was so dark green it was nearly black, and brought out the vibrance in both her hair and eyes. "But it wasn't really made for someone with my assets." She looked down at her chest.

Aubrey jerked her thumb toward another section of the store. "I have period-appropriate bindings if you want."

"Don't do it." I had to stop Ravyn in case she didn't know. "No dress is worth it."

Ravyn lifted her large, round breasts, and pressed them together. "Tits this nice? I'm not hiding them."

Aubrey let out an exaggerated huff. "Showoffs." She plucked another dress from the rack. "Fine. The colors won't be as stunning on you with this one, but the neckline..."

Ravyn held it in front of her, and twisted and turned, examining her reflection in a nearby mirror. The V-neck dipped low, the waist curved in, and fringe hung past the hemline. The deep burgundy and sequins still brought out a stunning flush in Ravyn's pale skin.

"It highlights my freckles." Ravyn wrinkled her nose.

"Which are adorable. Go try it on." Aubrey pushed her toward the dressing rooms. She turned to me when Ravyn stepped into one of the cubes. "You didn't come here to watch someone else pick out dresses. How are you really?"

"Same as before. But I did come to ask if we could use your studio today, for more pictures. Maddox wants to get some shots in."

Aubrey raised her brow. "Maddox is working?"

"Don't ask." Not that I had any answers.

"I get it. And yeah, of course. It's all yours."

"I need a zip-up," Ravyn called. "And probably headphones, if the two of you think you're having a private conversation."

I liked her. She would be a perfect addition to the Nerd Herd. "No privacy is assumed."

Aubrey vanished into the fitting room as well, and a moment later they both emerged, with Ravyn in the dress. She twirled in front of the three way mirror, checking herself out from several angles.

"You look incredible." I meant it. "Especially the freckles."

Ravyn grinned. "I guess I do." She met my reflection's gaze in the mirror. "Speaking of lack of privacy..."

I didn't want to hear this, did I?

She licked her lips. "My brother runs in wealthier circles than I do—most of my family does—so we know some shitty people. *They* know some shitty people."

"Kind of a weird lead-in to most anything," I said.

Ravyn flipped the fringes on the dress and did another twirl. "My point is, I know who Don Spader is."

Tension coiled through me.

"None of it's true." Thank God and Jesus for Aubrey immediately jumping to my defense.

"I figured as much," Ravyn said. "But I didn't know if you knew, or wanted to know..."

"What they're saying about me?" I finished for her. About me. About Evie.

"You don't have to hear it. It won't help you in any way." Aubrey held the dressing room door open for Ravyn.

It also wouldn't help me to make up in my own head what was being said. I didn't like it either way, but at least if Ravyn told me, I could brace myself. "I'd rather hear it from you first."

"Keep in mind I swear I don't believe a word." Ravyn stepped toward the door, but didn't vanish behind it. "The word is you lied about being pregnant with his baby, to steal him away from Evie, and when he called you on it, you tried to ruin his life."

"Ah. That's a classic." I could deal with that one, though it did hurt more than usual because the pregnancy scare now was like the one back then. "I didn't lie. I thought—"

“You don’t have to justify it to me,” Ravyn said. “I grew up on a steady diet of gossip, and I get it.”

I was so grateful for that. “Thank you.”

While Ravyn was changing into her street clothes, Onyx and Maddox showed up, and cut a direct path to the studio, to set up.

Aubrey grabbed me before I could follow. “In other news, you and Onyx...?”

“Friends again,” I confirmed.

“Thankfully.” How Onyx heard us, I had no idea.

Aubrey rolled her eyes. “I still think you’re a schmuck for not telling them,” she yelled back.

Ravyn emerged, in her street clothes again. “I’ll take this.” She handed the dress to Aubrey. “And just drop me a text when you want to stop by,” she said to me.

“Is the painting done?” Maddox seemed to appear from nowhere.

Ravyn nodded.

“Today. This afternoon when the sun is in a good spot.” Maddox was already moving toward the exit again.

He was still pushing. Not stopping. Not slowing down.

I hoped a couple of hours of focusing on the contest and photos would help him sort out his thoughts.

Maddox set up for the shoot at Aubrey’s quickly. He wasted few words, and his approach from behind the camera was night and day compared to when we’d done the Alice in Wonderland themed shoot. It was probably a good thing I needed to look something between stoic and startled for The

Motels cover, because there was no way my smile would look natural right now.

His attitude was the same at Ravyn's. Not rude, but focused. Direct. Very little conversation. He took his photos and wrapped up everything quickly.

We were at Onyx's again halfway through the afternoon.

"I'm going to develop the black and white rolls," Maddox said the instant we walked in the house.

"We'll go get food," Onyx said.

Maddox shrugged. "Whatever."

I grabbed his arm.

Maddox's sigh was weighted down, and he met my gaze. "This isn't something anyone can fix. It's my dad being himself. I'll be okay, but give me a little time."

"All right." I would try.

"Thank you." He brushed lips over mine, and headed toward the dark room.

Onyx and I climbed into his car instead, and headed the few blocks to town.

"What was that?" Onyx asked as he drove.

I stared at him, confused. "What was what?"

"Casual kisses with Maddox."

Of all the things he could choose to pick up on...

"I... Something changed last night. The kisses felt right today." I didn't even consider it was odd when Maddox did it, but now I was thinking about it... That had never been us before, and I wanted it to be going forward.

“Are you two together?” Onyx asked.

I hadn’t thought of it in those terms, but why not? The phrase was scary, especially with thoughts of Don so close to the surface. *Together*. Like *dating*. Last night’s kisses were incredible, though. And with promises of *I’ll never leave you...*

That felt pretty long term.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe.”

Onyx clenched his jaw, but didn’t reply. A short while later, he parked at Gage’s. As we were walking inside, we passed Travis. He was one of the people on the city council who had been working hard to upgrade the street. Unfortunately, *upgrade* in his world meant pushing the current owners out, and turning the place into high end condos and the kind of small offices that wouldn’t be useful to anyone who lived here.

He was on the phone with his back to us, and I was happy to pass by him without more than a glance.

“Total bitch.” His voice stopped me. “What Alys did to you... They’re both ignorant little sluts and they deserve whatever—” Travis stopped talking when he turned and found me watching him.

Onyx was already stepping between us. Like he always did.

I was grateful, but today I didn’t want him to protect us. And this was about Evie as much as me. I grabbed Onyx’s hand and stopped him.

“You asinine little toad.” I directed my anger at Travis. I might be pushing this too far, but it had been a long day, I was still worried about Maddox, and I didn’t have the emotional

bandwidth for Travis talking to Don about me. “Do you have any fucking idea what you’re talking about? You know what he told you, I’m sure. But the truth?”

My laugh was short. “Not that you know what truth is. Or what a good orgasm is. Or what a petty, pathetic man you are.”

People were starting to stare, and Travis looked furious.

“You don’t have to be like that.” Despite the anger on his face, Travis’s voice was calm. “I don’t know why you’re attacking me like this.”

“You don’t know why—” I was so furious I couldn’t speak.

Onyx moved between us again. He stepped up to Travis. “You know exactly what she’s talking about.” Onyx’s voice was low and threatening. “If you keep the bullshit up, I will make sure your life is miserable for weeks.”

“Did you just threaten me?” Travis scoffed.

“Without question. What you have to wonder is how I meant it. Walk away and keep your mouth shut.” Onyx turned away from Travis without waiting for a reply. “You were incredible,” Onyx whispered in my ear as we walked into Gage’s.

I was fine with that. Travis’s words had me shaking with fury, but that fucker didn’t get to see me break. Especially not if it was going to get back to Don.

When Maddox emerged from the dark room with the photos, his mood was closer to center. That still wasn't Maddox-like, but it was better.

Dinner and the fact that the photos looked incredible seemed to help as well, but things were still quiet the rest of the evening. I suspected we all had a lot on our minds. It was nice to have Alys back, though.

Saturday morning, several of the shops on Main Street were hosting sidewalk sales. I didn't tend to do more than open my doors and let the music flow out, because my stock wasn't as easy to display on the street as the other businesses.

Gage was drawing people in with free fries, while Joystick had one buck gachapon—little eggs with cheap surprise toys inside. Granny—we all called her that because at eighty she was everyone's Granny—had her actual grandson watching her yarn store. She was knitting in front of Sebastian's tea shop, and offering tarot readings.

All up and down Main Street was a fantastic, colorful sight.

Maddox decided it was the perfect time to shoot our Paul's Boutique photo, and looking at the front of Aubrey's and Deacon's businesses, he wasn't wrong. Aubrey had several

racks of newer vintage clothing on display outside, and Deacon had put out a few more portable pieces of furniture.

The antique spanking bench was probably the best thing he had on display. He'd added it to everything else like it was a strangely shaped end table.

That definitely needed to be in the picture.

Brooke joined me. "What do you think?"

"I think it's perfectly incredible."

"There's one more thing." Brooke glanced over at the entrance to the antique store, where a few what I assumed were mirrors sat, draped in sheets. "I know the albums you're working on are top secret, but Deacon told me about this one, and it was one of my favorites when it came out."

Brooke was a Beastie Boys fan? I wouldn't have guessed. Then again, most people wouldn't guess that I was infatuated with Christina Aguilera back in the day. For her music.

That didn't mean I could guess where Brooke was going with the thought. "Okay?"

"I made these. I should've checked with you first, to see if you needed them, but I wanted to do it regardless." She pulled away one sheet, to reveal a metal *Paul's Boutique* sign. It was clear the letters were hand-welded, because of minor imperfections, but they'd also been smoothed and sanded, then the whole thing painted, to look like a 3D version of the sign on the album cover.

"Fuck me, that's incredible." Maddox's exclamation surprised me.

Apparently he and Alys were here, and he was acting more like himself.

Aubrey stepped out of her store. “What are we looking... *Ooh, gorgeous.*”

“Thank you.” Pink spread across Brooke’s face.

“What are you doing with them after?” Aubrey asked.

Brooke shrugged. “Not a clue. They’re too big to hang in the workshop. Do you want one?”

I definitely did, and so did Aubrey. She claimed the huge *Lee’s Sportswear* sign—that Brooke had made these to scale was even more impressive.

“You’re taking the Paul’s Boutique one, right, Onyx?” Brooke asked.

“You have to.” Alys sounded emphatic.

Maddox nodded. “There is no place better in the world for a sign like that.”

Except maybe a place called *Paul’s Boutique*, but I couldn’t argue with that. “Okay, I’ll take it. There’s a perfect spot for it in the new...” *store*. I didn’t know why the word wouldn’t come out.

The way Maddox’s smile vanished and Alys’s faded made me hate that I’d even brought it up.

“Adam and Deacon are around, right?” Maddox asked. “To help us hang those long enough for photos?”

“Yeah. Let me go grab them.” Brooke walked away.

The mood was more somber after that, but still miles better than yesterday, and the joking resumed as time went on.

It took more time to stage the shots than to snap the actual photos, and we thanked everyone profusely when we were done. Maddox headed to the pharmacy to get the rest of the

color film developed, and Alys and I went back to my record store.

Maddox joined us a short while later. He and Alys worked on touching up the images, and finalizing each album cover. We had one more to shoot, and it was the one that required the most people. We'd do Exit Stage Left tomorrow at Evie's, when everyone had the day off.

But Maddox was determined to finish the rest today, despite the fact that we had another week ahead of us. *We're not going to miss the deadline, and who knows who might vanish from our lives next?*

The shop was busy, even for a Saturday. I spent the next several hours working out front while they did contest things in the back. Word had gotten out that I was leaving, and several long-time customers stopped by to wish me well and take one last look through my albums, to make sure they hadn't missed anything.

Halfway through the afternoon, there was a long enough break in business for me to join Alys and Maddox. I walked into the back room to find them with their heads bowed together. Alys was giggling at something, and Maddox looked brighter than he had in a couple of days.

He kissed the tip of her nose, and muttered something I couldn't hear. They had no idea I was here.

Jealousy spiked inside. Not that I had a right to feel that way. But I wasn't jealous that they were with each other—they'd been close for so long it wasn't a surprise. I was envious that I wasn't part of what was happening; they were so good together, but I was just as good with them.

Why did I think—how had I convinced myself for so many months—that moving to another state was the best way to deal with missing my friends?

The people I loved.

Fuck. I did love them both. Watching them now, I'd never felt more sure of anything. I was leaving, though, and it wasn't like I could yank them from their lives and ask them to go with me. I also couldn't back out of the deal in Arizona. Money had changed hands, and the plan had been set in motion. I couldn't recover financially from a decision like that, and I didn't want to abandon the new store regardless.

Alys looked up and her smile grew when she saw me. “Hey. Come check it out. Maddox did some amazing things to blend the images for Follow the Leader.”

Of course he did. I never doubted for a moment that he could pull this off.

For Alys and Maddox, I'd walk away from the last year's worth of plans, if I could afford to. The thought hit me hard, and refused to let go. At this point though, did it matter?

We gathered at Evie's store late Sunday morning. She and Gage hung the curtains before the rest of us arrived, and her back room had been transformed into the back of a stage.

Maddox set up a video camera to capture all of our work. He and Adam agreed this was premium content.

I wasn't sure why; watching all of us fumble around through stage directions, to get that one perfect shot, sounded

like a snooze-fest. Maddox was certain it would be entertaining, though.

“I grabbed this from an estate sale last week.” Deacon held up a stuffed owl mounted to a stand. He didn’t normally deal in taxidermy. “I was thinking if we needed it for this, it’s the right color, and they threw it in with everything else I bought.”

Aubrey studied it with a furrowed brow. “It’s not flying. The one in the image is flying.”

“I can throw it,” Deacon said. “Do you want to release a live owl in here, and see what happens?”

“No. But...” Aubrey trailed off with a scowl.

Maddox took the bird from Deacon. “It’s perfect. It’ll add to the weird charm, and there’s no question what it is.” Maddox handed it to Gage, who exchanged ideas with Evie on the best way to display it.

A moment later, Gage climbed a ladder, tossed a rope over the top of the bar hanging the curtain in place, and Evie secured the other end of the rope. Gage secured the owl so it hung from the rafters.

“Costume call.” While the outfits in the photo weren’t complicated for the most part, Aubrey had done a fantastic job finding near-likenesses of every single one of them. Including the flesh-colored thong she held up now. “Where’s our naked guy?”

I nodded in Maddox’s direction. “One guess.”

Maddox grinned and snagged the underwear from her.

Adam’s pout was ridiculous. “I wanted to be Naked Guy.”

“*God*, I can’t believe there are two of you.” Aubrey didn’t look anywhere near as annoyed as she sounded.

Maddox's smile grew. "Right? Isn't it brilliant?"

Aubrey sighed and shook her head. "Bowler hat guy?" She held up a suit on a hanger, and a hat.

"They have names." I wasn't sure I could handle an entire day of *Naked Guy* and *Bowler Hat Guy*. "They're each from individual Rush album covers, if nothing else."

"Do they?" The look Aubrey gave me was more fake than Adam's pout had been.

"She knows," Evie said. "This is her way of torturing you for lying to Alys."

Deacon stepped forward to grab two red jumpsuits from the rack behind Aubrey, and she nudged him away.

"You can't be mad at the entire male population forever," Deacon said.

Aubrey handed me the suit and hat, then grabbed the clothing Deacon had tried to extract. She handed one to him. "I can be, but I don't have a problem with Gage." Who got the other jumpsuit.

"It's because of the meat, isn't it." Pink spread across Brooke's face the moment the words left her mouth. "I— That's not what I meant. Just, the hamburgers. Gage's Grub..."

"You said my meat was a good size." Somehow Adam had managed to sneak past Aubrey to grab the jester hat, and it was balanced precariously on his head.

Brooke blushed harder. "It is. I didn't— Damn it." She ducked her head, but couldn't hide her smile.

As Gage stepped off the ladder, Evie moved up two rungs, and draped herself over his back, arms hanging down his

chest. “Aubrey has a point. It’s impossible to be mad at you and your incredible meat.”

“Because Evie has learned the best meat is ground meat,” Alys said.

I wasn’t the only man in the room who cringed.

Maddox kissed her on the cheek. “You hurt me so good.”

This was ludicrous and a blast. I was going to miss it so much.

We all changed into our outfits. Maddox should’ve looked ridiculous passing out stage directions in nothing but a beige thong, but he worked with such efficiency no one questioned it.

I didn’t know which of us looked the silliest—though my fake mustache had tight competition with Deacon’s skull cap.

Maddox put Aubrey in his spot while he positioned the camera, and shouted out a few last minute changes. Then he swapped places with her, and had her take the pictures, while we all shifted in tiny increments, according to Maddox’s directions.

We spent a while going back and forth with lighting, position changes, and all sorts of other tweaks, until Maddox was convinced he had enough shots to pick one good one.

As I changed out of my costume, there was a message waiting for me from Helen, so I pulled up the voicemail.

“Call me when you have a chance. The buyer came back with their stipulations—they want you to put twenty thousand into escrow, to cover just in case expenses associated with that new wiring you had done in the building.”

What the fuck?

I should think my response through, but I wasn't interested in being professional at this point. I sent her a quick text. *Absolutely not. Fuck that guy.*

“You okay?” Alys’s question came from the other side of the curtain I’d changed behind. “You’re growling back here.”

“Yeah. I’m good.”

I wasn't really. I had no idea what to do. About anything.

maddox

I pushed hard to wrap up our contest entry early. We wouldn't be handing anything in at the last minute, the way we had with our qualifier. Though the deadline wasn't until Friday night, I made sure we had it turned in Monday afternoon, and we were back at Onyx's by the time the sun set.

What we'd done looked incredible. Yeah, I'd taken some good photos, but Alys and Onyx and their ideas added to that. All our friends did as well.

Which meant the little voice in the back of my head asking if I was only doing this to spite my dad could go fuck itself. This was an amazing effort, and the old man had nothing to do with it. Not out of spite or otherwise.

Onyx, Alys, and I were sitting in his living room, riding the high of being done, and feeling silly. I summoned my best Pinky voice. "Hey, Brain, what do you wanna do tonight?" I settled into the couch and stretched my arms across the back.

"Depends on which one of us is Brain." Onyx apparently didn't know how this exchange was supposed to go. He took the recliner across from me.

"Not it." Alys sat next to me, her leg pressing into mine.

Really? They were ruining the gag. I could change gears though. I focused on Alys. "You definitely have brains. Sexy.

Fuckable...”

Alys raised her eyebrows.

“No?” I didn’t understand her response.

“Mind fucking isn’t typically considered sexy,” Onyx said.

Alys shook her head. “Definitely not.”

Spoil sports. I wasn’t disappointed, though. This was fun. “First of all, I said fuckable brain, and nothing about mindfucking. Second, if I ever start to act like Don, you have permission to kick me in the nuts. Repeatedly. As hard as you can.”

“Nope.” Like that, Alys’s tone went flat. “You don’t get to bring him up. You shut us out for days about whatever happened with your dad, and you don’t get to toss around *his* name now.”

Ah. I saw her point. On the other hand, “First of all, there’s nothing to say about my dad. I’m not hiding anything new. He didn’t understand why I was visiting him, he was less than polite about the question, so I left.” Repeating the scene, even in terse, brief terms, left a lump in my throat. I swallowed it down.

“I’m sorry.” Alys sounded sincere.

Not that I expected anything else from her, and not that it made a difference.

Actually, it kind of did. Knowing she would offer sympathy wasn’t the same as hearing it. Which was another reason I wouldn’t avoid the other topic. “We’re talking about Don, whose name we can say because he’s not Voldemort.”

Alys cringed.

Onyx looked more thoughtful. “In a way he is. Massive ego. Invisible... nose.”

“Dick. Invisible dick.” I refused to use any innuendo in this case. “Ignoring who he is and what he does only gives him pow— Wow, he really is Voldemort.”

“He wishes.” Was that a hint of a smile on Alys’s face?

She was probably right, too. “That does seem like a thing he would wish for,” I said. “He probably thought Voldemort was the hero and the series was a tragedy.”

“I still hate the way Don treated you.” Leave it to Onyx to make things serious again. He leaned forward, forearms resting on his knees, and clasped his hands. “You never should’ve gone through that, Alys. And you deserve so much better.”

Alys leaned more weight against me, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. True, we’d always been close. Touchy-feely. But the last few days of breaking down those little barriers, of being able to brush against her and kiss her and be close without question, were wonderful.

“I have better now,” she said. “There are times when I have to force myself to accept that it’s real, but this is so much better.”

I was so glad I’d stopped holding out, and yanked Alys deeper into my life. If only I could do the same with Onyx. I dropped my arm to wrap it around her and pull her into me.

“I had no idea you were interested in me *like that*,” Alys said softly. She rested her head on my chest.

“You’re a ray of brilliant sunshine.” Not my most poetic, but I was just starting. I’d keep going and worship her with

words all night if I had to. “Don tried to dim that light, and that’s unforgivable.”

“Maddox is right.”

I liked the way Onyx said that. “Say it again.”

Onyx rolled his eyes. “Maddox is right. I wish I could take that self-doubt away from you, Alys.”

“Both of you being you helps. A lot.” Alys let out a tiny, contented sigh.

“I’d say it’s hard work, but we’re just naturally awesome,” I said.

Onyx straightened in his seat. “Once again, he’s not wrong.”

A glance at Alys confirmed she was smiling. That was so much better than a few minutes ago.

We did have one problem, though it was a smaller issue than any of the others. “The original question still remains—what do we want to do tonight?”

“TV Roulette?” Alys asked.

Onyx grabbed the remote. “I’m in.”

The premise was simple. Each of us picked a number between one and ten, and used those to determine what channel, row, and column we’d watch. Wherever the numbers landed us, that was what would play.

We landed on *Jolt*. When we reached the scene where Justin kissed Lindy, Alys let out the softest, most tantalizing sigh.

It was good, but... “There are sexier things.” I liked the scene, but my mind was already skipping through

permeations, variations, and tangents, to acts that would be much more fun.

“Probably, but this is still hot.” Was Alys aware of the way she trailed her finger lightly up and down the inside edge of my thigh?

My imagination was homing in on one of my better ideas. “What if I showed you something hotter, right now?”

“How did you manage to make this about sex?” Onyx didn’t sound disappointed.

“Not sex. Heat. Seduction.” An important distinction. “Though orgasms will probably be a result.”

Alys raised her hand. “I’m in.” She turned to Onyx. “If you don’t want to watch Maddox and me have orgasms, you can go in the other room.”

Onyx stuck out his tongue—out of character for him, but also wonderfully playful. “I never said that.”

“Is that a yes?” I wanted us all on the same page.

“Yes,” Alys said.

Onyx leaned back in a deceptively casual, legs spread posture. “Sure. Why the fuck not? Show us *sexier*.”

I glided my fingers up the inside of Alys’s bare thigh. She was wearing a denim skirt that had teased me all day with promises of what lay underneath. I’d had a hard time thinking about anything besides how easily accessible those fun bits were, and all those yummy sounds she made when I played with her.

As I inched closer to her heat, her breathing quickened, and hitched when I brushed the outside of her panties. I lingered there, teasing through cotton with a light touch.

“You’re not watching the movie.” I nodded at the TV.

“No. I’m watching you.” Her reply was wispy. “Are you going to show me more?”

“Hmm... If you insist.” I pushed the crotch of her panties aside, and her slick desire greeted me.

Alys spread her legs wider without prompting, and her skirt crept up her legs. She pushed it the rest of the way up to her hips, leaving her gorgeous pussy on display.

So much better than my imagination, and enough to make me hard.

I dipped my fingers near her opening, but pulled away again. I focused on dancing my touch over her skin in long, slow strokes, until she was panting and digging her fingers into the couch cushion and my leg.

It was easy to slip three fingers inside her, she was sloppy wet. She and Onyx both groaned at the penetration.

The way she pushed against me, while I finger fucked her hard and fast, was fantastic. I loved the occasional spasm around my fingers, and the sway of her hips in time with my pumping, and the way her eyelids fluttered, stark against her pale cheeks.

“It’s good, you’re good, but that won’t make me come.” Alys gasped out the words.

I fixed her with puppy dog eyes. “My fingers aren’t big enough for you?”

“They’re a good size,” Alys teased.

“I don’t think she’s distracted enough, if she can poke fun like that.” Onyx may be joking, but he had a good point.

I withdrew my fingers from Alys, and glided up. She bucked at the first brush against her swollen nub, and then she was grinding into me again. The longer I stroked, the faster her breathing grew. The narrower the slits in her eyes. The wider the part in her lips.

I circled and pressed into her clit until she came hard, digging her fingers into my wrist, and singing in a beautiful soprano of cries. As she edged away from orgasm, I pushed my fingers inside her again, to feel the last clenches of her pussy around me, and draw out her pleasure.

When she slowed, and stopped, I rested my fingers inside her.

My cock was so hard it hurt, and Onyx watched us with an anticipation that matched my own. I pressed my lips to Alys's neck, then her earlobe. "Play with yourself," I prompted.

"Too much." She shook her head.

"Then don't play with the part that's too sensitive. Your thighs. Your tits. Show it off. Touch yourself in ways you love."

Alys caught her bottom lip between her teeth and furrowed her brow, then pushed up her shirt and bra, to cup her own breasts. The motions made her clench around my fingers again, and I grunted at the temptation.

I unzipped my pants with my free hand, worked my cock free, and finally pulled out of Alys. My fingers were slick with her juices, and glided easily along my shaft as I began to stroke myself.

Fuck that felt incredible, and Onyx's groan made it that much better. Knowing that he still watched. That Alys did.

The build-up had me halfway to coming, and I leaned my head back as I fell into the sensation. I let my eyes drift half closed, and listened to the people I loved as I put on a show. As I jerked off with Alys's slick desire. I yanked and tugged as pleasure built in my veins. Slowly at first, then faster, more insistent. Pounding in my ears.

Onyx grunted, again and again. I wanted to look, to watch him come, but I was lost in the physical. In the knowledge that he was getting off to me playing with Alys. With myself.

A tongue flicked over the head of my cock, startling and enticing me. *What the fuck?* Alys's soft moans still came from next to me, her weight pressing into my leg. My shock mingled with realization, and I looked to see Onyx kneeling at my feet, his dick in his hand, and his tongue flicking over my fingers.

Onyx was licking Alys's juices from my fingers and the precum on the head of my cock. Drawing me into his mouth, while I continued to stroke myself.

"I need to taste both of you." His voice was strained. Needy.

This was so much hotter than in my head. The combination of his touch. Of Alys coming again. My balls tightened, and my entire body was on fire with pleasure. When I came, I spilled into Onyx's mouth, emptying myself until his touch was too much.

How did this all feel so incredibly... incredible?

When I was spent, when they were, Onyx moved to sit with us on the couch, cradling Alys and leaning into me.

"We should clean up." Despite Onyx's words, he didn't move from the new spot.

“Give us a minute. “ I didn’t want him to pull away. Didn’t want to stop touching Alys. I wanted to memorize how this felt, because this was a one of a kind moment. A once in a lifetime experience.

We’d never have this again.

The thought hit me harder than I meant for it to. The reminder that Onyx would be gone soon, and things would really never be the same.

Tuesday and Wednesday passed without me hearing anything from Helen about my response to my buyer's bullshit offer. She told me she passed along my *go fuck yourself*, but in business friendly verbiage.

I wasn't sure if I appreciated her filtering my response or not.

It was Thursday morning, and Alys and Maddox were both working. She was splitting her time between her app and the game, while she waited on QA. He was tweaking volume and range on some sound effects.

I was supposed to be going through images, to see which I wanted to take with me to the new store and which went in storage. Alys and Maddox had already claimed several they said I wasn't allowed to steal.

Every photo or signed album that reminded me of one of them found itself in the *decide later* pile, which was ten times bigger than either of the other piles.

Fuck this—I could come back to the pictures.

I had a small collection of antiques I'd identified that wouldn't be going with me. I'd put off talking to Deacon about the best way to rehome them, because I hadn't told anyone

about the move. Now the news was out, there was no reason to delay.

I called him, to see when he might have time to come check things out, and he was at my place less than fifteen minutes later.

“You weren’t supposed to drop everything.” If I could keep this conversation light and fun, I would.

Deacon gave me a dry smile. “I would drop half a dozen Bay vases, to get my hands on that jukebox.”

What now? “I’m going to assume those are common?”

“Like Limited Edition black albums. But I still want to see this thing up close.”

I gestured toward one corner of the shop, where the item in question sat. It was a jukebox, but the cabinet was hand carved to look like a wooden pipe organ, and the speakers were set up inside. I’d gotten it when I first took over here.

Deacon walked around it, never making contact. “And you still have the photos?”

“I do.” I’d gotten the jukebox from the granddaughter of the man who built the case, and it had come with original photographs proving who the creator was, and how old.

It had been on display here since I picked it up, so Deacon had already examined it dozens of times. He let out a whistle sigh. “What do you want to do with it?”

It was the kind of piece that had local ties—it was created to look like the old Mormon tabernacle pipe organ—so it was more likely to appeal to a buyer here than draw attention in Arizona.

Keep it. Where it was. Not have to move it or get rid of it.

I also wanted to put everything back on the walls, and not sell. Not leave.

Why had I gotten myself into this situation?

“I don’t know. Sell it on consignment?” I said. “I want it to go to someone who will appreciate it.”

“You appreciate it. The people in town appreciate it. It looks perfect where it is.”

Great. He wasn’t helping.

“You were the one who rushed over here when you heard I was selling it,” I said.

Deacon jammed his hands in his pockets with a shrug. “I kind of didn’t believe it. I still don’t believe you’re leaving.”

Not him, too.

“Because Haddarville is the promised land? People move.” I tried to keep my tone neutral.

The front door swung open, and the new customer was one of my regulars. She called back with a wave, and moved directly to sift through the new arrival vinyl.

“It’s not that,” Deacon said. “You’re leaving the people who matter behind.”

I had no doubt he was talking about Alys and Maddox. “They left first.” I didn’t mean to get defensive, and I definitely didn’t want to reply that way.

“Did they? Because I’ve seen them almost every day for the last three weeks.”

“You know what I mean.”

Deacon nodded. “I do, and I think you’re an idiot.”

I didn't need this today, or any day, and Deacon was one of the last people I expected it from. We had a lot of friends in common, and we'd both grown up here, but he and I were never super close. Did everyone have an opinion about how I should live my life? "I didn't ask you."

"Here's the deal, and I'm saying this because either no one else has, or you're still not hearing it. Also, Adam will pout for a month if he loses his new podcast buddy because Maddox stops spending time here. I held out with the people I love. I refused to admit that I cared, and it almost cost me both of them. Stop being an idiot."

Even if insults were the way to change my mind, "It doesn't matter. I already bought the place in Arizona, and I'm in the process of selling—"

"About that. How the fuck are you selling to Don? Does Alys know? Why would you do that?"

My blood turned to ice in my veins. "What?"

"Selling to... I should've known he was full of shit."

"Back up." Was I selling to Don? *Fuck fuck fuck.*

"He was in my store the other day, trying to buy me out. Part of his pitch was that you were already selling to him, and that everyone else would fall in line soon, too. *If you get in early, I'll make you a better offer.*" Deacon finished with a perfectly slimy Don impersonation.

I couldn't be. "I don't know who I'm selling to. We're working through agents, and names weren't exchanged." Why didn't I ask?

Because I never thought—

"You wanna—"

“Look into that right now, yeah.” I talked over Deacon. My phone was already in my hand, and I was pulling up Helen’s number.

“You’ll figure it out. It’s not too late, but it will be soon.” Deacon turned away.

“Thanks. I think.”

I got Helen on the phone immediately, and asked her for the potential buyer information. The entire time I struggled to keep my cool. If it was Don, that might explain the convenient timing on the third party inspector. He still had friends in town, like Travis. And from everything I’d heard about Don’s real estate dealings elsewhere, the attempt to undercut me on the selling price was his MO.

But it wouldn’t be limited to him.

Helen promised to call me back as soon as she had confirmation whether or not the other party was Don Spader. The next couple of hours of waiting for her reply were agonizing. Had I almost sold to that asshole? Alys would never forgive me. *I would never forgive me.*

No work got done, but I hadn’t been accomplishing anything before the call, either.

When my phone rang with Helen’s name on the screen, I answered immediately. “What did you find out?” I said by way of greeting.

She huffed nervously. “The answer is yes. Don Spader is the buyer.”

Fuck. “The deal is off.”

“It’s not that easy.”

I didn't care. "Whatever you need me to do. I'll sign something. I'll have it notarized. I'll fax it, email it, or hand deliver it."

"You should take some time to think about this," Helen sounded cool and professional, but an edge undercut her words.

"I don't need to take any time. Cancel the contract. Tell me what I need to do."

"You want to keep selling, don't you?" Helen asked.

Of course. The words stuck in my throat. "Send over the details on canceling. Tell me how much it's going to cost. I'm not selling to him." The more times I said it, the better it felt. It was like a heavy load lifting from my mind. I could take the time to step back, and do this right.

No, I didn't like that thought.

I thanked Helen, and waited for her instructions.

I wasn't selling, but still needed to. Arizona would take a lot of time to establish. I'd already invested there. I couldn't walk away from that deal, and I couldn't afford both places with my current revenue.

But every time I thought *I'm not selling* it felt good.

The instructions from Helen weren't as complicated or as expensive as I feared, though the decision would cost me. It was worth it.

I was filling out a form and watching the front of the store when Don walked in.

Seeing him send anger and irritation coursing through me.

The warm, friendly smile he wore made it worse.

Once upon a time, we'd been so close. In high school, I thought we'd be friends forever. What he did to Alys, though... To Evie... He'd shown his true colors, and I was glad I figured that out early in life.

“Onyx. Buddy. It's been too long.” His greeting was as bright and fake as his expression.

“Uh-huh.” I wasn't going to waste energy on picking a fight, no matter how much I wanted to haul off and beat his smug face to a pulp.

He stepped up to the counter. “What's this I hear about you pulling out of the sale?”

“What's this I hear about you working to hide that it was you buying?” I countered.

“That's the way business works. Nothing underhanded. Nothing wrong with it.”

The fact that he felt he needed to clarify made me think it was very much meant to be underhanded.

“You need to leave,” I said.

He leaned in, resting his full forearm on the glass case, and leaving a large smudge. “You need to know that if you don't do this willingly, I will fuck you. No warning. No lube.”

“Why? You don't want to own a record store.”

“No. But I want to own this block. You assholes are sitting on prime real estate, running your idiotic mom and pop stores like your little corner of suburbia will be untouched forever.”

This was almost supervillain level monologuing. Gross. “Okay. But leave now.”

“Last chance, Cat.”

“To...?”

“Change your mind.”

That wasn't happening. I was about to repeat that he needed to leave, when Alys walked through the front door. She looked at Don, the color drained from her face, and her feet stopped moving.

Whatever happened next, he wasn't hurting her again. Not even a small, verbal wound.

In past years, the days between when we turned in our competition entry and when the winner was announced was tense.

This year's was far worse, because we weren't just waiting longer, I was waiting for Onyx to go. Not that I wanted him to, but there was an invisible clock ticking down in my mind that I couldn't ignore.

As I stepped into the music store, alarm bells rang in my head before I realized why. Don was talking to Onyx, whose face was twisted in fury.

I didn't need the contest to push me over the edge of insanity if Don kept showing up in my life.

"Hey." Onyx's smile slipped in easily, and was calming. He stepped out from behind the register, crossed the distance between us, and rested his hand at the base of my neck. The way he kissed me, claiming my mouth and swallowing my gasp, made my mind blank for a few blissful seconds.

"Hey." I let out the breathy greeting when he pulled away.

He pressed his mouth to my ear, and whispered, "Remember, I always have your back, Bunny."

I knew it. Whatever was going on here, he'd explain now or later, and there was no doubt he wanted Don gone as much as I did.

“Honey Pot. Hi.” Don's too-bright, too-friendly greeting scraped over my nerves. “Listen, Onyx, I hate to be the one to tell you this...”

“I doubt that.” Onyx faced him again, but never let go of my hand.

Don clucked. “You should've seen it coming, given who you're with. Your girl is seeing another man. Boy? Not sure he's old enough—”

“Stop.” Something inside me snapped, and I stalked toward Don. I wouldn't scream or shout or argue—he always had a counter to those reactions. He was a master at twisting angry words. But that didn't mean I'd let him insult Maddox or continue to spread bullshit lies about who I was.

And if he did push back, which I assumed he would, I'd keep going. I wouldn't listen to him anymore.

All of that rolled through my head in less than a second, and I stopped when I was only a few feet from Don. I adopted my sweetest, most neutral smile. “You haven't spent a lot of time around town recently, have you?”

“Not nearly as much as I'm hoping to.”

Gag me with a fucking spoon. “Onyx knows I'm fucking Maddox. He likes to watch.”

Don's eyebrows twitched, but otherwise he didn't show a reaction. “So you finally made some poor man your cuck.”

“No.” Onyx's short reply helped my own clarity.

Hurt cleared away. The clouds that usually flitted in when Don was around. The fear and self-loathing that showed itself. I could handle this.

“Did you lie to one of them about having their baby, too?” Don asked.

“No.” I intentionally kept my answer as brief as Onyx had. The less I gave Don, the less he had to work with.

He turned to Onyx again. “You know she’ll take advantage of you. Ruin you. If she’s the reason you decided not to sell —”

“You’re not talking to him, you’re talking to me.” I stepped between them.

“No. I’m talking business with a reasonable man.”

“Are you?” I asked.

Don’s smile was tight. “I understand you think you can play with the men. You can’t. You’re not that girl. You don’t have the skills or the drive, and putting out won’t work for you for long. You’re getting old.”

Now that I was thinking clearly, it was obvious how ridiculous his comebacks were. Part of me, the memories and the trauma, wanted to sink into his words and curl up and cry. But fuck them and fuck him. “Is that the best you’ve got?”

Onyx rested a hand on the small of my back. The quiet support was another layer of bolstering.

Don shook his head and took a step away. “I’ll come back when you’re free, Onyx.”

“No.” I moved into his path again. “You won’t come back. But I’m not done. I have no doubt that when you walk out of

here, you'll happily tell everyone how unhinged I am. *Slutty*. You like that one. How I'm going to be Onyx's downfall."

"You said it not—"

"Go the fuck ahead." I talked over Don. "The people who matter, the people who see through your narcissistic, pathetic bullshit will continue to do so. They know you're an insecure, tiny-dicked little man, who thinks the world owes you their worship, and really all you deserve is to live in a sewer, like the piece of shit you are."

Don scoffed and shook his head, but couldn't hide the creases in his forehead. The downturn of his mouth and the corners of his eyes. "The foul language isn't attractive. Neither is the pink hair, quite honestly. Other people will sell, and when I evict your cuck last, because he has no choice, I'll remind you of this moment."

"No. I don't care that you grew up here. You're not part of Haddarville and you never will be again." I was certain of that. "Get the fuck out of my boyfriend's store."

Don scoffed. "It's about time you let me leave, psycho bitch." He stormed out as if he was the one who made the decision to walk away.

Wow. Holy...

"How are you?" Onyx's soft question tugged me from my own disbelief.

"Did I just do that?"

He nodded. "One of the sexiest things I've ever seen."

My laugh felt slightly unhinged. "Holy fuck. I didn't ruin anything for you, did I?" I knew I hadn't, but that whisper of doubt...

“No. You made it all perfect.” Onyx turned me fully to face him, and tilted up my chin, to look me in the eye. “Boyfriend?”

All but, for so long now. It was another of those clear thoughts I should’ve seen sooner. “Yes.”

Onyx brushed his lips over mine. Without it being a show for anyone, without it being attached to sex, the kiss felt new. Unique.

Wonderful.

“I know we have things to work out,” Onyx said. “But I love you, Alys. For so long, but I didn’t see it. And what you did to Don just now? So, *so* sexy. *Wow*.”

I love you. The words filled me, until my heart felt like it might float away. It sounded so good to hear that from Onyx. So right. “I love you too.” I kissed him back, again and again. Relishing the way he nipped at my lips, and dragged his fingers up my back, and—

“You know the front door’s still unlocked, right?” Maddox’s teasing cut into the moment. “People can see you through the window? What did I miss?”

My laugh slipped out and I didn’t try to stop it, while heat flooded my cheeks. I had no idea how to begin to answer that question.

Maddox didn’t look upset, or even slightly bothered. He was watching us with the same openness he always wore. “The two of you are *really* hot together, by the way. And seriously, did I miss something?”

“We’re in love.” I needed to have a similar conversation with Maddox. Right now, I was enjoying finally hearing those words from Onyx.

Pft. Maddox blew out the noise. “I knew that.”

“Of course you did.” Onyx chuckled. “What you missed, in that case, is that apparently Don was the person trying to buy my store. I told him *no*, so he came down here to guilt me into it. Alys ripped him a new asshole that he won’t know he has until he opens his mouth and shit comes out a new place.”

Maddox wrinkled his nose. “Gross. I wish I’d come up with it.” He kissed us each on the cheek as if it were the most natural thing, and held up a to-go bag from Joystick’s. “Are we eating?”

Was this my life?

Onyx turned the sign on the front door to *closed*. “People can come back.” He locked the door.

We headed into the break room, and laid the food out on the table.

So much had happened in the last little bit, my mind was whirring to sort it all into the right spots. “Wait.” I paused mid-food-box opening. “You’re not selling.” That was an important thing I missed in the chaos of everything else.

Maddox already had a mouthful of wing. He swallowed quickly. “Does that mean you’re staying?”

It did, right? Onyx and I loved each other? Maddox... I doubted that was far behind. The buyer was out. Onyx was staying?

He pulled a face that instantly squashed my hopes. “I still own the new store in Arizona,” he said. “I... can’t afford to keep both.”

“I’ll buy this store.” Maddox didn’t hesitate.

“You want to run a record store?” Onyx’s disbelief was clear.

Maddox shook his head and took a long swallow of drink. “Your people can still run it. You can—”

Onyx’s phone rang, cutting Maddox off.

“It’s Markus.” Onyx stared at the screen.

I wanted to say *fuck him, we’re talking*. A sense of impending doom crept in, though. “Get it out of the way, so we can get back to figuring out how to get you to stay.”

“Yeah,” Onyx answered. “Wait. Say that again.” He set his phone on the table and changed it to speaker.

“One of the interns fucked up.” Markus’s news made my heart sink. “She spilled coffee on all of the entries to date—which is you and one other team—and destroyed them.”

I’d heard that wrong. I must’ve. My brain was revolting after the string of good things. “What?”

“I’m so sorry,” Markus said.

Maddox looked angry. Not as mad as when he’d come back from seeing his dad in the hospital, but still very un-Maddox-like. “You’re extending the deadline, then. Making an exception because this was your mistake?”

“I can’t.” Markus’s reply was full of apology. “Legal is prepared to offer you cash, as an apology—”

“No. Fuck no.” I wasn’t accepting this. Not after everything we’d just gone through.

This was unbelievable. After all our work... “We’re not disqualified though.” I needed confirmation.

“No,” Markus said. “If you can have new entries to me—”

“We will.” Maddox reached over and disconnected my phone.

And Maddox was right. “We still have the negatives.” I was saying what we were all thinking. “We don’t need to do reshoots, and we have a little less than a day to redo the painting and lettering.”

“Exactly.” Alys nodded. “We’ll be pissed after we’re back in the running.”

Great. “What do we need to get started?” The list was spinning in my head. “Paul’s Boutique is easy.”

“Thanks to Brooke.” Alys had her phone out and was taking notes. “What else?”

“We need color prints for all of them except The Rascals and Korn.” The images spun in my head. “Maddox will run to the pharmacy and get our color reprints, you and me back to my place.”

Maddox grabbed two more chicken wings in one hand, and gave a sloppy salute with the other. Evie would hate that.

“Meet you at home.”

Alys and I drove to my place. We didn't need to exchange words. She was already pulling out the paint, stencils, and other supplies while I headed to the darkroom to develop the black and white prints. Yes, Maddox usually did this part, but this was the easy part of the process and we were all doing what we could.

When I was done putting multiple copies of each image through developer and their bath, I left them drying on the line, and headed into the kitchen.

Maddox joined us a moment later. He laid each photo out on the table.

Rush just needed stenciling, and Alys grabbed the photo of everyone from Evie's.

Maddox had a new eleven by fourteen canvas for the Journey background. I grabbed the accompanying photo, to cut my own head out.

“By the way, you can't get out of the other conversation that easily,” Alys said.

“I don't...” But I did know what she was talking about.

Maddox painted a dark blue circle around the edge of the canvas. “You're not selling.”

“I'm not selling *to Don*.” I paused to slide the razor blade around the pieces on my picture's ears. “I still have to sell.”

“So I'll buy it.” Maddox swept his brush in smooth, straight strokes toward the center of the canvas, creating a gradient.

And now we were back to this. “You don't want to run it.”

“But you do,” Maddox said.

This wasn’t getting us anywhere. “I’m moving to Arizona. I own a store there, too.” I slid my blade along another line, focusing on the intricate cuts. I didn’t want to turn into a broken record on this store thing.

“But you aren’t selling the house.” Alys kept her attention focused on the tiny stencil in front of her.

“No, I... It’s the family home.” I bought it from my parents when they retired and moved. “I need to grab a black and white Alys from the dark room. Can we at least hold this until round one of the paint is drying?”

Maddox sighed. “As much as I hate it, Onyx has a point.”

“Thank you.” I also didn’t have any answers. It didn’t matter how much we rehashed the subject, the outcome didn’t change.

As I fetched the now-dry photo of Alys, for the Follow the Leader cover, I looped over the conversation, despite not wanting to. It had never occurred to me to sell the house. Xander brought it up once, and I brushed it off. I’d told him *A decision for another time*.

But...

I settled into my spot at the kitchen counter again, to do more cutting. I’d been planning this move for months. How was I having doubts now that I didn’t before?

“You know what we need?” Maddox asked.

Alys glanced in his direction. “A time machine?”

“Almost. A montage.”

I chuckled. “Since neither one is a thing...”

“You sure?” The challenge in Maddox’s retort was impossible to miss.

But that didn’t change my answer. “Positive.”

“Hey, Xerxes,” he called to my smart home device. “Play montage music.”

“When did you—?” My question was cut short by *Jawbreaker* by The Cruel Intentions.

Maddox grinned. “Months ago.” His voice barely carried over the music.

Fuck I loved this man as much as I did Alys. How was I going to leave them?

The fast paced, high-volume music kept us going, and we worked until we’d run out of things we could do until the paint dried.

Maddox sank into a kitchen chair with a slump. “You know what makes me sad?”

I had a few guesses, and it wasn’t a long list.

“Emergencies keep interrupting our lunch. I’m hungry.”

Maddox’s answer was so perfectly him, it made me smile. “What do you want for dinner, and I’ll go get it. Anything you want.”

He rolled his head to the side to give me a look of disbelief. “They don’t sell *anything I want* in Haddarville.”

“Then you have something specific in mind,” Alys said.

“Remember that place we went to *celebrate* the first time we lost the contest?” Maddox sat up a little straighter. “New place. Amazing curry.”

I did remember. “Bangkok Garden.”

Alys pushed back a little bit from the table. “Until that night, I thought I knew what spicy food was.”

That was such a great night. One of so many celebrations and other occasions we’d had together over the years. “Call the order in, and I’ll go get it. I can be there and back—”

“In an hour. Too long,” Maddox said.

I was already grabbing my keys. “You two stay here. Work when you’re able. I’ve done most of what I can anyway, at least this helps.”

We agreed on what we wanted, and Maddox promised to place the order in about fifteen minutes, so it’d be ready when I got there.

As I turned to leave, Alys stopped me with a hand on my arm. “You’re not gone yet. Come back soon.”

“Of course.” I brushed my lips over hers. We’d kissed dozens of times over the years, but this was different, like the one earlier today. This was with the pretending gone.

How did we ignore what we were to each other for so very long?

“What about me?” Maddox asked from where he stood a few feet away.

Couldn’t forget about Maddox. Not that I wanted to, but it would be impossible. I turned on him, and pressed him to the closest wall with my full body. I brought my mouth crashing down on his, controlling the kiss, despite him being taller. The way he squirmed against me and pushed back was incredible.

“I’ll be back,” I said when we came up for air. “And once our entry is in, we’re going to talk. You and me. All three of us.”

Maddox's grin was quirky and sexy. "Yes, Mister Onyx."

The entire day played in my mind on the drive, but especially the last few hours. *I love yous* with Alys. That kiss with Maddox.

The loop didn't lead me anywhere new, though. Getting to the restaurant. Driving back, the smells of curry making my stomach growl. I couldn't leave them. I couldn't stay. I couldn't let Maddox buy my store, but I couldn't let anyone else do it either. I wanted the new store, and I had great plans for it.

But I couldn't walk away from Alys and Maddox. Why did I ever think I could?

I got back to my house, and we ate and worked, pushing through the night. When we had points where we couldn't do anything, we'd snooze for an hour or so, only for an alarm to wake us up, and we'd start on the next step.

We were all dragging and loopy by the time we finished the next morning around eight. There was no brain power for talking as we drove to the radio station. We had our entry in before ten. More than twelve hours to spare before the deadline.

Go Team Wonderland Crew.

As we settled back into Maddox's SUV, I sank into my seat. "Let's go home and sleep."

"No." Maddox didn't turn the key. "We're gonna talk."

"Do you want to do that now?" I was exhausted and I didn't have any new answers, but I did have things to say. I needed to tell him how I felt.

Alys studied me. "Don't you?"

“I don’t want to wake up to another emergency, or get pulled away.” Maddox started the truck. “Alys’s place is closest. We’ll go there for privacy, but no more delays.”

“You’re right.” I couldn’t argue anymore. I didn’t want to.

Maddox drove us to Alys’s condo, which was only about ten minutes away, and she let us in. I’d only been here a few times, since we helped her move in, but that place didn’t look much different now than then. The furniture was arranged differently. But the only real personalized touches were the shelves of books, and the photographs in small frames that sat next to them. Some of Maddox, and of me. Of Aubrey and Evie.

Why hadn’t I visited more? Why did I put that on them?

Maddox faced me. “I’m listening. No, wait. I’m going first, because you took too long.”

I really had.

“I love you.” Maddox drove directly to the point, and his words hit hard. As hard as telling Alys the same. As hard as hearing her say it back. He looked at her. “Both of you. It’s probably obvious, but it needs saying. I love you both. And for the longest time, I didn’t think I could come between what the two of you have. Why would I even try? It’s so beautiful.”

“But you did.” I didn’t mean that as an accusation. He belonged where he was in our lives.

Alys shook her head. “But he didn’t. Maddox, you didn’t come between us. You didn’t push us apart.”

He jammed his hands in his pocket in a way that would’ve looked like withdrawing on anyone else, but was just Maddox thinking. Reacting. “I don’t know... I guess I saw...” He let out a noisy exhale. “It’s kind of like Xander. Not that either of

you are like him. But for as long as Judith's been in his life, there's been this bond that no one could sever. And then Dom came along...

"I'm not comparing us to them. My point is, all of that can exist at the same time. You being perfect together. Me loving you both. There's no rule in the universe that says we can't have all of that, and I can't imagine my world without both of you in it. You're... You make me a better man."

I had a hard time imagining that was possible. Maddox was already so good. "I love you too."

"Well now I feel silly saying it." Alys's tone was light.

The laugh that rolled through all three of us was enough to ease the tension in the room, but it didn't erase the incredible lingering feelings spilling out.

"But seriously," Alys said. "I love you too, Maddox. I do, so much. And you don't come between us, because you're right, you're part of me. Of Onyx."

He kissed her on the forehead. Watching it was almost as good as experiencing his mouth on mine.

But only almost.

I pulled Maddox to me, cupped his face between my hands, and kissed him hard. This was so different than with Alys yesterday, and I wasn't comparing the two to pick a favorite. That would be like choosing between chocolate and coffee. I needed them both.

With the words said, with the air cleared, my body reminded me we hadn't had real rest for more than a day. I was too old for all-nighters. "Now can we sleep?"

Maddox grinned and pulled Alys and me toward the bedroom. “Fuck. Yes.”

It was official—waking up surrounded by the people I loved was the best way to wake up. The light streaming through the windows was an indicator we’d slept most of the day away, and I was good with that.

Next to me, Maddox rolled over with a muffled groan, but he didn’t open his eyes. “Mmm... I was having the most amazing dream.” His voice was exaggerated levels of drowsiness.

“Were you eating the world’s biggest marshmallow?” Alys asked from my other side, where she was wrapped around me and pressed into me.

“Why? Is there a pillow missing?” Maddox cracked one eye open. “Cuz I hate it when that happens.”

Yup. This was us, and it was perfect. “I’ll bite. What was your dream?”

“I don’t see how the two are related—you biting, my dream...” He cleared his throat. “*Anyway*, I was dreaming that you let me invest in your record store, and decided you didn’t have to move to Arizona, you could just visit a lot and take us with you, and then we all had incredible sex to celebrate.”

“Aww. I dream about things like ninjas having tea with Hello Kitty. Lucky.” Alys’s pout was clear in her voice.

I wanted a witty comeback, but I was too hung up on how good this random idea was. “Fuck me. You’re a genius.”

“I don’t see how the two are related, but...” Maddox trailed off with a grin.

Alys sat up and picked up her pillow, like she was going to toss it at him. Maddox lunged across me to grab her and stop her, and both tumbled into an awkward pile on top of me, in a pile of giggles and *oofs*.

Maddox paused with his face inches from mine, his laughing expression frozen in place, and his hair flopped over one eye. *God* he was gorgeous.

I brushed his hair behind his ear. “And then we all had sex, to celebrate?” I repeated the end of his *dream*.

“Yes. Or maybe I covered you with blueberry syrup and had breakfast.”

“Ooh, let’s go for pancakes after the orgasms. On one condition.” Alys didn’t extract herself from the tangled pile so much as strategically adjust herself.

“What condition?” I asked.

“You have to agree to Maddox’s *dream* idea.”

I liked it, but, “It needs details.”

Maddox propped himself up on one elbow to look down at us. “We can figure them out.”

“And a real contract.” I was going to be a stickler about that, for his sake. “You can’t just give me money.”

Maddox shrugged as best as was possible from his position. “I can, but if it makes you feel better. Dom will help.”

I trusted us to work out a solid plan. It was one of many things we did well together, and the last twenty-four hours

were only one indicator of that.

“Well?” Alys asked.

“I’m in. We’ll make it work.” Because there was no option. Because I couldn’t walk away from them—from this. Because it was a good idea. I leaned my head up to press my lips to Maddox’s, and gripped the back of his neck as I deepened the kiss. Lingering. Pressing into him. Feeling *everything*.

I broke away to kiss Alys as well, then looked back to Maddox. “I have had so many fantasies about fucking you.”

Pink dotted his cheeks. “Yeah?”

“Without question.” I kissed Maddox. Alys. They leaned in for each other. I should’ve gotten lost in the sea of limbs, but I knew exactly what each of them felt and tasted and sounded like.

Some of it was obvious. Stripping off Alys’s shirt and sucking on her nipples, kneading her breasts, while I slid a hand between her legs to tease over her panties. Stroking Maddox’s cock.

And some of it was more sensation and instinct, as she slid her nails up my back, and he danced his fingers along my chest and sucked on my earlobes.

We’d been half naked before, to sleep, but the rest of our clothing fell away easily. I could roll around with them for hours, feeling bare skin against bare skin. Licking and biting and making both of them gasp and groan.

Alys rolled onto her back, and pulled Maddox on top of her.

He landed straddling her with his legs, his hands on either side of her head.

Seeing them was just as good as feeling them.

“Fuck me.” Her plea was delicious as she searched his face. She reached between his legs to playfully tug his cock. “No protection.”

I didn’t know which of us groaned louder—him or me.

I also wasn’t certain which of them thought to bring lube into the bedroom or when, but I was going to guess Maddox. The bottle sat on the nightstand within easy reach.

I watched, rock hard and captivated, as Maddox slowly penetrated Alys, and then I shifted position to press my chest into his back.

“Don’t move.” With the command, I lay biting kisses along his shoulder and upper back.

His strained laugh and compliance were intoxicating.

Pouring a generous amount of lube into my hand, I slipped a finger along his entrance, and then my own shaft, making sure we were both prepared. The entire time, he stayed buried inside Alys.

I nudged his opening with my cock, and his entire body tensed, then relaxed. I inched inside him slowly, relishing the tight, slick feeling of burying myself inside Maddox.

And then I was in him, to the hilt, and all three of us were rocking against each other. Slowly at first, finding our pace. Finding our comfort.

Fuck this was incredible. I swore I could feel Alys through Maddox, despite that not being possible.

Maddox reached between them, as our rhythm built to frantic, and the soft gasps and pants of Alys nearing orgasm reached my ears. *God* that sounded good. Better than good.

She dug her knees into his hips, which let me touch her, too. It let me feel both of them while I fucked him as hard and fast as he pounded her.

And I knew from the noises she made, from the way her shudders rolled through me, when she came. One of my favorite pieces of music, and it blended into a chorus—a crescendo—of Maddox's orgasm. Of him spilling inside her, but never stopping the way he thrust against me.

He slipped out of her as our frantic fucking continued, and he left a trail of cum glistening on her pussy.

The sight, the sensations, their heavy breathing, pushed me over the edge. Climax spilled through and from me, wrenching my body with pleasure until I was spent. Even then, I didn't want to stop.

This was incredible. Better than I'd ever thought we could have. I was so fucking grateful I didn't fuck things up with them so badly that I lost them. These two people were the best thing that had ever happened to me.

maddox

Saturday morning, I was up before Onyx and Alys—no surprise—and that meant I was making a coffee run. When I got back to Onyx’s, there was a woman waiting on his front steps. She was probably about my age, maybe a little younger, with her hair pulled away from her face in a braid, and the most practical sneakers I’d ever seen.

“Maddox Haddar?” She stood as I approached.

What the...? “That’s me.”

“I’m Quinn. I’m the daytime nurse staying with your father at his place while he recovers. You look just like the pictures he has of you.”

I bet he *loved* having a nurse watching over him. *Not*. “He has pictures of me?”

She nodded. “And your brother. Your mother. Though, he doesn’t say much about her.”

“No, he wouldn’t.” I was surprised he mentioned us at all. “How can I help you?” There was no reason to be rude to her for doing a job, but I wasn’t interested in talking about my old man.

“He keeps talking about seeing you at the hospital. Saying something wrong. I think he’d really like to see you.”

Yeah, no. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Please?” she said.

That conversation, the hospital one, hadn’t completely left my mind since the encounter. The last thing I wanted was Round Two. “You’re his nurse, so you’ve spent some time with him?” Presumably, since she knew who we all were.

“Yes. Grumpy on the surface, but not so prickly underneath.”

That wasn’t right. “You’re talking about someone else.”

“Having a heart attack can change a person’s perspective,” she said. “IF you change your mind, you know where to find him. He’s not going much of anywhere for a few weeks.”

“Thanks but no thanks. I’m sorry you wasted a trip.” I headed inside.

Brushing her off was easier than erasing the exchange from my mind. I could hear Alys and Onyx moving around in the other room, so I set the table, put our drinks and sandwiches out.

“Who were you talking to outside?” Alys asked as they emerged.

I shook my head. “No one.”

But the thought wouldn’t leave. The conversation with Quinn wouldn’t go away.

“No, really. Who were you talking to?” Onyx nudged.

Alys set her coffee down. “Don’t say *no one* again. You haven’t touched your sandwich.”

I picked up the sausage and egg croissant and took a huge bite, half to prove her wrong and half to put food in my mouth

so I couldn't answer. It tasted like sawdust in my mouth, and I couldn't hide my scowl.

"Tell us," Alys prompted.

I swallowed the food, washed it down with coffee, and repeated the conversation I'd had outside. As I talked, I was met with a concerned look from Onyx and a sympathetic one from Alys, and neither of them looked judgmental about my decision.

They didn't need to be—I had that covered enough for all three of us.

Alys pushed aside her food enough to lean in. "What do you want to do?"

I'd literally just said what I wanted to do. I'd already done it. "I don't know. Seeing him is closure. I can either tell him I'm done or I can hear him out, but I could say both to his face."

"It's up to you," Onyx said. "We support you either way."

Damn it.

I finished my breakfast and coffee, and still couldn't get rid of the thought. I wouldn't be able to stop thinking about it until I took action, so I gave my loves kisses, and headed out to the home I'd grown up in.

The several deep breaths I took as I walked up the front path didn't calm my nerves, but they did make me lightheaded, so that was different. When I knocked, Quinn opened the door almost immediately, and gave me a broad smile. "You're here."

"Yeah." I still wasn't sure it was smart, but I was here.

“He’s in the living room.” She stepped aside. “Ring the bell if you need me.”

“Thanks.” I shouldn’t be nervous. This was my home too. But it was surreal walking through a place that was both familiar and foreign, given how many years it had been since I came back here.

I found Dad exactly where Quinn said, in the living room, in a recliner in the same spot his chair had always been in.

He looked up when I crossed the doorway, and gave me a tentative smile. “Maddox. You’re here.”

“Hey.” I stopped a few feet back. If I left in the next few seconds, this position gave me a strategic advantage.

“I owe you an apology.” Dad’s voice was weak.

I must’ve heard him wrong. I took a step closer. “Beg pardon?”

He didn’t look amused—that was status quo. “I’m sorry for what I said in the hospital. My words didn’t come out right.”

“There aren’t a lot of ways to interpret what you said.”

He looked small. Tired. Not like I’d ever seen him before, sinking into his chair. “When I was dying, I saw your mother.”

Oh. Fuck me. How was I supposed to respond to that? The only thing I could do was sink into the nearest seat.

“I didn’t go into the light or anything.” His laugh was rough. “I know my place in Hell is secure and your mother was an angel. But as cliché as it is, my life flashed before my eyes.”

Years of experience with him made me want to grasp a cruel comeback, or at least an indifferent one. Neither had ever come naturally to me, but were necessary in this house. Instead, I stayed quiet.

“You’re a brilliant, creative, kind soul, and you’re so much like your mother that it hurts. It’s obvious every time I see you that you’re your mother’s son. And I look at you and I can only see her, and I’m sorry.” As Dad said the words, it did hurt. It ached through every inch of me.

Yup. I was out of my own words. “Why now?” Not a coherent question, but I didn’t understand why he’d never said anything like this to me before.

“Laying on an operating table for six hours with your chest spread open changes your perspective. Or at least, it added some new things to mine,” he said. “You’re not a fuck-up. In the hospital, I asked about the competition because I know it’s important to you. The words came out wrong, but I didn’t understand why you were there to see me, after all I’ve put you through.”

“You’re my dad. I was there for you.”

“I still don’t get it, but there are a lot of things you do that I don’t understand.”

That was more like Dad. Experience told me to brace myself for derision, but I wanted the warm fuzzies to keep flowing instead. “I could say the same about you.”

He gave a dry chuckle. Twice as many laughs as I’d ever heard from him in his life. Yup, I was pretty sure the scowls had him in the red for fun.

He tried to adjust himself in his seat, and slipped. His growl was both terrifying and heartening, and I hurried to

help, without looking like I was helping.

“There’s a property on Main Street,” Dad said when he was settled again. “Your mom owned it, and I held onto it for so long because... Because it was hers. She thought someday she might open a gallery there. Don Spader approached me about it.”

What? I tensed. “Did you tell him—”

“No. I told him *no*. I hear the rumors as well as anyone else in town, and I know he’s not the kind of businessman we want building here. The thing is, I’m going to sign it over to your brother, but you get first dibs.”

“What am I going to do with a business? I’m not that guy.”

Dad gave a terse nod. “Xander will know that it’s there if you change your mind, at least until he decides what to do with it.”

“So you’re still talking to Xander.” Was I surprised? A bit. Xander didn’t have anything affectionate—or really much of anything at all—to say about Dad these days.

“Not in the way you and I are talking right now. He and I are too much alike for that.”

“But...” I sank onto the arm of the nearby couch. Why was I considering ruining this? Maybe because I didn’t believe the conversation was happening. I wanted to. I really did. “There are things you don’t know about me.”

One corner of Dad’s mouth tugged up. “Like that you’re in love with two different people?”

That was weird. That was a level of insight this man had never had. I’d only told them yesterday. “Maybe.”

“You know nothing is private in this town, but it’s hard to miss the way you act around them,” he said. “And yes, I see you a lot of the times you’re here, even if you go out of your way to avoid me.”

“I don’t go out of my way. I just don’t go into my way to see you?” That wasn’t the right wording. My brain was so confused. Dad was nice? Dad accepted me?

He sank lower in his seat, and like that, his exhaustion was palpable. “My point is, I’m proud of you. Both you and Xander, for being good men. For being yourselves.”

“I love you, Dad.” I didn’t mean to say that, but apparently I was all about the love right now, and it felt good.

He held up a hand. “Don’t make it sappy, boy.”

I grinned and hugged him anyway, careful not to push too hard.

We talked for a few more minutes, but he was worn out and Quinn shoved me out the door.

I headed back to Alys and Onyx. To a life more perfect than a fairy tale. I didn’t expect the future to be completely without problems, but we could face it together. We could figure anything out.

I used to think I was too flighty and weird and random for life to hand me anything this good, and I was so happy I’d proved the world wrong. This was the perfect place for me, and I was going to live the fuck out of it.

As Sunday afternoon rolled around, my entire body was humming with anticipation.

After Maddox talked to his dad—and I was so happy for him the conversation ended the way it did— we spent the rest of yesterday doing little more than sleeping, eating, and fucking.

Oh, and talking about the fact that we were moving into Onyx's, and were going to need a bigger bed. It would take some maneuvering with my job, but I was willing to make it work, and probably start going remote most of the time.

And when Onyx went out of town to work on the Arizona store, we'd go with him, just like in Maddox's plan. Maddox joked that we'd be nomads, but his excitement level about the whole thing was as high as ours.

I would have my guys, and I'd be back in a town where I belonged. With my friends. With my life. With my adopted and extended family.

Hiding from the world with Onyx and Maddox had helped distract me, but now that we were walking to Joystick's, I couldn't stop thinking about the why.

I was trying not to get my hopes up. Every year we went into this having done our best, and every year someone else

won. It wasn't an easy competition. This year, we did our best twice. I wanted recognition for that. I wanted to decorate that fucking trophy with the gaudiest representations ever of music lyrics, before a new team got it in a year.

"Hold up," Adam called from behind us. The thud of sneakers on the pavement sounded as he caught up to us. "Hey, guys." He barely gave Onyx and me a glance before he shoved his phone at Maddox. "We went viral."

"No shit?" Maddox managed stunned and pleased in the same expression, as he looked at the screen in front of him.

"I'm getting sponsorship offers. For both of us," Adam said. "Most of them are shit, but people love us. They want more of us."

The turning gears in Maddox's head were almost audible. "We need merchandise."

"And a bigger web presence." Adam took his phone back.

Maddox grinned. "And so many more episodes."

"Right?"

I loved seeing Maddox like this. So very much.

Adam pushed us toward Joystick's. "We'll plan world domination after you guys win."

I laughed. "The announcement isn't for an hour." Such a long hour.

Like with the qualifying round announcement, so many of our friends trickled in over the next little bit. Evie, Gage, Aubrey, and Raven. Deacon and Brooke joined Adam not too long after we arrived. Kandace and Eli—who we didn't see often, but were really nice—were here with Joystick.

Kandace approached me. “Xander is running late, and he’s sorry. He asked me to tell you if for some reason he doesn’t make it before the big announcement, don’t leave after.”

Maddox’s scowl lacked conviction. “Why did he call *you*, when he could’ve called me. Or Alys?”

“Maybe the *why* is a surprise.” Kandace’s smile was mischievous.

So that was something additional to fixate on—what was Xander up to? Not that the question replaced the creeping anxiousness about the contest, but it was like the cherry on top of a nervous sundae. We all ate and talked and laughed, while the radio station played at low volume in the background.

I missed this, and in the last few weeks I’d gotten addicted to being around everyone. I’d felt lost for a while now, and being here healed that sensation. I was so busy ignoring what I needed from my friendships and love life that I almost surrendered what mattered most. My past had nearly let me believe I didn’t deserve this.

Judith, Xander, and Dominic showed up less than twenty minutes before the announcement. Maddox hugged Judith and Dominic, and stuck his tongue out at Xander.

I laughed. Too perfect.

“I need to borrow Alys,” Xander said.

Maddox scowled. “Whatever you have to say to her—”

“Are you fucking with me right now?” Xander rolled his eyes.

Dominic tugged him back toward Onyx. “They’ll tell you when they’re done,” Dominic said.

“But you know.” Maddox sat anyway.

Dom held out a free seat for Judith. “Of course I do.”

Nice to see that some things weren't going to change. I followed Xander to the same quiet corner of Joystick's that we'd talked in just a few weeks ago.

“There's a bidding war for your tech,” he said.

I knew what the words meant, but my brain wouldn't process them. “What?”

“It won't be official until tomorrow morning, but what you gave me? People want it.”

That couldn't be right. “I wrote that in a week. Not even a full week. It's a silly little piece of code.”

“Don't tell anyone else that. Or do, the results could be funny. The point is, it's a great idea. The concept has further reaching benefits than you've allocated it for, but what you're doing with it is good too. I'll start running offers by you tomorrow, and we'll talk through every single one. You don't have to sell to anyone you don't want to, and you can ask as many questions as you want. If you have a question, it doesn't matter how dumb you think it is, you ask it.”

“Okay?”

“Promise.”

“Yeah. I promise.” I was still trying to wrap my head around this. “Is it okay that this is overwhelming?” There. I'd asked my first question.

“Not only okay, but expected.” Xander smiled.

Next question. “What kind of offers are we talking about?”

“More than your salary for the next ten years.”

Oh. Wow. “Fuck me. For both?” I’d given him two different apps.

“For one. You have a few choices to make over the next few days, and none have to be made impulsively. I’m going to give you one to think about right now. We can keep doing this, but if you’re tapped out on ideas—”

“I’m not.”

Xander’s grin broadened. “Whatever you’ve got, you run it by me. It won’t all be good, I’ll be honest with you right now, but if it is, we’ll refine the concept, you’ll build it, I’ll sell it. There are a handful of people who write the cores of so much of what we use, and you could be one of them. You can be a big name, or you can stay anonymous forever. It’s up to you.”

This was so much to take in, but I already knew one thing. “I’m not a spotlight kind of person. What’s in this for you?” I didn’t mean it to be a cruel question, but Xander wasn’t doing this completely out of the kindness of his own heart. I wouldn’t let him.

“I take a significant finder’s fee-slash-agent’s fee.” His answer came easily.

That made sense.

“Besides, finding a mind like yours? No one gets to do that. That’s better than money, it’s bragging rights. Biggest reason though?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re family. Anyone who can make Maddox smile the way you do deserves good things.”

That warmed me all the way through. “I’m in.”

“And if you decide to quit your job, let Judith down easy. She thinks she won because she hired you first.”

“I did win.” Judith’s voice came from behind me, startling me. “I saw your potential long before he did.”

“And yet you squashed it.” Xander was focused on her now, but there was no malice in his voice.

Judith shrugged. “I make video games and she’s a brilliant coder. I gave her a place to shine.”

“*Pft.* My offer is better,” Xander said.

It was still odd being talked about like I wasn’t here. “Am I the trophy in this discussion?” Spending holidays with the pair had taught me they were intensely competitive. Especially with each other.

“You are. And you deserve it,” Judith said.

Adam’s sharp whistle cut through the room.

“Five minutes,” Maddox shouted.

“Speaking of trophies.” I wanted to win one. Today.

Judith squeezed my arm. “Good luck. And be good to my baby brother.”

I rejoined everyone else, and settled on a bench seat between Maddox and Onyx.

When Markus came on the air, a hush fell over the room. A chair scraped against tile, and as many people winced as laughed lightly.

We listened through the drug out explanations and descriptions. The third and second place. It was as disheartening as it was encouraging not to hear our name in

either slot—we'd placed second or third on multiple occasions.

“And now the moment you've all been waiting for,” Markus said, and a drumroll played in the background.

“*Get on with it,*” Maddox shouted at the speakers.

“Our first-place scavenger hunt winner this year, a team who had incredible entries—twice—”

Holy shit. It wasn't— We weren't—

“The Wonderland Crew.”

The entire dining room at Joystick's erupted in deafening cheers, drowning out anything else Markus had to say. The next several minutes were a blur of everyone congratulating us with hugs and handshakes and claps on the back.

I was smiling so broadly my face hurt.

This was perfect—not the contest win, though that was pretty incredible too.

That I got to do it with everyone, and especially that I was wrapped up in Onyx and Maddox, in the middle of the bedlam.

For so long I'd thought if I wasn't insanely perfect at my job, if I wasn't top of my field, if the world didn't know me and my ideas, and I wasn't raising a family on top of all of that, I wasn't good enough.

And I'd never been able to put it into those words before now.

But this... This was better than good enough. This was the best. I loved it, and Maddox and Onyx, and it was all better than anyone else's definition of a good life. Because it was my perfect life.

epilogue 1/evie

E^{vie}

Road trips were one of my favorite things, especially with Gage, or Aubrey and Alys.

This time, I'd gotten Gage and Aubrey, the three of us driving to Flagstaff for a local music festival that Onyx's new store was helping to host. The drive had been a blast, and now Gage, Aubrey, and I were strolling through the venue, looking at all the local businesses who had set up tents and tables.

A stage sat at the head of the city building courtyard, waiting for the bands that would start playing in a little bit.

The idea was a great one—local stores got to introduce themselves to neighbors who may not have heard of them, and there would be live music to keep the entire thing hopping.

I was looking forward to this, not only because of the event and not having seen Alys and the others in a few weeks, but this might be my last vacation for a while. My finances were falling apart in a way I couldn't wrap my brain around.

Sure, I was struggling a little, and had been for a while. I made mistakes with Travis, and years before that with Don—neither of whom I would think about here, because I wanted to enjoy myself—but the money I had in the hardware store's

account wasn't nearly what I thought it should be, to pay my bills. I couldn't get on top of things.

Gage rested his hand on the small of my back, yanking me from the edge of a spiral. "Where'd you go?" he asked.

"Outer space." A more fun answer than the truth. I hadn't told any of my friends about the money problems—they had worries of their own, and I was embarrassed that things had gotten this far without me recognizing how bad it was.

Gage nudged me toward the booths again. "What's it like there?"

"There's a lot of space."

He laughed and guided me toward Aubrey, who was waving at us from a booth with tie-dyed clothing. Not just T-shirts, but things like poodle skirts; one of which Aubrey was holding up.

"I'm in love." She held the waistband of the skirt in front of her, and swished her hips, making the petticoats dance. "What do you think?"

"I think you should get it." I loved seeing Aubrey in unique clothing. She was the kind of woman that could match the decade of whatever she wore, and do so with grace and beauty.

Gage grabbed a handkerchief from a display, folded into a triangle, and held it in front of my chest. "Look. Halter top."

I snorted. "Not sure that's going to cover enough."

"Not sure I care."

"Ugh." Aubrey's grunt was exaggerated. "Why here? Why now?"

Gage and I flirted all the time, and it didn't mean anything but that we were having fun. "To hear you huff like that," I said with a smirk.

She shook her head and handed the cashier the cash for her skirt. "The two of you are so Ethan Hawke and Winona Rider."

"No." Gage returned his find neatly to the table where he'd gotten it. "I'm definitely more of a Catherine Zeta Jones with these hips."

We waited for the shop to wrap up Aubrey's skirt as well as one could, given its size, she happily took her package, and we were on our way.

"Does that mean I'm still Winona Rider, or does that make me Ethan Hawke?" I asked.

Alys seemed to come from nowhere. "Ethan Hawke is here? Where?"

"Do you think he'll sign my boobs?" Maddox asked.

Onyx looked the most laid back of all of them—of us. "Really glad you all made it."

"Of course we did." I wasn't going to miss this.

"I heard Plaid Peanut Butter is playing," Aubrey said. "They're like... my favorite."

"O. M. Gee." Gage squealed.

I smacked his arm. "They're going to think you're being sarcastic."

"They speak fluent sarcasm, I'll fit in just fine. You're just jealous that I know the band. *Oh*. Hey, baby, I know the band. What'll you give me if I get you backstage?" Gage said.

I was going to reach in my pocket and offer him whatever lint I found there.

Maddox beat me to a response, imitating Gage's squeal. "Oh my God. You know the band? I'd blow someone if they introduced me."

Onyx scowled. "Don't go giving those things out like they're candy."

"Those things?" Aubrey repeated, as people brushed around us, giving us weird looks. "As in, blow jobs?"

"They are. Candy, I mean." The *duh* in Maddox's voice was playful, and he wiggled his eyebrows with a grin.

Alys grabbed my arm and Aubrey's. "Come see the booth." She pulled us in a new direction.

Our group headed to the table nearest the stage, though it was still a ways away. The tables under this awning were covered with CD's for every band playing today, and there was a sign explaining how to request autographs.

Though the tent itself was as simple as everyone else's, the decor shone with Alys, Maddox, and Onyx's influence. The splashes of color and the obscure music references were so very them.

I was so happy for the three of them, and it was about fucking time they got together like this.

We all chatted for a few, until Onyx had to get back to work, and Alys and Maddox had to go find the other half of Plaid Peanut Butter—he was the bassist and she was the drummer.

Aubrey, Gage, and I found a spot close to the stage, to watch our favorite band play.

As an emcee warmed up the crowd, my phone rang. The number on it was from the bank that held my biggest loan, and I wasn't taking this call in front of my friends. "I'll be right back."

"Want me to have them pause it for you?" Gage offered.

I smiled. "Right back." I walked away to the closest thing to a quiet corner in this place, and answered.

The finance office and I exchanged a few empty rounds of *how are you?* She'd been great, working with me while I tried to get on top of this one bill. When I borrowed the money, I'd needed to use my hardware store as collateral, and I'd been struggling to make sure I didn't lose the very thing I was trying to save.

"I have bad news for you," the finance officer said. "We need a big payment, you caught up on your late payments, in sixty days, or we'll put a lien on the building, and foreclose."

"No." My gut twisted in on itself. "I've been on time with my payments. I've been good." Not a great argument. I knew she'd ignored a few deadlines on my behalf, and *lost* a couple previous notices, to make sure I could stay in my place.

"I'm sorry." She sounded like she meant it. "No one was even looking in this direction, and then we got a big offer on your place. Now people above me know you're past due... I can't stall anymore."

"Do I have any options?"

"You can start the short sell process now. Get a buyer before we force you out."

No. I wasn't going anywhere. I loved that business. It was mine. "I'll find a way to get you the money by the deadline. How much is it?"

When she gave me the total, my heart dropped into my shoes. There was no way I could raise that kind of money in sixty days. "I'll have it." I didn't have a choice.

I thanked her, and tried to summon a smile again, as I rejoined my friends.

"What's wrong?" Gage asked the moment he saw me.

So much for hiding this. I pushed harder on the smile. "Nothing to worry about."

The band started up, cutting me off, and making conversation impossible.

But I couldn't enjoy the music. What was I supposed to do now?

epilogue 2

one year later

alys

I stood in the mostly empty front of one of the abandoned buildings on Main Street.

This building wouldn't be empty much longer, though. Maddox was turning the front of the place, the sweeping store front with the picture windows, into a sort of local art gallery, and right now he and Onyx were with Aunt Rosie, loading things up to populate the place.

I was waiting for them to get back rather than going with them, because they were packing every available space in two vehicles with little knickknacks.

In the meantime, I was talking business with Xander. Or trying to. Every few seconds, I wandered to the giant panes of glass, and peered down the street for a familiar blue SUV.

“You're not listening, are you?” Xander didn't sound surprised.

“No, I am. Most recent project has potential. You’re putting out feelers.” I hadn’t had a huge win since the first apps I produced, but those sales were enough to set me up for life, even if I weren’t in love with a man who had a giant trust fund he never touched.

Xander sighed. “That’s not even…”

“It’s the essential information.” It was frustrating at first, to hear that most of my ideas just weren’t massively marketable, but I’d gotten better at accepting when Xander told me something did or didn’t have sweeping potential. I couldn’t write all winners all the time—there wasn’t enough time in the world.

Maddox’s Toyota pulled up in front of the building, and I grinned. “I have to go, they’re here.”

“Send me pictures when it’s all set up,” Xander said. “Maddox certainly isn’t going to.” Xander had kept the building, but he and Maddox had actually worked closely to make this happen.

It was exciting to see it all coming together. “You could watch it online like everyone else,” I teased. The back room looked very different from the lobby. It was set up with sound proofing, sleek tables, and high-end recording equipment, because Maddox and Adam were going to make it the new home of their podcast.

Their surprise hit, massively successful podcast.

The room was also modular so when one of them decided it was time for a change, mixing things up wouldn’t be difficult.

“I want the inside pass,” Xander said. “I earned that.”

He had a point, and I was happy to oblige. “I’ll send pics, I promise. Gotta go.” I hung up without waiting for a response.

Xander would understand.

Maddox parked out front, and he and Onyx hopped out. Aunt Rosie parked her restored Chevy pickup behind him. Claire was with her.

I liked Claire. She was just a few years younger than me, and she’d escaped a marriage to an asshole who had way too much in common with Don for my liking. Rosie was helping her get back on her feet.

The five of us started unloading, and it was like our shop neighbors materialized out of the woodwork. Friends from up and down the street showed up to help us haul things inside, so the entire thing didn’t take much time at all.

And when both vehicles were emptied, most everyone faded into their stores again.

The shelves and display tables were already set up around the room, though I suspected once Maddox got things out, he would rearrange more than once.

He already had the camera rolling, recording this for an upcoming show, as he started to unpack the boxes.

His mom’s kites were in several of them, and so was a lot of her other artwork. She’d been so creative and talented. It would be amazing to see these things on display.

Her work would be a permanent fixture here, but Maddox would feature all sorts of art from other artists, on a rotating basis.

For instance, another of the first exhibits would be our scavenger hunt contest entries from last year, next to the

trophy that I'd spent hours decorating with album art and song lyrics.

We had to hand the trophy off in a few weeks, to the next winning team, but until then it looked great where it was.

Onyx's phone rang and he stepped away. Work kept him busy, though a lot of the time we were there with him so it all balanced out. His store in Arizona was doing as great as the one here. The fact that Maddox and Adam hyped both on their show helped.

So did one of my apps. It had gotten big—with people buying and selling and trading albums all over the country, and Onyx making full use of its capabilities.

But really, both shops were doing well because Onyx was the best at what he did.

I was so happy for him. For all of three of us. And I was so very glad I got to love both him and Maddox.

Onyx came back a moment later. "I have to run, I'm so sorry."

That wasn't good. "Is everything all right?"

"It is." Onyx's smile was genuine and warm. "And I promise I'll explain it all when I'm back." He kissed me on the cheek and patted my ass, and he was gone.

maddox

I might not have noticed Onyx leaving if it weren't for the quick kiss he gave me on his way out. I was engrossed in the project at hand.

This was all so incredible, seeing Mom's work on display, in a big open space, and being able to share it with everyone.

Thankfully, Alys, Aunt Rosie, and Claire were willing to put up with my non-stop directions for rearranging, as I tried to figure out how it all looked best. I had no idea how long we spent tweaking and adjusting, but it was finally looking right when the front door swung open.

There was still an instinctual clench in my gut whenever I saw my dad, because we'd clashed for so long. We still clashed, but we were friendlier about it, and I'd seen him more in the last year than in the ten years prior.

He even showed up to Christmas dinner at Rosie's last year. The invitation had always been there for him, but this was the first time he'd accepted.

Once upon a time, the terse nod he gave me would've left me questioning, but it was who he was. He wandered through the displays with his jaw clenched, making the occasional grunt.

When he reached me, he wrapped one arm around my shoulders, and squeezed, before letting go.

What the fuck? Dad wasn't a hugger.

"It looks incredible." His voice was thick. "Your mother would be... Well, I'll be honest, she'd probably be a bit embarrassed, but she deserved this. I think few things would make her happier than knowing you were the one making it happen."

I couldn't help my smile. "Take a picture with it all?"

“Fuck no.” Dad pulled away again. “This is your thing.”

Kind of a relief to see him back to himself again after those few agonizing seconds of sugar. I was still grinning.

He stayed a little longer before he was on his way, and a short while after that, Aunt Rosie and Claire left as well.

This was one of those days that would stay with me forever. Like the day I walked into a record store in the small town I’d grown up in, looking for help with a scavenger hunt, and met two of the most incredible people ever. The day I told Alys and Onyx I loved them. The day Adam and I hit one million subscribers on our podcast.

Yup, this was a Top Five kind of day, though it wasn’t One or Two.

I heard a door open, but it wasn’t the front entrance. I turned to see Onyx was back, and for some reason he’d come in through the rear. When a second person walked in next to him, Alys let out a tiny *eep*.

Or maybe that was me. “Holy shit. You’re Jake Etsam.”

onyx

I met Jake a few months ago, through Alys’s app of all places. He’d been looking for a new quality vinyl version of Jackaroo’s first album, the original, not the re-release. He hadn’t thought to keep one at the start of his career, and he was

offering the seller's choice of a signed album in return, plus a healthy sum of money.

I charged him what the record was selling for in my store, and he and I started chatting. He realized I knew the app maker—Alys—and Maddox, from the *We Don't Do That Here* Podcast.

Jake was excited to meet them both, and I had no doubt they'd feel the same, so we made plans for him to fly in a few days before he was supposed to play with his band in Colorado.

Alys and Maddox were staring at us now, eyes wide and jaws slightly open, as I told them the story.

"I need pictures." Maddox fumbled around him for his camera for several seconds.

"It's around your neck." I nodded at the large SLR hanging from a strap, in front of his chest.

He laughed. "Oh yeah. Oh, shit. No one is going to believe this is real."

"Actually, I was thinking you'd invite me to be on your show," Jake said. "I love your podcast."

Alys made that adorable *eep* sound again.

"Jake Etsam loves my show." Maddox shouted.

Once the mutual fan appreciation slowed down, the three of them fell into talking. Jake wanted to know about some of the new features on Alys's app. Maddox wanted to talk sound quality.

I joined in as well, but I was having more fun watching them.

At some point, we realized it was dinner time, so I called Joystick's and ordered something.

Joystick delivered it himself. When he walked in, he saw all of us together. "Hey, Jake. Long time no see."

"You too." Jake waved back. "How's it going?"

"Keeping busy." Joystick handed me the to-go bag with his restaurant name on it.

Jake glanced at it, then nodded. "Man, Onyx. You know everyone."

I didn't really, but it wasn't a bad list.

Joystick took off, and the rest of us stayed and talked long into the night with Jake.

I'd gotten him a room at the local motel, so he wouldn't have to deal with anyone recognizing his name, and he headed out for the night. "Thanks for the great conversation," he said. "I'll be back tomorrow for the podcast."

As he left, Maddox and Alys were glowing. We headed home, and they didn't stop talking about the evening.

I loved every single second of it. Seeing them happy. Excited. Because they deserved all the good things. And I was the luckiest man alive, getting to be a part of it all. Getting to explore this amazing life, with new adventures every single day, with the people I loved.

Thank you for falling in love along with Alys, Onyx, Maddox, and Haddarville.

If you loved the small town feel, plus sexy-sweet triads and heat, make sure to check out Evie, Gage, and Sawyer's book, [NERD GIRL](#) .

Evie has a history of falling for the wrong men, and she's done giving away her heart.

When her best guy friend gets into a chest thumping match with a tattooed hottie, and they want her to be the tie-breaking vote regarding which of them is bigger and better... How's a girl supposed to say *no* to that? Especially when each of them promises an exciting *climax* for her to judge.

There are two problems with the whole thing. First, she has to look Gage in the eye ever day after and tell herself they're just friends, and second, it turns out Sawyer is the big city billionaire in town to buy Evie out of her small town family hardware store.

Worse, Sawyer's keeping an even bigger secret from her. The kind of thing people in a small town love to gossip about. The kind of thing that wreck hearts.

It's a good thing she knows better than to give hers away again, right?

- Grab your copy of [NERD GIRL](#) today

For Xander, Judith, and Dominic's book, check out the Three Player Tag-Team series, and [BOSS LEVEL](#)

It's lonely at the top.

Judith knew it would be when she clawed her way up, trading away favors and any personal life to get to where she is today—the head of the hottest new video game company in the industry.

When an old friend calls in one of those favors, she's happy to help Xander out. His partner, Dominic, needs to impress some conservative clients, and showing up to get-to-know-you dinners with a heavily tattooed man on his arm isn't the way to do it.

And there are far worse things Judith could be doing than pretending to be Dom's fiancée.

When the fake kisses with Dominic start to feel real, she realizes there's something missing in her life. Worse, she's starting to realize she never should've let Xander get away.

But the three of them together will bring everything they've worked for toppling down around them. There's no way love is worth that kind of sacrifice.

- Secure your copy of [BOSS LEVEL](#) today!

Thank you to Alexa Padgett for letting me borrow her bass player, Jake. If you'd like to meet Jake, and check out an amazing author, go grab [A MOONLIT SERENADE](#).

Ryn has suffered her share of heartache, and she's not eager to risk a silly crush on an arrogant, unavailable rock star. Jake's band is one of the hottest acts in the world, but for a woman who's already lost it all, celebrity drama holds no appeal. The man himself, though, is harder to turn away....

But as the holiday season takes over chilly Seattle, something between Jake and Ryn glows warmer than twinkle lights.

But even if they can stop their doubts, close their eyes, and believe in magic, the pressure of his fame and her past can't just be wished away.

- Grab your copy of [A MOONLIT SERENADE](#)