

ROAD TO  
**ROCKTOBERFEST**  
2022

*David's*

**DISASTER**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**TL TRAVIS**



*David's*  
**DISASTER**  
**EMBRACE THE FEAR 2**  
TL Travis



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# TRIGGER WARNING

Physical abuse (depicted in two scenes and mentioned in a third), mention of sexual abuse, drug abuse, illegal dealings, BDSM club scene, attempted sexual assault

# PLAYLIST

The Warning - Money

Bring Me the Horizon - Teardrops

Mothica - Casualty

Eva Under Fire/Spencer Charnas - Blow

Dayseeker – Neon Grave

Bad Wolves/Spencer Charnas – If Tomorrow Never Comes

Bad Omens – Like a Villain

Halestorm - Bombshell

Crobot – Set You Free

Golden Earring – Radar Love

Shinedown – The Crow and the Butterfly

Catch Your Breath – Dial Tone

Motionless in White – Loud (F\*ck It)

Bad Omens – Just Pretend

Memphis May Fire – Make Believe

Rain City Drive – Blood Runs Cold

Volbeat – Becoming

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Travis

When Did Things Change

Trash

Beautiful Disaster



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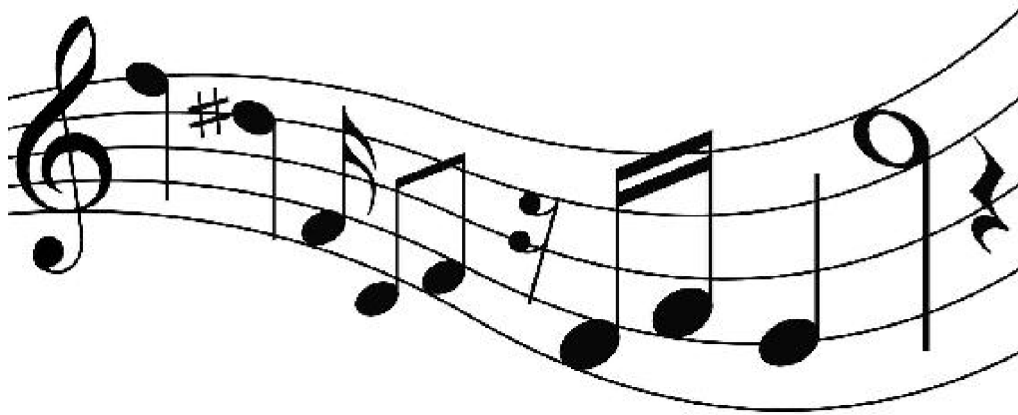
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# CHAPTER ONE



## David

“**W**hat the fuck!” Rhone yelled. Jordan and my heads shot toward the door so fast I thought we’d have whiplash. There Rhone stood, shooting daggers at us. His face was an ugly shade of red, not due to embarrassment. He was fucking pissed.

*Shit busted.*

With Rhone’s voice a hundred decibels higher than any man’s should be, that alerted Ely who came running up to see what’s going on. “What’s wr—” he froze, eyes locked on us. “You’re defiling our laundry!” he screeched. “My eyes! My eyes!” he repeated, burying his face in his hands as he took off.

“Dude, no,” Rhone pleaded, shaking his head. “Your house is across the fucking street, and you mean to tell me you couldn’t wait until you made the five-minute walk for this?” his hand wildly flailed as he gestured between Jordan who was still down on his knees, and me.

“Hey man, when the mood strikes,” I teased, though the humor fell flat. Rhone was livid. “Sorry, not sorry?” My smartass rhetoric only made it worse.

“Let me get this straight,” Rhone crossed his arms over his chest, and I knew this wasn’t going to go well.

“Ain’t nothing straight in this room,” Jordan smirked, zipping up my pants, then stood as he mockingly wiped the

corners of his mouth. I forgot my dick was still hanging out. Rhone's screech sent it into hiding. I hoped Jordan would finish what he started, bring it back to life, and across the finish line. It wouldn't be the first time I'd had an audience, I kind of enjoyed exhibitionism, if truth be told. It usually ramped up my performance with killer word of mouth —total pun intended— ratings.

“Sucking his dick in my laundry room, in my fucking house, is not cool.” Rhone growled at Jordan.

“Our house and I will need massive amounts of therapy that they'll be paying for to rid my brain of those images!” Ely shouted from somewhere in the kitchen.

I rolled my eyes so hard at their ridiculousness I thought they'd lodge in my skull. “You're blowing this way out of proportion. We're all adults here, not like you haven't watched porn before.”

“Not live!” Ely complained.

“Okay, the party's over. Take this shit back to your place because I've had enough for one day.” Rhone announced, shaking his head while bitching as he walked away.

“Dude, come on,” I pleaded, though I couldn't tell you why. As I followed Rhone further into the house, I saw that it was empty. At some point after Jordan and I had snuck off for a quick cleansing of blue balls, everyone had cleared out. I sincerely hope it wasn't because of us. If we ruined Ely's graduation party, I'd feel like shit.

“No worries, I’m out of here anyway. This group is lame as fuck,” Jordan said as he squeezed past Rhone and me for a quick exit.

“What?” I questioned Rhone’s evil glare.

He pointed at the door, “Out. Follow your consort. I’ve had enough for one day. Oh, and by the way, thanks for ruining Ely’s party.”

“I did no such thing,” I protested, though I wasn’t sure we hadn’t. “The party was winding down before we wandered off.” Worse, at least in my eyes, I never got to come. Shit shriveled up at the first shriek.

“Out!” Rhone demanded, pointing toward the front door.

Just as I reached it, someone knocked. *Ha, Jordan’s back for round two.* I whipped the door open, “Unfinished business?” I said in the dirtiest tone I could muster.

“Um, is Ely here?” A woman asked. I swear, a record needle scratched across my brain.

“Momma?” Ely’s voice called out from somewhere behind me. Ely was the spitting image of this woman, as was the young girl timidly standing beside her.

“My baby boy, I’ve missed you so much,” she said, arms wide open. Ely bolted past me and straight into her embrace. Rhone stood nearby poised and ready to step in if Ely even hinted at needing him. I loved their relationship, actually envied it if truth be told. Was I the goofy teammate always doing childish shit and throwing caution to the wind? Yeah, I

was. I loved non-committal fucking but witnessing firsthand the bond between Rhone and Ely caused an ache in my chest that no amount of orgasms could fuck away.

“Does Papa know you’re here?” Ely asked her, tears streaming down his face.

“No, and he’ll likely take a switch to me if he finds out. I’m so sorry, Ely, but I don’t have much time,” she said, gently cupping his cheek. “The good lord made you who you are. You were born this way, and I wouldn’t change you for the world. I’m just so dang proud of you,” she sniffled.

“Oh, Momma,” Ely cried, hugging her again.

“Hush you,” she said, wiping away his tears. “Your father thinks the devil has found his way inside your sister and told me to send her away as he did with you. I know better. The devil isn’t in any of my babies.”

“How’d you know where I lived?” Ely asked her.

“Oh, my sweet, precious boy. I’ve always known where you are. Now, I don’t have much time. I need you to take care of Sadie for me. I’d give you money if I had some, but you know your father doesn’t give me nothing but a grocery allowance,” she reminded Ely and glanced up at Rhone.

“You must be the one who won my Ely’s heart,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Rhone held his hand out, but she ignored it and pulled him in for a hug.

“You do right by, my boy. He’s special,” she told him.

“I promise I will. And Sadie, too,” Rhone assured her.

Ely turned to him, his eyes wide with wonder. His mascara-streaked face stared up at Rhone like he’d hung the moon. Hell, even I wanted to hold Ely and take his pain away. He’d grown on all of us. I’d never been a protector before, but Ely brought out that side in me. “Rhone are you sure?” his voice cracked as he spoke.

“Babe, you don’t need to ask. Family comes first. You know how strongly I feel about that. Of course, we’ll take care of her,” Ely burst into uncontrollable sobs as he nearly bowled Rhone over.

“You found yourself a good man, Ely,” his mother said, hugging Rhone and Ely together. She may be thin, but every inch of her was muscle born from a hard life. Ely had told us they had many acres they tended and grew as much food as possible. “Thank you for loving my baby.”

“He’s my world,” Rhone replied. The truth in his words were felt as his and Ely’s gazes locked. Solid. Sure. Had I ever been so sure about anything in my life?

Enthralled by their exchange, I wasn’t the only one fighting back tears. Mother, son, Rhone – each either released the salty betrayers or softly sniffled to hold them back. So lost in it. This felt too personal, like I shouldn’t be here. So intensely engrossed in the exchange I hadn’t realized Jordan returned and stood beside me until his hand slipped into mine. Ely’s doe-eyed little sister, Sadie, stood in the entryway, nervously



taking it in. Her tiny face was just as wet as the rest of ours, a small suitcase was tightly clutched in her hand like a lifeline.

She looked so lost and alone. Slowly, I approached her and extended my hand, “I’m David.”

“Sadie,” she whispered, her tiny hand shook with nerves as did her voice.

Turning to Rhone, I whispered, “Do you want me to stay?” I wasn’t sure what was about to go down, and if my band brother or Ely needed me, I’d be there come hell or high water.

Ely, his mother, and Sadie stepped past us. Ely guiding them toward the living room. “Nah, I think we’re all right.” Rhone nudged me, “but keep your phone handy just in case.”

My hand went up for a fist bump, that morphed into a bro hug. “You got it.”

Jordan and I said nothing as we walked across the street until we reached his car when he let go of my hand. “You and I will talk later,” I said as he slipped inside. Without a reply, he started the car and drove away.

*What in the hell am I thinking? Jordan and I didn’t talk, we fucked and nothing more. Talking, was something more.*

I’ve been chasing after Jordan, well, not chasing so much as he’d become my go-to for blowing off steam. For how long now? Since we first hooked up last year at Rocktoberfest? Fuck, has it been that long? And no one knows about, though after today, I’m sure the entire band will. How or why we got started, who knows. Maybe it’s the thrill of the actual chase

itself or that he kept declining requests for repeats and then randomly showed up unannounced at my doorstep days later. Or maybe it's because once he said yes, the addiction took charge. So many thoughts and scenarios played through my head, but whenever Jordan and I were together, it was like a *wham bam*, I'm in and out with no time to thank him before he's gone. Never once had he spent the night, not that I've asked him to stay. There are very few past hook-ups that I fucked more than once. Jordan has been the exception to that rule. A rule that had a chance of ruining me forever.

*What was it about him that got under my skin?*

He was flighty as hell. Jumpy, unpredictable, disorganized, forever frazzled, and on a constant sugar high. At least, I hope sugar was the cause of it. How he managed to get his catering clients and orders not only prepared but flawlessly executed, the world would never know. I'd heard Ely complain about Jordan being all over the place. Now that Jordan and Ely were going into business together, hopefully Ely could overcome the challenges and balance out Jordan. Maybe then Jordan could take some time off and learn to relax, leaving the business was in Ely's capable hands.

Easton announced earlier during the party that he'd hired Ely as our tour chef. The guys were excited about that, including me. It'll be great for both he and Rhone, not to mention Ely's an excellent cook. Rhone is a great guy who deserves all the happiness and is perfect for Ely. They're one of those couples you can see together forever. Being apart for months on end while we're on the road would be hell on

them though I wondered how it would work with Sadie in the picture. Everything was about to change for them, just as their dreams came to fruition.

Isn't it crazy the curveballs life trips you up with?

One minute you're getting busted mid-blowjob in one of your best friend's laundry rooms, then not ten minutes later, rogue family members show up, and you're left with another mouth to feed. Rhone has a strong sense of family with the way his mother raised him. It didn't surprise me that he immediately said yes to taking in Ely's sibling. Was it going to be easy for them to raise a kid? No, not in the least, especially when their careers were insanely busy. They'll figure it out, and Uncle David will be there to help however I can.

Chase was in the kitchen when I came inside. Notebooks and papers strewn across the table in front of him. He was in the zone writing lyrics and hadn't heard me enter. The four of us, Chase, myself, Rhone, and Seltzer, each had a hand in our songs though Chase fine-tuned them since he was going to be the one belting them out. He needed to feel them, get behind the emotion in the words. Delivering them robotically wouldn't put bodies in the seats and sell out shows. Occasionally one of us would write an entire song. There weren't any strict guidelines on how we operated outside of what instrument we played. While I was the chosen bassist for the band, I'm also a guitarist. Guitar was what I first learned to play though I can't deny how much I love the deep sound of a bass.

“Working on songs?” I asked, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge and holding it up. “You want one?”

“No thanks, I’m in the zone, so it’s gonna be a coffee night,” Chase answered, tipping the cup to his lips for a sip.

“You’ll be a zombie tomorrow, dude.”

“It’s all good. Got a couple that I’m putting the finishing touches on to share with the band at practice this week. We might want to include them on the next CD. I’m digging the soulful vibes. Once we put our musical stamps on them, they’ll come together.” He set his pen down and turned toward me. “Did everybody clear out across the street?”

I blew out a breath, flipped the chair around, and straddled it. “Yeah, you could say that.”

That got his attention. “Oh shit, what happened? Did someone get drunk and stupid and pass out or puke?” Chase asked. I can’t begin to tell you how many times that’s happened over the years. An all too familiar scene in our world.

“Nope.” I replied, purposely popping the *P*. “Ely’s mom and his little sister showed up as I left.” Intentionally, I left out the part about getting caught with my pants down. He’ll find out soon enough. “Sounds like Ely’s dad’s at it again and sent his sister Sadie, whom I’m guessing is maybe ten or eleven, on down the road insisting that gay demon got her too.”

Chase shook his head, “You have got to be fucking kidding me?”

“I wish I was, *mi amigo*. I think the only one the devil got into in that family is that worthless sperm donor. Ely’s mother seems terrified of him. She said something about him whipping her if he found out where she was. What’s a switch exactly?”

“Jesus. No clue.”

With a smart-ass southern twang, I said, “There ain’t enough praying in this world to fix the can of stupid that man was born with.” Chase rolled his eyes. “Let me go upstairs and grab my notebook and bass, and I’ll be right back.”

Once we started putting music to the lyrics, we’d pull an all-nighter. That was just how we rolled when the bug hit us. It was in our blood, a part of our DNA. We each had notebooks scribbled full of mindless musings, jotting them down as they popped into our skulls. Hell, if we sat down and went through them page by page, we’d likely find we had enough songs to fill three or four CDs. Either that or we’d find we needed our heads examined. But there’s more to it than lyrics when you’re laying down tracks. You have to feel the words bone deep. If you don’t, there’s no way the fans will. You have to play with heart and soul. Let the words take you away, and the music move you. If you only insert bits and pieces of yourself, you’re not feeling it, and it’s time to put that one aside and return to it later. Or maybe not at all. Not every song is meant to be played. Some are just random musings, fleeting thoughts in time.

The songs worth putting out are the ones we get done from start to finish that the four of us vibe with. Those are the ones we want the fans to hear, and with Maiden and Social taking us under their wings, we had a no-fail agenda. Our goal was to make them proud and prove to ourselves and our fans that we deserved to be on that stage. Is it a lot of weight on our shoulders? Hell yeah, but the Social and Maiden guys were a gift to us. Between them and Masterson Management, we were handed the golden chalice that Indiana Jones fought for. The very one, his dad nearly lost his life over. Failure was not an option in this Dojo.

Chase cleared a space for me when I returned, my notebook made a slapping sound as it hit the tabletop, “All right, man, show me what you’ve got.” He was ready to roll, handing me the sheets he’d been working on. I made some notes and figured Rhone would eventually break away and fill us in on their situation, then add his musical two cents while he was here. Seltzer too. I’m sure Ely and Rhone will end up running around to get stuff for Sadie, or Ely and Rhone’s mom Katy would take her shopping. Katy was the best, and she’ll be ecstatic to have a girl around to spoil. Poor Sadie, though. I can’t imagine what it was like growing up in a house with a parent like that.

“Our first real, full-on, digitally mastered in a freaking studio CD releases in April,” Chase said out of the blue, staring off like he was lost in a dream. “We hit the same time Maiden and Socials new ones do. Well, each one a week apart.” Not sure why this realization hadn’t hit him before.

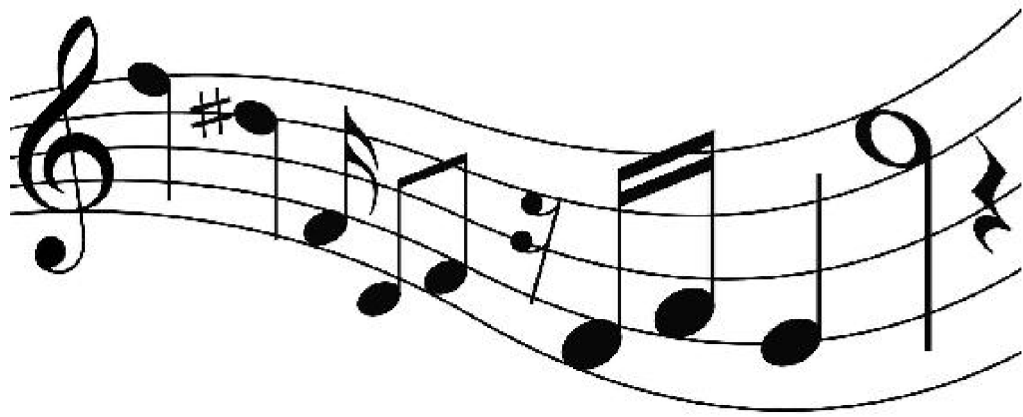
“I hope we don’t get lost in the mix,” I admitted. I wasn’t trying to rain on his parade, but the reality hit me as he said the words aloud. One after another doesn’t give the three bands much time to soak up rankings.

“I don’t think that’ll happen. If anything, I think it will elevate us just like the summer tour,” Chase said. “The Vegas shows we fucking rocked. Then the Social guys stepped up and helped us with the fan meet and greet when Ely and Rhone were out of commission. Dude, that was killer. I’ll walk in their shadows forever because that kind of camaraderie is worth its weight in gold. They’re extended family, and I’m still blown away by it. Diamond and Easton had just been married, and they showed up at the hospital the same day to support Rhone and Ely. I get chills just thinking about it. These guys love with their whole hearts, and I envy them. Hitting the road after the CDs come out, it’ll be like we launched straight into the atmosphere.”

Pen pointed at Chase for emphasis. I laid some words of wisdom on him, and hoped I wasn’t cursing us. “That right there is why you’re our front man. I just hope we don’t do anything to fuck this up.”

“You and me both, brother.”

# CHAPTER TWO





## Jordan

“**W**hat the fuck is wrong with me?”

“What the fuck is wrong with me?”

“What the ever-loving fuck, is wrong with me?”

Cursing aloud, I paced the living room of my tiny home I lovingly labeled the cozy cottage in downtown Vegas. An all too familiar chant as I wore a grove into the cream-colored carpet that'd outlived its intended lifespan. I should probably tattoo those words across my forehead. What *the fuck is wrong with me?* A stern reminder every time I glance in the mirror. Then everyone would know trouble was headed their way and to avoid me at all costs. Forever the dumbass I will be.

*Hookups.*

Hookups were the answer.

Praise the app gods for their brilliant programming minds creating apps for those who need a quick fuck.

Those I could handle. One and done's anywhere but at my place. This house may need updating, but it's mine, and no one enters it. I can do the shady corners of a club, dark alleyways, quickies, and blow jobs. Hell, this is Vegas —hiding in the shadows wasn't necessary. Most cops could give two shits less what anyone was up to unless it was happening inside a casino. There, you don't fuck around, or you'll find yourself face down with a steroid-riddled cop's knee pressed into your back and a dozen guns aimed at your head. Not something I've

been on the receiving side of, but I've seen it happen to others often enough. Stick to the rules, Jordan, the ones *you* put into place to keep your heart and body safe. That's the only way to survive.

No kissing—too personal.

No sleepovers—too risky to let them know where I lived or let down your defenses while sleeping.

No feelings. They just...suck. And not the good kind of suck, either. Stay away from anything remotely emotional or that has the potential to become such. Emotions only get you in trouble.

*I will not think of Tony.*

I will not allow that abusive asshole to take up space in my mind again. *Daddy, my ass.* He defiled the self-proclaimed title *he* gave himself, and instead of being loving and nurturing, he fucked with my head. Not to mention the numerous broken bones and bruises he left on my body. I wasn't opposed to impact play when doing a scene, but I was young, naïve, and new to the lifestyle. Having my arm broken the first time should've been enough for me to walk away. But no, I fell for the *it'll never happen again* line. *I love you, babe. I'm sorry I had a bad day,* another all too familiar one. Waking in the hospital and admitting to the police –total strangers – what a fool I'd been was the ultimate low. I'd hit rock bottom, and there was nowhere left to go. Literally and figuratively.

*Safeword?* Tony never would've allowed it. Ending a scene before he was ready would've only ended me.

The cherry on the abusive sundae came the last time we were together. Tony and I were headed out, where I couldn't tell you. He was in a mood and ordered me into the car. He was pissed, complaining about someone owing him money and how he would get it back. The next thing I remember, he pulled over, put the car in park, and proceeded to beat the hell out of me. If that wasn't enough, he yanked me out of the car, and I landed hard against the barren landscaping. He then took off, peeling out of the parking lot and my life. The pain was unbearable. I'd used it as a shield to combat some of the blows Tony was dishing out which broke it again. My shoulder was dislocated from the force he used to pull my body from the vehicle.

His final words to me were, "I gave you a life, took your whore ass off the streets, and this is how you repay me?" To this day, I still have no idea what he was talking about. He was high as a kite, pupils dilated, which had become the norm. Still, his sharpened words cut like a knife. A blatant reminder of where I came from. What I had to do to survive after watching my mother overdose in the seedy hotel room we called home after her dealer took what he felt was his and left. How many times had I witnessed her shooting up? Shit running down her face, a mix of make-up, and who the fuck knows what else. Her eyes rolled back as the release she sought hit her veins. Want to talk about a fucked-up childhood? There you go.

The following day, I packed up what little I had into a tattered backpack and left before the authorities could put me

in the system. Those verbal blows were worse than the ones his fists landed, taking me back to that day. Those took years of therapy to get past. Bruises heal, breaks heal. Mental wounds, not so much.

Or at least I thought I was past it.

Nobody knows about Tony Navarro or Jordan 2.0, what I'd lamely named myself after that. A promise to no one other than me that I'd rebuild, work harder without using my body for compensation. Even if it meant working multiple minimum wage jobs. Probably best, I kept that secret, and then no one would see how miserably I failed.

At least the nightmares had subsided. Mostly. I no longer live in fear that Tony's lurking around the corner, waiting in the shadows. Is he going to strike again? No, this last time was it for him. He killed someone that night in an unbridled fit of rage. I told the cops everything I knew, which wasn't much. I wanted nothing more to do with him. Living on the streets, I usually got away when someone got too handsy or refused to pay upfront. Slide between a building and a slender fence opening, jump inside a dumpster, or hide in a bush. I was small, but smart. Being trapped inside that apartment day in and day out was no life. Tony had his so-called friends watching me. I could never leave without him by my side. The day I got released from the hospital, I returned to the apartment and sold everything I could. Packed my bags and moved into yet another scummy motel and started over. No job, no friends, no family. Just me, myself, and I to rely on. I swore from that day forward that I'd never let another man in.

*No more so-called daddies.*

*I never even knew my own.*

*Letting David in is far too risky. Ending this now is the only answer.*

*I can't go back to being that same weak version of myself again.*

*I won't.*

Every morning I'd wake with the sunrise, walk everywhere I possibly could, and submit job applications. Nearly out of money and facing homelessness again, Lyle, who owned a small café, took a chance on me, and hired me as a busboy. Grateful, I swore I'd never do anything to fuck this opportunity up – and I haven't. Slowly I worked my way up, which was funny considering it was a diner – not a career ladder. Lyle was the reason I got my GED. Relentlessly, he tutored me and did a damn good job considering I passed it the first time around with honors. Who knew you could achieve that with a GED?

In his spare time, Lyle volunteered at the Las Vegas LGBTQIA+ youth shelter, and one day I tagged along. He'd promised the kids a spaghetti bash, and Lyle would give it to them come hell or high water. I'll never forget their faces when we came in, boxes in hand. Cooking had become the simplest yet most rewarding thing for me. I'd worked for Lyle for a couple of years at this point and became his sous chef. Lyle never had any kids of his own, never married, and lived

alone. He taught me all his recipes and treated me like flesh and blood. Like a son. We were each other's family.

Those kids at the center came from every race, every religion. Their ages spanned from ten to eighteen. Homeless for one reason or another, reminding me of myself. Lyle hired many of them who came and went through the shelter doors over the years. He started them out as bussers once they were of legal working age. None were career oriented as I had become, not purposely, but I enjoyed working for Lyle. It was familiar and soothing, and safe. Some of the kids that had moved on would come back from time to time to check in, and others we never saw again. Though they were out of sight, they were never out of mind. As the business grew, Lyle branched out into catering and put me in charge of it.

He took the orders and helped prepare the food, though we hired abled bodies from the youth center to help serve and bus at the various events, which is how mine and Ely's paths crossed thought it was a couple years later. Our friendship was instant, like it was meant to be. He'd always dreamed of becoming a chef and was quite skilled for never having taken a single class or held a job – in the industry or otherwise. He said he'd helped his Momma in the kitchen and was a natural. After the first time I went to the shelter with Lyle, I, too, devoted much of my free time volunteering there. The smiles on their faces when I'd walk into the rec room where they were huddled up watching tv or playing ping pong, lit me up from the inside out. Addicted to these kids was putting it mildly, they'd become my world.

About a year after we started the catering business, Lyle passed away peacefully in his sleep. I never knew his age, never asked. When we conversed, it was mainly Lyle talking and me listening. I hung on and absorbed his every word. He reminisced about a past love when men weren't allowed to love men. His Beau, yes, that was the man's real name, caved to societal pressure and married a woman whom he had a family with. That's when Lyle left their rural Midwest town and landed in Vegas to begin again. I miss Lyle more than words could say. It seems sad that I never mourned the mother I lost because she never really filled the role. Lyle though, he was the only person I loved and who loved me back. Not in a boyfriend way, but how a family should love and care for one another.

After the funeral, I had no idea what to do except keep coming to work every day until someone official told me not to. I was beyond thankful that Lyle taught me everything from payroll to bank deposits to taking and fulfilling catering orders. At least knowing that I was able to pay the staff and keep them from walking off the job. Though after a few weeks of working day and night, it wore on me trying to run both the cafe and the catering side. Catering held my interest more than the restaurant, but I didn't want to let Lyle's dreams die. Frustrated, I sat down to contemplate my options when I walked a man in a three piece suit asking for me by name.

"I'm Jordan," I said, wiping my hands on the apron before shaking his.

“I’m Clark Morris, Lyle’s lawyer. Is there somewhere private we could talk?”

I glanced at Chris, the busboy who was closing with me that night. He nodded, letting me know he had things under control. Thankfully, the dinner rush had quieted down, and there were only a handful of tables to manage. “Follow me.” I led him back to the small, cramped office behind the kitchen. “Please, take a seat.”

He rummaged through his briefcase and extracted a file folder and placed on the desk in front of him. “Jordan, I’m not sure you’re aware, but Lyle left you everything.”

“Everything?” What does that mean? Barely twenty-four and owning nothing of my own, I had no clue. For all I knew, he had some mangy little rat dog I’d need to feed and care for, and the business was returning to the bank.

“Everything he owned. This café, his home, his car, the catering business —it’s all yours.” Clark handed me the folder. Reluctantly, I opened it. Unsure if some sadistic jack-in-the-box type shit would pop out at me and yell. “Sike!” Things like this didn’t happen to me. I worked hard to afford the shady as fuck studio apartment I lived in at the time. Now to find out, I have a home and business. This was too much, too overwhelming.

“Take a deep breath, son,” Clark said, patting my shaking hand. “I know it’s a lot to take in, but Lyle thought highly of you. Told me he considered you, his son.” Swallowing hard, a feeble attempt to fight back the tears that refused to stay put.



“You can sell it all or keep it. The papers are finalized, as you’ll see there. Everything is in your name. What you do with it is completely up to you. Here,” he pulled a set of keys from his pocket and slid them across the scratched desktop to me. “These are the keys to Lyle’s home and car. The address is there, along with his banking information, the deed to the house and restaurant, the title to the car, and a few other things you’ll need. My card is also in there if you have any questions. Jordan,” he said, and I glanced up at him. “I know you’ll do right by Lyle, or he wouldn’t have chosen you as his benefactor.” Mr. Morris nodded then showed himself out.

Time passed as I sat there, staring blankly at the papers in my hand. Not sure how long I’d been there when Chris slid into the seat in front of me. “What’s wrong?”

“He gave it all to me,” came out in a voice I hardly recognized.

“That guy in the suit?” Chris asked, pointing toward the door. “What did he give you.”

I shook my head from side to side, clearing the brain fog. “Lyle. He left me,” still in shock. I drew a deep breath. “He left me everything.”

“Whoa.”

Chris and I closed the diner early that night and hopped into my beater car. I dropped him off at his apartment and headed to the address on the paperwork from Mr. Morris. A short drive later, I stopped in front of a mid-century ranch home, light brown with white shutters in need of repainting. The

front yard was a mishmash of dirt and rock, with no vegetation in sight. It made sense, Lyle was always on the go, so I'm sure landscaping was the last thing on his mind. No garage, but an attached carport to the left of the house which was where Lyle's car sat. I stared down at the keys firmly gripped in my hand, waiting for someone to jump out and take them away, but they never came. Finally, I turned off the engine and got out. It took a couple of fumbled attempts with my shaky hands before I unlocked the front door and stepped inside.

The house was clean and dated but tidy, just as Lyle kept everything at work. *There's a place for everything, and everything has its place.* The words he so often spoke replayed through memory. As I walked from room to room, I learned much about my mentor, a pseudo-father who was now gone but would never be forgotten—the one person who gave me a real chance and trusted me. The ache in my chest, a staunch reminder of the loss. Did it hurt this much when my mother died? Was it fucked up that I didn't remember?

Two bedrooms separated by the homes only bathroom was at the end of the hall to the right of the entryway. Cream colored shag carpet ran throughout the house, and books adorned the many shelves that lined the living room walls. My fingers danced along their spines as I passed them, the covers worn, likely read many times. How had I never known Lyle was an avid reader? Was I so stuck in my head that I never bothered to get to know the man behind the apron? I didn't deserve this gift of a new beginning, a better one than I could've ever given myself. Even in the afterlife, Lyle still

watched over poor wayward Jordan. With a firm determination to do better by Lyle, I knew what needed to be done. With a click of the lock, I left, returning well after midnight with what few belongings I had. The furnished studio apartment I paid far too much for, a blur in the distance as I returned to my new home with a promise to become the best version of myself I could be. I would continue to give back as my mentor had and help those in our community build better lives for themselves. They needed a break like Lyle had given this once homeless kid, and now I had the ability to pay it forward.

So much for that happening. Here it was years later, and I was no further along in bettering myself though I did manage to keep my promise to help others. Most of the employees I hired came from either the Vegas LGBT youth shelter or one of the many shelters within the area. But to this day I still was and forever will be a work in progress.

After I shut my phone down, I pulled the bubble gum ice cream tub from the freezer, and kicked back in the old recliner of Lyle's I'd never been able to get rid of. It was a part of this house, another connection to him, and the memory of him sitting in this very spot, remote in hand, flipping through the channels, wrapped around me like a warm blanket. My life didn't feel as lonely then. For endless hours, I sat, and binged Orange is the new Black. Monday morning came bright and early, thanks to my dumbass forgetting to shut the blinds. I was sleep deprived and coming off a sugar high which didn't make for a happy Jordan. Yet my mind immediately wandered to what David was doing. Had he hooked up with someone

else? Gone to a concert or lived any semblance of a life? Or was I the only one failing to move on.

Ugh, we don't even listen to the same music.

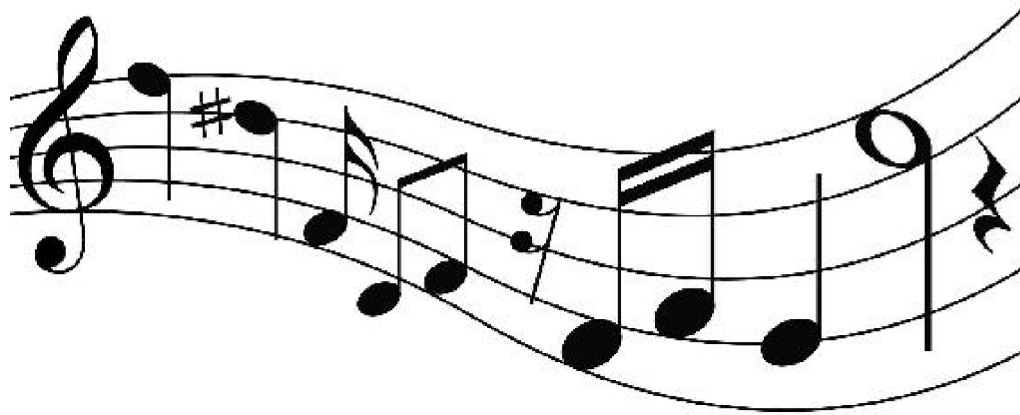
Lame excuse.

Why does my mind fixate on him?

*David. Come on, Jordan, you know his name. All you need to do is say it.*

Obsession with someone you had no choice but to walk away from was never a good sign.

# CHAPTER THREE



## David

“**Y**ou’ve glared at your phone a million freaking times. Quit wishful stalking or whatever it is that’s causing your fucked up attitude,” Chase complained. He didn’t have a mean bone in his body, and neither did I, but I did have an ornery streak, as my mother liked to call it, which was irritating him.

“What’s it matter to you?” I replied, far too shitty to one of my best friends. He didn’t deserve to be on the receiving end of my bad mood. Was it fueled by blue balls or missing a particular someone? “Sorry.”

“My problem is that you slam it down on the table every time you don’t see what you’re waiting for,” Chase said. “If you want to shatter your screen and spend an hour waiting for a new one at the phone store, go for it. But I’m going to be fucking pissed if glass finds its way over here.”

“Duly noted.”

Chase and I were out of view sitting in the dining room when we heard the front door open and then close, which was likely Rhone or Seltzer, “We’re in here,” Chase called out, sifting through the papers in front of him.

“Oh, there you are,” Rhone smirked at me.

“Where else would I be?” I questioned, shaking my head in disbelief.

Smugly, he tapped a finger to his cheek, “Hmm, I don’t know, maybe in the laundry room?”

“You got jokes today, I see?” I replied.

“Sexy, smart, funny, I’m the whole package,” Rhone winked.

Seltzer entered behind him, “I’m no cock block, but you fuck in our laundry room again, and it’s going to get an ugly, my brother. There’s not enough bleach to get your jizz off my clothes.”

Chase froze, “What the hell did you do?”

I spun my phone on the tabletop several times. “Not fucking, that’s for sure. You caught us the mid-blow job. So what? You know I enjoy entertaining others.”

“I can do without that visual, thank you very much,” Chase said, leaning comfortably back in his chair. “Spit it out, D.”

“That’s what Jordan said!” Seltzer added. The two jackasses, Rhone and Seltzer, fist-bumped like they’d just won a prize. They were enjoying this far too much.

“You and Jordan?” Chase said as the puzzle pieces clicked. “In their laundry room?”

“It was an unfinished blowy, no big.” They didn’t need to know this was mentally heading down a dangerous highway I didn’t care to travel. I couldn’t tell you how or when things shifted, but I needed to fuck Jordan out of my system with a hook-up or twelve. *Said he, who repeatedly glared at his*

*phone for any digital sign from the man in question.* “This is ridiculous. Who wants to go out?”

“If you’re trolling for ass, I’m out,” Rhone said.

“Yes, mister, I’m a one dick man,” I snidely replied. More to be a smartass than anything, even though I was riled up inside. The uneasy stirring was pissing me the fuck off.

“No need to be a prick,” Rhone threw back at me. I can’t deny I didn’t deserve that. “Don’t be jealous because I found my forever.”

*Forever.*

The one word I couldn’t fathom, not at my age. Twenty-two was way too young to straddle a solo cock. “How can you even be sure? Man, we are in our prime. Just making it. There is so much ass out there to be had.”

“I get it,” Chase said, “you walk around with a perpetual boner and feel the need to dip it in every available crevice. But not all of us operate as you do, David.”

“Dude, you make me sound like a slut,” I protested. I mean, what the actual fuck?

“If the shoe fits,” Rhone said, adding his unsolicited two cents.

“Fuck both of you!” I shot them a two-handed salute, stormed up the stairs to my room, and slammed the door behind me. Landing on the bed with a bounce did nothing for the shitty mood my so-called friends put me in. Was that how they saw me? Better yet, was that who I wanted to be?



It's like I can't help myself. Skin on skin, such an aphrodisiac. The glide of a lubed hand or a relaxed, well-oiled hole to slide into. The grip on my cock as their muscles contracted as they came. That feeling was like no other. Sex beat out Animal Crossing, which was saying something in my world. Was sex an addiction for me? Possibly, to a point, at least. Could I go without it? Absolutely and I have but was I going to pass up opportunities when I didn't need to? Nope. Life's too short, so I'll grab that willing head by the ears and fuck it senseless. Or into submission, at the very least. Was I a sadist? No, not in the true sense of the word, but I did love it when a sassy partner needed their ass smacked, their hair pulled, and their face fucked.

Case in point, Jordan.

And here I go again...

I had a few fuck buddies on speed dial, and I could hit them up anytime. Their numbers were right at my fingertips, abled bodies willingly down to fuck, but something held me back. Lately, my go-to had become Jordan. Having never been one to cave to what others thought, it felt like I needed to this time. Causing a rift between Rhone and Ely wasn't going to happen and if I pursued Jordan and this fell apart, I'd do just that. Ely and Jordan were best friends, something that shouldn't be overlooked. I'd rather cut off my right arm than cause problems for Rhone and his man. Ely was about as innocent as they came, and Rhone was protective as hell as he should be. It's probably best that I forget Jordan's number and move on.

Staring at the phone screen, my thumb hovered above the block option on his contact, but I couldn't pull the trigger.

God, those piercing brown eyes needily staring up at me. I lost all train of thought in the depths of them. Jordan's hands firmly gripped my thighs, goading me forward, begging me to fuck his mouth. His hair wrapped around my fingers as I pulled it tight, his scalp reddened, and a salacious whimper escaped his lips as he gagged on the girth of my cock. That act alone was hard to walk away from. A needy, willing bottom who could take all I dished out and begged for more. Fuck. Me.

Jordan was taller than the guys I usually went for and was the same height as me. At five foot eleven, generally, I was drawn to those smaller than me. Ones I could manhandle and dominate. Twinks. But Jordan craved the same, taking it as rough as I gave it. Where this side of me came from, I had no fucking clue, and neither did my friends, and it had to stay that way. They'd witnessed quick fucks and blow jobs, but not the shit I longed for. Taking charge and being in control was what drove me through. Why or how much power I sought, I had no clue. Back to that whole commitment-phobe issue so I'd never explored that side of myself. How could I possibly know in a single night how deep these desires ran? Was I into the pain portion? Punishment? Was I able to physically discipline a partner?

"Fuck," I mumbled, roughly scrubbing my hands through the day-old stubble on my face. Not that there was much, patchy at best, though my goatee was coming in nicely.

“Animal Crossing or catching a scene?” I asked aloud, my voice echoed through the quiet room. Fuck, I was pathetic as hell and done with this shit. I showered, shaved, put on a clean all-black outfit as was typical. Without a word to the others, I grabbed my wallet and key then left.

Our first paychecks from Masterson came while we were on the European Tour last year with Maiden and Social. The amounts blew us away. In our wildest dreams we never imagined we’d see that many zeros. The four of us were ecstatic to be out there playing while seeing the world on someone else’s dime. Even more so once we got home and Masterson offered us a five-year contract. All our expenses were paid for, so the money we earned sat in the bank until we were back on US soil. The first thing Chase, Rhone, Seltzer, and I did was buy new vehicles that weren’t held together by duct tape and a prayer, and then we met with Rhone’s mom’s friend, who’s a real estate agent. She’s the one that found us these two houses we currently rented. It was great, Chase had his side of the upstairs with a master and spare bedroom, and I had the same on my side.

Me, I’m a truck guy. I headed straight to the Ford dealership and custom-ordered my F-150. I wanted to throw the band logo on it, but the sales rep talked me out of it. He said it would attract fans, and at our career’s upward trajectory, it’d turn into a mob scene anywhere I drove. Instead, I opted for a custom paint job of midnight metallic blue with chrome accessories and rims. The windows are tinted as dark as was legal, and thankfully I was smart enough to add the cooling

system to the leather seats. Trust me, it was not fun having leather without that in the desert. If you're not singeing your balls, you're leaving layers of skin behind. The memory of past leather trauma forced shivers. Now with the remote start, the AC kicks on and cools the toaster down before I hop in. My balls and I are both thankful for that.

*Smythe, Sinjin Smythe.*

Gotta love the inner workings of the fabulous ADHD-riddled brain. I haven't seen *A View to a Kill* in a million years, yet there it was, the character name randomly flooded my non-stop brain as though I'd only watched it yesterday, all because I heard the word singeing. Go figure...

Art is an outlet for me, one of the only ways my parents could keep me under any semblance of control without medication. That love eventually morphed into another form of art —music. Every instrument I picked up, I mastered, immersing myself so intently in learning that my brain would forget all else including meals and homework. Not only can I play bass and guitar, but I'm also not too bad on the piano. I'm no Mozart, but I won't have you cringing and slapping your hands over your ears. I spent many years beyond bored in school and was forever getting into trouble. I'd wiz through assignments, and then I'd be up and out of my chair making new friends. The teachers grew tired of sending me to the principal's office, and he grew tired of seeing me. Finally, one of the teachers had an epiphany. The following week, I was tested and subsequently placed in honors classes. But like all good things, that too ran its course. Instead of detention, they

settled on a new course of action – band. Our band teacher, Mr. Farley, was the best. Every free minute I had, I spent in his room. He taught me to read sheet music and gave me free rein over the instruments. I'd say he was the real influence in my life. I wonder if he's still teaching at our old high school.

Designing our band logo and having the guys tattoo it on their bodies was beyond incredible, like having my art on display wherever we go. Mine I had inked on my right shoulder. I'm in the process of designing full sleeves, and with the help of Mash, tattoo artist extraordinaire, I'm sure they'll be epic. He does all the tats for the Social guys and has hooked us and Maiden up as well. That guy is busy as fuck, but I'm sure he'll show up during our tour next year. I think Diamond has him on a retainer or something. I turned the spare room on my side of the house into an art studio, so when I need a brain break or reality breather, which seems to happen frequently as of late, I hole up in there for hours on end, scribbling away. It's a dream of mine to create and illustrate a comic book series of my own. Ha, it would be kind of fun to turn my band brothers into cartoon characters. And there goes my mind... and my phone. *Fuck, it's Sikes.*

“This is David,” I answered, preparing for the inevitable ass-chewing.

“I thought you guys were working on songs?” Sikes snapped.

“Well, hello to you too, gorgeous,” I loved to torment Sikes and Snipe, the Embrace the Fear bodyguards.

“Where are you?” he growled.

Sikes and Snipe had zero sense of humor. “Heading to a club, hoping to bust a nut.” More like hoping by admitting it that he wouldn’t come looking for me.

“You know the rules, dimwit. No clubs, no public outings without a guard. Text me your coordinates.” *Click.*

Someone’s a cheery fucker tonight, hung up without blowing me a kiss. I parked then snapped a pic of the sign on the building and sent it to Sikes. No address. I’d leave it to the neanderthal to get a lesson in Google 101, then I headed for the door. As I walked up, the guard recognized me and waved me in. Beyond thankful I didn’t have to wait in line where I’d most likely be spotted, which would only prove Sikes right, and I did not need to hear that broken record. Not that I wasn’t going to anyway but it would be easier to endure if I’d just gotten laid.

The place was hopping, bodies gyrating to the vibrating beat, music bouncing off the walls in tune with the strobe lights. Techno wasn’t my thing, but it drowned out your thoughts and wayward moans when things started getting down and dirty club-style. I sidled up to the bar. My favorite bartender Sammie was working tonight. “David, good to see you, man,” he gave me a side hug over the bar top. “What can I get you?”

“Guinness in a bottle if you’ve got it?” I didn’t want to risk someone trying to roofie me, not that I wasn’t down for almost anything though I preferred to have my wits about me when it

came time to perform. Sammie dug one out of the freezer, popped the top, and slid it my way. “Place is packed for a Sunday night.”

“Yeah, Joe’s got the dancers working Sundays now. They come in at nine,” Sammie said, wiping the counter between customers. Joe was Sammie’s partner, and they owned the club. Sammie managed the food and beverage staff while Joe oversaw operations, including the entertainment. Some of those boys’ moves should be illegal. “Looks like your entourage is here,” Sammie nodded toward the door. Following his line of sight, two very angry bodyguards shot daggers at me. “Here,” Sammie handed me a pass, “take this up to the mezzanine.”

I grabbed the red disc, “Thanks.” Just as I turned, two muscular hands gripped my forearms like vices.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Sikes asked.

Flashing the red card, I announced, “To the mezzanine, kind sir!” in the most terrible British accent I could’ve done. Accents clearly are not my forte. Sikes and Snipe groaned in unison but relinquished their grips. Sikes walked in front of me while Snipe held up the rear. *Hehe, rear*. If I made that joke to them, they’d likely knock me on my ass.

The bouncer manning the upper VIP level, or the mezzanine as Sammie had called it, nodded, snagged the card, then grunted. What was it with these overgrown protectors and grunting? I’m waiting for one of them to grab a rock and start

drawing caveman-style all over the walls. How do they even understand each other?

It was much easier to breathe up here with a lesser body count though the music and vibrations still flowed. The view was fantastic, staring down at every sweaty, writhing body on the dance floor. This was front-row seating when the dancers hit the stage. “Would you like another drink, sir?” I turned to face the flirty voice, and there stood a five-foot-nothing cutie chewing his bottom lip and eyeing me like a lollipop. “Hello gorgeous, I’ll have one more, please.” He turned and winked over his shoulder, swinging those hips like the moneymakers they were. He knew the value of his...*asset*.

Maybe a dark, secluded storage room cocktail server ass was in the cards for me tonight.

Leaning over the iron mezzanine railing, lost in thoughts of the firm ass beneath the shiny black boy shorts fetching my drink, I scanned the overcrowded dance floor. Memories of once being able to be a part of it that seemed like so long ago when it really wasn’t. Our lives changed overnight by winning that Battle of the Bands competition. Did I miss not being a part of our old scene? Meh, not so much. The view from up here was much better, like having your pick of the crop. Lower level was all sweaty, grinding bodies. Most of the time, you couldn’t see past the face in front of you. No, I think I liked my odds from this angle much...

Better?

No, it isn’t.



“What the actual fuck?” I said loud enough for Sikes and Snipes to hear. Instantly, each large body took its place at my sides. There was no stopping this primal, animalistic need to seek and destroy. Alarms inside my brain activated, yet I couldn’t stop myself.

“Where’s the threat?” Sikes asked. Both sets of eyes scanned the floor for trouble.

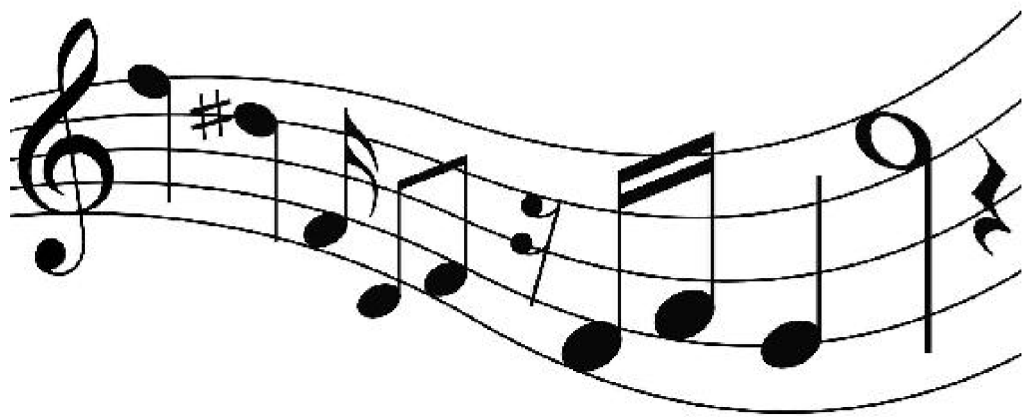
Down the stairs I went, nearly bowling over the poor guy with the full drink tray heading in the opposite direction. I knew I wasn’t alone, though I couldn’t hear Sikes or Snipe’s footsteps. It amazed me how those two over-muscled guards could move like the wind. I’d descended upon my prey in fewer steps than it should’ve taken.

I swear, all life, all sound, all music stopped when the three of us hit the dance floor. Bodies moved aside, primarily out of fear of the two men who were with me, I’m sure. But I was locked on a specific target. Dumbass one and dumbass two blocking my path weren’t too bright. They hadn’t even noticed that everything around them had come to a stop as they continued to feel up the body tangled between them. “Enough!” I ordered.

“Hey man, we saw him first,” dumbass one said, coming toward me. Sikes and Snipe cut him off, and he threw his hands up in surrender. “We don’t want any trouble,” he pleaded as he and dumbass two backed away. At that point, said target turned, and our gazes met.

“What the fuck, David?”

# CHAPTER FOUR



## Jordan

Curse the fates that keep fucking with me.

That single word, *enough*, rocked me, halting all forward motion when David said it. My body responded as though he were the puppet master pulling the invisible strings attached to my limbs and I no longer had control.

Was I happy with the overly handsy pair I was dancing with? No. Their paws were more like tentacles and never stayed in place long enough for me to extract pleasure from them. They were poking and prodding instead of gently caressing. Could I have gotten off that way? Unknown. The jury was still deliberating that case. Did I hope to find the one person my brain needed to banish here tonight? Abso-fucking-lutely not.

Fuck. My. Life.

David was pissed, arms crossed over his chest as his glare passed from me to the guys I was dancing with, landing back on me. I did my best to ignore how appealing his sleek muscular limbs were. No Jordan do *not* fixate on them. Do not *consider* how fucking hot his glare is. Or how amazing it felt to be tightly held in those very arms. *Stop!* I struck up my inner bitch, “I’ll repeat my last question – What. The. Fuck. David.” I made sure to enunciate each word clearly so he didn’t miss them.

“I was about to ask you the same, Jordan. What’re you doing, letting Tweedledee and Tweedledum feel you up in front of everyone? Is that what you want? To put on a show. Is that what you’re all about? Here, I’ll give you a fucking show.” David flipped me around, firmly gripped my hips, and ground his crotch against my ass to the beat. Please don’t ask me what song it was because I had little to no brain power. When had the music started back up? I have no clue. I was too lost in his anger, which should’ve pissed me off because he had no right to tell me what to do, yet it fucking turned me on.

What does that say about me?

Choosing tight leather pants tonight was probably not the best idea. Shit was chafing my dick, which immediately stood at attention the second David growled. Fucking Benedict Arnold in my pants wouldn’t stand at ease for his life. David was no better off. The incessant grinding was on the verge of wearing a hole through the ass of my pants with his rod. “We need to get out of here,” he said, taking my hand as he led me to the entrance.

“What about my car?” I asked as we neared his truck.

“Gimme your keys,” David demanded. Without a thought, I handed them over, and he tossed them to one of the guards. “How do they know....”

“We know which car is yours,” one of them said. I couldn’t tell you which one because I’d never cared enough to pay attention. I didn’t know whether to be pissed that they’d vetted me or happy they’d bring my card to David’s house.

Not a word was spoken until the front door shut behind us. “Upstairs, now!” David ordered. I opened my mouth to protest, but I knew better when my gaze locked on his. I should’ve said fuck this shit, and left, but deep down, I knew David wouldn’t hurt me. He never flagged me as abusive. Dominating? Yes, which it seemed I secretly craved. “First door on the left,” he said before heading toward the kitchen. Music was playing, so I knew we weren’t alone.

The guards came in a couple of minutes later, and I heard Chase ask, “Is he with?”

In unison, the guards replied, “Yes.”

“Why’s he so pissed then?” Chase asked.

“Jealous,” the guards again replied. I shut the door behind me, not caring to hear another word, though when David yelled *Fuck, all of you* to them, it came through loud and clear.

How do I always end up here?

David slammed the door when he came in. The click of the lock echoed through the room. “Here,” he said, handing me a bottle of water.

“Thanks.”

As David drank his, I watched his Adam’s apple and how it bobbed with each swallow. Feral, stormy gray eyes met mine. Mesmerized, I stared until he’d finished and placed the empty bottle on the nightstand. “Drink up,” he paused, “you’ll need it.” Slowly I did, watching as he unsnapped the wide leather cuffs on his wrists, then sat to remove his steel-toed boots. I

only finished half the water. Fear of the unknown had my stomach in knots. Vomiting wouldn't go over well. Not knowing what he had in store for me, outside of what I assumed would be angry, hate-filled sex, left me feeling like a scolded child awaiting punishment. "Get undressed."

Snarky, smart-assed Jordan lost his words. The urge to kneel and lick his boots clean had me in a state of panic. Was that something he was into? I wasn't, at least not that I knew of, and having thoughts of doing that sent my heart racing. I knew I could leave, and he wouldn't stop me, but maybe, just maybe, one last romp would be the closure we needed to move on from whatever this toxic thing between us was. There I stood, completely nude at the foot of the bed, awaiting his next command. David, I didn't fear as I had Tony. David would never hurt me in a cruel, malicious way.

David turned and gave me the once-over. His facial expression never betrayed his thoughts as he retrieved the lube and a condom from the bedside table. I'd been naked before him many times but never had I felt this exposed. "Face down, ass up." Scrambling up the bed, I assumed the position. "Out on the prowl for a good fucking tonight, Jordan? Looking for someone to own this ass?" His fingertip slid down my spine, prickling at his touch as shivers shot through me. "No one knows this ass better than me."

"Cocky much?" shot out of my mouth before I could tamp it.

*Thwack!* He smacked my ass and I whimpered.

“I’m in charge tonight, Jordan. You will do well to remember that,” David scolded.

“Yes, daddy,” slipped from my lips, and I immediately regretted it as the tension in the air thickened. I’d never wanted to get dressed and leave so fast in my life.

“Is that what you need, Jordan, a daddy? Someone to take charge and run your life? Tell you when to eat and what to wear. Or is the daddy you seek the one that orders you down on your knees? Leaves marks on your beautiful flesh and edges you until you come so hard you pass out,” he growled the last words. Nervously, I swallowed past the lump in my throat and kept my lips tightly shut, fearing what my dumbass would blurt out next.

Seconds later, cold lube drizzled down my crack as David’s fingers followed the trail, teasing between the cheeks before circling the rim. “This right here,” David said, pushing a fingertip in, “I will own tonight. You’ll remember this every time you sit over the next week. You won’t forget who was here, who took charge and showed you what it felt like to be dominated. Owned In the best of ways.”

His words faded as my mind and body focused on the rough prep. David meant it when he said I’d feel it. One finger turned to two, then three. He stretched and scissored them a couple of times, and then they were gone. I didn’t dare glance back at him. I needed to feel the stretch and burn as much as he needed to control this scene. A good fucking, I was always

down for, but a punishment —not so much though, for some odd reason, I wasn't backing away.

“Safeword?” David asked.

“Stoplights.” What? Where did that come from? I'd never used safewords before, never had a need to, yet I didn't hesitate for a second before replying.

Inch by thick inch, David filled me, not pausing until his groin rested against my ass. “You good?” I nodded. Firmly David gripped my shoulders, pulled out, and slammed back into me so hard the headboard hit the wall. Relentlessly David pounded my ass, and I fucking loved every minute of it. My dick was painfully hard, throbbing beneath me. The tip grazed the comforter with each pass, leaving precome in its wake, wanting more, seeking release. As though David knew this, his hand slid around my front. He gripped my throat and pulled me upright, my back pressed firmly against his chest, all the while he never missed a beat. His grip was not threatening, only controlling, reminding me who was in charge. Still, I didn't fear for my life.

His fingers tightened as he tilted my head and whispered in my ear, “Remember this, Jordan. Every time you sit. Every time you head to a club seeking a random one and done, remember how good I gave it to you. No one knows this ass as I do. I know what you need even when you don't. Remember that.” He knew I already had one foot out the door, all I needed to do was come. David relinquished his hold to grip my cock. It only took a couple of strokes before I painted his



bed with come. The primal growl he released as he filled the condom nearly had me coming a second time. As one, we fell to the bed. Breathless and spent, I drifted in and out of consciousness until the light shut off. I lie wide awake after that, silently crying. Not for tonight's actions but because David made me feel and want things I didn't deserve. Something that scared me more than anything. Fearing for your life as I had with Tony had nothing on the fear of heartbreak.

Soon as David's breaths morphed into snores, I dressed and slipped out of the house. I had to leave and never look back.

Bright and early the following day, I went to the warehouse space we rented for the catering side of the business. Inside we had three makeshift kitchens and fully stocked pantry stations. On the opposite corner of the building was an enclosed garage where we parked the vans and received deliveries. Between both areas were the restrooms and mine and Ely's offices. We'd turned my old office at the diner into an additional pantry. I needed to make some changes effective immediately so I texted Ely to meet me here. Bringing him in as a partner was one of the smartest moves I've made, especially in light of this past weekend's events.

"Good morning," he said as he entered the office.

"Good morning. I have a couple of things I'd like to go over with you before we announce them to the team," I said, shuffling some papers around and avoiding his gaze.

"Changes?" Ely questioned.

Steeling my nerves, I turned and met his gaze. “Yes, I’d like you to manage the catering team, and I’ll return to the diner.”

“You love the catering side,” Ely said. “Why the sudden change?” Hmm, let’s see. I’m getting ooey gooey feelings for your fiancé’s best friend, so now I need to avoid him like the plague.

Instead, I chose a more realistic explanation, smiling wide as I delivered it. I was ridiculously proud of Ely and his achievements, so this part of my agenda wasn’t fake or ill intended. “Well, now that we have a chef on staff, I will leave the catering kingdom in his capable hands.”

Ely rolled his eyes, calling me on my bullshit without uttering a single word. “Bull hockey, and you know it.” I quirked a brow, “Bull hockey? What are we ten now?”

“You know I don’t like to curse. Now, what’s the real reason, and what happens when I go on tour with the guys? We have Rocktoberfest coming up, and there is no way I can manage all that stuff, plus cook, and feed hundreds of sweaty rockstars. What gives?”

Well, so much for that plan. “Look, I...” I paused. How much did I want to tell him? Ely was my friend, really, my only friend. Sure, the people whom I employed were pseudo-friends, so to speak. I paid and trusted them, but Ely was the only one I ever did anything outside of work out with. “It’s best I stay away from David.”

“What? Why? What did he do?” Ely balled his tiny fists, “I’ll kick his butt if he hurts you.”

Ely always had a way of making me smile. His little badass moment here was a prime example of that. My sweet little friend couldn't kill a fly —literally. “Ely, I love you like a brother, you know that. David didn't hurt me, not in the sense you're thinking. Well, not at all, to be honest.”

“You like-like him,” Ely cooed.

“And we're back to being ten,” I rolled my eyes at his silliness. “I don't like-like anyone, and you know that. I merely tolerate humans during my short stint on their planet. It's just better this way. Besides, I know you'll rock the shit as the head chef and catering manager. I'm sure you've got an arsenal of new recipes you're dying to test out. Why not give them a shot on unsuspecting rockstars?”

Ely grinned so wide it was blinding, “I already have been. So far, they've liked them all.”

“Well then, there you go. Here's the binder with the catering schedule. We don't have back-to-back events until November, but there are still quite a few spread out between now and then. A handful each month, then Rocktoberfest. I have two weeks blocked afterward to allow us time to relax. You don't leave to tour with the band until April, right?” I asked, drawing a blank on the previously mentioned dates for that.

“I think we get ready in April when their new CDs release, but we leave in May. I'll double-check with Easton and let you know. I still need to figure out how the whole Sadie deal will work. Rhone suggested I talk to him or Derek since he has a kid but I think Lorraine has Colby when they're on the road.

It's weird to say that we have a kid. She's not our kid technically, but she kinda is," he rambled on. Poor guy had no idea how adorable he was when he got that way. "What are you smiling at?"

"You are too freaking cute for words, my friend. I'm sure you guys will figure it out before then. How did it go with her this weekend?" Some friend, I was too wrapped up in my own shit to check on them over the weekend.

Ely sighed, "She's scared, and I get it. That man, ooohhh," he groaned. "Our sperm donor, as Rhone calls him, is a horrible, awful excuse for a human. If I could I'd get my mother and other brothers and sisters out of there. He's verbally and mentally abusive and needs to rot somewhere alone with only his miserable self to contend with."

"Wow, I don't think I've ever seen you so worked up before. I agree wholeheartedly," I replied.

"Rhone's mom is the best. While the guys worked on songs at Chase and David's yesterday, Sadie and I went shopping with her. Rhone gave us his credit card with explicit instructions to get everything Sadie needed. We did that and more and had a great time. Sadie's eyes were big as saucers when we walked into the mall. She'd never seen so many stores in one place before. We're trying to figure out the whole school thing. Rhone's mom just retired from the school system but recommended we keep homeschooling Sadie until she's more acclimated to city life. Plus, the fall semester is already

underway, and she's been through too many changes at once," Ely admitted.

"I agree. If I can help in any way, let me know, and you know, partner," I said, and Ely smiled, "any time you need to take off and do family stuff, you don't need to ask. We're equals. Let me know when it happens, so we're on the same page coverage-wise."

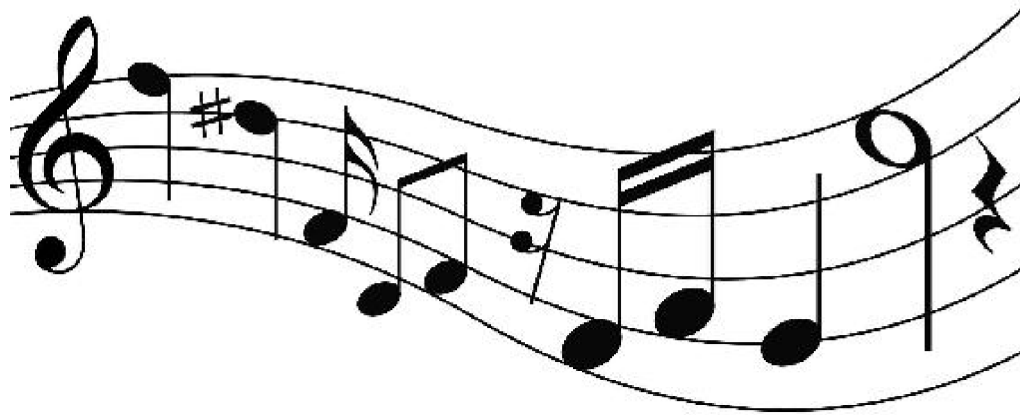
"Partner, I still can't believe this is my life. I owe you so much," Ely said.

"You owe me nothing, and you more than earned it. You've worked your butt off for me these last couple of years, and you deserve it, Chef," I threw in for good measure.

Ely glanced down at the chef coat Rhone had embroidered with his name on it that he gave Ely at his graduation party, "You know what, you're right. Thank you for recognizing that and for being my friend."

I stood and moved to his side, "You never have to thank me for that." We hugged and headed to the floor to meet with the staff. I may have rushed to decide to have him manage the catering crew, and for the wrong reasons, but without a doubt, I knew this hasty decision was the right one.

# CHAPTER FIVE



## David

Sliding my phone off the nightstand, I glanced at the time, seeing it was after ten am. I rolled over and reached for the body that should've been there but found the bed empty and the sheets cold. What did I expect? Jordan was flighty as hell on the best of days. Predicting this time would be any different would've been stupid. Elation is what I should've felt. It eliminated the uncomfortable morning after, yet I couldn't shake the empty feeling.

That possessive side of me last night —what was that about? I've never reacted that way. I'm a more the merrier guy, so I should've booked a room and invited all three of them back. Taking charge felt so right though. It filled a void inside that I honestly need to explore. Misreading Jordan's needs was foolish, and I now realize he has no interest in me. It's time to move on and work on what David wants. I hopped in the shower, and when I got downstairs the house was blissfully silent. I loved nothing better than enjoying my morning coffee with a side of something sweet while feeding my Animal Crossing peeps and checking on Daveland. Unfortunately, not long after I settled in, my focus went to shit.

“Ugh, when did things change?” I asked aloud, and the lightbulb went off. I grabbed the notebook and pen I'd left on the table when Chase and I were working on lyrics and jotted down a new song titled *When Did Things Change*.

When did things change?  
I've been too blinded by lust to see  
It all happened so suddenly  
This thing between you and me  
When your hearts are on the line  
You can't see how things should be  
The constraints that bind you  
Take away the ability to breathe  
Bodies writhe in pleasure  
Lost in the afterglow of what they seek  
The skin on skin, connecting as one  
I can't see where we begin when I come undone  
When did things change?  
I need to believe  
We're doing the right thing  
For you and me  
When did things change?  
There's no way to see  
How good we could be as you and me  
What the fuck went wrong?  
When I saw you with him  
I became someone else



A jealous version of myself  
Looking back, it drove the rage  
If I had to do it again, I couldn't promise a change  
Emotions are complex  
Wreaking havoc on your psyche  
But if you saw things through my eyes  
You'd know the reason why  
When did things change?  
I need to believe  
We're doing the right thing  
For you and me  
When did things change?  
There's no way to see  
How good we could be as you and me  
I don't know what's next  
But I'm not at my best  
So I think for a while you do you  
And I'll do me  
When did things change?

“I'm not sure whether to laugh or cry,” Chase said, scaring  
the shit out of me.

Clutching my heart, I groaned, “Jesus, man, give me a fucking heart attack, why don’t you?”

“Sorry, you were deep in thought. I stood beside you for like five minutes,” Chase replied, taking the seat across from me. “What the fuck happened last night?”

“Ugh,” I groaned and tugged my hair. “I have no fucking clue. One minute I was at the club eyeing the options on the playing field, the next, I was going all possessive demon on these two dudes groping Jordan on the dance floor.”

“Then you brought him back here, went full-blown Dom, and freaked him out. I don’t get it. That’s not your usual MO,” Chase said, staring at me over the cup of coffee he had in hand and then he took a sip. “I’m not sure Jordan is the right guy for you.”

“No truer words have been spoken, *mi amigo*. The problem is, I can’t seem to shake him.” Chase didn’t say anything else. He left me to my thoughts while he made his breakfast. The things I had to work through were ones I hadn’t considered, which meant paying a visit to my old man. His infinite words of wisdom helped me out a shit before. I slid my phone from my pocket and shot him a text.

**Me:** You busy today?

**Dad:** Never too busy for you. Lunch?

**Me:** My treat. Tacos?

**Dad:** You’re on. Meet you in twenty.

I loved that about my dad. Whenever I needed him, he was there. He's the Facilities Manager at UNLV. He's the one who taught me how to play the guitar as well as how to fix basic things. When I was younger, he let me tag along with him at work. Dad was in a garage band when he was in high school, but after graduation, they disbanded, and everyone went their separate ways. Once I'd mastered guitar, I moved on to the bass. I was a quick study, and Dad would say, "The skies are the limit for you, my boy." He always encouraged me to be my best, but once he saw how obsessed I'd become he knew it was more than a passionate hobby.

Keys in hand, I headed out to meet dad at our favorite taco place. Nothing was too far away in Vegas unless you tried to get down the strip at rush hour. Then it was every abled driver for themselves. I avoid driving near it like the plague and use a car service anytime I go down there. I pulled into the parking lot and instantly spotted dad's beater car, the old ass Subaru in dire need of replacing. Something I'll be sure to do with my next royalty check.

"Hey, old man," I said. He immediately wrapped me in a familiar hug. You never realize how much you miss something as soothing as a parent's loving arms until you're being held in them again.

"Old man, my ass, I can still take you," he teased. Dad and I have never argued, let alone physically fought. Come to think of it; I don't remember ever seeing him fight with anyone. The man is a pacifist through and through.

“Ya, ya, ya,” I laughed, “Come on, let me buy you some tacos.”

We ordered a dozen carne asada to split and sat by the window. He’s the one I got my love of people-watching from. “So, I’ve recently learned a few things about myself.”

“Like the fact you’re a slut?” Dad said.

“What? Not you too?” Wow, I needed to change more than I thought.

“Well, you’re a rockstar now. Isn’t that the lifestyle? Sex, drugs, and rock n’ roll? I hope you’re not partaking in the drugs portion of the limelight?” Dad cocked a questioning brow.

“No, dad, none of us do drugs. Not to mention Masterson would void our contracts if we so much as stepped a toe out of line. Or they’d sic Diamond on us, I’m not sure which would be worse. But dayum, the slut comment hurt,” I massaged my chest just above my heart.

“At least it took everyone’s focus off your Animal Crossing obsession. Sex, I understand. Video games, not so much. I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings. I assure you that wasn’t my intention,” Dad apologized.

“Sometimes seeing yourself through another’s eyes is a swift kick in the nuts,” I admitted. Thankfully, our tacos got delivered before I could dwell any further.

“While I’m delighted to partake in tacos with my favorite son,” Dad began.

“I’m your only son,” I reminded him.

“Be that as it may, it’s been a couple of weeks since your mother or I have heard from you and the only reason not to come to the house for this meeting tells me you need to have a man-to-man conversation. Am I right?” Dad asked.

I felt like a jerk, we’d been back for a few weeks now, and I hadn’t reached out since I invited them to the Vegas shows — and they came, then I still ghosted them. “Son of the year, I won’t be winning. Sorry, dad.” I haven’t seen Ariella and Angela, my ten-year-old twin sisters, in forever. The twelve-year age gap between us made me the cool older brother, and they looked up to me. I feel like I failed my entire family by not being around. My parents didn’t think they could have any more after me, given how long it took, but they were thrilled when they found out they were pregnant again. They were a little stressed due to needing two of everything, but other than that, they were overjoyed. Mom left her job as a receptionist at an insurance agency to stay home with them. Once they started school full-time, she got a part-time job in the office there. My parents worked hard, and they met when mom was working as a waitress and immediately fell in love. Mom’s Hispanic heritage can be seen in my sisters and me through our dark hair and complexion, though she jokes that she doesn’t know any Spanish except for the dirty words.

“Hey, you’re an adult now. I get it. We couldn’t be prouder of you, David, you know that. Now, how can I help my only son?” Dad asked.

“This is kind of awkward.” Crumbling, straightening, then pulverizing the napkin I had in hand did nothing to ease my nerves. “So, um, there’s this guy. Well, not like that. I think. But,” I tossed the napkin aside and shook my head. “Let me try this again. I’ve been messing around with this guy, and it wasn’t supposed to be anything. Then I saw him with someone else, and I went all caveman on him. It’s over now, we won’t see each other again, but the caveman part is where I got confused when I realized I liked it, and um, yeah.”

Dad removed his glasses and ran a hand over his face. “Let me see if I get this. You like this guy, then you got jealous, and it ruined it with him. But you liked how you felt?”

Shit, I confused the hell out of him. “No, sorry. So, when we um...”

“Fooled around?” Dad provided.

“Yeah, fooled around. I went all like, caveman,” I described, my hands waving wildly through the air. I looked like an idiot. “Dominant feels like the right word, and something inside me woke up and...I don’t know where I’m going with this. Ugh,” I groaned. How much was too much to share with your parent?

“Oh,” dad said and paused. “If I’m deciphering this correctly, you enjoyed being dominant and in charge? Like spanking or ordering someone around?”

“That’s the part. It was a little bit of both, and now I’m wondering if I want to explore that more.” There, I said it.

Dad stilled and said nothing. Was coming to him with this the wrong thing to do? Did I fuck up our relationship? The deafening silence was eating me alive. “You remember Uncle Casey?”

“Yeah, of course. He’s been your best friend forever. Why?” I asked.

“Uncle Casey has a unique lifestyle with those he dates,” Dad replied.

“What do you mean by unique? I know he’s bisexual, so he dates men and women, but there’s nothing unique about that. He’s open about it,” I said, uncertain where this was leading.

“It’s more than that. Have you heard of a club called Cordes?” Dad asked.

“Sounds familiar, but I can’t place it,” I made a mental note to google it.

“It’s a BDSM club,” dad added. “He’s a Dom, a daddy Dom and he usually dates someone who’s defined as a little. He’s explained it to me but understanding their dynamics goes over my head. Do you know what that is?” At his words, all the bells and whistles went off inside my brain. Dad smiled, as the *oh shit* moment hit my face. “I think Casey would be better to talk to about this than me. I’ll text you his number and let him know you’ll reach out.”

Dad and I spent a few more minutes catching up, and I promised to be over for dinner Sunday night. During the short drive home, a text came from Casey asking me to call him.

This required privacy, so I ignored the voices I heard as I entered the house and went straight to my room, and hit call as soon as the door was closed.

“Long time no hear from,” Casey said instead of a standard hello.

“Hey man, how’s life?” I asked.

“Life is good. I have been reading about my godson a lot in the news lately. It seems he hit the big time,” Casey said, triggering my smile. He couldn’t see it but knowing he was keeping stats meant a lot.

I laughed, “Not the big time yet, but we’re off and running for sure.”

“I’ll cut to the chase. You know I’m a no-nonsense guy. Your dad told me what you talked about, but I’d like to hear more from you,” Casey said. I loved his no-bullshit attitude. Knowing what I know now, he has the perfect attitude for a Dom.

“Man,” I blew out a breath. “Not sure where to start. These feelings hit me like a fucking truck. One minute I was checking out the scene, and the next, I damn near pummeled two guys, pissed on another to stake my claim, then came home and told him what to do and where to be.”

“Did he do it?”

“He did, then he bolted while I was asleep. Not sure what I did was the right for him but outside of the jealousy factor,



being in charge felt right for me. Now I've got all these thoughts and feelings driving my brain crazy," I admitted.

"That's a lot to take in, but this is a lifestyle for most. Is that something you're willing to think about? Or are you just looking for someone to play with from time to time?" Casey asked.

"I'll be honest, I'm only twenty-two, and outside of playing music, I'm not sure what I want. One of my bandmates, you know him, Rhone, found his forever person, and it hit me hard. It made me realize that maybe I want that for myself, just in a different way, if that makes sense?" How could it when I wasn't making sense to myself. How could I put this to make Casey understand?

"I tell you what, I don't have a scene scheduled for Wednesday night. Why don't you come to Cordes as my guest? We can talk and walk around, watch the different acts, and see what interests you. You can join if you enjoy the club and want to explore more aspects of the lifestyle. The membership fee isn't cheap and requires a background check, but if you're serious, I promise you it's more than worth it," Casey said.

"Sounds great. Text me the time and address, and I'll be there." We talked for a few more minutes before ending the call. He gave me a lot to think about and research. All of it was new to me, and I had no clue what I was into if anything. Guess I'll see if anything calls out to me when we meet.

Shortly after we hung up, the info came through via text, and confirmed for nine pm on Wednesday.

Two days to brush up on the BDSM world so I didn't look like a deer caught in the headlights with everything taking place around us. The naked bodies. Whips. Leather. God, I loved the smell of leather. Ugh, there was no way I wasn't sporting wood from the moment I stepped inside. How will anyone take a twenty-two-year-old daddy Dom wanna be serious?

Or was that even me?

With a sigh and an insane amount of determination, I fell down the BDSM wormhole. I'm no kink shamer, but I'll never be able to erase some of the things I saw. But others acts I found to be enlightening. The chat rooms and forums were where I gained the most knowledge. The emotional outlets those living the lifestyle spoke of shed new light on this. BDSM is nowhere near how the world portrays it— it's the complete opposite. Those I messaged with were welcoming and open to answering my questions. One guy I talked with was a high-powered executive, making decisions by day— multimillion-dollar decisions—and running an operation with a headcount well into the thousands. Being a sub and falling into what he explained to be *subspace*, the ability to relinquish all control to his Dom and just feel, reaching that highly sought-after Zen was better therapy than he'd received from any therapist he'd paid thus far. The way they each described subspace in their own words was beautiful.

There were daddies, mommies, littles, middles, and pet play, where the subs dressed up and acted like animals. As an outsider, it sounded so odd until they explained the euphoric highs they got from it. How it strengthened their relationships and how some found their forever partners by meeting them at the various mixers and munches held at the clubs they were members of that specialized in their kinks. They built a community where they felt welcome, and their words pulled me in. I smiled wide as I listened to their stories, feeling a sense of home.

Every person I talked to pointed me toward an app they used, a kink world app, which I immediately downloaded and set up a profile on. Overwhelmed as I was going into it, I came out enlightened and hopeful. Maybe there was a dynamic that would work for me. None of the ones I learned about tonight were the same, I mean, the kink themselves were, but each relationship was its own, and not attempting to shove a square peg into a round hole as I'd initially thought that was the way it had to be. No two relationships were the same, nor should they try to be.

*Knock. Knock.*

“Come in,” I hollered, closing my laptop. This was no one’s business but mine, and until I understood it better, I wasn’t talking about it with others who had less knowledge on the subject than I did.

“Dude,” Chase said as he came in, “You’ve been holed up in here for hours. I was about to order a pizza. You in?”

I glanced at my phone, “Holy Cow. Yeah, sounds good.”

“By the way, we have band practice Wednesday night at eight,” Chase said.

“Can’t make it. Any chance of rescheduling?” I asked.

“Big date?” Chase teased.

“Nope, learning something new. Call it my get-to-know-David better, if you will, and if it goes well, I’ll be out on Saturday night, too,” the thought of finding something outside of music to hold my interest had me all kinds of excited.

“Does this involve a certain catering someone?” Chase asked.

“Nope. Steering clear of that hot mess. Ely can deal with mood swing Barbie because I’m over it,” I shut off my desk lamp and followed Chase downstairs. Jordan was a disaster, a beautiful one, but still a disaster.

“Right. Okay, pepperoni and mushrooms?” he asked, and I nodded. “Wings too?”

“Sounds good. Do we have any beer?” I asked.

“Check the fridge,” Chase directed, clicking away on his phone ordering the food.

I realized as I glanced inside the fridge, a quick confirmation that we were indeed bachelors. I’m sure the empty takeout containers and sauces in the barren tundra were well past their expiration date. Cans of soda, and bottles of beer spread throughout. Yup, twenty-two-year-old single

junior rockstars. I grabbed a couple of bottles, popped the tops, and met Chase in the living room. Remote in hand as he channel surfed. “Here,” I said, handing him his.

“*Gracias, mi amigo,*” Chase replied, clinking his bottle to mine.

“*De nada.*”

Chase took a long pull from the bottle and contently sighed, “Sci-fi? Blood and guts? Or Anime?”

We turned, smiled at each other, and said in unison, “Star Wars marathon!” When the new episodes released, we’d binge and critique them. Now, having watched them so many times the digitally remastered added scenes had become a part of them. Tonight though midway through episode five, we struggled to keep our eyes open and called it a night.

The next two days flew by in a blur of writing. Bits and pieces would come to me but not enough to complete an entire song. We had time before we’d be back in the studio, and I hoped we’d have a dozen songs between the four of us to record by then. Before I knew it, Wednesday was here, and I’d changed my outfit a ridiculous number of times, overthinking each one. I never put much effort into my appearance, and most of what I owned was black, so it should’ve been a no brainer, but Casey mentioned the club had a dress code requirement to get in, and I was trying my best to meet it.

He explained the club’s basic logistics and mentioned that patrons could use changing rooms to slip into their gear or, for some, into nothing at all. But at the door, you were expected to

be presentable, and knowing I wasn't changing while there, comfort was something I needed to consider. Ultimately, I chose a pair of newer black jeans, a long-sleeved fitted black dress shirt, and my best pair of black boots. Thankful, Easton insisted we each have some dressier clothes just in case.

My palms were sweating, and it was like we were hitting the stage. The only difference was that the nerves dissipated once I picked up my bass whereas tonight, there would be no security of my bass and no alcohol to lessen inhibitions unless Casey brought some, which I highly doubted.

When I got there I entered the club and stepped into a small waiting room area with a sliding glass window like they had at doctor's offices. Next to it was a set of double doors that most likely led into the club. The opposite side of the room sat a glass-top coffee table that separated a pair of matching black leather sofas. There were a few people in line ahead of me waiting to be checked in. Casey stood near the double doors speaking with another man. He glanced my way just as I made it to the window.

"Hello, David," Casey said, pulling me into a hug. He turned toward the window, "Beth, this is David Jordan. He should be on the list as my guest tonight."

"Yes, Mr. Jordan, nice to meet you. May I see your ID, please?" Beth asked. I handed it to her, and she scanned it into a small machine she had on the desk. "I see you filled out all the necessary paperwork online. Thank you for that. It makes this go much faster. You read and understand the rules?"

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied.

“No photography takes place beyond those double doors, and your phone must be left in a locker. I’d recommend emptying your pockets and leaving those items as well if you wish to interact with other guests. Locks are provided on each. Secure them and remove the key,” Beth advised.

“We can use my locker for tonight,” Casey said.

“Very well. Enjoy your evening, gentlemen,” Beth said before addressing the next guest.

On the other side of the double doors was an upscale bar-type open area that included two separate lounges with stripper poles in the center. Standard four-person tables and chairs surrounded filled the core area then along the remaining two walls there were high-back privacy booths. “The bar is for those not engaging in the dungeons. No one is allowed to be under the influence of alcohol in those areas, and drugs aren’t permitted on the club premises at all,” Casey explained.

“Makes sense.”

“Come on,” Casey said, gesturing toward another door across the room. “The lockers and engagement spaces are through here.” We emptied our pockets and placed our phones in Casey’s locker. “I know you’re no saint,” Casey smirked, “but I’m sure some of what you’re about to observe will be new to you. If you have any questions, feel free to ask, and I’ll do my best to explain. With your interest in our lifestyle, I’d like to open your eyes to as many aspects as possible. You’ll

leave with a lot to think about and decide what, if anything, you'd be open to pursuing.”

“Thanks. I appreciate you taking the time with me,” I replied.

Casey patted my shoulder, “You are family, David, and I'm here for you. I am not going to lie. Having you here has me selfishly hoping you find what you're looking for. This way of life has more to offer than you know.”

We walked down a corridor, and Casey started pointing out the various spaces and their uses. “This is the largest of our rooms and the Little's space. Are you familiar with what a Little is?”

“A bit, though I don't fully understand how the ages are determined, and I'm not sure this is something I'm interested in. Being a daddy is on my radar but more along the lines of, I don't know how to explain it. Like an adult who needs to be kept in line and taken care of.” We watched the interaction inside the room through the hallway windows. Some of the littles played with blocks while others colored. There were a couple of daddies in there and another was using a large padded table to change his boy's diaper.

“Daddy?” a voice called out. I felt a tug on the side of my pants and looked down. There stood the cutest guy dressed in a onesie with a cartoon dinosaur on the front of it. He had socks on his feet and a binkie pinned to his top. “Will you be my daddy?”



I hadn't the faintest idea how to reply or what that entailed. Was this the norm here? I glanced over at Casey, hoping he knew the answer, and found him smiling wide at us. "Wanna give it a try?" He asked me. "He must be here alone." Casey asked him, "What's your name, boy?"

He blushed and murmured, "Henry."

"Hello Henry, I'm David. I don't know how to be a daddy, but if you show me, I'll try," I replied honestly.

"Kay," Henry said as he took my hand. "Let's go play cars."

Henry led me inside. Cartoons played on a flatscreen tv mounted to the wall with a couple of littles parked in front of it watching them. Henry guided me over to a rug with a cityscape on it, and a bucket of cars sat beside it. He dumped the bucket over and cheered, "Yay!" It was the cutest damn thing, and I couldn't help but laugh at his childish innocence. "It's gonna be so much fun having someone to play with."

My heart dropped, "Do you always play alone, Henry?"

"Sometimes. I don't have a daddy of my own," he said in a tiny voice. I didn't know what to say, I felt sad for him, but maybe he wanted it that way.

"Henry, why don't you show me what to do," I said.

"Silly, Daddy. You go *zoom-zoom* like this," he picked up a bright red car. "Vroom, vroom," he made car noises as he drove it along the roads outlined on the rug. He parked it beside a building and proceeded to pick up another car and do the same. "Like that, Daddy. Your turn."

Having a little wasn't on my radar though hearing Henry call me Daddy did something for me. He handed me a blue car and I proceeded to mimic him. I drove past his parked vehicles and into the center, where it was brown like dirt. I spun the car around, making noises like car tires squealing. Henry's giggles filled the air, so I kept doing it. His laughter was infectious and drew a crowd. Before I knew it, three others had joined us. "Daddy," Henry said, scooting onto my lap. "I thirsty."

I spotted a mini fridge in the corner, "Okay, Henry, what would you like to drink?" I hoped there would be drinks in there for them.

"Juice box peese," Henry said and kissed my cheek. My god, this guy was too much. He slid off my lap to playing with his new friends while I searched for juice boxes. He must've known what the fridge contained because it was filled with an assortment of sugar-filled boxes. Henry didn't specify a flavor, so I snagged an apple one.

"Here you go, Henry," I said, handing it to him.

"Silly daddy, you forgot to do the straw," he shook his head and handed it back.

"Oh, my bad," I slid the tiny straw from the wrapper, poked it through the hole, and gave it back. "All good now."

Henry sucked so hard it drew his cheeks in, "Mmm, tank ew, daddy."

Suddenly feeling like a parent, I mussed his hair, "You're welcome, Henry." Through the windows, I spotted Casey

smiling at us.

Henry tugged at my hand, “Here, daddy, all gone,” he handed me the empty juice box, which I threw away.

“What do you want to do next, Henry?” I asked him.

“Potty, daddy,” Henry replied.

“Um, what?” There was no way I was changing a diaper. “Are you potty trained, Henry?” I asked hoping the answer was yes, and he had on big boy pants.

“Yes, but I too little to go by myself. Daddy has to come with me,” he grabbed my hand and led me toward another door. This place had more doors than Home Depot. “You stay here, daddy. I be right back. Don’t move.”

“I won’t, Henry,” I assured him.

A few minutes later, Henry cried out, “Daddy!”

His nervous yell had me bolting inside, “Are you okay?”

“Can’t get snaps,” he tugged at the flap of his open onesie.

“Oh, um, I’ll try?” I said, picking my brain to remember how to these things worked. It’d been a long time since I’d helped with the twins, who’d been potty trained for years. My comfort level with this situation rapidly depleted as I reached below this full-grown man, trying to get ahold of the snaps without accidentally groping him. Somehow, I managed to secure all three snaps before Henry skipped to the door and returned to the play area. Leaving me alone to wonder what the fuck just happened.

Henry played with the others for a while longer. I stood off to the side, watching how the group interacted. Still unable to wrap my brain around the concept of littles, I couldn't deny how freaking cute this whole scene was.

It wasn't long after Henry yawned and returned to me, "Daddy, I seepy. Time to go nite-nite."

"Okay, Henry. What do you need me to do?" I asked, still feeling out of my element.

"Henry, change and go home. Daddy walk Henry to the room?" he asked. I guessed he meant to the dressing rooms Casey had mentioned before.

"Sure, lead the way," I said, and he reached up and took my hand. I told Casey I'd be right back when we passed him in the hallway.

Henry leaned on his tippy toes and kissed my cheek when we got to the room. "Thank you, Daddy."

"You are very welcome, little man. Do you need me to do anything else for you?" I asked.

"Nope, I'm all good," he said before slipping inside and closing the door.

When I returned to Casey, he smiled so wide my face hurt for him. "What's got you so happy?"

"You, my boy *are* a natural," he stated. "While age-play may not be your scene, you took to it like you'd been doing it forever. Henry's a regular here. He's had a couple of daddies, but they never work out for him. He works ridiculous hours

and doesn't live the lifestyle full time, he uses it to blow off steam after a tough week."

"That's good to know." I felt bad he was here alone. It was fun but not what I was looking for, so I had nothing to offer Henry. Not that I even know what that even is. "But it was fun, like babysitting the twins when they were little," I said.

Casey laughed, "Yeah, that was long ago."

"Dad says you have a boy now," I said.

Casey's face fell, "That didn't work out. He was looking for more of a sugar daddy with an open wallet and relationship, and I was hoping for more of an actual partner."

"Oh, sorry," I apologized.

"No need to be. It wasn't your fault. When the right boy comes along, I'll know. While I spent many years in open relationships, I'm ready to settle down now and build a life with someone who wants to be monogamous. In the meantime, I'll keep being the best Dom I can for my subs. Their pleasure brings me joy," Casey said. "Come on. There are more rooms to see."

We peered into the windows as we walked past so we could watch without disturbing them. They ranged from orgies to couples on various beds fucking around with only one partner to a giant shower with many naked, wet bodies writhing in pleasure. Downstairs, there were four dungeons, three of which were private and booked so that we couldn't go inside. The one in front was an open space where the Dom and sub

could be openly viewed. “This is where I usually am though not upfront on display. My clients book the private rooms,” Casey explained.

A scene had just wrapped up, and Casey gestured to the chairs circling the room. “Come, sit. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

I took a seat beside him, “That is a loaded question. Honestly, for the most part, I’ve been a voyeur here. While there is nothing wrong with that, and at the risk of saying something wrong, here goes.” I drew in a deep breath and let my innermost thoughts flow. “I’m looking for someone who wants me to take control. Know that I am there for them and put their needs first. They’d follow my direction in the bedroom as well as out, and enjoy rough sex.” Jesus, even to my ears, I sounded like a selfish sadist.

“There is more of that out there than you know,” Casey replied. “Rough comes in all shapes, sizes, and levels. Keep an eye on the Cordes online calendar. We offer seminars on Shibari and bondage, sex-positive culture, safe play with asphyxiation, proper use of impact play toys so you don’t injure your partner, and critical aftercare. But we don’t offer scat, water sports, or blood play.”

“Scat?” I questioned, “as in human feces?”

He smiled, “Yes, scat play or coprophilia is real. The list of kinks is endless.”

“You are the Obi-Wan of the BDSM world,” I said.

“Ha-ha, let me walk you out. I’m sure I’ve given you more than enough to think about,” Casey said as we left the dungeon area. The drive home was thankfully quiet. With my mind elsewhere, the relief I felt after I’d arrived home safely went without saying.

Two am and I was wide awake. Out of everything I saw tonight, the biggest takeaway was putting a partner over my knee and reddening their ass as a punishment. My handprint on someone’s behind would be the ultimate tattoo, albeit temporary. Playing with Henry was fun but, in the end, was more like babysitting. Watching live porn was fantastic, but it left me hard as a rock. I’ll be jerking off to the shower scene I witnessed for nights. How will I sit through dinner with my family tomorrow with all these thoughts floating around my head? I’ll never be able to look my mother in the eye. At some point, my mind cleared enough I could fall asleep.

“Chase?” I hollered as I went downstairs the next day.

“What’s up?” his reply came from the kitchen so I headed in that direction.

“Hey, do you want to go to dinner at my parent’s house? Mom’s making enchiladas?” I asked as a bribe. Chase had a hard time turning those down.

“I can’t. We got invited to Rhone and Ely’s for dinner. Damn, I love your mom’s enchiladas. Bring me some home, please?” Chase begged.

“Maybe, if there’s any left,” I teased. Mom always sent leftovers home for Chase, and I’m sure tonight won’t be any

different. “I’ll text Rhone and let him know I won’t be there.”

After lunch, I headed over to my parent’s house. As soon as I walked inside, my sisters swarmed me. “David!” they shouted, nearly knocking me down.

I picked up Ariella and Angela and spun them around, “I miss you both. You need to come over. You haven’t been since we first moved in.”

“You want to subject my baby girls to the rockstar lifestyle,” mom said as she hugged me. “You will not corrupt those innocent angels.

Rolling my eyes, I mumbled, “Innocent, my ass.” Mom smacked my arm, “Ouch! You know I’m kidding.”

“Dinner’s ready. I cook, but I don’t serve, so get a plate and fill it up,” mom announced on her way back to the kitchen, waving a hand towel around. I missed this so much.

We caught up over dinner, and the twins rambled on and on about school and their friends. Each one talking over the other. They mean the world to me, and I love them, but they give me a headache. “Did you guys eat a truckload of sugar before I got here?” I asked.

Dad laughed, “David, they’re always like this. I think they need a weekend with their big brother, don’t you, mom?”

“I do, but he would have to stay here. It sounds to me like mom and dad need to plan a weekend away,” mom teased, though I’m not positive it was a joke.

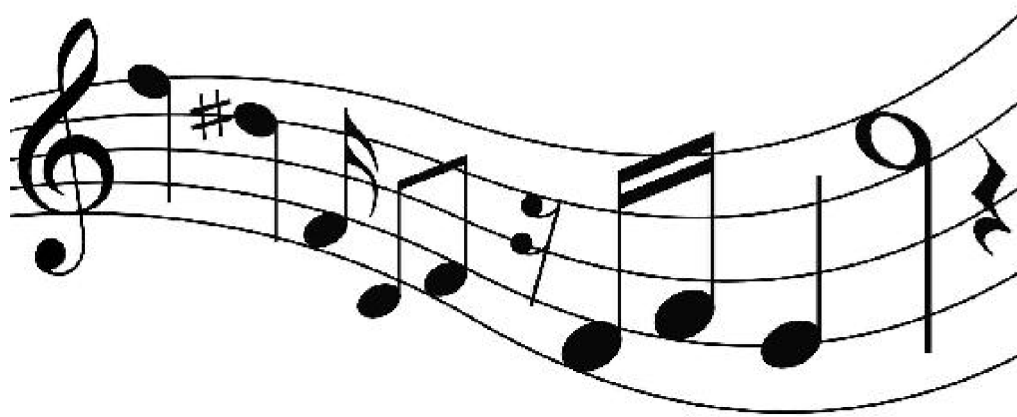


“Better do it quick, we have Rocktoberfest coming up, and Easton has hinted at a couple of other one-off shows,” I said. I’m not sure I have the energy to watch my sisters for an entire weekend, but I’d try for my parents.

“My son, the superstar. I’m so proud of you, David,” mom said, grabbing my face with both hands and kissing my cheeks. “I love you.”

“Thanks, mom. Love you too.”

# CHAPTER SIX



## Jordan

**B**ored. Bored. Bored. So fucking bored.

Going to a club is out of the question after the last incident.

Grindr it is then.

Swipe left, left, left.

Is it possible to get carpal tunnel in your thumbs?

Left, left.

“This is a worthless waste of time,” I tossed my phone aside and opened the freezer. “Looks like Ben & Jerry are tonight’s date. Two men instead of one, yum.” Why do I get like this? I don’t think I’m better than anyone else, yet I’m picky as hell and then feel like shit later when I swipe past so many willing faces. Usually. Who am I kidding? When it comes to getting laid, my standards are non-existent. I need a new hobby, not that fucking is a hobby, well, sort of in a sick, perverted way. Maybe if I focus on the business that will take my mind off my dick. Men only get in the way. From here on out, no more men. Stand back America, Jordan Wright has entered the land of celibacy!

Jesus, I need a fricken therapist.

“Sorry, Ben, sorry, Jerry,” I apologized before taking one last heaping spoonful and shoving the container to the back of the freezer. Out of sight, out of mind—right? I locked up the

house and showered and snuggled into bed, snagging my iPad from the nightstand as I did. How long has it been since I've read? The escape from harsh reality of life was more than needed. Scrolling through, I snagged a few from authors I loved. Locked and loaded, I dove in, reading far past a reasonable hour and until my eyes burned.

“Good morning, Ely,” I said as I passed him in the kitchen area on the way to my office. I hadn't so much as sat down before he stepped inside and closed the door.

“Okay, don't panic. I think you've been body-snatched. Who are you, and what have you done with my friend?” he asked me.

“I should be asking you that. Did you and Rhone binge sci-fi movies last night?” I asked.

“You come through the building whistling with nearly a dance to your step. I'm used to my grumpy, snarky friend. Did you get laid last night?” Ely asked me.

“What? No, but I did get some *me* time in,” I replied.

“What does that even mean? Isn't getting laid your version of me time?” Ely asked.

With a sigh, I sat back wondering how much to share. “It used to be. I'm turning over a new leaf. No more hook-ups.”

Ely full blown doubled over with laughter. “You, *ha-ha-ha*. New leaf, *ha-ha-ha*. No more, *ha-ha-ha*.”

“Real fucking funny, jackass. I'm being serious,” what was so hilarious about this?

“I give it a week,” Ely began. “Like a full-blown, seven-count day week before you’re either ripping the heads off dolls or, I don’t even know what to think let alone visualize what the *or* equate to.” Ely full body shivered.

“Don’t look so disgusted. My *or* will always be more exciting than yours,” my hackles raised along with my voice. How dare he challenge me in such a way. “Some friend you are.”

“Seriously, Jordan. Did you just go there?” Ely asked, shaking his head in disbelief. “What are we twelve?”

“I don’t know, Mr. I refuse to curse, are we?” While my comment was meant to be snide, it wasn’t meant to hurt, and the look on Ely’s face said I’d achieved the second. “I’m sorry, Ely. You’re my only friend, and I need you to be on my side and keep me motivated to be the best Jordan I can be.”

“Someone needs a hug,” he came at me, arms wide open. I rolled my eyes at his silly antics but secretly loved the sweetness that encompassed my dear friend.

“Enough with the mushy stuff,” I said, waving him off. “You’ve got baking to do.” Ely was in his element out there. While he was a phenomenal chef, his passion was baking.

Who knew getting caught up on paperwork made the time fly by? I’d processed payroll, ordered next week’s catering supplies, updated our schedule with upcoming jobs, and reviewed the temp resumes for Rocktoberfest.

Rocktoberfest. It was a month away, and I now dreaded the thing I once looked forward to. Something I was so passionate about but now was afraid of running into a certain someone and the awkwardness associated with that inevitable encounter. I can't let David get to me. I've worked hard to build the businesses and keep them running. *Jordan, you're nearly thirty, and its high time you start acting like the adult you're supposed to be.*

*Knock. Knock.* "Come in," I called out and in walked Ely with a steaming plate of culinary goodness. The scent alone had my stomach grumbling.

"I thought you might be hungry," Ely said, sliding the plate in front of me. "Four cheese quiche and French Onion soup."

I closed my eyes, inhaling the delicious scents. "I will be in a food coma after this. Good thing payroll is done."

Ely laughed as he sat in the chair across from me, "I need to tell you something."

My stomach soured, as did my mood. "Oh no, what broke?"

"Oh, nothing broke. Rhone just called me. Easton wants the band to play a couple of shows in California next month before they head up to Rocktoberfest," Ely released the words rapidly, and they took a moment to sink in.

"Well, we knew this was coming. Of course, not until next May, but we'll make it work. I know this is important to you and Rhone. What will you do with Sadie?" I asked, hoping he was asking anyone but me to watch her. Kids weren't my

thing, not younger ones, at least. Who was I kidding, it was more like not at all.

“Rhone’s mom Katy offered, or Sadie can come with us. I’ll let Sadie decide, something our father never allowed us to do. Rhone’s mom adores her, and Sadie likewise. I think she’d have more fun with Katy than on a bus with a bunch of sweaty rockstars with very foul mouths,” Ely said the last part like little Ms. Prim and Proper.

“No worries, we’ve got this. I’ll handle the catering side with Carmen. Things at the diner almost seem to run better without my interference. Have you put together the menu for Rocktoberfest?” I asked him.

“Yes, I just need to fine-tune it a bit. I’ll have it emailed to you before I go home tonight,” Ely said.

“Thanks, and thanks for lunch. This is fantastic. Is it for the conference banquet at the convention center next week?” I asked, barely breathing between bites—it was that good.

“Yes, what do you think?” Ely nervously wrung his hands together.

“Ask me when the dishes are empty, like in thirty seconds,” I teased. Ely jumped excitedly and giggled. How he held onto his youthful exuberance after what he’d been through amazed me and I envied him. My youth, stolen thanks to an addicted mother and abusive boyfriend, left me tainted for sure, wondering if I had the ability to embrace happiness should it ever come my way. With my luck, I’d be too ignorant to recognize it, so it’d whiz right past me.

When the plate was empty, I walked out to the floor, as we called the open area with the kitchens and placed it in one of the dishwashers. Theo and Carmine were cleaning up while Ely was at the loading area, accepting a delivery. He struggled to close the rollup door after the driver left, and I went to help when a blur of blonde hair whizzed past me.

“Hold on, gorgeous, let me help,” Rhone said, greeting Ely with a kiss.

“It’ll ruin your friendship going after his man,” Carmen whispered beside me and I flinched.

“Trust me. I’m not after his man. He’s nowhere near my type,” I replied.

“Right. Blonde, good-looking, kind, on the verge of being filthy rich. So not anyone’s type,” she retorted.

“Not only is he my best friend’s fiancé, but a rockstar. Something I steer clear of,” I said.

“Lies! All Lies!” She cackled, doing the worst Frau from Austin Power’s impression.

I snapped the towel I had at her, “Don’t you have dishes to do?”

Carmen stuck her tongue out, “All done. I’m going home. Night boss man.”

“Night, have a good one, Carmen.” I loved the camaraderie amongst our team. Working with those from the shelter was great, we’d built our own family. Our backgrounds may differ, our *forced to rebuild at the hands of another* theme was the



same. While I wasn't kicked to the curb when I came out like so many others were, I suffered in other ways. Carmen was one of the few that didn't come from the shelter. She came from the culinary academy Ely graduated from. She liked our business model and that we gave back to the LGBTQIA+ community which she was a part of.

“Hey, Jordan,” Rhone said, his arm slung over Ely's shoulder. The smile on Ely's face said it all.

“Hello, Rhone. What are you two crazy kids up to tonight?” I asked. Rhone was a great guy, and I did like him. He was just as crazy for Ely as Ely was for him. When Ely got shot, Rhone was a mess, and that was when we bonded over our fear of losing that wonderful man. Rhone refused to leave Ely's side when he was in the hospital and how his band and their management team came together to ensure Ely was given top-notch care, even going so far as to cover all his medical expenses, went beyond words. Balking at them for stealing my best chef and business partner wasn't happening after that. I'd make it work no matter the cost to myself or my business. Huh, I guess maybe I am growing up.

“Well, our first anniversary is next month, and I was hoping to get some alone time with this guy,” Rhone tightened his arm around Ely and pressed his lips to the top of his head. I swear to fucking god, I melted a little on the inside. “With the new shows Easton added before Rocktoberfest, we won't have much time to discuss our wedding plans.”

Ely beamed, stood up straighter, and kissed Rhone. “Really?”

“Really, really,” Rhone said, quoting one of Ely’s favorite movies, Shrek. “Next year will be busy with the new CD hitting in April and then the tour in May. I’m thankful you’ll be there with us, but it will be a whirlwind, so I thought March would be good. Weather is ideal for a spring Vegas wedding.”

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygod Rhone!” Ely squealed so loud it echoed around us. “Yes! A million yesses over!” They shared an intimate moment I felt unworthy of witnessing. “Jordan, will you be my best man?”

Tears welled in my eyes. I sniffled to get the errant emotions controlled. “Psh, you know I’m the only man for that job.” Joking was the way I dealt with feelings.

Another squeal was the only warning I got before Ely landed in my arms, “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me, love. You know I’d do anything for you.” And I meant it. Ely was one of, well, one with Lyle gone that I would say those words to and mean them. “All right, you two crazy kids better go home. You have a wedding to plan. Of course, you already have the caterers,” I winked.

With the two lovebirds gone, I finished shutting everything down, then glanced around the space before shutting off the lights and arming the alarm system. The building was as empty as my life was. Now, if that wasn’t depressing as fuck thought, nothing was.

I popped into the diner on the way home to check in, and the dinner rush had the place filled and a handful waiting for a table to become available. Not wanting to disrupt the flow, I left without being noticed. Relief that my businesses were running as smoothly as they should nearly had me pinching myself to ensure I was still alive and breathing. But even this knowledge left me feeling that life was passing me by and I was invisible to everyone, including myself.

The short drive home I was lost in thought. I drug my feet through the front door and set the keys in the dish on the entry table as I did every night. From there, it was a mindless repeat of the night before, and hundreds of other nights like it. Shower, ice cream, TV, bed. That was what my sad, lonely existence amounted to.

No wonder I was so fucking depressed.

When did I forget how to live? Even the last failed trip to the club had been weeks in the making. Every day was the same—wake up, go to work, go home, stuff my face full of sweet dairy products—then go to bed to do it again the next day.

Maybe a dog would help? *No, Jordan, remember the failed attempt with Mr. Fish—the goldfish you insisted you'd take care of and then a week later found him floating in the murky water in his bowl? The trip to fishy Valhalla you sent him on, flushing him away.* Okay, so no dog. A cat could work. You can get them a feeder and box and leave them alone for a couple of days. *True, but then you'd come home to your*

*belongings smelling of cat urine because you weren't home to give them the attention they'd demand for those five minutes they'd allow it.*

Okay, no pets.

A hobby?

I could do a puzzle. I glanced over to the bookshelves. My eyes darted right to the tattered box, remnants of the last 1500-piece one I'd tried, then got pissed when the pieces looked the same and launched it across the room. Taking up painting was out of the question since I possessed zero artistic abilities, let alone any imagination to execute something worthy of the cost of acrylics and canvas.

Wow, I didn't think my sense of self-worth could drop any less, and here I was, proven wrong once again.

A talentless human is what I am. Had Lyle not gifted me this house and business, I'd probably still be flipping burgers at the diner or worse, a fast-food joint. Would I ever feel worthy of anyone, including myself? This reality check was a kick in the teeth and revealed far too much. Am I led by a fear of failure? Is that what's holding me back from trying new things? Scared of another failing relationship, if that's what you can even call what I had with Tony. After that, I shut myself off and refused to try again. Getting hurt fucking sucks and until now I didn't see how deep that fear ran.

This downward spiral can't be fixed with Ben or Jerry...

Restlessness was a compliment compared to the lack of sleep I'd that came. I glared at the alarm clock on the nightstand, watching the hours tick away. Why hadn't I gotten rid of it years ago? Why hadn't I taken hold of this home and made it my own? The need to rebuild included that which surrounded me. I need to make this house a home. Put my personal touch on it, so when I come home after a long day it's somewhere that comforts me. But where do I begin? With that fucking alarm clock that's like a spotlight in the room all night long, that's for damn sure.

I devised a game plan and this weekend would be dedicated to going room by room and ridding it of everything that wasn't me. Then, new carpet, or better yet— no carpet. Tile? Wood? You know what, I've only paid for food and utilities all these years, there's enough in my account to get new flooring and paint. And now the wheels were turning.

"You're here early," Ely's voice called out, startling me.

I wiped the drool from my face, having fallen asleep atop the stack of invoices strewn across my desk. "Sorry, I didn't sleep well."

"Here," Ely thrust a cup of coffee at me.

"You are a godsend, my friend." The scent alone rejuvenated me. "How was your night?"

"I was about to ask you the same. Did you sleep here?" Ely asked, eyeing me curiously.

“No. I didn’t sleep well last night, so I came in early to finish up the invoices. It looks like I failed at that, too,” I glanced down at the papers, a giant wet spot on the top.

“Jordan, I’m worried about you. All you do is work. That’s not healthy for anyone,” Ely said, matching the internal dilemma I was wading through.

“Meh, don’t worry about me. Guess what? I decided to remodel my house. I’ll ask the contractor we used here if they do residential work. I’m pretty excited,” I did my best to play it off and shift the focus off the negative.

“Oh, that will be fun. Rhone and I picked a date, March fifteenth. Now we just need to find a venue. I want to keep it small, besides I only have three people to invite. I hope my mom can come,” he whispered.

“The Ides of March are upon you,” I said.

“Yes, thank you, Caesar. Ha, we should have it at Caesar’s. Wouldn’t that be funny?” Ely grinned.

“Funny? Or Corny? You’d be walking a fine line with that one, my friend,” I teased. “If you’re gonna keep it small, why not have it at your house?”

“I don’t know,” Ely said, fiddling nervously with the buttons on his chef coat. “You guys did my graduation party there, and I certainly don’t want to find you on your knees in my laundry room again.”

“You’re never gonna let me live that down, are you?” I asked.

“Not until it’s erased from my mind.”

“Great.” Another of life’s big mistakes I’ll never outrun.

“Where’s a good place for twenty-five or thirty people to have a wedding?” Ely asked.

“Hmm, let me think. We’ve catered to smaller venues before. Caesar’s does have a couple of rooms in different sizes. Your earlier joke may be the right answer for you guys,” I pointed out.

“Just seems too fancy for us,” Ely said.

“Do you know what you’re wearing?” I asked.

His eyes lit up, “Yes, I found this outfit that is a cross between pants and a dress. White pants and a long sleeve lace top with a lace train that trails from the neckline down then behind me about four feet. It’s gorgeous. I want to pull my hair up and have just a few curly strands hanging to frame my face.”

“That sounds amazing, Ely. But you’d look gorgeous in nothing more than a burlap sack. I swear, you can make any outfit fantastic,” I admitted as Ely blushed.

“Thank you,” Ely replied.

“Ding, ding, ding, ding,” I said, retrieving the card from my desk drawer and handing it to Ely. “Remember Lakeside’s Grand Garden venue? We catered a wedding there a couple of years ago. Outdoor with a view of the lake, which March will be perfect for. Great inside area for dinner afterward. You can get married outside right as the sun sets.”

“Oh my god! You’re a genius, Jordan. That place is perfect,” he hugged the card to his chest.

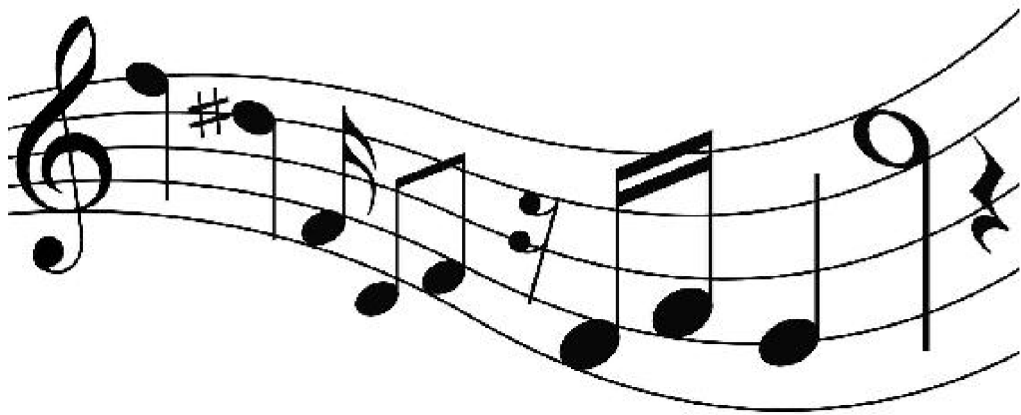
“Better call them now because they book up fast. You might need to play the *my boyfriend is a rockstar* card, and if that doesn’t help, Easton seems to have an uncanny knack for getting what he wants, so I’d use him as a lifeline,” I said, hoping my dear friend would get the wedding of his dreams. Ely hopped up and skipped out of my office toward his own.

Mentally patting my back for a job well done and wide awake, I returned to the invoices. The accounting system was set up to send them automatically to our clients once I closed the jobs out. I hadn’t realized I’d not billed Ryder and Max for their wedding reception. Not that I didn’t appreciate the free porn show, courtesy of Jaxson and Shep via an open second-floor window, but it wasn’t worth the twenty-five thousand they owed for food, beverages, the mountains of alcohol that crazy lot consumed, and the servers we provided. You know, there’s never a dull moment when in the company of these bands. I’ll never know how Easton managed to keep his cool. That man deserved an award, bonus, or an island of his own so he could escape the insanity.

With Rocktoberfest a month away, I reached out to the vendors I used last time and got those orders placed. They added more bands to the docket this year, so I’d need to add that head count though I did hear they also added a small outdoor eating area with a few food trucks behind the gates. Hopefully, that will help catering-wise.



# CHAPTER SEVEN



## David

I went to Cordes a couple more times and even played with Henry again, but nothing I saw called out to me. After talking with Casey and the others in the chat groups, I realized what I desired didn't need a label. When the partner I'm meant to be with comes along, we'll do what suits our relationship. We don't need to fit into anyone's preconceived boxes, and my age should never be a factor. It's my abilities and willingness to care for whomever I share my life with that should be taken into consideration.

"We need to round up the guys," Chase said, pulling me from my thoughts.

"What's up?" I asked.

Chase held up a finger while typing on his phone with the other hand, "Hold that thought for a couple of minutes."

Not long after, Rhone and Seltzer walked in, "Hey, what's up?"

Chase dove right in. "I know we haven't had much time at home since we did those summer festivals right after Ryder and Max's wedding, but as Easton mentioned before he set us up with a couple shows in Cali before Rocktoberfest. I just emailed you guys the schedule." At once, our phone chimes went off, all four faces locked on the screens reading.

"Social and Maiden are playing back-to-back shows at Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles with Embrace as their

opening act. The other show we're playing at Oxbow River Stage in Napa is with Blinding Light in a smaller venue. Social and Maiden won't be there, just us," Chase explained.

"Blinding Light? I thought they were without a lead guitarist?" Seltzer asked.

"Technically, their lead singer Easy plays guitar too though from what I've heard, they've been auditioning for a new guitarist. Maybe they already have one, and that's why they've scheduled this show. Either way, they asked if we'd play too. Easton asked me, and since we don't have anything going on, I answered for the group," Chase's eyes scanned the room for complaints though he wouldn't get any. We chose him as our front man for more than the fact that he was our singer. "All right, we head out next week. Ely and Rhone will share a bus along with Snipe."

Seltzer and I flipped Rhone off, and he laughed. "Don't be jelly, boys. At least you get to enjoy decent food."

"Word," Seltzer and I called out. "Pinch, poke, you owe me a coke," we again said together. "Jinx. Double jinx."

"I swear, you two are giant children," Chase groaned, shaking his head at our ridiculous antics. "Let's call it a tie and move on."

"I take it the three of us plus Sikes will be crammed in the other bus?" Seltzer asked.

"Yes. Maiden, Social, Easton, and their massive entourage will meet us at the arena. Ely's credentials for the kitchen and

the use of their catering staff which he'll oversee for our meal prep will be waiting when we get there. Social and Maiden will meet us at Black Rock City in Nevada for Rocktoberfest after we finish the last Cali show," Chase continued.

From that moment forward, we were sucked into a whirlwind of running errands, band practices, and equipment checks. Once we gave the okay to the road crew, they loaded everything up in the rental truck Easton got and hit the road. Ely and Rhone left the same day, then Seltzer, Chase, Sikes, and I left the next morning L.A. bound in our bus. Now that the guys in Maiden and Social had significant others, each couple had their own bus. Kinda cool when you think about it, like a goal to work toward. Hell, Rhone even got the same treatment now.

"Dude," Seltzer said, claiming a top bunk by tossing his bag on it. "Feels good to be back on the road, even if it's for a short time. I'm not knocking our downtime, but I was bored as fuck."

"I hear you." I spent most of mine reflecting on what was bothering me and with whom I wanted to be bothered by. Being young didn't mean you should be stupid, but still. I'm sure I'll partake in a groupie or two while we're out, though I know the empty feeling will still come in the morning.

"Gents," Chase said, tossing his bag on the remaining top bunk. I'd already claimed a lower one. "Grab your notebooks and meet me up front." Without so much as a second glance,

he was off. The bus was in motion, and Sikes was talking to the driver while Chase set up shop on the large front table.

As I reached for my notebook, I recalled the one I'd just finished and wondered what they'd think. "Okay, guys," I said, sitting beside Seltzer. "I have a finished song, but it comes with a disclaimer. You're going to read too much into this, and I need you not to. It's not directed at anyone in particular, and nothing triggered it more than a passing comment I'd heard." I tore the pages from the binder and tossed them on the table. "Have at it." As they read, my anxiety shot through the roof. "I picture this one being pretty hard-core with a grunge edge. Lots of screams, anger, and cue in deep bass. This one is going to be a grinder." At his words, the bass inclusion came together inside my head.

"What's the title?" Chase asked.

"Do you know what's going on? Sounds lame when I say it out loud," I replied. I probably should've thought harder about the name.

"I like it," Seltzer says, "and I can hear the angry words, totally metal. What about something more along the lines of Dignity and Grace?"

I thought about it for a moment, "Not bad, kind of, I don't know, nice?"

"What about something simple like trash?" Chase suggested.

The three of us stared blankly at each other and smiled. “Yeah, I like it. Trash it is,” I said, and Seltzer nodded in agreement. After a couple of wording tweaks, the lyrics were complete.

I’ve got nothing left to give

You’re up

You’re down

You’re all the fuck around

Your broken promises have beaten me down

left me black and blue

An empty shell of the man I’d once been

Cast aside like trash

What the hell does that say about you?

Chorus:

Do you know what’s going on?

Do us both a favor and walk away

Show some dignity, show some grace

How can you be such a fucking disgrace

You’re nothing more than trash

There’s no room in my life for you

Treat others like shit is how you operate

Trust me when I say your day will come

We’ll all be standing in line

Waiting to watch you crash  
Don't be concerned with me  
Acting as though you care  
We all know that's just for show  
So take your shit and leave  
I'll show you the way to the door

Chorus:

Do you know what's going on?  
Do us both a favor and walk away  
Show some dignity, show some grace  
How can you be such a fucking disgrace  
You're nothing more than trash  
There's no room in my life for you  
What's left of my sanity  
Has long since passed  
You're no good for me  
You're no good for you  
The dump is where you belong  
(Chant) In the dump  
Taking out the trash  
(Chant) To the dump  
(Screams) Taking out the fucking trash

“Well, that killed thirty minutes of our five-plus hour ride,” Seltzer said. “I’m gonna grab my acoustic and work on the melody.” He hopped up, and I followed behind him, grabbing mine. I couldn’t think of a single guitarist who didn’t take an acoustic on the road with them. Granted, I was the token bassist, but I traveled with my girl. Though in typical Embrace fashion, one note triggered another, and before we could stop ourselves, Seltzer and I were playing *Metallica’s Fade to Black*, and Chase was knocking the lyrics out.

“Now that we’re warmed up, let’s put down our track,” Chase said, and we got to work. Time flew by and when I glanced out we’d pulled up to the arena. I loved how quickly we got lost when working on new music.

“Guys,” Rhone yelled, jogging up as we exited the bus.

“You act like you haven’t seen us in weeks when it’s been less than twenty-four hours,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Bite me, jackass. Just for that, you don’t get any of the fab lunch Ely whipped up for us,” Rhone said.

Someone tugged on my hair. I turned and ran face first into Benny, one of Mickey’s from Social Sinners men. “I want to braid your hair sooo badly,” Benny said.

“Um, thanks?” I questioned, having never been asked that by another adult. My sister’s used to braid it but they were the only ones.

“Come on, little man,” Diamond, the drummer for Social Sinners, said, scooping Benny up and under his arm. “Enough



of that.”

“No, Boo, he has great hair. Can I play with it? Please?” Benny whined like a two-year-old. I wasn’t sure what to say or do as I watched this unfold. Benny was a goof, and I knew that, but maybe he was getting more comfortable with us. I never heard him ask Joey or any of the guys from Maiden who had long hair, so why me?

“You good with that, David?” Diamond asked.

“Maybe after lunch?” I replied. Benny clapped his hands together. Diamond shook his head and sat Benny down.

We entered the arena through the player’s entrance to the sounds of Maiden Voyage’s soundcheck. Man, fucking Derek Masters could wail. That guy held a note longer than any singer on the scene. Ryder Hampton, their lead guitarist, shredded it on their multi-award-winning song Her Embrace. That was his go-to piece for warmups. No matter how often I heard him play it, it was never enough. “Even in sound check, they rock the shit,” I said aloud. The only other person I knew that could flawlessly play that song was Stoli, the lead guitarist for Social Sinners. The history between those two bands would blow your mind.

“I want to be Ryder when I grow up,” Seltzer said, and the group laughed. “I feel like we’re in the presence of metal royalty.”

“That you are,” Stoli said, walking up to us.

“Do not get him started,” Joey, lead singer for Social and Stoli’s husband said. Diamond groaned.

“This way,” Rhone told us, steering us into a set of double doors that opened into one of the most delicious scents I’d smelled in a long time.

“Easton,” Stoli said, “hiring Ely to manage our meals was freaking genius.” Ely, who’d just walked up, blushed. Seeing him stand beside Joey and Stoli, barely reaching their chests, was funny.

“My man is amazing,” Rhone said, pressing his lips to Ely’s temple. Ely was a beautiful soul, inside and out. Hats off to him for being true to who he was. Flawless make-up, his hair pulled into a tight bun atop his head. Even in work mode, he was perfectly primed, and not one of us questioned why. Not only was it not for us to ask, but who were we to decide how anyone should be? This group accepted everyone in it and welcomed our differences. Now, if we stepped a toe out of line, we’d be bitch slapped by everyone in front of us. Disappointing your heroes, in my opinion, would be a fate worse than death and these guys were just that—our heroes.

“What culinary magic are you gracing us with today?” I asked Ely.

“Lasagna, salad, and garlic bread. Dig in, gentlemen,” Ely waved his hands toward the buffet tables. Hungry rockstars don’t need to be told twice when it comes to food.

Derek, Jaxson, Ryder, Shadow, and their men came in a few minutes later. Once we were all seated, Rhone stood, clapping

his hands to get everyone's attention. A red-faced Ely stood beside him. "Now that our friends are together in one place, Ely and I have an announcement to make. We're getting married on March fifteenth, and you're all invited!" Cheers erupted. Rhone had already shared this with Chase, Seltzer, and me, the other night via text after they'd picked the date. Rhone couldn't choose between the three of us, so he asked us to be his groomsmen, which we immediately agreed to. Everyone in the room was on their feet, hugging Ely and Rhone before returning to their meals.

The Social guys were done first, having to do their soundcheck next, then we were last. Security led us to the dressing room we'd be sharing with Social. Maiden had their own and had won it in a coin toss with Social. The way our bands settled scores was hands down hilarious. We got along like true brothers, even without the bloodline. With an hour left until showtime, the gates opened, and could hear thousands of stomping feet heading to their seats.

"Time to go, kids!" Stoli called out. Joey walked by, smacking the back of his head. "Ouch, babe. I was kidding. Knock 'em dead," Stoli told us, trailing behind Joey.

"Joey has his hands full with that one," Seltzer said, hooking a thumb toward the dressing rooms. "All right, boys, let's give 'em all we've got."

Each time we took the stage, it was like the first time all over again. We've probably played fifty shows since we were signed, not counting the dive bars we played before. The

nervous butterflies that fluttered inside us never changed. Off stage, Chase was somewhat quiet and reserved. Onstage, he was the ideal front man riling up the crowd and getting them involved. They were putty in his hands and that was a beautiful thing to watch. Chase didn't date much. I don't remember him ever having a boyfriend or a girlfriend. Huh, none of my business, thought I found it odd that thought chose now to pop into my head.

With the curtain still drawn, we took our places. Sliding my bass across my chest always gave me a heavy dose of *let's kick some fucking ass*. As Rhone pounded out the intro to Reason to Live, nervous the nervous jitters left. Seltzer followed, striking the riff right on queue. The curtain dropped, and the crowd roared as Chase broke into the opening line. *You walked into the room* then it was my turn, the magic flowed+ through my veins like a high no drug could ever give me.

“Good evening, Los Angeles!” Chase screamed into the mic at the end of the song. “You are a bunch of crazy mother fuckers tonight!” That had their screams thunderous applause killing the decibel level. “I'm happy to announce that not only did both nights at Crypto.com arena sell out, but they sold out in record time!” Insanity broke loose in the forms of elevated screams. “All right, all right, calm the fuck down,” Chase teased them, turning their screams to laughter. “I'd like to hear all you mother fuckers out there sing along to our next song. It's called, Forsaken.” Fucking hell, their screams could be heard throughout the great Los Angeles area and didn't lessen through the rest of our set. After the last song, the four of us

took center stage. Arm in arm with my band brothers, we took a bow and threw out Embrace the Fear logo guitar pics and drumsticks then left the stage.

“Excellent show, guys,” Derek, the lead singer of Maiden Voyage, said as we came off. “Thanks for warming them up for us.” Like they needed help with that. This shit was about to get real. The crowd was locked and loaded and had no idea Maiden was on next. Tomorrow night Social would go on after us but the lineup hadn’t been announced so they were in for a treat.

“Wanna stay and watch them?” Chase asked us.

“Hell yeah,” I said grabbing a towel and a bottle of water and set up shop along the sideline to enjoy the show.

The screams and crowd interaction with both Social and Maiden was always crazy. Someday I hoped we achieved that level of worship from our fans. Hell, my band brothers and I worshiped them ourselves. They were indeed rock gods. And off stage, they were some of the best people we knew, spouses included. With the first night over, we hit the showers.

When I got out, Benny was waiting. “Can I do it now?” he asked, batting those long lashes at me.

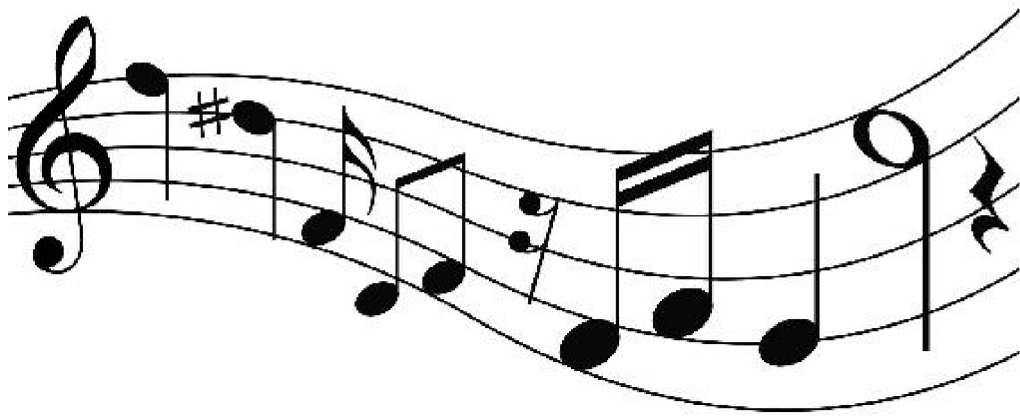
“Why not,” I handed him my brush, sat on the couch, and let him go to town. River, Benny and Mickey’s other partner sat there and watched.

“Once Benny likes you, there’s no getting rid of him,” River teased.

“It’s all good,” the gentle brushing felt terrific, as in a put you-to-sleep way. His hands guided the brush through my hair, occasionally reaching out to run his fingers through it. I was nearly asleep when he finished braiding. Then the knock came telling us to load up. We were carted off to the hotel for the night. After we dropped off our bags security led us to the restaurant on the first floor that they closed to the public for us. You’d think after having lasagna earlier we’d be full but sweating our ass off on stage killed the carbs. We ate our fill and with our stomachs full, none of us were thinking about finding any bed buddies tonight. We crashed hard, not waking until the call came that the SUVs were here to take us back to the arena for show number two.

Both nights were equally as loud and all three bands rocked the shit out of the arena. But it was time to bid our band brothers in Maiden and Social goodbye until we’d see them again at Rocktoberfest. We headed home for a couple of days before our next show on Friday in Napa Valley at Oxbow River Stage.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



## Jordan

Who knew the plumbing in a fifty-year-old house could fail? Not my dumbass, that's for sure. Guess the leak under the sink I'd thrown a bucket under and forgot about who knows how long ago should've been my first clue. Now, a fifty-thousand-dollar home improvement loan later, my house was not only getting new flooring and paint, but cabinets, plumbing, and a full-blown kitchen and bathroom remodel. Oh, did I forget to mention that I only have one restroom? This will be so much fun. Not! Yay me...

Fuck. My. Life.

And I planned to stay at the house through the renovations. I probably could've stayed at Rhone and Ely's, but I didn't want to burden them by asking. Plus, David's house too damn close for my liking, even though I knew he was out of town with them.

At my request, the construction company assigned the same superintendent to oversee my renovations as they had when we gutted the warehouse. I was thankful for that and comfortable enough to provide them with a key. I left for the office each morning before the crew arrived, and thanks to Ely being gone, I had enough work to keep me busy long after they went home every afternoon. The remodel would take six to eight weeks though I was hoping they'd be done by the time I got home from Black Rock.



No matter what context that word is said in, my mind turns it into being all about him. It will be hard to avoid David there, but if I stuck to the kitchen tents it could be possible. No, that wasn't fair to Ely. My job was to oversee the catering staff, and Ely's was the chefs and sous chefs. Being an adult was so hard sometimes.

"Good morning, Carmen," I said when she came in. "We need to start inventorying the Rocktoberfest supplies. The catering tents and equipment are being delivered directly to the site. I've booked the moving and refrigerated trucks, but we have one less driver with Ely meeting us there this year."

"Gotcha, boss, on it," she said walking toward the staging area. We'd placed the deliveries there for this event as they arrived, but needed to re-palletize them for easy loading. This was our biggest event of the year, two years in a row now, and I didn't want to lose the contract due to any mishaps that could've been avoided. Carmen spun around to face me, "My girlfriend Trish could probably drive one and help while we're there. You've met her before."

"Yes, I have. Would she be able to get off work? I'll pay her for her time. We'll be there five days total, driving back on day six. She'd have to sleep in the bunk trailers with the staff," I said, hoping to have another spot filled.

"Let me give her a call, but I'm sure she can. Her boss is pretty cool," Carmen headed out, phone in hand.

Setting up payroll for the temps I'd hired for the festival took up most of the morning. Before long, Carmen was setting

a plate down in front of me. “Thank you, but you don’t need to feed me.”

“Yes, I do,” she grinned. “I have strict instructions to follow that Ely left. First is to ensure Jordan eats because he tends to forget.”

I should’ve seen that coming. “That man.” But his thoughtfulness warmed me though I’d never admit that to anyone.

“That man is a true friend and adores you. By the way, Trish got the time off. I’ll take home an application and W-2 for her to complete so you can get her set up in the system.”

“Thank you both a thousand times over. I owe you big time,” and I meant it. I wouldn’t have to keep an eye on the two of them. They’d work perfectly fine without supervision. Now, to verify that the direct-to-site units will be delivered on time and touch base with the supplier we used last year to restock while onsite. Never hurt to double and triple-check plans, especially not with this much at stake. Our sole focus right now was on Rocktoberfest where it needed it to be. Before long, it would be over, and life would be back to normal.

If only it were that simple.

It was after nine pm when I got home. I walked into the bathroom to shower only to be reminded that the house was under construction, easy to forget when away for fourteen hours a day. While the crew at least left the toilet in place for me to use, the shower was nonexistent, considering it was no

longer there, and neither was the tub for that matter. “Ugh, guess I’m showering at work in the morning.” Glad I’d had the forethought to add showers to the warehouse restrooms when we renovated it. You never knew when you’d wind up wearing some exploding concoction. Too tired to deal with much of anything, I stripped down and went straight to bed. Seriously, I have got to be the most boring human on the planet. When Ely’s voice popped into my head, I smiled. “Now that’s just silly, Jordan. You don’t even know everyone on the planet.”

About a week later, the bathroom was back to functioning, but the kitchen was out of commission for the next two weeks. I rarely cooked at home though having the refrigerator housed in the living room wasn’t much fun. The bathroom turned out stunning and the tile laid there was being laid throughout the house with decorative borders used to separate each space at the entryways. Initially, I had a hard time choosing between wood flooring and tile. Chris, the super, suggested a wood look tile in a gray wash because the walls would be two different shades of gray with white molding and ceilings. Most would be a light gray, while an accent wall in each room would be a shade darker. I’d still need to order furniture, but I’d worry about that later. Little by little, my vision peeked through, but more than anything, I’d be happy when the renovations were done. And the one-inch layer of drywall dust throughout the house disappeared.

Maybe after this was complete, I’d invite Ely and Rhone over for a dinner party, my first one. Wow, grown-up Jordan

might not be so bad after all. Too bad I didn't have many friends or a plus one so I wouldn't be solo Jordan.

I've come a long way from the homeless kid who learned a hard lesson in how to survive, but was I even capable of achieving happiness? It's good that I decided to take some time to work on myself. It seems my self-esteem needed to be dealt with first. It's hard to remove the negative and find the positives even though I knew I had it good now. My home was paid for, and I got approved for the loan on the first try. The business is booming, and I've busted my ass to keep it out of the red, and continuously growing.

Maybe the big 3-0 lurking around the corner is what's dragging me down. When do guys have a mid-life crisis? Is that the thirties or forties? Gee, I had so much to look forward to. Get over one hump, and in comes another.

The next few days were masked in a whirlwind of deliveries and finally, loading the trucks. The temp crew I hired came in for a team meeting the day before we headed to the desert. I'd put together briefing handouts, giving them each one as they arrived.

"Hello," I addressed the group. "Thank you for joining us on this adventure. The paper in your hand is a list of bullet points we'll be focused on for Rocktoberfest. Ely, our head chef, will meet us there. For those of you assigned to his team, you'll meet him at the food prep station at five a.m. Thursday morning. I've provided you with a layout of the catering tent area. I've also noted Ely's, mine, and Carmen's cell phone

numbers on there. Cell phone towers are in the area so we will have service. I'm not going to lie and say this endeavor will be without incident because it won't be. Never a dull moment with rockstars around." They laughed. "Please, I know it's easier said than done but try not to fanboy or fangirl out. It's hot, they'll be tired, and many will likely be drunk thanks to the free alcohol. It's in our best interest to go unnoticed and fall under their radar as much as possible. I've received signed non-disclosure forms from you, so no social media posts, pictures, or speaking about anything you see, or you can and will most likely be sued. Probably by the rockstar on the receiving end of a less than stellar post. Do I make myself clear?" I asked, scanning each set of eyes facing me. As one, the group said yes. "Good. We need to remain professional no matter what we're dealing with. You can breathe freely when we're among teammates in our tents where the performers are not allowed. Well, except for Rhone, Ely's fiancé." A couple of brows raised, "Rhone is the drummer for Embrace the Fear. Ely is the head chef for their management company and co-owner of ours. Outside of our tents, you are Switzerland. Remain neutral and steer clear of the drama."

"Yes, sir," they collectively replied.

"Okay, as much as it pains me to say this," I smirked. "Everyone meet here at five am tomorrow morning so we can head out. For now, let's load the non-perishables and lock the trucks. Then they'll be ready to roll bright and early." I was taking a team of thirty out with me. The temp employees I hired locally in Black Rock would meet us Wednesday

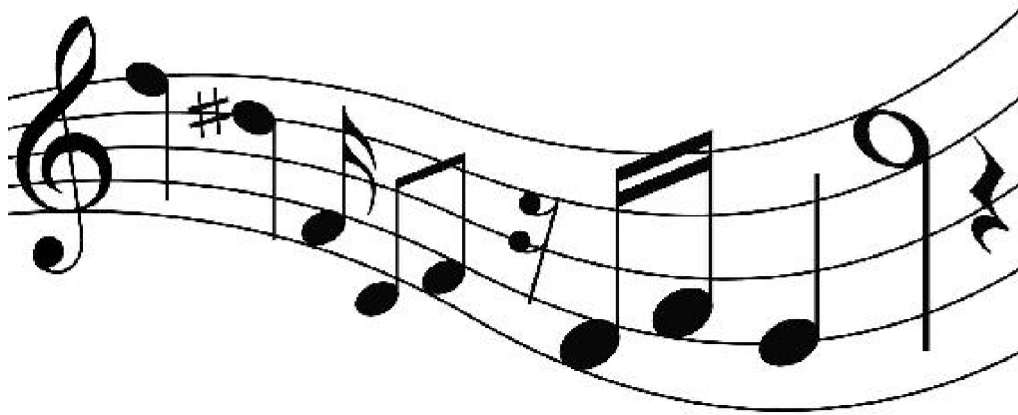
afternoon to unload and get organized. That day was set aside because the bands arrived on Thursday and Friday. The gates would open to the fans Friday at ten a.m. therefore, the concession stands would need to be fully operational and staffed, which was another aspect my team oversaw.

Hopefully, year two would go off as well as year one did.

We had the trucks locked and loaded in under three hours, safely parked behind our security fencing. Gas tanks were full and ready to roll for the morning. I sent the rest of the team home while I took care of gathering the paperwork for an easy exchange to receive our all-access passes for the team when we got to the security checkpoint tomorrow. With the folder in hand, I headed home to pack my bags.

Let the fun begin.

# CHAPTER NINE



## David

*Wow.*

The view of the endless rows of grapevines was beyond words. Napa Valley was its own little oasis tucked away from its sister cities in California. Breathtaking and seemingly untainted by humans. It made me wish I drank wine so that I could partake in some of the tastings offered here, staring out at the fields while enjoying a glass.

“The Oxbow River Stage is in the center of town,” Seltzer said, staring at his phone screen. “This place is kinda pretty.”

“It really is,” Chase said, gazing out the window.

Like Rocktoberfest, the buses were directed to a fenced area beside the stage to park. I could see why Social Sinners and Maiden hadn’t been asked to participate. There wasn’t anywhere their security team could keep the guys out of the public eye. Still, I was excited that we were invited to play here. It reminded me of a smaller version of the Isleta Amphitheater in Albuquerque.

“Stay here while I find out where they want us to park,” Sikes said, hopping off the bus. “Okay,” he said jumping back on a few minutes later, showing the lot map to the driver.

“We’re halfway between home and Black Rock. I wish we could spend the week here before Rocktoberfest,” I said.

“Want me to call Easton and see if he can hook us up?” Chase asked, appearing as excited at the prospect as I was.



“I’m in,” Seltzer said.

“Ditto.” Count me in for a few days of R&R, incredible scenery, and no traffic.

“Hey Easton, how’s it going?” Chase asked him when he answered. “Good, good. Yeah. We just got here. The guys and I were wondering what it would take to spend a few days in Napa and then head straight to Black Rock from here. Okay, cool. Let me know,” Chase said before hanging up. “He’s going to call around. The concert at Oxbow sold out most of the hotels in the area, but he has an idea where to put us.”

My phone rang right as Ely and Rhone came aboard, “Hey man, how’s it going?” I answered the call.

“R & R in Napa is what I’m hearing,” Mickey, Social Sinners bass player, said. “What’s up with that?”

Mickey was great, so down to earth. He may be a millionaire, but he wasn’t a prick that lorded it over you. “Pulled into the parking lot at Oxbow and were like, what the hell are we going home for after this? It’s halfway between Vegas and Black Rock so let’s see if we can camp here until it’s time to head to the desert.”

“Makes total sense,” Mickey said. I heard another voice in the background.

“Is that Benny?” I asked.

“Yeah,” *smack* followed by a squeal. “Got two little naked asses running around. Hard to focus.”

“Ha-ha, I can understand that. So, what’re you doing calling me with that kind of a distraction around?” I asked.

“Just over a D & E’s house, using their playroom. Got finished doing a scene when E’s phone rang. He told us what was up, and I thought I’d give you a ring before diving into round two,” Mickey replied. That man had more stamina than I did. Diamond and Easton’s playroom had become infamous between the three bands. Chase, Seltzer, Rhone, and I hadn’t partaken in the offer to use it...*yet*. But Mickey and his boys were frequent visitors. There was no sharing of partners going on, but both couples enjoyed watching the other, which worked well for them. “Well, better let you go. It looks like E worked some magic for you, and I’ve got a cute little ass getting waved in my face.”

“Dude, better get on that. Talk later,” I said then hung up. Mickey has become a great friend and mentor. Anytime I get stuck on a note or have any questions, he’s always there. “Rhone and Ely in for the Napa vacation?” I asked Chase.

“Rhone is, but Ely’s calling Jordan to check in first before committing,” Chase replied. Just at the mere mention of that name, the face appeared in my mind’s eye. I’d worked so hard to shove all thoughts of Jordan into the vault, yet a simple mention released him.

No man could be the opposite of what I need more than Jordan.

So why can’t I shake him?

“You all right over there?” Rhone asked.

“Yeah, just got some shit on my mind,” it wasn’t a lie. I didn’t know or want to approach the subject with my band brothers. Especially not Rhone, he’s too close to the issue, and I don’t want him in the middle of this mental mess. Though based on the look he just gave me, he already guessed.

“Wanna talk about it?” Rhone asked.

“Nah, man, I’m good, but thanks for asking.” Hopefully, that shut it down. He gave the nod but his questioning gaze lingered until Ely neared.

“We’re good for whatever. Will be a nice break,” Ely said, sliding onto Rhone’s lap.

Chase’s phone rang, “Hey E,” he answered. “Yeah, we’re pretty easy, so that should work. Will you send the guards all the info? Dude, you rock. Thanks again.” Chase hung up. “Tonight and tomorrow night, we’re sleeping in the buses here, which we were already doing. Starting Sunday until we head to Rocktoberfest on Thursday morning, he booked us at a local winery that’s a bed and breakfast. They have room to park the buses, and Easton rented the place out, so it will only be us, our guards, and the drivers. Oh, and they have a pool and a jacuzzi too.”

“Fucking sweet,” Seltzer said.

“Do we have to share a bathroom? Is it that type of set up?” Ely asked.

“Nope, each room has an ensuite, but they only offer breakfast and lunch, so he, um, asked them if it was okay if

you used the kitchen to cook for us, and they agreed,” Chase told Ely.

“Well, it’s still a better break than Rocktoberfest will be, and compared to that, feeding you guys is a breeze,” Ely replied. “I’m in.”

“You are the best. Love you, babe,” Rhone said, planting a toe-curling lip lock on his man.

“Yes, love you, babe. Muah, muah, muah,” I mocked them, making kissy faces and noises. Rhone flipped me off. “Love you too, babe,” I said, blowing him a kiss.

“You guys hungry?” Ely asked us.

“When aren’t we?” Seltzer asked.

“Good point. Okay, Rhone, come help me bring dinner over,” Ely stood, tugging Rhone’s hand.

“They don’t deserve you, babe,” Rhone protested.

“They’re hungry boys, and we’re feeding them the goodies I made before we left the arena,” Ely told him.

“Okay,” Rhone reluctantly agreed. He’d do anything Ely asked, and Ely knew that, but he wasn’t one to take advantage of it.

“Food! Food! Food!” Seltzer chanted.

“Come on, guys,” Chase stood, gathering his stuff. “Let’s get cleaned up.”

A few minutes later, Ely and Rhone returned with two pans of lasagna, salad, and bread. “I made extra the other day fully

expecting we'd stop for lunch today but we ended up napping the entire way," Ely said with a blush.

"Right, napping," I winked. "Is that what we're calling it now?"

"Shut up," Ely blushed. His words held no weight with the smirk on his face.

There wasn't a quiet stomach on the bus as the scent hit us. "Ely, if Rhone doesn't marry you, I will," Seltzer said, filling his plate.

"Fuck you, Seltzer," Rhone wrapped his arms protectively around Ely. "Mine."

"Awe, be still my beating heart," Seltzer teased, his hand fluttering against his chest. "True, possessive love at its finest." The entire bus erupted in laughter—guards included. Rhone threw his wadded-up napkin at Seltzer, but even he was laughing.

After dinner, we all chipped in and helped with the dishes, made coffee, and then raided the snack drawer. "Hey Rhone," Chase said, "we've been working on a few songs. You down for hanging out for a bit and going over them?"

Rhone ran to their bus to grab his notebook and returned a few seconds later. When we got to Trash, the one we'd finished the lyrics on the bus earlier, he glared at me. "Do not do this," Rhone warned me.

"It's not what you think or about whom you think, so chill," I said even though I knew a few jabs at Jordan were

subconsciously hidden there.

“Don’t fucking lie to me, man,” Rhone glared, pointing a finger at me. Ely was in the restroom at the time. “Ely is my fucking world, and I won’t allow you to come between him and his best friend.”

“How could I, or why would I do that?” The anger rose, simmering just beneath the surface. Who the fuck was he to designate who or what I did. “Not your fucking call, man.”

“Don’t,” Rhone growled as Ely emerged. “Hey,” he said to Ely, “let’s go back to our bus and watch a movie?”

“Oh, okay. I thought you were working on songs with the guys?” Ely asked.

“Nah, we’re done,” Rhone stood, grabbed his notebook and followed Ely without another word.

As soon as the bus door shut, Chase said, “Let him cool down. He’s being overprotective. I can’t see Ely getting involved in what goes on between you and Jordan.”

“Nothing is going on. I haven’t seen or talked to Jordan since that night at the club. It’s over,” I grabbed my stuff and headed to the back. Sliding the curtains shut on my bunk, I popped in my AirPods and opened the Hulu app on my iPad and tuned the world out.

The following day, I was the first one up. Well, after Sikes, that is. “Morning,” he said as I b-lined straight for the Keurig.

“Morning,” Donuts called to me as I snagged a pack from the junk drawer and sat down. Sikes was scrolling through

something on his iPad.

“Soundcheck is at two,” Sikes said.

“Thanks.” I glanced at my phone and I saw the time was after ten. No clue what time I crashed out last night. I was binging Archer when I fell asleep. It wasn’t too much longer when Chase and Seltzer walked out wearing nothing but their boxer and shuffling along like zombies.

“What time is...” Seltzer started to ask, but the three of us cut him off.

“Two,” we said.

“Ely’s bringing over subs for lunch at noon,” Sikes informed us.

We’ve spent so much time together that we’ve memorized each other’s routines. Take, for instance, this morning. The four of us sat around the table, sipping coffee and eating whatever we found. All the while typing or reading whatever was on our electronic devices in companionable silence.

Right on time, Rhone and Ely came in with their arms loaded with containers. Ely got to work sorting things out and making our plates. “Hey man, can we talk?” Rhone asked me. I shrugged and followed him to the back. “Look, I want to apologize for last night. It’s none of my business, and a beautiful little someone told me, and I quote, I need to mind my beeswax just like he is.”

“That’s right,” Ely sang from the kitchen area.

Rhone laughed. “Again, I’m sorry. I don’t want anything to ever hurt Ely or make him uncomfortable.”

We bro hugged, “I would never do anything to hurt Ely or put either of you in a bad spot. Jordan and I, we’re over, and there never was a ‘we.’ Just hookups, and those stopped a while ago.”

“We cool?” Rhone asked me.

“Always, my brother.”

We ate and got ready to head to soundcheck. Blinding Light had already come and gone, so we didn’t get a chance to meet them beforehand. After a quick dinner, it was showtime. The curtain was still drawn when we took our places as two guys walked across the stage toward Chase. “Hey man, good to see you,” one of them said to him. They chatted for a couple of minutes before one of them introduced the other. “This is Liam Tarrant, our new guitarist. He kicks ass. Wait til you hear him.”

Chase replied, “I look forward to it. I’m planning to stick around after our set and watch you guys. Blinding Light’s been on my list of bands to see.”

Rhone pounded his bass drum several times, warning the rest of us to get in place. I slid my baby over my shoulder and plucked a couple strings to get the crowd riled up. The curtain rose and we were off and playing Strings n’ Sex. My eyes were drawn to the mosh pit forming in front of the crowd near where the guys who talked to Chase earlier stood. I loved



being on stage more than anything, but sometimes I missed being a part of the mayhem, thrashing away in the pit.

“Hello, Napa Valley!” Chase called out after the first song ended. “My band brothers and I are happy to be here. There are some special friends in the crowd with you tonight,” he pointed to the two guys he’d talked with earlier. “Easy, the lead singer for Blinding Light and their new guitarist Liam are there moshing out with you tonight!” The crowd went wild. At least now we knew their names. Wasn’t enough time for Chase to do the intros earlier, but I’d hang out and watch their show with him. This crowd may have been a fraction of what we had in LA, but their voices were equally as fierce.

“Oh, shit, my bad,” Chase said as we watched security remove Easy and Liam from the crowd and bring them up alongside the stage where it was safer. “Didn’t mean for that to happen. We’ve got a couple more songs to play for you tonight. So here is, Reason to Live!” Five songs and an encore later, our sweaty asses left the stage for the crews to set up the next bands gear.

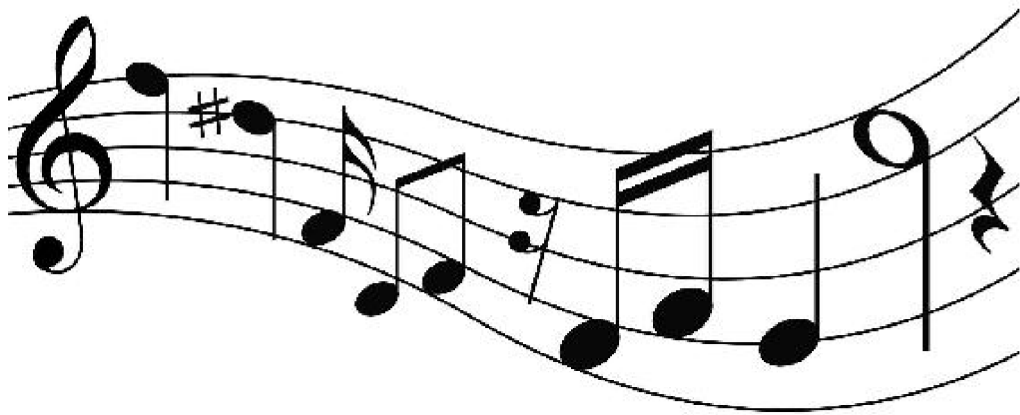
“Wow, killer crowd,” Rhone said, guzzling down a bottle of water.

“Didn’t see that coming,” Seltzer added.

We stuck around, watching the rest of the bands play, and most were pretty good. Saturday was spent mingling with the others while Ely manned the barbeque, feeding whoever came along. It was like one big party but without the bigger kids around, more comfortable and lower key, if that makes sense.

Everyone was excited to be there and meet, which was a nice change. Saturday night, Blinding Light rocked the shit. I was jonesing to get into the pit, but Sikes and Snipe wouldn't let us. Mosh pit cock blocks. I got it, but it still fucking sucked.

# CHAPTER TEN



## Jordan

Cactus.

Dirt.

Cactus.

Dirt.

Rest area bathroom.

Cactus.

Dirt.

My ass was numb, and my nerves were shot. On top of that, I had to piss like a racehorse by the time we reached Black Rock City. Which, by the way, takes all of fifteen minutes to drive through from one end to the other. Three bodies to the cab of each vehicle were a bit much to cram inside, especially considering that the drive was already eight and a half hours before we made any stops. Add in those and we're at just over nine hours for today's trip. We'd stopped for bathroom breaks three times, filled up the trucks at the halfway mark on the map, and now all I wanted was to get unloaded, shower, and sleep.

We'd just pulled inside the gates when I heard a familiar voice yell my name. "Jordan!" Ely shouted. I scanned the area, locating him hopping up and down beside a golf cart. His arms waved wildly, and I thought he'd take off in flight. I jumped out of the truck and ran over to hug him.

“You are a site for sore eyes, my friend,” I said, and he smiled wide.

“Okay, follow us in the golf cart,” Ely said. “I’ll show you where we’re staged.”

“Who’s that driving it?” I asked. The burly man had his back to us.

“That’s one of our guards, Snipe, and you’ve met him before. The guys are with the other bands, so they’re covered in security, and Snipe insisted he stay with me. I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to having a bodyguard,” Ely admitted.

“You’re marrying a rockstar, love. You better get used to it,” I kissed his cheek. “Lead the way, my good man.”

Our caravan followed them along the outer bus loop. The line of buses behind us waiting to be let in at the gate was extensive which would prove to be a busy day for security. On the far side where we headed was the trailer graveyard, as I called it. The drivers dropped their trailers here and would be back on Monday to pick them up. Along with those were the refrigerated trucks, shower and bunk trailers which would be our makeshift homes for the next few days. The attendants in charge of lining the trucks and trailers up guided us to each spot they wanted us in. Once we were in place, the unloading began.

“Okay,” I said, addressing our group. “This is Ely, our head chef. Everyone who is listed as a chef or sous follows him. The rest of you, come with me.” First, I took them to the trailers and had them pick their bunks. Locks were provided

with each locker, and after they secured their belongings, we got to work setting up the catering tents. They'd already been erected, appliances in place, but we needed to stock everything. Ely came in at one point and announced that dinner was ready. We'd been at it so long when we left the tent we were in, it was already dark outside. I'd lost track of time getting our stuff organized.

"Thanks for doing this," I said to Ely, stuffing my face. I guess he was right. I did tend to forget to eat.

"I knew you'd forget. Besides, it's my job to feed the troops," Ely replied. "How much more do you have left to do? We've got the kitchens and prep stations set up."

I wracked my brain for what had been done. "Honestly, nothing that can't wait for morning. We got the tables and chairs set up in the dining tents, the serving line tables in place, and the empty chafing dishes on top ready for first service in the morning. I think we're at a good stopping point."

"Great, because it's midnight, and we start at five am tomorrow," Ely pointed out.

"No rest for the wicked," I kidded, "at least not for the next six days." I'd live off energy drinks and snicker bars when Ely wasn't looking. With all these bodies, getting the dishes handled, and things locked up only took a few minutes and we were done for the night. "Time for bed. Great first day, everyone. See you bright and early at five a.m." They groaned.

"We promise to have coffee and sugary goodies for you," Ely cheerfully added. There was no way anyone could stay

mad at that.

The first thing I did after I waited for Rhone to pick up Ely, who was staying on their tour bus with them, was grab my toiletry bag and hit the shower. My head didn't so much as touch the pillow, and I was out. Far too early though, my alarm went off. Luckily everyone in this trailer was part of our team and needed to get up too. "All right, my darlings, rise and shine."

More groans. "I know, but today the real fun begins," I swear as I stood, every inch of my body popped and protested. When we got to the catering tents, Ely was already there working away. The scent of coffee and cinnamon filled the space. "Ely, if you weren't already engaged, I'd claim you," I teased, kissing his cheeks.

"Why does everyone keep saying that to me?" He smiled and handed me a cup dolled up just the way I liked it.

"Because you are a godsend." The team filled their plates from the assortment of breakfast foods my glorious partner and his crew put together for us. Without Ely, I would never be able to pull off an event of this caliber, nor would I want to even try. I may pretend to be off put by his cheerful nature, but he knew it was a false façade. Ely was a bright light in my never-ending gloomy days.

By six a.m., we were hard at work filling chafing dishes for the diners as they arrived. Those were primarily crew members, stagehands, and assistants. Rockstars were not early risers. "Good morning," Rhone said as he passed me on his

way toward Ely. “Hello, my love,” he greeted Ely with a sweet kiss.

“Hello, handsome,” Ely swooned. Some staff watched their exchange while others kept to the tasks at hand. “Let me fix your plate.” In the beginning, Rhone would tell Ely he could get his own and that he didn’t need to serve him though he quickly learned that was one of Ely’s favorite ways to show he cared. He loved to feed others, and to him, that included filling their plates for them. For the most part, he only does that for Rhone now, or if he’s working in a tight space, he’ll do it, so he doesn’t get overwhelmed with too many bodies in his area, which I understood.

With the whispers escalating, I decided to take the bull by the horns. “Okay, everyone, let’s get this over with. This is Rhone, Ely’s fiancé and the drummer for Embrace the Fear.” As I finished, the rest of his band walked in. “And this is the rest of Embrace. Chase, the lead singer, Seltzer, their guitarist, and David.” I could barely get his name out, consumed with an unexplained emotion. “Their um, their bassist.” Our crew waved, as did the band though I stayed rooted in place like my feet were filled with lead and couldn’t move.

“Are you okay, Jordan?” Ely whispered beside me.

“Yes, of course, I am. I just forgot something,” I bolted out of the tent and around the side to catch my breath. What the hell was wrong with me? I never react that way toward anyone. David and I haven’t seen each other in weeks, our hook-ups having long since ended, thanks to me. There was no



excuse for reacting that way in his presence. He was just a man and I needed to get a freaking grip.

“Are you all right, Jordan?” the man in question asked walking up behind me. My body stiffened, and I momentarily forgot where I was. “Jordan?” he asked again, touching my arm.

“Oh, um, yeah. Sorry, I just needed some air,” I lied, well, sort of. I did need air though I refused to tell him why.

“Do you want me to get you some water or something to eat?” he asked, his voice filled with concern.

“No thanks, I already ate. I’ll just,” I hooked my fingers toward the other tents. “I need to get to work.”

“Jordan, wait,” he gripped my arm. My eyes darted to where his flesh met mine, searing his touch to memory. “This doesn’t need to be weird between us. With Ely and Rhone together, our paths are bound to cross.” As soon as I glanced up, I immediately wished I hadn’t.

“David,” I gasped.

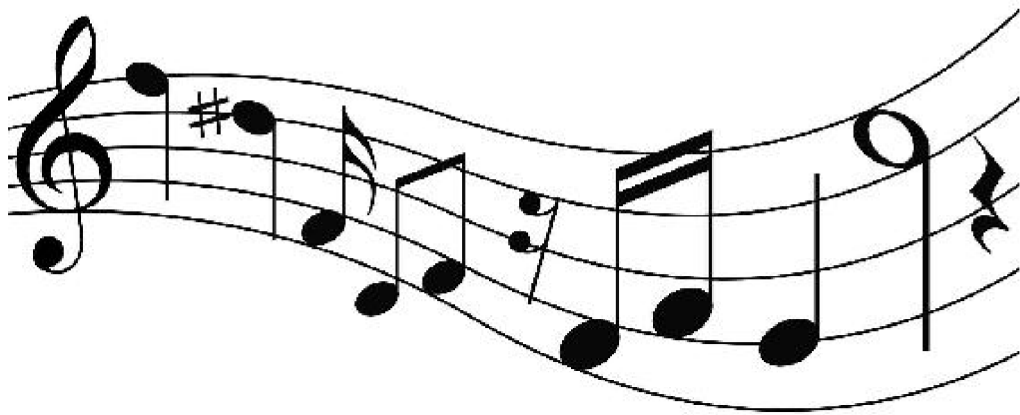
His hand moved from my arm to my cheek as his thumb traced my bottom lip while he stared longingly at it. I was frozen, locked in some warp where time stood still, and everything around us ceased to exist. David and I were the only ones here. His voice, his touch, sent me spiraling into unknown territory. He gripped the back of my neck firmly as he crashed his lips to mine. His tongue trailed along the seam, and something inside me snapped. My eyes popped open, “I

um, I've got to go," I said and bolted for the supply tent. Once there, I dropped down onto the nearest chair, "What the fuck was that?"

How could my mind and body betray me by allowing him to take charge so easily? I controlled myself. The trust I felt in his touch, like he cared, was more than I could handle. But does anyone ever honestly care? Are humans capable of loving as deeply as those stupid romance novels lead us to believe? I wasn't about to let my heart get shredded to bits. It was in my best interest to avoid any areas David would be in but there was no way I could do that. Not here.

Fuck.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



## David

Like a moth to a flame, I was drawn to Jordan. Unexplainable forces pulled us toward one another. I thought I'd moved on, but all it took was one look, and I was hosed. My brain screamed on an endless loop to escape the fire, but the trance I was in wouldn't allow it. There was no way hurricane Jordan wasn't going to burn me.

And he felt the same, I knew he did.

I saw it in the panic that crossed his face before he bolted.

The urge to stop Jordan from running off was heavy but forcing him to talk when he wasn't ready would've made matters worse. Before anything else, he needed to come to the same realization I had—fighting this, whatever it was, was futile. Fuck the bullshit I spewed to Rhone. I was only fooling myself when I said it. My gut told me there's more to Jordan than meets the eye, but what's spooking him? Once he acquiesced, I'd need to take charge. In the interim I fully anticipated a hurricane Jordan would fight this tooth and nail.

“Everything okay?” Rhone asked. Seltzer and Chase stood beside him just inside the tent where I'd left them.

“I wish I knew. Look, man, I know you don't want to hear this, but I don't know what's happening. I thought I was over Jordan, done with us messing around, but I'm not. He's important to me, and I can't let go. I don't want to,” I openly admitted.

“For what it’s worth, Ely thinks you’re good for him,” Rhone said.

“I sure as fuck hope I am.”

“Come on,” Seltzer said, “he’s already spooked, plus you’ll never catch a scared dog. Let’s get some grub.” Purposely, I chose a seat facing the entrance in case he reappeared. I wouldn’t approach him, merely smile, silently letting him know I’m here when he’s ready. But he never came back in.

“Let’s head out,” Chase said, glancing at his phone. “Social just got here, and Easton wants to talk to us.”

“Hey guys,” Easton greeted us as we stepped onto his and Diamond’s bus. “You arrived last night?”

“Yeah, Ely needed to be here early today, so we came in with him,” Rhone replied. “Besides, it’s no hardship sleeping on these posh buses. Thanks, by the way.”

“We treat the talent well,” Easton smirked.

“And the talent, appreciates it,” Diamond replied with a kiss. It’s funny to see a man who’s always as put together and in charge as Easton reduced to mush by his man.

“Have a seat,” Stoli said, taking the pressure off Easton while he composed himself.

“Are we in trouble for something?” I asked.

“The opposite, actually,” Easton said. “Have you guys heard of the band Eradicate Apathy?”

“Aren’t they the ones with the deaf guitarist?” Seltzer asked. Leave it to him to know about another guitar player.

“Yes, they are,” Easton replied. “They’re playing Rocktoberfest during the day on Saturday.”

Seltzer turned to us and said, “I caught some of their stuff on YouTube. Their guitarist, I think his name is Josh, that guy fucking shreds.”

“What do you guys think about playing a smaller venue show with them when you get back to Vegas?” Easton asked the group.

“I’m down,” Seltzer replied first, glancing at the rest of us.

“I am, too, looking forward to hearing them this weekend now,” my interest was piqued for sure. That’s some serious talent to play with such a challenge.

“I’ll let their management team know. Why don’t you guys extend the invite when you see them this weekend? They’ll probably appreciate it more coming from their peers,” Easton suggested.

“On it,” Rhone announced.

As the voices around me engaged in various discussions, I reflected on the last few days. Unwinding in Napa, hanging out poolside sipping drinks, late night soaks in the hot tub. I don’t remember ever experiencing that much peace and serenity. The only thing that could’ve made it better would’ve been having a partner to share it with. If things work out the way I want them to, taking Jordan there will be a bucket list

item for me. No one needed to unwind and stop and smell the roses as much as he did.

“You all right?” Chase whispered to me.

“Yeah, just thinking. It would be nice to own a secluded spot like the vineyard we toured someday. Not too far yet, not too close to the hustle and bustle of city life. A place to escape reality, if you get what I mean?” I replied.

“That I more than get, my friend. I love this lifestyle, but as things get crazier, we’ll need an escape to keep our sanity,” Chase said.

“Never thought I’d understand that until now. You, my friend, are an old soul,” I said.

“Not the first time I’ve been told that,” Chase replied.

“Hey guys,” Stoli said, “rumor has it Dez from Tattered Angel is playing his blue Adrian Lee in the shred-off on Saturday night.”

The hush through the bus was crazy. No one moved. No one spoke at the mention of the iconic Adrian Lee guitar. He’d given it to some kid in the crowd a million years ago, swore he’d live to see that kid play it on stage someday. Then, he died far too young in a helicopter crash. “Wait, are you saying?” I couldn’t get the words out.

“Yup. Dez was the kid in the crowd and still has the guitar. Someone issued a challenge, and he stepped the fuck up. Kale and Terry from Shriveled Rose confirmed it, and they’re supposed to be here Saturday night to witness it firsthand.”

“Whoa,” Seltzer said.

“Whoa is right, my man,” Stoli replied. “It’ll be like going to the Vietnam Memorial in DC, only rockstar style. You won’t hear a sound the entire time Dez plays.”

“Are you playing in the shred off?” Seltzer asked him.

“Yeah,” Stoli said.

“So am I,” Ryder said as he boarded the overcrowded bus. “Though I can guaran-fucking-tee this night will go to Dez as it should. What a killer tribute to an iconic guitarist. Adrian Lee was the best, and the man had a heart of gold.”

“Shit, I don’t know what I’m more excited about now. Us playing, or watching Dez shred on Adrian’s guitar,” Seltzer said.

We hung out for a bit more, members of three different bands in one bus chatting it up like no one was better than anyone else. That was how we rolled, like a family—one big rock ‘n roll *familia*. I couldn’t be prouder to be a part of the Masterson team.

“Hey guys, Ely just messaged its lunchtime. Anyone hungry?” Rhone said, glancing around.

Every hand shot up, and the body it was attached to called out, “Me!”

The walk to the dining tents took twice as long as it should have, “Man, Stoli knows everyone,” I said. Stoli had stopped no less than ten times to greet someone he knew.



“I am the man,” Stoli said as he came up behind me.

“Please, for the love of all things holy, do *not* make his head any bigger than it is,” Joey pleaded.

“Awe but babe, you love my big head,” Stoli winked and smacked Joey’s ass.

“See what I mean?” Joey replied, and we laughed.

As soon as we walked inside, my eyes immediately scanned the tent. My head bobbed from side to side, hoping to spot him. “Who are you looking for?” Mickey asked as we stood in the serving line.

“Me? No one,” I lied.

“I know! I know!” Benny yelled.

Thankfully Mickey caught the horror in my eyes and quieted him, “Benny, my love, let’s not embarrass him.”

“Okay, but only if he lets me play with his hair again,” Benny pouted.

“Should I be weirded out that you have some sort of fetish with my hair?” I asked him.

“No, I have doll heads at home. I do their hair on all the time. I’m good at it, and you have great hair,” Benny replied, running his fingers through mine.

“Benny, stop freaking people out,” River pleaded. “It sounds creepy when you say it like that.”

I was...without words. Where did he get the heads? Did he want to add me to his collection? Um, no. Just...no.

“Don’t worry,” River said, “they’re those big beauty make-up Barbie type heads they used to sell. Trust me, not as Jeffrey Dahmer as we’re making it sound.”

“Oh, thank fuck,” I relaxed.

Max and Snipe slid two of the eight-person tables together so our large group could eat together. Shortly after everyone was seated, Ely came over and said hi. “Ely,” Derek said, wiping his mouth. “I wish you were around in our earlier years when we lived off fast food. We’d be in much better shape if you had.”

“Speak for yourself,” Diamond said, running his hands over his six-pack. “I’m in killer shape.”

“And so modest too,” Jaxson said. Diamond tossed some fries at him.

“Ethan Matthew Taylor, there will be no food fight,” Easton scolded.

“Oooh, mom pulled out the full name card. You got in trouble!” Jaxson teased him, and Diamond growled. “Pfft, your growl is nothing compared to this guys,” Jaxson hooked a finger in Shadow’s direction. In typical Shadow fashion, his scowl remained firmly in place. I, for one, didn’t want either drummer growling at me. Those two were scary as fuck.

A few minutes later, we headed out. Some of the guys wanted to walk around and see which bands were there. Rocktoberfest was like one big rockstar reunion. I tagged along, hoping to spot a specific catering manager. I needed to

make sure Jordan was okay, but he remained elusive. The same went for dinner, and after that we went back to our buses for the night. The guys wanted to kick back, hang out, and drink a few beers, which we did. We knew Friday would be a madhouse with the rest of the bands arriving, the gates opening, and the general public added to the mix.

“Man, I must be getting old. I’m fading,” Ryder said as he stood. We’d been sitting in a circle of lawn chairs around a firepit someone pulled out of a magic hat, though it was likely stored under one of the Maiden buses. “Time for beddy-bye, Maxie,” Ryder winked at his stoic guard/husband.

Max rolled his eyes, “Call me Maxie again, and you’ll be sleeping alone, Ryder Pooh.” The group laughed. Shortly after that, the rest of us called it a night and returned to our own. Chase and Seltzer hung out in the common area in our bus while I dove into my bunk, needing some alone time. I grabbed my switch, readying to check out my AC peeps, and popped in my AirPods. Ironically, Octane was playing Blood Runs Cold by Rain City Drive.

*I still feel you in my veins.*

Fuck, if that didn’t sum up how I’ve felt since I saw Jordan today, then nothing did. How or when he became such a vital part of me, I didn’t know. Bone deep was how I felt him. Seeing how spooked he was put me on alert. He’d been hurt before and was afraid, which explained a lot. Now, to get him to trust me, which won’t come without its own set of challenges.

Friday, we hit the ground running. Between interviews and sound check, we barely had time to eat. If it weren't for Ely keeping an eye out for us, we'd likely pass out on stage from lack of subsistence.

"How's everybody doing today?" Chase yelled into the microphone as we took the stage. "Hot enough for ya?" his comment was met with boos, and he chuckled. "Yeah, that sounded lame. We're so happy to be here, kicking off Rocktoberfest 2022!" Chase bellowed, and the crowd roared. I glanced over to the sidelines, spotting Stoli and the guys from Social, along with Midnight Hunt, watching us.

"This is our second Rocktoberfest, and we couldn't be happier to be back here with you. Let's get this party started with a little song called, Forsaken!" The crowd quickly filed in, their bodies pressed against bodies as they pushed toward the stage. The floor filled in a matter of seconds as Rhone kicked off the opening beat and Seltzer joined in right on queue. The opening riff for Forsakes was my favorite of ours. Pulls you right out of your seat.

This right here, this is what we lived for. What we'd worked our collective ass off for like many of the bands sharing this very stage this weekend. Our brothers in Social Sinners and Maiden Voyage who've overcome so much to get to where they are. No one walks up and says hey, I'm in a band and gets handed a million-dollar check and a mansion. Many things will stand in their way. Forward progress will be a constant uphill battle. For every band that makes it, thousands more don't. Did we have it easier by winning the Battle of the

Bands? Yeah, we got lucky, but that still didn't mean life wouldn't throw curve balls our way or egos wouldn't come to blows in the future.

Song after song, the crowd sang along. I loved our music, though I was more than ready to start playing our new songs. But we had to hold off until the marketing team allowed the music stations to premier them first. Hearing your band's songs on the radio was like a quick hit to your veins. The four of us screamed until our voices failed when Jose Mangin played Reason to Live on his show for new bands called Octane: Test Drive. Fucking brain rush, and that's when shit got real. From then on, it's been a whirlwind of tours, photo shoots, meet and greets, and recording studios. So fucking worth all the sleepless nights.

We had to exit the stage as soon as our set was over. There was a tight setup and tear-down schedule for the bands since we played back-to-back. "Great show," Stoli said, high fiving each of us as we passed him. "Nice way to kick off the weekend. You guys set a high bar for the next band in line."

"Thanks, man," Seltzer said and then guzzled half his water bottle before he poured the rest over his head. "Still hot as fuck out there." He shook his head like a dog, and sweat flew everywhere. "Fucking disgusting," a stagehand complained as he passed out towels. "That's one way to get fired," Easton said. The poor kid paled and high-tailed it out of there.

"Well, babe," Diamond said as he wrapped his arm around Easton. "I can guarantee he won't do that again. Poor guy

probably just shit his pants.”

“It may be disgusting, but it feels hella cooler being wet out in the blazing heat,” Rhone added.

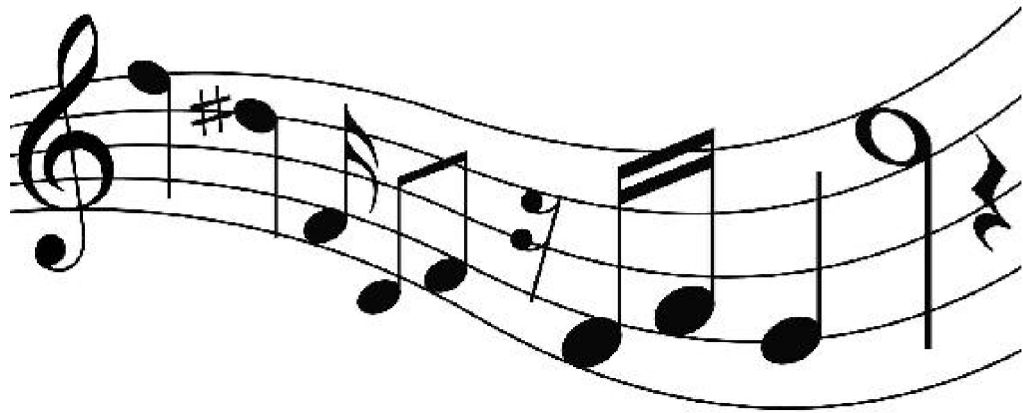
“Yeah, too bad it takes smelling like ass to feel this refreshed,” I said.

“Now that I could’ve done without hearing,” Chase replied.

“Yeah, we are a bit ripe. I call dibs on the shower!” Seltzer hollered as he hopped into a golf cart and took off, Sikes hot on his tail and not looking the least bit impressed.

The three of us, Chase, Rhone, and myself, headed back to our buses to clean up. We’d likely be sweaty messes again, considering we planned to come back and watch some of the other bands, but hopefully, we could tone down the rankness level with a shower first. Maybe come dinner time, I’ll cross paths with Jordan.

# CHAPTER TWELVE



## Jordan

**D**avid was looking for me, and I hid like a chicken shit each time I saw him, and our paths nearly crossed. He'd glance around, then sadness marred his handsome when he didn't spot me. This was mentally killing me and breaking my heart and I had no one to blame but myself. Desperately I wanted to run to him, be wrapped in the safety of his arms, hear him say he wouldn't break me. If only I were brave enough to let him in. That last part was what kept me away. Brave. Something I wasn't.

“Jordan,” one of the staff called out, “where are the extra towels?” I moved about six inches to the right and pointed at the shelf behind me. She blushed, snagged one, and returned to the dishes she was washing without a word. Day two, and we'd already exceeded our mental capacity. This catering job was rewarding but also taxing. You had to be *on* the entire time you were awake, your needs met last while others were taken care of first. Smile and nod, get them what they asked for, and unclench your jaw once out of sight, free to breathe again. It was emotionally exhausting. Some of these jerks didn't deserve a granola bar, let alone the gourmet meals Ely and his team prepared.

But we will persevere.

Or die trying.

By the time we closed Friday night, my feet hurt, my back and neck were stiff, and more than anything, I wished there



was a bubble bath-filled tub to soak in. Ultimately, I settled for a lukewarm shower and then straight to bed. Only to wake up at the butt crack of dawn on Saturday and dive into what would be the busiest day of the event. All the major bands would hit the stage tonight. This year though they allowed some non-headlining bands to start playing at noon. Last time that was what Friday was reserved for, but they had so many artists ask to be a part of this event that they decided to add more bands to the docket.

Saturday morning was a blur, and I operated on autopilot. The lunch rush came, shoveling in pounds of food in record time before heading to the VIP area backstage, where they could listen to the bands as they played. Promoters, management, security, there were so many bodies here that it was hard to maneuver the catering carts around them. One guy grabbed a couple of rolls off of it as I pushed it into one of the dining tents. I nearly drew blood biting the inside of my mouth as hard as I did, had I unleashed the vulgar word vomit I likely would've been escorted off the property. The asshole knew it was a dick move as he smiled and winked, then walked away.

“What’s wrong?” Ely asked when I finally made it inside.

“Entitled pricks, that’s all,” I complained, slamming the containers down so hard the chafing dishes rattled.

“Here, let me do that,” Ely took the dish out of my hand. “Why don’t you take a break?”

“No time,” I groaned.

“That’s just great,” a guy, I’m guessing a bodyguard based upon his size, sitting at the table behind me said loud enough for his group to hear. “Over a hundred thousand bodies here, and we need to sniff out an escaped convict?”

“Well, if it’s any consolation,” the equally as large guy beside him replied, “He’ll likely be wearing orange.”

“Not if he stole someone’s clothes, and with all those unattended tents pitched out front, his options are limitless,” the first guy replied. A few moments later, they left, but I was too busy to care.

I’d just finished refilling the serving dishes when David, Chase, Rhone, and Seltzer came in. “Hey baby,” Rhone greeted Ely with the sweet pet name.

“It’s all over the news,” some girl said to her friend as she passed us. “This bus transporting prisoners crashed just outside of Black Rock. One prisoner escaped.”

The most significant, loudest alarm blared through my brain, and every hair on my body stood on end. *This can’t be, can it? I hated to ask, but something told me I needed to,* “What was the prisoner’s name?”

“Tony something or other,” she giggled, “I’m not good with names. His mug shot on the TV was scary enough.” Everything around me stopped. No one moved, no one said a word though they likely were, only I couldn’t see or hear it.

My heartbeat pounded so loudly I could hear it as it tried burst from my chest. There was no way it was him. This was

only a panic attack. Or a heart attack? *Come on, Jordan, calm down.* Take a couple deep breath was my last thought as my legs gave out, and down I went. Muted voices called out to me, I think I heard my name, but it was garbled.

“Jordan?” My name was again called though it sounded so far away. “Jordan?”

“Should we take him to the hospital?” Another asked. Why did they sound so weird? Where was I? Why would I need to go to the hospital?

Slowly, my blurred vision cleared as I sought an object to focus on while regaining my senses.

“Oh, thank fuck,” David said.

“David?” I asked.

“God, yes, babe. Fucking hell, you scared the shit out of me,” his arms tightened around me. I was on his lap, on a bus. It must be his bus but how did I get here?

*Did he call me babe?* “Why am I sitting on you?”

“You passed out, scared the shit out of me. Are you all right?” He stared intently at me, awaiting my reply. Concern marred his handsome face, and I so desperately wanted to reach out and touch him.

Was I all right, though?

“What happened?” I asked, hoping to hear something more than what I’d just envisioned.

“Some girl talked about a guy who escaped a prisoner transport bus crash. You asked for a name, and she said it was Tony, then you turned white as a ghost, and down you went,” David kissed the top of my head, and his hair fell forward, shrouding us from the others. I wished we could stay there, hidden away from the rest of the world.

“Did anyone get his last name?” I whispered.

“The Tony guy?” David asked.

“Y-yes,” I nervously stuttered, on the verge of another panic attack.

“Navarro,” one of the guards said, and I fucking lost it.

“Jordan, you’re scaring me. You’re shaking like crazy. Why are you crying? Are you hurt?” David rattled off, taking my face in his hands. “I need you to breathe. Come on, Jordan, breathe with me. In,” I did my best to mimic him and choked. “Okay,” he wiped away the tears with his thumbs and tucked me tightly against his chest. I had no clue I’d even sat up.

“This. Can’t. Be. Happening,” I said between sobs.

“Sweetheart, I need you to take a deep breath,” David said, and I mimicked him like I was learning to breathe for the first time. “And another,” again I followed his example. Soon, breathing at an average pace on my own. “Now, start at the beginning.”

To a bus full of people, I hoped to never have learn the details of my sordid past, I recounted the lowest moments of my life. I told them I ultimately was the one to rat Tony out

even though he'd already been jailed for manslaughter. Without going into gory detail, I mentioned the abuse, both the physical and sexual, the broken bones, and the final hospital visit that I determined would be my last.

“Alert all security detail,” Sikes said into his earpiece, reiterated the highlights of what I'd shared. Ironic how things you'd tucked away for so long vividly came back in an instant.

“What are the odds he'd be transported near a location Jordan would be at?” Chase asked.

“Someone must've been watching you and told him you were here,” Snipe replied.

“Then couldn't that someone be working here as a security guard or something?” David angrily grit out, his worry surfacing as anger. “I want security detail on Jordan, and I'm not leaving his side.”

“You're the talent,” Sikes reminded him, “you can't be with the catering staff 24/7. It's not safe.”

“Jordan's safety is my concern. I will be where Jordan is,” David's words left no room for argument. It was like he knew I needed him to take charge, and I'd never been more appreciative.

“David,” Easton said as he came inside the bus. “We need to let security do the jobs they were hired for. This is what we pay them to do. Rest assured we will have detail on Jordan.”

I needed to do what was right even though I didn't want to be without him. “David,” I said, when he didn't turn the angry

scowl he'd pinned Easton with to face me, I tilted his head for him. "I have a job to do and a team to manage. This is my business, and it's important to me. Please, you need to be with the other bands—that's your job. Now that the guards know they won't leave me alone long enough to go pee," it was a joke though it fell flat, and I felt anything but safe. Ten years in prison will have only made Tony deadlier, but I couldn't let my fear show. It would freak David out even more. "Please?"

"Guys," David said, "Can you step outside and give us a few minutes? Please?"

Reluctantly, they did as David asked. I hadn't realized how many bodies were in here until they passed us by, but one was missing—Ely. Guess I'll have to recount this horror story yet again. I owed him that much.

"Jordan," David said. He hadn't released me since I came to. "I now understand why you are the way you are."

I smiled, knowing what he meant wasn't what out, and I needed to draw on my snark right now, "Fabulous?"

"Yes, you're fabulous," he agreed, pressing his lips to mine. "We can't fight this anymore, you and me. We've tried, and at least for me, I've failed." Protesting and throwing up my usual barriers before bailing resurfaced, but he stopped me. "No, Jordan. This is me, and I won't hurt you. Not in any way. We *will* make this work, but I need you to trust that I can and will put your needs first."

Somehow, deep down, I knew that David being in charge wouldn't be the same as it was with Tony. David *would* put me

first and ensure I was taken care of. I knew he wouldn't hurt me. I hoped and prayed that giving him a chance wouldn't result in that because I'd likely not survive a second time. "Let's just get through this weekend and deal with the *us* portion when we're home, okay?"

"Promise me you're not gonna bail?" David asked.

"I promise," I assured him, sealing it with a kiss.

As we parted, he asked, "Please unblock me on your phone."

I felt around my pockets, coming up empty. "Where?"

David reached across the table, "Is this it?"

"Yes, thank you," I unlocked it and unblocked his number. "There."

David stood and held out his hand, "You ready?"

"No," I answered honestly then slid my hand into his, "but I have to be."

Outside the bus stood a line of security guards, Sikes and Snipe filling them in on what they now knew of the prisoner at large. Nothing like facing a line of angry scowly bears staring you down. "Time to move out?" Sikes asked us and I nodded. He turned to the group, "That's the principal in question. Keep your eyes and ears open, mics on, and know your surroundings." He turned to David and me, "Lead the way." David held my hand the entire walk, and when we got to the supply tent, Ely was there and immediately hugged me.

“Are you okay? What happened? Why is there so much security with you?” He rapid-fire questioned.

I held up a hand to stop his rant. “Have a seat,” I gestured to the boxes, “and I’ll explain everything.” From there, I launched into the whole seriously fucked up story. Ely could never be a poker player. His face gave away every emotion as it hit him.

“Oh my god, Jordan. Why didn’t you tell me before?” he asked. David stood by my side the entire time, never not touching me. It was oddly comforting.

“I wanted, no, I needed to leave the past in the past though now it’s come back to haunt me.”

“You don’t think he’s here for you?” Ely asked.

I chanced a glance at David, then Sikes and Snipe. “It’s too coincidental for him not to be. He never cared for unfinished business, and now he has his chance to tie up what he considers loose ends.” Admitting that aloud made it feel far too real. Fuck, they needed to catch him before he got to me.

“I hate to leave you,” Ely said, glancing at his watch, “but we need to get the dinner rush sorted.”

“Who’s on who - guard-wise?” Rhone asked, he’d been silent the entire time so I forgot he was there.

“Sikes is on Ely, and I’m on Jordan,” Snipe replied. “Plus, the venue added more of their rent-a-guards back here. Like they’ll be any help armed with nothing more than mace.”

“Extra eyes are extra eyes,” Sikes reminded him.



Rhone, Ely, and Sikes headed out, and Snipe stepped outside the tent to give David and me a minute. “Jordan, I don’t like leaving you,” David admitted, wrapping his arms around me.

I drew in his scent, apples, and it made me smile. So simple yet one that I’d not soon forget. Ely’s fall baking would leave me warm in a dream state for sure, if I made through the weekend, that is. “I don’t either. I’m not going to lie and say I’m not worried when I’m completely terrified. Tony was scary before prison. I can only imagine what ten years behind bars has done to him.”

“Jordan?” Snipe called from outside the tent, “there is a line of your employees waiting to get in.”

“Shit, time to go,” why did this goodbye feel like our last? “I need to get to work.”

David leaned down and kissed me, deeply and with meaning. “Keep your phone on. I’ll message often.” He pressed his lips to mine, then reluctantly let go and stepped outside. I drew in a breath, centered myself, then grabbed a water bottle, and returned to life.

When dinner was ready, I texted David to meet us in the main dining tent. Snipe and I, the man who’d become my shadow that took his job seriously, scowled at anyone who dared look at me during the short walk. “Come on, big guy,” I said. He growled, so I chose to take that as a positive response, “time to eat.”

David, Rhone, Seltzer, and Chase were waiting inside when we arrived. “Hey,” David said when he walked up to me. “How are you doing?”

“Meh,” I shrugged, not much more to say. “Let’s eat, I can’t stay long. Dishes and restocking come next.” We fixed our plates and joined his bandmates and Ely at the tables they’d slid together. “How have the bands playing today been?”

“Not too bad,” Chase replied. “Eradicate Apathy is on in forty-five, and we want to catch that show for sure.”

“And, of course, Maiden and Social later tonight,” Seltzer added.

“I don’t like leaving you, not with it getting dark out,” David whispered to me.

“I’m not thrilled with any of this, but I won’t risk you getting hurt. We need to trust that the guards have this,” I said, even though I knew how dangerous Tony was and my confidence level was zero. But I had to be strong. David was here to enjoy this with his bandmates. “It’ll be fine. I’ll be fine.”

“Spend the night on the bus with me, please? I need to hold you. Nothing will happen but sleep,” David pleaded.

“Okay, I’ll tell Snipe, but I need to shower after work first,” I replied.

“Deal.”

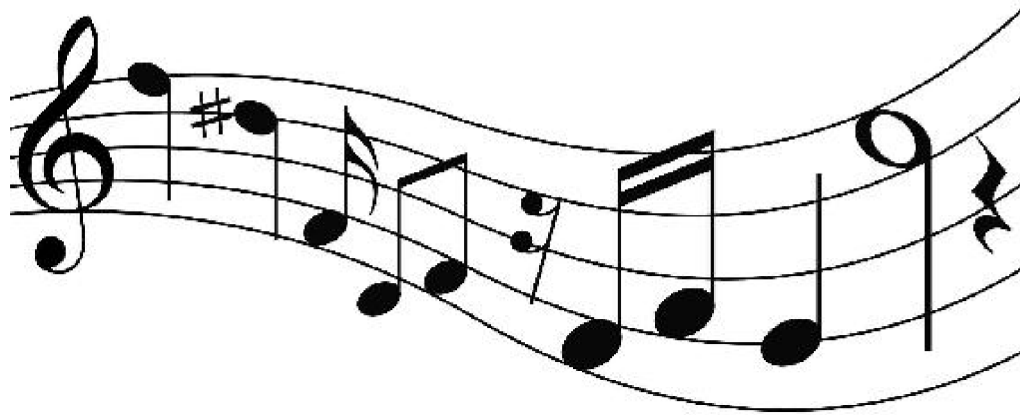
The guys headed back to the VIP area while the staff and I cleaned up. We’d filled the chafing dishes well into the night

so often that I lost count. With the added bands and security, we nearly doubled what we'd served last year. I had to keep that in mind if we were granted the 2023 contract.

Hot, tired, and with wrinkled fingers from helping with the dishes, I was done. Snipe was outside, so I began sending the staff back to the bunks for the night. I gathered the last of the dirty towels and threw them in the soiled basket, then removed my chef coat, more than ready to call it a night.

“Did you miss me, Jordan?”

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



## David

“‘**Y**ou’re shitting me? There’s no way that guitarist is deaf?” Seltzer said to Chase.

“Dude, trust me, he is, and his name is Josh,” Chase replied.

“I’m in awe,” Seltzer bowed, still watching Josh play.

Eradicate Apathy put on one hell of a show. We had to hit them up as soon as they came off stage. “Hey, I heard your set. That was great,” Rhone said to Josh. “We’d like you all to come to Vegas and open for us. We’ve arranged it with Munoz, you know, making sure your schedule was clear. We want you guys there.”

The Eradicate crew looked back and forth at each other, smiles spread wide. “Hell Yeah!” One of the guys cheered. “Oh, sorry. I’m Casey, and it looks like you already know Josh. That’s Branston and Margo,” he said, pointing them out as he called them by name.

“Sounds great,” Rhone said, “it’s still hot in Vegas, so stick around after and we can have a pool party if you guys are down for that?”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Branston said.

Rhone smiled and turned to Branston, “Branston Vale. I remember being a kid and rocking out to Red Badger. What happened was a damn shame. I’m glad you’re back on the circuit.”

Branston chuckled, “Yeah, these guys are good. Thank you for what you’re doing for them.”

“Hey, I think you all will be bringing in the crowds. You’re amazing. Social Sinners and Maiden Voyage are on tonight,” Rhone added, his way of asking if they were hanging out.

“Well, be there for sure,” Josh said. Poor guy seemed shell shocked.

“See you later,” Rhone said with a wink and a wave then we turned and headed back to the VIP area.

Seltzer turned and walked backward as we entered and smacked his hands together, “Dudes, I am so frigging stoked for the shred-off tonight.”

“Yeah, it’s gonna be wicked cool,” Chase added.

We grabbed a beer from one of the bars in the fenced-off area when a shrill whistle echoed through, we turned, and there stood Derek Masters, lead singer of Maiden Voyage, grinning as he waved us over. “Dude, that whistle could wake the dead,” I said.

“Got your attention, though, didn’t it?” Derek replied.

“Ours and every single body in this jam-packed VIP space,” Seltzer said, sticking a finger in his ear for effect.

“Anyway,” Derek said, rolling his eyes at Seltzer as he flipped him off, “I saw you guys talking to Eradicate. They weren’t too bad. Is their guitarist really deaf?”

“Yup, he was sliding his hearing aid back in as they came off stage,” Chase replied.

“Badass,” Derek said. “I need to meet him.”

“Come on,” Rhone said, “I’ll introduce you.”

“Where’s Derek going?” Ryder asked.

“To meet Josh from Eradicate,” I said.

“Dude, wait up!” Ryder hollered. Max shook his head and followed them.

“Max has his hands full with that one,” Chase said.

“You have no idea,” Jaxson said as he stepped beside us. “You guys watching us tonight?”

“You know it,” Seltzer replied.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I added. The longer we stood rooted, the larger the group around us grew. Not sure if they were merging our way due to lack of space or because Social and Maiden bodies surrounded us.

“Hey man,” Diamond said, “next time you’re in Seattle, let me know, and I’ll set you up with Mash.”

“Perfect, I meant to talk to you about that. I’ve been working sleeve designs, and I’d love to have him put the ink to the canvas,” I said, now even more excited about getting the pieces done. “It has some lyrics interwoven with music notes, band equipment, and demons. You know, the usual saints and sinners’ type of art.”

“Now that I’d like to see,” Diamond said, “You’re an incredible artist. I’ve been stalking your Instagram. Your drawings are deep, a little warped at times, but fricking sweet.”

“Thanks, man, that means a lot,” I replied. Diamond fist bumped me. “But yeah, I’m in for sure. I’ll check our schedule and see when I can swing it. By the way, Rhone talked to Eradicate, and they’re down for doing a show when we get back to Vegas.”

“Right on, Easton and I will be there for sure,” Diamond said.

“Cool, looks like we’re having a pool party with them too, so bring your trunks,” I added.

“What, no commando? Where’s your sense of adventure?” Diamond teased.

“Dude, I think enough of the world has seen your junk. Keep the anaconda tucked away, *por favor*,” I told him, and I was not kidding. There are some things you don’t need to see or learn about your band family.

As if being summoned, Easton appeared, “Swim trunks are not optional, Diamond. If we go to the party, you *will* be appropriately clothed.”

“Awe, babe, you’re no fun,” Diamond teased Easton.

“I’m no fun because I don’t want to spend the next month sending out cease and desist letters to every website blasting my husband’s cock and balls to the world?” The way Easton



said that eluded to the fact they'd been down this road before which did not surprise me.

“My bad. Sorry, babe,” Diamond apologized though it lacked sincerity. “I’ve been super careful about what I post to insta since that incident. You know it was an accident.”

“Diamond, I’ve come to the conclusion where you’re concerned that there are no accidents,” Easton pinched the bridge of his nose. “Quit taking shots of your dick to send to me. Trust me, I know what it looks like. After all these years, I have it stored in memory,” Easton tapped his head for emphasis.

“All right,” Stoli said, “You ready, Ry?” He asked Ryder.

“You know it,” he said as they high-fived. “Shred-off!” they hollered in unison, racing each other to the stage like kids on a playground which I guess we all kind of were in this environment—a concert playground for supposed grown-ups. Half the VIP tent followed them and the others who’d entered the contest, though no one expected to see Kale and Terry from Shriveled Rose on stage with Dez from Tattered Angel.

“Whoa,” Stoli said, staring at the legends standing before him. “Whoa is right,” Ryder added. “Hey man,” he turned to Seltzer, “grab your baby, let’s go.”

“Nah, man, this crowd is above my skill set. There’s a reason you’re the golden boys of the metal world. I’m merely a newbie mimicking his gods.”

“While I’m honored you feel that way,” Ryder said, “we need to work on your self-esteem.”

“Damn straight, kid,” Stoli added, “you’re a killer guitarist, so if they do this next year, you best be ready to join us, or I’ll drag you up on that stage myself.”

“Duly noted,” Seltzer mock saluted, his face glowing from the compliments. Seltzer is an incredible guitarist, but I get where he’s coming from. That would be like Chris Kael from Five Finger Death Punch or Fieldy from Korn treating me like I deserved to play with them. Having that much metal royalty on stage is overwhelming, especially when it’s your idols.

The wings along the sides of the stage were packed with a sea of bodies. The crowd on the other side of the fence stood elbow to elbow, doing their best to get to the front to witness history in the making.

“Dude, is that?” Seltzer said, eyes glued to the piece in Dez from Tattered Angel’s hands. “The Adrian Lee guitar? The one from the video? Is Dez that kid?”

“Holy shit,” I replied. There was no way, was there?

Rhone handed his phone over, “That it is. Check it out.” We stood in the wing watching a video of a young Dez in the crowd at a Shriveled Rose concert a million years ago. He’s singing every word and playing the air guitar along with Adrian Lee when the pivotal moment every guitarist in the world heard about happens.

“I wonder…” I whispered.

“You and me both,” Selzer replied.

“Welcome to Rocktoberfest’s first shred-off!” The MC announced. Seriously in all the major fests we played in Europe, I’d never heard a crowd reach this decibel levels this radical before. Phones in hand, they were ready to record this history-making event. It wouldn’t surprise me to hear on the news tomorrow that they crashed every social media outlet with the massive number of uploads. “No prize will be awarded tonight. This is for notoriety and for the guitarists to get a chance to jam with one another and show you what they’ve got. On that note, let’s kick it off with two of the cockiest guitarists that challenge each other every chance they get. Let’s hear it for Ryder Hampton from Maiden Voyage and Stoli Branson from Social Sinners!”

Ryder immediately broke into the guitar solo for Her Embrace, that fucking thing was like three minutes long. His fingers flawlessly flew across the strings. The dude was a fucking badass. When he was done, he flicked his pick at Stoli, who shot right into the solo from Adrenaline Rush. These two were like mirror images of each other, never missing a note and barely breaking a sweat. They’d played these songs so many times that it was nothing but muscle memory for them. When Stoli finished, he flipped Ryder off, and laughter rang out. That was their style, and Social Sinners had it right when they coined the phrase—Family doesn’t need blood to form a bond, it only needs to have a heart—which these two bands had without question.

“All right,” the MC said, “calm down. Those two know they’re all that and more,” he joked though he wasn’t far off. Both were smug as fuck when it came to their playing abilities though Stoli was a cocky fucker pretty much all the time. A few more guitarists got up there and did their thing, and they were great but nowhere near the caliber of the first two. But Dez still hadn’t played, and he was a fucking badass, a true guitar prodigy and the one everyone was waiting for. When Dez and his guys walked up there with Terry and Kale, the crowd quieted to a level you could hear a pin drop. Every single body here anxiously awaited what came next. As one, they broke into a classic Shriveled Rose song, playing it together they had been doing it every day. The phones in the air recorded, and Dez already had his gaze locked on a kid in the crowd.

“No way,” Seltzer said.

Dez took the mic and addressed the crowd, “Now, with the sponsor’s permission, we’re going to hijack this segment for a minute. I’m betting everyone here tonight likes guitar playing just a little.” The crowd fucking went nuts. “Sounds to me like maybe more than just a little. Bet there’s a bunch of you out there dreaming of being up here with us tonight!” Shit, Seltzer and I were jonesing from the sideline but didn’t want to take the moment we anticipated was about to happen away from another more deserving. “How many of you play!” It looked like every hand in the crowd shot up. “How many of you practice every single day!”

The kid in the crowd I'd seen Dez eyeing while he played watched Dez intently the entire time he spoke. "How many of you pass on hanging out with friends and would rather spend a Friday night with a guitar in your hands than out partying? Who thinks they have what it takes to get where we are? Be honest with yourself for a moment. Think about what you put in and what you want to get out of it and tell me who thinks they have the potential to stand up here."

That kid seemed unsure he wanted to respond. His hand raised no higher than his chest. Dez being Dez, he decided for him and held his hand out to help the kid up on stage. "You wanna come up and prove it?" The kid grabbed onto Dez's hand as the crowd helped him up. They seemed as eager as we were to see what this kid was made of. Once onstage, Dez took off the guitar he'd been playing, Adrian Lee's guitar, rumor has it, and placed the strap over the kid's shoulder.

"All right, kid, what's your name?" Dez asked him.

"Blaze."

"Well, Blaze, it's awesome to meet you. Now, show us what you can do."

Seltzer and I turned to each other, "Holy shit!" We shouted just as Blaze broke into a song, and man, that kid could play. Never mind, he didn't have the time to tune it to his liking or that he'd never played this particular guitar before. It was like a second skin to him, his fingers flying of their own accord as he nailed every note.

“I’d say he proved it, wouldn’t you!” Dez said to the crowd as they cheered nearly as loud for Blaze as they did for the rest of the guitarists on that stage tonight.

“I’d say you just earned yourself a guitar, too,” Dez said to Blaze.

“I fucking knew it,” Seltzer said, grinning like he was the one getting the Adrian Lee.

“Holy shit, really? Like, to keep?” Blaze asked, eyes wide as the moon.

“Yup,” Dez said, smiling equally as wide.

“Holy...shit,” Blaze choked out, staring down at the guitar in disbelief.

“Care to join us in one more song?” Dez asked him.

“Hell yeah!”

“Do you know The Final Nail?” Dez asked him. That was a Shriveled Rose classic, every guitarist worth his weight strived to learn it. Adrian Lee was a gifted guitarist who left this world too soon.

Blaze dove in, eyes glued to his fingers as they hit every note. I caught a glimpse of Kale and Terry wiping their eyes. What an excellent way to pay tribute to their fallen comrade, Adrian Lee, who died in the crash that rocked the metal world. But before we knew it, the shred off was over, and I was elated to witness it firsthand. Security stayed with Blaze, making sure no one got a chance to strip him of the gift Dez gave him. I hoped the kid had a safe way to get home. I’m sure Dez and

his crew would see that he did. Man, the elation Blaze was feeling. I imagine he was flying high right now.

While the crews set up the stage for Social Sinners to play next, the rest of us left our perches in the wings and headed back to the VIP area. As we rounded the corner, Snipe stumbled toward us, clutching his right arm. He was covered in blood and cuts. His lip was busted, one eye was swollen shut and the other well on its way. His shirt was shredded, and his earpiece wasn't missing.

"Snipe!" Sikes yelled, barely catching him before he hit the ground.

"Jordan," he choked, "trouble." He paused far too long for my liking, as I readied to take off at warp speed. "Supply tent. Ambush. Three guards. Tony," was the last he said before he passed out.

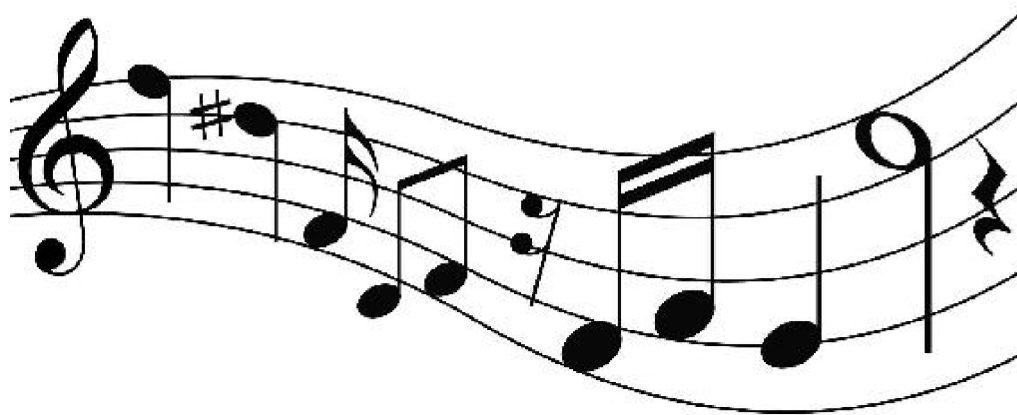
"Code blue to the supply tent!" Sikes said loud enough into his earpiece so the guards around us heard too. Half took off and headed toward the supply tent. Tony had to have been planning this for a long ass time to have multiple guards helping him. How did he know Jordan would be here?

*Ah, his people are still watching him, reporting back to him.*

*Fuck.*

"David!" Someone yelled from behind me, but my feet were already in motion. My only hope was that we got to Jordan before...

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN





## Jordan

“So,” Tony said. With my back to him I heard him slide a knife from the butcher block.

*There's no way I'm not dying tonight.*

*David's smile, Ely's bubbly personality. The things I'd miss most.*

“You think you're good enough for these people?” Tony asked. When I didn't respond, he grew angry. “Turn the fuck around when I'm talking to you, boy!” Slowly I rotated until I met Tony's glare. Would his terrifying eyes be the last ones I'd see? David's caring, warm grays flashed through my memory. Have you ever stared into the eyes of a predator? No humanity left. Their soulless gaze devoid of all emotion. No care. No fear. No remorse. The human that was once inside them was long gone. Replaced by the devil they'd become. That was some of what I felt in Tony's gaze. I thought he was cold before, prison only worsened it.

Tony stared longingly at the knife in his hand, mesmerized. Light reflected off the polished steel, dancing along the canvas as he wielded it. “You don't belong here. You don't belong in this new life you've inserted yourself into. You're nothing more than a common whore just like your mother was.” He reached for an apple from the basket, slicing through it with ease courtesy of the freshly sharpened blade. “You're still the pathetic little boy I rescued from the streets.”

“My-my guard will be here soon, and-and you’ll be sorry,” I tried to say with confidence though it came out as anything but.

“My-my guard,” he mocked. “Your dumbass guard was no match for me.”

Stalling was what I needed to do. Keep him talking until the others have time to find us. “How did you get out?”

“Don’t you worry about that? You should be concerned with whether I’m going to kill you right here or take you out into the desert and leave a trail of your body parts for your little boyfriend to find,” Tony said. “Wouldn’t that be quite the story? I can see the headlines now, David Jordan’s boyfriend was found, well, pieces of him, throughout the Nevada desert. The wildlife will eat some of it first, I’m sure.”

*He knows who David is, but how did he know we were dating? That only came about yesterday, and even we’d not named what we were doing. This is not good. He can’t hurt David. I’d rather it be me. He’s right. I’m not good enough to be a part of this life. I’ll only drag David down. He deserves better. No one will miss me.*

“Ah, I can see the wheels turning,” he trailed the tip of the knife along my cheek. Warmth ran down my face, and a coppery scent filled my nostrils. As he raised it, his tongue darted out and licked the blood from the blade, and I realized it was mine. “I’ve always known where you were, Jordan. What you were doing, whom you were doing it with. I’ve got eyes everywhere, and you’ve been a very naughty boy. You

remember what happens to boys who disobey their daddies, don't you?"

At the mere mention of the word, anger filled me. "You're no daddy. Daddies are warm and caring, always putting their boy's needs ahead of their own. You were a sadistic, abusive fuck!" I yelled. In hindsight, I probably shouldn't have responded but my brain didn't engage until we were face to face with his hand squeezing my throat.

"Jordan," Tony's eyes, dark as night, bore into mine. "Ten long years I've waited for this, planned for this moment. You were supposed to die that night, right along with her. Being the nice guy I was, I let you go because you were just a kid. Then I ran into you a couple of years later and decided to keep you as my pet to do with as I pleased."

"What do you mean," the words came out as nothing more than breathy gasps. His grip restricting the airflow.

Tony's maniacal laughter chilled me to the core, "Your mother, dumbass. Oh, this is rich, you don't remember?" When I didn't respond, he continued. "You don't remember who your mother's dealer was?"

Past visions of a lifetime ago, scenes of horrific memories I'd suppressed, came rushing back. My mother and her tricks, quick fucks to get her next hit. Disgusting, vile men came and went at all hours of the day and night in the seedy hotel rooms we'd called home. Often, I hid in the closet out of sight while they did whatever they wanted to her—and she let them. Then...there he was, clear as day. Tony hovered over my

mother as he tormented her with the tiny bag she desperately sought. “Goodbye, Theresa,” he said, spitting in her face before she dove for the baggie he’d dropped. He vanished as I watched her snatch the elastic band and syringe from the bedside table, tightening it around her arm before plunging the needle into her vein. That was the night she died.

“You?” I said, my voice trembling.

“She owed my boss a shit ton of money, and he was tired of taking it out in trade from her addict ass. I’ve got one word for you—fentanyl,” he snarled the word.

Tony murdered my mother.

Would she have turned her life around if he hadn’t? Got a real job? A home for us? I’ll never know because he fucking killed her. How many lives has he presided over as judge, jury, and executioner? There was only one place a soul as dark as his could go.

“And now, with that bit of information tucked away inside your brain, it’s time for me to punish my naughty boy before we say goodbye. See,” Tony said, “I can’t let you live knowing what you know. But first, I’m going to fuck you. One. Last. Time.”

“I’d rather die,” I grit out.

“Oh, trust me, you will. But it will be with some of *me* still inside you.” Tony reached down with his free hand and pulled his dick out. The sick bastard was rock hard. He was getting off on this fear-fueled power play. He twisted me by the throat

to the angle he needed and gripped the elastic waistband of my pants, yanking them down. Footfall sounded outside the tent, cursing and bodies shuffling. “Awe, is that your little rockstar boyfriend? Come to watch me fuck you? I’ll show him how a real man does it. He’s cute. Maybe I’ll have his ass for round two when I’m done with you?” Tony spat in his hand and smeared it on my hole. “It’s going to fucking hurt, and I’ll love every second I get to hear you scream. This ass is mine, Jordan.”

Tears welled in my eyes as I felt the head of his dick press against my entrance, but I refused to let them fall. Tony fed from other people’s pain and misery, but I wouldn’t give him that satisfaction. He would kill me no matter what, so what was left for me to lose?

“Get the fuck away from him!” David yelled.

“David, stand back,” I heard another man say. “Tony, release Jordan and step away with your hands in the air.”

“Fuck you,” Jordan spat and pressed forward as his cock breached my hole.

“This is your last chance. Release Jordan, or we *will* shoot,” the same man said, and Jordan gave pause though only momentarily.

A single shot rang out, echoing through the tent. The inertia from the hit forced Tony’s body forward, knocking me into the metal shelving. Under our combined weight, it caved, and we tumbled to the ground.

“Jordan!” I heard David shout before I took one last breath.

\*\*\*

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

*Is that the damn smoke detector again? Didn't I just change those batteries?*

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

I tried to throw back the covers and get out of bed trying to remember if I had anymore 9-volt batteries, but something tugged at my arm. I reached down to yank it off, when another hand came down on mine. “Jordan, don't. That's your IV.” My eyes popped open, and I glanced around, there beside me stood a nurse.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“St. Mary's Regional Medical Center in Reno,” she replied. “I'm Nancy. I'm your nurse tonight. How do you feel, Jordan?”

David burst into the room, his eyes were red and swollen. I couldn't look away. He was here. I didn't die. That threw me into a fit of tears, releasing the emotions I'd held in. He was immediately at my side, holding me as best he could, given the IV's and where I was. “Jordan, fuck,” he wiped at his eyes. “I thought I lost you. I thought, fuck.” By this point, we were both bawling.

“But I didn't,” I coughed. The sharp pain in my throat as I spoke felt like I'd swallowed a box of nails.

The nurse picked up a cup from the bedside table, slid a straw into it, and placed it at my lips, “Small sips, Jordan.” I wanted to gulp it until the first drops hit the sore area, then I wanted to shove it away, it burned so badly I grimaced. “That’s why I said to sip it. Your throat is going to be sore for a while. It’s bruised inside and out. Thankfully the doctor said there doesn’t appear to be any permanent damage.”

“I’m a disaster,” I said.

“You’re the most beautiful disaster I’ve ever laid eyes on,” David replied, pressing his lips to mine.

“How did I get here?” My voice was barely audible, and it hurt like hell to talk.

“Helicopter. They let Sikes and I ride with you and Snipe. The guys wanted to meet us here, but Easton told them it would be a media circus if they came. There are too many fans in the area from the concert that would’ve tried to come when the paps caught wind,” David replied.

“Tony?” I questioned, hoping like hell he was gone.

David and Sikes stared at each other before Sikes answered. “Dead.”

“Thank fuck,” I sighed. The sudden urge to sleep overwhelmed me. Whatever they were giving me it was good shit.

“Rest now, love. I’ll be here when you wake up,” David said, then kissed me again.

*Did he just call me love?*

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The next time I woke, David was asleep in the chair beside the bed, and Sikes was in the corner doing the same though he woke when I moved. “Hey,” Sikes said. “How are you feeling?”

“Ugh, like I was beaten and choked,” I tried for humor, but neither of us were having it. “Is there water over there?” I asked, pointing to the bedside table.

“Oh yeah, let me get it,” Sikes said, placing the straw at my lips as the nurse had.

“Ugh, still burns,” I complained.

“Probably will for a while,” Sikes said. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No thanks. Did they find out how Tony got in and who was helping him?” I asked.

“Three security guards and two of your temps from Black Rock were in on it. They staged the wreck, purposely wiping their own vehicle out in front of the prisoner bus. It flipped a couple of times, and that was how Tony broke free. They had a car waiting nearby for him,” Sikes said.

“How did they figure out who it was at the arena?” I asked.

“Cameras. Only management knew they had them and where they were. Found the guys nursing sore knuckles and limbs. Snipe got them pretty good before they took him down, so they were easy to apprehend. I took great pleasure in giving



back what they did to my partner,” Sikes growled, a sad look crossed his face, which he quickly schooled though not before I saw it. I wonder if there’s more to their story.

David stirred beside me, “Hey, beautiful,” he took my hand and pressed his lips to the knuckles. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’d rather be almost anywhere but here,” I admitted, staring into the gray eyes I feared I’d never see again. “You have the most amazing eyes.”

David blushed, “Right back at ‘cha, babe.”

“What, these things?” I teased, fluttering my lashes.

“Knock, knock,” Snipe said as he pushed the door open with his hip. “How’s the patient?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” I said, taking in the cast on his right arm and the stitches above his left eye. “They got you pretty good.”

“Yeah, the fuckers ambushed me. Now I’m off work for who knows how long.” Snipe groaned. Did these guys really love their jobs that much?

“Here, sit down,” Sikes said to Snipe, directing him toward the chair he’d slept in.

“Hello, Jordan. Glad to see you’re awake. I’m Dr. Simpson,” the doctor said as he entered the room. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired, and my throat is sore, but otherwise, okay,” I replied, more than ready to get out of here. “Oh crap, how are

we getting back to the venue?” I still had packing to do, trucks to load, and a drive to make back to Vegas. “There is so much to do. We need to get out of here.”

“Jordan,” Dr. Simpson said. “I believe your friends and partner have taken care of all of that if I’m not mistaken?” He eyed the three of them.

*Partner...*

*Was it true? For the first time, giddiness filled me at the thought.*

“You’re correct,” David said. “The bus will pick us up on the way back to Vegas tomorrow. That is if you’re getting released then?”

“Yes, I think Jordan can be released in the morning,” Dr. Simpson said. “You’re going to be sore for some time. Ibuprofen and ice packs on your neck in twenty-minute increments should help with the discomfort. Jordan, you’re lucky to be alive. Had he continued to hold you as tightly as he had for much longer, you could have been asphyxiated. Thankfully the x-rays didn’t show any sign of cerebral perfusion. The pressure did cause broken blood vessels in both eyes, but that will go away in a few days.”

“David, you didn’t tell me that. I’m haggard as fuck,” I threw my arm over my eyes. Maybe if I hid, the ugly would go away.

“I’ll be back later to check on you,” Dr. Simpson said as he left the room.

“Here,” David said, tapping my arm. “Ely is calling every fifteen minutes to check on you, so you might want to give him a call.” He slid a phone into my hand.

“I’m glad you found my phone. I was afraid I’d lost it,” I admitted. He wasn’t kidding. I had thirteen missed calls and a million texts from Ely alone. That didn’t cover the ones from Carmen and other staff members. I’d begun typing out a group text when my phone rang with Ely’s name lighting the screen. “Hello dear,” I teased.

“Oh my god, Jordan. You have no idea how happy I am to hear your voice. How are you? Are you okay? When can you leave?” Ely fired off.

“One question at a time. You’re killing my brain,” I mock groaned though I was elated to hear from my friend and see the faces I feared I’d never gaze upon again. “I’m good, Ely, though I feel horrible. I’m not there to help with everything today.”

“When do you get to leave? I need to see you. Can we stop by on the way home tomorrow?” Ely asked.

“David said the bus is picking us up tomorrow. Maybe be on that bus?” I hinted. “Crap, who’s gonna drive the truck home for me?”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ve got everything handled. You just focus on getting well, and I’ll make sure I’m on that bus tomorrow. I need to hug you and see that you’re okay with my own eyes,” Ely replied.

“Okay, mom,” I teased, but that only stirred an unpleasant memory from last night. “I’m getting tired. I’m going to get some sleep.”

“Love you, Jordan,” Ely said, and I choked up.

“Love you too, Ely,” I said, then handed David my phone for safekeeping.

“What was that look for?” David asked. Of course, he didn’t miss it.

I swallowed the rising bile. “Tony admitted he killed my mother.”

Sikes and Snipe glanced at each other. Unspoken words passed between them. “What the hell?” David said.

“I was young when she overdosed and took off right after so the cops wouldn’t shove me into a foster home. I’d suppressed the memory, likely due to the trauma of watching her die, until he brought it up last night. Then it came back full force and nearly knocked me on my ass. Tony worked for her dealer. He said she owed them a lot of money, so the last hit they gave her was laced with fentanyl,” I told them.

“Jesus Jordan,” David said, roughly gripping his hair. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Well,” I said, brushing at the blanket though nothing was there, “she was an addict and was incapable of being a real mom, but she was the only one I had. It just made me wonder when he said that last night, what if she could’ve gotten her shit together and we became a real family, you know?” I said,

more like asking the universe even though it was irrelevant, and question would remain unanswered.

It was a restless night. Opening the vault in my mind released past demons that once again haunted my dreams. Trauma's better left buried with the dead. I'll never know how I survived those years, left to my own devices at a ridiculously young age. By all rights, I should've been dead right out of the womb. Why was I gifted with the ability to survive while others weren't so lucky?

Was I being given a second chance to make a difference? To be a better man? Or was there a guardian angel looking out for me? If so, that poor angel more than earned their wings. I was a handful on a good day.

I opened my eyes, ready to take on the world. Glancing around at some of my newfound family asleep in the uncomfortable hospital chairs just to be near me, to make sure I was going to be all right. What did I do to deserve them?

David's eyes opened, and his head rolled along the chair back, facing me. "What are you thinking so hard about over there, beautiful?" he asked me.

Do I share my innermost thoughts? Are we at that point? I don't see how we could be when we were nothing more than fuck buddies prior to this weekend. "Life and whatnot," I said, keeping it neutral. "Didn't realize I had as much baggage as I do. Maybe it's um, maybe it's time to talk to someone."

"Like a therapist?" David asked.

I sighed, “Yes.” From what I hear, admitting it is the first step.

“I would support you one hundred percent in whatever you decide,” David said, sliding his fingers through mine. “I’m sure Easton could help you out with a referral.

“I’ll probably go to the same one Ely has been seeing. He seems to like her, and she’s one Easton referred him to,” I said.

“Speaking of Ely,” David began. “I asked him to pack up your stuff and bring you a change of clothes when the bus arrives. I didn’t figure you’d want to wear the hospital gown home. Not that you don’t look fabulous in it.”

“I do rock it, don’t I,” I winked even though the thing was God awful.

“The guys all chipped in to help get the trucks packed. They hit the road early this morning and should be here in a couple of hours,” David said. “Breakfast should be here soon.”

“Yay, more Jell-O,” I complained though I know I should be thankful.

David laughed, “I’m sure Ely will hook you up once we’re on the bus. You and I are going to ride on theirs, it’s more private, and I think it will be more relaxing for you too.”

If I were standing, I would’ve full-on swooned. Witnessing this new side of David, the daddy side, made my insides all gooey. Was I in love with him? No, not yet, but if he keeps this up, it won’t take much before I am. We didn’t have to wait long for breakfast to come. While I ate, Sikes and Snipe

headed down to the cafeteria. They'd bring something back for David. I couldn't wait to be able to eat real food. There was only so much Jell-O and broth a man could take. I'd just started to doze off when Ely and Rhone came in. I heard them tell David that Sikes and Snipe had met them at the rear employee entrance.

"Oh, Jordan," Ely cried, running to my side. "I was so worried about you."

"I'm fine, Ely. How is it that you waltz in here looking like you just stepped off a magazine cover? Meanwhile, I look like death warmed over," I complained.

"Jordan, I don't care what you look like. I only care that you're still walking this earth with us," Ely sassed.

"Good morning, Jordan," Dr. Simpson said as he entered the room. "I see we have a full house today, good thing I'm coming to release you."

"Yes!" I cheered.

"How are you feeling today?" he asked, examining my throat. "Any changes?"

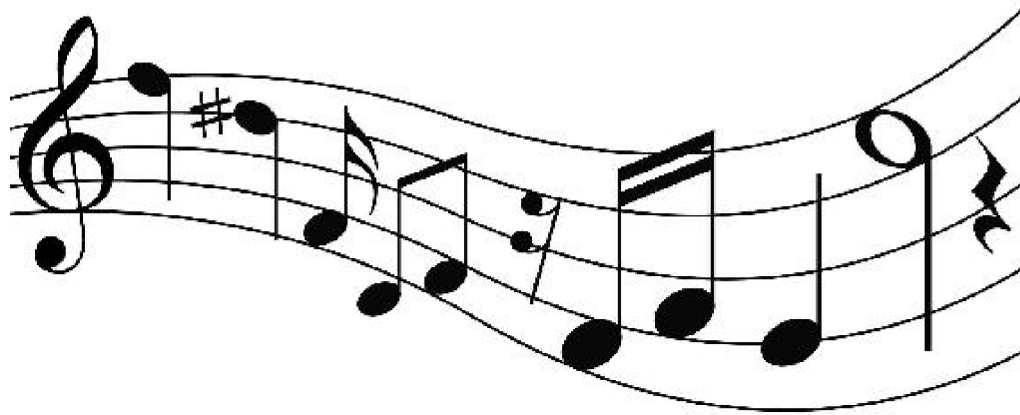
"No, I feel the same as last night but less tired," I replied.

"Open wide, please," he asked as he placed the depressor against my tongue while shining a light down my throat. "Still a bit swollen, but it has lessened. Why don't you get changed while the nurse prints your discharge papers? Remember, drink lots of fluids, ibuprofen for pain, and ice packs in twenty-minute increments as needed."

An hour later, they were wheeling me out. I assured them I could walk, but the nurse said it's hospital policy and there's no way around it. Ely and Rhone insisted on giving David and me the back bedroom so I could rest comfortably during the nearly seven-hour drive back to Vegas.



# CHAPTER FIFTEEN



## David

While Jordan napped in the hospital and on the bus, I worked on a song that came to me after one of our conversations and wanted to get Rhone's take on it. Sappy anything wasn't my style, but I felt these lyrics were deep, residing within my core and I had to get them out. "Hey man, you got a sec?" I asked Rhone. Ely was putting lunch together in the kitchen area. Snipe was resting in one of the bunks while Sikes sat in the front with the driver.

"You bet. What's up?" Rhone replied.

I handed him the paper then slid into the bench seat across from him. "I've been working on this song and wanted to see what you think. It's called Beautiful Disaster and a bit outside my wheelhouse." Rhone read it and then snapped a picture and shot off a text. "What was that all about?" I asked.

"This is a great song, one straight from the heart, and I get where it came from," he glanced toward the back of the bus. "This is the calmest I've ever seen Jordan. Granted, he's medicated, but how the two of you look at each other," he shook his head, "Ely was right when he said we needed to stay out of it. I texted Chase and Seltzer to get their input. Not sure if you had a chance to read the email, but Easton set up a show at the House of Blues in two weeks with Eradicate. Maybe we could work out an acoustic version and play it for the person who was meant to hear it live that night. What do you think?"

I stretched back and stared at the ceiling. Thoughts swirled around—could I do this? Not only put music to the lyrics but play it live in front of Jordan? In two weeks? I'll never know until we try. "Think we can pull it off?"

Rhone's phone chimed, "Yeah, and it seems I'm not the only one." He handed it to me so I could read their responses. Chase and Seltzer were confident and virtually cheering me on.

"All right, I'm in," I replied. If my brothers believed in me, then I needed to as well.

Jordan emerged from the bedroom. Bedhead and pillow lines across his face made sleepy Jordan extra adorable. "Hey, what's going on?"

"You're just in time," Ely said to Jordan, "have a seat. Lunch is ready. I packed some of the leftovers from this weekend and was able to whip up a tomato-basil soup and sandwiches. Sorry, Jordan, just soup for you today."

"I'm more than good with that. I've had enough broth and Jell-O to last a lifetime. This will be a warm welcome," Jordan replied, as he sat beside me. The urge to slide him onto my lap and feed him was overwhelming, but I refrained. Ely set a water bottle in front of him along with the ibuprofen.

"How are you doing?" I asked, squeezing his knee.

"Tired," Jordan sighed. "Having a hard time sleeping."

Crap, I didn't think of that. He slept rough in the hospital too, but I figured it was due to all the distractions. "Would it

help if I laid down with you?”

“It might,” he whispered. Ely and Rhone were talking about wedding stuff, so they probably weren’t listening to us. “I just keep seeing him, those evil fucking eyes staring at me.” Jordan shivered, and I wrapped my arms around him.

I kissed the top of his head. “He’ll never touch you again.”

“Yeah, but what if he has more people watching me?” Jordan replied, his words barely audible. I wouldn’t have heard if I wasn’t sitting as close as I was. I’d often had the same thought while watching him sleep, thanking the fates for sparing his life. The bruises around his neck darkened by the hour to the point I could make out the asshole’s handprint. If that fucker weren’t dead, I’d probably be in jail for killing him myself.

“Do you want to stay with me?” I asked, the words forming without thought. “When we get back to Vegas?”

“I don’t want to be in the way or cramp your style,” he replied, staring down at his untouched meal.

“Jordan, you are my style. Now please, eat.” He nodded and took a bite but still wouldn’t meet my eyes. “Jordan, I’ll sleep better with you beside me.” My hand gently glided along his back, tracing a delicate pattern. Slowly, he relaxed, leaning into me. Between the repetitive motion and emptying his bowl, he tucked in and dozed off.

“Should we put him to bed?” Ely whispered as he cleared the dishes.

Gently, I nudged Jordan, “Hey, sleepyhead, let’s go to bed.”

“Will you stay with me?” he asked, barely awake.

“Of course,” I replied.

“Thanks, daddy,” he mumbled. Ely and Rhone’s heads pivoted our way, mouths agape as they stared at me. I thought I knew what Jordan needed or at least that was my hope. Hearing that word cross his lips when he was most vulnerable answered that question. Jordan needed a daddy, and that daddy was going to be me. I guided my sleepy boy back to bed and slid the door shut. Once I’d stripped down to my boxers and t-shirt, I snuggled in beside him. Usually, I slept in boxers or naked, but I didn’t feel comfortable doing that, given what he’d been through. Reaching for the body beside him after having a nightmare, finding it naked would probably freak him out. That wasn’t happening on my watch.

Jordan rolled over and laid his head on my chest, cuddling in tight. “Thank you, daddy.” Uncertain he’d remember this slip of the tongue when he woke, I lived in the moment, soaking it up.

“You’re welcome, my sleepy boy.” Nothing more was said and given that I’d spent two nights in the most uncomfortable chairs known to man, I curled protectively around Jordan and crashed hard both in mind and heart.

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“David?” a familiar voice said but in my groggy state, I couldn’t place it. When I didn’t respond, he shook my arm,

“David?”

Opening one eye, I prepared to glare at whoever had a death wish. Waking us was a cardinal sin. But when my gaze landed on Ely, the anger dissipated. “Hey, what’s up?”

“We’re back in Vegas. They’re dropping us off outside the houses in a couple of minutes,” Ely replied.

“Oh, okay, thanks. I’ll get Jordan up,” Ely nodded and slid the door behind him. Jordan was still curled beside me, “Hey baby,” I whispered, “we’re home.”

“Hmm, don’t wanna go home. Wanna sleep,” he mumbled.

“We can do that, but we need to get inside first. Think you can wake up for me, or did you want me to carry you?” I asked.

He flopped on his back, “Carry me fireman style.”

I laughed and stole a quick kiss. “There’s the snarky Jordan we all know and love. Does that mean you’re feeling better?”

“So-so. Still beyond tired, and I smell like a hospital,” he gagged.

“Let’s get inside, then we can shower and go back to sleep,” I said, just as his stomach grumbled. “Think Ely has any tomato soup left? I swear, that guy could have nothing more than a beet and a piece of ham and could somehow turn it into a gourmet meal,” Jordan said, shaking his head.

“I heard that,” Ely hollered from the hallway. “And I already put the rest of the soup in a container for you.”

“I love you!” Jordan said in return.

“Right back at cha’,” Ely bounced back.

Rhone and Ely helped us, carrying our bags while I helped a sleepy Jordan inside. Chase and Seltzer were waiting in the living room with Easton and Diamond. “Hey, what are you doing here?” I asked.

“We wanted to check on Jordan and see if you guys needed anything,” Easton replied.

“Huh?” Jordan stumbled. “Really?”

“Jordan,” Easton said as he walked over to him. “You are family now, and we take care of ours. Now, what can we do for you?”

Jordan burst into tears and nearly bowled Easton over, trying to hug him. They likely would’ve tumbled over if Diamond had not been standing behind him. “I’ve never had a family,” Jordan sniffled.

I wrapped my arms around him and Easton from the opposite side, “You do now.”

They stayed and chatted for a few more minutes until Jordan’s yawns increased. Easton and Diamond hit the road, back to Seattle on their bus after Ely assured Easton that he’d take care of Jordan’s meals. Otherwise, they said they were ordering food delivery service for us. I was good either way because cooking was not my forte. As soon as everyone left, Jordan and I went upstairs to shower. It was nice how he relented and let me take care of him, washing every inch of his

body and scrubbing his hair. After dressing him in a pair of my boxers and a t-shirt, I tucked him in and then took my turn cleaning up. When I got to bed, he was curled up in the middle.

“That was nice,” Jordan mumbled when pulled back the covers.

“I thought you were asleep. What was nice?” I asked.

“Everything. Easton and Diamond, Chase and Seltzer, Ely and Rhone. It’s nice to have people care,” Jordan replied.

“They’re your friends too. It’s only natural they’d want to make sure you’re okay,” it broke my heart that Jordan never had a family or anyone but Ely to call his friend. Not that Ely was lacking in any way, but still. All these years, he had been taking care of himself. For as long as I’m a part of his life, I’ll ensure he’ll never be alone or feel unloved again.

*Loved.*

Was that the plateau I’d reached with Jordan after nearly watching him die? As soon as he hit the ground, Tony’s dead body draped over his, my fucking heart stopped. They wouldn’t let me near him until they secured Tony, and by then, the emergency medical personnel were there, assessing Jordan and carting him off to load into the helicopter. During the flight, they had a body on either side of him, one reading off his vitals while the other charted them. That was by far the scariest night of my life.



“Ely’s my friend, but the rest are yours. Still, it was nice,” Jordan said, shaking me from my thoughts.

“Babe, you, and I—we’re an us now, that makes them our friends, and if they didn’t like you, they wouldn’t have come to check on you. Ely is your best friend and will be there no matter what. The others now consider you family. Speaking of family, I’d like you to meet mine when you feel up to it,” I blurted out, probably not the best time to add that to his plate.

His eyes popped open, “You-you want me to meet your family?”

“Yeah, of course. You’re important to me. I’ve never brought anyone home, and they’ll be excited that I finally have a boyfriend. Oh god, the twins are going to tease the hell out of me,” I groaned. Just thinking about their energy wore me out.

“The twins?” he asked.

“Sorry, I guess we never talked much before, did we? Okay, here’s the 4-1-1 on my *familia*. Dad, mom, twin ten-year-old sisters, Angela, and Ariella. I love them to death, but they have enough energy to power the universe,” I smiled, thinking of the two adorable hellions. “And tons, like, beyond the ability to count that high number of relatives though I won’t throw you into that viper pit yet.”

“What if your parents don’t like me? I know I’m a bit much for most people. I don’t mean to be. I just get nervous, ramble on and on, and try to stop, but...” I cut off his ramble with my lips. “Mmm, that’s nice, daddy.”

*Daddy...* “I wondered if you’d remember saying that. You were pretty out of it when you did,” I said, happily surprised.

“Is it okay? I’ve never had anyone care for me the way you have like a real daddy is supposed to. I know it’s only been for a few days, and maybe this is moving fast. I probably should’ve gone home, but I didn’t want to be alone. Scratch that. I didn’t want to be without you...” Again, I cut off his rambling with a kiss. “You know, those dangerous lips of yours only temporarily stop the anxious mutterings,” Jordan teased.

“Yes, I know this, and while the ramblings are adorable, kissing my boy is much better,” I said.

“Your boy. I like that, but can I have a special nickname, daddy?” he asked.

He was fucking killing me with this daddy stuff. I thought it was something I might want, a role I now knew was made for me. Without a shred of doubt, Jordan’s daddy was who I was meant to be, and my age had zero to do with it. “Hmm, how about rambler?” he scrunched his face. “Princess?” that one got an eye twitch. “I think I need more time to find the right one.”

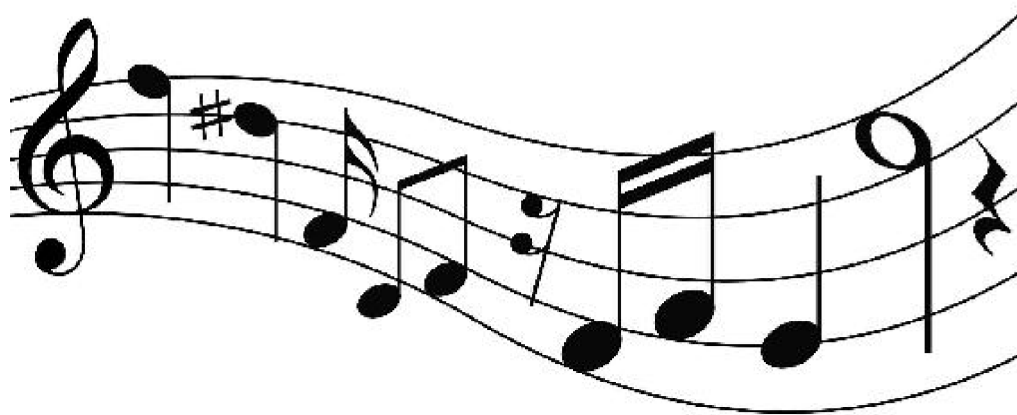
“You do that. Take all the time you need because rambler and princess ain’t happening,” he snarked—God, how I’ve missed that these last couple of months we spent apart.

“All right, my brave boy, time for bed,” I said.

“You think I’m brave?” Jordan mumbled.

“You are by far the bravest boy I know, Jordan,” I pressed my lips to his forehead. “You’ve been through so much, and you always persevere. You are without a doubt my sweet, brave boy.” If my friends could hear me now, they’d torment me and call me an old man. But I didn’t care. I found the one who tamed me. The one who needed me. The one who controlled the strings of my heart, and in time, when he was ready, I’d tell him so.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN



## Jordan

**W**e'd been home from Rocktoberfest for two weeks, and I had yet to sleep at my house. Daddy and I stopped by so I could grab some clothes and check the mail, but that was it. While there, he insisted I check whatever was in the fridge and make sure it hadn't spoiled. Such a daddy thing to say. Coming home to that smell would've been horrific, but when he opened the door, a whole new lecture surfaced. He informed me if I did stay here again, he'd hire Ely to set up a meal plan for me including stocking my fridge and pantry. Little did he know, I had no plan of staying here or anywhere he wasn't, so the joke was on him. Once I got a taste of sleeping in daddy's arms, there was no turning back. He made sure I ate and bathed before bed, and sometimes joined me in the tub. He cared, and I'd never had that before. I never felt safer than I did with him, and tonight was the night I'd tell him so. After the concert, they played at House of Blues with Eradicate Apathy.

The holidays were just around the corner, and it was back to work for Ely and me on Monday, but for this weekend, we were spending it with our men and the members of Eradicate. Sitting in the front row with Ely and watching both bands perform was amazing. I'd seen Embrace play before, but not like this, like I belonged here.

“Good evening, House of Blues!” Chase's voice boomed through the mic. The crowd went wild. Embrace was nearly

through with their set, and soon, we'd be headed home. I was nervous, having never said those three little words to a partner before. "Tonight, we have a new song we'd like to perform for you. It's a special song, written by our bassist, David Jordan." I watched daddy as he walked out carrying a stool and an acoustic guitar. "You ready, man?" Chase asked him.

"Ready as I'll ever be," he replied.

"What's going on?" I asked Ely. He shrugged and mimed zipping his lips. I wanted to shake that smug look off his face.

"Jordan, would you join us up here, please?" I froze, like full on couldn't fucking move. Sikes came and escorted me up onstage. "Have a seat," Chase directed, pointing to the stool beside daddy's that had magically appeared while I was in la-la land. "All right, this song is called, Beautiful Disaster." Wait, that was what daddy called me in the hospital when I said I was a disaster. As he strummed the opening chords and Chase began to sing, daddy turned his head my way, serenading me.

My resolve slowly decays

Dying a horrible death as I cave

I tried my best to leave

Only to be pulled back in

When I dream

You're right there beside me

How can I let you go

When you hold a piece of me

Chorus:

My beautiful disaster

How can it be

That you were meant for me

Life can be cruel, but not as much as fate can be

My beautiful disaster

How can I make you see

You wound up in my arms

For reasons beyond you and me

Your scent is everywhere

On the sheets beneath me

I breathe it in just to keep you near

I don't understand what you've done to me

Your pleasure is mine to control

Down on your knees is where you'll be

While I give you what you need

Give your worries to me, so you're free to breathe

Chorus:

My beautiful disaster

How can it be

That you were meant for me

Life can be cruel, but not as much as fate can be

My beautiful disaster

How can I make you see

You wound up in my arms

For reasons beyond you and me

When we're apart, I miss your touch

And that gorgeous face staring expectantly at me

I'm so tired of fighting these feelings

When giving in is what we need

Chorus:

My beautiful disaster

How can it be

That you were meant for me

Life can be cruel, but not as much as fate can be

My beautiful disaster

How can I make you see

You wound up in my arms

For reasons beyond you and me

My beautiful disaster, this is how it's meant to be

By the end of the song, tears streamed down my face. Daddy sat the guitar down and cupped my cheeks in his hands. "This song is for you, Jordan. I love you, my beautiful disaster." Then he kissed me in front of all of Vegas.



The crowd's deafening cheers brought me back from the high I was riding. As I stared into the gorgeous gray eyes I'd fallen in love with, I admitted my truth, "I love you too, daddy." He kissed me again then it dawned on me what I'd said. "I'm so sorry. I'm used to calling you daddy and now I said it in front of everyone."

"Jordan, you can call me daddy anytime and anywhere you feel comfortable," he wrapped his arms around me. Mmm, my safe place and daddy wasn't mad at me.

"All right, lovebirds," Chase teased from the helm, "We've got one more song for the fans tonight."

Daddy kissed me again then Sikes escorted me back to my seat. Ely nearly jumped in my lap, trying to hug me. "Omg! That was so ah-mazing," Ely swooned, covering his heart while swaying back and forth. "I'm not going to pretend to understand the daddy stuff, but I've never seen you happier, and as long as this works for both of you, I'm ecstatic." As was I, I still couldn't believe this was real.

After the show, Ely and I met the guys backstage. They had a quick meet and greet with the fans, alongside Eradicate. It was cool to watch. They smiled and signed everything thrust at them, from posters to tickets to, wait, was that a boob Chase just signed? I laughed and shook my head. "Those boobs are barking up the wrong rockstars."

"I know, right?" Ely smiled.

A few minutes later, Rhone slung his arm around Ely's shoulders and daddy did the same to me. "Ready to bounce?"

Rhone asked.

“Yes, please,” Ely politely replied.

“Chase and Seltzer are hanging out with Eradicate tonight,” daddy said. “Easton and Diamond headed up to their hotel room. There’s a limo waiting to take us home.”

This had become my life. Tour buses, limousines, screaming fans, and boobs. Who would’ve ever expected the scrawny kid from the gutter would go from a frog to being treated like a prince from nothing more than a rockstar’s kiss?

Daddy nudged me with his shoulder from the seat beside me in the limo, “What are you thinking so hard about over there?”

Threading my fingers through his, I stared down at our entwined hands. “What my life has become. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined all of this,” I gazed around the inside of the limo. “It’s surreal, you know?”

“I do,” daddy replied. “It’s the same for me. I’ve known for a long time that this was the life I wanted but it was still a shocker when it hit. Up on stage, playing my heart out. Money, cars, first-class everything. And now I’ve got a sweet boy to share it with which makes it so much sweeter.”

“I think I may vomit,” Rhone said from the bench seat across from us, fake gagging.

“I deserve that,” daddy admitted. “I gave you a hard time when you went all gaga over Ely.” “I believe the line you used was one dick forever,” Rhone reminded him.

“Yeah,” daddy said as he turned and stared at me, “One dick forever.”

“Wow, I feel like we should be chanting one ring to rule them all,” I teased. Daddy and Rhone doubled over laughing. Ely shook his head but was smiling. Guess I was in the presence of LOTR fanboys.

“We’re home,” Ely announced as the limo stopped. The driver came and opened the door, and we filed out. Ely and I hugged as we said goodnight, and daddy and Rhone fist bumped. Is there a term like the word *jocks* but in a rockstar version? Like they rockstar fist bump instead of the dude broisms? Well, whatever it was, they did their version of a goodbye.

Daddy and I hadn’t fooled around since we’d returned from Rocktoberfest. In fact, I hadn’t done anything sexual since our last hook-up that night after the club scene. I know he didn’t want to rush things, given what I’d just been through. But tonight, felt right after openly confessing our love, and I knew I’d have to make the first move to show him I was ready.

“You ready to shower?” daddy asked as he sat down to remove his shoes.

“I’m ready, daddy,” I announced, peeling my clothes off as I flitted across the room, leaving a trail behind me.

Daddy grinned, “You, my beautiful butterfly, are too cute.” He stopped as he turned the shower on, “There we go.”

“There we go, what?” What did I miss?

“You’re nickname,” he replied as he tugged under the warm spray.

“I’m lost.”

“Butterfly. You emerged from your cocoon twice as bold and beautiful. You’re my beautiful butterfly,” daddy explained.

“I thought I was your beautiful disaster. I still can’t believe you wrote a song for me,” the enormity of what he’d done blew me away.

“Some days you’re my beautiful disaster, others you’re my beautiful butterfly. The point is that no matter which side you present, you’re mine, you’re beautiful, and I love you,” he tilted my head back so he could wash my hair. His fingers worked their magic, massaging the shampoo through my scalp.

“You’re gonna put me to sleep, daddy, and I have plans for us,” I flirted.

“What plans are those, beautiful?” he asked.

I dropped onto my knees and our gazes met and I gripped his semi-erect. A couple of strokes were all it needed to stand proudly. My lips parted and slid over the head deeper and deeper I took him until my nose nudged against his groin.

The pad of his thumb traced along the scar on my cheek where Tony had cut me, “Absolutely beautiful.” Daddy moaned as he fucked my face, careful not to be too rough. For now, that was okay, but there will come a time when I’d want

it rough again. “Sweet boy, daddy loves this, but I don’t want to come this way.”

Isn’t it funny how something that had previously traumatized you, calling the wrong man daddy, now felt right because it was the right man? Like the missing piece to your internal puzzle magically slid into place. “Would daddy like to fuck my pretty hole?” I asked, seductively batting my lashes, completely aware of the game I was playing.

“No, beautiful,” daddy replied, shutting off the water. “I want to make love to you. But first, we need to talk.”

“Am I in trouble?” I wracked my brain and came up with nothing. I’d been as angelic as possible, on my best behavior, which I’d done without trying. Not my norm at all.

“It’s the opposite. Come on, let’s lay down,” daddy said. I scooted in beside him and laid my head on his chest. “I know in the past we just kind of went at it, for lack of a better term. Sex was rough, hard, and fast, which got me thinking. The last time we were together, I let jealousy fuel me, and at one point, I held you by your throat.” He paused, and I realized where this was headed. “You’ve been through a lot, my love, and I know you’re seeing Dr. Lee, and I don’t want to do anything to set you back. With that being said, I feel we need to set boundaries.”

“Understood. While I did enjoy that the last time, I don’t know how I’d react now. I know you’d never hurt me, but the thought of anything around my neck kinda freaks me out,” I admitted.

“Good, thank you for being my brave boy and sharing that with me,” he kissed the top of my head. “I have no problem making love to you, but if anything triggers you, I need to promise you’ll tell me, and we stop immediately.”

“I promise, daddy.”

“Such a sweet, brave boy. Now, safewords. Did you want to stick with stoplights like last time, or did you want to come up with your own?” he asked.

“Stoplights, for now, daddy.” That was so much easier than having to think.

“Thank you, beautiful. Now, what was it you had in mind for us tonight?” Daddy asked, sliding down and covering my body with his as his mouth took mine in scorching kiss. Kissing was minimal in our past and I now realized how much I loved it. Would be tempting to see if I could get off by doing nothing more than that. Daddy’s lips left mine as they moved to my jaw, that sensitive spot beneath the ear, collar bone, and...*Oooh*.

“Yes,” I hissed, as the suction deepened. Lightly nibbling then switching to the other, pebbling both buds. The dampness in conjunction with the cold air was a sweet sensation.

“Someone’s nipples are sensitive,” he teased then nibbled them again before moving down my torso.

I ached to have his lips wrapped around my cock, yet he purposely avoided it. He spread my legs, and slid between

them, nipping up the inside of my thighs. So close to where I wanted him yet so far away. “Daddy,” I whimpered.

“Patience, baby,” daddy said, licking a stripe up my taint. “I need to taste you.” He spread my cheeks and dove in.

“Oh, my holy hell!” I proclaimed. I’d engaged in countless sexual encounters and never once had someone... “I have died and gone to heaven,” were the last words I could articulate, everything after that was pure gibberish.

“Scoot up, babe,” daddy said.

“Wait? What? No,” I whined.

“Another time I’ll let you come on my tongue. Tonight, I need to feel you around me,” daddy said, rolling a condom on. “When you’re ready, I’d like for us to get tested.”

How was I to argue with that? Wanting to be inside me? No barrier. “Yes, daddy, me too.”

I stared up at the face of the first man I’d ever truly loved and who loved me back. “Jordan,” he began. Not baby, babe, beautiful, but my name. While I knew it meant something serious was coming, I still loved hearing my name come from his lips. But I did enjoy the sweet nicknames too. “I’ll say it again, if at any point you need us to stop, please say so and we stop.”

“I will, daddy,” even though I knew I wouldn’t need to. At least, I hoped I wouldn’t. He grabbed the lube and slicked himself then reached down to further prep me. His touch was

gentle, not rushed like in the past. It was a new feeling, having someone care about more than an orgasm.

“Jordan,” as soon as I looked at daddy, he continued, “Keep your eyes on me.” I nodded. When I felt the head of his cock at my entrance I flinched, waiting for the pain to come like it had when Tony roughly breached me. “Hey, Jordan, are you still with me?” My jaw was clenched, and my eyes were tightly shut. When had that happened, I couldn’t say. “I don’t think now’s the right time,” he said.

“Please daddy, don’t stop. Make me forget. Replace the bad memories with new ones, beautiful ones. Please,” I pleaded, desperate to rid my mind of those images. “Please,” I said around the lump in my throat. “Bring the butterfly out of its cocoon.”

A single tear toppled over, and daddy wiped it away. “Only if you’re sure, my love.”

I nodded, unable to speak.

He pushed forward, little by little until his groin pressed against me. My fingertips trailed down his back, firmly gripping his ass and tugging him forward. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I arched my back taking his cock as deep as I could. I focused on the moment, our first-time making love, leaving everything else behind me. Once I got out of my own head and just felt, my troubles faded away and I was able to enjoy this. Enjoy daddy’s loving hands caressing me, treating me like a precious gem. His precious gem.

His instrument.



The one he lovingly plays, restrings, tunes, then carefully watches over it. His cock glided in and out, our bodies coming together like a finished song. The melody quaked, reaching the apex of the chorus as we came. We were a song just like the one he wrote and played for me.

I, Jordan Wright, was loved and cherished for the first time in my life.

“Daddy,” I panted, feeling that familiar pressure building at the base of my spine. “Oh, daddy. I’m so close.”

“Me too, baby,” he said placing his forehead to mine. I loved how his hair fell forward, cloaking us. “Come for me, show me how beautiful you are when you let go.” He sat back on his haunches, taking me with him, and adjusted his angle perfectly, hitting the spot that made me see stars.

“Daddy, I’m coming!” I shouted as my release barreled forward.

“Jordan,” he muttered, thrusting as far as he could, and then he too came. A few moments later when he’d caught his breath, he reached up and brushed the sweat-stuck hair from my forehead and kissed it. “Hi.”

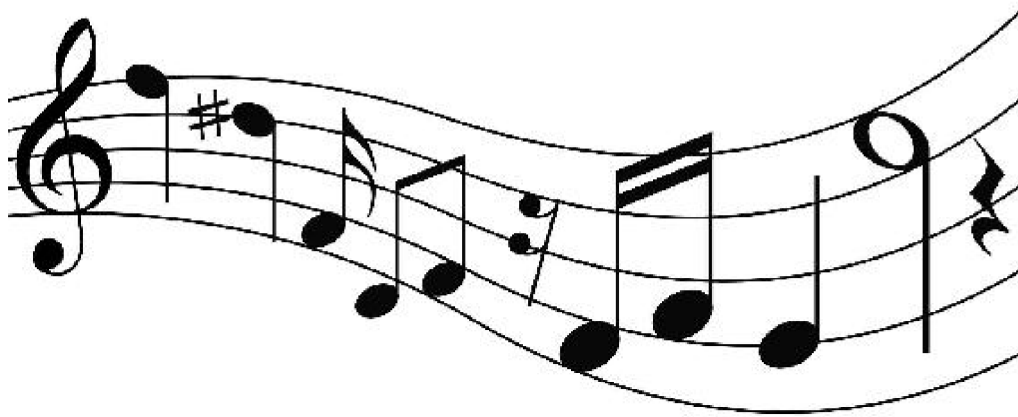
I grinned, “Hi.”

Dr. Lee warned that things I liked before may trigger me now, but nothing daddy did made me uncomfortable. I trusted him without question. Though I’d only had a handful of sessions with her, many things from my past resurfaced during our discussion. Men in my early years she claimed were

boyfriends which I later learned were nothing more than tricks, fucks for a quick buck. They'd knock her around then turn their fists on me. She was far too wasted to help herself let alone her kid. After that I'd either hide or take off, wandering the streets at all hours of the day and night. The fact she didn't know who my father was, nor did she care to find out just goes to show how little I meant. She only wanted that government check and food stamps for having me though all that stopped when we lost the shit box apartment I'd forgotten about, resulting in our first bout of homelessness. Bouncing from one seedy motel room to the next.

Gazing into those gorgeous eyes I fell head over stupid heels in love with, I realized everything in my life was the best it's ever been. I have a great job, friends, a wonderful life, and a man who truly loved me—faults and all. Am I a work in progress? Absolutely, but who isn't? I just need to take it one day at a time and work on myself and with daddy by my side, I know everything will be okay.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



## David

Jordan did better than I thought he would. I was ready to back off the moment I witnessed the struggle cross his face, fearing an anxiety attack nearing, but it never came. My brave, sweet boy. He's been through so much. He's got a long road ahead of him, but I'll be there right by his side the entire way. He's met with Dr. Lee a handful of times since we got back from Rocktoberfest and I was so proud of him for knowing that was what he needed, to speak to a therapist.

"Wake up sleepy head," I whispered, brushing my lips over his. "We have the pool party today."

"Ten more minutes, daddy," he whined.

"Baby boy, it's already noon and we're supposed to help Ely and Rhone set up. The others arrive at two-thirty," I reminded him.

"Oh shoot, I forgot about that, and I don't have my swimsuit here," Jordan said.

"I have a couple. You can borrow one of mine, but they're board shorts. Is that all right?" I asked, not sure what he normally wore.

"That would be great but do you, um," he paused. "Can I borrow a t-shirt too?"

My boy's confidence really took a hit. But karma was the bitch those who hurt him had to sleep with now and I hope those fuckers rot in hell. "Absolutely. Come on," I said,

hopping out of bed. “I need coffee before I attempt to people today.”

“Me too.”

Do I broach this subject now? Will he think it’s a foolish idea? Here goes nothing. “Jordan,” I began, watching his lithe body stretch beside me as he wiped the sleep from his eyes. “If I had my way, all your clothes would be here.”

His eyes widened, many emotions crossed his face, finally settling on stunned. “What are you saying?”

“I’d like you in my bed permanently, our bed. I love falling asleep with you in my arms and your nightmares aren’t as frequent,” I admitted. We’d not talked about that because I didn’t want him to feel self-consciousness and withdrawal back inside the safety of the cocoon he’d shed.

Jordan’s cheeks reddened. “I’m sorry, I can sleep in like a sleeping bag. Or a cot or something so I don’t wake you,” he apologized.

“Jordan, I want to be here for the good times and the bad. I’m your daddy by choice. We need each other and I want to take care of you. Please don’t apologize for something you can’t help. I love you, you’re the first person outside of my family I’ve ever said those words to. They mean something to me. They’re not words being said in the heat of the moment. You are what I need, what completes me, and I think you feel the same way.” Wow, mature David, welcome to adulthood.

“You don’t think it’s too soon to move in together? I mean if that’s what you’re suggesting,” he said, nervously chewing the inside of his mouth.

“If you think about it, we’ve basically been dating for over a year now. Not well, I’ll admit, but,” okay, dropping more truth bombs. “You’re the only person I’ve slept with since the night I went all caveman.” Not going to mention the numerous failed hook up attempts that at the time made no sense but I now saw with complete clarity.

He picked at the hem of my worn out Led Zeppelin t-shirt. God, I loved seeing him in my clothes, my bed, and in my life. Why had I fought this for so long? Guess I needed to do some growing up first. “Same,” Jordan mumbled. “Can I think about it? The moving in thing?”

“Absolutely, there’s no rush. When you’re ready just start moving stuff over, if that never happens, we’ll make it work.” I’d be disappointed but I didn’t want to guilt Jordan into anything. Right now, he needed to focus on himself and his mental well-being.

Jordan nodded, hopped out of bed, and went into the restroom emerging a few minutes later smelling minty fresh. “Whatcha got there?”

Bent over the open dresser drawer, I’d selected a couple board shorts for today. “Which do you want to wear?” I was lucky we nearly wore the same size. I was slightly wider but being near the same height worked to our advantage.

He shrugged, “You pick.” I handed him the ones with sharks on it and a t-shirt. “These are actually cute.”

“Glad you approve. Let’s get ready then grab a bite before we head over,” I said, sliding out of my boxers and into the trunks. When I straightened, I caught Jordan’s wandering gaze. “See something you like, baby boy?”

“Very much so, daddy,” he flirted, moving in for the kill. “How much time do we have?”

“I’ve created a monster,” I teased, tugging him by the shirt bottom toward me. Mouth to mouth, tongues dancing in that familiar way. Zero to sixty like a wicked guitar solo is how my body reacts to him and I’m instantly rock hard. “Baby, if we hadn’t already committed.” Fuck, it sucked playing the grown-up sometimes.

“Ungh, daddy,” he ground his hard cock against mine.

Who was I to deny the boy who stole my heart? The question of age is something I never should’ve been concerned with. Instinct led me to this lifestyle and in essence to Jordan. Taking it day by day, finding our dynamic was the key. Taking care of this sweet boy’s needs—within reason, of course—would always come first. “Come here, baby.” Leading him over to the bed, I grabbed the bottle of lube from the nightstand. “Pull off your shorts and lay down.” I dropped my shorts as he got comfortable, and slicked my cock and then did the same to his before hovering above him.

“Mmm, frothing. You’re a genius, daddy,” he practically purred.

“Beat you to the finish line?” I teased and wrapped my hands around our cocks.

“Game on,” he nearly growled.

Took a couple strokes to get a rhythm going but by then we were both chasing the end. Who knew picking out swim trunks was foreplay? Staring down at Jordan, face flushed, lips slightly parted, God he was gorgeous. His hands roamed my backside, legs wrapped around my waist. Fuck, this man had me under a spell I didn’t care to break.

“Come on, baby boy, daddy’s really close,” like to the point my fucking balls were on fire.

Jordan trembled, then gasped and thrust upward, “Daddy,” crossed his lips as he came.

That one word sent me careening over the edge, “Jordan,” I gasped as my released hit me like a fucking truck. How is it I’d come countless times between my hands and others yet every time with Jordan was a thousand times better? In a relentless pursuit of the ultimate high, falling in love, sharing that bond with another was the winning ticket. *Love*. Four little letters that up until a month ago had no space in my vocabulary. Now, look at me—caring for another. Filled with a sense of belonging, fulfillment, and it’s turned me into a babbling idiot. Smiling, I shook my head at myself.

“Hey, what’s so funny up there?” Jordan asked.

“Just me being a dumbass, nothing more,” I leaned over and kissed him. “I wish we could lay here and cuddle in the



afterglow, but we've got a party to get to." Reluctantly, we got out of bed and cleaned up then headed downstairs for a quick bite. Ely would have a big spread set up I'm sure, so no need to stuff ourselves now. Ely was working on teaching Rhone how to grill but given the last beef jerky style steaks we gnawed on, I didn't think Rhone would be allowed to touch it today.

"Here baby, sit," I said to Jordan, putting a bagel in the toaster for him. "Butter, cream cheese, or?"

"Cream cheese, please. Want me to make the coffee?" he asked.

"No love, I've got it." For years I heard my parents call each other *my love* and various pet names and us kids, *love*. It came naturally to me to call Jordan that though at the same time I felt like some settled, got my life on track, older man. In a way I kind of was. My career was on its way, the income was amazing. Seemed crazy that we got paid to do something we loved when so many others worked themselves to the bone for pennies. Driving through Vegas was depressing as fuck, seeing the homeless everywhere. That triggered a thought of past Jordan. Scared, alone and living on the streets, fighting for his next meal.

"Hey, I'd like to volunteer at the LGBT youth center I've heard you talk about," Stepping up was what I needed to do. Use my up-and-coming celebrity status for good and help others in the community. Plus, I'd feel like I was giving back, helping those who'd been in Jordan's shoes. I was one of the

lucky ones, my parents didn't bat an eye when I came out as bi-sexual. They'd been very open with my sisters and I from the beginning. *You are born how you are and there's no use trying to fight it. Embrace it and be your true self*, my mother had said. I was truly blessed. "Really?" Jordan asked, his hopeful gaze locked on mine.

"Yes, love," I kissed the top of his head as I passed him on the way to the fridge. After dolling his coffee up just the way he liked it, I sat the cup in front of him. "I want to give back to those who helped you. Pay it forward, you know?"

"I do know though they helped Ely, not me. Lyle gave me my break and got me addicted to the kids there which is how I met Ely," Jordan said.

"Huh, I never knew that. Ely is a great guy and his story is heartbreaking," I admitted, finishing up our bagels and taking the seat across from him as I set our plates down.

"Yeah. It seems the fates strike those who should be parents with sterility and others who shouldn't be with the ability to pump them out like tic-tac's. I call that a programming failure," Jordan said. I'm sure his thoughts immediately reverted to those who'd brought him into this fucked up world.

I reached across the table and put my hand over his, "Then let's do what we can to show them they belong despite their unfair start in life." Jordan and I put our dishes in the sink, grabbed our towels and walked across the street.

"Hey, we're here," I announced as we headed inside Rhone, Ely, and Seltzer's place. I like to give warning in case they

were engaged in extracurricular activities. Not that I wouldn't stop and watch, but I didn't think that would go over too well with Jordan or Ely considering their relationship.

"In the kitchen," Rhone called out. "Ely just ran to the store."

Walking in to Hatebreed vibrating through the surround sound was a welcome greeting. "How can you understand what they're saying?" Jordan asked me.

"You get used to it. The music grabs your attention then the lyrics pull you in. It's like your skin absorbs it and it ricochets through you. Metal is in the blood, it's a driving force. The inertia pushes you forward," I said, quite poetically if I do say so myself.

"Hey man," Rhone and I did our usual fist-bump greeting. "Anyone else here?"

"Me," Seltzer said, pointing to himself. "Isn't that enough?"

The three of us rolled our eyes. "Right," I replied, drawing the word out. "What do you need help with?"

"Throw your towels outside then, hell, I don't know. Ely runs the show. Jordan, any clue?" Rhone asked him.

He glanced around the kitchen, "Well, I know Ely won't be happy with you setting the containers out and sticking a spoon in them so let's start putting the appetizers into serving dishes which I know you have."

"Describe a serving dish?" Rhone said to him.

Again, Jordan rolled his eyes, “You’re engaged to a chef, you need to learn these terms.” He dug out a handful of dishes and placed them on the kitchen island. “Start putting the food *neatly* into these trays,” Jordan directed us.

“On it!” The three of us said, though Seltzer nibbled more than he placed.

“Seltzer,” Jordan smacked his hand, “wait until the guests arrive.”

“Dude,” Seltzer turned to me. “You better check your man.”

“Nope. You did it to yourself. You know the kitchen is his and Ely’s domain, so you better ask for forgiveness before you’re denied nourishment.” Rhone was laughing so hard I thought he’d piss his pants.

“What’s so fucking funny over there?” Seltzer asked him.

“You’ve lived with Ely and I for what, a year now? He may be small but when he’s in his element he’s mighty and you know better than anyone not to fuck with him when he’s in the zone. What led you to believe Jordan would be any different?” Rhone asked him.

Sheepishly, Seltzer shrugged and mumbled. “I’m hungry.”

Chase chose that moment to make his appearance, “When aren’t you hungry?” he asked Seltzer.

“Hey, I’m a growing boy,” Seltzer protested.

“You’re a growing something,” Chase retorted.

“Eradicate should be here any minute,” Rhone said, walking toward the front door just as they knocked. “Hey, Eradicate is in the house! And they brought beer and chips, food fit for kings,” Rhone said. Seltzer and I made our way over to greet them.

“Come in,” Rhone said.

“We were chilling inside until it warmed up, but it feels hot now,” I told them.

“It’s Vegas, it’s always hot,” Seltzer added.

“We’re good with anything,” Casey said. “We feel lucky even being here.”

“Dude, we totally get that,” Seltzer told them. No joke, sometimes just being near Maiden and Social we were like, WTF, do we even belong here?

Rhone led them toward the kitchen. “Yeah, a few years ago we were in the same place you are, well not exactly, but close to it. The rise came fast. We still don’t know what happened. It was like we were barely making ends meet, trying to play anything that would elevate us. Here we are in Vegas, living a good life, rocking out, having fun.”

“It’s weird how much stuff has happened in such a short time for us,” Margot said as she walked further inside. “Wow, I like the place.”

“I love living here,” Rhone said. “Ely isn’t here right now. He’s my man.”

“We saw him at Rocktoberfest,” Josh said.

“Yeah, he’s a great guy.” Rhone said, his eyes darted down to Josh and Bran’s hands. “I guess you two are a thing?”

Bran and Josh looked at each other, a silent agreement passing between them. “We are. But we’re not public with it.”

“We won’t say a word,” I assured them. Wasn’t our story to tell.

“Thanks. We want our relationship to be deeper before stuff gets crazy,” Josh said.

“That’s smart,” Chase, our voice of reason said.

“Come on out. We have plenty of chairs, lots of space for fun,” Rhone said, leading them through the kitchen to the sliding glass door that led to the backyard.

Jordan waved when we stopped. I walked over and kissed him. “This is my man, Jordan.” They waved and introduced themselves to him.

The Eradicate crew dispersed into the bathrooms to change into their swimsuits. Rhone, Seltzer, and I headed outside just as Ely came in from the garage. Jordan and I glanced toward the laundry room separating the garage and kitchen. Our gazes met and he blushed, I winked, furthering the crimson flush.

“Bran, you want a drink?” Rhone asked him but Bran’s attention was on Josh as he slipped out of his shirt and into the water.

“Hey Bran, what’s going on there?” Seltzer teased.

Bran turned toward us, his eyebrows raised in question.  
“Sorry, what?”

“Rhone wanted to know if you wanted a drink,” Seltzer said, repeating Rhone’s question.

Bran shook his head. “No, I’m good,” then he moved, pushing off the edge of the pool.

Rhone took a swig of his beer and at the top of his lungs announced, “Cannonball War!” “What’s that?” Josh asked. I was stunned at the question, had he never cannonballed into a pool before?

“We see who can make the biggest splash into the pool,” Seltzer explained.

One by one, they got out of the pool while each took a turn to see who could land the biggest splash. As we each got eliminated, it was down to the final two—Rhone and Bran. “We should jump off the roof,” Rhone suggested. My eyes immediately went to the kitchen to see if Ely heard that. He’d be out here in a hot minute reading Rhone the riot act if he had. What the fuck was he thinking? Our houses were identical two-story structures. Had he been drinking before we got here?

“No way,” Margo told him.

Telling Rhone no, unless you were Ely or Rhone’s mom Katy, was like issuing a challenge. “It’s fun,” Rhone told her. I wasn’t Rhone’s daddy, not even close, but if I heard Jordan

utter those words, he'd be over my shoulder in a heartbeat, hauling him off for a good ass whipping.

I could tell Margo was the mom for their group, glad they had one. "As the voice of reason here, I say no," she told Rhone, and she left no room for argument.

"But we don't want reason," Rhone protested.

Exasperated, Margo threw her hands up. "Okay. I don't think it's wise."

Casey intervened, holding his phone up. "Before you go up, watch these videos." Thank fuck for Casey.

"Wait," Josh shouted, holding his hand up. "Sorry, what are you all talking about?"

"They want to jump off the roof into the pool," Casey told him, holding his phone up.

"Absolutely not," Josh told them,

The videos showed people falling off roofs, one guy did a serious gut bruising belly flop. Rhone cringed, "Ouch."

"Fucker," Seltzer said. "Why did you show us that? Now I'll have to think twice before I do that."

"You all have jumped off your roof before?" Casey asked, eyeing the dual floor house.

"Yeah. Multiple times," Rhone said.

Chase closed in on the still running video, eyes nearly popping out of his skull. "Shit, that is so, ugh."



“Well, I guess we aren’t jumping off the roof now,” Bran smugly replied.

“That’s right, you aren’t,” Josh said, wrapping his arms protectively around Bran.

“Fuck, that’s okay,” Rhone relented. “We’ll do it from here. This is for the win,” he said as he lined up for his shot and then jumped, landing with a huge-ass splash. Bran went next though he was nowhere near the distance Rhone had. Rhone grabbed his towel and headed inside Ely was sporting a killer ensemble consisting of a cute purple, form fitting tankini and what I believe was a speedo that didn’t leave much to the imagination. I’d imagine Rhone was currently laying claim to that tight little ass as we spoke. A few minutes later I heard Josh whisper to Bran about using the restroom. Before I could warn them they hadn’t so much as slid the door open before they froze in place.

“I didn’t know Ely was back,” Bran said, and I laughed. Then Bran turned and pinned Josh to wall. I wondered if we were going to get an outdoor show with our meal today.

Not long after the sliding door opened, and Rhone and Ely stepped out. The red tint in Ely’s cheeks matched Bran’s. This was fun to watch. “You two can use the bathroom. You stepping in on us pushed us over the edge,” Ely told them as he walked past. The little shit was quite smug, and I was in awe. This was a new side to Ely I’d never seen before.

“Shit,” Josh mumbled before they disappeared inside.

“Yo, thanks,” Bran told them.

*Clap, clap, clap.* “Way to go Ely!” Seltzer cheered, mock wiping a tear from his eye. “Our little boy has grown up.” Rhone flipped him the bird while Ely forced his concentration on the barbeque like it was about to do something exciting. Me? I was more than enjoying the show. Where’s the popcorn when you need it?

“Yo,” Sikes said as he and Snipe came outside. “What’re you boneheads up to today?”

Rhone, Seltzer, Chase and I came over to see how Snipe was doing. “How’s the arm?” Chase asked.

“Doc said it’s healing well,” Snipe told him, Sikes stood protectively by his side.

“Fizzbo sent us to check on your guys, making sure you’re not doing anything stupid,” all eyes shot to Rhone.

He threw his hands up, “Hey man, I haven’t done anything.”

“Nor will you,” Ely replied. “Can we fix you guys a plate?”

Sikes glanced at Snipe who answered for the pair. “Yeah, we could eat.”

Ely nodded and went inside. “Look,” Sikes said. “Fizzbo is busting our nuts. We got chewed out for the Tony situation and he’s pulling everyone in for our annual month-long training early. Wants to get it out of the way so I need to make sure you boneheads aren’t planning anything that’ll cause any trouble?”

“What about Snipe?” I asked, nodding to his cast.

“Doc says it’s healing well and comes off in a couple weeks,” Snipe replied.

“Yeah,” Sikes said placing his hand on Snipe’s shoulder, “But you’re the twenty-year marine. He’s not worried about you.”

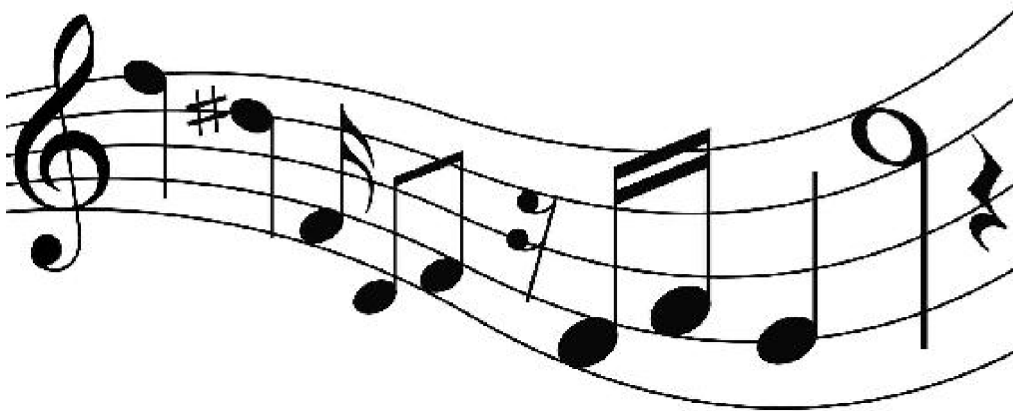
“Says you who didn’t get ambushed,” Snipe replied, clearly disappointed in himself.

Rhone, Seltzer, and I looked at Chase. “I’ll make sure they stay out of trouble. With the holiday’s coming up we’ll likely all be too busy to engage in stupidity,” Chase replied, Rhone, Seltzer, and I shook our heads in agreement.

“Good,” Sikes said. “Let’s eat so I can get this one home. He’s as bad as you guys when it comes to taking it easy.”

Burgers, dogs, and salads of every kind along with enough beer to drain a liquor store were consumed. No one jumped off a roof, no broken bones or blood was drawn. Just two bands hanging out and having a great time. New bonds were formed with brothers from another band we hoped to break strings with again.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



## Jordan

“That was fun,” I said once we were home and in our room.

Our room.

Daddy’s earlier suggestion was at the forefront of my mind. But was I ready?

“It was. The Eradicate crew are a great bunch. I think Easton is looking to book us in more venues with them,” David replied.

“How was it the pool was so warm?” I asked.

“Well, it was ninety-five degrees out. You and Ely were running around taking care of everyone and the bodies flying in and out of it kept the water moving which heats it up,” Daddy said.

“True. Guess I never thought of it like that,” I replied as I stripped down. “I need to wash the chlorine off.”

“Here baby,” Daddy said, taking the dirty clothes from me. “I’ll start the shower.”

There was something so soothing, so relaxing when he washed me. Sets my mind at ease and I’m ready to sleep. Today was somewhat like work, though I got to hang out with Ely one on one stress free while the guys stayed outside with their friends. Once the food was done, Ely and I joined the group which was nice. Daddy didn’t treat me like I was less

than him but as an equal and someone he was proud to have around. No embarrassment or acting like I was the hired help, but as an equal partner. “So, I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh yeah?” Daddy asked. “What’s going on inside that gorgeous head of yours?”

“If I were to accept your offer to move in here, I don’t want to get rid of my house. Would that be a problem?” *Please say no, please say no.*

“Not at all, love. But would you be holding on to it as means of escape? Keeping one eye open and a foot out the door thinking we’re going to fail?” Daddy asked, the sadness in his voice nearly broke me.

“No daddy, not at all. I was thinking about turning it into a rental property for kids turning eighteen at the shelter who have jobs but need a home to transition into. Only two at a time could live there, but I own it outright so I could keep the rent low and make it affordable for them,” I said.

“Jordan,” He kissed my forehead, “I think that is a fantastic, altruistic way of thinking.”

Altruistic? Note to self, google that word when Daddy’s not around.

“I just want to give back. Help others with the start I didn’t get. It was rough for me, thrown into adulthood as a young teen. If I can help one or two or more to get a better start than me it makes it more than worth it,” I said, feeling so much lighter having shared my idea with daddy.

“Jordan, I support you a hundred and ten percent with this and not just because it puts you in our bed each night. I think your idea is brilliant and I’ll help with whatever you need. Please don’t hesitate to ask,” Daddy replied. I was beaming. Yeah, sure, I made my own decisions but to hear him say I was brilliant lifted me higher. “Come on, let shower. You’re back to work bright and early and we’ve got band practice tomorrow.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” Until recently, my life revolved around work. Now that I had someone, I preferred sleeping in, waking then immediately working off our morning wood. Dare I say this was...nice. My biggest fear was losing what we’re building together, having the happiness life never allowed me to have before taken away.

I took a few extra minutes after our shower grooming then joined Daddy in bed. “You want to tell me what’s got the pretty head of yours all tied up? You were quiet the entire time we showered.”

“Just me being me, I guess.” I know getting better at expressing my needs and insecurities was something Dr. Lee brought up during one of our sessions. I turned off the beside lamp and slid in beside him. Encased in darkness, bravery piqued. “I’m afraid of losing us. With us both returning to our jobs, we’ll be apart more. What if you decide you like that better than us being together all the time? What if I do something to fuck it up? What if like, karma, or whatever it’s called that’s never allowed me to be happy before dips its ugly head in and tears us apart?”

“Now I see it the opposite way,” daddy replied.

“How so?” I asked, hoping his words would soothe me.

“My beautiful boy, you’ve enthralled me. Yours is the last face I want to see when I go to sleep and the first when I wake. You’re the one I want to share the highs and lows of my days with. The one I want to be most proud of me and what I accomplish. The one I want walking the red carpets and have waiting backstage after a show. I know that won’t always be possible because of your job, but maybe someday you’ll get to be more of a hands-off owner, if you want that is, and can travel with us. Spending the months apart as we did gave me the time I needed to find me, to grow as a person. I may only be twenty-two, but I know what I want in my forever and it’s you,” Daddy said.

“Oh, daddy,” I sighed, squeezing him around the middle. I’m sure he could feel the dampness of my tears on his chest where my head rested. “And you’ve more than proven age is just a number. It’s what you possess inside and how you treat others that matters most.”

“I love you, Jordan.”

“I love you too, daddy.”

The next morning, I woke before the sun and quietly got ready for work. Daddy was peacefully sleeping, barely moving as I pressed my lips to his and whispered, “Goodbye.” It was hard to leave him but hopefully it would get easier over time.



“Good morning, Jordan,” Ely practically sung as he walked into my office and set a steaming mug of coffee down for me.

“You are an angel, Ely,” I said, sipping the perfectly doctored brew.

“It’s hard to leave them, isn’t it?” He asked. That little imp was inside my head.

“So hard. He asked me to move in with him,” I admitted.

Ely’s eyes widened in surprise and morphed into a huge grin. “We could be neighbors. Living across the street from my bestie would be awesome.”

That was one of the great things about Ely on a list that was a mile long. He of course focused on having his friend nearby. “You are beautiful, my friend. Inside and out. I need to meet the contractors at the house after work for a final walkthrough. Staying with dad-err, David these last couple of weeks while they finished the remodel was perfect.” I tossed the pen I had down. “Guess I have a big decision to make.”

“What will you do with the house if you move in?” Ely asked.

“I talked to him about that when he asked. I want to meet with the board at the youth shelter and see what needs to be done to allow them to use it as a transition home,” the more I thought about it the more determined I was to see this through.

The workday was over before I knew it, having spent it getting the orders in with the vendors for the upcoming holiday parties we had on the books. We weren’t catering any

thanksgiving events the day of, but we had forty plus orders for thanksgiving dinners that would need to be delivered the week of. This year, I was spending the holiday with Daddy's family. Now to reprogram my brain to call him David in front of them. I know he said I could call him daddy whenever I felt comfortable, but that day wouldn't be it.

"Hello, Jordan," Dan, the superintendent with the construction team completing the renovations at my house greeted me as I walked up.

"Good evening, Dan. I'm excited to see the finished product," I said.

"Well then," he opened the door, "Welcome home, Jordan."

Home. The place that had been my home for many years now felt like a house, but a gorgeous one at that. "Whoa," I said taking in the changes. Approving a design on paper was nothing compared to seeing it completed. "This is amazing."

Dan smiled, "Glad you like it. Let's start in the kitchen."

The crew had removed the wall separating the living room and kitchen, creating an open floor concept. The gray washed ceramic tile up against the gray kitchen cabinets was perfection. Recycled glass counter tops with pops of blues and browns on a sandy background were stunning. The subway tile backsplash brought the color variations together. Trailing my fingers across the finished product, I muttered the only word I could muster, "Wow."

“Ha-ha, I have to say this is the first time I’ve met speechless Jordan,” Dan teased. “Fresh coat of paint and tile throughout the house. Complete kitchen and bath remodel. You basically have a brand-new home, at least for the interior. Ready to see the bathroom?”

Again, “Wow,” was the extent of my vocabulary. The flooring matched the rest of the house, but the floor to ceiling subway tiles that matched the kitchen backsplash gave the spatially challenged bathroom the appearance that it was larger than it was. New tub and tile insets in the shower surround along with the sliding glass doors were stunning. The vanity matched the kitchen cabinets but the brushed nickel finishes including the light fixtures were perfect. The fact the rooms were barren excluding the few boxes in the center of each space for the items I was keeping didn’t distract from the beauty. I was happy I’d donated the old furniture and clutter beforehand.

“When you’re ready to update the exterior, give us a call,” Dan said. “If everything is to your satisfaction, I’ll just need you to sign the completion form then I’ll be out of your way.” He handed the clipboard with the paper to sign along with the spare key I’d given him. “I left the booklets for the new appliances and fixtures in a kitchen drawer. We’ll email you the final documents and our one-year workmanship warranty. Thank you, Jordan, it’s been a pleasure.” Dan shook my hand and left.

Dazed, I roamed the renovated space and then took a seat on the floor dead center. Everything was perfect, so why did I feel

so empty?

Lyle would love this.

He'd love your idea equally as much.

"He'd be proud of me," I muttered aloud. My voice echoed through the empty space. I stared at my phone screen, the smiling faces of daddy and me staring back. The picture I'd taken one night while we laid in bed talking until we could no longer hold our eyes open.

"Hello, my beautiful boy," daddy answered my call.

"Daddy," I sighed.

"What's wrong?" I loved how he could read me.

"The house is done," I said, leaving it at that.

"Then why do you sound so sad?" daddy asked.

"It's everything I ever wanted, but it doesn't come with you," I replied. Familiar voices chatted away in the background. "I'm sorry, you're busy and I'm being ridiculous."

"Pack up everything you want to bring with you. We'll be there in twenty minutes. I love you," he said and then ended the call.

"We?" I questioned to myself.

Exactly twenty minutes later, in walked daddy, Rhone, Seltzer, Chase, and Ely. Daddy opened his arms, "Come here, baby," and I ran right to him. Daddy always knows what I need and what's best for me even though our relationship was

still so new. I learned quickly to trust him and my instincts. “What’s coming with us?”

“Just the boxes in the bedroom. Everything else can stay for the kids to use. I should probably get new furniture before they move in,” I laughed. “Sleeping on tile sucks.” I should know having done that a time or a hundred when I was younger.

“Alright boys, you heard the man. Ely, why don’t you keep Jordan company while we load up,” Daddy said then joined his friends, our friends, in loading up what little I owned.

Ely hugged me, “I’ve never been here before, but it’s really nice.”

“Thank you. Is it weird that while I was sitting here, I could feel Lyle’s presence?” Great, now Ely probably thinks I’m nuts.

“No, not at all. Did he talk to you or was it like cold air rushing by?” Ely asked.

“I swear, he told me in his way it’s time to share his gift and make a difference for others. I know I’ve never told you much about my past, except for Tony now. Lyle gave me my first real break and was like a father to me. He left me this house, the café, and the catering business in his will. He passed away before you came into the picture, but he was huge on giving back to our community. Even though he’s gone, it’s important to me to follow his path.” A tear rolled down my cheek just as daddy passed by, stopping long enough to wipe it away.

“You’re doing the right thing, baby boy.”

I nodded. I wanted to help them load up, I mean, it was my shit they were carrying. But daddy told me to stay put and I wanted to listen and be a good boy. What happened to the old Jordan who defied everyone and lived by his own rules? He found the right man, a real daddy who he wanted to make proud. Daddy made the right decision, moving me in with him. It was time for me and this house to move on to the next chapter in our lives.

I was the last to leave the house, walking room to room saying goodbye. With the trucks loaded, they took off ahead of me while I ordered pizza to thank our friends for their help. Pretty much all my clothes were already there so the boxes we brought didn't need to be emptied so we stacked them in a corner of daddy's art room. "We can set up a desk for you in here too, there's plenty of room," daddy said as I gazed around.

"I feel like I'm invading your personal space," I admitted.

"Our space, so we make it work for us. I'd rather have you working here late at night than at the warehouse. Find a desk you like then we can get you set up. In case you can't tell, Chase and I aren't decorators. Whatever you do we'll be fine with," daddy said.

"Truth," Chase muttered from the open doorway. "Pizza's here."

"Shots!" Seltzer announced, holding one up as we came into the kitchen. "A toast to another brother down." He handed each of us a glass. "To David and Jordan, welcome to the

Embrace the Fear family.” The glasses came together, and the alcohol went down.

“Oh my god,” Ely complained, waving a hand in front of his face. “Is it supposed to burn?” Ely wasn’t a drinker. At most he’d sip a fruity cocktail on a rare occasion but only one and usually the ice watered it down before he’d reached the halfway point.

“Ha-ha,” Rhone laughed. “Yes, that is the alcohol, babe.”

A bottle of tequila and three large pizzas later, Rhone, Ely, and Seltzer said goodnight and went back to their place. Chase left to watch a local band he knew some of the guys in play, and daddy and I went upstairs. “You could’ve gone with Chase. There’s no need for you to go to bed early just because I am.” First official night living together and I was already failing.

“Jordan, trust me, if I don’t want to do something I won’t. I’ve seen them play before, they’re not bad but I’d rather hang out with you tonight,” daddy said. “Come on, let’s you get in the tub so you can relax. It’s been an emotionally exhausting day for you.

“That it has. Dr. Lee will be earning her money for sure tomorrow.” I stripped down while he got the water going. “Ooh, bubbles. I love bubbles.”

“Slide in. I’m going to work on some lyrics so call me when you’re ready to be washed,” daddy said, and then he rolled a towel to put behind my neck and kissed me. I closed my eyes, enjoying the peaceful Zen. This was just what I needed to

unwind after a stressful day. All these years I merely just survived, operating on autopilot yet never took the time to relax and enjoy what I had. Life was always go-go-go, now I had someone to remind me to stop and smell the roses.

After nodding off a couple of times, I decided it was best to get out. “Daddy?”

“Coming,” he replied, walking in moments later. “Ready to get out?”

“Yes,” I said, holding up my fingers. “I’m pruney.”

“That you are.” Daddy washed, dried, and dressed me and I ate up every moment of it. “Okay, go lay down while I shower.” Did I already know to do that? Yes, but having daddy tell me made it so much sweeter. Plus, I think he got off on it too. It was a win-win for us. I hopped into bed with a bounce, mindlessly surfing social media until he came in to join me. “Whatcha reading?” he asked.

“Honestly? Nothing. That was literally mindless internet surfing while waiting for you.” I plugged my phone in to charge and laid it on the nightstand. “Thank you for everything today. You knew what I needed and took care of it. In case I haven’t said it enough, I appreciate you and all you’ve done for me. I love you, daddy.”

“I love you to, baby boy.”

The days leading up to Thanksgiving week were a whirlwind of orders, deliveries, near fire extinguisher level catastrophes—courtesy of a new hire Ely was patiently



training, and countless hours spent as a team holed up inside our warehouse space. How we managed to get the orders not only delivered, but correct was an act of the culinary fates. By noon the day before Thanksgiving we were done, not only with the orders but we were exhausted. Ely and I gifted each team member a turkey to share with their friends and family the next day then we locked up the warehouse ready for the much needed four-day weekend. When we returned on Monday, the holiday rush would be in full force.

Ely and I carpooled now. The warehouse wasn't far from where we lived, but it was nice to have the company in the morning. He spoiled me just like daddy did, bringing coffee and breakfast to my office each morning. Hmm, I wonder if he and daddy were secretly working together to keep me fed. Who was I to complain? I had a family now and I loved it.

Speaking of family.

"Honey, I'm home," I called out as I walked inside the house. "Hmm, trucks in the driveway but no answer." Kitchen was empty, living room the same so I headed upstairs and found no one there. They must be over at Rhone and Ely's. I desperately needed a shower after the chaotic morning we had. At some point, I managed to spill half a gallon of pumpkin mix all over myself. But knowing daddy liked to take care of that for me I needed to ask permission first.

*Me: Hey daddy, I'm home.*

*Daddy: Hey baby, boy. We're at band practice. How was your day?*

*Me: Tiring and I smell like pumpkin. Is it okay if I take a shower?*

*Daddy: Of course. We're gonna be a while so shower and relax. Love you.*

*Me: Love you too.*

Clean and refreshed, I grabbed my iPad and headed down to the oversized sectional couch in the living room to curl up and read. Ely was to blame for that new addiction. While I recovered, he turned me on to some of his favorite authors such as Kaje Harper, BL Maxwell, Aria Grace, Blake Allwood, Nic Starr, Lynn Michaels, Layla Dorine, Kris Jacen, Samuel York, Elle Keaton, and Ann Lister. I'd been binging their books ever since. The TBR on my Kindle app was enormous.

"Hello, beautiful," daddy's sweet voice said, pulling me from the story.

"Hey, daddy," I said through a yawn as I stretched. "What time is it?"

"It's after midnight. Sorry we're so late though it looks like you were well taken care of," he teased, reaching for my iPad. "Who fell in love with whom today?"

"No love yet, just a bunch of gritty rockstars getting their kink on," I teased.

"We are a wild bunch though some have found the perfect partner to tame them," he leaned over and pressed his lips to mine.

“What time do we need to be at your parents’ house tomorrow?” My stomach roiled with nerves, everything hinged on what they thought of me. Daddy swore it didn’t, but I knew better. Besides, I really wanted them to like me.

“Dinner is at three, football starts at eleven. Dad and I always watch the Dallas game together which is at one this year, so we’ll leave here around twelve-thirty. Oh yeah, Ely said to make sure we grab the pies he baked for us to take,” Daddy reminded me, good thing too since I’d already forgot.

“Okay,” I shut down the iPad. “Ely will be up bright and early. You can take the boy off the farm.”

“But the farm will never be out of the boy, he’ll forever hear the roosters crow at the butt crack of dawn,” daddy continued. “And you love him for it.”

“I do. Let’s go to bed, tomorrows a big day,” I said.

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We woke to the annoying sound of daddy’s alarm clock. “Make it stop,” I whined.

“No can do. We need to get up. Happy thanksgiving,” daddy said. “You’ve made me a grown up,” he growled and nipped my neck. “Come on, let’s get some food in you.”

When we got to the kitchen, Chase was making eggs and on the island, sat two freshly baked pies. “Want some eggs?” Chase asked us. “Rhone brought those over.”

“I may vomit,” I muttered as I took a seat.

“Are you sick?” Chase asked.

“No, he’s being a drama queen over meeting my family today,” daddy said.

“Now that’s not nice. How would you feel if it was the other way around?” Arms crossed defiantly. It was like I’d digressed to the age of two pouting like I was.

“You’ll be fine,” daddy said, sliding a plate of food in front of me. “Please eat so we can get ready and go.”

“Jordan,” Chase said, “David’s parents are cool. Trust me, you will be fine, and his sisters will go nuts when they meet you. You have the fashion sense they say David lacks.” Daddy flung eggs at him, and Chase laughed it off. “Seriously though, they are really down to earth. I wish I could go but I already made other plans.”

I swear, I changed my outfit a hundred times and while daddy was usually the calm one of us, he was getting frustrated with me. “I’m sorry, but I can’t pull off the gothic all black ensemble like you do. I need to look good, this is important,” I said, straightening the collar I’d just ironed.

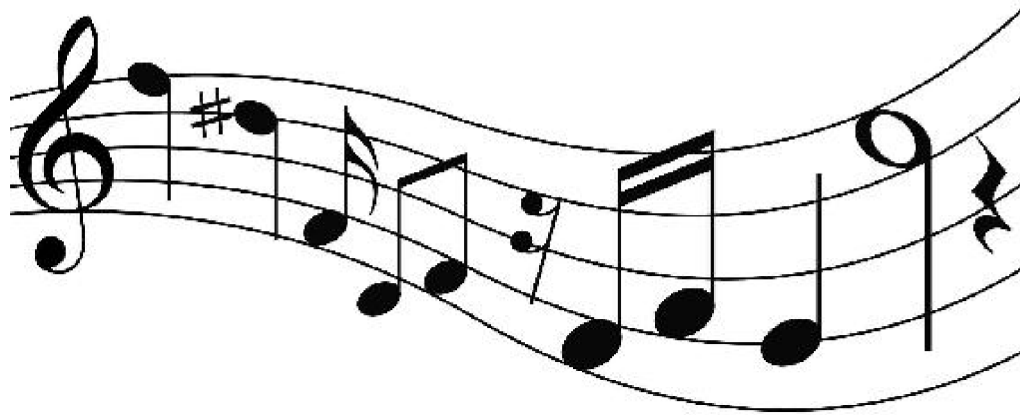
“Gothic? This is metal black, big difference, Jordan,” he corrected me. “You look great, can we please go?”

One last look in the mirror. Hair in place, check. Shirt ironed and collar cuffed, check. Suede shoes brushed, check. “Yes, I’m ready.” I applied a clear lip-gloss, slid my wallet and phone into my pocket and walked right past him and down the stairs.

“Don’t forget the pies,” he called out from behind me.

Shit, I nearly did. One sharp right later, I had them in hand and we headed out the door. Why did it feel like I was about to face the firing squad?

# CHAPTER NINETEEN



## David

Jordan vibrated with nervous energy in the seat beside me. His leg bounced so much, it shook the cab of the truck. “Hey,” I placed my hand on his knee. “Remember when I told you what a brave boy I thought you were?” Sometimes the level of maturity I spoke with shocked me. Like my need to care for Jordan took control of my mouth.

“Yes, daddy,” he replied in a childlike voice. Not one I’d heard from him before, so I pulled into the nearest lot and parked. “What’s wrong, daddy?” he asked, tears shot to his eyes, and the scene he shared of Tony beating him and shoving him out of the car came to mind.

“I just want to talk to you, beautiful. Make sure you’re okay.” I took his hands in mine and stared into his eyes. This was a pivotal moment and he needed to see the sincerity in my words. “Jordan, please look at me.” When his tear-filled gaze hit mine, I nearly lost it. “My sweet boy, I will never hurt you nor will I discount your thoughts or feelings. If I believed for even one second that my family would be cruel, I’d never subject you to them. My mother is so excited to meet you and my sisters are wanting to use you like some sort of doll they get to play with.” His cheeks pushed the tears over the edge as he grinned. I reached over and wiped them away. “I love you, Jordan and I’ll never let anyone hurt you again.” Before he could say anything, I kissed him, something I’d grown fond of and never got enough of. I didn’t say those things so he’d

come back with an I love you or something equally as nice. I said them because I meant them and that was what he needed to be reminded of. “Now, if you still absolutely do not want to go tell me and I’ll turn around and take you home.”

He took a minute to respond then squared his shoulders and said, “Let’s do this.”

“You’re 100% positive?” I asked, giving him a final out.

“No, but nothing is worth losing you over,” Jordan replied.

I knew Jordan loved me. He’d told me many times but to hear him say nothing was worth losing me over really put things into perspective. When we pulled up to the house, two identical smiling faces appeared in the front window. “Your admirers are stalking us,” I said.

Jordan’s head perked up. “Is that your sisters?”

“That is, beautiful. No turning back now. Stay put, I’ll come around and help you with the pies.”

“Such the gentleman,” I heard my mother say as I reached Jordan’s side of the truck.

“My mother taught me well,” I replied, taking the pies from Jordan so he could step out. He barely had both feet on the ground before she had him wrapped in a mom hug. “Jeez mom, let him breathe why don’t ya.”

“Hush you. If I want to hug my new son I will,” she released him, but only partially. “Let me take a look at you. Jordan, you’re gorgeous. My son has picked well. I’m Cecilia,



by the way,” she said, sliding her arm through his, “come with me, I have baby pictures and stories to tell.”

“Mom, no,” I pleaded though it fell on deaf ears. Jordan stared back at me over his shoulder, eyes open wide. Wordlessly I mouthed *sorry* and trailed behind them.

Dad and the twins surrounded Jordan as soon as we walked in. “You must be Jordan,” dad said, holding his hand out which Jordan shook.

“Yes sir, it’s nice to meet you,” Jordan nervously replied.

“Please, call me Richard,” dad said.

“Look,” Angela and Ariella said in unison to Jordan, pointing at the embarrassing family photo wall. “David looks funny.”

“Yay, it’s like I’m not even here,” I mumbled, pushing past them to get to the kitchen.

“Someone’s grumpy,” mom said before wrapping her arms around me after I set the pies down. “Happy turkey day, love.”

“Happy turkey day, mom. I’m not grumpy but a hello would’ve been nice. I get it, Jordan is the shiny new toy today,” I said, just as Jordan walked up. Wrapping my arms around him, I pulled him against my side. “Jordan, this is my crazy ass family.”

“Hey,” mom scolded. “We’re not *that* crazy.”

“Ha-ha,” I laughed. “Nah, they’re all right. I’ll keep them.”

“Like you have a choice,” Ariella said.

The fact that Jordan smiled wide witnessing our silly antics firsthand was a sign how comfortable he was. “Jordan come on,” Angela said, waving him in the direction she headed. Come play with us.

“Um, da-err, David,” Jordan said. Intimidated was the best way to explain the look on his face.

“You seriously can’t be scared of two ten-year old girls now, are you?” I teased him. The look he gave me said, oh, you will pay. “Muah, I love you,” I said, blowing cheesy kisses his way. A dish broke in the kitchen, and dad dropped the remote. “What?” I asked, both my parents stared blankly at me

“Did you just say I love you to someone other than your family?” mom questioned. “Is the world coming to an end?” She dramatically swooned, dad came to her rescue, scooping her up in his arms.

“No, my love,” dad fake cried, “please don’t leave us.”

“Oh, you two are real freaking funny, aren’t you?” I rolled my eyes at their antics.

“In twenty-two years never once have you brought home a boyfriend or girlfriend. Now you do and it’s already progressed past the getting to know you stage. We’re just stunned is all,” dad said.

“Jordan’s different. Jordan’s my forever,” I admitted.

He must’ve been nearby as he came barreling toward me, knocking me into the cupboard, “You’re my forever too, daddy.”

“He’s not your daddy,” Ariella said.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” Jordan whispered, burying his face against my neck.

“Don’t worry about it.” I knew my parents were all too engrossed in hearing the explanation I was about to give the girls. “I’m not his daddy like dad is yours,” I said. “I’m his daddy like a boyfriend daddy. It means I take care of him and make sure he’s okay.”

“But you still kiss him and stuff like a boyfriend does?” Angela asked.

“Yes, exactly,” I told her.

“Hmm,” Ariella shrugged. “I don’t get it but, whatever. I like him so don’t screw this up.” With a flick of her hair, she and Angela wandered off like it was no big deal.

“Well,” dad said, “that went well. They might have questions later, but you hit the gist of it.”

“See,” I said to Jordan who was still clutched to my side like a baby koala, “my parents are cool. Well, until mom breaks out with the baby pics they are.”

“Hey,” mom said, flicking a spoon of mashed potatoes at me. “I’m stepping it up now.”

“No mom!” I protested.

“Oh yeah, streaking down the hallway videos of David. Dinner and a show tonight,” she threatened. Well, it for sure

wasn't a threat. If mom said she was doing something, she did it.

"You did that to yourself, son," dad said, snagging a beer from the fridge. "Welcome to the family, Jordan," he said. "Cowboys are on in ten."

"Want to watch the game?" I asked, holding up a beer to see if he wanted one.

"No thanks, if it's okay I'll stay in here with you, Cecelia?" Jordan said.

"I would love that, and given what my son just said, you can call me mom," she said, patting his hand.

I swear I heard Jordan's heart stop. "Babe are you okay?" he stood there, like he couldn't move. "Jordan?"

He flung himself at mom who at five-foot-two barely caught him. It seemed emotions worked as a forward thruster for Jordan. "What's wrong, Jordan." She stared wide eyed at me, and I mouthed *I'll tell you later*. She nodded and held on to him while he worked through his emotions. This was what he needed, to be accepted by my family. And now he has someone to call mom and I knew that meant the world to him.

"Mom said, and I quote, tell them dinner is ready and to get their butts in here," Jordan delivered the message grinning.

"You are having too much fun in there, aren't you?" I asked, pulling him onto my lap.

"Your family is so great, da-David," he once again corrected himself as he glanced over at my dad.

“Jordan, if you normally call David daddy, then do it. As long as the two of you are happy that’s all that matters to us. If the girls have questions they’ll ask, and we’ll answer them. That was one thing Cecilia and I said from the start, we’d never deny our kids knowledge. If they were mature enough to ask the questions, then we needed to extend them the same respect and answer them honestly,” dad said.

“Told you my family was awesome,” I said, filled with pride.

Jordan rolled his eyes, “Come on, I refuse to get on my new mom’s bad side and won’t think twice before throwing you under the bus to save myself.”

“I have a new favorite son,” mom yelled from the kitchen.

Dad and Jordan thought that was hysterical, “I fail to see the humor here,” I mock pouted, walking ahead of them to the dining table.

The quietest my family ever gets is the beginning of dinner. There was enough food today to feed an army, no lie. As the shoveling of food slowed down, the conversation started. “Jordan,” mom said, “we don’t know much about you except that you work with Ely at the catering place.”

Jordan smiled, “Well, I own the catering place and a diner in old town. It’s nothing fancy and not in the best area but I keep it there. Business is good and recently we’ve changed to a pay what you can method. I know what it’s like to go hungry and if I can do something as simple as feed someone who’s down on their luck then I’m going to do it. The homeless don’t pay

because they can't, but the surrounding businesses that know what we do have become regulars who overpay so it evens out in the end. My chef, Maurice, he's been there forever it seems, and he enjoys what he does. I have a great staff with a pay it forward mentality, and only hire others with the same mindset so the teams work well together."

"I didn't know that," I admitted, falling deeper in love with the amazing man beside me.

Jordan blushed, "It's my way of giving back."

"Jordan, I know it's not my place to say since I'm not your birth mother but son, I am so proud of you," she reached across the table and squeezed his hand.

"You're the closest I've had to a real mom, and we've only just met. But thank you, your words meant more than you know," Jordan said. Mom glanced at me, and I nodded. "My birth mother overdosed when I was young. I lived on the streets until, well, until I didn't. That didn't work so well for me but then one day my guardian angel, Lyle came along. He showed me what it was like to be cared for and to help others. When he died, he left me the businesses and my house and I'm doing my best to carry on his legacy. I'd like to think he's proud of me," Jordan glanced skyward. I assumed he was shooting heavenward thanks to Lyle.

Mom and Jordan were both crying, and dad wasn't far behind, "There's no way that man isn't proud of you, son." Fucking hell, now dad calling him son sent all of us over the edge. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

“Okay,” mom said, wiping her eyes. “Enough of this. Today we celebrate our family and those gorgeous pies Ely sent.”

Both Jordan’s and my phone started ringing. “Speaking of the devil,” Jordan said, showing me his phone screen.

“Ditto,” I tilted mine his way, showing Rhone was calling me. “I hope everything’s okay?”

“You won’t know until you answer,” dad said. The entire family stared at us waiting to find out.

“Hey,” I said, “Is everything okay?” I asked Rhone.

“Yeah man, we’re getting married!” Rhone cheered.

“We know this, in March. Are you drunk?” I asked him. This wasn’t a newsflash, as far as I knew the venue was booked and Ely was working on the menu.

“Nope, New Year’s Eve,” Rhone replied.

“Wait, what? Did you knock him up or something?” I said to be a smart ass. “Why so soon?”

“The venue called, and they double booked for March fifteenth but said they had a cancelation on New Year’s Eve. If we wanted it, it was ours, so we took it,” Rhone said. I glanced over at Jordan, he stared wide eyed at me, mouth hanging open. “Hey, put me on speaker.”

I clicked the button, and he started talking, “Mr. and Mrs. Jordan, you there?”

“Yes, Rhone and we’ve told you a million times to call us Richard and Cecilia. You’re an adult now,” dad shook his head

though Rhone couldn't see him.

“Old habits and all that. So hey, Ely and I moved the wedding up to New Year's Eve and we'd like you to be there. Ely doesn't really have any family and I'd like to share mine, extended and all with him. Can you be there? Bring Ariella and Angela too,” Rhone said.

“We will be there,” mom replied. “Give David all the details and congrats, Rhone. I'm so excited for you.”

“Thanks. Gotta go, my mom just opened a bottle of champagne,” Rhone said.

“Tell your mom hi from us. Bye Rhone,” mom said, the rest of us yelled goodbye.

“Holy crap,” Jordan said, shaking his head. “Ely has no idea what he's done. December is our busiest month and now we have his wedding to cater on top of it.”

“I didn't think about that. I'd offer to help but I'm a danger to myself in the kitchen,” I told him.

“Truth,” mom added.

“I know there's no way to talk him out of us catering but maybe I can talk him into at least ordering their cake from a bakery,” Jordan said, his mind already working through the chaotic details.

“Who's standing up with them?” mom asked.

“Jordan and Sadie will be beside Ely. Seltzer, Chase, and I will be with Rhone. The four of us have been best friends for



so long he couldn't choose one over the others. Makes total sense, I'd be the same way," I said.

"I'm excited for them," mom said. "Rhone has a good head on his shoulders and has always been a family man."

One by one we stood to clear the dishes away. Once they were cleaned and the dishwasher was running, mom made a pot of coffee and hot chocolate for Ariella and Angela for us to have with the pies. It didn't take long for us to fill the small amount of room our stomachs had left and between the six of us, we killed half a pumpkin and half an apple pie. Jordan and I waddled to the truck, leftover containers in hand around eight after wading through an embarrassing amount of photo albums. At least she didn't break out with the videos like she'd threatened.

"I love your family," Jordan said once we'd hit the road.

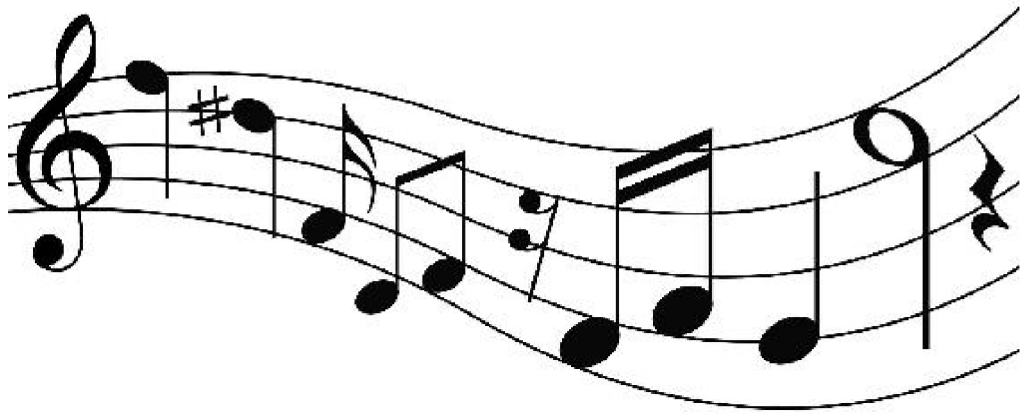
"Looked to me like they felt the same way," I said.

"Thank you," Jordan replied.

"For what?"

"Loving me."

# CHAPTER TWENTY



## Jordan

**W**hat the literal hell was Ely thinking when he decided to move his wedding date up?

The only reasoning I could come up with was that he'd lost his freaking mind. We'd been working late nights and weekends since the Monday after Thanksgiving. The smartest thing I did was cut off accepting any more orders after Ely said they were doing the deed on New Year's Eve. But we already had two dozen jobs accepted and under contract to complete and now his overzealous reception menu to work out. How he thought he'd have the time to not only do wedding stuff but to create his culinary masterpieces, I would never know.

Thankfully most of our staff wanted to be at the wedding so they'd volunteered to work that night. I hired bartenders from the usual pool I pulled from at a local company that did nothing but alcohol and beverage services. At least Ely finally relented where the cake was concerned and ordered it from a bakery where he knew the bakers well. The checklist items that remained consisted of a whirlwind of suit fittings, decorations, and party favors he wanted to give to each guest in attendance.

Diva Ely was alive and in the house people.

"Jordan?" he hollered across the warehouse.

I rolled my eyes and waved my hand in the air, hoping he'd walk over to me and quit squawking. "Come here," he called

me like a dog so nope, the hand wave was a #failure.

I sighed, signed off on the transportation ledger from the delivery driver I was finishing up with, and made my way toward him. “You rang, master,” I bowed.

“Here,” he thrust a spoon of something brownish at me. “I need you to taste this. It’s the glaze I’m working on for the salmon.”

“Carmen could’ve tasted it. You didn’t have to summon me from across the warehouse like a dog,” I took the spoon and sipped. “This is good. I get a hint of bourbon and brown sugar. Is that cinnamon I detect?”

“It is. You really like it?” he preened. It was so hard to stay mad at him when he was this freaking adorable.

“I do. I never would’ve thought to marry those flavors, but they work well,” I said. “I sincerely hope you keep all these recipes in a binder and one day publish a cookbook or two.”

“It’s in the back of my head. For now, I just want to get through the wedding and reception without passing out,” he said, taking a seat.

“I get that you want this day to be perfect, but if you kill yourself before it happens it will all be for nothing,” I said. “No one is going to judge you if a flower is wilted, or you don’t have a dressing they want for their salad. They are there to witness you marrying the love of your life. I guarantee the majority of guests would be just as happy with pizza and beer.”

“You hush your dirty mouth,” Ely scolded.

Time for a subject change. “What did you get Rhone for Christmas?”

“We decided to forgo Christmas and focus on our honeymoon. Guess where we’re going?” he said, excitedly dancing like he had to pee.

“Bathroom’s over there,” I pointed toward it, and he smacked my arm. “Okay, um, Tanzania?”

“No,” he rolled his eyes.

“Guatemala?”

“You’re doing this on purpose,” Ely pouted.

“Yes, I am. I give, where to?” I asked.

“Paris! We are going to freaking Paris,” he spun around. “Can you believe it?”

“I can, Rhone would give you the world if he could. Congrats, I know that was number one on your travel bucket list,” I replied.

“You remembered,” Ely preened.

“Of course, I did. You’re my best friend and it’s my job to know these things,” I said. “Don’t do it,” I told him, his eyes glimmered with unshed tears. “Don’t. You. Dare.” If he cried, I knew I would too, and I’d shed enough tears these past couple of months to float Noah’s Ark. “Come on, it’s late and I want to go home.”

With Ely driving, my mind had time to wander. I had no clue what to get daddy for Christmas. Ely and Rhone would be gone the first two weeks of January for their honeymoon. Perfect time of year since I gave everyone the first week off to recover anyway. Not much went on during week two, mostly inventory and a deep clean of the warehouse kitchens. I wonder if daddy would like to take a trip somewhere as well.

“Night,” I said to Ely as I jogged over to our house, daddy was waiting on the porch for me.

“Hello, baby boy. Did you have a good day?” he asked, squeezing me tight.

“I did though bridezilla showed up a couple of times,” I complained.

“Ut oh,” daddy muttered.

“Meh, it’s okay. It’s his big day and I get it but he’s the one who moved it up three months. Anyway, I think he’s got the menu nailed down which is great because we have a million freaking catering jobs before his,” I sighed, mentally exhausted just talking about it.

“Wanna shower before or after dinner?” daddy asked.

“Depends on what we’re eating. Please tell me I don’t have to cook.” Well, I wasn’t anyway but I at least wanted to give him the opportunity to choose. Even if I was hell bent on Chinese food tonight.

“Let’s order in,” Chase yelled from somewhere inside.

“Chinese?” I asked.

“You got it. I’ll order while you shower. You look dead on your feet and if I shower with you, it’ll be hard to keep my hands to myself,” daddy said, following me upstairs. No joke, I was ready to drop. Getting home close to ten every night was taking its toll on me.

“The idea of sex is glorious, but the execution would be flawed by my snoring,” I said.

“That it would be, my love.” As soon as the warm water hit my skin, the most salacious moans came from me. “What’s going on in here?” Daddy asked, peeking his head inside. “Sounds like a party I wasn’t invited to.”

“Sorry, the hot water is so relaxing. Good thing I didn’t opt for a bath instead because I’d likely have passed out. Hey, I wanted to ask you a question,” I said.

“Shoot,” daddy replied, eyeing me like dessert.

“They’ll be none of that,” I teased. “Ely and Rhone are foregoing Christmas gifts in lieu of their honeymoon. Since I already have a week off in January, what do you think about us doing the same? Minus the honeymoon part?”

“Hmm, I think that’s a great idea. What destination did you have in mind?” daddy asked.

“My first thought was somewhere warm only I didn’t want to fly across time zones and end up jet lagged. How about a cabin in the mountains. Can you ski?” I asked.

“Nope, can you?” daddy asked.

“Nope, but a ski lodge with some snow to play in, hot chocolate, a nice fire with a big fluffy rug in front of it. What do you think?” I suggested.

“Tahoe for the win,” he cheered. “Easton will need to handle the arrangements. Are you cool with that?”

“So cool I’m a popsicle,” I said, realizing just how cheesy it was *after* it left my mouth. “I forgot to ask Ely who they got to officiate the wedding.”

“Diamond,” daddy replied.

“Diamond as in the Diamond who is hell bent on taking off his clothes at every gathering?” I cringed.

“One in the same. He got ordained to do Joey’s dad’s wedding. Easton offered and Ely and Rhone snatched it up. But you’re safe, Ely insisted Diamond remain fully clothed and Easton promised he would be.”

“I don’t know how that guy does it, Easton that is. He has his hands full with all of you and his husband seems to be the largest child.” I turned off the water and stepped out to a waiting towel getting wrapped around me. Daddy dried my hair while I basked in his care.

“That he does,” daddy said, dressing me in my Stitch pajama’s. “Here, put your robe and slippers on. It’s a bit chilly since we don’t have the heat on.”

“You are a wonderful daddy, everything I’d always dreamed of finding,” I said.



“And you are a wonderful boy who’s easy to love,” daddy said with a kiss.

The remaining two weeks were a chaotic storm of events. Ely, Carmen, and I split up overseeing the crews we had dispatched across town. With our business booming I added finding and training new event supervisors to my to do list. I think I’ve reached the point that I don’t need to be as hands on anymore. It’s time to step back and enjoy the owners role and I’d make sure Ely did the same though I know he’d still have his nose buried in the recipes.

The week of Christmas, Ely had his final dress fitting. He’d found his dream combination at a local bridal shop that had gender neutral wedding attire. He’d described it to me before but seeing it on him blew me away. “Ely, you’re stunning.”

He blushed. The white slacks were form fitting until mid-calf where they flared out slightly. A white button up satin blouse with long lace sleeves and a train to match that trailed from his neckline down and trailed behind him four feet. Absolutely gorgeous. I couldn’t wait to see how it tied in with his hair and make-up.

“Stunning,” the tailor Marcus said. “You are a vision, love. And as the designer nothing brings me more joy than to see my creations on the models they were meant for.”

“Do you want me to take your picture?” I asked Ely.

“No, no pictures. Not until everything is perfect,” he replied, staring at himself in the mirrors. I couldn’t take my eyes off him either. “Do you think Rhone will like it?”

“Ely, your beauty alone will render the man speechless. When he sees it tied up in this magnificent package, he’ll be in tears,” I replied, afraid to even think about what this cost. Ely was more fashion conscious than I was. And I’ll be standing beside him in a white suit, God help me keep it clean, with a pink satin tie and matching rose boutonniere. All Ely’s color choices.

“Come on, let’s grab a bite to eat on the way back to work.” We changed into our gear and headed in the direction of the warehouse.

The catering events were slowing for the Christmas holiday. Christmas eve we had all the meals ordered delivered by one pm and sent the staff home, each with an envelope that contained a hefty bonus. “Enjoy your time off everyone. We’ve had a great year and that’s thanks to all of you.” We hugged, wishing each other a happy holiday though next week we still had a couple of events including Ely’s but that wouldn’t require the full staff.

Christmas morning before we even reached the door to mom and dad’s house, yes, I’d grown on them that much, we could hear the laughter. “Sound like Santa was good to Ariella and Angela,” I said. Daddy and I each carried large red Santa bags that would only add to the girl’s merry mischief.

“Merry Christmas!” we cheered as we walked inside without knocking.

“Merry Christmas!” the sea of bodies inside returned. “Um, daddy, we didn’t bring enough gifts.”

He laughed, "I thought the endless line of cars parked up and down the street gave it away."

"It's Christmas, I didn't know which house they belonged to," I nervously replied.

"Come on, time to meet the rest of the family." Daddy took my hand and led me into the crowd. Names and faces I'd likely never remember hugged me, welcoming me to the family. I didn't have the heart to remind them we weren't married, especially not with them all being so warm and openly accepting of me as they were. We ate and drank, they shared stories of things daddy did when he was little such as washing laundry in the toilet and flinging it into the tub to dry.

"Hey, in my defense I thought I was helping my mom out," his protest was met with mad laughter.

Mom kissed the top of his head, "Oh you were helping me alright. Helping me lose my mind." I shivered at the thought of my clothes going into the toilet. Clean water or not, it's an image I'd never be rid of and wouldn't be able to wear those clothes again.

"I'll take over laundry duty," I said, adding to the hysterics.

"Just for that, there's a pop quiz to see how many names you remember," daddy threatened.

My eyes nearly popped out of my skull as I gazed around the room. "Uh-uh," I stuttered.

"That's what I thought, smart ass," daddy teased, but I was still trying to remember all their names.

We returned home with as much in food as we'd delivered in presents. "We won't have to grocery shop for a month," I told him as we put the last of it away. "I swear, half the population of Vegas was at their house today."

"Pretty close," he replied. "What's on the agenda for tomorrow?"

"Ely and I have to pick up our outfits. Did you guys already get your suits?" I asked.

"I think we get ours tomorrow too, not sure. Rhone just barks and we follow," daddy said.

"It'll be nice when this is over, and we head to Tahoe. I'm glad we're flying, it'll get us there quicker," I said, envisioning it. Feet up, roaring fireplace, staring out at the falling snow while sipping a hot drink.

"Amen, baby."

If there were seven days to this week, they went by in one big rush after kicking the shit out of me. Between clients calling every five minutes asking for delivery ETAs to bridezilla flipping out over his sauces not being perfect—newsflash—they were perfect the first fifteen times. I was on the verge of losing my shit and going into hiding.

Then the day finally arrived.

Thank that fucking wedding fates for that.

The wedding planner did a beautiful job. The grand garden was exquisite to begin with but decorated with white and pink roses and baby's breath really left me speechless. Outdoor

heaters were placed throughout, rice paper had been rolled down the center aisle leading to the arch the faced out to the lake. The tables inside the dining area were dressed in white linen cloths, a matching centerpiece in Ely's chosen flowers that were simple yet elegant. The photographer was running around, trying to get pictures before anyone mussed it up.

"Ely," I said, entering the room he'd chosen to get ready in. "I thought you were pulling your hair up?"

He shrugged, "I was, but Rhone loves it when I leave it down and Sadie suggested a loose French braid with baby's breath weaved through it. She did all this." Ely gestured to his hair.

"It's perfect, but no crying or you'll ruin your make-up," I told him.

"Yeah, and it took you two hours to get it right," Sadie reminded him.

*Knock-knock.* "I'll get it." I gasped when I saw who was on the other side.

"Oh Ely, you look beautiful," his mother said, already dabbing at her eyes.

"Oh mamma!" Ely cried as she hugged him tight. "I'm so glad you're here."

She turned and hugged Sadie next, "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"What about..." Ely began, but she cut him off.

“Just you hush now, they’ll be time to talk about that later. Let’s go and get my beautiful boy hitched,” she said, and I too wondered how she got away from his dad to attend their wedding.

“Momma, will you walk me down the aisle?” Ely asked her. He’d planned to walk with Katy but having both moms’ would bring this full circle.

“Yes, baby, I’d be honored.”

I slipped out to tell Katy what was going on and she immediately ran to the room to meet his mother. Ely and I may have come from different upbringings but we both longed for the same thing—family—we got that and so much more.

In lieu of walking down the aisle to the standard wedding procession, Ely asked Easton for another favor. One Rhone had no idea about.

“It’s time, Ely,” Katy said.

“Ely, this is your day. Wear it like a shiny tiara. I love you, my friend,” I said as I hugged him.

“I love you too.”

“I’ll meet you at the front.”

When I got to the arch, Rhone was shaking and pacing. “Calm down, he’s nearly here,” I told him.

“He is coming right?” Rhone asked, dead serious.

“Of course, he is. That boy loves you more than life itself, he’d never do anything to jeopardize that. He’s waited all his

life for this day.” I glanced over at daddy, so stunning in his suit he took my breath away. “Daddy, you look. I don’t even have words.” The groomsmen were in suits like mine but black with the same pink silk tie and boutonniere. Daddy had his hair pulled back in a tight braid. Words escaped me.

“You are gorgeous, baby boy,” he winked just as the wedding song began to play, then Diamond stepped up behind us.

“That’s Ely’s song, the song I wrote for him,” Rhone said, barely above a whisper as he wiped his eyes. “How did he?”

“That magical elf we all rely too much on had a hand in this,” Diamond replied.

The crowd stood as Ely approached, a mom draped on each arm. “His mom came,” Rhone said, completely stunned.

When Ely reached the front, the mom’s each kissed his cheeks then did the same to Rhone. Both he and Ely were already in tears and the ceremony hadn’t even begun. When the music stopped, Diamond started the ceremony.

“I would open with, friends and family, but when I look at each face in the crowd tonight, I see nothing but family. So, I’ll begin again. Welcome, family. Tonight, we come together for the culmination of two souls to be joined as one. Rhone and Ely have written their own vows they’d like to share with you. Rhone?”

Rhone cleared his throat then staring deeply into Ely’s eyes, he recited his vows. “Ely, when I first laid eyes on you.”

Ely cut in, “You thought I was a woman,” he said, making everyone laugh.

“Yes, but a beautiful one. You took my breath away just as you have again today. When I was younger my mom said our family falls in love hard, fast, and forever. I never understood that until I met you and I knew right away you were meant to be mine. I love you Ely now, and forever.”

“Ely,” Diamond said, “your turn.”

Poor guy was shaking so hard I wasn't sure he'd get his words out. Then he squared his shoulders and strong Ely came forth. “Rhone, the first time we met I was in a snit. It has been a bad day and more than anything I wanted to hide. Then you came along and made it worse,” queue in more laughter. Who knew Ely had it in him. “You were persistent, determined, and one of the kindest men I'd ever met. You showed me how it felt to be loved, a love I was worthy of, and that I was someone special. I fell in love with you equally hard and fast and never once have I regretted it. You too are my forever, Rhone. I love you.”

“You guy are killing me here,” Diamond said, wiping his eyes. “Rhone, do you take Ely to be your lawfully wedded husband? To love and care for, in sickness and in health from this day forward until you leave this earth?”

“I do.”

“Do you Ely take Rhone to be your lawfully wedded husband? To love and care for, in sickness and in health from this day forward until you leave this earth?”



“I do.”

“By the power vested in me by the state of Nevada, I now pronounce you husbands. You, Rhone, may kiss your husband,” Diamond said.

Cheers and clapping filled the air as Rhone tipped Ely back and took what was his – a binding kiss from his husband. When they stood upright Diamond announced, “I know present to you Mr. & Mr. Horne.” Once again, we cheered as they walked down the aisle toward the dining room hand in hand. Smiles so wide they could light the night sky.

No speeches were given at the requests of the grooms. Rumor had it Rhone was afraid of what his comrades would share which I fully understood. “Hey baby,” daddy said, taking his seat beside me at the table we were assigned to.

“Mmm, daddy,” I cooed, basking in his lips. “Wasn’t it a beautiful ceremony?”

“It was baby boy.” The table began to fill. We were seated with Chase who opted for no plus one, Seltzer who’d done the same and Diamond’s brother Jeremiah who daddy introduced me to.

“Wait, so your name is Jordan?” Jeremiah said.

“Yes?”

“And David, your last name is Jordan?” he asked daddy.

“Yes, you know this already. Why the twenty questions?” daddy asked him.

“I’m guessing you guys haven’t thought too far ahead?”  
Jeremiah said.

“Dude, skip to the end,” daddy said.

“Jordan and Jordan,” Jeremiah said, looking at us like we were dumb.

“Oh my god, how did I never catch that?” Seltzer added.  
“I’m the smartass in the group and even I missed it.”

“What’s so funny over here?” Rhone asked as he and Ely walked up.

“Shit,” I said, the wheels finally turning. “You know this means we can never get married?”

“Why?” Daddy asked.

“Because I’d be Jordan-Jordan,” saying it aloud set the teasing in motion from our group.

“You could be Jordan Wright Jordan. No then you’d always think you’re right,” daddy teased. “Honestly Jordan, just because we get married doesn’t mean you have to take my name. You have numerous assets already that would be a pain in the ass to change, just keep your last name.”

“Hmm, guess I didn’t think of that,” I replied.

“You’re still Jordan-Jordan to me,” Seltzer loudly sung. Daddy flipped him off. We walked around the room, chatting with those we knew which was pretty much everyone. Joey, Stoli, Mickey and his men Benny and River, and Easton were all in attendance. Rhone’s entire family including his Uncle

Tony and his family plus mine and daddy's—mom, dad, and the twins Ariella and Angela.

“I need to use the restroom, daddy,” I whispered.

“Me too.”

We headed down the hallway to the single use restroom and opened the door, “What the fuck?” daddy yelled.

“What’s going on?” Chase asked as he walked up behind us. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

“What? He won’t kill us, you’re being dramatic,” Seltzer rolled his eyes.

“Maybe you should pull your pants up?” I suggested to them.

“No dude, you’re wrong,” daddy said. “He will fucking kill you.”

“Let me worry about my brother.”

“Worry about your brother for what?” Diamond asked, pushing through the crowd. His face turned an ugly shade of red, fists balled up at his side. “I will fucking pummel you!”

“Diamond, no!” Easton yelled. “What is it with this group getting caught with their pants down at weddings for fucks sake? First Jaxson and now you two?”

# ABOUT AUTHOR

TL Travis is an award-winning published author of LGBTQIA+ contemporary romance and erotic musings

that have earned “Best-Selling Author” flags in the US as well as Internationally.

When she’s not busy spinning steamy webs, she enjoys spending time with her family, going to concerts,

wine tasting, and people watching. With every face, there’s a story and half the fun is dreaming up what it

could be.

TL is surrounded by her extensive 4-legged rescue family, her sons, and adorable grandkids. She will

continue saving furry friends in need for as long as she lives. Tl would like to remind you to “Adopt, not

shop.” Saving that lost soul may very well be the one you need.

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**T**L Travis Social Media Links

Email: [tltravis@tltravis.com](mailto:tltravis@tltravis.com)

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