



Dominance,
PROTECTED

A J A Y D A N I E L

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Ajay Daniel

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*For my partner
The Caiden to my Vincent*

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See this page for trigger warnings (**includes possible spoilers**)

There are instances in this book which could be triggering for some readers, including but not limited to: homosexual slurs, mentions and brief instances of BDSM, a scene with gun play, a scene with mention and brief use of knife play, spanking, sexual encounters between the main characters with others not in the romance (no cheating), and one scene of violence including a murder.

See below for a list of chapters with possible triggers. Some may exist outside of the listed chapters, but these are the most notable ones. **Beware of spoilers.**

Chapter 10: Mention of knife play with brief use

Chapter 20: Murder, sex outside the main romance (no cheating) with MMF, BDSM, gun play

Chapter 21: Sex outside the main romance (no cheating)

Chapter 25: Spanking

Welcome to Business, Casual
where we often mix business with pleasure ...

1 Top or bottom?

Caiden Augustus

One thing to know about me: I manage to ruin everything good that comes into my life.

It's a bad habit, like cocaine or crystal meth, and quitting is just as difficult. As a matter of fact, I still haven't figured out how to *stop* fucking up. Maybe it isn't an addiction, but a disease. Maybe there is really and truly something permanently wrong with me that causes me to make a mess of life for the entertainment of absolutely no one.

Almost six weeks ago, someone tried to kill me. At a drama-filled Gala for New York's most elite, a fake waiter gave me poison inside a champagne flute. Chaos erupted and I ended up in the back of an ambulance with my best friend's brother telling the paramedics how to do their job. He even went as far as to shove a struggling nurse out of the way in order to give me life-saving CPR after the poison stopped my heart.

The entire experience sucked, of course, and my best friend Phoenix, CEO of *Bernardi Security*, loaned me some of his employees to try and keep me safe.

Spoiler, it didn't quite work out.

I managed to drunkenly slip away from my temporary guards, leaving them in the basement of my apartment building while I rode the elevator all the way up to my penthouse and straight into the barrel of a gun.

Once again, Phoenix's brother was there to save me.

After that incident, Vincent was forced by his older brother to be my personal bodyguard. Whereas all the others would watch me from a distance and rotate out, Vincent was to keep me within arm's reach at all times. I was moved into the guest bedroom at his apartment, and he took his job in all

seriousness, never straying from my side no matter how much of a dick I was.

And, somewhere down the line, *arm's reach* became *embrace*.

I fell for Vincent, my bodyguard, my best friend's younger brother, and I fell *hard*.

Then, in a classic Caiden Augustus move, I ruined it.

Vincent and I spent the most amazing night together in Italy. We did everything from me watching him win a street fight, us running from the cops, painting each other's bodies with luminescent colors in a blacklight-illuminated LGBTQ+ club, confessing our feelings for each other, and tangling up in one another all night. It was everything I never knew I was missing in my life. It was perfect.

That night, I'd discovered what I thought was a breakthrough — that *Mazza Corp* was dirty and trying to enter an import contract with my business but someone didn't want that, thus the attempts on my life. However, after leaving Vincent alone in bed high and dry the morning of his sister's wedding, I told Phoenix my news on our way back to New York, thinking for sure that was it for Vincent and me. With this information, I wouldn't need a bodyguard anymore, and since I can't bring myself to publicize my feelings for a man, I thought for sure that would have to be the end of us.

So, imagine my surprise when my friend tells me this changes nothing and that Vincent will continue to be my bodyguard for the foreseeable future. That means we can be together for *our* foreseeable future.

Except, I've already hurt him, badly, and I have no idea if he will take me back.



Knowing Vincent is just a room away, one door separating us, isn't a fact that wants to leave my mind anytime soon. Not being able to go beg for his forgiveness immediately is absolute torture. Phoenix has no idea about my feelings for his brother or his brother's feelings for me, and I can't think of a good enough excuse to get to the back bedroom of Phoenix's plane where Vincent is without seeming suspicious. As far as Phoenix knows, Vincent and I tolerate each other, nothing more.

Instead, I just have to sit and make small talk when I'd prefer to be wrapped in Vincent's arms, breathing in his scent and holding him hard enough he has to know I never want to let him go. My lips ache to be pressed against his skin, his mouth, just *anything* Vincent-related.

"I want my apartment back," I sigh absentmindedly, grasping at anything to prevent myself from barging into the bedroom just feet away. Since being shot in my apartment, I've been staying with Vincent, but I miss my penthouse with its giant closet and theatre room.

Phoenix shrugs from his position on the plane bed across from me. His bulky six-foot-seven frame absolutely dwarfs the furniture, and his legs are stretched lazily across the entire aisle between us. The native Italian man speaks with such a heavy accent I sometimes have trouble understanding all his words — when he actually uses words instead of grunts. "I know you have extra bedrooms. Get Enzo to have our security system installed and let him crash there instead of you two being at his place. He was supposed to offer you that option already." After a drunken birthday weekend, Phoenix still looks extremely well put together, no dark circles under his eyes unlike me. He's in his signature all-black suit, jacket resting on the back of the couch, and his sleeves are rolled a few times to expose the tattoos that cover most of his body. From fingers to neck and every inch of skin I've happened to see in between, ink swirls against tan olive skin. Other than the tattoos, he and Vincent resemble each other — same eyes and hair — though Phoenix keeps his hair cut short.

I stare wide-eyed at my friend, confused and curious. “He did not give me that option.”

“Of course not. He is an idiot.”

I ignore that comment, though I have to bite my tongue against retaliating. One thing I’ve learned about Vincent is that he is ridiculously intelligent, always thinking ten steps ahead, so if he had a reason for not offering this suggestion, I trust him. Still, it would be nice to be back in the comfort of my own home. My OCD would appreciate it dearly. “I’ll buy my whole apartment building and contract with you if it means I can get my place back,” I admit.

“You do not have to do that,” Phoenix shakes his head. “Just speak with your building manager. Most likely, they will let you install my security system inside the apartment, a secure lock for the front door, and an elevator key for your floor. They are usually amicable with those things. I cannot believe Vincenzo did not even offer this to you.”

I don’t even listen to everything he says, stuck on his earlier statement.

Vincent can move into my apartment. With me.

No, I correct myself. Not move in, just live there temporarily.

For the foreseeable future.

The problem remains that I screwed things up with Vincent, and now I have no idea if he will even want to come to my apartment with me. Maybe he’ll see this as an opportunity to get away, have someone else guard me — like Jamison, his right hand in the company — and cut his losses. After all, what confident gay man wants to be in a secret relationship with someone who doesn’t even know what their sexuality is anymore? He would be smart to never speak to me again after the way I’ve treated him.

God, I don’t want that.

I don’t want any of this — someone trying to kill me or having to hide a relationship. I just want to lock myself in

Vincent's apartment with pasta and Parks and Rec and not have to worry about anyone finding out about us.

Phoenix is the one to break the silence which has taken over the dark cabin of the plane. "Was that the first time you played the piano since Caroline?" He asks tentatively, glancing at Adam and Jackson. Both managed to fall asleep shortly after boarding the plane.

At the mention of my late sister, I feel my face pale. I know he's talking about the wedding on Saturday where I stepped in as a musician, but my mind is on last Thursday night with Vincent when we played a duet together on his parent's piano.

When he had placed his hands on the keys, pressing them with a child-like passion — so opposed to my strict, robotically trained movements from years of lessons involving slaps to the knuckles with rulers — I remember thinking that man could never stop surprising me. The next night, I realized just how true that was when we went to the fight and the club.

"Yeah," my voice is rough with emotion at the thought of my sister.

Caroline was taken too, too soon.

"Thank you. For doing it for my sibling."

He doesn't even know how true his words are despite how wrong they are in the way he means. I did break my eight-year abstinence from playing the piano, but it wasn't for his sister like he thinks.

It was for Vincent.

"Listen, I don't want to bother Vinz, so do you think you can email that Jamison guy and ask him to coordinate for the security system? I'll call my building manager in the morning and make sure everything is okay with them. Maybe it can get installed tomorrow too, do you think?"

Phoenix stares at me contemplatively before uttering a sentence completely unrelated to my previous question. "You act like you cannot stand my brother, yet you call him a nickname only his bastard ex has ever called him."

I think my blood actually runs cold, realizing Phoenix could be onto us before there even is an *us*. “I didn’t realize.” He never told me the nickname I chose for him is the same one that an ex had called him.

“I cannot believe he lets you call him that.”

This is not good. If my nickname for him was going to cause concern among his family, he should have said something. My mind flashes back to Gaia muttering about that nickname, too. Damn it. Can I rewind time? Am I found out after I already cut everything off?

“I will have Jamison get everything ready,” Phoenix continues. “But Enzo is staying as your bodyguard for now, no matter how much you dislike each other. I know you are ready to be rid of guards, but this is for your protection.”

“O-okay,” I stutter, unable to come up with anything else.

Lying down on his bed, Phoenix flicks off the soft overhead light and sends the cabin into mostly darkness. “Get some sleep. *Cay*.”

My body jerks as he says that. My friends don’t shorten my name to that, only Vincent does. Does Phoenix know that? He can’t. He would have said if he was suspicious of something. Right?

I toss and turn fitfully in my small bed that feels too big without another body in it. How have I already gotten so accustomed to sleeping next to someone — next to Vincent? Every muscle in my body aches to cross the short distance to Vincent’s door, and I have to stop myself from getting up multiple times.

Instead, I bring out my phone and look through the pictures in my gallery, seeing Vincent’s smiling face in every one. We took *a lot* of pictures at the club Friday night, and I still have the three he sent through text of him in his bedroom in Italy. When the pictures start to hurt too much and my eyelids are tugged by anvils, I finally fall into an unrestful sleep.



The plane lands eight hours later, six hours behind Italy time. Since we left at midnight, after an eight-hour flight of going six hours back in time, we arrive in New York at two in the morning. We'd tried to stay up as long as possible during the flight, so we are all still in a state of confused sleepiness.

I've decided I hate flying through time zones. Plane math is worse than toilet paper math.

As we exit the plane, I realize with dread that I have to get in a car alone with Vincent now and go back to his apartment while trying to figure out just how to apologize. Hell, he may not even want to listen to what I have to say. He may not acknowledge my presence just like I did to him this weekend.

Vincent looks utterly exhausted, eyes glazed and black curls lacking their usual luster, as we load our luggage into the back of the SUV and climb into the seats, him in the driver and me in the passenger. He's dressed in a simple black v-neck shirt, the short sleeves rolled once or twice, and black jeans with chains dangling on one side. It's only been a few days, but I feel myself taking in every inch of him, unconsciously drawing closer like Vincent is made of magnets. I want to reach over and hold his hand, caress his thigh, tangle my hands through his curls, and devour his mouth until neither of us can breathe.

The air inside the car is ridiculously tense, and after twenty minutes of driving, I can't take the silence anymore.

"Why didn't you give me the option to put a security system in my apartment instead of living with you?" Well, *that* isn't what I meant to say.

I study him, watching for any reaction. The only inclination he heard me is the tightening of his hands on the steering wheel. The black polish is gone from his nails, and his eyes are free of any charcoal today. I find myself missing those two simple things, as well as the cute butterfly drawing

he had on his high cheekbone at the wedding ceremony. I'm not sure how he got it so perfect, but it reminded me of his tattoo as soon as I saw it.

And the tattoo resting between his hip bones and crotch reminded me of other things that I definitely did not need to think about during my best friend's sister's wedding.

"I thought I did. My bad."

Vincent pulls into the parking garage of his apartment, getting out before slamming his door. I have to practically jog to keep up with him as he calls the elevator using his phone.

This is not what I want. This is not the way I pictured this going.

I thought our time was up. I thought we wouldn't be able to continue this any longer.

I also realize that I made the decision based on the future — a future we can't have because of me.

This has to be for the best. Right?

Fuck, fuck, fuck. What is the right thing to do?

The elevator doors close with us inside, rising gradually to the 24th floor of the complex.

"We ... we could never work," I start tentatively.

"And that is your decision to make alone?" Vincent spits at the doors in front of him, refusing to look at him even now.

I let out a frustrated half-sigh, half-groan, throwing my hands in the air and facing him. "Can you honestly tell me you would be happy in a secret relationship for however long we might be together? Never going out in public together and acting like we hate each other around your brother? We couldn't live together, or spend all our evenings and weekends together like a real couple. This is the best way. Cut it before it gets too far."

I fear it already has for me.

"Is this because of your Jesus Freak parents?"

Ignoring the jab, I clench my jaw to hide my anger. I'm a grown man; My parents have no say in my life. "It's because of me. I can't risk my image at my company, and that's another thing. You wouldn't be invited to any family events — Christmas, Thanksgiving, or family reunions. Our relationship wouldn't exist to my parents. Even if I came out, we would always be hidden. I see you, Vinz. *I see you*. You do not hide who you are at all, and I love that about you. But I can't do it. I cannot do what you do. Our lives are too different. We would never work."

His voice is just as angry as mine when he replies, practically yelling. He's turned to face me now, teeth glinting in the fluorescent light of the elevator as he curls his upper lip on one side. He pokes my chest with a strong finger. "How can you possibly decide that for the both of us without even letting us try first?"

I don't know why I feel the need to stab a knife into the already gaping hole, but I do, and I twist it hard, going right for where it hurts. "Which of us gets it in the ass, Vinz? Is there a reason we haven't talked about that?"

Silence.

The elevator doors ding open.

Theo is standing in front of us, dressed in a pair of running clothes with headphones in his ears. He looks up, then slowly pulls one headphone, and then the other, out. "Hey. What's up, guys?"

"Is Vincent a top or bottom?" I demand from Theo without any preface.

Though his cheeks blush darkly, Theo answers honestly. "I've never met such a hardcore top if I'm being honest."

"Thanks, Theo," I say, storming out of the elevator with my point proven.

I hear Theo try to talk to Vincent, but he gets brushed off like a spec of dust on glasses. "Cay, that doesn't mean anything," he whisper-yells, considerate of neighbors.

I've already pulled out my phone and unlocked his door with the security application, bursting into the apartment like a madman. "Oh yeah? Enlighten me, then." I turn in the middle of the living room to face him where he stands in the hall just inside the apartment. I even drop my bag to the floor to give him my full undivided attention.

Vincent sets his duffle down gently, the bag thumping lightly on the tile, and the chains on his jeans jingle at the movement. He holds his hands out as if to keep a wild animal calm. "You ... might like bottoming," he suggests cautiously.

My emotions rise to a new height, spewing my words before I have a chance to think about them. "So, that's it, then? No offer to have a dick shoved up your ass, huh? I don't think I could do it, Vinz. I'm not ... I don't know. I'm attracted to you, and I've touched your dick, which was fine. But, I've never had the desire to have anything shoved up my ass, and I don't think I will randomly start now. Even in high school—" I break off. I didn't mean to say that.

Vincent doesn't miss it — because of course, the ever-observant bodyguard catches everything I accidentally confess. "High school?"

"Forget it."

"No," he argues, taking a step forward. "Tell me. Please."

I'm not sure I've ever heard him say please. If I have, it isn't very often.

I'm not sure why I tell him my deepest, darkest secret, but, *fuck it*, I do. Scratch that, I do know. I tell him because I love him, and I'm not ready to give up on us even if that is the entire basis of my very argument right now. "One night," I begin with a tense breath. "After a football game, we were all in the locker room. There was a party after, so almost everyone left quickly to get there. It was just me and the co-captain in the showers, and we ..." I trail off, struggling to voice the one thing I haven't allowed myself to so much as think about since the night it happened.

“Kissed?” Vincent inquires in my silence, taking one step closer to me.

I nod.

Another step. “Touched?” Nod. “Further?” Nod. “... Fucked?”

Here it is.

Deep breath.

This is the first time I’ve ever said it out loud.

“I pinned him against the wall, he wrapped his legs around my waist, we made out, and I fucked him. In the ass,” I tack on for clarification. “We had no idea what we were doing, but at least we both finished. After, we never said another word to each other for the rest of the year. We graduated and never saw each other again, so I forced myself to forget all about it. Everything my parents engraved in my head kept yelling at me that it was wrong, sinful, *perverted* ... And I fucking listened.”

Now, Vincent steps even closer, running a tender hand down my arm, fingers just grazing my skin enough to erect goosebumps. “Cay, I am so sorry.”

I don’t think I’ve heard him apologize, either. “For what?”

“You didn’t deserve to be abandoned like that,” he murmurs, leaning in close enough to run his nose along mine. “And your parents are wrong — so, *so wrong*.”

I think I’m melting. Overwhelmed by the scent of him — mint and smoke, sage and bergamot — I draw in deep breaths through my nose. I savor the comforting smell of my lover, the warmth of his body so close to mine, and the feel of his feather-light touches against my skin. It’s not enough; It’s never enough when it comes to Vincent.

“I would never have done that to you,” he continues in a whisper.

I take a step back. “Obviously, the position was less than favorable for him, so he forgot about it just like I did. I ... I don’t want to go there with you, just to regret it later. If I

ended up hating it just like he did, how would we move past that?”

“You can always try,” he presses, moving to consume the space between us I just created. “You’d be surprised how good it can feel — how close you feel with your partner during.”

His words strike a cord in me as I realize he is talking from experience. “Wait, you’re saying you’ve done it and enjoyed it, but you’re not willing to be the bottom for me?”

“Cay—”

“No. No excuses. What the actual fuck, Vinz? I must not be *that* special.”

Desperate now, Vincent reaches out for me. “It’s not like that. Look, no one has to be the bottom. We can do plenty of other things—”

I shake his hands off my shoulders. “No, Vinz. It’s very clear that we are on two entirely different pages here. It’s time to stop living in fantasy land and just go our—”

“Cay, stop—”

“—separate ways. This is not going to work.”

He tries to reach for me again, but I dodge out of the way, much to his irritation. “Cay, stop. Just listen to me. I want to do this—”

“There is no ‘this.’” I interrupt him. “There is no us.”

Lies, lies, lies.

“You don’t mean that.”

I don’t.

“I do.”

I try to move passed him, but he throws an arm out to the side to stop me, desperation in his dark eyes. Knowing my resolve is crumbling, I push his arm away rougher than intended. The narrowing of his eyes is the only indication of his anger before he turns to face me full-on and shoves at my chest.

“You are not even willing to try for me! You are not even willing to listen to what I have to say to try and fix things. Apparently, *I* am not that special to *you!*”

His words — and push — brush along my internalized fury in just the right way to make it explode outward. Before I can stop myself, I’m shoving his hard chest just as he did to me. My push has more strength behind it, but Vincent barely moves back a step, chains rattling slightly at the movement. “Don’t you accuse me of not loving you. I risked everything to be with you this weekend!”

“If you really loved me, it would not fucking matter what anyone thought about you — about us. If you really loved me, you would not have had women all over you these last two days. If you *really* loved me, Cay, you would not have left me Saturday morning or ignored me for the rest of the weekend!” Another shove from him, harder this time.

I retaliate with an even harder push to his broad chest, the firmness there not giving a bit under my hands. “Don’t you fucking say I don’t love you!”

“Stop lying to me and to yourself! Obviously, you are delusional or something if you think *this* is how love works!” This time, his hands on my chest send me stumbling to the ground, but I’m more wounded by his words.

How dare he say I’m lying about loving him. I risked my friendship with Phoenix just to spend a few hours with Vincent in Italy. A few hours for my five-year friendship! Why would I do that if I don’t love him?

I want nothing more than to pull him against me and prove to him just how much I love him.

The push to the ground did piss me off, though, and my anger doesn’t dissipate slowly once unleashed. I climb back to my feet and rush at Vincent, seeing his eyes widen in surprise a half-second before my fist hits his jaw. Vincent stumbles back, holding the wounded part of his face, and I see a thin line of blood falling from underneath his hand.

Oh, God. I just hit him. Like, actually punched him. What is wrong with me?

“Vinz—” I start, but am thrown back as a punch lands on my face as well. Not as used to being hit as Vincent, I fall to my ass again. As I try to stand, a hand clamps around my throat and holds me down, strong thighs straddling my hips.

For the briefest moment, I wonder if our fight has escalated too far — that Vincent might take me out as he has done to opponents in street fights — but then I assess the situation. His fingers are digging slightly into the sides of my neck, not hurting, and his palm is lifted slightly to ensure my breathing isn’t affected. He isn’t trying to choke me out.

I feel his panting breath against my face, his hard body pressed against me in all the right places, and I release an embarrassing groan into the otherwise silent living room.

Fuck, when did my dick get hard?

2 Fucked

Vincent Bernardi

As soon as my fist lands on Caiden's face, he falls, sprawling to the ground. Immediately, I drop as well, wanting to make sure he is okay.

Fuck, what is wrong with me? Why would I hit him back like that?

As my body presses against his, I feel something that completely changes my mood.

His erection.

When did he get hard?

Taking that hint, I wrap my hand around his throat with a new resolve.

I'll show him exactly how we can be intimate without a top or bottom.

Pressing firmly enough on his neck to restrict some blood flow, I grind my hardening dick against Caiden's. He lets out a groan that has me almost moaning at the sound. With a newfound determination, I slide my cock against his over and over, the jeans between us rubbing with an almost painful friction.

"Do you feel what you do to me, Cay?" I growl in his ear. "Do you feel what I do to you?"

Caiden lets out a needy whine in response.

"You would not be falling apart like this if you did not feel something for me, would you?"

He lets out a gasping groan, but I'm not having that right now.

"Words, Cay. Tell me. *Dimmelo.*"

“Fuck,” he cries against the friction, eyes closed tight. “I love you I love you *I love you.*”

There’s my Caiden and our sets of three, just as it should be.

Satisfied, I widen my legs to completely straddle his waist, sitting up to run my hands down his torso, then underneath his t-shirt. My fingers dance along his heaving chest, pulling his shirt up with them. “Do you want this, Cay? Do you want me?”

To my surprise, Caiden reaches up and grasps my wrists firmly. He stares into my eyes with wholehearted seriousness, and I swear there is more moisture in his hazel eyes than usual. “I want this. I want you. I want pasta-making Sundays. I want pizza night Fridays. I want cleaning to Taylor Swift songs and cuddling on the couch to Parks and Rec. I want playing piano duets and home haircuts. I want you sitting on my desk at lunch and a shared plate of pasta for dinner. I want to fall asleep in your arms every night and wake up in them in the morning. God, Vinz, I want you — all of you — so fucking bad, it hurts.”

“Forget everything,” I beg him. “Nothing has changed, yet. We don’t have to go our separate ways, yet. Forget all your worries and just be with me, here, now. Day by day, we’ll figure this out. Please, just give us a chance.” My bottom lip stings with each word, and I slide my tongue out to prod the split. It stings, and I almost groan. Caiden gave me that pain, and he can make it feel so, so good if he only gives in to me.

Maybe I should get a lip piercing, and he can nibble on it every time we kiss.

Below me, Caiden lies frozen until, ever so slowly, he starts to nod. One of his hands reaches up to grab the back of my neck, and then he is pulling me down for a kiss, sucking my wounded lip into his mouth. He runs his tongue along the cut, the metallic taste of blood getting lost somewhere between his mouth and mine. Teasingly, he slides my lip between his teeth and applies a soft pressure that sends my head spiraling.

I open my mouth, my bottom lip still captured by his teeth, and moan out loud at the sting that feels oh-so pleasurable, my dick pulsing against him with a carnal need.

Caiden's hands roam my body, pulling at my t-shirt until the seams crackle in protest. Breaking our connection, he pulls away only to yank my shirt off, then his lips are back on mine in another heated kiss.

Still straddling him, I reach for the button of my jeans just as he does the same, and we smile against each other's mouths. Together, we unbutton my jeans and tug them down as far as we can. With me straddling him, that's only to about my upper thigh, but it's enough to allow my cock to spring free, slapping against my stomach.

I'm delightfully surprised as Caiden manages to flip us over. We roll off the living room rug and onto the cold, hard tile, but only the hiss that escapes through my teeth at the icy shock on my bare back is all either of us offer in acknowledgment.

Too caught up in each other, we seriously don't give a fuck about the unforgiving floor as Caiden begins to tear off his clothes as well. He manages to kick off his shoes and socks, so his pants are free to slip completely off his legs — not that I'm complaining.

I engage every muscle I have in order to sit up, forcing Caiden to straddle me and sit on my outstretched legs. He doesn't seem to mind and continues to kiss a trail up my neck to my ear, toying with my cartilage piercing between his teeth. He tugs, I groan, and our hands roam wildly over each other — abs and nipples and hair all caught in the assault.

Our hard, naked dicks glance off each other with our movement and frantic hands, and I am too far gone to stop and offer for us to go to the bed or even the couch.

With one smooth maneuver, I turn us so Caiden is on the floor again, and he hisses at the cool touch of tile just as I had. With my knees between Caiden's legs — though he doesn't offer a wide straddle for me to nestle in that well — I place

one forearm on the floor by his head to hold myself up and use my other hand to grasp our dicks.

Cocks pressed together, I wrap my hand around them as well as I can. Due to the combined girth, though, my thumb just barely covers the top of my dick, and my fingers curl around the top of Caiden's only partially. Still, I rub my hand up and down, reveling at the feel of our marble-hard and velvet-smooth erections pressed together as I pump them at the same time.

My eyes have fallen closed, and I lazily lay biting kisses along Caiden's shoulder and collarbone where my head has fallen due to the pleasurable sensations coming from our joined bodies.

I feel something touch my thumb, and open my eyes to look between us. Caiden has brought one of his hands up, too, and slides my thumb between two of his fingers. His thumb slides between my fingers, and together we hold hands as we both pump our dicks into oblivion.

"Cay," I groan, biting into his shoulder until he moans in response.

"Vinz."

I've never loved that nickname more. "Fuck, you feel good." His teeth move along my neck, giving tentative nibbles and gentle sucks I pray will leave marks. Squeezing my hand on our dicks, I moan. "Harder, baby."

Caiden tilts his head down slightly, then bites hard on the top of my shoulder. The pain is sudden, and I cry out at the feeling, automatically moving our joined hands at a faster pace.

Together, we pump and tug, each groaning in response to some way the other teases our bodies.

"Promise me everything will be okay," Caiden begs, head thrown back on the tile floor in ecstasy.

Bringing my lips to his, I kiss him deeply. "Everything will be okay," I assure him, though I'm not sure if I am lying or not.

Sweat is building up on our bodies, and my arm quivers from holding my large frame in a plank for so long, but I don't dare interrupt us. Instead, I stroke us harder and faster, groaning and growling at the feeling of Caiden under me.

"Neither top or bottom," I say breathlessly to him, trying to prove my point. "We can do this. *This* is amazing. You're amazing."

"Fuck," Caiden whines, and I love the profanity as it falls from his soft lips, knowing he only does that for me. He swipes his tongue out to run it over the split on my bottom lip, a wordless apology.

Already forgiven.

"I'm gonna come," he warns, groaning against my mouth. "Fucking shit, Vinz. You feel so good, babe."

"Not yet," I growl, stilling our hands. His pulsing cock calms, though a bead of precome spills over his tip, and mine thrusts out a dollop of white, too. I stare down at our needy cocks, gathering saliva in my mouth before letting it fall smoothly over the heads. Using our joined hands, I smear the spit all over, then resume pumping slowly, the slick friction feeling so much better.

Caiden swears, again and again and again, and I devour each delicious curse with my mouth.

God, I fucking love how vocal he is.

I feel him adjust, and know what he wants before he even does it. As one, we roll again, and Caiden straddles me since my jeans are still only halfway down my thighs, restricting a lot of my movement.

Caiden repeats my earlier stunt of salivation on our joined dicks, and our slippery hands slide up and down, harder and faster and tighter — so warm and smooth. I feel the tightening of my balls, and I ache to come.

"*Ah, sì,*" I moan. "*Cazzo, sto per venire.*"

"Fucking come then," is Caiden's gruff response to my Italian groans, his voice demanding as he pants just as hard as

I am. Brows furrowed, teeth gritted and imprisoning his bottom lip, chest heaving, and arm veins straining, Caiden looks like a fucking god wreaking havoc on my body, and I'm fucking letting him. I feel his arm, placed near my head almost exactly how mine was, quivering, and I know he'll most likely give out soon.

I moan his name, capturing his lips with mine, sloppy and wet. Almost immediately, he takes control and sucks my tongue into his mouth, then clamps down with his teeth. Hard.

My mouth opens, tongue still captured in his teeth, and I cry out as my dick explodes across my stomach, Caiden following only seconds later as he lets out a hoarse roar. I feel the heat of our mixed come all the way up to the tops of my pecs, but I can't be bothered to worry about it at this moment.

Apparently, neither can Caiden. He collapses on top of me, squishing the mess between us without a care.

"I love you, Vincenzo Bernadi," he proclaims.

"I love you, Caiden Augustus," I say, still breathless. "But if we are going to continue this relationship, there is something I have to confess."

Caiden raises his head from my shoulder to look at me with worry.

"I hate Parks and Rec."

He laughs uncontrollably, smiling wide, abs pulsing against me, still panting from our fucking, and I bask in the beautiful sound as it bounces off the tile beside me. His forehead drops to mine, and he kisses me through residual giggles. "There's something I have to confess, too."

"What's that?" I hum, not worried in the slightest. I've already persevered through days of him ignoring me, and convinced him to be with me again. He can't say anything to break us now.

"I'm too old for this," he groans. "My knees fucking hurt."

We both laugh at that statement, and I wiggle a leg to find that my knees are also very tender. Maybe even to the point of

bruises.

“I have a bed,” I suggest seductively.

Caiden’s next smile is coy, playful. “It’s four a.m. and we both have had almost a full night’s sleep on the plane. How can we possibly waste four hours in bed before I have to be at work?”

My smile isn’t reserved like his. No, it’s wicked and sinful, full of promised mischief. “I can think of a few things. Starting with that mouth of yours. You hurt my feelings when you ignored me, Cay, but I’m sure we can work something out by way of apology.”

When the lustful look returns to Caiden’s eyes, I know I’ve got him.

I have him for at least a few more hours, then I’ll try for a whole day, then a week, then a month.

Then for years, hopefully.

It just starts day by day first.

I can do that.



It’s like the universe is trying to fuck me over.

At seven in the morning, after only two more hours in bed with Caiden and a shared shower, there is a knock on my door. We’re both getting ready in the bathroom, towels still around our waists as we elbow around each other for different products from the counter.

Caiden made a joke about ‘his and his’ sinks at his apartment that had my heart stuttering in my chest.

Just that little admission of us being together falling from his mouth is enough to keep hope alive in my chest that maybe — just maybe — he'll get to a point sometime where he is comfortable enough to call me his boyfriend. Hearing him say that would further cement my feelings that we can persevere through anything as long as we're together.

Then, the knock.

Seeing as Caiden would have a conniption if he had to walk across my apartment without being fully dressed, I exit the bathroom, trotting to the front door as another impatient knock sounds.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," I holler, tightening the towel on my waist. I'm not sure who would be at my door — maybe Theo or one of my friends — but I know whoever it is wouldn't have been able to enter the building or use the elevator without permission. It has to be someone I know with access.

And it is.

I swing the door open, honestly thinking it would be Theo asking about earlier this morning, and am met with dark eyes with an exact likeness to mine. I've never wanted Gaia — hell, even Dante — to be standing in front of me so badly because that would have been a lot better than this.

"W-what are you doing here, Phoenix?" I try to ask casually, leaning on the partially open door. I can't believe I actually stutter at the beginning of my sentence as that is not like me at all.

Fuck. Caiden is standing in the bathroom wearing only a towel and still wet from our shower, and I left the door open when I exited.

This could all turn to shit very quickly.

"I am here for Caiden," he grumbles, not caring about my state of undress. We've seen worse of each other in the past. Without waiting for a response, he tries to shoulder passed me and into my apartment.

Two options: I can block him and make him suspicious, or let him in where he might see Caiden and me both in towels and each still damp from a shower in my one-bathroom apartment, thus making him suspicious.

I opt to let him in, but raise my voice slightly as I reply to his retreating back. “The first time you’ve visited my apartment, Phoenix, and it’s not even to see me!” Hopefully, Caiden hears my words and thinks up a plan.

My brother halts in the living room, looking around. “Hmm. Small.”

“Fuck you.” My eyes drift to the pile of clothes kicked beside the couch, a mixture of mine and Caiden’s from last night. I guess he didn’t like them strewn about the living room, which is good, but if Phoenix looks close enough he will be able to tell the pile consists of both mine *and* Caiden’s clothes.

The universe really does hate me.

Stepping by Phoenix and further into the living room, I look down the hall to see the bathroom door now closed. Good.

“I think Caiden is still in the shower or something. I don’t really know. I was getting dressed. Did you want to make fun of my bedroom too?” Apparently, my ability to form complex sentences is gone, and my sarcasm quickly becomes a foot-in-mouth situation. The state of my bedroom after this morning’s activities is not at all something Phoenix needs to see.

Crinkling his nose, Phoenix shakes his head. “If it is anything like your room in Italia, I do not want to be anywhere near it.”

“I am *not* that messy.”

“Go, go,” Phoenix shoos me like a child before walking over to sit on the couch and pulling out his phone.

Part of me wants to ask why he has been so glued to his phone recently, but I quickly shrug that off. It’s his business, and I really don’t give a fuck.

I grab my own phone from the coffee table before slipping into my room.

Caiden had been playing some classical piano music while we showered, so I know his phone is in the bathroom with him. Ignoring the low battery signal on mine, I call him and wait for him to answer.

“Is your brother here?” He whispers without any greeting.

“Yeah,” I reply in the same volume. “He’s here to talk to you about something, but I’m not sure what. I told him I’m getting dressed and you’re in the shower. Just hurry and go talk to him so he will leave.”

I can hear his smile through the phone. “I like when you’re bossy.”

“*Cay*,” I hiss, though his words secretly make my stomach flutter. “Do you want me to tell my brother exactly what we did on the couch he is sitting on earlier, or are you going to behave?”

Instead of a response, there is a click, and the call disconnects. I stare at the black screen, mouth agape. That brat really just hung up on me.

Before the shock can completely fade from me, my phone vibrates with a notification. I check it to find a picture sent in our Snapchat messages. Usually, Caiden sends them as deleting photos, but this time he must have sent a picture from his camera roll. I open it, and my jaw drops.

On my phone sits a well-captured photo of Caiden’s beautiful cock. It’s standing erect and still wet from the shower, a drop of precome at the tip as he grips the base with one hand. The veins on his arm, hand, and dick all jut prominently from his skin, begging me to run my tongue ring down each one. Then, another notification.

Snapchat: Mio Principe is calling ...

What the hell?

I do a quick save of the picture, not wanting to lose it just yet, and select the new notification to see it is a video call from Caiden. I feel my adrenaline pick up as I wonder what the camera will show, though I don't have to think too hard.

My breath completely halts as the window opens to show Caiden standing in my bathroom mirror, towel gone and that hand still wrapped around his erection. In a flurry of movement, I rush to plug my phone in, connect my air pods, and lock the door. When I make it back to my phone, Caiden's soft moans are reverberating in my ears, and my dick is painfully hard.

He flips the camera to face him, angling to show the smattering of hair on his chest, flat stomach, happy trail, and hard cock being stroked by a quick fist.

Fuck, he isn't playing around. We are doing this right here, right now. Hard and fast and dirty.

Phoenix is still waiting in the living room.

I sit up onto my knees on the bed, the towel falling open around my legs, and grab Caiden's tie off the nightstand. We'd used it this morning for ... activities, and now I wrap the silk around my palm and slide it up and down my dick in view of the camera, grunting at the smooth feel of it surrounding my shaft.

"Ugh," Caiden groans breathlessly in slight irritation against the pleasure flooding through him. "You're such a bitch. I told you earlier that tie is fucking expensive."

"Shut the fuck up, Cay. I already said I'll buy you a new one." My words aren't intended to be rude, but rather a means to move on with the situation. It seems like I'm always telling him to shut up during times like this, and it is starting to become a sentimental phrase to me.

Caiden reacts to it just like I want him to, giving words up in exchange for moans and groans that only fuel the speed of my hand around my dick. I stay as quiet as possible while still

letting some sounds fall from my lips so Caiden knows how good I'm feeling, too.

On the video, I see Caiden pick up the pace impossibly faster, and he murmurs into the phone that he is close.

Fuck, baby, me too.

The sweet release hits us within seconds of each other, and we sit panting in each other's ears through the phone, utterly spent. After the last few hours, I'm not quite sure how he or I still have any *go* in our dicks.

I never thought I would need a break from coming.

Caiden has a way of making me forget any and everything else going on until it is just me and him.

And my brother knocking on my bedroom door.

"Can you hurry the fuck up? Some of us have jobs to get to. Where the hell is Caiden?"

The call on my phone ends, and I hear Caiden holler something from the bathroom. I yell an 'almost done' as well, so Phoenix knows for sure we are both doing our own separate tasks.

Which just happened to consist of a video call and our dicks in our hands.

Well, what can you do?

I wrap the towel up, my come folding inside, and throw it in the direction of the hamper in the corner. It goes in, unlike most of my other dirty clothes discarded around it. Then, I get dressed in my usual black suit pants, white button-up, and black suit jacket I always wear to escort Caiden to work. I load down with all the normal weapons — brass knuckles in my jacket pocket, guns tucked on either side, a thigh holster for another gun, knives in a holster on my back, mace, and handcuffs, which I have to retrieve from within my bedsheets.

Who knew that together Caiden and I would be completely insatiable?

3 Understand?

Caiden Augustus

Phoenix showing up after I just spent hours tangled up naked with his little brother is not something I expected.

Actually, it is throwing my entire morning off.

After the call with Vincent, I had to shower again. He and I shared a few more promiscuous messages while he finished getting ready and entertained Phoenix in the living room, my friend getting more pissed off by the minute, but now I'm finally dressed in a light blue suit and tie, ready for the day ahead. I walk out to find Phoenix and his brother sitting quietly on the now-dwarfed-looking couch.

“Hey, Nix. What's up?”

“Took you long enough,” my friend grumbles. He's dressed in a simple black button-up rolled to his elbows and black suit pants, as if he is only half dressed for work. “Jamison has everything together for your apartment. After clearing it with your building manager, feel free to come by my office and pick up all of the tech. Vincenzo knows—” Phoenix's words slow as if waiting for something, then fade out completely as he casts a peculiar gaze to his brother.

I glance at Vincent, too, wondering what that look is for.

Vincent, wearing his normal black suit and white shirt get-up, meets his gaze just as curiously. “What?”

“I— Nothing. Anyway, he can install everything, and you will be set to move back in whenever you want. I am keeping your detail the same until the plans for your company are completed, and Vincenzo will stay with you at all times until we find the root of the threat and eliminate it.”

As he stands, I give him an inquisitive look. “You came to the apartment for that? You could have just called me or sent an email.”

Phoenix shrugs. “I have business in the area this morning. Also, I need to speak with you privately,” he says to me, then casts a pointed look Vincent’s way.

The man in question gapes theatrically. “What the fuck did I do?”

“It is what you are not doing,” Phoenix growls. “Get the fuck out. Go to the garage. We will meet you there.”

Vincent argues, and his brother snaps back just as hard. Though I can tell most of it is sibling rivalry and Vincent not wanting to be bossed around, I can see the hurt — the worry — carefully hidden behind his eyes. Eventually, he throws his hands dramatically into the air in defeat, huffs, and stomps out of the apartment.

Removing my eyes from his retreating figure in what I hope is an appropriate amount of time, I stand to match Phoenix and look up at the large, tattooed man. “What is it that you can’t say it in front of Vinz ... cent?” I quickly try to tack on his full name in an attempt to avoid any suspicion. Phoenix had said only Vincent’s ex called him Vinz. I haven’t brought it up with the man I’ve been sharing a bed with yet, and I’d like to hear it all from him, not his brother.

Phoenix sighs, his mask slipping as he draws a hand over his face in what looks like a mixture of worry and disappointment. “Did you see Adam’s group text this morning?”

No, I was busy showering with your brother while listening to Beethoven’s third movement of Moonlight Sonata and finding my release against his stomach during my favorite string of chords. I shake my head. “You know I hate group texts.”

Already knowing that would be my answer, Phoenix continues. “His brother, Benjamin, is coming into town, and everyone is invited to dinner at the Santiago’s on Saturday. We are all going: Adam and Koda, Jackson and Alexandria ... Myself plus one.” I remember going to a dinner once at the Santiago’s — all four brothers, their parents, and a few other guests including some pyromaniac who set fire to the

backyard. That was a year or so ago, and we haven't been invited since. I'm pretty sure Adam was completely mortified.

Wait, Phoenix has a plus one? Maybe he means Vincent?

"Oh," I say, unsure of how I feel about that. "That will be ... fun."

"Caiden, do you even remember Adam's parents' names? Or his brothers'?"

"Benjamin," I tick off on my fingers automatically as he just volunteered that one, then pause. "... Adam ..."

Damn, I have been a total dick my entire life. Have I really never bothered to learn people's names?

"Right," Phoenix smirks as if proving a point. "So, here is the deal. I need you not to go."

I scoff. I've just decided to be a better person this last month, and now I'm being asked to ditch my opportunity to actually give a fuck about my friend's family. "What? Why?"

My friend works his fists and jaw, shuffling on his feet as if uncomfortable. Something must really be bothering him, something personal, as that is the only time Phoenix lets his emotions show. He sighs, defeated, knowing he has to tell me the whole reason. "Vincent is your bodyguard around the clock, which means he will have to be where you are. If you do not go to the dinner, then he cannot either."

He's going to have to do better than that, and I relay that to him. "So, the full story?"

"Do you remember Benjamin and the man who was with him — Zev?"

That doesn't sound familiar at all, so I answer honestly with a shake of my head.

"He set the yard on fire ..." Phoenix prompts. "Which was not even the first *or* last time," he mutters under his breath.

I clap my hands together in realization. "Yep. I'm with you now." I do remember that pyromaniac. He'd been huge and covered in scars and downright insane. The look in his eyes

wasn't quite right, his laughter edged against manic, his smile was a little too wide and full of teeth, and he flicked a lighter open and closed the entire time, passing his hand through the flame way too close and way too slow.

Insane, probably.

“Just spit it out, man. We both have to go to work.”

Phoenix growls in frustration but offers the information this time. “Zev is fucking crazy. He likes fire. Anytime he comes to town, he and Vincent get together to stir up trouble, usually ending in a burning building or barge. Not just that ...” He pauses as if struggling. “We did not ever clearly tell you this, and you are an unobservant motherfucker, but if you had paid attention you would have seen that Ben and Zev are together.”

“They're gay?”

“I know you have the homophobic thing going because of your parents, so we did not tell you outright about them, not that you seemed to care anyway. You had that one bitch on your arm the whole time—”

“Move on. And I'm not homophobic.”

My friend raises his hands in surrender before crossing his arms, tattooed forearms bulging. “Fine, then I will be blunt. Ben and Zev are polygamous and in an open marriage. They live together and fuck each other, have separate bedrooms and fuck other people, and share partners together too. It is not our place to judge, and we all know Ben absolutely loves Zev, Zev loves him, and they love sex — with each other and other people. I know for a fact that Enzo usually takes the opportunity to get his dick wet when Zev comes into town, and maybe with Ben also, or both of them. Fuck, I do not know the ins and outs of my brother's fucking habits, but I know Zev, at least, is bad for him. Zev likes fire and pain, just like Enzo, and they have a tendency to feed off each other without boundaries. After Zev comes to town, I always find Enzo with burns or cuts I know are not from fights. It is dark shit, and I want to keep him out of it if possible. I apologize if this is too much information about your bodyguard — fuck, I

do not want to know all this about my brother, but here we are. I just want to keep him safe, and I know you do not usually care for these types of things. It is not often that I ask for help, so I hope you can see how important this is to me.”

That is ... a lot to take in.

Where to start?

First, that was a lot of talking for my usually wordless friend.

Second, Ben had seemed so normal — if I don’t have him confused with a different brother — and Zev had seemed like ... well, a psychopathic pyromaniac.

Third, and maybe the most painful, Vincent had led me to believe the cigarette burns on his side were from someone doing that against his will. He had a chance to tell me the truth, and he hid it.

Which leads me to my fourth point: does he require something out of sex that I haven’t — and maybe can’t — give him? If he asked me to place a lit cigarette against his skin, could I do it? Could I let him do it to me if he demands it?

Fifth, would he have told me himself or left me in the dark at the Santiago’s while a man who fucked him — or maybe two of them — interacted with him, leaving me entirely clueless?

Sixth ... would he have snuck off this weekend to enjoy his sadist/masochist/threesome fantasies with Zev and Ben?

I’m staring.

I’m staring way too long.

“I knew you were a homophobe,” Phoenix grumbles, mistaking my silence for disgust. To be fair, at one point in my life it *was* disgust, but disgust at myself, not others. Things are so different now, and I see my relationship with Vincent as one of the most beautiful things this Godforsaken world could ever create. “Were you not aware of Enzo’s sexuality? I thought by now you would have found out or been told — I mean, he

wore makeup and participated in Gaia's bachelorette party for fuck's sake."

"N-no," I stutter. "No, I knew. I mean, I know. I-It's just a lot to take in, and now I have to look at him and think about ..." About him having sex with two men as they all share the pain he has already told me he likes. "What you just told me. It's ... different."

My friend claps my shoulder with one hand. "We all have our sexual preferences. Hell, I have been in a car with you while you fucked a girl or two beside me, remember? We are passed being squeamish about these things."

I chuckle at hearing the strange English word roll from his native Italian tongue, trying to forcefully lift my mood a bit. It doesn't work, but I put on a facade anyway. "Fine, fine. If that's all, Nix, we should be off. You know I don't like to be late."

With that, we exit the apartment and board the elevator, a tension settling in my bones that I hope Phoenix doesn't notice. Vincent is waiting as we enter the basement, sitting cross-legged atop the hood of the SUV with a cigarette dangling between his lips. "Took you fuckers long enough," he drawls around the white stick, feigning indifference, but I can see the anxiety behind his eyes. Does he know? Was he in the group chat? Or did *Zev* message him directly already? "Let's go. I need some fucking food."

The swearing is a dead giveaway of how close he is to dropping his whole mask of apathy in front of his brother.

I say my goodbye to Phoenix, who only grunts in response. It's only once I'm buckled into the passenger seat of the SUV and Phoenix's black jeep wrangler is exiting the parking garage that I remember he had said he is bringing a plus one on Saturday. If it isn't Vincent, then who?

Subtly checking my phone, I note that Vincent is, in fact, not part of the group chat. So, he may not know anything about what Phoenix and I were talking about, and it is probably eating him up inside.

Instead of speaking to Vincent, I dial the number for my building manager and engage her in a conversation regarding *Bernardi Security Systems* and my intent to install an alarm in my apartment. She doesn't put up a fight, just reminds me that there is a condition in my contract regarding her access to my apartment as well as the fees in the event I move out and leave those things behind for someone else to handle. Seeing as I absolutely love my penthouse, I don't think I will be giving it up any time soon.

When the conversation is over — after some questions regarding the bullet holes in my apartment and if my hired killers are going to affect her hospitality ratings — I finally hang up as we pull into my office building's car garage. Vincent backs us into a space, but as I go to open the door, it locks.

“What did Phoenix say to you,” Vincent asks darkly.

I raise my chin, defiant and angry at my own mentally-created wild accusations floating in my head. “What do you think he said?”

“It had to be about me,” he deduces. “Or he wouldn't have asked me to leave. What, did he tell you how my ex ruined me or tell you how much he wants Luca and I to get back together? Honestly, it could be anything. I figured you would be willing to volunteer the information, but I see now that you aren't going to.”

“Kinda hard to get back with Luca when you have a running weekend fling every so often already set up,” I snap before I can think better of it. Great, jump to conclusions and reveal all your cards at once, Caiden. That's so smart.

God, Vincent has this way about him that makes me forget all of my common sense.

Guarded ebony eyes slowly drift from their previous spot staring out into the parking garage, sliding to meet mine cautiously. “What the fuck did he say?”

I shrug as if uninterested in the conversation at all. “Just that every so often you participate as a third for a set of

masochistic/sadistic men, let them inflict permanent damage to your body for pleasure, and set shit on fire like the pyromaniac you apparently flock to at his beck and call.”

If I could cut off my own mouth, I would. I sound like such a jealous teen right fucking now.

But, hell, we couldn't even get passed our top or bottom issue, much less talk about full sex and kinks. Everyone has their thing, as Phoenix said, but there is a difference between a little bit of exhibitionism and permanently scarring someone to inflict serious pain during sex.

I'll choke someone in a hallway closet while fucking their brains out where anyone can hear, but I'm not going to mar them to get off. I can't.

Vincent seethes. “Since we're on the topic then, I guess, let's talk about your preferences during sex, huh? Restraints, gagging, choking, exhibitionism, control ... What else? Because we haven't even discussed those; I've just observed them. Have I demanded to know exactly what your deepest, darkest desires are? No, because we can't even *fuck*, Cay. We haven't even crossed the bridge to fuck each other, much less talk about our fantasies.”

I bristle in response, angry that he can't see how simple mine are compared to his. “My preferences don't leave you permanently *marred*.”

Something flashes in his eyes but disappears almost as quickly. What was it — embarrassment, shame, disgust? At what? “If you don't find me attractive — scars and all — then don't fucking look.” I can tell he's trying to hold on to his anger as he lights up another cigarette, blowing the smoke out quickly before sucking in hard enough to make the tip glow bright orange.

His words trigger something in me. I do find him attractive, of course. I've kissed every scar and freckle and tattoo on his skin — fuck, I nipped at them, sucked light love bites into any I was particularly curious about. Each time, Vincent had gasped and shuttered under me. Had he been

remembering the pain of when he got them or enjoying the painful pleasure I gave him?

Unsure, I just ask. “When I kiss those scars — when I bite them and suck them and re-name each one after my mouth — do you think of the pain from when you got them? Do you think of who gave you each one and how it felt to be at that point in your life, whatever it may be? Am I just a means to remind you of your past pleasures?”

“Fuck, no!” Vincent doesn’t miss a beat. In fact, his words pretty much cut mine off. “If we’re going to do this,” he pulls the cigarette from his lips, resting it in his fingers on the armrest between us. “Then, let’s fucking go all in.” His eyes are hard and deadly serious as they stare into mine, unblinking. “I think of you reopening them, whichever they are — be it a gunshot or from a knife. I think of you remaking that as your own fucking scar and giving me a million times the pleasure from that fleeting pain it once was. I don’t need the pain. Hell, you’ve gotten me off by only kissing me through my boxers — so sweet and soft and delicious. Do I like pain? Yes. Would I like pain with you? Fuck yes. Does it consume my every thought with you? Fuck no. But if you wanted to rebrand every single fucking scar including my goddamn circumcision, then baby I am at your fucking mercy. And if you only want to get me off by putting my dick in your fucking armpit, I don’t give a single fuck. I just fucking want *you*. I just fucking *love you*.”

Each time he says the word ‘pain’ my mind floats back to different instances between us — the way I bit down on his nipple hard enough to stun him, the way I dug my tongue into the slit at the tip of his dick, the way I bit and tugged his still healing piercing, or how I squeezed his gunshot wound hard enough to open it back up. Have I already been responding to his silent request for pain without even realizing how far I’ve gone? I intentionally bit at those scars to add a pleasurable ache to them, something I’m just now noticing.

And, fuck, it feels so different thinking of rebranding those scars as mine. They would be my own artwork across his skin, not anyone else’s.

Could I do it?

Could I give it and take it?

I recall Vincent's sharp, bruising love bites or just plain bites in general. The way my body reacted to that bit of pain was unexpected, yet pleasant.

Could I take more?

My gaze flicks to the cigarette resting between us, the lit end turned partially toward me, and I think 'fuck it, why not.' In a calculated move, quick enough to take Vincent by surprise though I know he could have stopped me, I raise up from my seat while simultaneously pulling my shirt free from my trousers. A stripe of skin exposes itself at the bottom of my stomach a moment before my movement is complete, and Vincent's lit cigarette is pressed to it. I feel the sting a delayed second later, a shocked cry escaping my lips.

But I'll be damned if my dick isn't stiffening.

Vincent swears, yanking the cigarette toward him and dropping it briefly onto his pants. He scoops it up easily before raising astonishment-filled eyes to me, which then flick down to my growing erection. "Oh, fuck, Cay. What the hell did you do?"

The sting of the cigarette burn is still there as I slump back into my seat, panting. "I had to see if I could do it," I explain. "I had to see if I could handle it. I don't know about intentionally hurting you; We'll have to explore that. But, I think I have enough to work with when it comes to you hurting me."

Shaking his head, Vincent tosses the cigarette out of the window. "No, fuck that, Cay. I'm not going to scar up your sexy-as-hell body, unless it's an accident. I don't need the cigarettes," he reaches out and undoes the top of my shirt before yanking it and my tie to the side. Opening my visor mirror, he makes me look at the dark — and I mean *dark* — love bite there. He'd spent a long time making that masterpiece. In fact, I think it was just as long as it took me to make him come just from kissing over his boxers.

Slow and torturous.

My phone rings. My assistant.

“What?” I snap into the device after answering.

“You have the meeting with Ibragimov this morning,” she squeaks. “You’re late.”

Growling, I adjust my erection in my pants. “I’m coming,” I tell her. I hang up the phone, just to see a grinning Vincent beside me. “What?”

“That’s what he said.”

My eyes narrow at the joke, understanding but not appreciating — not right now when I’m rock hard and have to go into a professional meeting that I am already late for. “Do you see this,” I palm my dick through my suit pants. “Does this look like a fucking joke?” My voice is a lot deeper than normal, taking on a lustful husk.

Vincent notices and licks his lips needly. He should definitely pierce that lip so I can bite it hard enough to make him feel the soreness for days.

Whoah, easy there, Caiden.

“No, sir,” he murmurs darkly. “I would say that is no fucking joke at all.” He pauses. “If it is, though, then it is the biggest, thickest, longest joke I’ve ever seen.”

Fuck him. Fuck Vincenzo Bernardi because he is the end of me, I swear.

“I am going to fuck that mouth of yours, Vincenzo,” I use his full name, so he knows I’m deadly serious. “Today. After the meeting. Hell, maybe during if I can sneak you under the conference table. Up there, in my office, it’s just you and me and frosted glass. I won’t need you sitting on my desk at lunch today because you’ll be under it with my cock in your mouth like a good little fuck toy. Understand?” I let the term slip out, giving him that hint of bedroom play we have yet to discuss, but maybe, just maybe, he’ll be into letting me call him some names. And maybe, just maybe, I’ll let him have some of that control, too.

Vincent gives me a heated look, lips parted, voice husky. “Fuck toy?”

“Sure. You’ll be my fuck toy, all while being the man I’m hopelessly in love with. Then, when my cock is limp and spent, my mouth will be your fuck toy. Temporarily. As long as you also stay hopelessly in love with me.”

The emotion that floods his eyes can only be described as lust. Good, he doesn’t mind a little degradation — another thing we will eventually need to talk about. But, not now. Not yet. “Hopelessly, Cay,” Vincent says softly. “Hopelessly in love with you.”

The end of me, I swear.

4 The Biggest Dick Around

Vincent Bernardi

Caiden has a meeting with *Ibragimov Industries* this morning which is not good.

Not only do I suspect they might be the ones coming after Caiden, but I haven't been able to look over the file Jamison sent me Monday morning.

I left my tablet in Italy.

I didn't mean to, of course, and it made for a long flight back to the states watching videos on social media and brooding instead of getting actual work done. We have regular email accounts with basic encryption for easy matters like overtime sign-up without details, but everything else has to be accessed through a specific application that is very well protected and can only be downloaded to a device with our IT people present to add in the permissions. I probably could have done it, but I didn't even have a device to use anyway.

Instead, I called my assistant, Tim, this morning while waiting for Caiden and Phoenix to come down from the apartment and told him to bring me a new tablet first thing to Caiden's job, but that was before I was informed of the meeting.

I'm going in blind.

These might very well be the guys who tried to kill me — well, the instructions might only have been to wound me based on the location of the shots, but I'm betting the thug simply had bad aim. I'm the brother of the CEO of *Bernardi Security*, hired to keep Caiden safe despite the hit put out on him, and that CEO happens to be one of Caiden's best friends. There is a lot of leverage there to use against Caiden by wounding me.

There isn't long enough to build a strategy, and I don't have time to inform Caiden while making sure he can keep his reaction in check during the meeting.

As we ride the elevator, I send Tim a message telling him to have the guard stationed outside the meeting room bring my tablet in as soon as it gets here, then silence the phone, no time for distractions. I do have time to mention something to him, though, just in case he's planning to bring it up during the meeting. "I heard you were supposed to be getting Gaia a hotel room with the Ibragimovs," I say. The doors open to the floor below Caiden's office — the one used for meetings. "Don't."

"Why?" Completely oblivious to my cautions, Caiden steps off the elevator while adjusting his sleeves and tie.

"Just don't. You're getting our security system today, so just have her stay at your apartment." I bite out the words quietly, eyes sweeping over the muscle standing outside of the meeting room. Two guys, bulky, serious-looking, and armed at their waists. Why the fuck were they allowed guns into the building? Caiden's security is bullshit.

Wide eyes turn my way. "With us?"

I roll my eyes while trying to remain professional as well. "She already knows about us, doofus. She helped you get dressed for our date."

He doesn't have a good response for that, realizing I'm right, and sighs with a slump of his shoulders. "I would prefer to have you all to myself, but okay."

My heart jumps at that, but I can't let the emotion show. The two Ibragimov guards have noticed us, and they are sizing me up. It isn't often I am intimidated by someone, but these thugs are more muscular than even Phoenix. My mind is already mapping out how I would take them down. Bulky means they move slower, so I could knock one out with a quick jab to the jaw, though they are taller than me. The other problem would be their guns. I'd have to disarm them to make sure they couldn't get a shot off at me or Caiden.

"Winnifred," I call through our radio. "I want you and Matthew both up here for this. Run as a *pickle*." I use our *caution* code, and I hear their sharp replies crackle through my earpiece. They know how serious I am, even if I haven't clued them in on anything else.

“Pickle?” Caiden questions, but I shush him.

“*Avoid all conversation about Mazza,*” I hiss in Italian as we near the guards. I know the company name is the same in both English and Italian, but at least anything else they might overhear is in a language that — hopefully — they don’t speak. I don’t like to take my chances, though, so I don’t say anything else.

Caiden’s eyes are wide again as he stops walking to look at me. “*You’re acting strange. What’s going on?*”

“*I can’t tell you right now. Put on your professional face and be as stern as possible. Be the old Caiden. Please.*”

His face hardens, and he nods.

I silently thank him for understanding.

As we near the conference room, I see my guys exit the public elevator with stern demeanors. Their eyes sweep Caiden and me, then the armed guards outside the door, expressions tightening even more. They give me swift nods, taking a stance across from each guard with a subtle flash of their holstered guns as well.

I trained them nicely.

Matthew swells his muscles in a way that only those of us who know him can tell, but it makes each already bulging muscle even more prominent. He looks very similar to Phoenix’s stature now, and I start to feel better. Matthew has always been good at intimidating people.

Emily is waiting at the open door for Caiden, her tiny frame dwarfed by the giant guards around her, and her intimidation shows on her face. Not wanting to expose Caiden’s back or have him walk in blind, I turn my broad shoulders to fit through the doorway as we both enter the room at the same time. My eyes study every detail of the room, looking for any sign of danger.

Another guard stands off to the side of the room, just as big and armed as the ones outside. There are four people sitting at the end of a large oval desk with empty chairs on either side. Caiden makes his way to the other end and pulls

out the rolling chair before sitting and bringing his body, back impossibly straight, up to the table. He doesn't apologize for being late, just like old Caiden wouldn't. "Let's get started," he straightens the papers on the table in front of him.

I round the room, stopping behind him with my eyes studying the members of the Ibragimov group.

Each Russian representative in front of me is male, older than Caiden, and dressed in expensive-looking black suits except for one who seems like some type of assistant as well as translator. He's a scrawny thing wearing a basic tan suit without a tie, and he leans to the man beside him to murmur in Russian after Caiden's statement.

The dark-haired, stoic man in the middle frowns slightly. "You are late, Mr. Augustus," he says in a heavily accented voice. His suit is all black, even his tie, and I can't help but think Phoenix wears the look better. Crooked teeth peek out from his thin lips as he speaks. "I do not like to be kept waiting."

My mouth wants to raise on one side in a threatening snarl, wants to defend what is mine, but I know Caiden can handle himself. Instead, I let my hard gaze burn on his face. If he was the one who made the hit to try and kill me, let him squirm uncomfortably at my stare.

"And I don't like assassination attempts," Caiden waves a hand in the air, dismissing the man's words as he flips through a few pages without glancing up. When he does eventually give them a confident stare, I know his hazel eyes are unyielding. "It makes my security team a little more cautious whenever I go somewhere. Sometimes, that leads to delayed meetings. You understand," his eyes flicker to the armed guard standing off to the side. "Also, next time you come here, your men will need to leave their weapons with security. Just a warning, so there is not any confusion."

The man's eyes drift to me, and I swear I catch a glimmer of surprise in them before he snuffs it out. "Who is this?"

"Vincent Bernardi," Caiden doesn't miss a beat with his cold voice. Did I want him to give my name? Eh, not

necessarily, but it isn't the worst thing in the world. Most likely, they already know who I am anyway.

Considering they tried to have me killed. Allegedly.

“He is the head of my security detail. I'm sure you are familiar with *Bernardi Security* here in New York. Their service is absolutely phenomenal.”

I smirk, letting my accent out full force and deepening my voice. “I'm hard to dispose of as well.”

The man in the middle clears his throat before looking to the man to the right of him, asking something in murmured Russian. That one nods, and they flick through a few of their papers as Caiden had.

Before another word is said, the door draws open slowly to reveal a nervous-looking Emily with Matthew over her shoulder. “M-Mr. Augustus? Mr. Johnson has something f-for Mr. Bernardi.”

Caiden sighs, not looking up at her. “Well, let him in, Emily. Now.”

I swear I hear a squeak from the assistant as Matthew shoulders through to me, passing along a tablet most likely brought by Tim. I press the key to open it and see that it is, in fact, equipped with access to our servers.

Great, I can get started on my research.

“Thank you,” I mutter to Matthew. He nods and leaves the tense room, silence falling over everyone again.

Seeing as there is nothing going on, I stalk over to the window sill and sit on it, one foot dangling close to the floor and the other knee raised to hold the tablet. I begin searching through all the information Jamison gathered for me as conversation finally picks up in the meeting room.

Caiden and Center Suit talk numbers and shipments, imports and expenses, and I tune out anything that doesn't sound important.

My eyes drift over different documents accumulated in the Ibragimov file on the tablet, finding a certain folder dated

before Ibragimov started contracting with Caiden's company. In fact, it specifically mentions a company I'm not familiar with, so I swap applications into an internet browser and type in the name. It brings up a couple of results, the most recent one being from five years ago. It's a news article reporting the fall of that company after the death of the entire family who owned it.

Shit.

This is not good.

I find myself researching more about the death of the family and the circumstances surrounding it, not liking anything I find. It's all very mysterious, but one thing sticks out like a sore thumb. This article states the CEO of the company had received anonymous death threats as well as attempts on his life before his home was broken into. Each member of the family — including two kids — was shot in their beds during the night. Nothing was taken from the house, and no one was ever arrested in relation to the murders. It may be circumstantial, but what are the odds Ibragimov would be involved with both of these companies when their CEOs become targets?

If I wasn't already sure, now I am. Ibragimov is the one behind the hits against Caiden and me. Glancing up, I look around to make sure everything is going as it should, and my eyes land on the man at the furthest end away from the translator. He's typing something into his phone under the table while pretending to be engaged in the conversation. He glances down, reads something, nods to himself ...

Then the fucker smiles as if he won the lottery.

I know something is up.

Caiden and Center Suit both close their packets, nodding at each other. Left Suit speaks next. "We are concerned about some rumors we have heard," he says.

The familiar crackle of my earpiece catches my attention a half second before Winnifred speaks. "Boss, it's Phoenix. He's been hit."

These motherfuckers.

“There has been talk about Mazza—”

“This meeting is over, Mr. Augustus,” I say in an unrecognizable voice and in Italian for only Caiden to understand. *“It seems we have a man down and must leave due to a medical emergency.”* I keep my eyes trained on the smiling man as my Italian words drift through the room. I try to keep them basic enough for Caiden to understand and elusive enough that they can’t gather too much information if their translator does speak my language. *“Tell them you have handled everything you were here to do. You have other meetings.”*

Caiden makes a show of checking his watch. “You’re right, Mr. Bernardi. I am expected elsewhere this morning.” He addresses them with a bored look. “I believe we have discussed everything regarding our contract. I’ll have my legal team revise the contract and send you a copy to sign. You all have a good day.”

He stands casually, and I follow as we walk leisurely from the conference room. “Matthew, see that these men and all their guards find the exit,” I tell him. “Winnifred, with us.” Instead of getting on Caiden’s private elevator, I lead us to the furthest conference room down the hall, near the private elevator. It’s a good distance from the one with the lingering Ibragimovs, and I know they won’t be able to hear us. “Tell me,” I demand of my friend and employee as the door closes behind him.

“Hit and run,” he says instantly. “Some blue pickup with fictitious Texas tags jumped the pavement and hit him at about 30 miles per hour. My understanding is that he went over the hood and into the windshield, then held on as the driver tried to escape. He punched through the windshield and managed to turn the wheel before they wrecked into a building. The suspect is in custody — seems like another low life — and Mr. Bernardi is on his way back to the office. It’s not confirmed, but we are pretty sure the guy was hired. The truck is way too expensive for him to have gotten on his own.”

“Wait. Nix?” Caiden questions, looking between Winnifred and me. I nod. “Hit by a car? And he isn’t on his way to the hospital?”

I roll my eyes. “My brother wouldn’t even go to the hospital when you were admitted. Twice. He hates them. I do need to go check in with him — to make sure he isn’t hiding any broken bones and to tell him Ibragimov is behind all of this.”

Caiden swears, something old him definitely wouldn’t have done. “How do you know?”

“Winnifred, go catch up with Matthew and make sure those fuckers leave. Caiden and I are going to Headquarters. You all stay here for the rest of the day in case they try to pull something.”

My teammate nods before leaving the room, and I drag Caiden out moments after. As we take the elevator down, I’m too nervous for my brother to find Caiden’s usual elevator button routine cute, as I normally do. Instead, I inform him of everything I’ve found and about how dirty the Ibragimov family is in case he isn’t already aware. He isn’t, and anger blooms across his face.

“Those bastards think they’re getting a contract renewal. I can’t wait to see the look on their faces when I refuse to sign them again.”

I shake my head worriedly. “Cay, they could come after you if you don’t keep a contract with them. I’m not sure of the best way to handle this, which is why we are going to talk to Phoenix. He’ll have a plan, I’m sure.”

“Winn told you Phoenix was in trouble during the meeting, right? That’s why you said to end it.”

I nod.

“I want one of those earpieces. I hate being in the dark.”

Despite my worry for Phoenix, I cock a smile in his direction, finally looking down to meet his concerned eyes. “I’ll never keep you in the dark, Cay,” I let my voice rumble lowly throughout the elevator.

Caiden raises on his toes, leaning forward to press his lips against mine firmly. “If Phoenix can go back to his office,” he says once we’ve separated. “That means he is at least conscious and can make his own decisions. That’s a good thing. We don’t have to worry too much.”

He’s consoling me just as much as himself, and I see the concern we both hold for my brother. I’m reminded yet again how much Caiden means to me. If it were him hit by that truck ... There’s no way I could be as calm as I am right now with him in my arms.

“I love you, Cay,” I whisper, searching his eyes for more of that reassurance only he can give me.

“*Ti amo, Vinz.*”

God, I love when he tells me he loves me in Italian.

I know I’m in dangerous territory. I know I’ve fallen fast and hard for Caiden Augustus despite the fact that he may never go public with our relationship. My job as his bodyguard may come to an end one day, and I won’t be able to share an apartment with him. One day, I won’t be able to use my job as an excuse to eat lunch with him or go to the farmer’s market on the weekend. One day, we won’t be able to spend all of our time together. We may never freely kiss in public.

This is quickly becoming eerily similar to my relationship with Michele, and that fucking scares me.

But, damn, is he worth every bit of heartbreak he might give me one day. He’s setting up to ruin my fucking world, and I am begging him for it. As I race through the city streets without a care in the world and Caiden slips his hand into mine, I know I’m definitely in too deep.

He only lets go when we park in the basement of *Bernardi Security*. We exit the car into the parking garage and pass Bruce working the booth. He asks for the color of the day as we empty our pockets, this time free of any stray condom packets on Caiden’s part.

“Plaid,” I reply, still hating the word.

Brows crinkled, Caiden looks at me as we gather our approved belongings. “That’s the same as last time.”

Chuckling, I grab his elbow and pull him to the elevator as Bruce summons it for us. “It’s always the same,” I whisper to him before hollering back to Bruce. “Top floor!”

Caiden’s mouth drops. “It’s always plaid? And why plaid? You know, you don’t quite say it right—”

This time, I full-on laugh at his antics. The elevator doors close and begin the long ascent to Phoenix’s office floor. “Shut up, Cay,” I say lightly, shaking my head with a smile.

He does, and a faint tinge of pink tips his ears. I’ve let go of his elbow now, but he drifts closer and closer to me in the large elevator. As I see him rise to his toes, I turn and lean my back against the wall away from him, clearing my throat. I quickly type out a message on my phone in our texts before flipping it around for him to see.

‘Phoenix watches the cameras. And there is audio.’

Realization crosses Caiden’s face. He slinks back to the other side of the elevator with a somber look, his mind probably right where mine is.

Would we ever be at a point in our relationship where we touch freely without a care who sees?

Neither of us knows the answer to that.

The elevator dings open on the top floor and Caiden rushes out, practically knocking over a grinning, tablet-holding Theo. As Caiden continues to bolt for Phoenix’s office, I step out of the elevator with a sigh.

“Hey,” Theo greets, his smile faltering only slightly at Caiden’s attitude. “I noticed your clearance come through at the garage. Didn’t know you would be in today.”

My eyes drop down, taking in the tablet in his hand and the business attire he wears, and I give him a one-sided smile. “Didn’t know you got the job here. Guess we should really talk more.”

“Yeah,” he drags out the word and looks questioningly at Caiden’s retreating form. “About that. How is everything ... with you-know-who?”

I let out a dramatic sigh, gesturing for him to walk with me as we follow far behind Caiden and at a slower pace. “It’s ... something. We’ve actually made a lot of progress.”

Theo gives me a knowing look. “You two don’t seem lovey-dovey now. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I really have to check on my brother ...”

“He’s fine,” Theo waves a hand and stops walking, so I stop too. “Tessa is patching him up right now. He can wait. I don’t often get you without your shadow, so this is the perfect time to talk about your troubles.”

My eyebrows rise higher than the roof. “Tessa?”

He smirks. “I’ll tell you if you tell me.”

Rolling my eyes, I go into detail about how Caiden made the first move before the plane ride to Italy, our night on the plane, our conversation about not seeing other people, how he got the confidence to touch me for the first time, our date, our confession, our serious fight, our make up, and how Phoenix spilled the beans about a past fuck buddy of mine which led to another fight. I tell him how neither of us is sure if we will ever pass the issue of fucking all the way or if we could ever publicize our relationship because of his issues.

By the end Theo’s eyes are wide and his jaw is slightly slack. “Wow, man. That’s a lot.”

“Helpful,” I say dryly with a matching grimace.

Theo sighs. “Coming out is hard, especially so late in life. He’s spent all these years being told it isn’t okay to be gay — whether it’s the business industry or his parents — and it’s going to take a lot to get passed that. You just have to keep being supportive about it. Push where you can and understand where you can’t. About the top or bottom thing ... Can you tell me why you aren’t willing to try? I mean, don’t get me wrong. You exude top energy, but switching is a thing.”

“I know. I used to switch,” I confess, shaking my head. “I grew up switching, actually, and I like it. My last serious relationship, though ... He refused to bottom, or even touch me. We were together for three years, all in secret. He proposed, but when it came time to tell people, he told them I made up the entire relationship. He wasn’t ready to come out — or he was just straight and experimenting. I don’t know. Either way, I told myself I wouldn’t be fucked over again by some guy who doesn’t know if he wants men or not.”

By the end of my spiel, Theo is staring at me as if I’m speaking Dutch — like I’m being completely ridiculous. “That is the dumbest thing I have ever heard, Vincent.”

I drop my jaw, mouth open with appall, and give a laughing scoff of disbelief. Did I hear that right? “Excuse me?”

“If you love him, what is the big deal? You already told me that despite all the odds against you two, you are giving him your love and even letting it grow. You are literally asking to be hurt, but you aren’t willing to make both of you completely happy in the meantime. In your mind, you are preparing for the worst, so what does it matter if you let him top or not? You’ve already given away your heart, and you might be fucked over anyway. Might as well enjoy it all while it lasts. Not saying it won’t last, I’m just going off your tormented mindset here.”

I blink.

Theo blinks.

“If I’m going to get hurt anyway,” I ponder out loud, “what does it matter if I bottom?”

“Now you’re getting it.”

Trying to work it out in a way that gets through to the logical side of my mind, I continue my verbal brainstorming while staring off into space. “I’m already prepared to be shattered. Letting us go all the way wouldn’t make it hurt anymore if we are to break up. But, we would both enjoy it in the meantime.”

Theo claps sarcastically. “Congrats. You’re ready to get fucked.”

My eyes widen and meet his nervously. “Fuck. I haven’t done anything to prep myself for that in *years* ... And Caiden is not on the small side *at all*.”

“I knew it. He walks like there’s a third leg there.” Raising his eyebrows, Theo grins. “You aren’t small either,” he reminds. “And you deserve some pain after the way you fucked me without a lot of prep.”

I give him a wince. “Sorry.”

He just grins wider. “So, how big?”

Working my jaw, I try not to smile like a teenager talking about porn. “Big,” I offer with a chuckle, but then puff out my chest. “Not as big as me, though.”

“Oh, no. Of course not, baby.” Theo coos, patting my chest mockingly. “You’re the biggest dick around,” he laughs, and I do too.

5 ‘Fe Fe’?

Caiden Augustus

I leave a grinning Theo with a brooding Vincent, brushing by him less politely than necessary and walking toward where I know Phoenix’s office is.

I’ve only been to see my friend at his work a handful of times, and I was always escorted by him. Security never asked him questions or made him empty his pockets. Part of me wonders why Vincent has to. His brother owns the whole place, so he kind of does too by default. The only two explanations I can think of are: one, it’s the rules and he is going to follow them whether Phoenix does or not, or two, his guys have to do it every time so he thinks he should as well.

I’m thinking number two is the most accurate. Vincent takes every class he assigns his guys, and, before me, picked up extra shifts just like they did to help with overtime despite being on salary.

Vincent having a secret heart of gold just adds to the pile of reasons why I feel the way I do for him.

As Phoenix’s office comes into view, I catch a glimpse of him through the high glass window. Only his head is visible, and he’s looking down at something in front of him. Not too worried about it, I barge through his office door, ready to tell him off for not calling me first thing after his accident.

“How dare you not at least text us that you’re *okay*—” My eyes swing around the office to lock on Phoenix’s, which widen in surprise. All movement in the room freezes for half a second as I take in exactly what is happening.

There’s my friend, Phoenix, leaning against the front of his desk, shirtless with a patch of gauze on his side and a few scrapes on his tattooed-covered chest.

There is also a woman kneeling on the ground in front of him, her blonde hair striped with iridescent colors in plain

view for me as she is facing my friend's exposed crotch in front of her, one delicate hand wrapped around—

Is that a piercing?

I don't dwell on it, feeling my face turn red as I abruptly turn around to face the door.

“Caiden!” Phoenix growls.

“My bad my bad my bad! I'm gonna wait out here!” I practically run for the office door and exit quickly. I lean against the door while trying to rub the image from my eyes, then think better of it and move far away from the wooden surface, not wanting to accidentally over-hear anything going on in there.

I can't believe I just walked in on my friend getting some dick attention.

My mind flits to the image of his hard member being stroked by that woman's small hand, and I quickly shake my head in disgust. Not at the pierced tip or tattoos along the length, but at the situation in general.

Am I ... not attracted to other guys? Shouldn't I enjoy seeing his dick? If it had been the woman naked and draped across the desk, I probably would have looked longer despite the impropriety of it. Why was it not the same for Phoenix?

A rational part of my brain reminds me that if it had been Koda naked on the table, I definitely would have turned around even quicker. She is a friend, not something to be seen as sexually attractive. Is that why I wasn't interested in the scene in Phoenix's office?

Unsure if the two of them are going to complete their *intimate* moment or not, I just wait outside and rock from heel to toe until the office door finally opens. It's a suspicious amount of time. They could have either finished the job quickly or taken a minute to get themselves together. Either way, my face is still red as Phoenix tells me to come in.

“I'm sorry,” I apologize to both my friend and the girl in his office. He's fully dressed now in a solid black suit, even the tie, and I have to admit it looks good on him, though his

tattooed neck and hands stick out of it as if saying he doesn't really belong here.

The college-age girl doesn't seem phased as she hops up onto the large desk and swings her Doc Martens back and forth. She's young and pretty with long blonde hair, blue eyes, and a heart-shaped face. Her lips are full and pouty, coated in dark maroon lipstick, and her body is thin with curves Ashlynn would most likely be jealous of.

Damn, Phoenix did good.

The girl just shrugs while pulling a long red chewy candy from a pack on the desk. She snaps off a piece between her straight white teeth and continues to swing her legs as she stares at me without shame. "Don't worry about it. I'm Tessa. I'd shake your hand, but I don't think you want that." Tessa makes a jacking-off motion with her candy-free hand and I raise my eyebrows.

Shameless.

Phoenix grumbles something, swiping a hand across his face.

I give her a toothy grin. Anyone that can get on Phoenix's nerves can be my friend any day. "I'm Caiden."

"I gathered that when Phoenix yelled your name with my hand wrapped around his dick. Didn't hear you come in. Thought he was suddenly living out a gay fantasy."

My eyes narrow. "And would that bother you?" Phoenix doesn't need to be dating a homophobe, not with Vincent being his brother. I know Vincent doesn't hide and stands up for himself, but he shouldn't have to around his brother's girl.

Tessa shakes her long hair back and it drags along some papers on Phoenix's desk. "I kept going, didn't I?"

Ah, so they did finish their dick appointment. I don't necessarily need to know that.

The door opens and Vincent practically barrels through. "You bitch! You could have at least texted that you were okay

— Who the fuck is this?” His dark eyes land on Tessa and he scans her from charcoal-rimmed eyes to combat boots.

Huh, she kind of reminds me of Vincent, actually.

She takes another bite of what I think is a Twizzler, grinning with the red candy in between her teeth. “Tessa,” she offers, roaming his body, too. Her feet start swinging faster. “You seem fun. Do you want a Twizzler?”

Vincent stares at her for two more seconds before dropping his entire stern facade. He shrugs, stalking over to her and sliding a red rope from the pack on the desk.

Phoenix stares at them with as much emotion as I’ve ever seen from him, and I think it is dismay. “You wouldn’t let me have one!” He accuses Tessa.

That is the most childish whine I have ever heard come from the large, tattoo-covered twenty-eight-year-old man.

Vincent and Tessa both ignore Phoenix, instead nodding and chatting with each other. Vincent says something about being more fun than his brother, and Tessa chuckles. “Got a Snap?” She asks, pulling out her phone.

“Yep.” Vincent pulls his out as well, and the two of them seem to know exactly what to do as Tessa leans over to angle her phone at his.

Two seconds later, she makes an ‘aha’ sound and retreats to look at whatever she’s discovered. “BigDick69? Classic.”

“Well, I don’t want to brag, but ...” He lets his words trail off, shrugging with a ‘what can you do’ look.

Tessa rips off another bite of Twizzler, smacking it in Vincent’s direction with those perfect teeth, the red between them almost reflecting the savage bloodlust I can feel coming off of her. This chick is something else, and I can’t believe my friend is even putting up with her. Phoenix hates any and all emotion — including jokes and sarcasm. “So, I should be going for you instead of Phoenix, huh?” Her gaze is challenging him, but he only laughs at it.

“I’d bet my left nut I’m bigger and better than my brother in bed—” *I can confirm the bigger statement, but only just. The two brothers are more alike than they may realize.* “—But unless you have a dick hidden in those pants, we’re probably better off friends.” Vincent pointedly looks down at her crotch, where we are all one hundred percent sure she does not house a penis.

“Well, shit. Here I thought I could get two Bernardi brothers railing me.”

There’s a pause as Vincent considers her with what appears to be admiration.

These two are too similar — too dangerous to be in the same place together.

“I’ll try anything once,” Vincent drawls, though there is a teasing lilt to his deep voice as he types something into his phone. Then, he looks over at Phoenix and me.

That’s when I realize Phoenix and I have been staring at the two young adults with slightly slack jaws, completely taken aback and dumbfounded by their interaction. He and I both see now that having them anywhere near each other is cause for trouble, and I don’t think Phoenix realizes Vincent’s words are a joke. His eyes widen as he continues to stare in shock at his brother.

“*Vincenzo*,” the growled word is a warning.

The man in question raises his hands in mock surrender, his phone forgotten and raised in the air in front of us with the screen still on. His Snapchat is open with a screen full of chats, but only one with a little fire symbol beside it. There’s a number nine just to the left of the fire emoji, and Vincent had to explain to me that it is a representation of our snap streak. For nine days now — since the day he was shot — we have sent at least one picture on Snapchat back and forth. Considering we spend most days together all day, the pictures consist of all types of things. Sometimes he’ll send me something sweet with a nice smile, sometimes it will be a side profile of me doing something, sometimes he’ll drag me over and go through a couple of funny-looking face-changing

things, or sometimes he will sneak off into the bathroom to send a provocative picture. He told me a complicated version of how he kept the streak during the two days I didn't speak to him, though at one point I drunkenly sent him a picture of some stripper which must have helped string it along. He'd said I was the only one he has a streak with, and he didn't want to let it go easily.

His words are obviously true as the screen clearly displays a bitmoji with brown hair next to 'Mio Principe' and a nine beside the fire emoji with no others having the same.

"*Fragolina*," Phoenix cocks a grin reserved only for torturing siblings, addressing Vincent with some nickname I haven't heard, before snatching the cell phone from him quick as lightning. Vincent makes a noise of protest and tries to wrangle the phone from Phoenix to no avail. The taller man simply lifts his hand into the air, two or three inches higher than the shorter can reach. "Who is your 'prince,' little brother?"

My friend clicks on the chat and starts scrolling through the messages that have been saved (Vincent's doing as I'm not sure how to do that yet), and he reads them out loud. "This hickey is darker than your eyes," he reads from the chat. "Aw, that is sweet, but also weird. Who talks about their hickeys over messages?" I try not to let the blush rise to my cheeks as Phoenix reads my chat. Those are our messages from this morning, and I know I didn't put my name in there at all. With any luck, he won't figure out who has sent those. If he goes too far back, though ...

Vincent is still stretched up high, trying to steal the phone back despite the large arm blocking him from getting too close. He does everything he can think of — jumping and throwing punches — but Phoenix dodges them all as they do a strange half-dance, half-shuffle across the room, the taller man wincing and holding a hand to his ribs while maintaining control over the phone.

"Come on, Nix," I try to say as nonchalantly as I can, attempting to sound bored. "Give it back."

Phoenix just chuckles darkly, scrolling up some more to look at the few other saved messages consisting of mostly bedroom promises made back and forth between Vincent and me. “Whoah!” From the phone’s position high in the air, we can all see the saved picture of my dick.

My dick. On Vincent’s phone. In Phoenix’s hand. Where his new girl-whatever can see.

Fucking embarrassing.

Tilting his head to study the picture, my friend puts all his focus on my dick displayed across the Snapchat screen. “Damn, brother. Not bad.”

“You’re not even gay!” Vincent wails helplessly as he goes for the back of Phoenix’s knees.

Phoenix falters slightly at the blow to his legs, but recovers just as his brother’s fingers graze across the cell phone. He holds the device up even higher. “I can still appreciate.” He argues. “Someone’s ass is going to be hurting. If it is not already.”

“You are the worst brother ever. I. Fucking. Hate. You.”

“It’s nice,” Tessa offers her approval from her position on the desk, still swinging her boots and munching on chewy candy. “Straight, with a gradual curve. Great girth. That mushroom head is beautiful — the doctor who did his circumcision should be proud. The length is nice too. Is he bi? Will he third for us?” Her blue eyes are aflame, mostly teasing (I think), as she stares at Vincent questioningly.

“I hate you too.”

“What do you think, Caiden?” Phoenix turns the phone my way, my dick staring right back at me.

My mouth goes dry as a desert and I know my eyes are wide. I somehow stammer through the sand. “U-um. I mean, I-I don’t know. I guess ... Um ...”

Tessa frowns, looking at the Bernardi brothers. “Is he a homophobe?”

“Pretty sure,” Phoenix shrugs. “Just wanted to see what he would say.”

“I-I’m not!”

“You’re not making a good argument for yourself,” Tessa shakes her head as if disappointed in me, then she addresses Vincent. “He needs a Prince Albert.” She gives a suggestive eyebrow wiggle at him, suggesting the very piercing I just saw on Phoenix’s dick.

Well, at least we’re even, Phoenix. We’ve both seen each other’s dicks today.

Vincent seems to weigh the recommendation. He shrugs. “That would be hot.”

I choke on my own spit, coughing loudly.

“Okay, put it away before the homophobe accidentally kills himself on his Jesus-freakiness,” Vincent jabs, though I see his fists clench at the hurtful words aimed at me.

I try not to take it personally. I know he is only saying that to try and get Phoenix to return the phone — and close the picture of my dick that is currently being flashed around. This has not gone at all how I planned. As Phoenix smirks while giving the phone back to Vincent, I turn to face him with a serious look. “What happened, Nix?”

We all sober up as Phoenix tells us about his run-in with a pickup truck. The story is basically what Winnifred told us, and Phoenix doesn’t dwell on details, of course. When he is finished, Vincent pipes up about his suspicions of the Ibragimov and Mazza dealings. We all sit in conservative silence as we ponder what this means and how we go about dealing with it. Even Tessa is sitting still, not eating any more Twizzlers at the moment.

The CEO of *Bernardi Security* is the first one with any kind of plan in mind, and he immediately dials up some of their private investigators to look into the two families apparently fighting over me. Tessa murmurs something about servers before dragging out a laptop and brandishing another rope of candy.

“What are you doing?” I ask her curiously as Phoenix and Vincent mutter and grunt to themselves in that Bernardi way of theirs.

“Hacking,” Tessa shrugs.

Her words bring a smirk to my face, knowing yet needing confirmation. “Don’t tell me you’re the one who hacked his company.”

She just grins cheekily in response.

“Caiden,” Phoenix calls to get my attention. “Just checking in for Adam. You said you cannot come to the dinner this Saturday, right?” His dark eyes are staring at me with heavy intent. He wants me to go along with it, for his little brother’s sake.

Though I don’t look over at him, I can feel Vincent studying me with a similar intensity. He doesn’t want Phoenix to interfere with his life or even have the power to do so.

Do I choose my friend or my ... whatever Vincent is to me?

Picking my poison, I shrug coolly. “I was actually thinking it might be nice to catch up with everyone.”

There. I did it. I officially chose not to make Vincent mad over Phoenix. I’m not sure why I do it because I definitely do not want to basically dump Zev into Vincent’s lap, but I push that jealousy aside. Vincent loves me. His snap streak is with me. Not Zev. I don’t have anything to worry about.

My phone rings in my pocket before Phoenix can add words to his scowl. I free the device and see it is my assistant. “Emily,” I say by way of greeting. “I’m taking the rest of the day off.”

“I know, sir,” she squeaks through the phone. “But, sir, Raimona Mazza and the other *Mazza Corp* representatives are here. They went into the conference room, and they won’t leave.”

I sigh heavily, bringing one hand up to rub at my temples before wiping down my face as if that will relieve my stress. “I

really do not want to deal with *Mazza* today,” I grumble mostly to myself, but Emily overhears.

“I know, sir.”

“I’m at the Bernardi building right now,” I tell her. “Let them know I’ll be there in about half an hour. Offer them any refreshments they might want. Emily, keep them happy,” I give my last instruction as more of a warning, to which she squeaks out an affirmative. Ending the call, I look at Phoenix and Vincent. “*Mazza* is at my office right now, waiting in the conference room to speak with me about our contract.”

Phoenix’s face hardens, completely forgetting the previous reason for his ever-present frown. “I’m coming along.”

I’m the only one who makes a sound of protest at that. He just got hit by a truck, for God’s sake. Tessa, Vincent, and Phoenix all shrug off my concern, walking as a group to the office door as if communicating without words. I trail behind them with a sigh.

As we pass a large, empty-looking desk just inside an office beside Phoenix’s, Vincent ducks in and grabs a stack of boxes. “For your apartment,” he explains, hoisting them up in his arms. I try not to let my eyes linger on the way his biceps flex through his suit jacket, but I don’t think I’m very successful. When I see his vision is completely obscured by the high stack of boxes, I wordlessly grab the top two from him and carry them myself. The writing on the outside says ‘*Bernardi Security Systems*’ and Vincent said they are for my apartment, so I assume this is everything to be installed before I can officially move back into my own home.

We make it to the unusually empty parking garage, and I follow Vincent’s lead to put the boxes in the back of our SUV. We turn to find Phoenix scowling even more.

“What?” Vincent deadpans at his brother.

“Everyone is either out on a job or working with the police on the hit and run, and my car is across the Manhattan bridge right now.”

Vincent gives him a look. “So?”

“Tessa and I are not sitting in the backseat of this car. I know what has gone on back there courtesy of your current client. Give me the keys.”

Scoffing, Vincent pockets the car keys stubbornly. “I’m not sitting back there either. You didn’t have a problem sitting back there while he was fucking Ashlynn two weeks ago.”

“Hot,” Tessa comments around a twizzler, sending me a wink.

I know what Phoenix means, though. He doesn’t want to put Tessa in the back where he has also made his own indiscretions in the past. I completely understand as I do not want to put Vincent back there either.

“Here,” Phoenix mutters, walking over to a key box and unlocking it. He pulls out a set with the dealer tag still on them. “Happy early birthday, *fragolina*.”

“Don’t fucking call me that,” Vincent growls, and I make a mental note to look it up later.

“Do you want it or not?”

Rolling his eyes, Vincent snatches the keys from Phoenix and looks over them, specifically at the matte symbol nestled on the black plastic. “A Harley?” He questions, looking up at his brother. “You hate motorcycles, but you bought me one?”

“Yeah, well,” Phoenix actually looks mildly sheepish for two seconds before correcting himself. “I guess I am just hoping you will get in another wreck and die this time. Better for everyone that way.”

I work my jaw at that comment. I didn’t know Vincent had wrecked motorcycles in the past, but I still don’t like the way Phoenix said that so easily. He wasn’t on the phone with Vincent when he got shot, and he didn’t have to exit his company building to see the bloody gunshot wounds on Vincent, either. He shouldn’t just throw comments like that around because you never know what can happen.

To my irritation, Vincent laughs at his brother’s comment. He looks around before locating the motorcycle in the corner of the garage — black and sleek and fast-looking. “A

Nightster? Badass.” Apparently, Vincent loves it. He practically jogs to the thing and starts caressing it more intimately than we’ve touched in the bedroom. Not really, but those hands sliding along the motorcycle’s body makes me picture Vincent savoring me like that, dipping into every valley of muscle, lips parted in awe, breathing escalated. My cock twitches in my slacks, and I widen my stance to try to hide any evidence of my arousal, tucking my hands into my front pockets to lift the fabric from my growing erection. God, just looking at Vincent is enough to get my blood flowing.

“Come on, Caiden,” Phoenix rumbles as he ushers Tessa into the passenger seat of the SUV, opening the back door for me.

“I’m not being a third wheel,” I exclaim. No one wants to sit in the back alone.

My friend stares at me for a moment. “It is either back here or on the motorcycle, and Enzo is a psychopath when it comes to those.”

Tessa suddenly swings her door open with force, smacking Phoenix across his side. The large man doesn’t move an inch, but he does wince slightly at the impact. “I don’t want him in here, Fe Fe. I was thinking a blow job on the road?”

I cock an eyebrow at my ‘bad boy’ friend. “‘Fe Fe?’”

“Fucking ride with Enzo then, but do not come crying to me when you are dead.” He turns abruptly, though his walk is somewhat pained as he approaches Vincent to get the keys to the SUV. Tessa must not have been joking about giving him another blow job, and he seems already very affected by her statement alone.

Is the big bad Phoenix Bernardi whipped by some college kid?

As I stand there smiling goofily at Vincent inspecting his new bike, I discover I can’t talk too much shit about my friend. I am very whipped by someone a lot younger than me too.

Phoenix and Tessa speed off, slightly swerving already, and I roll my eyes. Children. I walk over to a still fangirl-ing Vincent and watch him for a moment. Everything he does brings a smile to my face, and I realize that I really, really don't want to have to face the inevitable days in the future when I don't get to spend all day every day with him. For a brief second, the crazy thought of telling him to quit his job, move in with me, and let me support him drifts through my head. He could spend every second with me and tell his brother that he found another job.

There is no way he would go for that.

He may not say it out loud, but I can see how proud Vincent is of his employees and their training. Though Phoenix may do a lot of the office work, Vincent is the one out there training them to be mini little Bernardis. He would never give up his job without serious cause.

Now, Vincent finally turns to face me, his smile as wide as I've ever seen it except for maybe the night we confessed our feeling for each other in Italy. That night will always be a favorite for me — and I hope for him as well. “Let me get us helmets,” he says, barely containing his excitement.

As he moves to pass me, I stop him with a hand on his firm chest. Phoenix isn't here and Bruce hopefully knows how to keep his mouth shut, so I capture Vincent's smiling face in my hands and kiss those stretched lips — tender, sweet, and deep. I never want to forget the taste of him. “I really fucking love you, Vinz.”

“I love you, too, Cay,” he says softly, holding my wrists in his hands gently, dark eyes lighter and softer than usual with mischief playing in their beautiful depths as he peers down at me. He pauses as if trying to hold in his joy, but it doesn't work. “And you are going to love this bike. I swear.”

Vincent separates from me to go rifle through a cabinet in the parking garage, and I swing my gaze to Bruce. He's watching me from the guard post with slightly widened eyes, eyebrow cocked.

“You didn’t see anything, did ya, Bruce-y?” I slap a hundred-dollar bill on his desk and slide it to him.

Those watchful eyes narrow on me, but he takes the money anyway. “You hurt that boy, and I’ll hunt you down. Hear me?”

I swallow thickly, almost audibly, and nod my head at the older man who could definitely take me in a fight with his eyes closed and hands tied behind his back. “Loud and clear.”

6 My Nicotine

Vincent Bernardi

I feel alive despite Caiden squeezing the life out of me.

His helmet is pressed tightly to the back of my shoulder, and both of his arms are wrapped around my torso in a death grip. Honestly, I wouldn't mind his hands roaming across my abs while I race the New York streets on my new bike, but Caiden doesn't seem to be interested in that. At all.

As I hop another curb to race down a sidewalk, I swear Caiden yells. I pull to a stop right then and there and turn my head to try to look at him through the dark-tinted visors we both have. Angry pedestrians shake their fists at us, but I ignore them like usual.

I flip my visor up. "You okay?"

Caiden says something else, too muffled by the helmet for me to understand.

"Baby, I can't hear you." Even idling, the motorcycle is still loud, so I'm having to raise my voice over the engine. Caiden's soft voice and covered face literally make it impossible to hear him.

Shaky hands unwind from my waist and he also moves his visor out of the way. "This is scary," he confesses.

"I got you."

"Can we slow down?" He pleads. "And stay on the actual street?"

"Well, that's no fun," I grumble, but reposition my helmet back and lift my feet to continue driving. Caiden scrambles to fix his helmet and wrap his arms around me again, still squeezing tight enough to constrict my movement a bit — not that I mind. He didn't say anything about passing the cars blocked up in a traffic jam, so I dip the bike onto the center line and weave in and out wherever I can.

Caiden's grip strengthens, but he doesn't say anything.

We pull into the parking garage of Caiden's office building without anyone checking our identification at the entrance, and I make a mental note to stop fucking around with his security plans. The protective measures currently in place are absolutely abysmal. I need to get my head out of my ass and do my damn job already, even if it means I may be reassigned from Caiden's detail.

Phoenix and Tessa are already waiting in the garage, and I roll my eyes at that. Between their head start and his ridiculous driving, of course they made it before us. I could have held my own if Caiden hadn't been such a baby about the sidewalk driving.

But he's my baby, so I'll let it slide for now.

I park my new bike beside the SUV, and Phoenix is already standing in front of me, arms crossed and glaring before I can take my helmet off. I kill the engine, the sudden break in noise being louder than the bike was. "What?" I snap as I take my helmet off. I hate when he just stares at me like that. "Use your words like a big boy."

Behind me, I feel Caiden trying to keep his composure as he dismounts the bike and passes me the drawstring bag containing my tablet, though I know his routine is completely thrown off. We're one spot over from his usual walk to the elevator, and my bike doesn't have any doors for him to triple-check the locks. Hopefully, he can keep himself pulled together and avoid another panic attack. His last one resulted in me being shot — though there wasn't any actual correlation between those two events.

Phoenix grunts. "That security guard at the gate didn't even question us when we drove in, *stronzo*. Have you done nothing here? The plans for Caiden's deal should have been done a week ago."

I work my jaw, looking away from my brother — my boss. Obviously, he knows the plans should have been completed by now. It's his job to know. Now, I look either incompetent or suspicious, and I've risked Caiden's safety in the meantime.

Phoenix is right. I should have submitted them as soon as I had them.

Knowing there isn't great signal in the basement, I rip my tablet out of the drawstring bag I stole from our stash at work and leave it empty and hanging from the handlebars of my bike. I shoulder passed Phoenix to the elevator where Caiden stands with Tessa, the firecracker of a woman pointing out every new wrinkle in his suit. I almost groan and facepalm because now he is going to be obsessing over that.

Picking up my pace to reach them before my brother, I make a show of leaning by Caiden to press the elevator call button. As I click the button three times with purpose, I let my lips fall near his ear, on the opposite side of where Tessa stands. "You look fine," I murmur in a low voice so only he can hear.

Caiden goes rigid, and I wonder what I've done wrong. Then, in a way that is completely un-Caiden-like, he shoves both hands deep into his pockets.

I don't have time to investigate as the elevator slides open and we all pile inside. To my surprise, Caiden keeps his hands fisted in his pockets instead of trying to press the buttons as he always does. I take the initiative to select the necessary buttons to his liking before letting my eyes drop across him, checking for anything wrong.

Phoenix and Tessa are positioned at the front of the elevator, exchanging glances that I don't even want to think about understanding, and Caiden is slinked in the far back corner. I've never seen him so off to the side as opposed to in the center of attention, but as my eyes drift down his suit-clad body, taking in that perfectly tied tie tucked into the form-fitting, matching vest down to those now-full pockets, I see the reason.

My little *principe* is sporting a hard-on.

Because of me? I hope so.

Just seeing him there all turned on gets me going, and I let out an audible groan of frustration as I let my body fall against

the wall of the elevator.

My brother gives me a curious look, Tessa shrugs it off, and Caiden hangs his head at my antics. The elevator opens to the lobby, and we all exit onto the large first floor. Caiden leads them toward his private elevator, but I duck off to the side to call my assistant.

“Yes, sir,” Tim answers.

The large green plant in front of me sways in the air conditioning, and I start poking my thumbnail into different sections of the leaves, not really wanting to say what I have to say. “I need you to submit the plans for Mr. Augustus’ building to our legal team to check, then have the final agreement drawn up for Mr. Bernardi to review. I need it done today, so it takes priority over anything else. Got it?”

“Y-yes, sir. Also, sir, have you seen Mr. Bernardi? I have a file for him—”

My nail jabs through the plant a little too hard, a large tear joining the half crescents sporadically placed along the big leaf. “Why do you have something for him? You’re my assistant.”

I can practically hear Tim gulp before he speaks again. “H-He requested something from some of Mr. Augustus’ files that you have access to. I-I didn’t know it would be an issue—”

“Well, what is it?” I snap. Phoenix has his own assistant, and if he uses mine to dig into my files, he might come across something I don’t need him to see. Sure, all of the pictures of Caiden and me are on my own personal devices, but the completed agreement has been in my electronic files for a while. Also, some of my devices are linked to my personal accounts, and things like pictures or messages can be accessed from those. I know Tim would never intentionally go through my personal things, but the worry is still there.

“*M-Mazza Corp,*” Tim stammers across the phone.

“Send it to me.” My voice is just as hard as a second ago, and I almost — almost — feel bad as Tim lets out a squeaky ‘yes sir,’ but I just hang up instead. As I stalk for the public

elevator, my tablet chirps with an incoming message, so I open it and look through the file quickly in preparation for Caiden's meeting.

I'm not sure why I chose the public elevator because it seems to stop at every fucking floor, but at least that leaves me time to skim the file further. It has a basic cover with information regarding their company, stocks, trades, income, and the number of employees — useless shit to me, really — then has a personnel file for each of the higher ranking employees, starting with their CEO, who does not attend these meetings. I swipe through each page as the elevator continues to stop and go. We're near the floor reserved for Caiden's conference rooms when I finally reach the employees designated for the meetings, as well as their security team. I'm not sure how it happened, but I am not going to complain about being more prepared for this meeting than with Ibragimov — as we had no information on who we would be meeting with earlier. Caiden's files had the basics, and the information from when they first signed their contract, but that was from five years ago.

I read through each one with the attached images, starting with the main negotiator Raimona Mazza. Nothing on her file sticks out, so I move to the next, and the next.

As I flip through their security team, noting the big muscle they've brought, just like Ibragimov, the elevator opens on the second to the top floor, and I step out with a quick scan of the area. To my surprise, I see Phoenix at the other end of the hall standing with his back to me, facing the private elevator with an impatient tap of his foot.

Two guards that I recognize from the first pages of Mazza's security file are standing outside of a conference room door, and I figure Caiden must already be inside. So, why is Phoenix waiting at the elevator?

I decide to quickly flick through the last two pages of the file, just to see what guards will be waiting for me inside the room, while walking down the hall. As I study the second to last one, I hear Phoenix call my name. I hold up a finger for

him to wait for a second, though I hear his footsteps quickening toward me, which makes me look up.

Panic has only graced my brother's face twice throughout our lives.

Once, when Gaia ran away as a child.

Second, when I returned home after setting fire to the police department in Arezzo, attempting to burn my ex-fiancé alive under the guidance of my stupid friends.

Now, I see it for the third time.

"Vincenzo—"

"That's not my ..." I trail off, looking down at the last personnel security file listed for the Mazza guards. "What the fuck?" Fury floods my veins, and I can't believe what I am looking at.

My brother's large, tattooed hands slam onto my heaving chest, halting my forward momentum, which was headed directly toward the conference room. I feel like I just walked into a brick wall, and my body reverberates against the force of our collision. *"Don't go in there, Enzo."* He's slipped into our native language, and I don't blame him. He probably holds as much anger as I do at this very moment.

I can't seem to get my thoughts together well at all. *"Is this for real?"* I hold the tablet where he can see. *"Is he in there? Does he know? What the fuck is this, Fenice?"*

Phoenix's hands drift to my biceps, holding my arms tightly as I try to look around him into the conference room to verify this with my own eyes. *"It's right. I saw him before I came out here to wait for you. I don't know if he knew you or I would be here, but he looked surprised when I walked in. Look, why don't you just go wait in Caiden's office, and we'll come to get you after the meeting."*

Working my jaw, I try to calm my breathing, looking between the guards giving us strange looks and my brother's dark eyes burning with rage that mirrors my own. "No. I told Caiden I would be his translator when he met with Mazza."

“I can translate.”

“We both know you hate that, and you struggle sometimes.”

“Fuck you.”

I sigh, our teasing not calming me as much as it should. I’d like a cigarette, a hit of nicotine, to steady my hands, but all I can think about is Caiden instead. I don’t like that he is in there with *him*. More so, I don’t like not being in there with Caiden, no matter who else is there. I tell myself it’s just because there is someone who wants to hurt him, but I know there is more to the story. Caiden is mine — my responsibility and my whatever-we-are. I know I calm him in situations — like in the basement when he worried about the wrinkles in his suit or pressing elevator buttons (though he went a little further than just calm) — and he calms me, too.

Caiden is better than nicotine.

“Let me go,” I instruct Phoenix, rolling unfazed resolve off me in a way I hope is believable. “Phoenix, let me go.”

My brother’s hands tighten slightly against my biceps, but he eventually lets them fall to his sides. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

I take only a moment to straighten my suit jacket and loose tie, then pat-check my weapons in my calming technique.

Three guns, seven knives, one mace, one taser, one pair of handcuffs, set of brass knuckles, two fists,

And Caiden.

With renewed steel, I approach the two guards stationed outside the conference room door, Phoenix hot on my heels. I don’t hesitate for a second as I press down on the handle and stride confidently into the room.

My gaze sweeps around the same as it always does when I enter a new place, landing first on Caiden, then Tessa sitting on the window sill as I did earlier, and finally on the group of people at the other end of the large, oval table. I recognize each face from the file, Raimona Mazza, sitting in the middle

of two other high-ranking employees of her company, and two guards standing behind her.

The guards are wearing the same black suits with red ties as the ones outside, and each carries a firearm on their hip only partially covered by their jackets. Their hands are clasped in front of them professionally, giving me the perfect view of one heavily scarred hand. The burned area seems to have healed nicely in the last five, almost six, years, though the marred skin will never be the same.

Just as I will never be the same.

Caiden straightens some papers as we move to his side of the table. Phoenix sits, while I choose to stand at Caiden's right shoulder. "Now," businessman-Caiden begins. "My translators are here, so we can start this meeting."

His words fuel a smirk to grace the face of the one man I desperately wish wasn't here today. "*The Bernardis are pulling translator jobs on the side? Their business must not be doing so great, or their parents are spending all of their money on that giant house.*" The jab comes from him, and I feel my lip curl in a snarl.

Before Phoenix or I can defend ourselves, Caiden speaks up, much to my and everyone else's surprise. "*Forgive me. That is the excuse we have been using since our last almost-meeting, but I see it won't be necessary here. My close friends Fenice and Vincenzo Bernardi are here as a favor to me, due to the multiple attempts on my life in the last two months, and have been providing security for me since the first attempt at the end of February. Vincenzo has saved my life multiple times and taken bullets for me. Fenice was chased down just this morning in connection as well.*" Caiden pauses, seeming to think about his words before he lets out a weary sigh. "I'm still learning the language. Even so, I am sure you all understand me clearly enough in English when I say this: If I find that your company is the reason my friends are being attacked, you can guarantee I will make sure you never find a foothold on the entire east coast of this country. It is one thing to come after me, but I will not stand for the injury of my friends. Do

you understand, or should I have my best friend and business partner graciously translate for me?”

I try not to show my shock at Caiden’s ferocious tone — though my dick twitches dangerously — and then I try to stifle my smirk at the appalled look across the Mazza employee’s faces. The smirk eventually breaks through, not that I was trying to hide it too hard anyway. “Capeesh?” I throw out the American pseudo-Italian for ‘understand’ with the cockiest look I’ve ever constructed.

Phoenix snorts softly at that, still sitting relaxed in his chair. I recognize it as his business move. Where Caiden sits impossibly straight and pristine, Phoenix allows himself to lean back, entirely relaxed, to show just how little he cares about what others think. He and I both know that at any sign of trouble, he would be the first out of his chair with fists swinging.

Raimona’s calculating eyes settle on each of us for a moment, her cherry red lips turned down in a frown. “Perhaps there are a few affairs we must attend to back in Italy before we move forward with a deal, Mr. Augustus. If it pleases you, we would like to simply pause our progress with your company and revisit it when we are more prepared.”

“That’s fine.” Caiden’s voice is hard, no-nonsense.

The *Mazza Corp* representative stands as if she didn’t wait close to an hour only to be denied by Caiden. She rounds the table and waits near the door as Caiden and Phoenix both slowly rise to their feet, ever the cool, calm, and collected CEOs that wait for no one, but make everyone wait on them. I follow only a half step behind, surveying for any backlash at Caiden’s threat.

She extends a hand for Caiden to shake, and he grasps it tightly. “Perhaps it might be best to spread the word that you have ‘paused’ our dealings for the time being.”

Raimona rolls her lips in at his words, obviously not liking them too much. “I suppose we might have a loose-mouthed employee who may gossip amongst the local bars tonight.”

“I’m not fucking around,” he hisses in her face, using their joined hands to yank her closer.

“These things are delicate,” she explains. “I will personally see that the gossiping employee takes their words far away from my side of town, perhaps into the Russian-controlled bars across the city.”

Caiden seems to appreciate that answer more than her previous one, and he releases her. “Excellent.”

Raimona stalks out of the room, her very tight red dress hugging every curve as she leaves, though not a single pair of eyes linger.

One guard does stay behind, however, pausing at the doorway to turn and look back at Phoenix and me. In Italian, he addresses us. *“I’m sure we will be seeing each other around, as we are in town for quite a while yet. Tell me, are there any nice rivers around this city?”*

“The Manhattan bridge is especially popular right now,” Phoenix sneers a response in our first language. *“Would you like me to give you a personal tour — of the top and every centimeter between it and the river?”*

“I would, but you don’t have a bitch here to drive your getaway car this time. Unless this fag is offering,” he sends a pointed look at Caiden, and I feel my lip curl.

Stepping forward, my chest bumps into Caiden’s shoulder, but I don’t care. My goal is only to tell this fucker exactly who the fag here is and make him leave before something bad happens. I follow his and Phoenix’s lead, speaking in Italian as well. *“Fuck you, Michele.”* How could I have ever found him attractive? His skin is too tanned from his obsession with tanning beds, and his hair falls flat and greasy-looking against his scalp. Those ugly shit-brown eyes, turn to me, but I can’t care less. Between those eyes, his way crooked nose, and yellow teeth, I don’t know what I ever saw in him. Albeit that was almost six years ago, and we have both changed a lot since then. *“Go crawl back into whatever hole you came out of, asswipe.”*

Maybe I'm too angry to notice Caiden's hand slip between us, but so are Phoenix and Michele. We're all oblivious to his actions until it is too late.

My bastard ex licks his thin lips, smearing saliva all around them in what I guess is an attempt to be attractive. *"Like yours? Tell me, is it still as tight as I remember, or have you whored yourself out to every cock that so much as grins your way? You always wore your heart too close to your dick, Vinz."*

And then my baby, my nicotine, my calm in my storm, punches Michele in the jaw hard enough to knock his ass onto the conference room floor.

7 Are you sure?

Caiden Augustus

“Fuck!” I swear, shaking my hand out after sliding the brass knuckles off them. “I thought these things helped.”

Vincent’s dropped jaw slowly raises into a smirk aimed at me. “They do. They help take someone down, not protect your hand. Did you lift those off me?” He pats at his jacket pocket where I know he keeps the brass knuckles, and where he knows I took them from.

I give a not-so-apologetic smile as I hand the metal back to him. “Keep these two fingers like tweezers” I hold out my first and second fingers. “So the thumb won’t catch the mark.”

“Where did you learn that?”

“White Collar,” I shrug, remembering my friend is also here with us and the guy — Michele — is still on the ground. I’d seen the tension between him and the Bernardi brothers and understood enough of the Italian exchange, but as soon as I heard him say ‘Vinz’, I knew: this is — as Phoenix put it — Vincent’s bastard ex. That combined with all the shit he was saying made it easy for me to send a punch flying his way.

The guy on the ground groans, slowly rising to his feet as he nurses his jaw.

“Oh, man. That was a hard tumble you took there into the conference table, bud.” I slap my hand onto his shoulder roughly. “Hey, tell Raimona I appreciate her diligence with our deal, and that she knows I’m here once her drama is all straightened out. I know she’ll do practically anything to partner with me. Hell, I bet she would even ignore something as minor as — I don’t know — say, assault? Yeah, I bet she wouldn’t bat an eyelash at something like that. Run along now, *fag*.” I spit his own insult back at him, shoving his shoulder toward the door, which he stumbles through. That leaves Phoenix, Vincent, Tessa, and me alone in my conference room.

“Who’s going to tell me who the hell I just punched?” I know he’s the bastard ex of Vincent, but I don’t know when or why or how.

Tessa pops her head up from behind Phoenix, grinning wildly. “I don’t know, but that was hot. Will *you* third for us?”

“Tessa, stop with the threesome jokes, I beg of you,” Phoenix finally shows his exhaustion at her never-ending energy, and I smirk. He’s whipped.

The girl in question just launches herself into the air before clinging onto Phoenix’s back like a monkey. “Aw, Fe Fe. You know you’re hella amazing in bed. There’s no need to be jealous.”

“Not jealous. Just annoyed.” My friend sighs, then turns to face me. “It is not my story to tell. If Enzo wants to share it with you, that is for him to decide. We are going to go look into more about the Mazza and Ibragimov feud. I will let you know what we find, and I will drop off the boxes at your apartment.”

Phoenix turns and marches out of the conference room with Tessa still on his back, kicking her legs and hollering ‘yeehaw.’ What a piece of work.

When they’re gone, it’s just Vincent and me.

“Are you going to tell me?” I ask him.

The look he gives me is just begging for me to let it go, but I refuse. “Do I have to?”

“Please.”

He sighs, running a hand through his curls which quickly get tangled in his fingers. “At your apartment,” he bargains. “Keep me company while I install your security, and I’ll tell you the whole story then.”

“Okay.”



“Luca and I first hooked up when we were fourteen.”

I raise my hand up. “Whoah, wait. One, why do I need to know this? And two, what does this have to do with Michele? And three, isn’t that a little young?”

We’re in my apartment after Vincent did a sweep for anyone hiding to try and attack me again. My plant at the door is dead, the air is stale, and a thin layer of dust has settled across most of the furniture. I texted my cleaning lady almost as soon as I walked in.

Vincent is sitting on my couch studiously connecting some wires in a small electric box, all of his attention focused on that task rather than the story he is trying to tell me. There is a pile of sensors and detectors beside him, each one equipped with an adhesive back to stick to the walls instead of having to drill holes and run wires. He’s also confiscated my phone to program an application on it that will sync with the alarm system.

His dark eyes raise to meet mine, and the vulnerability there brings me to my knees in front of him, reaching out to hold his face.

“Vinz, what is it?”

Cheeks clasped between my hands, he searches my eyes as if looking for something to hold onto. “I feel like you should know everything,” he confesses. “So I’m going to tell you everything. If you want.”

Ignoring the hard floor biting into my knees, I nod and whisper an affirmative. “I do.”

If something has affected him this badly, I’m here to listen to it. All of it.

His hands drift back to his work before he starts talking again. “Luca and I were friends since we were in diapers, and no one was surprised when we started holding hands or kissing. We explored each other as kids do, figuring out what the other likes and dislikes. We ... I,” he swallows as if the

words are stuck in his throat. “I liked switching, and so did he. So, that’s what we did for the next two years or so, something like that. I cheated on Luca when we were sixteen with Michele, who was eighteen at the time. We started our relationship, and I should have realized something was wrong when he refused to be around me in public. He’d told me he wasn’t out yet, which was fine, but he wouldn’t even wave at me in the school hallways or anything. It was better once he graduated because we only saw each other on his terms — always in private. The red flags were everywhere, but I ignored them. Michele never really touched my body, and he would only be intimate with me when the lights were off. He refuses to bottom, so I never got to top. That lasted almost three years, and the night I graduated, he proposed. He gave me a ring and everything. Said he saved up for it for six months. I was young and dumb, and I said yes. We went to my graduation party with my family, and I spilled my guts to them and showed off the ring he gave me.”

Vincent stands, walking over to my front door to secure the security panel on the wall there. He holds pressure to it longer than I feel necessary, almost leaning his weight on it as if he can’t hold himself, and hangs his head low. “He told everyone I was obsessed with him. That I made the whole thing up. I was devastated.”

Right here and now, I want to wrap my arms around him and threaten Michele with every insult I can think of, but I see there is more in Vincent. He has more to say.

My knees are killing me — God, I’m so damn old — but I don’t dare move as Vincent comes back and starts organizing the sensors and motion detectors into groups around my large coffee table.

“That night, he came knocking on my window and asked me to go out with him somewhere. Like an idiot, I did. He took me down some sketchy streets where he had friends waiting. They jumped me, and while I got in a few good hits, there were just too many. Phoenix apparently saw me sneak out, followed, and showed up a few minutes later. He fought them off and dragged me away before calling the police. I

made my report with them, and they went and arrested Michele a few hours later. I told Luca everything, who in turn told all of our friends. Alessandro came to me with a bunch of gas cans and matches. He drove me to the back of the police station where they kept arrestees in holding, and we set the damn place on fire.

“I can still hear the screams, the sirens.

“Michele got his hand burned up pretty bad, and they released him in exchange for issuing warrants for my arrest. Phoenix left business school early, got his degree forged, and borrowed some money from a loan shark to bring us here. I was so mad at him that I rebelled against him a lot, but I always came running back with my tail between my legs until I finally figured out where I needed to be. He managed to house and feed us, then started bringing more and more money home until we could send it back to Italy for our family. The business took off, and Phoenix and I both became pretty successful at our jobs, but I stayed broken. Completely and utterly shattered. I swore to myself I would never let a man fuck me over like Michele did, and I took that too literally.”

He pauses his organizing to meet my eyes, and we exchange sorrowful looks. He’s hurting; I’m hurting for him. “I told myself I would never bottom again, as if I had something to prove or some shit.” Vincent scoffs at his words. “I was wrong. Very wrong. I’ve been so wrong for almost *six years* that I’ve missed so many things that could have made me happy because I was too stupid to see what’s right in front of me.” He slides to his knees as well, just a few inches away and close enough that our breaths mingle. In this position, we’re at an even height, and I savor that.

We’ve never been on more equal terms.

I told him my story — well, the story that makes me so nervous about going all the way with him — and now he has told me his.

What do I say now?

Vincent keeps talking.

“I don’t want my stupidity to be the reason we don’t get to experience everything a couple should. *You* are here, right in front of me, and this — whatever this is — is the best thing to happen to me in a long time. You make me happy, Cay, and I’m not going to be an idiot any longer when it comes to you.”

His hands are now cupping my face tenderly, and his lips are so close to mine. Those dark eyes stare into me as if they can see my soul. Our breaths are mixing, eyelashes fluttering, hearts stammering. I feel like I know, but I need to ask anyway. “What are you saying?” My voice is barely a whisper.

Soft lips press to mine gently before pulling back the shortest of distances. “Fuck me, Cay,” he whispers back. “I want you. I don’t want to be a *stronzo* anymore when it comes to us. I miss bottoming, and I want to fucking do it with you. Please, if you’ll have me, make us both feel good, baby. Give us what we both want.”

Our eyes are closed, our foreheads pressed together softly, and I release a timid huff. “I have no fucking idea what to do when it comes to that, Vinz. The one time I tried ... I don’t think it was good for him. I don’t want to fuck this up.”

“Let me show you,” his lips brush against mine alluringly, his words dripping seductively, the baritone of his voice getting lower and lower. “Let’s be teenagers again and discover each other’s bodies with clumsy hands and nervous butterflies in our stomachs.” He presses a firm kiss to my mouth. “This floor hurts my knees, Cay. I can’t imagine your old bones are doing much better.”

I chuckle at his jab, feigning annoyance. “Fuck you, Vinz.”

“Do it, Cay,” he dares.

“Promise you won’t leave after?”

“I fucking swear.”

At his words, I close the distance between our lips and give him a deep kiss. Doing this, allowing this, is scary for both of us. Am I terrified he is going to hate me after? Yes. Am I willing to try? For him, yes.

Vincent starts to lean back to the floor, but that isn't what I want. This is not going to be like a blow job in a plane bathroom or jointly fucking our dicks together on the floor of his apartment.

No, this is going to be special, and I'm determined to make it that way.

I rise, dragging Vincent along by our connected lips, and we stand in the middle of my living room making out for a moment as I wonder just how I am going to get him to my bedroom. My fingers dance over his stomach, parting his suit jacket before I decide to just remove it completely. He lets me, then returns the favor with mine, unbuttoning it and pushing it down my arms firmly but gently.

My shaking hands drift to the buttons of his shirt, and I start opening them one by one as he does the same to first my vest, then my white shirt. I let my fingers explore his torso, pulling guns from his rib holsters and knives sheathed along his spine until he is weaponless before me.

Three guns, seven knives, one mace, one taser, one pair of handcuffs, a set of brass knuckles.

I slide all of them onto the table beside us.

I imagine those weapons are his defenses, and he has let me lay siege to them all. He's still fully clothed, but he's never been so bare. I did that. Not Michele. Not Luca. Not Theo. Me. The trust he's given me is deep and tethering, and I know I have to do anything I can to make sure I don't fuck it up again.

Our kisses are slow and deep as we leisurely undress each other in my living room. Soon enough, we're both shirtless, although Vincent's black tie still hangs loosely around his neck. I decide to leave it, as it reminds me of the photos he sent me back in Italy.

Both trying to lead the way to my bedroom, we stumble for a moment.

"Jump," I growl against his mouth, moving my hands to his waist.

“I’ve seen you at the gym, Cay,” he pants while adjusting to kiss up and down my neck. His voice is muffled against my skin, his tone raspy and full of lust. “I love you, but no fucking way.” I feel his teeth against my skin as he grins.

Not wanting to hear how weak he thinks I am, I step forward hard enough to throw him off balance while commanding him again with more force. “Jump.” As if trying to prove me wrong, Vincent swings one leg to my waist, then completely gives in and pulls the other up to match. His legs lock around me, and I use all my strength to not stumble at the sudden weight of him. I smile triumphantly when I’ve successfully steadied him in my grasp, my hands cupping the back of his thighs to hold him up. Like this, we’re at the same height, and he uses that as an advantage to kiss and bite along my bare shoulder.

“This is hot,” he comments into my ear.

I let out a rumbling noise I don’t recognize, walking as steadily as I can to my bedroom as our hard-ons rub against each other deliciously with each step. Once there, I kick the door closed and release one of Vincent’s thighs to splay my hand on the wall in search of the light switch. I find it and flick it on, despite the afternoon sun streaming in glaringly bright through the window.

Vincent giggles — *giggles* — and my heart thumps wildly at the sound. He knows what I’m doing with the lights, and I know he appreciates it. Michele wouldn’t touch any part of him with them on; I’ll touch all of him with them on.

Grabbing his waist, I raise him off me and toss him onto the large bed. For a second, we stare at each other, chests heaving, before I let my gaze drift agonizingly slow down his body. I know my eyes are full of desire, and his mirror mine with just as much intensity.

I reach forward and lock my hands around the back of his knees, pulling him to the edge of the bed where I kneel with my face inches away from the large tent in his pants. I plant kisses down his clothed length, teasing him with a few bites until he groans out loud and weaves his hands into my hair. It’s

almost time for a trim, and I can't wait to do our haircut routine in my bathroom. And naked. That would be nice, too. I hum at that thought, pressing my mouth around his dick for him to feel the vibrations.

“Stop fucking teasing me,” he warns huskily.

At his words, I bring my hands up to the button of his slacks, unbuttoning and unzipping slowly enough to make him groan in frustration again. As soon as his pants are open, I reach into his boxers and free his hard and engorged dick. It sways proudly in my face, but I am way past the point of being nervous. I've done this more than a handful of times now, and I've had time to think of new tricks.

I act like I'm about to put him in my mouth, then dive down further to suck on his balls, drawing one into my mouth, then the other, as his hands grip my head tighter. “Fuck, Cay,” my name falls from his lips in a breathy moan. I kiss my way up the bottom of his shaft along the large vein there, open-mouthed and wet to make taking him in my throat easier. When I reach the tip, I swirl my tongue around the underside of his mushroomed head, then touch the tip of my tongue at his slit, pressing with a wavelike force until he tugs on my hair for more.

Done with my teasing, I take him into my mouth and down my throat in one fast thrust that has him crying out in bliss. The sounds reverberates straight through my body and to my aching dick in a pleasurable torture. Once he's as deep as I can take him — I'm getting better each time I do this — I force my throat muscles to swallow so they tighten around his cock like a vice.

Vincent swears again, then firmly grips my head to move it up and down, fucking my mouth like I promised he could this morning.

“Look at you,” he hums in a mouthwateringly low voice, and my eyes raise to his. Those ebony eyes seem even darker with the love and lust amalgamated there. “What a good little fuck toy,” he praises using the term I mentioned earlier, eyes

not straying from mine. “Taking me so deep in your mouth. You’re so good at this, baby.”

I can feel the hot precome leaking from my aching dick, and I moan against the cock sliding in and out of my mouth. Vincent slams into me harder and deeper, and I gag against the intrusion. I’m not embarrassed this time. If anything, I’ve even more turned on. I taste his saltiness in my mouth, which only spurs my enthusiasm.

Does he come before? Without help, he won’t come just from me being inside him, will he? Should I finish him now?

“Do you want me to come in your mouth, baby?”

Yes.

I moan again as an affirmative, and Vincent lets out a slew of Italian obscenities that has me palming myself through my pants.

Fuck, this is so hot.

My head bobs up and down at the mercy of his hands, and I can do nothing except suck like my life depends on it. His balls harden against my hand massaging them, and I know he is close. His grunts and curses grow nearer together, broken only by ragged breaths until he slams me down onto his dick further than I’ve ever been, practically to the hilt, as he growls out an almost intelligible command. “Swallow.”

I listen immediately, my action setting off a chain reaction of his dick twitching deep in my throat and hot cum filling my mouth. With him so far down, I can’t take in a breath, and black dots swim across my vision, but I don’t dare pull back until Vincent is softening in my mouth. Only then do I let him fall from my lips with a slurry of saliva and leftover come that drips between us as evidence of our pleasure. The sudden rush of oxygen hits me like ice-cold water on a hot summer day, and I realize why my previous partners have loved breath play in the past.

It’s exhilarating.

Vincent’s thumb swipes under my bottom lip, dragging away the spilled release remaining there. “Are you sure?”

“Are *you* sure?” I mirror.

In reality, we both know the truth. Neither of us is one hundred percent certain if we should do this, but we both *want* to do this. We’re throwing caution to the wind, chasing a high neither of us has experienced in a long fucking time.

“What do I do?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper. My own weeping dick is completely forgotten as I worry about hurting Vincent in any way. “It ... It feels good for you, right? It’s not like you just suck it up and take it.”

Vincent clasps his hand around mine where it holds his thigh. “It feels good,” he promises. “I like it.” He glances around my perfectly neat room, eyes searching. “You don’t have any lube, do you?” He finally inquires.

“I do,” I nod, reaching to the bedside table beside us and brandishing a practically unused bottle.

He stares at it for a second, looking like there is a question bubbling up under the surface of his tongue, then it finally erupts. “You haven’t done anal with a woman?” He wonders. “Sorry, that’s probably really personal and inappropriate right now.”

Looking at the bottle in my hand, I remember Ashlynn bringing it over one night as a surprise, asking me to fuck her in the ass. She’d lubed up my dick, stripped, and flipped over to reveal a butt plug with a fuzzy purple tail dangling from it.

I’d laughed too hard for her liking, and my dick fell to not even semi-erect.

Accidentally laughing out loud, I’m forced to tell Vincent the story, and he, thankfully, chuckles, too. “That sounds just like you, Cay.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s cute,” he argues at my biting tone, leaning forward to kiss the tip of my nose.

I blush. “This,” I gesture between us, “is not supposed to be cute right now.”

Vincent smiles softly, tugging me forward by my hand. “Come here,” he murmurs, pulling me closer until we are both lying on my bed, his head on the pillows and me hovering over him.

“My socks are still on,” I protest.

“Then take them the fuck off, Cay. You’re a big boy.”

“I hate you.” My tone is light despite the harsh words, and Vincent knows better than to take them to heart. He just chuckles instead and watches as I lean back to rip off my socks, then decide to take off my pants as well.

Cocking an eyebrow, he gives a pointed look at his pants. I get the hint and try to ignore his quickly-recuperating dick as I pull his pants and boxers the rest of the way down in one tug, his socks coming off with them. He’s naked except for a black tie, and I’m in my boxers, a bottle of lube resting between us.

“We have to ... prepare me for your ginormous cock,” he tacks on the extra-descriptive word in an attempt to lighten the tense air between us. “You can do it, or I can if you want.” When I don’t respond immediately, worry floods his face. “Or we can stop now.”

“No,” I say a little too quickly before correcting myself. “No, it’s okay. Let’s keep going.”

“Come here,” he commands again softly.

I crawl forward toward him, and he waits until I’m close enough before knocking my elbows out from under me so I fall on top of him. Vincent runs his fingertips up my back, sending shivers down my spine and to my dick. He kisses me then, and I let one hand splay across his chest, the other caressing the barely-there stubble on his face. I know he shaves over his face almost every morning, but he didn’t today since Phoenix interrupted us. I find I quite like the sandpaper feel against my hand, so I keep caressing his cheek as we let our lips collide passionately.

I’m lying beside him, but partially on top of him, and he has one arm wrapped under my head with that hand drifting along my back leisurely. The leg not pressed against me is

bent at the knee, and the hand on that side slides along my waist, toying with the waistband of my boxers as we kiss unhurriedly.

As our tongues explore each other's mouths, I let the hand I'm not pinning underneath me drift along his abs just as his traces my back. We're a slow-moving mass of arms and legs and tongues and lips, and I'm so caught up in every sense of him that I completely miss the click of a bottle and one of his hands disappearing from my body until he gasps softly into my mouth.

Knowing I haven't done anything worthy of a sexy gasp like that, I pull away and survey his body with lust-leaden eyes. I lock onto the muscular arm that isn't underneath me and follow the puffed-out veins down, down, down to where his hand disappears deep between his legs. The muscles of his forearm flex with movement, and Vincent responds with another breathy groan.

My eyes return to his face, and I watch completely enraptured as his eyes drift closed, dark lashes laying against his cheeks, and his pink mouth drops open the slightest bit in pleasure. I feel his arm move again, and again he breathes shakily in absolute satisfaction.

Wanting to be the cause of that pleasure, I let my fingers slide from his face, to his shoulder, and down his arm until my hand rests against his own between his legs. Wordlessly, I ask permission to fuck him with my fingers.

8 Taste Yourself

Vincent Bernardi

Caiden's hand joins mine between my legs, sliding against it and blindly feeling what I'm doing. My finger slipped in easily due to the amount of lube I slathered onto it beforehand, and I immediately remembered why I liked bottoming so much. At the curl of my middle finger, I find myself gasping and closing my eyes at the pleasurable feeling deep within me.

I feel Caiden's fingers more firmly around mine, and I know he wants to try. He wants to mimic my movements and draw out my pleasure himself. I want him to as well.

"The lube," I urge him gently, opening my eyes to lock onto his.

"Fuck. Right."

I smile at his curse. He only swears around me, usually when I get him worked up.

He sits up, leaning between my legs to grab the bottle from beside me, but stops when his gaze catches my finger sliding deeply into my hole, all the way to the knuckle. I don't shy away. I'm comfortable with my body, and this is what it means to be in a gay relationship. If he can't handle this, we should stop now.

To my delight, he doesn't flinch away, simply watches my movements with slightly parted lips, swollen from our kisses and my rough fucking into his mouth. I groan, loving the way he watches me and the way my finger feels deep inside me, but I need more.

"Caiden," I groan needly.

"I'm coming, babe," he promises, spreading some lube onto his middle finger. He closes the bottle before nestling his hand over mine again, only this time he is facing me with his eyes trained intently on my ass.

I pull my finger out and feel Caiden line his up beside mine. Together, we push into my hole at a slow pace, and I try to cover the wince that dances across my face.

“It hurts?”

Ignoring his question, I use my finger to urge Caiden’s into curling deep inside me against that sweet spot, and my back arches off the bed as I groan in response.

“Oh, fuck,” he breathes shakily, watching me and palming his boxer-clad dick at the same time.

Yeah, baby. Just like that.

Together, we fuck my asshole while Caiden squeezes his length through the light blue fabric stretched across his deliciously large erection, a small, slightly darker spot indicating he’s already leaking with desire.

At the thought of his dick, I add another finger into the mix. Caiden is not small by any means, and I don’t want him to see any pain on my face when he enters me. Before I have a chance to stop him, Caiden dumps more lube onto our joint hands and thrusts another finger of his into me as well.

“Ah!” The grunted cry escapes my lips without permission, mostly from shock, but slightly from pain. The intrusion is an exquisite stretch, though, and my sound drifts off into a moan as my dick hardens painfully once again. “*Cazzo*,” I curse breathlessly.

“Do we need a condom?” Caiden questions in a moment of clarity.

My eyes, previously squeezed shut in satisfaction, snap open to peer at him with a deadpanned expression. “It’s a little late for that, baby.”

He thinks for a moment, surely remembering the times we’ve fucked each other’s mouths like animals, without a fuck given about using condoms. I’m usually more careful, but Caiden seems to take my common sense and throw it out the window of his ridiculously tall office building. “I ... guess you’re right. I’m clean.”

“Well, I’d be fucked if you weren’t. I’m clean, too. But since we’re talking about it, how do straight people protect during oral?”

“Dental dam,” he shrugs. “Plastic cover over the vagina.”

I turn my nose up at that. “Let’s not talk about vaginas right now.”

“You asked.”

“And I’m about to be soft now.” I don’t mean anything by the banter, but Caiden doesn’t seem to want to risk it.

Taking my words seriously, he dips down and sucks my cock into his mouth in a way that has me arching my back and clenching my ass around our fingers. I groan loudly, his nickname falling from my lips.

He pops back up, all proud of himself. “Better?”

I nod and smile at his adorableness. “Better.”

Caiden withdraws his fingers from me, pulling his boxers down and off his body in one smooth motion. His eyes are trained on my fingers deep in my asshole as I scissor them to help stretch me for him. I see his mouth form the shape of an ‘O’ at that, awe flooding his face.

He pours a generous amount of lube onto his dripping cock before giving it a few pumps to spread it around. “Fuuck,” he draws out, low and breathy. “I can’t wait to feel you, babe.”

I groan into the warm air between us, our close bodies and heavy breathing muddling together in a swarm of heat despite the fact we aren’t even touching each other at the moment. “I want you to fuck me,” my voice is as close to a whine as it has ever been, but as the words fall from my lips, they feel slightly off. Yes, I want Caiden to fuck me just like he’s face-fucked and hand-fucked me before, but there’s something else — something more.

“I’ll fuck you,” he promises, fisting his length as he kneels over me on the bed. “But first, I’m going to make love to you, Vincenzo Bernardi, and you’re going to love every fucking second of it.”

“Caiden.”

His slick tip presses against my entrance, pushing my fingers out of the way, and I spread my legs wider for him. I'm not as flexible as I once was, but the burn of my muscles is satisfying as I make room for him to nestle between my thighs while he presses into me slowly.

I feel my hole stretch around the wide head before he pushes over the thickest part of his cock. At my sharp gasp, he pauses. “What can I do?”

Too overwhelmed in pain and pleasure to speak, I simply reach down and tug at my own dick. I don't get very far before Caiden swats my hand away in place of his. He pushes further into me while gliding his slightly-lubricated hand down my length deliciously tight and slow.

Caiden bottoms out inside me with a hiss, stalling again as we both adjust to the feeling of being wholly connected. He surprises me by swirling his hips around, his dick massaging inside me with a glorious ache that has me crying out in ecstasy.

“I love the way you sound,” he tells me in a gruff voice, drawing out a few inches before thrusting back into me. “Oh fuck, you're so tight.”

I make another embarrassingly loud groan at the combination of his dick and his hand pleasuring me, trying to adjust my legs until he can hit my sweet spot with every thrust. He must see my struggle because he reaches down and slowly lifts one of my legs to his shoulder, my knee hooking over it in a way that stretches me more. My other leg locks around his waist, and I force him to lean into me.

At this angle, he can't pump my dick, but I don't care. Our chests are close, almost touching, and if I raise my head, we can kiss. So I do just that, and Caiden kisses me wonderfully slow as he makes love to me in his bed.

“All of you,” I gasp, wanting him to pull out completely with each thrust. That slightly-burning stretch over his wide tip adds fuel to my fire as he grants my wish. At this angle and

with his movements, I feel my orgasm building and building, just waiting for something to push it over the edge. “You feel so good, Cay.”

Caiden picks up his pace somewhat, thrusting into me so blissfully hard that the bed frame smacks against his wall noisily. We pull away from our kisses to place our slightly sweaty foreheads against each other, chuckling softly at the thuds echoing through the room. “My wall,” Caiden complains half-heartedly.

The normalcy and comfort of this strikes a cord deep within me. We aren’t tense. We aren’t worried. Fuck, we’re giggling about his bed hitting the wall. This is ...

“This is perfect,” I tell him, moaning as he swirls his dick against my spot deep inside. “You’re fucking perfect, Cay.” My hands wrap around him, and I let my short nails scrape the muscles of his back.

He groans, twitching within me. Grasping my hips, he rails me at a glorious pace, grunting his next words with each hard, quick movement. “You’re. Fucking. Perfect. Vinz. I love you.” His last sentence is accompanied by a few pumps to my dick, and I come with a low cry I barely recognize as my own.

At the clench of my muscles, Caiden finds his own release with a rough shout, collapsing onto me as his dick pulses deep inside me. He remains sprawled across my chest as he softens and starts to slide out of me until I shift my hips just enough for his spent dick to fall onto the bed between my legs.

“I love you too, Cay.”

Only the sound of our panting breaths can be heard throughout the brightly lit bedroom as we try to slow our racing hearts. Our bodies are slick with sweat, and one of our stomachs grumbles in need of food, making us chuckle.

Caiden’s head pops up sometime after our breathing and hearts slow to a normal rhythm. “Do you think my wall is okay?”

I take in his disheveled appearance — lips darkened, eyes bright, and hair splayed everywhere. Reaching one steady

hand up, I brush it through his chocolate-colored locks until they sit perfectly in place like normal, Caiden's eyes fluttering closed at the soft touch of my fingers. A shiver runs down his back, and my lips raise on one side in a grin. "I hope not," I rumble, my voice deepened from the sounds that erupted from it earlier that seem to have used up its clarity, resulting in a slightly hoarse tone. "I hope our lovemaking is permanently etched onto your goddamn wall."

Eyes still shut as if reliving the high from minutes ago, Caiden sighs. "That sounds a lot better, actually."

"Speaking of lovemaking being on a wall, have you heard what people are doing with paint and sheets nowadays?"

He shakes his head, opening those hazel eyes full of adoration and meeting my gaze as if to say 'tell me.' We shuffle around slightly, getting comfortable against each other despite my mess still slick between us.

"They take a white sheet, throw some paint across it, fuck on it, then pin the sheets to a frame like a canvas and hang it in their house."

Caiden smiles mischievously, then shares his thoughts with me. "That would have been amazing for when we were on the floor of your apartment. There was a lot going on that entire time, and I bet a canvas painted with those motions would be beautiful and chaotic — just like we were."

"We can reenact that night and make a nice painting for your apartment," I offer.

"How can I ever be satisfied by just that ever again now that I know what this feels like? No, we'll make our painting in the natural heat of the moment as we fuck each other on it."

My eyes had drifted from his, watching my hand as I drew lazy circles on his bare skin, but now my hand stills and my gaze snaps back to his. "Fuck each other?" I repeat his words questioningly.

My love blushes, pink blooming across his cheeks and ears adorably. "I was thinking about it just now. If you can sacrifice the entire basis you've made yourself around, I can be willing

to make sacrifices as well. I'll give it the old college try — i.e. you might have to get me drunk first — but I want to at least try to see if I can offer you what you have so graciously given me.”

“I've given you my heart, baby,” I murmur, pulling him further up my chest so we are face to face. “Are you offering me yours?”

“I don't have to,” he whispers, brushing my lips with his. “You stole it the first time you sat on my desk for lunch. No —” He quickly corrects. “The first time you pushed that damn elevator button three times. You made me feel ... normal.”

I chuckle. “You aren't normal, baby.”

Caiden rolls his eyes, grimacing. “Speaking of my particulars,” he brings his hand between us, turning it where the light shines across his still-lubricated palm. “You better love me for this. I've never touched slimy shit with my bare hand on purpose.”

At that, I release a hearty laugh, leaning down to kiss him fiercely for a moment. “Go shower. I'll make us some lunch.” I inspect the lowering sun. “Make that dinner.”

It takes us a few minutes to separate from our kisses, but eventually Caiden dives away into his shower, and I scour his kitchen in search of food. There isn't much as he hasn't been here for quite some time, so he emerges from the bedroom dressed in black boxers and black socks to two frozen dinners microwaved until piping hot. He's rubbing a towel through his wet hair, but pauses when he sees me in the kitchen wearing only my black tie loosened around my neck.

Ignoring his heated look, I carry the hot plastic containers across the kitchen to his dining area with burning fingertips. I rub my fingers together after releasing the trays, trying to relieve them of the sting.

“You're naked,” Caiden rumbles from the entrance to the room. “Vincenzo Bernardi, my best friend's little brother, is naked in my dining room with only a tie wrapped around his neck, and he's made us two, probably freezer-burnt, value

dinners. If you told me two months ago this is where I would be, I would have laughed.”

I turn to face him, leaning my arms back onto the table and tensing my ab muscles for him to ogle, which makes my dick twitch as he falls for the trap.

Fuck, when it comes to Caiden, there is no satiating me — physically or emotionally. I want all of him, all of the time.

There’s still the unknown of what we are going to do once Phoenix confirms the threat against Caiden is gone, which seems to be growing closer and closer now with Mazza backing off, and as much as I try to push it aside, that worry still floods through me.

Caiden has said multiple times that he loves me, but is it enough? Can I be happy in a secret relationship with him, not living together or spending our days together? If I’m lucky, I’ll get messages and Snapchats during the day and maybe a few stolen nights throughout the week whenever neither of us is busy. There would always be the threat of someone showing up at his job or apartment unannounced, and we would have to make up an excuse.

That is definitely not what I want at all.

Having to make excuses to spend time with him is too similar to what Michele did. I am entirely too aware of how alike this relationship is to my previous one, and every bit of sense in me is screaming it is going to end the same way.

My heart, though, is too far down my arm, hanging off my sleeve by the barest of threads, to listen to any kind of reason from my head.

The tie around my neck tugs, and I’m brought back from the depths of my anxiety-filled mind to see Caiden fisting the material. “The food needs to cool down, I think,” he says casually, nodding at the steam coming from the plastic trays. Lust dances in his eyes, which look more green than brown in the golden light of the waning sun.

I take his hint without question, pushing all of my worries back until tomorrow. Or the next day. We promised to take this

day by day with each other, and that's what I am doing. For the rest of today, Caiden is mine. We'll worry about tomorrow when it comes.

I smirk and drag one finger down his chest. "I think we can figure out something to pass the time."

Caiden's heated gaze flickers to my finger with brief apprehension, and he swallows nervously.

"I washed my hands," I promise him, knowing what he is thinking. To add fuel to the fire, I lean forward and nip at his ear teasingly. "Three times," I whisper huskily.

He groans, and I chuckle lowly. Oh, yes. I know what gets my baby going.

Despite Caiden's dominant grip on the tie around my neck, I turn us so his back is to the table before lifting him easily by his hips to settle him onto the wooden surface. He hisses as the cool table hits his thighs, but tilts his head back as my mouth assaults up and down his neck with biting kisses.

Caiden moans, tightening his grip on the tie, and I push him back slightly until he has to prop himself up on one elbow on the tabletop. My lips trail along his ear, tongue dipping in teasingly, and down his neck and chest before sucking one of his nipples into my mouth.

"*Vinz*," he moans my name, releasing the tie in exchange for my hair. Strong fingers weave their way into the dark curls atop my head, and he pulls hard enough to make me gasp through my teeth clamped around his nipple.

Not wanting to let him get the upper hand, I keep the base of his nipple between my teeth and use the ball of my tongue piercing to flick over the tip with a teasing pressure that has him writhing beneath me. His hips undulate forward, looking for relief, so I bring my hand to the outside of his boxers to palm his thick dick. He groans, and I bite harder to turn that sound into a cry of pain and pleasure.

"*Fuck, fuck, fuck*," he mutters under his breath.

Three times. Smiling to myself, I release his nipple and trail my mouth down his torso, licking around his belly button

and through the smattering of hair along his happy trail. Finally, I take his waistband into my mouth and tug at it teasingly.

Dropping to my knees, I hook Caiden's legs over my shoulders and lift him slightly to pull the boxers off. I quickly discard them and return my shoulders under his knees, pulling him to the edge of the table before swallowing his dick in one well-practiced move that has him crying out like the screamer he is.

I take him in all the way to his hilt, exposing my teeth to apply a bit of pressure at his base. His responding moan is all I need to tell me he likes the feel of that.

Sliding him out, I stop at his head and once again use the ball of my tongue piercing, though this time I run it along the underside of his tip, wishing I had my vibrating one in right about now. Caiden doesn't seem to mind though, as he groans out my name along with a string of curses reserved only for me.

I raise my eyes to him, pulling out until the head of his dick rests against my bottom lip, and raise my pinky to his mouth. My other hand massages his balls which makes him release another throaty groan. Using the opportunity, I stick my pinky into his now-open mouth. "Suck," I command, keeping his dick nestled on my lip. When he follows my instructions, I dip my mouth onto his dick again and work him into a panting mess.

Caiden opens his mouth to moan, and I withdraw my finger before adjusting his position above me by using his legs on my shoulders. I pull him to the edge of the table and raise slightly, then let my moistened pinky finger run along his puckered hole.

He recoils, and I freeze.

"Yes or no," I ask gruffly after letting his dick go with a slick popping sound.

"Yes," he groans, settling back down.

Seeing his nervousness, I slide my wet finger all around his hole, then pull it forward to spit a large glob of saliva onto the digit to make sure he has plenty of lubrication back there. When I touch him this time, he doesn't flinch away, so I work my fingertip into his tight asshole, only going as far as the first knuckle before pulling out again.

"That feels like ... shit," Caiden admits with a gasp, making me chuckle against his dick.

I pull off him once again. I know exactly what he means. It's not that it feels bad or hurts right now, it's that the only thing to have ever made the same motions as my finger is doing has been literal shit. It can take a bit to train the mind to realize this is completely different. "The old college try, remember? Give it a little bit, okay?"

"I trust you."

Trying to distract him, I swallow his gloriously hard cock into my throat once again, pulling out all the stops until my pinky is bottomed out in his ass. I let it slide in and out for a minute before curling in search of that inner sweet spot. Knowing I'll find it here shortly, I bob my head along his dick with a renewed fervor.

My finger swipes around once more, and I press my thumb against the spot just behind his balls, applying pressure to his prostate from the outside as I massage it on the inside with my pinky.

Caiden very abruptly blows his load into my mouth with a roar, so much and so quickly that I almost can't catch it all. I can feel his muscles twitching in my mouth and around my finger, and I groan against his dick in response, which only spurs him further.

After a minute, he's softening and I'm pulling my finger from his ass while simultaneously letting him fall from my mouth. There's still a lingering taste of him on my tongue, floating in a reserve of saliva I've kept especially for him.

Panting open-mouthed on his dining room table, Caiden looks utterly spent, eyes heavy, head tilted back, and a light

sheen of sweat on his forehead, as he regards me with the most 'I've just been fucked into oblivion' look I've ever received.

I smile wickedly to myself before extending my clean hand forward to grasp his jaw and cheeks with an almost bruising grip, forcing his mouth open. His eyes snap to mine, wide, but I ignore them as I lean forward and spit the mixture of my saliva and his release from my mouth into his with primal dominance, owning him. Claiming him. "Taste yourself, baby," I growl lowly. "Taste what I do to you."

9 Wait, my what?

Caiden Augustus

“No, that is not going to work,” I growl into my office phone. “Did you see the projections for the next quarter’s tax increase in comparison to the income we are expecting from our top-tier clients? You cannot go around adjusting payment dates simply because someone calls with a sob story about their struggling company. The payment date stays the same, as do the fees for late payments as well. You will *personally* explain this to the charity case you’ve tried to help under the table, then you will show yourself to a two-week leave of absence without pay.”

“Mr. Aug—”

“Argue with me, and the next step will be a demotion along with a visit from our company’s lawyer discussing your breach of contract by attempting to alter client contracts without permission. I’m only going easy on you because you have been a devoted employee since before I took over this company, and you are one of our top closers. Don’t mistake my words for job security, though. I can replace you with two fresh faces for half your salary and still bring in as much revenue.”

The line is silent for a moment, then, “yes, sir.”

I hang up on the employee, not wanting to waste my breath on him any longer. In all honesty, I should fire the man for trying to go behind my back, but the company he tried to assist has been a long-term client of mine who happens to donate a lot of money to local charities. They seem to have overestimated their income for this next quarter — probably expecting their stocks to have increased more than they actually have — and made their usual donation without having all of their money squared away first. That has left them short on their contractual payment for my company, which is very unfortunate.

For them.

If they had come to me, I may have felt generous and offered them a grace period, but not when they conspired with an employee of mine to alter their contract permanently without my approval.

My intercom beeps before I even have a second to breathe, and I sigh in frustration, trying not to mess up my hair by running my hands through it.

“Mr. Augustus?”

“What is it, Emily?” I exhale heavily again at her timid voice. Obviously, something has her on edge, but she is beating around the bush to get there. She could have simply given the necessary information in one sentence across the intercom without a greeting, and I tell her just that.

“S-sorry, sir. It’s just that your ex has called . . . ?” My assistant trails off hesitantly.

I rub my brow with one hand. “Which one?”

“Ms. Calsott, sir,” Emily says, using Ashlynn’s last name. “She said she wants to meet for lunch—”

“Tell her I am busy. For the next fifty years.” I grumble, still rubbing at my aching head. “Stop tying up my line. I have other people to speak with.”

Without waiting for her reply, I disconnect her intercom connection and tap through my previous calls list in search of the intern in the legal department who caught the fraud coming through their office regarding the adjusted contract. I find the number, but don’t click on it yet. I take a moment to shrug off my suit jacket as it is getting warm in my office from my heated conversations, roll the sleeves of my blue button-up haphazardly to my elbows, and loosen my tie.

This morning has been filled with a ridiculous amount of work, just like the entirety of this week has been. I’ve been staying in the office until about ten every night trying to fix this screw-up that Joe — my most trusted closer — seemed to have orchestrated by himself. At first, my legal team and I thought it might have been an outside job by the struggling

company itself, and it's taken all week to get to the conclusion we found today.

I even had to skip poker with my friends last night, and I never miss poker Thursdays.

On top of that, I have been utterly exhausted from working such long hours that I haven't been able to do much more than kiss Vincent a few times before falling asleep. That's two and a half days in a row where all we have done is sit in my office, not even enjoying a quiet lunch due to all the conference calls I've been on, and ordering dinner instead of cooking together as well. There's been some conversation, but I can tell he is leaving me to my own devices to figure this out as quickly as possible.

What I am missing desperately, though, is sex.

I've managed to fall asleep in my bed kissing a very attractive man two nights in a row when my intention had been sex each and every time.

I'm about ready to sell my company and live in a box just to get some action.

That thought alone has my dick twitching, and I adjust myself with a groan before pressing the call button on my office phone. The ringing sounds throughout the room, and I lift my eyes to make sure the noise isn't interfering with Vincent's work. He's been diligently conversing with my legal team as well regarding the contract and plans for security for my company, so he hasn't had much time for me either.

Vincent is already looking at me with a dark gaze, lips slightly parted as his eyes roam over my disheveled clothing. "Have I ever told you you're extremely hot when you are in boss mode? So assertive."

The ringing stops a second later.

"Hello?" I hear the voice of the young intern flood through my office before I have a chance to reply to Vincent, though my dick pulses at his words.

"Is this ..." I search my desk for the unceremoniously deposited sticky note laying around with his name scrawled on

it. “Damian?”

“That’s me.”

I recall the glimpses I’ve seen of the intern this past week as he stopped by my office a few times with the documents from my legal team either for me or for Vincent. Poor guy has been worked to death by all the deals coming through, but that’s just how it is as an intern. We’ve all been there, done that, so I don’t feel too sorry for him. If he tries hard enough and has the right skills, he’ll get where he needs to go. He’s tall with golden skin, a sharp jawline, bright blue eyes, well-styled blonde hair, fit, and has a smile that can convince any girl to eat the forbidden fruit. He’ll go far enough on those looks alone. Plus, he’s currently in Harvard Law School, which is always a good way to make an impression.

“This is Caiden Augustus. I’m calling to let you know that the discrepancy with the contracts has been solved, and you may shred the false one now as we will not be honoring it. Please disseminate that information to your superiors as well. You did well, kid. Let me know if you ever need a recommendation.”

Damian clears his throat, obviously not expecting any kind of praise from me. “Thank you, sir.” He hesitates a moment. “Is Mr. Bernardi with you by any chance? I need to talk to him, and it might save me a trip up there if he can speak over the phone.”

“Hold on.” I mash the mute button and glance up at Vincent, who just shakes his head at my tone.

“You’re so abrasive sometimes,” he says with a smirk and an eye roll, but stands to walk over to my desk. He rounds it, then kneels beside my chair with his mouth at my ear. “But I like it.”

Vincent nips my earlobe, sliding a hand over my thigh and onto my stiffening dick. He rubs me teasingly from the outside of my pants, and I throw my head back onto the headrest of my chair in pleasure.

This. This is what I have been missing.

“Be good and stay quiet for me,” he coos before reaching over with his free hand to unmute the desk phone. “Damian, man, how’s it going? Got the final revisions for me yet?”

“No, actually. I’m still working on that, but I wanted to ask you something.”

My eyebrows raise despite Vincent’s hand rubbing my dick with delicious motions. Since when do Damian and Vincent converse in Italian? I’m definitely glad I’ve taken the time to learn the language so that I know what is being said. If he isn’t wanting to talk about work, then why exactly is he talking to my boyfriend on my phone?

Wait, my what?

Did I just refer to Vincent in my head as my boyfriend? I know we’re exclusive with each other, but we aren’t public and neither of us is sure if we ever will be. Still, the term had drifted through my mind without any hesitation.

We’re going to have to talk about that.

Vincent gives my dick a squeeze, and I bite my lip to keep from moaning out loud.

When his deft fingers pop open my pants and free my now-raging hard-on, I have to bite so hard I taste blood. His thumb swipes over the dripping tip, spreading slickness down my shaft as he starts pumping with agonizingly slow strokes.

“Oh, what is it?” The pair continue their Italian conversation.

“What are you doing tonight?” Damian questions out of the blue.

Dark eyes drift to me, then down to my exposed cock as if to indicate exactly what he will be doing tonight. Or rather *who* he will be doing. *“A couple of my friends and I are going to the carnival in town, then our usual movie night. Is there something you need?”*

We’d already discussed movie night being at my apartment this Friday as Vincent and I are now completely moved in, and I have an in-home theater with a giant screen and all of the

streaming services someone could want — which I bought specifically for him. I only had cable before I met Vincent, but the man loves to jump around shows like the Easter bunny hiding eggs for the holiday.

I hadn't explicitly asked him, but when he'd brought in the suitcase and garment bags of clothing, we'd exchanged a surreptitious gaze before he silently hauled them into my closet. We hadn't shared a word as we both unpacked our clothes, Vincent on one side of the large closet and me on the other. Of course, he'd made a jab about my ties, so I'd retaliated with a comment about how all of his clothes are black. That had been Tuesday night — almost around midnight as we had stayed up late moving everything in and basking in the next stage of our relationship — and we'd passed out shortly after with Vincent's socks and underwear still packed away.

The carnival today is news to me. He hadn't mentioned it at all this week, and I have no idea if I am expected to stay home while he goes with his friends even though I have plans with them later for movie night. Also, he's my bodyguard around the clock, so how would that even work? I'd have to be where he is at all times unless he's cleared a night off with Phoenix.

Silently dropping spit onto his free hand, Vincent uses both now to jerk me off under my desk, and I know I won't be able to hold off much longer. His large hands work my length expertly, sliding and tugging while picking up the pace.

I feel my need for him deep in my belly, aching to be buried in him while he cries out in absolute ecstasy-induced delirium.

My fantasies have been running a little wild recently. I blame it on the delicious man kneeling in front of me while fucking me with his hands under my office desk.

He tugs up, corkscrewing his hand ever-so-slightly in a maneuver that has me *this close* to moaning out loud.

The intern on the phone clears his throat again. What, is he sick or something? “*Well, I was kind of hoping you would be*

open for dinner or a movie or really anything, actually. A date, I mean. I was hoping you would go on a date with me."

It feels like a bucket of ice has been dumped across my body, and the lust clouding my mind disappears almost completely. I lunge forward and jam my finger onto the mute button. "Fuck no!"

Vincent smirks, still rubbing my cock. "No?"

My voice is an animalistic growl as I give him a warning. "Say yes and see what the fuck happens, Vincenzo."

If possible, the smirk widens, and he raises one spit-covered hand to unmute the desk phone. "*Si.*"

Damian speaks again excitedly, but I can barely understand it through the anger coursing through me. "*Great! Do you have a time and place in mind?*"

Staring at me, the smirk on Vincent's mouth never wavers, and he continues to pump my dick, which remains erect despite the rage boiling my blood "*Why don't you meet my friends and me at the carnival tonight? Around 8?*"

The glare I am giving him is the most deadly I have ever been able to muster. I could tattle to his brother and get him in trouble for ditching me tonight, or I could tell Phoenix that Damian is a bad influence on Vincent. The latter would be a lie, though. I personally vetted Damian and even conducted his interview for the intern position. He's charming and already a self-made man, having kept his grades up through high school despite being in an orphanage, then moved on to university before being accepted into Harvard. He's young and actually Vincent's age, unlike me.

"Sounds great, Vince. I'll see you then."

My office phone disconnects and the room floods into silence except for the slick sound of Vincent's hands still pumping my dick. "Why the fuck did you do that?" I growl out.

Vincent shrugs. "It's not like I'm in a relationship right now, am I?" He chuckles darkly. "Also, I thought it would be funny as hell to fuck with you, and it was. I can't wait to see

how jealous you get tonight at the carnival. You didn't think I was going without you, did you? This just makes things ... interesting."

I'm so close to release that his words are barely registering over the lusty haze which has settled over me, but I understand enough to know he needs to be put in his place. I am not one to be messed with, especially not on a day like today — a week like this week. Snapping my hand out, I grasp Vincent's neck tightly and quickly enough that his eyes widen in shock and his hands flinch off my dick. He's sitting entirely on his knees, so when I push him back by his throat, he has no choice but to let me hold him.

I force him back until his head rests on the drawers of my desk, and he's leaned in a way that would make him fall if there was no support behind his head. In this position, I bet his thighs are quivering from the exertion, testing his body to its limits, but I don't have the time to check. I stand, grasping my dick in my free hand and pumping hard as I tower over him, still firmly gripping his neck.

"What—"

"Shut the fuck up," I growl. Vincent's dark eyes narrow on me in a glare he can't maintain. They slip down to my dick waving in his face only seconds later, and those sinful pink lips drop open, unconsciously asking for my cock to be shoved between them. That's not what I have in mind, though.

I pick up my pace, not letting my dick touch his needy mouth, and revel in the sight of Vincent kneeling immobile under me, at my mercy. Even with the glare he has returned to my eyes, I can't help the images in my head of Vincent submitting in the bedroom as I tie ropes around his rippling muscles.

"Don't you dare," Vincent barks, challenging me, as he sees the intention in my heated gaze, but it's too late. He tries to sit forward, but I keep steady pressure around his throat.

"*Si*," I retort with a snarky tone, mocking his earlier words when he confirmed a date with another man. The start of a guttural groan is all the time Vincent has to prepare, and he

squeezes his eyes shut in anticipation. A second later, a much-needed orgasm wrecks its way through my body, tightening all of my muscles deliciously and sending chills across my skin. Warm streaks of come erupt from my tip only to fall onto Vincent's face. When I'm finished, ropes of release drape across his lips, cheekbones, and even an eyebrow, narrowly avoiding his hair.

My panting is the only thing to be heard throughout the room as I squeeze my cock of every last drop before falling back into my chair, spent. I'm still breathing hard as I tuck my softening dick back into my pants before zipping up just as Vincent's eyes snap open with a half-asses glare.

He licks his lips free of come, though the rest of his face is still covered. "That could have got in my fucking eye, you bitch," he snaps, though I can still see the lust in his eyes, the fast rise and fall of his chest, and the boner tightening his slacks.

I hold his face and smirk at him, my eyes dancing off each ribbon of my release on his tanned skin. "And you would have begged for more, babe."

He rolls his eyes. "Fuck you."

"Why don't you go fuck Damian?"

My response makes him snap his mouth shut as he contemplates for a moment. The come on his face is slowly sliding down and drying, but he doesn't seem to care. "I was just teasing," he murmurs. "I didn't mean to actually make you mad." Eyes drifting closed, Vincent leans back against the desk while bringing his legs around with a slight grimace at the movement. I guess his legs really were aching at the position.

Despite my mature brain screaming at me to shut up, I can't stop the next words as they fall out of my mouth like I'm some lovesick teenager in high school. "Do you two hang out enough that he thinks he has a chance with you? In all that time together, you haven't mentioned that you're already taken? Or ... or are you interested in Damian?" My voice

sounds defeated even to my own ears, and I feel a blush bloom across my cheeks.

Vincent raises his head to look at me, not saying anything. After a moment, he reaches a hand up behind him to start blindly feeling along the desk near the tissue box I keep there. I lean forward and pluck a few out before handing them to him, which he uses to wipe away the come on his face. “You really think that?” He questions, eyes closed as he cleans his skin.

“Think what?”

“Any of that,” he clarifies. “Do you really think I would intentionally lead someone on, be it you or anyone else? I’m interested in you — only you — not Damian. You and I already agreed to exclusivity, Cay.” Tossing the used tissues aside, he faces me with a steely gaze. “He and I do not hang out enough for me to have needed to mention that I am seeing someone, so I don’t know where he got the idea to ask me out. Don’t you trust me to keep things appropriate with other people? It isn’t my fault he jumped the gun and asked me out without making an effort to know me well enough to see that I am completely in love with someone else.”

I let out a heavy sigh, rubbing my brow again. I seem to be doing a lot lately. “Fuck, I’m sorry, Vinz. I don’t know why I’m acting like a goddamn hormonal teenager. Of course I trust you. I’m sorry about your face; I shouldn’t have taken advantage like that.” I need a day off work, a thorough fuck, and lots of sleep.

“First, shut the fuck up about my face. That was so goddamn hot, baby.” He and I are both cursing more due to our heated feelings, and I smile at that. As a kid, I was scolded harshly any time I slipped up with a curse, so I grew up never using them. Even in my adulthood, they had been engrained into my head as the mark of an ‘uneducated’ person unable to get their point across without swears, but now it’s something Vincent and I do when clean words aren’t enough. We need the dirty, augmented curses to show how raw our feelings are for each other. It’s exhilarating — breaking my parents’ rules like that. “You can dominate me anytime you want as long as

we can switch it up, too. We can pick a safe word, and I promise I'll use it if I ever need it. I get what you mean, Cay, about not knowing exactly what we are. I felt a surge of jealousy when Emily said your ex had called, not that I don't trust you. I guess I just feel a little ... unsure about where we stand at the moment. We fuck, but we aren't in a relationship. Friends with benefits or fuck buddies don't typically confess their love for each other, so those aren't good terms either. I've been burned in the past — as you know — and I suppose a part of me is worried you are going to turn around and say this was all an experiment for you. I know we might never be out together, and I've kind of come to terms with that. It's the not knowing what we are to each other behind closed doors that is getting to me a little bit.”

“Ashlynn was an experiment,” I blurt, slightly covering his last few words, and he pauses, looking at me curiously for his position still on the floor, propped up against my desk. “And every girl before that.” The confession is just rolling off my tongue now without any filter, and I only realize how true the words are as they fall from my lips. “That night in high school was the only time I ever felt like myself with someone until you came along. You awoke something in me I hadn't felt in a long time — happiness. Before you, I was a total dick who couldn't even be bothered to learn someone's name unless I needed them for something. You aren't an experiment. You're my fucking lifeline. I love you so goddamn much, Vinz.”

“I love you, too.” He smiles softly. “Is that all we are, though? Just in love?”

“Well, I was thinking ‘boyfriends in love,’ but if you want to shorten it, that's okay too.”

10 Or I Won't Stop

Vincent Bernardi

“What are the knives on your back for?”

I shiver as Caiden drags one finger down the middle of my back, brushing over the set of five knives sheathed there. They're strapped in a v shape with the longest, most deadly knife centered on my spine between my shoulder blades. The others touch at the tips inside the sheath, but fan out slightly as they decrease in size so they do not overlap. I can reach them easily due to the stretches I've kept up with during my workouts, and drawing them in a tense situation is almost like second nature — not that I have had to do that in a while. The leather straps holding the knives go over my shoulders with one around my ribs under my pecs to keep everything in place.

It's close to time to leave his office, and I'm sitting on his desk instead of my chair by the door like usual. We've spent every second since lunch — since he officially called us boyfriends — in this position, just talking about anything and everything we can think of. Caiden's ignored every call and email that's come through his devices, and even Emily on the intercom, in lieu of us making easy conversation.

He told me about his parents — how his father is a pastor at the local church, his mother is just as devout as his father, and about his childhood growing up. Of course, Caiden was an A+ student in school. He was also the quarterback for his football team and took piano lessons until he went off to college, supported by a dual scholarship in football and music. I had no idea just how self-made Caiden is, but as he explained about being an intern during college and working his way up to take over this company, I realize that's exactly what he is.

Caiden used his brain, athleticism, musicality, and charm to get where he is today, and those are natural skills that not everyone possesses. Certainly not me.

“They are for defense,” I say slowly, teasingly, a smirk tugging at my lips. I know that isn’t what he meant with the question, but I like seeing him get flustered.

His mouth turns into a frown, making him look pouty. “You know what I mean.” Caiden lets his hands slide down my back to my waistband, then starts tugging the back of my shirt free from it. I let him, curious as to where he is going with this. He’s leaning closer than an office setting calls for, but then again we both hand-fucked his dick earlier until he came on my face. This is not nearly as lewd as that.

Still, I can’t help the goosebumps that raise along my back as he drags his hands up to the knife sheath nestled between my shoulder blades. He runs his fingers over them, then grasps one of the smaller knives on the side by the hilt.

Caiden pulls the knife out slowly, giving me a chance to stop him, but I just watch with intrigue. Once it’s free of the cover, I feel Caiden’s hand adjust it slightly, then cool metal trails my spine agonizingly slow and purposeful. The tip glides down the skin without resistance, and I can tell he’s arranged it so the flat of the blade is what is touching me, not the sharp edges.

He takes his time dragging the metal around my ribs and to my stomach, almost catching on my belly button. I can feel my pulse racing, blood rushing south, and when I glance at Caiden from under my lashes, I can see him breathing just as heavily as me, lips parted in wonder.

“I trained with knives first back when I started street fighting,” I try not to gasp the words. Caiden’s gold and green eyes flicker from my abdomen to my own darker gaze, and I see the lust from earlier returning. “They’re a comfort to me. If my guns ever fail, I have my knives as backup.”

“How do you reach them back there?”

I smirk. “I keep up with stretches to maintain my flexibility. I prefer them on my back because it isn’t a common place to be searched. If someone is sloppy enough to miss them during a search, that’s their problem and gives me an upper hand.”

Caiden presses the blade flat against the center of my chest, staring me down. “Show me.”

Slowly, I raise one hand high into the air, then bend it back and underneath my collar, grasping the handle of the largest knife and withdrawing it slowly. “Mine is bigger,” I taunt once I’ve presented it to him.

He skips over my teasing. “What do you mean you trained with them?”

Just because I’m a cocky son of a bitch, I toss my knife in the air to flip it, catching the blade carefully between my fingers before drawing my arm back and throwing the knife to our right without looking away from Caiden’s eyes.

It thuds, and Caiden is the first one to look away. I follow his gaze as it lands on the knife sticking out of the wall, impaling a poster of Caiden’s office building. The tip of the knife is embedded in a bullseye on the top floor on the north side, just where this office is located.

Perfectly placed.

“I mean I trained with them,” I shrug, though Caiden’s eyes don’t leave the knife in his wall. “I learned how to handle them, how to throw them, stab or slice to maim or kill.” I let the words hang in the quiet air for a moment before I press forward, knowing there is a chance my next comments could bother Caiden, but hoping they will intrigue him. “I spent a summer in LA with my friend, Zev, and Ben, Adam’s brother, at their sex club where I learned the techniques for knife play by some of the best BDSM exhibitionists in California.”

Now, those hazel eyes snap to me, wide with surprise. “Knife play?”

“Mhm,” I hum. “It’s like what you were doing with that knife against my skin, but add in the basic principles of BDSM with the pleasure and pain aspects. Some people go as far as to inflict varying cuts on their partners during knife play — all consensually, of course.”

“And were you ... into that?”

I shrug again. “I’ll try anything once. When it was simply about the dynamic between pain and pleasure, I found it interesting, but I see where you are going with this. I wouldn’t want to do anything further than what you have done so far. I love you,” I grasp his hand still holding the knife to my chest. “And I can’t imagine scarring up your body. I love what we do now, and how we are growing in our intimacy. There’s no need to cliff jump into sadism or masochism when I have you giving me all these amazing feelings already. Feelings I’ve never experienced with anyone no matter how deep into BDSM I went. It’s something to consider later, I think. After we’ve gotten tired of vanilla sex — though I don’t see that happening for me in the near future at all — we could always venture out. We could go to Ben’s club in California sometime.”

I’m almost completely positive Caiden will say no. Hell, he was raised by Jesus Freaks, but I’m surprised when he actually seems interested.

“We could try that out,” he agrees.

I want nothing more than to pin him to his desk and take him right here and now. Reason overtakes my mind, telling me it’s just after six, and we need to head home to change for the carnival tonight. “Come on,” I urge him while sheathing my knives and correcting my clothes. “We have a carnival to get ready for.”

Caiden follows me as I lead us out of his office toward the garage basement where my motorcycle is waiting for us. He’s become more comfortable with the bike these last few days and offered this morning for us to take it to work instead of the SUV, to which I eagerly agreed.

I pass my black backpack containing my work devices and paperwork to Caiden, who slings it over his shoulders without question. I mount the bike, and he swings on behind me, his toes barely touching the ground whereas mine sit comfortably flat, holding us up as I kick the stand from the concrete.

We slide on our helmets, then Caiden wraps his arms around me — something that has become a new favorite of

mine while riding the motorcycle. I feel his hands caress down my chest, fingers dancing along my abs when he reaches them, and I reach down to hold his hands in one of mine as a silent form of affection.

He wiggles closer. “You make me feel ... small,” he confesses from his lifted visor, chin resting on my shoulder. “Not weak or delicate, just small. With my exes, I was always the taller, more muscular one, and I had to kill all the spiders.”

Despite the cute words falling from his lips, I straighten my back at the last comment, looking over at him with wide eyes. “Baby,” I say seriously. “I am not killing any spiders. Me and those beasts don’t get along one bit. Have you seen how many eyes they have and those fang things? Ugh!” I feel a shudder travel through my body at the thought of those furry fucks.

Caiden tips his head back in a cacophony of guffaws, the laughter echoing around the empty basement. I think he even has tears in his eyes, but I can barely get passed my own horror to appreciate how his blush-colored lips stretch across his straight white teeth in a way that just makes me want to stare forever. “Big, bad Vincenzo Bernardi trained to maim, kill, and fuck with knives, but *spiders* give you the heebie-jeebies?”

I frown. “Heebie-jeebies?”

“That shudder, the way your skin crawls, a reaction to disgusting or creepy things,” he explains, looking as if I have two heads. “You haven’t heard that term? Have you been living under a rock?”

That only leaves me more confused. “Living under a rock?”

“Ugh, babe. You are not helping yourself here.”

Scowling, I reach one hand back to slap his visor down over his face, effectively shutting him up before letting my bike roar to life beneath us. The familiar rumble trembles my bones comfortingly like a child’s blanket, and it is nothing but

me and the crowded streets of New York as I peel out of the parking garage.

Caiden squeezes my torso, reminding me that he is there. At first, I think I've scared him with my driving, but as his hands creep down my front I know that isn't the case. He toys with my belt buckle, his fingers barely brushing the front of my pants. The feather-like sensations are enough to make my dick spring to life despite the already taut fabric containing it. Semi-hard, I release a groan that gets drowned out by the bike's engine.

He continues to tease me, rubbing the inside of my thighs where I straddle the bike or flicking at my waistband. Just as he finally palms my rising hard-on, the sound of sirens blares from behind us.

I raise my visor with one hand and turn my head for Caiden to hear me as I swerve around cars to avoid the cop. "Flip my plate, baby."

"What?" His reply is heavily muffled by his helmet, but I manage to hear it anyway.

"Reach back and press against my license plate until it flips in, so the cop can't read my tags. You can do this."

"Just pay the fine!"

I cock a wicked grin. "But running is so much more fun."

Feeling one of his hands release me, I wait until Caiden gives the 'okay' that he flipped the plate. Not as worried about the cop getting my information, I stop my close weaving and focus on gaining speed through the streets. After cutting through some alleyways and driving the wrong way in traffic, I lose the police officer.

I raise my hands off the handlebars, celebrating with a whoop. "You can't tell me that wasn't fun," I demand to Caiden. If my dick is any proof, running from the cops is plenty exciting. It's standing high and proud, straining against my pants painfully, and I'm reminded of a similar night in Italy when Caiden and I evaded the police — confessing our feelings for each other in the darkness of my mustang.

“Let’s just get home,” he grumbles through the visor, but I know there is a hint of a smile tugging at his lips despite the fact I can’t see them.

Maneuvering the bike back towards Caiden’s apartment building, it isn’t long before we’re parked in the basement and making our way up to his penthouse. I’d brought in the *Bernardi* tech guy to install a fingerprint scanner in the elevator for anyone who tries to select the top floor and one for Caiden’s front door as well. The added step to Caiden’s usual elevator routine has slightly thrown him off, and each time he has to break that trio of threes, he tangles his free hand with mine, holding tight as if I am the only thing standing between the scanner and an anxiety attack.

I don’t mind.

“What does one wear to a carnival?” Caiden inquires as the elevator rises.

Giving him a curious look, I tug on our joined hands and draw him closer to me. “You haven’t been to a carnival?”

He shakes his head.

“Well,” I muse, using my free hand to fiddle with a piece of his hair that has come free from the confines of its pomade. “How about I pick out your clothes while you shower?” He opens his mouth as if to protest, but I cut him off. “Don’t even try it. I know you have to shower before you change clothes, and I know what you like to wear. Trust me?” At the slow, almost reluctant nod of his head, I dip my mouth down to his, kissing every bit of worry from his pouty mouth. “I love you.”

The words are both light and heavy on my chest. Letting Caiden in like this has been terrifying, but he hasn’t done anything to break me ... yet. I hold on to that thought.

Pushing onto his toes, Caiden presses his soft lips harder against mine. “I love you, too,” he murmurs against me.

This is nice. This is wonderful. This is *perfect*.

When is the other shoe going to drop?

In his apartment, Caiden strides off for a shower while I lay out some clothes for him in his closet, which also happens to be my closet now, too. I leave them where he will be able to clearly see them after his shower, then walk back into the living room to make a call.

“What’s up, butt buddy?” Theo chimes through the phone after answering. He must be spending too much time with Phoenix’s girl — Tessa — because that sounds like the type of quip she would pull on a one-night stand turned friend.

Theo’s been joining in on our movie nights, and he’s invited to the carnival tonight as well, so I decide to brush off my ‘date’ to him if he wants. I do have a boyfriend to keep happy, after all.

“Don’t call me that,” I plead, but my tone is teasing. Everything between Theo and me is completely platonic now, and the ‘butt buddy’ comment doesn’t phase me. “You aren’t seeing anyone right now, are you?”

“I’m not hooking up with you again, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I roll my eyes. “Theo, no, I — wait, why not? What if I wanted to hook up again?”

He lets out a snort across the line, and I can just picture him returning my eye roll with one of his own. “Um, because I don’t really feel like fucking a man in love with someone else, no matter the reason. But, I am your friend, so I’ll take the bait. Is everything okay?”

“Well,” I draw out the syllable of the word for a good few seconds, running my finger along Caiden’s grand piano in the corner of the living room. I press the ivory closest to me, and a slightly off-key note echoes through the room. Apparently, Mr. Perfect hasn’t kept up with keeping the thing tuned. “You might want to dress nice tonight. Not that you aren’t attractive usually, but you should definitely put in some thought to your outfit.”

“Vincent.”

“Okay, okay. I kind of accepted a date with this intern in Caiden’s legal department and told him to meet us at the carnival tonight, but that was before I had an official boyfriend. I can’t really be going on a date now, can I?”

Theo lets out a squeal that could rival any of Koda’s on a good day. “No way, no way! You two made it official? Congrats, man.”

“Thanks. Listen, it’s official, but not public, okay? He’s still working on that part, so just keep it to yourself tonight. Especially around the guys. I don’t want Caiden getting spooked.”

He agrees, telling me that he already knows to be discreet. Then, he asks the real question. “So this date you’re setting me up with who thinks he is going on a date with you ... Is he attractive, at least?”

I chuckle at that. “He’s no Caiden, but I think you’ll appreciate him. Blonde hair, smooth skin, sharp features, blue eyes, nice smile, looks like he works out, and he attends Harvard.”

“He works and he’s in law school in Massachusetts?”

“Yep. He’s an intern at Caiden’s company. He spends half a week in class and half a week at the company. From what I can tell, he’s in the business of sustaining himself, so I don’t know if he is looking for a hookup or something serious. He did specifically call it a date though, so maybe he still has time to fill around his schedule. I know he gets good grades, and he caught a major fuck up at the office the other day, so his future is looking pretty bright. I’d say snag him before someone else does.”

“And his name?” Theo inquires in a sing-song voice. I tell him, and he muses over it for a second. “Damian ... I can definitely moan that name, no problem.”

Plopping onto the piano bench, I roll my eyes yet again at Theo’s antics, but chuckle nonetheless. “You’re something else, Theo. Listen, I’ll catch you at the carnival, okay? See you soon.”

As I pull the phone from my ear to hang up, I hear Theo holler. “Fuck your man before you have to share him with us!”

As tempting as that advice is, I know Caiden would just have to shower again if I made him all hot and bothered, and we simply don't have time for that. Instead, I search for a song I heard recently that features a whole mess of piano scales and listen to the intro a couple of times, studying it with my ears, before trying my hand at playing it on Caiden's piano.

I can tell immediately that some of the keys are out of tune, but for the most part, I can make them out easily enough. Fortunately, none of them are quite to that point where they basically become another note, so I focus on the notes I heard in the song and the ones spilling from my fingers on the ivory keys stretched out in front of me.

This particular song is full of different notes and keys riffing up before the singing even starts, and it also has parts where some resonance cords are practically slammed down by the artist. I love the emotion put into the song by the singer, even if the lyrics are about a toxic relationship. I don't relate to the meaning behind the song, but I can still appreciate the musicality of it.

Taking my time, I play key by key while imagining the song slowed in my head. I can work out most of the notes, and press them in order slowly before speeding up. My hands are nowhere near as nimble as Caiden's, but I like to think I can hold my own. The gift of hearing something and being able to play from that alone is something I've realized not every musician can do. That doesn't automatically make you good, though.

I sing the lyrics softly to myself, slamming my hands onto the eerie-sounding cords before moving on to the next section, trying to piece the notes together with just my hearing alone.

I eventually get it, repeating the intro, lyrics, cord, and new section to commit it to memory while murmuring the words to myself.

“I didn't know you sing, too,” a murmured voice rumbles from behind me, sliding along my spine like the graze of

fingertips. Goosebumps flood my skin as I imagine those nimble fingers caressing me earlier.

Smiling to myself, I let my hands fall from the keys and turn to face Caiden. He's leaning in the archway of the hall that connects to the living room, wearing the clothes I set out for him.

Fuck, I did a great job of picking his clothes.

I stand and look him over, slowly. My eyes take in his appearance, his body, in one laden drag that leaves the air between us charged with heat.

Caiden's wearing a dark blue short sleeve button-up made of a silky material — which honestly might be actual silk if it is from his closet. It might be a little extra for a carnival, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to have him wear something so similar to what he wore in Italy on our date. I am not disappointed. The end of the short sleeves are rolled once or twice, resting taught against the lean muscle of his bicep, and he's left the first few buttons undone. It leaves a lot to question, as the last button he left makes it low enough that a straight man wouldn't usually wear it that way, but at the same time, it isn't quite as revealing as something a more outwardly gay man would wear. He's walking that line, and I love it.

His jeans are light-wash with factory-made frayed holes along the legs, and I can see his dark blue boxer briefs peeking out of one of the higher openings. It's subtle but attractive. These aren't like any jeans I've ever seen him wear, but they were in his closet, so they must be his. In his hands is a simple pair of Hey Dudes in a dark blue color that matches the shirt well. I found those deep in his closet with the tags still on, and I'm pretty sure they are the most relaxed shoe he's ever owned as an adult.

I make a show of checking him out from his perfectly styled hair to his dark blue socks and back up again once more. Wetting my lips, I let the heat simmer between us. "You look like my next meal," My voice comes out low and gravelly, my accent more prominent.

Caiden blushes, shoving his free hand in a pocket sheepishly. “Vinz.”

The nickname sends a shiver through me, and my cock reacts despite me telling it to simmer down. “If we were in Italy,” I keep my voice at a seductive hum. “I’d have set out a chain necklace for you, and some wrist bands — probably leather ones — and you’d have more of your shirt unbuttoned. Hopefully, you’d have more of that eyeliner around your eyes, too. I don’t think I’d let you out of the apartment, though. No one gets to see my boyfriend looking so delicious.”

Striding toward him, I grip the back of his neck before pulling him the few inches up to meet my lips in a hot kiss. I work his mouth, diving my tongue in deep to taste him for a minute or two before jerking away with a ragged breath. “I have to stop, or I won’t stop,” I gasp to him.

Caiden groans, almost a whine. “We could just stay here,” he tempts.

I pull back even further and tap the tip of his nose with my index finger. “Nice try, but I have a carnival to show you.”

“I set out clothes for you, too,” he tells me, shuffling his socks on the floor as if unsure of my reaction.

I just cock a smirk at him. “Thanks, baby.” Brushing passed him, I head for the closet to see just what he has chosen for me.

11 Did you think you won?

Caiden Augustus

“I called this sugar puff during my first few years in New York,” Vincent confesses, raising the pink cotton candy in supplement to his words. “Matthew was the one to tell me I was calling it nonsense, and I think that was only about two years ago.” He’s wearing the clothes I picked out for him which consist of a black form-fitting shirt, black jeans, and some chains he brought back from Italy.

Gaia had tossed in a few extra jewelry pieces in his luggage, which I also set out. Silver chains, slightly more dainty than the ones hanging from his belt loops on one side, wrap around one of his wrists and there is one around his neck as well, resting over the v-neck shirt. His sister had also sent along some eyeliner and stamps, which I quickly recognized from the wedding when he’d had a butterfly along his cheekbone just under his eye. I knew that butterfly was for me, but I was in denial and refused to even speak to him at the ceremony or after.

I’d set the eyeliner and stamp to the side, giving him the option to wear it if he wanted. To my delight, he’d placed the butterfly in the same place as before and also swiped some eyeliner along his lash lines.

All that paired with black combat boots, and Vincent is looking absolutely mouthwatering.

I think I melted when he met me in the living room after dressing. We’d taken the bike to the carnival, and I’d had to resist groping him the entire ride. I’ve never been in a relationship where I felt so deeply for someone — emotionally and physically. My statement about Ashlynn being an experiment feels even more true now as I realize I’ve never quite felt the things you should feel in a relationship. No one has taken my breath away whether they were wearing expensive, tailored clothing or had just woken up with bed hair

and dried drool in the corner of their mouth. No one's smile has brightened my days and nights. I've never felt comfortable being wholly myself in someone's presence without any fear of judgment.

Not until Vincent.

Thankful we got to the fair a little earlier than scheduled to meet with friends, I soak in all the Vincent time I can get before they arrive. I lean closer and pluck some of the cotton candy from him. "Sugar puff," I muse around the disintegrating sugar in my mouth. "I get it. That's a good name for it, actually. It's much better than what I tried to call the trash can in Italian."

"You, my love," Vincent murmurs, swiping a thumb across my bottom lip and around the corners. "Are turning into me — talking with your mouth full." He pulls back and sucks his thumb clean of whatever food he wiped from my mouth. We'd talked about the carnival treats, about how I'd never had any of them, before he practically dragged me over to the carts to buy anything he deemed necessary to try. "Mmm, you taste like fried Oreos."

I don't know if it's his low, humming voice, the intimate way he collected the food from around my mouth, or the use of the term 'my love', but my heart stutters. I wonder if I am still too young to have a heart attack, or if I should actually be concerned about that. "The fried Oreos were great," I manage out, though my voice sounds tight.

"I do remember your attempt to say trash can," he chuckles at the memory. "It was very bad."

"Thanks," I say dryly and nudge him sharply with my elbow.

Moving the cotton candy to one hand, Vincent fishes out his phone which must have gone off. He glances over the notifications, then pockets the phone. "The guys are here, and Damian texted that he is parking."

"Damian has your number now?"

Still camouflaged from anyone that knows us, Vincent rounds to face me before cupping the back of my neck and bringing me in for a filthy kiss. “Be a good boy tonight,” he mumbles against my lips. “And I’ll reward you later. Besides,” he pulls back, releasing me, but I maintain our proximity by looping a finger in his belt loop. “I’m setting Theo and Damian up, and I’ll tell Damian that I am unavailable.”

“Just promise me I have nothing to worry about,” I plead in a whisper, needing to hear the words. We’ve managed to stop in the middle of the sidewalk where everyone is trying to pass, but in true New York fashion, they ignore us completely, simply flooding around our halted forms.

Vincent grabs my chin firmly, forcing me to meet his dark-rimmed and ebony gaze. “The only thing you have to worry about is me taking it easy on you when we get back to the apartment. I’ve had a semi since you came out of the bedroom looking like a siren sent from the devil specifically for me, and I plan on worshipping every bit of you later.”

His words make my dick rise as well, but the blood rushing to my cheeks takes some of the brunt off the hard-on in my jeans. “Okay,” I pant, already needing him. “We still have time to leave before they realize we’re already here.”

Something slams around my shoulders, capturing Vincent’s as well, and a body lands between us with enough force to break our holds on each other. “Hey, guys! Thanks for waiting on all of us!” The voice and body belong to Theo. He hangs between us like a weird third-wheel hug, and when I look over his shoulder, I see the other guys walking toward us in the crowd. “Don’t worry, they didn’t see anything, but I had to jump in here to cover you two in time. Really, it’s like you both wanted to be caught. Unless everything is public now?” The hope that shines in his bright eyes makes my heart sink. I know he and Vincent hooked up and are now only friends, but it’s obvious he still wants the best for Vincent.

Right now, I’m not the best for him.

Right now, I’m hiding who Vincent is. Not every aspect of him, but enough. He can’t even tell someone hitting on him

that he is in a relationship with me.

I'm a shitty boyfriend.

"No, Theo," Vincent says softly, ducking out from under the arm around his shoulders. He tosses the last of his cotton candy into a nearby trash can before walking down to meet the guys. "Hey, glad everyone could make it. What do we want to do first?"

There's a sigh near my ear as Vincent and his friends catch up a few feet away, their voices somewhat lost in the hustle and bustle of people. It's from Theo, who is still hanging on me with one arm over my shoulders. We're the same height, so his arm isn't too strained, and he seems comfortable hanging against me. "I don't like thrill rides," he whines, letting his legs go limp until he is dragging in the dirt.

I'm forced to wrap an arm around his waist, supporting him so he doesn't fall to the ground. "Why did you come to a carnival if you don't like the rides?"

"Do *you* like them?"

I shrug as well as I can while holding him up. "I don't know. I've never been." Readjusting my grip across his hips, I practically drag him toward our friends further down the busy path.

Theo lets out some type of *hi-yah* sound and swings one leg into the air to lock around my waist from behind. Before I know it, I'm staggering under his weight as he climbs up my body for a piggy back ride.

I grunt at the effort it takes to keep the both of us from falling. "Theo, we're not children."

"Speak for yourself."

Trying not to show my struggle, I stumble up to our friends with a quiet huff, and Theo cheers like a kid. Vincent looks at us once, then swings his head around in a double take. "What are you doing," Vincent snaps at Theo.

"Relax. His old back can still hold me."

Ouch.

No one responds to that, but I see Vincent's lips thin as he holds back more words.

"We should do the fun house!" Theo exclaims beside my ear.

The suggestion actually sounds nice as I've not quite worked myself up for the rides just yet. "That sounds good," I offer to the group, and they all exchange sly grins.

The grown man on my back kicks his legs out spastically like a child, then plants a kiss on my cheek that has a blush blooming across my face. Part of me wishes it was Vincent hanging on me, but another part chimes in about how that would definitely out us. Theo is an obvious flirt, so it isn't as suspicious that he has draped himself over me. Not that any of our friends care. They've all accepted Vincent's sexuality, and now Theo's, which makes it all the more painful that I can't be myself around them. In another life, maybe. But not this one. Not mine.

"Vince!"

We all look in the direction of the voice, and I feel Theo tense against my back. "'Vince'? Who does this guy think he is?"

While everyone is distracted, Vincent steps closer to us. He has a wide smile on his face aimed at Damian, who is heading our way, but his words are angled at Theo and me. "Your date," he grits softly through his teeth and that fake smile. "Now, get the fuck off of mine."

Theo hops from my back with a chuckle, muttering something that sounds suspiciously like 'mission accomplished.' He steps forward to greet Damian, then introduces him to all the guys.

"Your shirt," Vincent says, still looking anywhere other than directly at me. We're already standing close to each other, so he's doing what he can to make us seem as casual as possible.

It takes me a second, but I catch on to his words, glancing down to see that my shirt has shifted. The open buttons

allowed one side to be pulled by Theo enough to show the dark hickey, courtesy of Vincent, on the outside of my collarbone. I adjust it with a grateful “thanks” just in time for Damian’s eyes to land on me.

“Oh, Mr. Augustus.”

“We’re out with friends,” I greet as nicely as I can knowing he’s gunning for my boyfriend. “Call me Caiden.” I don’t like it, but these are the cards I’ve been dealt.

Damian’s bright smile falters slightly. “Aren’t you a little old to be hanging out with these guys?”

Ouch. Again.

To my right, Vincent’s smile drops, a hard look coming over his face. “These are my friend whether you like them or not. Winnifred is only a year and a half younger than Caiden, so there isn’t really a large age gap between anyone in our group.”

“Not to mention Vincent is an epic, badass bodyguard in charge of protecting Caiden day and night, right?” Theo pipes up in his own helpful way.

“That too,” the aforementioned bodyguard rumbles. “I need to talk to you, Damian. Walk with me to the funhouse.”

Damian shrugs, but seems happy enough to walk beside Vincent in the direction of a towering building decorated with clowns, paint splatter, strobe lights, and black lights. The way the purple hue makes the paint glow reminds me of the club in Italy, and I smile to myself as I remember painting Vincent’s body with the stuff.

And I also remember us washing all the paint off. Naked, together, *exploring*.

I have to shove a hand in my front pocket to hide my growing excitement as I recall that night in Italy. I let my mind wander a moment, then quickly chastise myself and think of anything I can to make my arousal fade. Like ... Ashlynn. *Yep, that will do it.*

Vincent and Damian walk ahead of the group, chatting to themselves in what I hope is a conversation leading to Vincent explaining the misunderstanding he's created. Theo pops up beside me, sliding his hand in my free one and entwining our fingers. My eyes snap over to him questioningly, but I notice he's holding Matthew's hand, too. Apparently, Theo is very touchy-feely once he gets to know people. Thinking back to our last few encounters, it all starts to make sense. He's just that type of person.

I give his hand a squeeze, letting him swing our arms like children as he tries to skip for the funhouse. Matthew, following Theo's lead, tries to lumber an attempt at the prancing maneuver, but stops when he sees I absolutely refuse to join them. I do still have a reputation to uphold even if this crowd isn't the type to recognize my face from a business newsletter or article.

As the funhouse looms before us, I hear screams and cackles from inside. I've never met a clown in person, and I know some people have serious fears of them. Hopefully, that won't be the case for me.

I'm dispirited as Vincent and Damian show their wristbands at the entrance to the house and continue inside without a glance back at us.

"Do you all like funhouses?" Theo asks our group.

Matthew lets out a bellowing laugh, followed by chuckles from TJ and Hunter, and Winnifred is the one to explain what is so funny. "We're highly trained in defensive and offensive hand-to-hand combat as well as reconnaissance and weaponry. We all have multiple weapons on us at this very moment, even though we're off duty. We're always on alert, so not much surprises us, and not many people can get the drop on us. We treat the funhouse as a ... training exercise. It's always fun to get catch anyone trying to scare us and scare them instead. Including each other." The grin following his words is wicked.

Theo and I gape at the guys. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly," Matthew growls menacingly, pulling out a gun.

It doesn't take Theo and me long to register that it's a water gun — the lime green see-through body kind of gives it away. He passes it to Theo before pulling out a second green one for himself. To my surprise, Hunter hands me a pink gun while brandishing one of his own. TJ and Winnifred both carry two each, blue for the former and red for the latter.

“What exactly is going on here?” I question, looking at the full water gun in my hands. The liquid inside is slightly thicker than water usually is, and the color is augmented and opaque inside the compartment. It's almost like thin paint rather than water.

They don't say anything because, at that second, we walk up to the entrance post, and a man with a ridiculous handlebar mustache throws his arms out in a welcoming gesture. He's wearing a red vest with stripes over a white shirt, looking like he belongs exactly where he is. “Well, if it isn't the Bernardi guys! Your friend said to go ahead without him. It seems he forgot his guns this time.” He lifts a small walkie-talkie, clicking the button before speaking into it. “The Bernardi crew is here. Give them all you've got, and watch out for their water guns!” He turns back to us and opens the gate for us to walk through.

We're halfway to the slowly-rotating entrance when Theo breaks. “What are we supposed to be doing?” Theo cries dramatically, aiming his gun at each man in an attempt to be threatening, but it comes across as completely adorable.

Matthew bats the green weapon away when it reaches him. “Don't aim it at me, doofus. We're on the same team.”

Our group shuffles closer to the entrance, and Theo squeezes our joined hands in a death grip.

“Okay, you guys break off and explain to your partners what's what. Theo and Caiden, from now on, you two are enemies,” TJ explains, looking between the two of us as if we are about to go into battle. “That means no more holding hands. Let's man up and do this shit.”

Theo and I jump away as if burned, giving each other curious glances. Matthew tugs Theo to the other side of the

entrance, and Hunter waves me over to him. The other two men duck through the slowly-revolving, tubed entrance before disappearing completely from our sight.

“Caiden, tell me you know how to shoot a gun,” Hunter pleads with me, pushing a hand through his light brown hair and glancing nervously at the team on the other side of the entrance.

“I can shoot a water gun.”

Hunter sighs as if my words release a weight from his shoulders. “Good, that’s good. Listen. When we get in there, you’ll hear Winnifred sound the whistle, and then it is a free for all except for the two teams. You and I will work together, and Matthew and Theo will work together. Hence the different colored guns. The liquid inside is a washable fabric paint, so it won’t stain your clothes. The goal is to shoot everyone you see, and the game is only over once everyone else has each team’s colors on them somewhere, leaving one person, or team, standing with the least amount of tags. Now, I know he said Vincent doesn’t have any guns, but I don’t trust him one bit. He and that Damian guy probably each have a gun — Vincent always chooses white to show up really bright under the black lights — so watch out for them. They are probably expecting us to count them out, but that’s exactly what we’re not going to do. Personally, I prefer the funhouse mirror room as my hideout, is that okay?”

I let his words pour across my brain, vaguely realizing this is like a different version of laser tag, which I have played before — years ago. I’m pretty confident I can do this. “Sure. Is there a trick to the mirrors?”

Smirking, Hunter taps his pink gun against mine and ruffles my hair at the same time. “I knew there was a reason I chose you for my team. So, half of the room is full of distortion mirrors and the other side is a mirror maze. During our setup, I always go through and mark the bottom of each mirror in the maze, so I know which way is a dead end or not. You’ll just look for the pink at the bottom, and if it is there then that is a mirror and not a good place to try to run. Trust me, the mirrors hurt when you run face-first into them. Try not

to make it obvious that you are looking at the marks either. This is my strategy, so you better not sell any information.”

Part of me is upset that Vincent chose Damian instead of me to be his partner, but I harden that anger into a steely resolve. I’ll just have to exact my revenge in the form of pink paint. I hold my gun up to show I’m ready. “Let’s do this.”

We cross the entrance just behind Matthew and Theo, smiles already forming over all of our faces.

“This way,” Hunter whispers, tugging my shirt to the right. We weave through the eerily silent house, and I realize the recorded screams and cackles from earlier are quiet. “They’ve shut everything off while we get into place,” he explains when he sees me looking around curiously. “Bonus points if you manage to tag a worker. They’ll be running around in their masks and things to try to scare us.”

He leads me up a set of uneven stairs, both of us teetering back and forth on the narrow slopes. I keep my eyes locked onto his white shirt glowing under the black lights when a sudden realization occurs to me. Glancing down, I realize my jeans are also glowing brightly in the lights.

Vincent is wearing all black.

I curse under my breath as we reach the top, sliding across rolling pins instead of solid flooring.

“What?” Hunter hisses back at me.

“I just realized Vincent is wearing all black,” I grunt with the effort it takes to cross the rolling floor. “He’ll be very hard to see.” The pin below me takes off spinning as I try to move forward another step, and I struggle to remain upright.

Maybe I am too old for this.

Hunter pauses long enough to smirk back at me. “I’m a trained professional. We got this.”

His words come back to bite him sometime later though, as we’re defending our mirrored room against TJ, Matthew, and Theo. Colorful splotches now line multiple mirrors, running

down to the floor and smudging our carefully placed navigation marks.

“You always go to the mirrors!” TJ hollers from his position hidden around a section of mirrors. We can see his side profile in a wacky mirror, but that does us little good except prepare us for his next attack as he moves. “We always hunt you down in here!”

“And you always lose,” Hunter yells back. Unfortunately, he’d taken a shot from Winnifred in close range right to the forehead, so red paint leaks down his face almost like blood. A lime green hit from Matthew is centered on his chest, and a minute ago he was two inches away from a blue splatter to the ass, courtesy of the man currently egging him on.

I’ve managed to somehow come out paint-free, my pink already splattered on both Winnifred and Theo.

I’m pretty proud of that, if I do say so myself.

My eyes dart around, trying to figure out a plan. I realize the only reason TJ can see us is because we can see him in the wacky mirror. As subtly as I can, I switch places with Hunter and assume a sniper-inspired position on the floor between his legs. I close one eye and focus on spraying my water gun at the bottom of the distorted mirror until TJ is only visible from the waist up. Then, I start army crawling toward where I know he is camped.

With the visibility in the mirror covered, he has no idea where I am or that I’m gaining on him. I near the corner of the mirror maze he’s defending and turn my body so my head is facing him and my feet are away. I stick my hands over my head and roll like a log, keeping my eyes focused on the alcove protecting TJ. He spins into view and I immediately go trigger-happy on his face.

The pink paint drips over his forehead well enough that he can’t see to shoot back, and I quickly dive for my teammate again, jerking to my feet before jumping and rolling like one of the professionals.

As I land on one foot and one knee, ready to celebrate with Hunter, I realize I've severely messed up.

Hunter stands with his hands in the air, his gun deposited on the floor at his feet. Vincent holds him at (water)gun-point, the white liquid shining brightly in the black lights.

The enemy smiles wickedly. "Hello, Caiden."

I raise my gun, but a nudge at the back of my head makes me freeze. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," Damian's voice sounds behind me.

So Vincent really did choose him over me. I feel the anger flood through me once again and let my glare burn into Vincent, whose smile wavers slightly. His brow furrows. "Cay —"

While he's distracted talking and Damian is being cocky, I spin around on my knee, discarding my gun in exchange for disarming Damian. I push his wrist with one hand, slackening his hold on the white gun, then push with my other to grab the weapon by its grip and flip it back on him in record time.

I target his forehead with his gun, temporarily blinding him before dropping the white gun to grab my pink one. I turn on my knee again and roll forward to pick up Hunter's gun as he yanks himself out of Vincent's grasp. When the roll is done, I let my feet extend, lying on my back with my two guns aimed up at Vincent. I'm partially under him, our hips in line with each other and my legs through the gap in his shoulder-width stance.

"Did you think you won?" I smirk from below Vincent.

I tag his groin.

12 As Your Friend

Vincent Bernardi

Caiden never ceases to amaze me.

He came out of the funhouse almost completely unscathed, Hunter only slightly hit. Their team obviously won — and for good reason. The maneuvers Caiden pulled in that mirror room made me wish desperately that I had chosen him for my partner, but there were many things wrong with that.

First, I needed to talk to Damian alone, and we had plenty of time to do that while we waited for the others.

Second, I wanted the element of surprise on my friends, which didn't actually work. They know me too well.

Third, I wanted to rile Caiden up a bit before we get home tonight. I have a surprise in store for movie night that will get the exhibitionist blood in him pumping.

Fourth, if Caiden and I had been in that funhouse together alone, we wouldn't have come out until our paint was smeared across our bodies like we'd made one of those canvas sex paintings we'd talked about.

We've been on a couple of the rides since the funhouse, leading to a few of the guys feeling motion sick. I've never had a problem getting sick from speed or spinning, but I've always had to slow down for anyone who went with me. Caiden seemed to like them just as much as I do, though. I make a mental note to bring him back, just the two of us, and figure out which of us can ride the longest without getting sick.

Theo suggested we end our carnival part of the night on the Ferris wheel, and the other guys agreed. As we waited in line, I noticed Theo and Damian talking very animatedly to each other. I hope they've gotten on well. Damian had said in the funhouse he did think Theo was cute, so maybe there was hope for them yet.

I hung back by Caiden as our group was slowly ushered onto different carts on the Ferris wheel. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or rhythm as to who they let off and on, so TJ and Hunter ended up two carts ahead of Matthew and Winnifred while Theo and Damian were four carts behind them. Caiden and I boarded three carts behind the last of our group, and finally, we had enough privacy for us to talk.

"You're mad," I state, looking pointedly at my crotch splashed with pink paint from Caiden's water gun.

"I'm mad," he agrees. The cart raises us higher, but he doesn't say anything else, simply stares out across the fairgrounds.

"Because I didn't partner with you?" I guess, and the way his jaw clenches tells me everything I need to know. "Look, baby. There are a couple of reasons why I didn't choose you. I needed to talk to Damian about our not-date, I wanted to surprise you, and I knew if I was alone with you in there, I would have done a lot of things to make that place be renamed from the funhouse to the cum-house. Got that? You're irresistible, and my willpower around you is dangerously low. Especially if we were to be alone together in a dark, secluded place that reminded me a lot of the club in Italy." When he doesn't respond, just continues looking out over the brightly lit city as we rise higher and higher, I run my fingers along his stubbly cheek. I love the feel of it under my nails. Love how his wind-chilled cheeks cool my warm hands. "Your moves in there were incredible. Are you sure you aren't a trained assassin or something?"

At that, Caiden finally cracks a smile. "When I tell you my back, knees, and shoulders are killing me, I'm not exaggerating. Your friends are right, I'm old."

I shrug and nudge him playfully. "Should I just call you Daddy, then?"

Caiden tilts his head back, roaring with laughter. "Please, don't. Ashlynn tried that once, and it ruined our whole mood — not that there was ever much of one to begin with." I notice Caiden tends to give nicknames to people he is close with —

usually shorter versions of their names — and seldom calls them by their full name. Just now, he said Ashlynn’s full name, which goes to show she is no longer important to him.

It’s a small thing, but it means so much.

“Ashlynn is probably young enough to be your kid,” I muse teasingly.

He scoffs. “Shut up. She is not.”

“Shut me up, baby,” I dare.

We’re approaching the top of the Ferris wheel, and I very much want to recreate the most cheesy dating trope — kissing over the city lights. As I look at Caiden, smiling wide with colorful carnival lights bouncing off of his face in the darkness, I know there is no one else I want to be with like this. There is no one else I want to kiss at the top of a Ferris wheel, no matter how cliché it is.

Caiden turns to me then, still grinning from something that seems to have made him happy. I want desperately to be the cause of that smile for as long as he’ll let me. His green and gold eyes sweep over the cityscape one more time before we stop at the top of the Ferris wheel. Below us, a cart is being unloaded.

Leaning towards Caiden, I smile as he meets me halfway, and we kiss at the top of the Ferris wheel like some love-sick teens in a cheesy movie.

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I love you, Vinz,” he murmurs against my lips, not seeming to want to break the kiss even as our cart starts moving again. He says it so often now, without any reservation, but every time he does, my heart still stutters as if it is the first time all over again.

We pull back, and he swipes his thumb just underneath the stamp on my cheekbone. I knew he would appreciate that I added it onto my face, even if he did set it aside like he didn’t want to force me to do it.

Maybe one day he'll let me apply eyeliner along his lash line and stamp an outline under his eye, too. Even if we stay inside all day, I want him to be able to express himself in any way he wants. The fact that he likes it so much on me, most likely means he'd want to try it for himself. He did let Gaia put eyeliner on him for our date, after all, and he never complained about it.

"Ti amo, Cay," I respond in my native language, the words feeling more raw and personal that way. By the way his eyes soften to expose every emotion behind them, I know he appreciates my Italian words.

Caiden hooks a finger in the chain around my neck, eyes fluttering closed and lashes brushing his cheeks as he tugs me in close for another kiss. I indulge him, pouring as much emotion into the connection of our lips as he does. Like sugar puff, our kiss is achingly sweet. As I dip my tongue in to languidly taste every corner of his mouth, I realize he's just as sweet, too.

I pull away a lot sooner than I would have liked, but we're more than halfway down now. The ground looms below us, TJ and Hunter are standing off to the side waiting on everyone else, Matthew and Winnifred are exiting their cart, and I break our kiss to keep Caiden's secret.

"I wish I didn't have to hide us," Caiden whispers brokenly, half a second before our cart reaches the bottom and we are ushered out.

His confession is an opening for me to try to convince him we can do this together, but as the crowd and our friends fold around us once again, I know I'll have to wait for the next opportunity. Bringing that topic up in front of everyone is definitely not the way to approach it.

Our group heads for the exit, and those employed by me start discussing the layout of Caiden's apartment, the theatre room, and where they think the remote will be stashed. They lower their voices even more after Winnifred suggests someone stall Caiden and me as we have an 'unfair advantage.'

All that is fine by me. My only goal is to snag one of the loveseat recliners, as opposed to the single seating options, and make sure Caiden occupies the other half. I could care less about the movie or victor of the remote. This once, I'll let one of them have it.

I've got something better planned.

The guys managed to park by my bike, though I'm not sure where Damian parked, and our whole group heads for the darker section of the lot that has somewhat been vacated. We must have stayed longer than the usual visit calls for, but I'll be damned if we don't get our 'training exercise' at the funhouse and at least one turn on each ride.

Our group breaks off from a few others exiting as we near our vehicles, and I feel a smirk twitch on my lips as I think about my plan for Caiden later.

He has no idea.

Just as my mouth starts to curve up, I hear it.

The unmistakable sound of a gun cocking.

"Pickle!" I don't know if any of my coworkers heard it too, but my shout is all it takes for them to move into action. Just like that, Matthew grabs Theo by the waist and dives in between two cars, Winnifred doing the same to Damian. Knowing Caiden is most likely the target for an ambush, I press him tight to me, blocking his body with as much of my own as I can. I put myself between him and where I heard that familiar click belonging to a gun, forcing him against the side of a dark truck nearby. Hopefully, my dark clothes will blend us in a little bit in the darkness.

In any other situation, I would love to have Caiden pinned against the side of a vehicle with our bodies touching at every point, hard and soft. This situation, however, is bad. Very bad.

Even as I think it, a gunshot sounds from up ahead where Matthew ducked with Theo.

"Get under," I growl quietly into Caiden's ear. "Crawl under the truck. Now."

We both drop to the ground quickly, Caiden following my orders without question, for once in his life. He starts to shimmy under the slightly lifted truck, loose gravel sliding against rocks noisily enough to give away our position. I don't have time to chastise his lack of delicate touch as I survey everything I can from my position. I draw my two guns from their holsters on my sides, cursing myself for not strapping another to my back, into my waistband, or onto my thigh.

“Here,” I hiss, thrusting a fully loaded pistol under the truck where Caiden is hiding. “Tuck yourself behind the wheels as best you can. Watch all around. If you see a face you don't recognize, shoot it. No safety. It's ready to fire. Don't make a sound.” I don't even get a good look at him before assessing my surroundings once again.

More shots have gone off, and a cry sounds from further down where our vehicles are parked. It doesn't immediately sound like someone I know, and I trust my guys to hold their own. With that in mind, I dip my now-weaponless hand underneath my collar and withdraw a mid-sized knife from my back. This one is capable in close combat as well as accurate when thrown, so I switch it to my dominant hand. My gun fits comfortably into my non-dominant hand, thanks to my vigorous training. I'm accurate with both hands, but probably even more so with the cool anger flooding through my veins.

I have one goal in mind: protect Caiden.

With that thought, I spring from my crouched position and use the bed of the truck to cover most of my body as I fire shots at the muzzle flashes facing me. As their bullets whiz passed me, my own strike home in various bodies.

“Team sound off!” I demand into the darkness. We aren't wired with our radios, but we can yell just as fine.

“Hunter!” The yell comes from my left, accompanied by two gunshots. “I've got three targeting me!”

There's a pause, and I wonder if Matthew is dead or simply an idiot. We always sound off in alphabetical order, and he always misses his cue. He finally pipes up, calling out his

name along with any information we might need. “Two on me! I’ve got Theo!”

“TJ! Four on me! One severely wounded!” *Bang, bang!* “Make that two wounded!”

My turn, I don’t even offer my name. They know who I am, and I don’t want to risk my hand with these bad guys being able to overhear us. “Zero!” I give my number of suspects in view now that I’ve taken down at least five. “Eagle 23!” I use our code for Caiden and the numeric specified for ‘in custody.’ We use it broadly, and this time it only means that Caiden is with me without giving that information away to our attackers.

“Win!” I hear him call from not far away. “Zero! I’ve got Damian!”

I weigh my options. I don’t want to leave Caiden, though I have to. Hunter has the most attackers on him, but he is also the only one across the driving way on a different aisle. I’ll have to run through the open to get to him, then back again when we’re done. It seems like my only choice, though.

Huffing in frustration at having to leave Caiden, I bounce my feet for energy before dashing across the open space. Almost immediately, the shots are all directed my way. I’m able to take down two before slamming into a car beside Hunter, my pulse racing.

“This is fun,” I tell him breathlessly, peeking around to check for our attackers. Each one seems to be wearing all black with ski masks, but they haven’t made any demands from us. Their skills are not quite up to par with ours, so I can only guess this is some lowly gang trying to make a quick buck from the target on Caiden.

We dealt with Mazza well enough, and made it public, so why are these guys still after him?

“We haven’t had a good shoot-out in a while,” I pant to Hunter, who chuckles in response. “Remember DC?”

My friend gives me an incredulous look. “Do you have flares on you that I can’t see?” He asks, referring to the

diversion we created during a job in the capital city. The diversion was ourselves as we walked out with bright red flares and semi-auto rifles like straight out of an action movie.

“Nope. Just like to reminisce on the good times.”

Hunter rolls his eyes, then as a team, we dive from our cover. We shoot at any suspects we see, but my gun clicks empty only a few shots in, the extended magazine finally letting me down. Not worried, I reach for my two smaller knives before throwing them one at a time at two guys who seem too preoccupied trying to shoot TJ to notice us across the aisle.

We take down more and more — there must be at least fifty guys here to attack us — and Hunter ends up fighting with his brass knuckles while I slice and jab with my two remaining knives. We’ve managed to put ourselves out in the open, but the bad guys left standing aren’t shooting at us. Either they also ran out of bullets, or they don’t want to risk hitting their own members.

Tires squeal behind us and three vans come barreling our way. Hunter and I barely have time to duck and take cover under a heavily-lifted Tahoe before the vans come to a stop. More similarly-dressed guys pour out and I feel my gut wrench. There’s no way we can take on fifty more people. If Caiden is their target, they’ll have him.

At that thought, my stomach rolls as if I’ve been on back-to-back roller coasters for the last three days.

To my surprise, they simply start grabbing the bodies of their fallen comrades, dragging them to the back of the vans before peeling away again as quick as they came.

“A clean-up crew?” I voice my question, and Hunter seems as confused as me. Had those new guys decided to attack, we most definitely would have been done for. Apparently, they were only here for a clean-up, which means whoever was behind this didn’t want us to find anything out about them.

Sirens wail far off in the distance.

“Took them long enough,” I mutter. Hunter and I slide out from under the SUV, me extending my hand to help him up. Then, I holler to my guys. “Clear! Okay, there’s nothing to tell the cops since that clean-up came through. Take any evidence or casings you find on the way to the vehicles, and let’s get the hell out of here!” I barely finish the instructions before my mind is focused on more important matters.

My feet pound against the gravel as I run back to the truck where I left Caiden, worry pressing on my chest. What if that crew came through because they got what they needed? What if they got Caiden? I can feel my pulse racing faster than it did during the fight, and I reach the truck after what seems like too long. My combat boots slide across loose rocks as I drop down to peer underneath, catching myself with my hands on the rough, scraping gravel. “Baby?”

The endearment falls from my lips before I can stop it, but I don’t give a fuck who hears right this second.

Under the truck, I find Caiden tucked along the inside of a wheel, pistol pointed straight at me. As soon as he recognizes me, he lowers the gun to the ground before rubbing at his face like he does when he is stressed.

“Come here, Cay,” I command, my voice sounding strangled even to my own ears. Reaching my hand out, a ragged breath falls from my lips as I feel Caiden’s hand land on my own, solid and warm and *alive*. I don’t wait for him to shimmy out, pulling him using my strength, the loose gravel acting like small rollers moving his body.

I draw him into an embrace, both of us still lying across the rough ground. Somehow we tangle up in each other, our legs entwined and heads tucked into the crook of our necks. Our chests are pressed together, hearts hammering hard enough to make it impossible to discern which belongs to who. His body in my arms is the only thing holding me here, now, instead of soaring into disastrous scenarios in which he’s missing or dead.

Never have I ever felt this much concern for someone during a mission. I recall my hesitation to leave him to go help

my team, and a part of me considers if I'm not the best person to be his guard anymore. If I can't think clearly with him in danger, maybe I shouldn't be the one trying to keep him safe. There's a reason we aren't supposed to date our clients.

I shake that thought off, not wanting to admit it to myself. Caiden is fine, and my team is fine. Everything is okay.

Tilting my head, I let my lips fall onto Caiden's cheek in a firm kiss, staying there as if convincing the both of us that he is okay — that we're okay. He holds me back just as tightly, and I feel some of the tension start to fall from my body as well as his.

"Boss," a voice sounds from above us.

Caiden's body freezes in my arms, and I know he knows we've been caught by someone in this compromising position. Releasing Caiden, I look up with a challenging gaze at my friend and coworker. "Matthew."

Theo stands behind Matthew, shifting nervously. He seems to understand the issues around this situation. As an employee of *Bernardi Security*, he is more than aware of the company policies regarding relationships with clients. Matthew knows something is going on between Caiden and me now. It's his duty to report it.

Not just that. Caiden could draw away from me completely with another person knowing about us. He has made it clear he doesn't want to tell anyone other than those who already know, and this has broken his plan completely.

"The cops are a few minutes out. We should go."

"We should." I stand, tugging Caiden's hand with me as I do so he stands as well.

Matthew isn't a total idiot, and he has been trained well by me. He doesn't miss our hands or the way I fix my eyes on him, daring him to say something. His brown eyes flicker purposefully to Caiden's hand clasped in mine, then back to me. "Boss."

"Matthew. You're my friend and a damn good security guard. I'm not asking as your boss, coworker, trainer, or

employer, but as your friend. Please. Can you use discretion about this?”

That well-trained gaze continues to roam over me, my hand, Caiden’s hand, and Caiden’s face. I feel Caiden try to loosen his grasp, but I only hold it more firmly in mine as I continue to stare at my friend.

Finally, Matthew speaks. “He’s my friend. Hurt him, and you’ll have me to deal with.” His gaze flickers between the two of us as he makes the threat, and I’m not sure which one of us he is talking to.

Theo, never knowing when to keep his mouth shut in tense situations, pipes up. “Which one are you talking to?”

My friend smirks, winking at the both of us lightheartedly, and I know everything is going to be okay. He isn’t going to report me to my brother, and he isn’t going to gossip to our other friends. “Both of them. Come on, lovebirds. We need to bail before the police show up.”

13 Ready for movie night?

Caiden Augustus

Theo and Damian seem to have less of a stomach for violence than I even do, so they excuse themselves from movie night. I didn't expect us to still gather at my house, but the guys appear to be very awake and energetic, probably from the thrill of the gunfight.

They are all fighting over the controls in the theatre room, so Vincent and I sneak off to our room to change out of our dirty clothes. The guys brought their overnight bags with pajamas tucked inside, not that I was aware of that until they unloaded in the parking garage of my apartment building.

Vincent is on the phone with his brother, discussing the attempt to get me — yet again.

If the team of security guards for *Bernardi Security* hadn't been there tonight, I might have been taken or killed.

And I know why.

The pair, now arguing over the phone like the brothers they are, had both told me to hold off on canceling my contract with the Ibragimovs, and I hadn't listened. I'd had my legal team draw up the paperwork this week, and it got sent to them in time for them to launch another attack against me.

Knowing their illegal dealings, and the fact they tried to have Vincent and Phoenix taken out, I couldn't stand to be in business with them any longer.

I'm regretting my decision now.

When I exit from the quickest shower I've ever taken, Vincent is still arguing with Phoenix in a mixture of English and Italian that makes my head spin. The basics of the argument seem very juvenile, so I let the two work it out amongst themselves.

At one point after I'm dressed, Vincent tries to balance the phone on his shoulder, snapping something in Italian, while attempting to pull up a pair of pajama pants with one hand.

I chuckle to myself, grasping the elastic waist and pulling it over his ass and hips easily. He turns to face me, and I quietly tie the strings in the front loosely, knowing he doesn't like anything too tight against him. In the thin grey pants, I see Vincent's cock twitch and can't help myself from palming it. I bite my lip, looking up at him through my lashes.

"I have to go," Vincent rushes out into the phone where Phoenix's voice was in the middle of speaking. "We'll talk tomorrow." He smashes the end call button, his heated eyes never leaving mine.

"Ready for the movie night?" I hum after releasing his dick from my hand, acting nonchalant about it. I turn and walk confidently out of our shared room and make a beeline for the theatre room.

Before I can get there, Vincent has my front pinned against the wall, his body pressing along my back in a way where I can feel every one of his muscles. His hand is on the back of my neck, pushing my face harder into the wall, but I love the roughness, the dominance. "Are *you* ready for movie night, Cay?" His words are low and husky and right in my ear, accompanied by a grind against my ass. His bulge presses against my backside with enough pressure for me to feel him hardening, and I find I don't hate the feeling of him against me there. He nips my earlobe. "Because you've been a bit of a brat tonight, and brats get what they deserve."

Abruptly, he releases me, stalking into the movie room way more composed than I am. It takes me a second to calm down enough to follow behind him, but I eventually make it across the threshold. Immediately, I'm bombarded by four grown men dressed in different variations of pajamas. They all stare at me as if I called them here for some type of meeting.

Matthew's muscular frame and military haircut seem quite at odds with his Winnie The Pooh matching pajama shirt and shorts as he steps forward, holding out a remote. "We've been

waiting on you forever.” The room is so large, his voice echoes off the walls and tile floor, but that only serves to better the acoustics on the surround-sound speakers.

“There are way too many remotes in this room and not enough consoles,” Hunter brandishes two more remotes. He’s in a pair of plaid fleece pants and a camouflage shirt. The shirt matches his wavy brown hair, but not the pants.

TJ pipes in as well, holding yet another remote. “How are we supposed to choose a movie when we can’t even find the right remote?” His blonde hair looks as if it got completely destroyed when he slid on a white hoodie, not caring to fix it. His pajama bottoms are just some black joggers, as he doesn’t seem to have grasped the ‘pajama’ clothes concept well.

Finally, Winnifred opens his mouth. He’s always been the more reserved, quiet one, which makes sense with him being the oldest — and most likely wisest — of the group before I came along. His dark skin contrasts with the light pink pajama onesie he’s wearing, complete with little ears on top. They’d made jokes about his pajamas earlier tonight, but I didn’t realize why until now. Despite the crazy get-up, his feigned glare at me is still threatening. “Give us the remote control, Caiden, and no one gets hurt.”

My eyes bounce along the room, taking in every guy standing as well as Vincent sprawled across the loveseat recliner. There are a lot of other comfortable chairs in here — including bean bags, single recliners, and oversized chairs that spin — but Vincent has claimed the only one that can comfortably sit two people. I can’t help but hope he intends for us to share it.

Grinning at my friend’s angry faces, I walk from the doorway at the back of the room, passed the three rows of seating, and to the wide wall on the far side where all the chairs face. The far wall is solid white to accommodate the projector mounted high above the doorway, but as I press my hand against different panels along the sides and middle of the wall, they pop open and slide gently to reveal different gaming consoles, a DVD player, surround-sound system, and multiple

wall-mounted TVs surrounding a larger main TV, revealing where all those remotes come in to play.

I had the room set up a few years ago when I actually played video games, but it's been a long time since then. Still, it's heavily equipped with anything guys their age could possibly want. At their awed faces, I try to hide my smug smile and shrug nonchalantly. "Alexa," I call to the room. "Turn on the main TV."

The feminine, robotic voice acknowledges my request before the TV in the center of the wall flicks on.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did you guys want the TV or the projector screen?"

From the corner of my eye, I catch Vincent smirking in my direction. He's trying to stifle the twitch of his lips, but I know he's enjoying me getting the upper hand on our friends.

Matthew tries to call out to Alexa, but she doesn't respond to him.

"It's specific to my voice," I inform the guys. "I guess I can pick the movie."

Winnifred's glare returns. "No, no. We should all get a chance to mimic your voice. Whoever gets Alexa to register them gets to pick the movie."

The other guys agree, though Vincent stays quiet, and I raise my hands in surrender. "Okay. Go for it."

There is no stopping these guys when it comes to picking the movie for movie night. They each take turns modulating their voice to try to trick Alexa into thinking I'm the one talking, and I chuckle at each failed attempt.

That is, until TJ manages to get the upper hand.

Alexa responds to him, and he throws his hands up in victory, mouthing a 'fuck yes.' "Alexa, turn on the projector." She follows his orders, so I click the panels back into place, not caring if the main TV stays on or not. If the screen goes out, I'll just get another; It's not worth interrupting TJ's victory. He continues with instructions, telling her to play a

movie we have all seen before — one about a rich guy and the TV-rated ‘kinky’ sex he has with some chick. They end up together at the end of the three-movie franchise, and it’s fine and all, but it’s one of those movies where if you’ve seen it once, you don’t need to see it again.

A chorus of groans sounds around the room, knocking TJ’s self-congratulatory grin from his face. It wavers, his blue eyes bouncing around our group.

“I was going to make it a drinking game,” he pouts, defeated.

Matthew eyes him warily, not quite sure if he wants to believe him or not, but always down for a good drinking game. “How?”

TJ perks right back up again. Those baby blues dance with excitement as he starts talking animatedly. “We all know this franchise is seriously cringe, so here’s what we do: every time you get secondhand embarrassment from the actors, you have to take a shot. It’s totally fun. That, or we can draw a mustache on the wall and whenever it lines up with one of their faces, we drink.” He shrugs like he only cares as long as there is alcohol involved.

“The secondhand embarrassment is actually pretty good, TJ,” Hunter pipes up. “Let’s do it. Caiden, you have alcohol, right?”

The attention turns to me, and I nod in response. I’m a grown man. Of course, I have alcohol. “I’ll go get it.”

“Vincent, go with him and make sure he doesn’t grab any fancy top-shelf stuff,” Matthew instructs with a sly smirk directed at us.

I try not to let my face flush. Matthew finding us tangled together on the ground earlier, Vincent’s lips against my cheek and our hands clasped tightly together, was new and dangerous territory. Of course, there were the few that did know about us — Paola, Gaia, Koda, and Theo — but adding another person, so close to us and Phoenix, is something I wasn’t prepared for.

He seemed to understand the severity of the situation, though, and doesn't seem too upset about it. Sending Vincent and me off together to my liquor room is a clever joke on his part, and I hope it means he really will be discreet with our secret.

Playing the part, Vincent lets out a huff before lugging his toned body off the loveseat recliners, trudging behind me as I leave the room.

"Should we really be doing our movie night after ... you know," I question as he follows me down the hall. My liquor storage is in a separate, temperature-controlled room attached to my kitchen. I don't get to use it often, but every now and then I bring a nice bottle to poker night with my friends. "Shouldn't we be talking to the cops and figuring out who was behind the attack? I saw Winn pick up some bullets or casings or whatever from some cars out there. Should we be analyzing them?"

Vincent darts ahead of me, opening the glass door to the chilled alcohol storage room with a gentleman's kindness. "Stop overthinking," he rumbles as I walk passed. My arm brushes his torso, and I have to keep myself from stopping to explore those muscles further. "The guys are all riled up from a good shoot out, so they appreciate having something to do instead of going home alone. We know who is behind the attacks already, and Phoenix is working to get them stopped. I'm not sure why they're still after you, but that's for Phoenix and the private investigator to figure out. The PI will talk to the cops for us when he has something. Winnifred did get some evidence, but there is no one at the lab to look at it right now. We're professionals, baby. Don't worry. We have it all under control." Vincent's hand slips to the small of my back, pressing me toward him until I am close enough for him to plant a reassuring kiss on my forehead.

Despite his encouraging words, I can't help but feel my heart sink into my stomach. I pull away from his embrace, walking down a row of bottles and fiddling with them. "I know why they're still coming after me," I confess quietly. I don't have the courage to meet his eyes as I own up to my

mistake. Phoenix had told me not to, but I did. It's my fault. "I had my legal team process an end-of-contract notification for Ibragimov."

"Caiden," Vincent sighs my name. When I finally get the guts to look over, I see his hand pressing against his brow, eyes downcast, just as I do when I'm stressed. He doesn't often use my full name, so I know he's disappointed in me when he does this time. "We told you to just wait."

"It was either renew their contract or cancel it."

"Or stall it," he snaps back. Dark eyes rise to meet my own, and I have to admit I am taken aback by the anger in his voice. It hits me that I put him, his team, and myself in danger by disobeying Phoenix, and the guilt wrecks me like a semi-truck. Vincent takes a second to breathe in deeply, calming his vexation. "I want you to cancel on Gaia. I do not want her in the states when the target on your head has perhaps doubled now. Pay for her to stay abroad longer or just let her down completely, I don't care. You aren't about to put my sister in as much danger as you have already put my friends, my brother, and me. Honestly, did you even think about your actions before going off on your own?"

I feel old Caiden rise up inside, my gaze hardening, my back straightening to the brink of discomfort. "Ibragimov may be trying to take me out illegally, but don't think for a second they won't take me down legally if they are given the chance. In the business world — in *my* world — there are bigger things at stake than just hitmen. If I had stalled, as you so freely put it, they could have found me in breach of our pre-arranged contract. In the fine print, it states that either party must present a request to end their partnership 90 days prior to the contract expiring, which happens to be 91 days from today. If I hadn't, Ibragimov could have sued me for everything I own — dragged my name through the gutters and cost me my entire business — all because you wanted me to stall. To avoid that, I would have had to renew their contract, but you and your brother don't want me to do that either. Quite frankly, neither do I. Illegal dealings are not something I take lightly. I've fired smaller clients for less. It is my business — *my*

company — and you don't get to tell me how to run it. Remind me, which of us actually graduated from business school? That's right, me. That's why I have an office higher than a college kid at a Saturday night party, and you are just hired muscle for a security company."

Before I can even begin to feel bad about talking to him that way, I'm shoved against the back wall of the liquor room, bottles clinking together at the impact. There's a strong hand around my throat, a tall body towering over my own, and raging ebony eyes honed in on mine. At first, I think Vincent is mad and that we might end up in a fistfight like the morning we came back from Italy, but I'm surprised as he shows off his perfect teeth, those slightly sharp canines glinting in a wicked smile in the LED lighting.

"You like my muscle." His voice is thick and low and coarse as he bends down to nip at my ear lobe, drawing a gasp from my lips. "You're the big, bad CEO, and I'm your very own personal bodyguard, instructed to be on your ass all day and all night. You listen to orders when I give them, just like earlier under the truck. You were such a good boy following my instructions without question." His voice gets steadily quieter, more seductive, until it's just a whisper breathed into my ear. "I'm bigger and stronger than you, Cay. I could take you down in a heartbeat. And you wouldn't have it any other way."

A needy groan over which I have no control escapes my lips. He knows exactly what to say, what to do, to play me like a fucking fiddle. I'm putty in his clutches, leaning further into the hold around my neck instead of away. Well, I'm gelatin in every way except the hard cock straining at my dark blue pajama pants.

"I love when you're so assertive, Cay." Vincent places open-mouthed kisses along my neck, letting his words linger in the air between us. He frees my throat from his hand, only to grab my chin and tilt it to give him more room to work his mouth across my skin. His free hand splays across my flat stomach before bunching the fabric into his fist as if I might disappear at any moment. I feel every line of his legs against

my own, his hip bones nudging mine with only our erections preventing them from pressing harder together. “But sometimes that brat-itude needs some humbling.”

With that, his hands and mouth vanish from my body so abruptly my head is left spinning. The sound of bottles sliding from the rack beside my ears makes my eyes — which I didn’t realize had fallen shut — snap open. Vincent pulls two basic bottles of vodka from the shelf on either side of my head, cocks a shit-eating grin at me, and leaves me stiff and panting in the chilly storage room.

When I get back to the movie room, the guys are all lounging around in their chosen seats with what looks to be every single one of my throw blankets strewn about. Matthew, Winnifred, Hunter, and TJ are all lined up on the second row with a vodka bottle and shot glasses on the floor in front of them, and Vincent is alone on the third row occupying the two-seater with his own bottle and two glasses.

TJ impersonates me again, telling Alexa to start the movie. I chime in about dimming the lights, and she obeys.

In the cover of darkness, broken only by the light from the projector, I pad quietly to the couch where Vincent is sprawled and fold myself onto the free space. Almost immediately, he throws his sock-clad feet into my lap without even looking my way, then pulls a blanket from the back of the couch to cover us.

It’s not even two seconds into the start of the movie when Hunter takes a shot. At everyone’s curious gaze, he just shrugs. “This whole movie is cringy. I need something to take the edge off before it even begins.”

That makes everyone laugh, and I’m hit yet again with the realization that these guys have become like family to me. Sure, I’m a few years older than them, but we all get along like we grew up together as kids.

Matthew may come across as a little ditzy at times, though he is anything but. He has trouble finding a place to stay and keeping it because he sends almost every cent of his check to his disabled mother, paying for her housing, nurses, groceries,

and medical bills. I never would have known if I hadn't walked in on him in the bathroom at work one day. On his cell phone, he'd been arguing with whom he later — and reluctantly — informed me was his landlord about being kicked out for late payments. It had taken some time to get him to open up, and Vincent had even come in to check on me before leaving us alone again, but eventually, Matthew spilled his guts, along with a few tears.

Like any good friend, I called up an old buddy of mine who owns some apartments near my office building. They aren't anything fancy, but it's pretty decent for New York. I got Matthew a good deal and even paid him out for a few months to help him get ahead.

I also left instructions on Emily's desk for her to look into Matthew's mother's situation and find her bank information. Once I have that, it will be easy for me to send her enough money to keep her comfortable.

I smile to myself as he clinks shot glasses with TJ and Hunter, then they knock them back like it's their lifeline.

TJ and Hunter are very similar, but also not. Where TJ is pale, blonde, and blue-eyed, Hunter is tan and brunette with chocolate eyes, but take those away, and they are basically the same person. Their facial structures, height, and build are so similar, they could be brothers. Both men are playful — hell, this whole group is immature off the clock — and have the same sense of humor as well.

Dad jokes. Dad jokes for days.

One major difference is how they dress outside of work. TJ isn't wearing pajamas even though everyone else is, but at least his hoodie and joggers look decent together. Hunter's camo shirt and plaid pants clash about as badly as any other outfit he wears.

My gaze flickers to Winnifred, his eyes drooping slightly. He is known to fall asleep first on movie nights, and the other guys have attempted to draw mustaches on his face when he does. His skin is so rich that the dark marker barely showed up, and one day he came to work with it still drawn on, just

faintly visible to those who were looking for it. I think Matthew said something about buying a white marker for next time, but hopefully, they'll leave the poor man alone. Winnifred is almost two years younger than me, having been coined the 'old man' of the group long before I joined in. Even so, you can still see the carefree differences between his relaxed, lighthearted personality versus my Business Caiden — or 'Old Caiden' as Vincent has dubbed it.

I'm barely aware of my actions as I slide my hands under the blanket and start massaging Vincent's socked feet. Ashlynn used to beg me to rub her feet every time we relaxed on the couch, but her white socks always had a dirty footprint smudged on the bottom. When I explained my aversion to touching the dirty fabric, she started taking the socks off. Although her feet were usually relatively clean, they were coated in some slick-feeling lotion she applied religiously all over her skin, and I couldn't get passed the oily feeling on my hands. Despite turning her down every time, Ashlynn would still ask at literally any opportunity.

With Vincent, I don't think about what dirt could be staining up his black socks. His feet do not smell (Ashlynn's did after she would wear close-toed heels), I know he keeps his toenails trimmed (and the tops of his toes waxed), and his heels are free of any callouses. I have no qualms about touching his feet like this.

At the way his eyes flutter low and his head tips back, I don't think he hates it either. I take in his profile, my gaze following the curve of his neck and the bump of his Adam's apple as he tilts back against the couch. His dark curls fall back slightly, longer than he likes. Maybe I'll suggest a haircut this weekend as mine is getting a little long, too.

I trace my eyes along his sharp chin, full and slightly parted lips, straight nose, and the gentle curve of the eyebrow I can see. His dark lashes lay low enough to almost brush his high cheekbones, and I remember the way they drift against my skin any time he deigns to darken the love bites along my collarbones and shoulders.

I'd have to be crazy and blind to not have fallen in love with Vincent.

Michele can go fuck himself. Anyone who would hurt the man in front of me deserves to miss out on love for the rest of their life.

Vincent may put on a hard exterior, but he has the absolute biggest heart I've ever had the pleasure of getting to know and love.

His dark eyes flicker over to me, and he gives me a lazy smile. "I texted my sister," he whispers. "I told her to use that card you gave her and go anywhere in the world as long as it isn't New York. I explained the danger, and she agreed to come once we are sure you're not going to be targeted anymore."

I nod, not quite able to apologize for the actions I took regarding the contract. It was the right — and most legal — thing to do.

He moves slightly until his legs are straight and his back is against the armrest. Now, he is facing me more than the TV in front of us. "Turn," he mouths silently to me, spinning his finger in the air in a gesture that helps explain his word. I obey, shifting my body against the armrest like he is, and draw my legs from the extended lower half of the couch onto the cushion where we are sitting. Vincent grabs the bottom hem of my pajamas to maneuver my legs straight out into his lap. His legs are forced between mine, his feet resting in my lap, as mine stretch out on either side of him.

Fingers dance around my ankles a moment before my socks are ripped from my feet. Tossing them off the side of the couch, Vincent starts massaging my feet and lower legs with strong hands.

Stifling a groan of pleasure, I feel my head tip back much like his did earlier. His large hands kneading into my muscle is absolute ecstasy. A moan sounds through the room from the movie, and three shot glasses fill, tip, then slam back onto the ground. All the guys chuckle at the poorly-acted sex scene playing on the screen.

“Take a shot,” Vincent commands, so quietly I almost miss the words. The guys in front of us definitely can’t hear him. I lean to the floor in front of our couch and pour two shots of the cheapest vodka I’ve bought since commandeering my company. When I raise back up, offering one to Vincent, he shakes his head. “For you.”

I shrug, downing one shot, then the other. The inexpensive alcohol burns as it slides down my throat, and the buzz hits quickly. Just as a goofy smile graces my lips in Vincent’s direction, something traces along my crotch, right over my dick.

My eyes narrow on Vincent who watches me with a shit-eating smirk. He brings one finger to his lips in a shushing gesture, his foot sliding more firmly against my soft dick. Even as I realize what he is doing, I feel a twitch in my pants.

Damn him. He knows I get extra horny when alcohol is involved.

Whiskey dick? Not a word in my vocabulary.

Feet aren’t my thing, but as I focus on the pleasure being directed at my increasing erection under the blanket, I forget about the method entirely. All I know is that my cock is hardening, being caressed painfully slow and erotic. The large projector screen has an actor pounding hard into an actress, her breasts exposed and peaked, and our friends are six feet away and oblivious, though any second one of them could turn around and find us in this compromising position.

It’s hot.

Vincent continues to stroke me over my pants, gradually moving harder and quicker along my full erection until he suddenly stops. My heavy-lidded eyes snap open, looking from the ending explicit scene on the TV to Vincent. Is he mad I was watching the movie instead of him?

My worry only fills me for a moment before Vincent goes back to innocently massaging my feet and legs, turning his head to face the movie. I adjust myself to try and relieve my aching dick, but Vincent’s nails dig into my calves. I flinch

mostly from surprise, the sting of his grip not actually bothering me. When my eyes land on his again, I see him shaking his head.

“Just wait,” he murmurs, and then I know.

Excitement courses through my veins, prompting my dick to stay hard, as I realize what he is doing. He’s not upset I was watching the scene, he’s waiting for another one. Whether he purposefully meant to edge me or not, he did, and I find myself watching the movie intently, waiting for any sign of another heated moment so I can chase my own relief.

I let Vincent tease and edge me throughout the whole movie, never getting quite to climax, although I’m close each time. When it’s over, TJ slurs for Alexa to play the next, and they continue their game as Vincent and I continue ours. In between each erotic session, Vincent calmly rubs my feet and legs, a delicious mixture of firm pressure from his hands and scrape of his nails, and I slide his socks off to return the favor as well. He has my legs forced to his sides, or else I would return the favor to his dick as well.

He seems content just to watch though.

Halfway through the second movie, Vincent gets up to use the bathroom. When he returns, he’s carrying a glass full of ice and water, which he sets on the ground in front of the couch. None of the guys in front of us turn their heads, probably too drunk and into the movie to care, and Vincent rips the blanket off of me before climbing in between my legs.

He settles against me, his shoulder on my chest with his front facing the movie. It seems like an innocent gesture as he covers us with the blanket again, though I know it is anything but. In this position, he can reach my aching dick all too easily.

And Vincent does.

His actions are harmless at first, slipping under my shirt to drag his fingers lightly along my torso and nipples, never drifting south until the next sex scene. When it starts, he teases over my pants for a minute, then slips inside easily.

I have to stifle my groan by placing my hand over my mouth as he wraps his large palm around my base. He circles my shaft with his fingers, squeezing firmly before corkscrewing his hand slightly as he tugs all the way up to the tip. His thumb brushes over the precome leaking at the top, using it to moisten his next descent down my rock-hard length.

His actions are painfully slow, and I find myself trying to jerk my hips up to meet his hand faster. Vincent uses his body to keep me pinned, though, so I have to sit here and take the torture.

When the scene is over, Vincent swipes his thumb over my tip one last time to collect the tangy liquid there, then pulls his hand from my clothes as I expected he would. He sucks his thumb into his mouth, letting out a pleased hum as he tastes me on his tongue. The almost inaudible sound reverts from his chest against me, and my cock pulses with need.

“Vinz,” I groan breathily in his ear. I take his earring into my mouth, flicking it with my tongue and pulling on it with my teeth until I feel him shudder. “You’re such a fucking tease,” I murmur with my mouth against the soft skin of his ear.

14 Goddamn Lighthouse

Vincent Bernardi

“You wouldn’t have it any other way,” I respond cheekily to Caiden calling me a tease.

The second movie starts and I wait patiently for my next moment to hand-fuck Caiden. I can’t seem to get enough of his cock — like warm, smooth velvet over hard diamond. He feels amazing pressed against my body and falling apart under my hand, and he knows just the right way to tug at my piercing to give me a delicious sting. I’ve purposefully been changing the earring often to keep it from healing too quickly so the dull pinch of Caiden’s teeth on it can last longer. Once this piercing is fully healed, I’ll probably get a new one for him to play with.

Our friends are just a row away, unaware of Caiden and me and our hands. They’re probably too drunk or asleep to notice, but the thrill is still there. I know Caiden is aware of it, as am I, and it spurs us further and further. Is it messed up? Maybe. Do I care? No.

My next opportunity arrives as the actor and actress go at it again, and I leisurely dip down to scoop an ice cube from my glass. It’s partially melted and softened now, perfect for what I have in mind. Caiden is practically trembling with anticipation under me, but he hasn’t seen what I have palmed in my hand.

Just wait, baby.

With the blanket still covering us, I use my free hand to tug the waistband of his pants down far enough to free his heavily-edged cock, then give no warning as I press the ice cube between his shaft and my palm.

He makes a choked noise for the briefest of moments before slamming his hand over his mouth. I feel my teeth bare themselves in a wicked grin as I watch him writhe beneath me.

Caiden's eyes are screwed shut, his soft brown hair messy as he pants heavily as quietly as he can manage. His heart thrums hard against me, his breathing making my body rise and fall with each quick inhale and exhale. I watch in awe as his jaw drops. Those pink lips spread in delicious ecstasy, and I see hints of his straight, white teeth peeking from behind them.

I long for him to bite me with those teeth or to shove my own cock between those seductive lips and into the heat of his mouth.

But that's for another time.

Now, I firmly jack off Caiden's cock with the ice cube lubricating my way. I make sure to move it around to keep him from becoming overstimulated by the cold, and he responds to each twist of my hand perfectly. His dick fights to stay erect against the cold, and he alternates between breathlessness, panting, and stifling whimpers coming from his gaping mouth. One moment, he winces while thrusting deeper into my fist. The next, he's biting the meat of his finger to hold back moans.

The perfectly composed CEO is falling apart under my hands, and neither of us would have it any other way.

Tilting my head, I nibble on his neck, feeling his pulse pounding beneath his skin. My free hand slides down, groping his balls, then moves further to cup them and apply pressure to the spot just behind. Here, I massage his prostate from the outside, something he seems to love.

"Fuck me with your fingers," he growls in a gruff breath into my ear. I wanted this to be completely under my control, but the desperation in his voice entices me to do as he says. With the ice melted, my hand is left wet, so I switch it with my dry one to press a cool, damp finger at his entrance. He bucks his hips up, trying to give me as much room as I need.

I let my hand tug his cock distractingly enough that my one finger slips easily into his hole. Once in, I massage his sweet spot while moving in time with my hand jacking him off. When I know he's enjoying this as much as I am, I tentatively slip in another finger.

Two pumps and more caresses to his prostate, Caiden is spilling over my hand, my arm, his shirt, the blanket, my shirt, his pants, my pants ... Fuck, his cum is everywhere and it fills the tiny space between us with a warm, piquant scent that I can't get enough of.

I feel Caiden quivering beneath me, his heart thudding against me, and I know I've satisfied him more than he expected. He shakily reaches for my waistband, but I swat him away. Tonight is just for him.

“What are you doing?” Caiden’s sleepy voice, deep and gravelly, interrupts my recall of last night, and I subtly try to adjust the hard-on in my jeans to little avail. I’m leaning over the piano, tuning it with the tool I went out and bought this morning after the guys left. Caiden slept through all of them waking up, already acting rambunctious until I ended up kicking them out.

I hated not sleeping beside Caiden on the couch, but it was a necessary evil as Winnifred is an early riser.

“Tuning the piano,” I reply, pressing a key and turning the tool until it plays the right pitch. “I bought you breakfast.”

Sleepy Caiden rubs his eyes against the sun shining in the large living room windows, and the bottom of his shirt rides up to expose the skin above his waistband. My eyebrows shoot up when I realize he is still covered in his release from last night, looking like he has no intention of showering before devouring the pastries waiting on the kitchen island.

He shuffles, bare feet sliding across the floor listlessly, into the kitchen and peers inside the white paper bag. Smiling lazily, he pulls out a jelly-filled donut covered in powdered sugar. When he takes a big bite into it, the white powder goes everywhere and jelly spills from the side of his mouth and over his fingers. Caiden moans loudly, completely ignoring the sticky jelly and powdered sugar along his lips.

I pause from my tuning, staring at him. “Who are you and what have you done with my Caiden?”

He attempts a glare, but only ends up looking adorable with his hair all wild around his head. “If you don’t like it, come lick it off.”

Heeding his advice, I abandon my task and stalk toward him. I unabashedly swipe my tongue along his lips and around his mouth, lapping up every bit of mess except the dried cum on his clothes. “Mmm, blueberry. I’d lick the rest of your mess, but it’s old and dried now. We can start fresh, though.”

My words seem to confuse him, so I flick my gaze down to the dried white smudges along his shirt and pants. His eyes widen in realization, and I see my Caiden come back to me. Taking the donut from his hands, I lick his fingers clean, then softly slap his ass as I set the pastry on the counter. “Go shower, baby. The donuts will be here when you get back.”

Caiden rushes off to shower before an anxiety attack can hit, and I shake my head while checking out his backside as he leaves. This man never ceases to surprise me, but ultimately, he always reverts back to his particulars.

Once he’s disappeared into his room, I turn back to the piano, but my phone rings before I can tune more than two keys. I pull out the ringing device and check the caller ID, frowning as I see who is calling me. It might be important, though, so I answer it anyway.

“Hello?”

“Good morning,” Zev’s deep voice purrs across the line. At one point in my life, I was very attracted to the way his voice used to send chills down my spine or the way he plays dangerously with fire. The summer I spent in LA, we would lay in his bed, taking turns with a cigarette, and whoever got the last drag had the pleasure of putting the cancer stick out against the other’s flesh. We would chain smoke and fuck in bed all day, then his boyfriend, Ben, would join us after work for a few hours until Zev left, then it would be Ben and me fucking until Zev got home the next morning.

That summer in LA was mind-blowing, and they offered me a place in their relationship at the end of it. I considered joining for some time. I liked both of them and enjoyed

fucking them day and night, but I started to fall really far into the affair. I lived more for sex with them than I did for food or water or sleep. Sure, I was the most fit I've ever been in my life, but I wasn't living for myself while being with someone — I was living *for* them instead. When they were gone, I didn't know what to do with myself. I spent time at Ben's BDSM club learning a lot of new tips and tricks to use in bed, but I was chasing something I couldn't have.

Those two men are breathtaking and terrifying, but they are polyamorous and open. A relationship with them would mean sharing them with whoever else they wanted — including women — and I didn't think I would be able to shake the jealousy or insecurity.

We were better as fuck buddies.

And that's how it stayed. We would link up anytime we happened to be in the same city and remained friends who sometimes called or chatted about life. It was better that way.

Which is why I am concerned about this call. If this is anything like his calls in the past, he wants to figure out when we can meet up and fuck. Any other time, I would be all for it, but not after Caiden. He's ruined me for anyone else.

Ben and Zev may be a tsunami of erotic unknowns that pulled me in deeper and deeper, but Caiden is a goddamn lighthouse calling me home.

I lean against the piano, looking out of the big window and wondering if I'm about to have to turn down a hook-up with Zev. I'll do it in a heartbeat, but it will still sting for us both. "Good morning, Zev. To what do I owe this pleasure?" I know he's in town this weekend, and I'll see him tonight at the Santiago's family dinner. I hope this isn't a booty call beforehand.

One, because of Caiden.

Two, because it usually ends with the Santiago's yard on fire, and Mr. Santiago loves his grass un-singed.

"Not good news, handsome," Zev drawls, using his nickname for me. "Bennie and I have this girl now —

Rosemary — in our relationship, and it's still pretty new. While we explore if we'll all work out together, Ben and I are not partaking in any *love* outside of Rosemary right now. I love it when you fuck me, handsome, but I'm afraid this visit will lack that luster."

Though I'm secretly grateful, I still play my part with Zev. He doesn't know I'm unavailable, and if I tell him, he'll tell Ben. Ben will tell his brother, and Adam will tell Phoenix. Then, Phoenix will be ever more up my ass about who I am fraternizing with. "You have a wonderful way with words, Zev. How could I even be mad when you talk about how much you love me fucking you? I suppose I can keep my hands to myself this evening. If I must." I also know if I tell him I'm seeing someone, he'll expect me to bring said person this evening. Zev likes to do his own background checks on those close to people he loves.

"I'll make it up to you one day," he promises. "I have this new mini torch and some thick rope I've been *dying* to tie someone up with just to burn it off. You know Ben isn't a fan of the fire, and Rosemary hasn't ventured to try it, yet. Fuck, closed relationships are not for me. Hopefully, we can get Rosemary comfortable soon, and I'll come back for a personal visit."

I imagine the picture his words are painting, but it's Caiden burning that thick rope bound between my hand and across my chest, or me doing it to him, and I shudder. "Fuck, that sounds nice," I mutter huskily, thinking of my boyfriend and a goddamn mini torch.

For some reason, my eyes flicker from the view of New York toward Caiden's room, and I straighten up as I see him standing in the doorway, staring at me. He's close enough that I know he has heard my entire half of the conversation, which is so not good.

"I gotta go, Zev. We'll catch up tonight."

"Okay. Later, handsome."

Gaze still locked on Caiden, I lower my phone and end the call, sliding it into my back pocket. I extend my hands as if

I'm trying to calm a wild animal and slide on foot forward, wanting to be close to him when I explain this.

Caiden spooks, turning tail and slamming the bedroom door with a click of the lock.

“*Cazzo*,” I hiss, running to the door. “Cay, let me in!” I pound on the wood to no avail. Unluckily for Caiden, I'm not a patient man. “Fuck it.”

With a heave of my shoulder, I break through the ridiculously unsafe lock, thankful I haven't gotten around to reinforcing it since it's on the inside of the apartment and therefore hasn't been a priority while I'm staying literally in the same room.

I round the bed to see him sitting on a stool in the dark closet. “We're both grown-ass men, Caiden. Let me explain like an adult before you act like a child.”

“Fuck you.”

“Cay, baby,” I step into the darkness. “Please.”

Caiden waves his hand in the air with a wild gesture. “Explain how you just told another man how you can keep your hands to yourself if you must, or how you two were talking about how much he loves fucking you.”

“*Being* fucked by me,” I quickly correct. “You're the only person who makes love to me, Cay.” Dropping to my knees in front of him, I feel the wetness in my eyes as I practically beg him to hear me out. I've never been much of a crier, but then, I've never felt so deeply for someone before. I'd take being poisoned, shot, hit by a car, or stabbed with gratitude if it meant Caiden was safe, knowing he loves me and I love him. He *has* to hear me out about this because I won't let him get hurt — by me or anyone else. “Please trust me enough to let me explain.”

A moment of silence except for sniffles, though I don't know if they are his or mine, then he gestures in a more controlled way than earlier for me to go ahead with my explanation.

I let out a heavy sigh, grateful. “Fuck, okay. Zev called me. I thought it was going to be a booty call, and I was wondering how to turn him down in a way he wouldn’t question me where Phoenix could hear about it tonight. Instead, he told me about their new girl and said they aren’t seeing other people right now, so this trip won’t result in a hookup. I played my part and told him I won’t be upset and I will keep my hands to myself. I had to make it flirty, or he would have known something else was up.”

“Fuck, that sounds nice?” He questions my words reluctantly as if he doesn’t want to know the answer.

I place my hands on his thighs, squeezing desperately and staring into his eyes like they’re my lifeline. “He told me about this thick rope he bought, wanting to tie someone up in it and then burn it off. Ben and their new girl do not like fire, but he knows I do, so he was mentioning it to me as an ‘in the future’ kind of thing.” I see his mouth open to interrupt, but I push forward. “*Let me finish.* The whole time he was talking about it, I was imagining *you* burning that rope off me. I swear to you, Cay. I promise. My response was only believable because I was thinking about you.”

“You want me to burn some rope off of you?”

Taking his hand, I ease his fingers out of their clenched fist before resting it flat against my chest, right in the center so he can feel how steady my heart is, how sure I am. “I want you to make love to me for as long as you’ll have me.”

“You only want Zev to do the rope.”

“Caiden!” I huff in exasperation, throwing my hands into the air. “Forget the rope! Would I rather go to the carnival or stay at home and watch movies? It doesn’t matter, as long as I’m with you. No one else.” I try to use a not-sex-related example, and it seems to get the point across because Caiden snuffles, his eyes drifting from mine as if the weight of my gaze is too much.

“Do you promise?”

I take his hands and bring his knuckles to my wrist, kissing them sincerely. “I fucking swear on every fiber of my being. I’ll do anything for you, Cay. Please, believe me.”

He nods. “I believe you. I’m sorry. I should have let you explain.”

“I should have just told him I’m committed to someone. To hell with my brother.”

Caiden’s still wearing his dirty pajamas, and he looks down at them in disgust. “God, I look absolutely repulsive. I probably have the worst morning breath, too. Why are you even looking at me right now?”

Chuckling, I kiss his nose, his cheeks, his chin, his forehead, and finally his lips. “Because I love you, Cay. Dried cum clothes or not.”

He blushes. “Go away. Let me shower and wallow in peace. I need to wake up and get a clear head and stop acting like a teenager. I think you and your friends are rubbing off on me.”

“Only I am rubbing one off on you,” I rumble lowly as a joke.

To my delight, Caiden reddens more. “I’m going to shower,” he says with finality, standing. He pauses at the doorway, turning back to me. “Did you say you’re tuning my piano?”

I nod.

“I could have called someone in to do it.”

“It’s no problem,” I shrug. “I learned how to tune a piano as a kid, so it’s pretty easy for me.”

Caiden smiles fondly. “I want to hear about little Vincenzo learning to tune and play the piano.”

I love the way he pronounces my birth name properly, none of the American twang added in which muddles it unrecognizably. “Come back before I’m done, and I’ll tell you.”

He scurries off, and I'm left alone in a dark closet chuckling after him. It hits me suddenly that I could have fucked this all up just now by not coming clean to the people I know about being in a relationship.

It hurts because I've never had to hide myself or my relationships except for the time I was with Michele. It feels so wrong, so toxic, that I worry for a moment if we're heading in that bad direction.

I try to calm myself, reassuring myself that Caiden is, in fact, out to five people now — Matthew, Theo, Ma, Gaia, and me. Maybe he'll slowly start opening up a little more.

Theo did mention pushing where I can and supporting where I can't, so that's what I decide to do. Tonight at dinner, I'll tell my brother — and my friends who are invited as security by Phoenix — I am seeing someone. I won't give them details, but it might help push Caiden in the right direction to see them be supportive.

I take my time tuning the piano, wanting to make sure Caiden has plenty of time to shower — thrice. As I do, I'm interrupted by my phone again. It dings with a Snapchat notification, and my heart stutters as I wonder if Caiden has sent me our daily streak from the bathroom. I'd definitely have to join him if that is the case.

Unfortunately, it isn't.

Snapchat informs me that I've been added to a conversation, and the occupants of it are all typing furiously, filling up the chat.

Bad Bitches

Tessa

Please tell me we are linking up at the dinner tonight? I can't stand another minute with Phoenix!

Alexandria

Don't tell me you're tired of all the hate sex you two are having

Koda

At least you all are getting sex.

Tessa

**Phoenix can give great head, but he is too damn clingy!
Some random people start trying to kill me and suddenly I
can't leave a house without a guard!**

The dick is good, though

Alexandria

Same

Koda

Same (when I can get it)

Me

Why the fuck am I here?

Tessa

**I've seen the dick you're getting. You definitely belong
in this group.**

Me

Not the point!

Koda

So, we all know about Caiden's dick now?

Alexandria

Caiden?????

Tessa

CAIDEN?! The homophobe?

Koda

He isn't a homophobe

I guess we didn't all know about Caiden's dick. What dick was Tessa talking about, Vince?

Tessa

Was that Caiden's dick? Damn, I thought he was a cocky mother fucker. Turns out he is very *cocky* ;)

Me

Koda, how the fuck do you know and why are you telling everyone??

Koda

Who do you think taught Caiden to give a blow job? He has tried it, right?

Tessa

That's hot.

You take his booty virginity, yet?

Alexandria

Do the guys know...?

Koda

NO!

Alexandria

Um... Jax knows now

He saw my phone

Me

Oh my god, all of you stop

This is bad

This is very bad

Caiden is not out yet!

Certainly not to his friends!

AND PHOENIX CANNOT FIND OUT!

Tessa

Relax, I won't tell Fe Fe

Koda

Obviously I won't

I just ... thought that's what we were talking about this time

I promise I won't tell

Not that Adam would care

You guys know Ben and Zev?

Crazy situation ... Can't say I wouldn't get in that sandwich if I wasn't already taken

Tessa

Fucking same

Trying to convince Fe Fe for a foursome

Alexandria

Saaaame

Also I won't tell anyone else. Jax was an accident.

Me

I swear to god if any of you blab about Caiden or to Caiden or he gets spooked in any way, I will burn your house down

Koda

Okay

Alexandria

Okay

Tessa

Okie dokie

Me

I want out of this group chat

Koda

Nooooooooo!

Tessa

I was being serious when I said we are hanging out tonight. I'm thinking a drinking game

Koda

I'm pregnant, but you all have fun

Alexandria

Do you girls like poker?

Me

I'm not a girl.

Tessa

Shut up, bitch :)

Koda

I can bring all of the chips and cards from Adam's house and we can run our own game of poker!

Tessa

Let's do it!

Alexandria

Whooo!

Me

Yeah, okay

But I do have to talk shop with my brother at some point, and my other friends will be there working security, so I'll probably be in and out

Tessa

Laaaaaaaame

15 You never caught feelings?

Caiden Augustus

“When I was twelve,” Vincent begins, pressing high A on the piano before tuning it with the tool in his hand. “I would mow lawns for money. We were not well off at all, and sometimes Ma would skip dinner so my brothers and I could have full stomachs. So, I started up my own little freelance and got a few regular customers. One was an elderly lady who lived a few blocks away. She would always invite me inside after and give me a glass of fresh lemonade to cool down. I noticed she had a piano, but when I pressed the keys, they didn’t sound right. She told me it wasn’t in tune, but she had one of these,” he waves the tool he’s been using in the air between us. It looks similar to a socket wrench and seems to basically do the same function as one. “And said if I tune the thing, I can play it. I spent some of the money I’d earned on a tutorial book on tuning, brought it with me the next week, and tuned that piano to perfection. She came in as I was finishing up and asked how I pitched the notes correctly without a tuning device — the one that plays the note for you to match — and I just shrugged because I didn’t honestly know how I knew when it was on pitch. Apparently, I’m really good at hearing the notes. She tried to teach me how to read the sheet music, but I couldn’t get it unless I listened to the song first. I’m self-taught, can’t read music, and I have no idea what the names of any of these notes are.”

He hits the next key and tunes it. When he’s ready for the next one, my hand is already there. “High C,” I offer, tapping the key and letting the note ring out. He corrects the pitch, and we move on to the next one, working as a team as I explain which note each ivory key stands for.

I fucking reached out and started pressing these keys before I realized what I was doing. I have to stave off the cotton in my mouth and the dread that threatens to creep up with every new note.

“My parents put me in piano lessons when I was five,” I tell him. My mouth dries out, unable to hold it back anymore as I think of telling him about Caroline, my dead sister. He doesn’t know that night in his parent’s house was the first time I’d played piano since she died — doesn’t know how much it means for me to even be touching these damned keys right now.

Not after what I did.

Caroline died eight years ago, with her last dying wish being that I played her favorite song at her funeral.

I didn’t go to the funeral. I got drunk out of my ever-loving mind and missed the entire fucking ceremony.

I didn’t touch a piano again. Not until Vincent.

I don’t tell him that, though. I’m too fucking ashamed.

“My piano teacher would pop my knuckles with a ruler when I messed up,” I say in place of the words weighing heavy on my heart. “They would be bruised and swollen, so I’d play even worse until the lesson was over. My parents didn’t care. They said it was making me a stronger player. I guess that’s true because I did get a scholarship with it, but I didn’t keep it. I stopped playing for a while, which I guess is why this piano went so long without some maintenance. Thank you for tuning it.”

He finishes the last note, then starts playing a few scales to make sure everything is in order. “Sound good?”

“Perfect.”

Vincent smiles, those dark eyes holding so much of the affection he reserves only for me, and I feel as if my heart might seize up. Before we got to know each other, I only saw Vincent from afar, always wearing a scowl and always mute unless directly spoken to. Now, he shares intimate and personal moments with me — *only* me — and he looks at me like *that*. Like he wouldn’t be anywhere else in the entire world for any reason. And I feel the exact same way.

“Play something for me.” The words tumble from my mouth before I have too much time to think about them, but

Vincent doesn't seem to mind. His smile stays as he sits along the piano bench, positioning his fingers over the ivories in a way that seems natural and comfortable, not permanently engrained by ruler slaps to the knuckles. His hands can make mistakes, and it will be okay. They can fumble a melody or miss a key change without repercussions. I look at his hands on the piano and see exactly what I never had. Freedom. "Sing for me," I ask in a whisper.

Obedying, Vincent lets his hands take over, pressing the keys gently as his deep voice billows softly through my echoing living room with lyrics I don't recognize as they are in his native language. Italian is difficult enough to understand when speaking, much less when the words are sung in a melody.

He coos a few 'oh's in a way that has my jaw dropping. Between his velvety low voice and how he riffs between notes, I'm completely enraptured by him as he continues singing the ballad.

His voice goes higher than I've ever heard it, still smooth but with some gravel now, too. Vincent belts the lyrics out as if they mean everything to him.

He keeps singing and playing across the piano keys as if the whole world has fallen away. It's just Vincent and this grand piano as he bellows a song that takes over him completely until he drifts off into silence, the notes gently fading away.

"Does that song mean something to you?"

"At one point it did," Vincent replies, shrugging. "I used to relate to it after the Michele fiasco, but now not even the song holds any power over me. It's just a distant memory."

I check the time on my watch, one with a dark blue band and gold face which matches the suit I'm wearing. It's just after noon, and dinner isn't for a few hours yet. "Do you want to get some lunch? I've been meaning to take you to this nice Italian restaurant I sponsor. The food is wonderful."

Vincent gives me a skeptical side-eye. “I am going to complain about every little thing that is wrong.”

“*I know*,” I chuckle. “That’s why I want to take you. I love when you put your thumb to your fingers and shake your hand like the grumpy little Italian you are.” I imitate the gesture I’m talking about before ruffling his hair at the dramatized anger on his face.

He rolls his eyes, but agrees to come as long as he can complain about whatever he wants.

“Just be a little nice,” I ask of him on our way to the restaurant. Thankfully, he doesn’t mind taking the SUV every now and then, despite his love for the motorcycle. I can’t handle the bike every single day. “Each plate here costs about one hundred dollars, so I want to enjoy the food without there being spit in it *and* get my money’s worth without them kicking us out.”

“Cay, that’s too much!” Vincent looks over at me sharply from the driver’s seat, ignoring the road completely.

“Babe, the road!”

He returns his attention to the street ahead of us, pulling into the restaurant’s private parking lot. There’s valet, but Vincent bypasses them with a flash of his *Bernardi Security* badge. Apparently, their reputation precedes them because the valet doesn’t even ask for payment for the parking. “I’ll share a plate with you. I can’t justify you spending that much money for me to hate the food.”

Reaching over, I pull his hand away from the steering wheel. He’s forced to back into the parking spot with only one hand, but he doesn’t seem to mind as I tangle my fingers with his. “I asked you on this date, so I’m paying for it. Trust me, your sister is spending a lot more on alcohol and massages in the Bahamas right now. This lunch is not going to break me.”

Vincent parks and winces at my words. “Is Gaia going to break you?”

“Babe,” I give him a ‘*seriously*’ look. “I just bought an overseas company for double what it’s worth because the

owner didn't want to sell. And I still have enough money to buy every resort Gaia has booked up for the next week. You hooked yourself a big fish, Vinz. Own it."

Opening the door, I slide out and wait for Vincent to meet me around my side of the car. "This is a date?" He questions.

I look around the half-full parking lot, considering if there will be a lot of people here on a Saturday at lunch. It doesn't appear like anyone who is anyone is inside as there are no paparazzi waiting with big cameras and microphones. Feeling relatively confident, I grasp Vincent's hand again. "This is a date" I confirm.

Although I squeeze his hand as if it's a lifeline, I walk confidently to the front of the restaurant and even hold the door open for Vincent. He grumbles something about that being his job, but I just roll my eyes.

"Caiden Augustus," I tell the hostess, who checks the benefactor list. Only those who have contributed to the restaurant in some way are allowed to dine here, but they can bring anyone with them when they do. It's a good way to keep money coming in for the owner, and there isn't usually a wait as the list is pretty exclusive. "For two," I say as she confirms I'm on the list, and I clutch Vincent tighter if possible. He gives me a reassuring squeeze in response.

The hostess grabs two thin black books and flicks her long dark hair behind her back. She's conventionally pretty, but I find myself uninterested in her curves or full backside as we follow her to a table on the far side of the restaurant. The windows have opaque shades drawn over them to block out most of the sun, and the small chandeliers centered over each table are mostly for mood rather than light. Candles flicker around the room in various places, giving off a warm glow. "Here you go, Mr. Augustus. You two are so adorable together. I'll have to tell my girlfriend I had my first LGBTQ customers today. She said the rich around here never show their queer relationships in public. I can't wait to tell her how wrong she is." She sets the leather-covered menus down on either side of the table before disappearing with a promise that the server will be right over.

Instead of sitting on the other side of the table, Vincent settles on my right and slides his menu over without a care. Sure, we should sit across from each other because that's what you do at a nice restaurant like this, but I find myself not caring at all about what is proper when Vincent has anything to do with it. I'm glad he is near me. "You're going to have to help me," I sigh in defeat.

Vincent, studying the menu intently, hums without looking up. "Hm?"

"LGB ... what? And queer — is that not offensive?"

His eyes flicker up to meet mine. "You want to know about gay terms?"

I nod.

The server arrives before he can say anything else, and I order us a sweet and bubbly white wine I know he will like. It's sold by the bottle, though I'm sure we won't drink that much. One of us has to drive out of here after all.

"Choose your lunch, and then I'll explain," he commands, and I listen without question.

My eyes scan over the pages in my hands until I come across the tasting menu. It has a wide variety of food to offer, and it all seems authentic.

I don't donate to this place for nothing.

"Let's do the tasting menu," I suggest, flipping to the correct section in his book to show him. "It's for the whole table and has all of these included." My finger slides over the seven items listed — an appetizer, four entrees, and two desserts.

"Cay, that is \$199 per person." He reads from the menu.

"That's not bad for seven items," I muse. "Let's do it." I glance up and lock eyes with the server as he returns with the wine I ordered. He looks to be Vincent's age, and can't seem to keep his eyes off my date even as he struggles to open the wine bottle. "If you stopped gawking at my boyfriend for two seconds, you would probably be able to open that bottle."

Unless you are simply incompetent no matter where your attention is,” I snap at the waiter. If I am going to spend this much money, my service better be su-fucking-perb.

Beside me, Vincent chuckles and leans over to kiss the corner of my scowling mouth. At the same time, he retrieves the wine bottle from the waiter before opening it himself and filling our glasses. “We’re going to do the tasting menu,” he says without looking up at the now red-faced waiter. The kid scurries off, and Vincent shakes his head at my brash attitude. “And you were worried about *me* being the reason there is spit in our food. I should have known I can’t take you anywhere.”

I narrow my gaze at him. “He was devouring you with his eyes.”

“Like you do all the time?” He jests. I give a fake pout, but he kisses my jutted lip, then the tip of my nose. I can’t help it as my eyes search over the interior of the restaurant, making sure no one is staring at us. “I like when you tell people I’m your boyfriend.”

“I like saying you’re my boyfriend.”

“You do?”

“Of course.”

Vincent smiles at me, then spends the rest of lunch explaining different terms within the gay community — what to say and what not to say. He explains the different pride flags and the parades and parties for pride month in June, and I try to soak it all up. I’m not sure if I’ll ever use the terms or participate in public events, but Vincent continues on and on even after our food arrives. I enjoy hearing that low baritone voice of his, no matter what he’s talking about. Since knowing him for the last five or so years, his time as my bodyguard has been the most I’ve ever heard him speak, and I bask in the smooth, velvety tone. He could read me bedtime stories every night with a voice like that, and I wouldn’t complain.

Of course, Vincent has some critiques for the food, but I can tell he is actually impressed, just a little, under all that Italian attitude.

I start to wonder what it would be like if I told my friends I'm in a relationship, but I can already hear the questions they would ask. First, they would hound me about what girl it is. If I told them it was a man, they would have a shit-ton of questions about my sexuality I don't even know how to answer myself as I don't know what it is yet. Finally, they'd ask who and if it slipped that I'm fucking Phoenix's brother ... I might end up at the bottom of the East River courtesy of my best friend/boyfriend's brother.

I can't say I like the fact that everyone believes Vincent is single right now, especially Zev. Vincent explained there is nothing going on between Zev and him, but I can't help my insecurity. As long as our relationship is hidden, I think the unease will remain.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to tell my friends the truth — as long as Phoenix wouldn't kill me — but it's not just them. The media has a tendency to follow me around at times, like earlier this week when I went for a walk to the coffee shop around the corner. A random paparazzi came out of nowhere asking me why my pictures had been deleted from Ashlynn's Instagram. My guards ended up running him off, but a picture of me, Vincent, and Winnifred outside the shop still appeared in a section of the newspaper and online with a headline about how I need caffeine because of a difficult breakup.

It's ridiculous, the way they follow me around and judge different aspects of my life when they need a column filled. It happens a little too often for my liking considering my occupation is not as lucrative as some of the others here in New York, but between the GQ article and being listed as an attractive eligible bachelor, the paparazzi stays on me quite a bit at times. And if they run an article about my sexuality and dating preferences, my parents and business partners are bound to see it. I'll lose clients and my family will disown me even more than they already have. I'll be alone.

I have to keep Vincent a secret.

After stuffing our faces with savory food at the Italian restaurant, we share the two desserts with a single spoon, then

make our way back to my apartment in a flurry of roaming hands.

At the apartment, we lose ourselves sweetly in each other, rolling around in my sheets until we are connected in the most intimate way possible. I pour every feeling I wish I could say into our movements, and Vincent meets me thrust for thrust, love for love. As we try to catch our breaths, Vincent opens his Snapchat and we send funny pictures of each other back and forth, our naked bodies tangled together and bare to the room without a care. It's so innocent and relaxed and *natural*, and I wish every day could be like this. I wish we could love each other until the world disappears far, far away, forever.

When we are absolutely, positively going to be late for the gathering at the Santiago's, we reluctantly move our lovemaking to the shower where we spend way too long tasting every bit of each other. Vincent washes me as I wash him, thrice, with the Italian soaps that smell like him. And after, we stand in the same mirror together getting ready despite the two different sinks and mirrors — his and his as Vincent and I have coined it, not that we use both of them. We make use of our proximity as I spritz Vincent's sea salt spray in his hair and he rubs a light pomade into mine. Before him, I hated having to put the stuff in my hair, but now here he is, doing it for me to save my hands from the icky feeling.

I dress in one of my most casual dark blue suits, but Vincent goes all out expressing himself with black clothing, chains, eyeliner, and that damn stamp under his eye that I want to lick until it is gone, only to reapply it and start all over again.

We head for the door, but I can't help wrapping him into my arms again to devour his lips and caress my tongue against his, tasting the minty mouthwash he uses. He chuckles against my mouth, informing me that we are about to be very late and might even miss dinner if we don't leave now.

He promises more later tonight, and tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, and my heart swells with my love for him.

This day couldn't have been any better, but dread starts to fill me as we drive for the Santiago's. I've never been very social, and with Zev there, I'll be worried about him coming on to Vincent. I trust Vincent, though. I know he won't let anything happen.

"Is it just Zev?" I question as we drive in the SUV, remembering Phoenix explaining about the polyamorous and open relationship between Zev and Ben, Adam's brother. Vincent touched on the topic at lunch, too, when discussing the different ways people identify.

"Is what just Zev?" Vincent doesn't turn to face me, but his knuckles whiten as his grip on the steering wheel tightens, forearms straining. His jaw sharpens. Despite his request for clarification, I have a feeling he knows what I mean.

I don't sugarcoat my next words. "Zev and Ben are in an open poly relationship. Were you with both of them or only Zev?"

He takes a moment to answer, studiously paying attention to the traffic. "It was both," his reply is soft, cautious.

"I want to know more."

Vincent flexes his jaw. "Why?"

That's a great question, and I don't have an answer to it. "I'm not going to be mad," I promise. "Or jealous. I just ... want to know, I guess. I'd tell you about any of my past relationships if you asked."

"It was not a relationship," he quickly corrects. "I met them a few years ago and we messed around a bit whenever we happened to be in the same city at the same time. It was casual. Last year, I was interested in their arrangement, so I flew to LA for the summer and spent three months with them. It was both exciting and terrifying, giving up some of my control to them, but I gave it a good try. I could not let them fuck me, so I knew it would not work out. At one point, I got very depressed and overwhelmed by the entire thing. I could not get over them fucking other people whenever they wished. I was always wondering if and when someone else would

share our bed. Would it be the woman in the grocery store or someone from their club? It weighed on me day and night. I was paranoid about every person they spoke to. Kept thinking I would be left behind for someone they liked better.”

“Did you work while you were in LA?”

He shakes his head. “That’s the thing. I would spend all day in bed with Zev doing the hardcore fire shit, then Ben would get home from work and we would all fuck, then Zev would go to work for the night, and Ben and I would spend our time doing bondage and his other kinks. Sure, it was all a fantastic workout, but I wasn’t *me* anymore. I spent my time waiting for my next fuck while they were out fucking each other or someone else. It wasn’t for me. They offered me a place in their relationship at the end of the summer, but I turned it down. Zev and I kept hooking up because it is hard for him to find someone to appreciate his fucked-up kinks, but that’s it. I care for both of them, but only as friends.”

I mull over his words for a minute. “All that fucking and you never caught feelings?”

“How do you feel about that boy you were with in high school?” He turns the spotlight on me.

“That was one night,” I argue.

“But,” Vincent draws out. “That’s an experience you two shared, and it will be with you forever. Just like sex with Luca or Michele or Theo will always be with me. I can care about them knowing we shared something so personal, but not have any desire to relive or rekindle it.”

My jaw literally drops at his words. “You actually slept with Theo? I kind of hoped you two had just overplayed your relationship.”

He winces. “I thought you had figured that out. Sorry. If it helps, we called it all off when he found out about my feelings for you, even though you didn’t seem interested in me at the time. He did help me try to make you jealous, though.”

We’re a block away from the Santiago’s house in central park, and Vincent pulls over. He turns to me, grabs my face,

and kisses me like I've never been kissed before, deep and hungry. He pulls back to hold my gaze, and I get swept away in his dark eyes. His hair is perfectly curled across his forehead, though it is a little long, his tan skin is smooth and begging me to kiss him all over, and every sharp line or gentle curve of his face is so goddamn mouthwatering. "I love you, Cay. No one else matters, okay? You've helped me grow into a better version of myself these last few months, and there is no one I would rather have by my side, whether it's in public or behind closed doors. I want to be with you more than I've ever wanted someone before — not Zev, or Ben, or Theo, or Michele, or Luca, or anyone else I've ever felt anything for. I'll be your bodyguard forever if that's the only way for us to be together."

I kiss him passionately in return. "Quit your job," I blurt when we separate. "And live with me. We can be together whenever we want without your job getting in the way. I can support you, and we can wake up tangled in each other's embrace every morning. Phoenix doesn't ever have to know."

Even as I say it, I know his answer will be no, as it should. He deserves someone who doesn't try to hide him from everyone — someone who doesn't hide an entire relationship. And that person isn't me.

16 They All Know

Vincent Bernardi

I'm not sure what I expected to feel seeing Zev and Ben with their new girl.

Nothing isn't really what I thought. Walking into the spacious family room of the Santiago's home, my eyes automatically take in everyone standing and sitting around, including the trio filling the loveseat on the far side of the room. My gaze lands on them, and not a single feeling hits me. I'm not jealous, or longing to be with them, or even attracted to the men anymore.

There's just ... nothing. Platonic friendship, yes, but anything deeper? No.

Matthew, Hunter, TJ, and Winnifred are all stationed around, each one switching out for perimeter patrol every few minutes, per Phoenix's request due to the increased threat on Caiden. They're dressed in our simple black *Bernardi Security* t-shirt and jeans, each with an earpiece as well.

Damn, I should have brought mine.

At that thought, I remember I am here for personal reasons, not work, and my team can handle anything that may come their way.

Coming my way is Zev. He pops up from the far couch as soon as his bright blue eyes catch my own, dragging his six-foot-four frame off the cushions with the grace only a man in his profession can possess. His skin is pale, as he spends most of his hours awake at night rather than outside during the day, and I know from personal experience that he is hiding very lean muscles under his oversized, long-sleeve charcoal t-shirt and dark jeans. He's an excellent sparring partner, but only if that session is to end in sex. Zev's sparring always ends in sex. As his arms swing with each step, I can see the hints of his

scars peeking out from the ends of his sleeves and around his collar.

Zev is covered in those scars — self-inflicted, intentionally inflicted by others, or from the hazards of his job. The scars all vary in size and shape and location, but most of his torso under his shirt is covered in them. A few cigarette burns dot along his knuckles from our summer together, and there is a scar just under the corner of his jaw from our last hook-up. His face is scarily symmetrical and conventionally attractive, no scars marring that skin.

When he reaches Caiden and me standing in the doorway, Zev immediately wraps his arms around me in a friendly embrace. He pats along my back, feeling the knives he knows I keep strapped there — which I've recently replaced from my stockpile since my last were grabbed by the clean-up crew at the carnival. As he pulls back, I see that slightly manic smile of his spread across his lips, showing a few too many teeth than it should. "I love that you carry those knives, so easy to access when the mood calls for it. Do you still carry the one you fucked me with?"

I want to smack myself in the forehead as I see Caiden's jaw hit the floor out of my peripheral. *Goddamnit, Zev, you can't keep anything private.* I try to walk the line between old, flirty me and new, only-friendly me, rolling my eyes instead of answering him. "Zev, you remember Caiden, right?"

"The homophobe," his smile flatlines.

"I'm not a fucking homophobe!" Caiden hisses, one side of his mouth raising and causing his nose to scrunch adorably. I fight the urge to lay a delicate kiss on the tip of that perfectly straight nose. He would not appreciate that here and now. "I like men, too."

A lot of eyes widen, looking at Caiden in shock. Of those eyes include Zev, Winnifred, Adam, Koda, Alexandria, Jackson, Mrs. Santiago, and Dennis, one of Adam's younger brothers.

And me.

We all stare, surprised by his bombshell confession made so publicly.

Even in our most private moments, Caiden has avoided discussing his sexuality with me. Any time I ask, he ends up redirecting the conversation to something else, no matter how gently I broach the subject. His own boyfriend hadn't even known his preferences until now. With those four words, Caiden has at least admitted to being bisexual to a couple of people. It feels like a big step, but it was also spurred by a stressful situation. Will he regret that later?

Zev's icy blue eyes narrow as he glares down at Caiden. "Top or bottom?" He asks suddenly, testing him.

Caiden shrinks back slightly under the weight of Zev's intimidating gaze and posture, something not many people can hold their own against. "T-top."

Again, I want to face-palm. Damn it, Cay, you failed the very first question. Tops are confident and dominant as hell, and they don't back down or stutter when answering another man about their sexuality or preferences.

"Can you believe this guy, handsome?" Zev turns to me, quietly laughing to himself and pointing to Caiden. "Thinks he's a top."

I slap my hand onto Zev's shoulder in a way that looks friendly, but is hard enough for him to get the idea to shut the hell up, a tight, fake smile stretching across my teeth. "I don't know anything about Caiden's sexuality or his sex life, and neither do you, Zev. It seems new to him, so maybe let it go for now. If you're nice, he might remember you once he's figured everything out. Maybe he likes fire." I start to lead Zev back to Ben and the girl beside him who must be Rosemary.

The blonde throws his head back theatrically, groaning loudly and practically falling onto me. I support his large body as we walk the rest of the way to his partners. "Ugh, don't talk to me about fire right now. Abstinence sucks!"

"You're not abstinent," I chuckle. "You're *committed*. There's a difference."

“I have to abstain from fire,” he argues. “And other people.”

I don't have a response for that. Telling him we won't be sleeping together any time soon definitely won't help his situation now. “Hey, Ben,” I greet as I finish half-carrying Zev to the couch where he flops dramatically.

Ben stands, wearing a suit so similar to Caiden's that I have to do a double take. How could I have forgotten how nice Ben dresses 24/7, unless he is naked? The only difference here is that underneath his suit, almost every bit of his body is covered in tattoos whereas Caiden's skin is a pure, blank canvas. Ben hides his tattoos well, though sometimes they peek out like Zev's scars from his sleeves and collar. His skin is tan like Adam's, his eyes and hair dark brown — like a younger version of his brother in every way physically. “Hey, Vincent. It's great to see you again. You look ... happy.” He says the words thoughtfully as he studies my face, genuinely seeing me through the cold exterior I carefully front. Ben has that way about him. As a businessman, he makes it his mission in life to be able to read people far beyond the best of poker faces.

He leans in to hug me, and I respond just as friendly. His hands brush my knives sheathed along my spine before he pulls back with a wicked grin. “Remember when you fucked Zev with one of your knives?” There's a familiar gleam in his eyes, a predatorily bright flash of white from his teeth, and I know, just like his partner, Ben is mentally replaying the session we had with one of my knives last summer.

God, that was *one time*.

“*With* the knife?” The small girl on the couch squeaks.

I peer around Ben to smile politely at the cute girl. She looks to be about my age with big-rimmed glasses, freckles across her nose and cheeks, and reddish-brown hair which tumbles in waves down her back. Her face twists in utter horriification, so I kneel in front of her while drawing a medium-sized knife from the sheath on my back.

Zev snorts when he sees I haven't pulled out the largest one — the size I *actually* fucked him with — but I'm trying to help him out here, so he should be thankful. His girl is going to have a very bad impression of BDSM if no one sets her straight.

Not that Ben would let her misinterpret anything, but he might let her stew on it for a bit instead of clarifying right now. He's a dick like that sometimes — gets off on it. Just by looking at her grimace, I can tell she would appreciate an explanation sooner rather than later, and Ben and Zev aren't going to argue with me about that. I was practically in a relationship with them last year, and our trust in each other runs deep.

Turning the knife around so I'm holding the blade, I extend the handle to her. The whole knife is black, one side of the blade is dull, and the other has a slightly curved tip, a razor-sharp edge, and a short serrated section near the handle. The handle itself is rubber and ribbed for better grip, but that isn't what I used it for with Zev.

“Not the whole knife, sweetheart. Just the handle here, see?”

She reaches out, her delicate fingers running up and down the rubber before she wraps a hand around it like it's a cock, squeezing a bit. Beside her, Zev groans. Ben reaches out and brushes some hair from her cheek. I see Zev's hand creeping along her thigh and remember what it was like to be the center of their attention, their hands all over my body, and I'm surprised when my dick doesn't even twitch at the sexual tension now filling this little corner of the living room.

That stands so contrary to what I've grown accustomed to recently. Anytime I think about Caiden, even if it is simply about the way he lightly snores when sleeping on his back, I'm immediately hit with the desire to be close to him. To negate any distance between us. To hold him and never let him go. To love him as emotionally and intimately as possible.

I guess I really do love that idiot.

Zev groans again. “Can I have that knife for later?”

Angling the handle, I point it as if I am chastising him. “Hey, keep it PG in Mr. and Mrs. Santiago’s house.”

His eyes narrow on mine, and suddenly we’re having a glaring contest — a battle of dominance. “Keep pointing it at me like I’m a child, and I’m going to rip that fucking knife out of your hand. I hope it cuts on the way out so I can enjoy the blood.”

I give a throaty chuckle. “Fuck you, Zev. You won’t do shit on your new leash.” Maybe I shouldn’t be encouraging this type of conversation because it drifts a little close to that line of friendly and flirting, but it’s so hard to distinguish between the two. I’m naturally flirty with people I actually enjoy being around, especially when they like to flirt back *and* we have a lot of history. I look around for Caiden, wondering if I can get out of this somehow.

Zev lunges for the handle, but I have another knife whipped out before he can grab it. I let it arc toward his hand, only stopping when the blade is millimeters away from his skin. Zev freezes, staring at me with a hunger I recognize all too well, then turns to Rosemary. “He’s really fun to play with,” he tries to persuade her.

I pull my knives back. “I don’t do women.”

Ben gives me a curious look. “You participated in a knife play exhibition with a woman in my club,” he calls me out. “You only touched her with the knife, obviously, but you still did the cutting while I fucked her, and you liked it. You’d be welcome in our bed once we open our relationship again. We would love to have you.”

Gritting my teeth at the unappetizing thought of playing with them while having my heart set on Caiden, I carefully sheath the knives again and try to find the words to let these men down gently. “What I meant to say was: I only have eyes for my boyfriend right now, but if it doesn’t work out, I’ll hit you guys up.”

“Oh, shit, man. My-fucking-bad. Is that why you had to go so quickly this morning? I hope I didn’t fuck things up for you two.” Zev’s eyes widen as he recalls our phone call earlier.

“What happened this morning?” Rosemary ... squeaks. I can’t think of any other way to describe her high-pitched, soft voice.

“Nothing,” Zev and I both reassure her, which only looks more suspicious.

I sigh. “It was a phone call, nothing too inappropriate. My boyfriend took my side of the conversation wrong, but we got it figured out. It’s okay.” For the first part of my quick explanation, I speak to Rosemary, placating her jealousy, then address Zev for the last bit.

“Well,” Ben sighs. “If the last time we fucked is the last for a while, at least we went out with a bang.”

Zev starts to flicker his lighter as if thinking hard about something, and I know he’s trying to cut off his feelings. Something is bothering him, so he’s disassociating from it. One glance at Ben, and I can tell he is thinking the same thing.

“Zev?” I ask gently, still kneeling in front of the couch where he now sits.

“Hmm?”

“What’s up, man?”

He lets out a heavy sigh, eyes downcast. “I saw how happy you were walking in, and I thought it was because you were thinking of us. I see it has absolutely nothing to do with me or Ben, but everything to do with that homophobe you let top you,” he spits the last bit.

Ben’s eyebrows raise in surprise, and his brown eyes snap to study my face, gauging my emotions. “You let someone top you? And a homophobe, at that?”

I glance around to make sure no one is looking before hissing out a response. Everyone is engaged in other conversations, though Caiden keeps looking my way, but I still keep my voice low between the four of us. “Caiden is not a homophobe. I love him, and he loves me. He just ... isn’t out yet.”

“Vincent,” Ben drags my name out like he is scolding me.

“I know, I know. But we’re making a lot of progress. It’s going really well.” I aim my next words at the sulking man on the couch. “I’m really happy with him,” I say as convincingly as I can. It isn’t difficult to let absolute sincerity drift into my tone. It’s true; I am very happy with Caiden.

Mrs. Santiago calls us for dinner then, and we all shuffle into the oversized dining room. There isn’t enough space at the large dining table, so there are a few additional tables set up with chairs around the room. I spot Adam’s other brothers and their dates filling up a table, while Koda, Tessa, Alexandria, and Mrs. Santiago claim another. The girls wave emphatically for Rosemary to join their table, and Ben has to nudge her forward before she walks toward them.

That leaves Ben, Zev, Phoenix, Adam, Jackson, Caiden, Mr. Santiago, and me at the main table. We distribute ourselves around the mahogany, and I see way too many men suspiciously trying to make sure Caiden and I sit beside each other. Ben and Zev don’t surprise me (though Zev might still be on the fence about Caiden), and neither does Jackson due to Alexandria’s confession in our group chat, but it almost seems like Adam is trying to help, too.

I end up between Caiden and Phoenix. Apparently, the three — possibly four, if my gut is correct — men were smart enough to get me beside Caiden, but not smart enough to keep us very far away from my oblivious brother.

Everyone else fills in around the table, and the Santiago’s staff starts bringing out bowls of soup to place in front of us. Light conversation strikes up around the room, and I enjoy watching Caiden catch up with his friends. He skipped poker last Thursday, and I know it bothered him more than he’d like to admit.

Mr. Santiago is a cool guy. An older version of Adam and his brothers, it’s obvious strong genes run in the family. Most parents are lame and conservative, but Mr. Santiago doesn’t care about his second son’s sexuality or relationship, although one could argue that Zev is another son of his. The Santiagos took him in when he was only 16, having come from a very rough background and homeless at the time. Ben was 17 then,

and he took Zev under his wing in more ways than one. Now, Mr. Santiago asks LGBTQ questions related to current news that Ben, Zev, and I answer without any awkwardness, and he nods along with our responses.

It isn't until the second entree that Mr. Santiago brings up the dreaded topic. "So, Caiden. I heard someone is trying to kill you."

Zev glances up from devouring his food, eyes narrowing at the topic which has been brought up — immediately recognizing his area of expertise.

Caiden gulps his bite of food down, wiping his mouth with a linen napkin as he considers the older man's words. "Unfortunately, yes."

That's all he says.

Every pair of eyes at the table focus on him, waiting for more information, and I slap my palm to my face for real this time. Caiden really sucks at anything outside of his job. Or me.

Well, actually, he sucks me ...

"Caiden was approached by a company that runs an Italian mafia," I explain for him. "They wanted to front their mostly-legal business with a trade contract at Caiden's company, then use that to get a foothold inside New York for their illegal businesses — street fighting, street racing, and drugs, mostly. A long-term client of Caiden's, Russians who aren't so squeaky clean either, got mad about it due to some turf rivalry between the two companies, and they put a hit out for Caiden. We didn't figure this out until I did some research on the suspect company's past where I found a previous trading company they burned to the ground — metaphorically," I tack on at Zev's interested look. "Caiden got the Italians to back off, then gave the Russians a stern talking to. We *thought* it was going to stop there, but Caiden sent a notice to the Russians stating he is terminating their contract."

"What?" Phoenix growls out, leaning around me to glare at his friend. "Caiden! I told you—"

“Anyway,” I wave Phoenix off. “That stunt got us retaliated upon yesterday evening. We were leaving the carnival with my friends when some gunmen started shooting at us. We managed to hit most of them, and then a clean-up crew showed up. They took all the bodies and any evidence they could get before peeling away. It was very different from the last attacks.”

Zev’s eyes don’t leave mine, bearing into me for a long minute before he speaks. “If you know who is behind the attacks, my guys and I can ... have a nice chat with them,” he offers. Those of us who are aware of his business stiffen, and Phoenix gives me a meaningful shake of his head. We only deal in legal matters, that’s what Phoenix said when we took over the security company.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I give him a soft smile, politely turning him down. “We’re going to keep things above the table for now. Thank you, though.”

The blonde pyromaniac shrugs as if it isn’t any hassle for him either way, and Ben pats his shoulder as if he’s praising a dog for being a good boy.

My eyes drift to Caiden, and I want nothing more than to express my affection to him, too. There isn’t much I can do with everyone here, but I let my right hand fall below the table, wait a minute, then inconspicuously slide it onto Caiden’s thigh. I calmly pick my fork up with my non-dominant hand, feeding myself without a problem due to my meticulous dual combat training. Caiden blushes, shifting slightly, but continues to nod along to Phoenix’s very low chastising.

When my gaze lazily slides around the full table again, I catch smirks from Ben, Zev, Jackson, and Adam. I narrow my eyes at the last one, glaring at him, then snap that glare to Koda across the room. She’s already looking at me like a deer in headlights, her own widened eyes flickering between her man and me.

She gives me a weird apologetic grimace-smile that is just as awkward as she is.

Tessa lets out the loudest burp I've ever heard — which is saying something as I grew up with two brothers and a sister.

Most everyone turns to look over at Tessa, but I'm still glaring at Koda, who looks at Adam, who looks from Koda to me sheepishly. Phoenix is glaring at Tessa, Adam's youngest brothers are chuckling between trying to out-burp the girl, and Rosemary is staring in awe at Ben and Zev who are now fully making out at the end of our table. Mrs. Santiago gives her husband a coy smile and finger wave he returns. Alexandria locks eyes with Jackson, turning her face into a threatening scowl before swiping her finger across her neck in the universal gesture for 'murder' as she glances meaningfully between her boyfriend and mine.

“What the hell is going on?” Caiden mutters to me.

I squeeze the top of his leg reassuringly. Sometimes social situations like this can go over Caiden's head, and this time I am glad. If he knew how many people in here are aware of our relationship, he might have a literal heart attack at twenty-eight.

Because they know. They all know.

Dessert ends after Tessa throws a beignet at Phoenix's head, hitting him between the eyes with a cloud of powdered sugar, and he chases her out of the room.

“They better not have sex on my childhood bed,” Adam grumbles.

Mrs. Santiago giggles to herself as Adam's father pipes up. “They wouldn't be the first.”

The entire room erupts into laughter, and Adam fake gags at Mr. Santiago's words.

Soon, Caiden is whisked away by the guys to drink beer in the backyard. I start to follow, but the girls from our 'Bad Bitches' chat snag me before I can.

I groan. “Are we really going to play poker when our men are right outside? Can't we do something fun while looking at our eye candy?”

“You read our mind,” Alexandria cackles, leading the group of us through the house. She stops at the stairs to let Rosemary in front. The girl timidly leads us to a second-floor room with three sets of suitcases, obviously belonging to her and her men.

Rosemary digs around for some swimsuits. “Alexandria, you’re built like me, so you shouldn’t have a problem. Tessa, Koda, you two have bigger boobs, so these swimsuits might be a little small.”

Koda chuckles. “The only time I’ve ever been told I have big boobs, and it’s because they’re swollen from pregnancy. They’ll be small again in a few months,” she sighs.

When all the suits are doled out, Rosemary turns to the men’s suitcases. “Vincent, do you think Zev’s or Ben’s swim trunks will fit better for you?”

Tessa rips her shirt and bra off before I can even respond to Rosemary or turn around, flashing her boobs to everyone in the room. I study her nipple piercings for a moment before realizing she might have an issue with that. I shake that thought off because she just took her shirt off in front of me, so she can’t possibly be modest.

To my surprise, Alexandria steps forward and studies the intricate piercings up close. “Wow, Tessa! These are so cool.” The metal is bent in a star shape with a bar going through the center of either nipple.

As Koda turns to fawn over Tessa’s tits, too, I look away and respond to Rosemary. “Uh, it depends. Ben is shorter than me, so his clothes are always a little snug. Zev is bigger in general, so his are usually too big.”

“Do Ben’s so Caiden can get an eyeful of the outline of his dick,” Tessa suggests.

I sigh at her antics, but let Rosemary toss me some lavender-colored swim trunks out of Ben’s suitcase.

None of the girls are shy as they change in front of each other, so I casually strip as well. I’m pulling the bottoms on

over my naked body when I look up to see them staring at me.
“What?”

Alexandria, clad in a hot pink skimpy bikini with lots of strings, speaks first. “Are Italian men built different?”

Tessa’s in a dark green one-piece with a lot of cleavage and half of the middle of the suit missing. Her ass is practically hanging out, and it jiggles as she bounces while clapping her hands excitedly. “Oh, no! I know this one! Fe Fe is a show-er — and I guess so is Vincent. They don’t grow as much when they get hard because their dicks stay big even when soft.”

“Adam stays pretty big when he’s soft,” Koda muses. She’s in a simple red bikini with every one of her assets spilling over and her tiny baby bump showing.

Rosemary doesn’t respond, only leads the way out of the bedroom and down to the pool in the most conservative white swimsuit of the bunch.

I say that because my dick is outlined very clearly by the tight swim trunks.

“What’s your tattoo,” Tessa asks as we trudge outside. She pokes my side with a hard job of her finger, and I wince, rubbing at the spot.

“Ow,” I complain half-heartedly at the attack. I have to look down at my ribs to remember the tattooed words across them before translating for her. “*Meglio un giorno da leone che cento da pecora*: Better one day as a lion than a hundred as a sheep.”

“I like it.” She muses, then shoves us forward with renewed vigor. “Let’s go make our men horny as fuck!”

17 What choice do I have?

Caiden Augustus

The confirmation email comes in just before lunch.

I'm trying to diligently get some actual work done instead of thinking about my amazing weekend with Vincent. After he wore some tight swim trunks, I sat with a raging boner until we eventually left. At the apartment, we didn't fall asleep until the sun came up. When we did lazily drag ourselves out of bed that afternoon, we spent our Sunday making pasta and going through our haircut routine, only to end in another steamy night.

We've been trying to keep our hands to ourselves all morning with little success.

"Babe, can you get that off the printer?" I ask casually, keeping my eyes trained on the completed contract on my computer screen.

Vincent groans and I imagine he's tilting his head toward the ceiling. "You're closer, though."

When I don't reply, he huffs but stands to get the paper anyway. My gaze follows him over the top of my desktop as he grabs the paper and looks over it like the little snoop I know he is. I see the moment the shock washes over his face. "Cay, what is this?"

"A transfer of ownership for a new business I've acquired. I'm considering bringing the brand to the states, what do you think?"

His wide eyes raise to meet mine. "This is ..."

"The company that makes your favorite soaps," I nod. "Sorry, I don't know how to pronounce the Italian name."

"Baby, you bought the company that makes my favorite soap."

I nod. “Yes, I know. Until I get a team in to launch some stores here, I can at least lower the price of import in the meantime. You said you spend too much of your salary getting the products here.”

Vincent stalks over to me, leaning down to kiss me deeply, the paper crumpling in his hands as he presses them to my chest. “This is so extra, and unnecessary, and such poor business judgment ... but thank you, Cay. I love the gesture. I love you.”

“I love you,” I hum happily against his lips.

Something chimes from his chair at the front of the office, and he frowns at the interruption. I follow his ass with my eyes as he trudges away, and I see his posture change at whatever he reads on his phone.

“Do you want lunch early? I saw this cute cafe on the corner a few blocks east, and it looks pretty good.”

Early lunch isn’t something we usually do, but it appears he has other things on his mind. If he’s hungry, we can get food. “What’s the name? I’ll look up the menu.”

“It’s Bluebird, but that’s okay. I’ll pick you out something I know you’ll like.” In a flurry of movement, he’s donned his work jacket and bounced over to kiss my lips too quickly for my liking. Before I can even comment on it, he’s out the door, and I’m left stupefied.

He didn’t let me pick my food, it is way too early for lunch, and he didn’t even have the other guards pick their meals.

I can’t seem to shake the uneasy feeling as I attempt to return to my emails. Almost absentmindedly, I reply to Damian in the legal department with a short ‘thanks’ for getting the completed transfer of ownership documents to me first thing. My assistant has sent a few appointment requests, so I check each date and time with my calendar before approving or denying them.

I’m reading through my second mock-up report for some upcoming contract renewals when a new email pings. I flip

over to the desktop application to see an automated security notification asking if I want to receive emails from an outside source.

Many of my clients email me, so I think nothing of it as I allow the user's message — and future messages — through to my inbox.

The words along the subject line make my heart stop.

‘What would your mother think?’

When I click on the email, it opens in a new window. The only words are in the subject line, and the email address is a generic one listed as ‘user’ with too many numbers to count.

And there, displayed in a large, high-quality photo in the body of the email, sits a lone picture of Vincent and me kissing at the top of the Ferris wheel last week.

It's as if reality suddenly comes crashing down as I realize someone sitting in the cart behind us took a photo of our public display, and, somehow, someone got a hold of it. Not only that, but they are threatening to show my mother — my very religious mother who would disown me for this picture alone.

Another email pings.

‘What would the press think?’

When I open this one, I'm assaulted by a whole portfolio of pictures. In one, Theo and I are standing in front of the funhouse, hands clasped tightly together. The next is also of Theo and me as I give him a piggyback ride around the carnival. Another, and Theo is pecking my cheek.

There's one of Vincent and me before the others showed up, standing too close and looking at each other with too much

affection. He's holding a piece of blue cotton candy to my open mouth as I laugh at something he said.

Next, an image of Hunter and me. He's tapping our paint-filled water guns together while ruffling my hair. Although it's completely platonic, the photo combined with the others definitely appears suspicious.

I continue to scroll, seeing one of Matthew and me posing for pictures close together at the skating rink before the trip to Italy.

Another, in the bar, just hours before I was shot, that handsome stranger leaning in close, obviously hitting on me.

The very last one is from the day Vincent was shot. I'm standing in the busy New York street with an unbuttoned suit jacket, messy hair, and frantic eyes. Vincent has his hands on my shoulders, leaning in closer than he should be in public. My hand at my side holds Winnifred's gun he had given me in the elevator only minutes before.

My blood runs ice cold. I'm chilled to the bone, though a clammy sweat settles across my skin, pricking under my arms and the backs of my knees. My stomach rolls. My breakfast threatens to make a second appearance.

If these get out, I'm ruined.

My family and the press would have a field day with these. I would be the center of New York's drama, and my clients would hate the scandal. If I go under scrutiny, so does my company. Clients and their customers would all have questions, or plain old opinions, strong enough to end contracts. Based on these photos, I look like a promiscuous, gun-wielding gay man sleeping with multiple men.

Also, if they have this many photos, they likely have more. I play poker, and I'm a businessman. I know those with the upper hand never reveal all their cards at once. If they're smart, they have more ammo ready to be put to use at any moment.

I'm not sure I've taken a breath since the first email came in ten minutes ago, but I must have at some point because I'm

not dead. My chest burns as if I've been holding air too long, and my head swims like I don't have any oxygen, but I'm still alive — barely.

Ding!

Head buried in my hands, I don't even want to look up at the new email, but damn it, I do it anyway.

The regret is instantaneous.

'So you think you know your lover boy?'

My hand trembles as I open the body of the message.

It loads so slowly, I feel I might scream in frustration. My mouth opens to do just that, and it suddenly generates all at once.

I take in the two people in the photograph. My eyes first fall on Vincent, wearing his usual black suit and jacket, noticing how his body is leaning onto a brick wall with his elbows pressed against it at shoulder height.

Then, I notice exactly what is wedged between him and graffitied brick — a body.

The man is as tall as Vincent, muscular with a dark complexion, and he still has a fading bruise on the side of his face I can see through Vincent's bent arm. His hands are splayed against Vincent's chest, and their faces are closer than either of ours were in the second email.

I try to convince myself this must be an old picture, but the bruise on Michele's face is from my fist and the to-go bag on the ground at Vincent's feet says 'Bluebird.'

It's from today.

It's from *now*.

Vincent is out there with his ex after leaving in such a hurry without any explanation.

I've never felt pain like this in my chest before — not even when I was shot.

I don't have a second to begin pulling myself together before my assistant's voice screeches out of my desk phone, extra loud and annoying on the intercom.

“S-sir, I'm sorry! I couldn't stop her! Your ex is on her way in with—”

My anger breaches my body like a high tide over a pier, smashing in and exploding up. Out. “God-fucking-damn it, Emily!” My roar echoes around my office and out of the partially open door, and I know she can hear me even though I've thrown out my hand, swiping the phone from my desk and into the wall beside me. It clatters and shatters, a painful semblance to my heart.

There's a feminine gasp from my office doorway that doesn't belong to Ashlynn or my assistant. “Language!” My mother stands there, one hand over her heart as she waves her other across her body in the shape of a cross.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Of course. Of-fucking-course! Ashlynn and my parents stand in the doorway as I try to hold back a complete breakdown in front of them. They wouldn't care that I am in absolute shambles. No, they would worry about what the public would think.

Angry outbursts are a sign of the Devil invading your heart and soul, and you must pray that sin away.

Sorry, Mom, there's no praying away my sin now. I'm in too deep.

I take a few breaths to calm myself as the trio enters my office, looking curiously at the chair stationed by the door and my broken landline on the floor. I stand and greet my parents, scowling at Ashlynn. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” My jaw is gritted together so tight, I feel I might break the too-perfect veneers my parents forced over my already-decent teeth when I was seventeen.

Mr. and Mrs. Augustus look exactly like what two religious icons who broadcast their sermons over live television should look like. Perfect skin, teeth, hair, and clothes, not a string out of place. Both have brown hair like mine — like Caroline’s — and I inherited my hazel eyes from my dad. Caroline had striking green eyes like my mother, and I almost can’t stand to look at the woman who raised me. Her eyes remind me too much of my dead sister. Instead, I look at her hair, curled and pinned to perfection in a way that pulls the skin of her face taught, or maybe that is the Botox. They’re both in designer clothes that look like they should be in the church — well, on television — instead of visiting their son at work during the week.

My father closes the door behind him with one handkerchief-clad hand, worried about the germs, but the latch doesn’t go all the way in. The door falls open a few inches, enough to where I can hear Emily’s crying as she runs down the hallway by my office in search of the bathroom.

Ashlynn looks concerned for me as she sits in an office chair in front of my desk, but she has always been an impeccable actress. My mother sits beside her with tears threatening to spill from her eyes. My father stands behind Mom, his hands on her shoulders as he glares at me.

“We’ve been so worried about you!” Ashlynn cries, dabbing at fake tears. “Your idiot of an assistant wouldn’t take any of my messages, and she said you were unavailable. I had to come up here in person just to see you! I tried your apartment all last week, but you were never home.”

My father clears his throat to shut up the waterworks from my ex. “There’s concerning news your girlfriend has brought to our attention. I feel it needs to be addressed behind closed doors with complete discretion, son.”

My eyes flicker to the partially open door, hoping Vincent will walk in at any moment. He’ll have an explanation for the picture. He has to.

An email pings again.

‘Listen to them.’

There isn’t a picture this time, so I let my gaze drift back to my parents. Who the hell is running this? How did they get my email, and how do they know my parents are here talking to me?

“What is it?”

Rolling her lips between her teeth, Ashlynn slides a manila folder onto my desk, right across the place where Vincent usually sits.

I drag the file closer to me, unwinding the cord before pulling out a glossy sheet. It’s facing down, so I flip it to reveal the image underneath. I take in the picture, then let my eyes snap up to inspect each person in the room. By the somber — or disgusted, in my father’s case — looks, I know they have seen this and made their own assumptions.

Slamming the picture on my desk with the blank side up, I seethe for a moment. “That is not what it looks like.”

Ashlynn narrows her fake-eyelash-rimmed eyes, and I wonder how she even sees through the black caterpillars glued along her lash line. “It *looks* like you’re holding hands with some guy!”

I grind my teeth, my words sounding dark and deadly. “It is *not* what it looks like.”

“This looks very suspicious, Caiden.”

“How could you do this to our family?”

“What will the media think?”

All three people in the room begin striking me with questions, and my mother sobs while continuously shaping crosses in the air in front of her — aimed at me.

“Shut up!” I snap at them. They sit there, stunned, as we all remain silent. Only my heavy breathing can be heard as I try to figure out a plan. At least in this case, I can tell the truth

— partially. “You can hold hands platonically. He’s *just* a friend, I swear.” Here comes the lie. “I’m not a fucking fag.”

“Language,” my mother sobs again.

My eyes catch the movement a half-second before the office door is thrown open, and Vincent stalks in looking murderous — an evil glare directed toward me. His clothes are rumpled and askew, his hair more messy than usual, but I can’t even confront him about cheating on me.

One, because my parents and Ashlynn are in here, and they already think I’m gay. I have to put that fire out, not fan it.

Two, because he’s *pissed*. I can only assume it’s because of what I said, that he somehow overheard my last words, but he has to know it is a lie to protect myself. He knows I am not ready to be out — might never be ready. *He knows*.

“Here’s your lunch, Mr. Augustus,” he growls, slamming the food onto my desk where he usually sits. “Here. This arrived for you at the shop today. To replace your old one.”

Something drops onto the wooden top of my desk, rebounding and clattering against my keyboard. Vincent doesn’t even look at me as he turns to stalk out of the room, and I long to chase after him. My mind remembers the picture of him and Michele sent to me through an email from a stranger, and I decide not to risk following him.

If he cheated on me, we’re done anyway.

I look at the box thrown haphazardly on my desk, the calligraphy on the top telling me everything I need to know.

It’s from my favorite tailor shop, and the box is all too familiar.

A tie box.

To replace the one he and I—

Pain wells in my chest again, and I clench my hands tight to try and relieve the ache. Despite the half moons digging into my palms, I can’t seem to draw the sting away from my heart.

“It still does not look good, son,” my father grumbles. “And, unfortunately, I’m not even sure this is the worst news.”

Ashlynn’s boohoo farce drops, and she looks at him with a hurt glare, mascara starting to bleed down her cheeks. “Hey!” She gasps dramatically.

Rolling his eyes, my father gestures for her to continue.

The social media model instantly perks up, clapping to herself before pulling out her phone and clicking a few buttons. She turns the screen to face me, and I’m left staring at a grainy white, grey, and black image.

“The hell is this?” I grunt.

My mother sobs out another ‘language!’ but I am over it by now.

“Our baby!”

I feel the confusion and disgust cloud my face, unable to keep my poker skills up at her ridiculous statement. “The fuck?”

“You used to be such a good boy!” My mother cries. “All you do now is ignore us, curse every other sentence, and knock up any hussy who opens her legs!”

My father taps her shoulder, chastising her words. “Greta, we do not have to stoop to their level.”

Ashlynn lets out another ‘hey!’ and ends up in some type of argument with my parents over how much she loves me and can’t wait to build our family together, while they retaliate about the sin of sex before marriage.

I fall back against my office chair, completely stunned. How did this happen? Well, I *know* how it happened, but *when*? I’ve always been so careful, and Ashlynn and I haven’t been together since the night before I went ice skating with Vincent’s friends. It does take some time for a pregnancy to show up, but did I even have sex with her in the backseat of the SUV? Vincent was driving and Phoenix was beside me. I know I’ve fucked girls in the back before, it just doesn’t feel right this time.

Also, I always use a condom. I've never, ever forgotten. I guess condoms can break or have holes, but it's never happened to me before.

What is there to do?

While I'm a firm believer in women choosing what happens to their bodies, I know my parents consider abortion to be murder. They would never let Ashlynn choose to do that to their grandchild. Fuck, even the term grandchild sounds so wrong. That's what it is, though. That ugly gray thing on her phone is a fetus that will one day be my child, my parent's grandchild.

I'll be a father.

How the fuck is that going to work?

My parents — and my PR rep — will insist we get married. But after? Am I supposed to give up everything I like doing? Knowing Ashlynn, she'll expect me to be home a quarter after five every night to have dinner as a family. She'll make us pose for pictures for her social media, and we'll have to go on family outings and shit to look like the perfect American family.

Poker night? Forget about it. More like changing dirty diapers and listening to crying all night.

I *really* do not want to do that.

But what choice do I have?

If Ashlynn wants to keep this child, I have to support her.

Maybe whoever sent these photos knew this would happen. They exposed Vincent for a reason, and it might be to make sure I choose Ashlynn.

Pushing aside all my better judgments, all my second thoughts, I do the only thing I can think of — get down on one knee beside Ashlynn and ask her to marry me.

I know things with Vincent right now are ... in a rough patch. I know I love him, and I know my life has completely changed for the better since finding him in this dark, chaotic world.

I know I will be devastated by this.

But Vincent might have cheated on me. The picture is pretty damning, yet so are the other ones of me taken out of context. It makes sense that someone could get some photos of me with my friends — *Vincent's friends*, I correct myself — because I'm close with them. I can't think of one good reason why Vincent would be pressed up against Michele in a back alley, so it's difficult to try to justify his actions.

I don't know how I'll explain this to him. He probably doesn't even want to listen to anything I have to say, anyway. Telling him I can't out myself to my family or the public would only solidify how toxic I have been to our relationship. Not to mention, Ashlynn is pregnant, and I can't leave her on her own for this. The press would have a field day with the tabloids — saying how bad of a father I am for knocking up a girl and not staying with her.

And the picture with Michele ... maybe it's better if Vincent and I don't talk.

I love him with every damn cell in my body — that much I know — and I will most likely keep loving him for the rest of my life.

It doesn't matter that he's my best friend's brother. It doesn't matter that he is a man and I'll never come out to my friends and family. It doesn't matter that I'll be getting married, or that I'll have a family, or that he broke my heart by being with his ex.

Vincent is a fucking iceberg, and I'm the goddamn Titanic.

He appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. He threw my world off kilter, uprooted and upended everything I thought I knew and showed me what all I could be. Then, he took me down, down, down.

He ruined me.

But I played my part. I stood on the front of that boat with my arms out wide, bared myself to him, and embraced everything I have ever, truly wanted.

And I wouldn't change a damn thing.

18 Taking A Vacation

Vincent Bernardi

My bare fists pummel the punching bag over and over and over.

“Thanks for getting this done for me. I know you said the line has been discontinued, but this will mean so much to my boyfriend,” I smile so wide my cheeks hurt. It took some time to figure out where Caiden got that fancy suit and matching tie, but I eventually found it. When I’d originally contacted the owner of the shop, he’d said there was no way to get a new tie to replace the one we’d ruined. I’d begged and bribed until he finally said he would keep an eye out.

Lo and behold, the owner emailed me today and said he found one. It costs literally my whole month’s salary, but I simply asked Phoenix for an advance. I haven’t been buying my own groceries, or anything really, since Caiden and I finally stopped arguing so much and gave into our feelings, so I have some wiggle room.

I hate that he pays for everything, but I know his bank account is a lot, lot bigger than mine.

I also know he will appreciate this gesture.

Swinging by Bluebird on my way back to Caiden’s office, I whistle a jaunty tune to myself despite the angry yells and honking horns which practically never stop in New York. I drop the tie box into my pocket and try to focus on not swinging the to-go bag of food too much. Caiden would like everything from that restaurant, but today I only ordered him a flatbread similar to the one we shared my first day in his office. I know he’ll love it, even if I have to hold it for him.

I really don’t mind at all.

A hand snatches out to grab my arm from behind, and I chastise myself for not paying more attention. Damn Caiden

and the way he makes me forget about the dangers of this world.

I spin to fend off the assailant, trying not to jostle the food too much, but freeze when I see who it is.

“Michele,” I sneer. “The fuck do you want?”

“I just want to talk,” he holds his hands up in surrender.

“Should we stop him?” Someone whispers.

“No,” another masculine voice hisses. “You remember what happened last time!”

The first continues. “His knuckles are bleeding!”

Someone new pipes up, soft and timid, never harsh, always understanding. “I checked the system. He’s reassigned *you-know-who’s* case to Jamison *indefinitely*. I went home for lunch and saw him moving boxes back in, blasting that awful metalcore band. You know, the one that talks about killing and fucking corpses.”

“Jesus.”

“I don’t think Jesus would sing about necrophilia.”

“Fuck you, Winn.”

A roar escapes my mouth as I punch another bruised and swollen fist into the bloodstained punching bag. I whirl to face the five men standing in the gym. “Shut the fuck up and get the fuck out!”

Everyone except Theo leaves, and he slowly backs toward the door once they’re gone. He holds his hands up in surrender, just like that bastard Michele did earlier today. “I’m here to talk if you need, Vincent.”

He leaves.

Everyone always leaves.

“I miss you, Vincenzo,” Michele says into the dark alley.

I shake his hands from my shoulders. “Get the hell off me. I don’t want to even look at your ugly face.”

He reaches out for me, but I drop the to-go bag and shove his chest so hard he hits the brick wall behind him. The beautiful graffiti stands in stark contrast to his aforementioned ugly face, and I let my lip curl in disgust. “Don’t try to touch me, asshole. You have no right.”

“I want you back.”

“Fuck you.”

Bang! Bang!

Gunshots ring out from the street, one bullet hitting the metal stairs to my right. I jump for the cover of the brick wall, ignoring as Michele gets pinned between me and it. Car tires screech as a few screams ring out following more shots, then it’s suddenly quiet.

I hold my breath, waiting to hear anything that might indicate another threat.

It’s silent.

A muscular hand grips my bicep *hard*, yanking me away from the bloodied punching bag. “Vincenzo,” my oldest brother growls in my face, dodging a swing of my fist directed at him. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m fucking punching this bag. Leave me the hell alone!” My voice almost breaks as I yell at Phoenix, and I know deep down I sound like an angsty teen. I can’t seem to find the effort to care — about my voice or my bloody, split knuckles.

Phoenix ducks away from a one-two aimed at either side of his face and manages to catch my wrists in his giant hands. He holds the damaged skin up between us so we can both see. “Enzo, what happened?”

“Let. Me. Go!” I struggle in his hold, pulling my arms this way and that in any attempt to get away. He holds fast to my wrists and lets me tire myself out before switching to grip them both in one hand. With his other hand, he circles the back of my neck, then applies steady pressure, bringing me closer and closer to his slightly taller form.

“Talk to me, Enzo,” he murmurs as he successfully gets me near enough to move his hand from around my neck to across my back. My brother hugs me tighter than I’ve ever been held, like a mountain wrapped around me. “Tell me,” he whispers.

I give up my struggling, falling into his embrace. “I ... I can’t.”

Hands creep against my chest, and it takes me a moment to snap out of guard mode to realize who I’ve just inadvertently protected from gunfire. My eyes meet his for the briefest of moments before I yank myself away, not suppressing the shudder of disgust that runs rampant over my body.

“Leave me the hell alone,” I snarl at Michele, grabbing the bag of food and practically running for Caiden’s office. The need to see Caiden — to touch him and let him touch me until the gross feeling of Michele is burned from my memory — is stronger than any other I’ve ever had. I need him. Desperately.

I need my comfort.

“Enzo.”

My legs give out, and Phoenix and I sink to the ground of the wrestling ring inside the *Bernardi Security* gym. He doesn’t let me go, and I breathe in the familiar scent of cloves and whiskey which always lingers on my brother’s skin — the damn alcoholic. “I fucked up,” I whisper with my forehead pressed against his collarbone, face titled down in shame. “I fucked up and wore my heart on my sleeve, and I *fell for him.*” The last words come out in a pained, broken whisper, but I know Phoenix hears as he stiffens below me.

“So, you two ...”

“No,” I interrupt immediately. The part of me that loves Caiden — fuck, that’s every part — wants to protect him even after the pain of his rejection.

I exit Caiden’s personal elevator, walking to his office door from the opposite direction of his assistant’s desk. Overlapping voices fill the air as I near my destination, but they’re so quick

and covering each other that I barely comprehend it is English, not getting any specific words. I do, however, hear Caiden yell “shut up!” From what I can decipher, there is another male in there, and at least one female, maybe two.

Picking up my pace, I pause at the slightly open door as Caiden continues talking. I carefully peek around the corner to make sure it’s okay for me to go in right now. If he is in an important meeting, I can always wait for the emotions to calm down.

Caiden taps his finger on a manila folder on his desk. “You can hold hands platonically,” he says to the people in front of his desk. Two females — one being Ashlynn — sit in chairs and another male stands behind the older lady. Ashlynn’s parents, maybe, if they are here with her. “He’s just a friend, I swear. I’m not a fucking fag.”

The older lady says something, but I can’t hear over the throbbing of my pulse in my ears, can’t see over the red in my vision. His parents are one thing — his friends are one thing — these strangers are nothing! Ashlynn is inconsequential. Yet he can’t even bring himself to admit he has feelings for me.

I’ve never seen the two older people a day in my life, and Caiden hates Ashlynn. How can I expect any growth from our relationship if he blatantly denies us in front of these inconsequential people? Based on the manila folder and the way he uses it as evidence to defend, I assume they must have a picture of us holding hands somewhere.

‘Platonically,’ he’d said.

“No, Caiden doesn’t know,” I say, protecting him even now.

Phoenix grumbles under me before pulling back to meet my eyes with his matching almost-black gaze. “So, what happened?”

I mentally spaz for a moment as I think of something to say that would justify my reaction. I can’t take too long, so I start with the truth. “When we had the shoot out at the carnival, I hesitated. I knew I should have backed my team

after making sure Caiden was hidden, but I took an extra second deciding what to do because I didn't want to leave him." I pause, gathering my thoughts. "Today, I went to get his lunch and came back to overhear him calling someone a 'fucking fag.'"

My brother squeezes my shoulders as fury flashes in his eyes. "Was he talking about you?"

"I-I don't know." The stutter comes out before I can stop it, and I hope he can't tell it's from not knowing the best way to manipulate my lie from here.

"This doesn't make sense," he mutters to himself, then shakes his head as if he didn't mean to say those words. "I approved Jamison to switch. Do you need me to get anything from Caiden's apartment? I know you asked for an advance in pay, do you need more?"

I feel my lip tremble and want to smack myself for being so vulnerable. "I think ... I think I need to get out of town for a while. Maybe go to Italy or-or LA." How am I supposed to forget everything Caiden and I have built together when everything here reminds me of him?

"Enzo," my brother warns. "LA was not healthy for you last time."

"I know that now, and it wouldn't be the same as last time. Ben and Zev have Rosemary, and they're trying a closed relationship for a while. I would only be spending time with friends. I need that."

"What about your friends here?"

Shaking my head, I don't reply. I don't know how to tell him that my friends are Caiden's friends, and they remind me too much of him. "I need to go. I need to get out of here."

Phoenix nods. "Do you want the jet?"

"I'll fly commercial. I just ... I need some money to keep myself up while I figure something out. Can I ..." God, I hate asking for money. "Can I have my full salary in advance? I promise I'll come back. I just need some time."

“You’re my brother,” Phoenix says, pulling me into another tight hug. “You can have whatever you need, no strings attached. I’ve given our family plenty of money. It’s time for you to be spoiled a bit.” He fishes for his leather wallet and brandishes a card so similar to the one Caiden gave Gaia that I almost can’t accept it. “Use whatever you need. There’s plenty. Just keep yourself safe, please. Don’t hurt yourself like this anymore.” He slaps my hands hard enough I wince from the pain in my knuckles, returning his glare even though I’m grateful for everything he is doing for me.

Phoenix could have been mad at me for fucking up my job or falling for his friend, but instead, he’s supporting me, helping me. It makes me feel like there is someone in my corner.

Now, I just have to go find more.

“Here’s your lunch, Mr. Augustus.” I unceremoniously drop the food onto his desk, then throw the tie box. It clatters along the desk and keyboard, but I don’t care. “Here. This arrived for you at the shop today. To replace your old one.”

I leave.

I leave Caiden, his office, his building, his security, his apartment, his life.

When my bike finally roars into the parking garage of his apartment building, I’ve already called and scheduled a moving truck to get my things. I’m getting out as fast as possible, and I’m not leaving anything behind.

Well, maybe one thing.

I pack all my shit, then let the moving crew take it to their truck parked downstairs as I invade Caiden’s home office. He’s old enough to still have burner CDs laying around, so I load one into the computer and find the best way to express my feelings at this moment.

It takes longer than I remember to burn a song onto a CD, but eventually, the status is at 100%, and I can remove the disk. I root around his office until I find an old CD player, then

pop the CD inside. I listen to the whole song, making sure not a single glitch made it onto the disk.

He needs to hear every note — every word.

I leave the CD player on top of the grand piano in Caiden's living room, knowing he'll see it as soon as he walks in.

My phone chimes with a notification, and I look to see Koda has shared something from Instagram in our chat.

Koda

Koda

Holy shit! What the hell is this?

Below is a screenshot from Ashlynn's Instagram, showing her in an upscale jewelry store. She's leaning heavily on Caiden's arm and pointing at some diamond rings in a glass case at their waistline. He doesn't seem thrilled, but Old Caiden never was anyway.

The next is an image of what I assume is Ashlynn's manicured hand, a giant rock on her ring finger that looks way too gaudy to actually be real. The diamonds are ginormous and plentiful, and her caption says she can't wait to be the new Mrs. Augustus.

I'm not sure when they rekindled their relationship—maybe it's been happening behind my back this whole time — but I feel my heart desperately trying to beat around the knife impaled through it, slowly trying to save me while simultaneously bleeding out.

And I just don't think it can keep up with the loss.

I stand in the airport, my single duffle bag slung over one shoulder, and stare at the different flights scheduled for this evening. I don't have a specific plan in mind as I read over the destinations, so I'm hoping something will stick out at me. Maybe there will be a sign, or maybe there won't.

Maybe I'll stand here forever, waiting on my heart to petrify and scar enough to stop my emotions completely.

“Where ya going, hun?” The ticket lady calls to me.

I look up at the sign once more, then give her my response without a drop of hesitation.



The sun here is a lot brighter than I remember.

I didn't say goodbye to my friends, and I've ignored all their messages over text or social media. Part of me considered deleting them, but I don't want them to feel like any of this is their fault.

With that in mind, I take a picture of the large airport terminal, washed out by the bright rays of sunshine, and add a message saying '*I'm good. Taking a vacation*' before sending it out to anyone who has checked on me.

The hourglass beside Caiden's name in Snapchat tugs at my heart, but I ignore it — and I ignore it *hard*.

They said to wait for a sign, that they would send someone to get me, but as I look around the busy airport, I'm not so sure how I'm supposed to find anyone in this chaos.

Then, as I turn another circle, I see it — my sign.

“Handsome!” The extra-wide smile on his face fades only long enough for him to lean in and land a firm kiss on my lips. The familiarity of his lips on mine reminds me of a better time, a better place, before I went and royally fucked up my life.

“Zev,” I murmur with a sigh as he pulls away. The comfort he provides isn't like with Caiden. It isn't all-consuming and powerful enough to make me forget all my worries or fears, but it's enough to make me consider the idea of a light at the end of the tunnel. After all, his relationship will be open again at some point, and though I may not fuck with their woman, I will fuck with Zev and Ben.

Anything to get Caiden out of my mind.

Zev brings one rough hand to my face, holding my cheek. The smell of gunpowder and orange floods my senses, and I manage to chuckle. I remember questioning him once about the particular smell, and he'd shown me a giant bottle of orange soap he uses to clean up after his team's late-night adventures. The gunpowder ... well, that is a bit obvious.

"Fuck Caiden for doing this to you," Zev growls, kissing me again, too deeply for what is appropriate in an airport.

I smile against his lips. "You don't even know what he did, or that it was him. Also, are you *supposed* to be kissing me, Mr. Closed Relationship?"

He shrugs, taking my duffle bag from me against my protests. "Rosemary has given us a pass. She knows something has bothered you, and she is starting to understand our feelings for her outweigh those for anyone else. It's slow-going, but we're thinking about using you as a learning curve. You don't mind being used, do you, handsome?"

"As long as I know in advance," I mutter. "As long as it's clearly stated to begin with that it won't crash and burn, taking me down with it."

"You may have burned down, but we'll build you up stronger." Zev loads my duffle bag into the trunk of a cherry red mustang, and I look at him accusingly. He shrugs. "I may have called your sister. She said you have a thing for this kind of car."

"You bought a car because I would like it?" My breath quickens at the thought, remembering how Caiden bought an entire company for me. That thought hurts, so I consciously choose not to think about it. When he doesn't reply, I follow him into the car, buckling in the passenger seat as Zev slides on some mirrored-lensed shades. "You're oddly alert for it to be so long after your bedtime," I comment conversationally.

I gesture to the radio displaying 9 am on the dash. Zev's usual awake hours are from about one in the afternoon to five or six in the morning, so he is up well passed his normal time to be asleep.

The blonde-haired pyromaniac gives me his signature smile, still not speaking. He floors it down the highway, and we both whoop as the numbers on the dash speed to the three digits. His mustang is automatic, which is fine. It just means the engine is shifting on its own rather than the driver forcing it when he wants. Personally, I like to hear it crescendo into a roar, testing the limits before pressing the clutch and flipping that gear, but to each their own.

Plugging my phone into the aux, I shuffle through an Avenged Sevenfold playlist, and Zev belts the lyrics out right along with me. That's the great thing about Zev, he gets me. He'll sing my favorite songs with 'fuck' as every other lyric or about marrying a corpse or just any of their songs that make me feel *something*. Zev doesn't care. He becomes the person I need when I need him, and maybe I'm a little selfish because I don't tell him to stop.

He waits until I'm done belting my heart out before turning the volume down slightly. "So, listen. I know you're on vacation and everything, but I remember last summer didn't treat you so well — sitting at the house all the time." *Fucking constantly*, he doesn't add. "Would you want to come on a few jobs with my team? I know you have the skill, and I don't mind letting you take your anger out on a few people before we finish them off."

The offer is tempting. In the past, I never tangled with Zev's illegal business, choosing to go to the club instead of out with him on his excursions. I know his dealings often lead to murder or serious bodily harm, and that's something Phoenix and I never got into.

Don't get me wrong, the street fights were fun, and setting the police department on fire was thrilling, but I'm no killer.

Could I be?

I'm not sure I want to find out.

"Thanks, Zev. I'll think about it."

19 What?

Caiden Augustus

A man showed up at my office a few hours before five. I vaguely recognized him as one of Phoenix's employees who'd watched me sometimes back when I had guards around the clock and also from the Gala in February.

"Jamison," he'd introduced himself.

He told me he had been reassigned as my permanent guard instead of Vincent.

I didn't know my heart could fracture any smaller.

The rest of the work day had been painful, my lunch break was full of ring shopping with Ashlynn, and I was flying out of my office ten minutes before I was supposed to, too anxious to get home and see what was waiting for me.

It shatters me more.

When I open the door to the apartment, I'm hit with the intoxicating scent of Vincent — not smoke and menthol anymore, but sage and bergamot from the shower products we share. I know he's been here.

Jamison follows cautiously as I practically run through my ridiculously oversized apartment. Who needs so many extra rooms full of nonsense? I just need my bedroom to be right here, so I can see what I already know deep down has happened.

Vincent has moved out.

He's taken every article of clothing, shoes, his half of the Italian soaps, and even his waxing kit is gone from beneath the sink.

He's really and truly gone.

I'm not sure what I would have done if he were here. Everything has been knocked off course so badly, I have no

idea how I would have even explained it. Looking back, I could have told my family that I'm in love with a man, and I could have told Ashlynn I'll support her un-romantically, but the uncertainties still make themselves known. My parents would probably disown me if I came out, and Ashlynn would high-tail to the media if I didn't support her.

I'm ... trapped.

There's also the issue of Vincent and Michele hooking up in an alley. Maybe Ashlynn and my family pulled me into this mess, but Vincent pushed me, too.

My feet drag the tile floor, my shoes scuffing the shiny surface in places. I hadn't taken them off when I came in. I was too distracted.

I enter the living room where Jamison stands awkwardly to the side, unsure what to do with himself, and then my eyes land on something that doesn't belong in here.

It's an old CD player from my home office, but I know I didn't put it on top of the piano.

Vincent must have.

Hands trembling and ignoring Jamison completely, I turn the player on and press the button to make it start. Immediately, the beat of drums and aggressive piano riffs flood through the room, the volume having been left all the way up. I don't make a move to soften the song as it blares so loud the downstairs neighbors might complain. It doesn't take me long at all — about the first few lyrics, actually — to realize that this is the song Vincent was teaching himself to play before the carnival trip two weeks ago.

As my mind takes in the lyrics, mulling them over and milking each word for their meaning, I realize I have misjudged the artist completely. His quick hands and raw voice don't stem from aggression like I so hastily concluded. No, these notes and words tighten around me despite the spacious living room, conveying pain and fear and *passion*. The man singing this song is so ardent, I find my own fingers

twitching to press the same keys — to *feel* and *release* everything inside.

The more the song plays on repeat, the more I feel myself relating to the artist. To the pain and sorrow and desperation of his situation.

It's like Vincent is actually here, saying these words to me as I stand too numb to cry. One part reminds me of confessing the fear about us being together physically, from my past that haunts me even now.

The song continues, atrociously loud, as I break from my trance after minutes, or hours, or days, who knows, and I make a dash for my office. It takes only a few clicks in the search bar of my desktop computer before sites start filling the page. I pick the first advertisement, barely even checking to ensure I'm buying the correct thing as I input my card information into the sketchy-looking checkout. Oh well, if that account gets hacked, I have plenty of others.

The sheets print out only moments later, and I'm sitting in front of my piano with papers spread out in front of me before I can even register what I'm doing. I wait, my hands resting in the air, my fingers poised in well-trained perfection over the keys, as the song fades out one last time. When it's quiet, I press the stop button to halt the continuous repeating, and then the song is coming out of my piano.

It's slow going at first, the elaborate riffs and scales hiding alternating sharps and flats, and I perch there, posture impossibly pristine, until there are no more mistakes left to make. I practice the song, obsessively, not until I get it right, but until I can't get it wrong.

Then, I sing.

I'm not a singer by any means. Unlike the original artist of the song, whose voice is gruff and soulful, or Vincent, who sounds as if he should be singing in an old-style lounge with that velvety low of his, my voice is uninteresting. Normal. My tone is relatively on-key, and my range is decent, but I've never been one to draw a crowd from my singing. Still, I let the lyrics drift over my tongue and fall from my lips as my

heart finally loosens its hold on my tears, and slow, wet streaks form down my cheeks before disappearing beneath the collar of my shirt.

One line hits me the hardest, speaking of knowing a relationship was doomed before it even began. Others resonate within me as well, like forgetting the beliefs carved — *engraved* — into my head during my childhood and I picture Vincent saying these words to me.

Even as the joints in my knuckles start to ache, even as my back begins to pinch, even as my fingertips go numb from pressing the piano keys so many times over and over, I continue to play.

I can't quite figure out why Vincent set this out for me, though. *He* left me. Why would he want me to listen to something about us, if he was truly leaving me for Michele? It doesn't make sense.

There are two parts I can imagine myself singing to him instead of the reverse. They speak of past abuse and schemes to make a partner envious. He'd opened up about his past, and he'd used Theo to make me jealous, so I start to wonder if he means this to be for me about him.

It doesn't all line up until I realize all the issues within the story of the song. The artist sings about their love interest baring themselves to him, but leaving on their sleeves like they're still hiding. He talks about how badly he feels after a fight between the two of them. They both know they can't stay together long, yet the other person used someone to make the songwriter jealous. It sounds—

Toxic.

I've restarted the song for what feels like the thousandth time when a hand comes from beside me to wrap firmly around my wrist. Pausing my movements, I look from the sheet music sprawled haphazardly across the stand on the piano and down to the offending appendage. When I do, I notice a slick, red substance smeared across some of the ivory keys as well as my fingers, slowly drying.

My eyes drift up the bare arm attached to the hand, then across the black *Bernardi Security* t-shirt he must have changed into at some point, and finally lock onto Jamison's neutral expression. He doesn't try to make friends, for which I am grateful, simply slides the cover over the messy keys before releasing my wrist.

“Good night, Mr. Augustus.”

He leaves the living room, flicking off the lights so only the city illuminates the path back to my bedroom. Jamison has chosen the guest bedroom closest to the living area, most likely because it is the best vantage to my room and the front door. I'm sure Vincent would have picked that one as well, had he not slept in my bed every night.

I walk into my bedroom, heart feeling weak and sluggish in my throat as I see the obscenely large bed empty of the usual body occupying it. It's as if the loss is tangible as I slide beneath the duvet that still smells like bergamot and sage, and I long to feel something, anything.

Not even my split and bleeding cuticles break through the numbness settling over me.

As fast as I got into the bed, I'm out and digging through my bedside drawer. I've already checked that Vincent took every article belonging to him from my room — and possibly an extra pair of my Calvin Kleins I can't seem to locate — but I search through my side table for the pack and lighter I stashed there a while ago.

The package of menthol cigarettes fits in my hand like it belongs, and I'm already lighting one up as I duck into my bathroom to avoid any smoke alarms. The first drag hits my lungs hard and my heart even harder.

As I slide to the cold tile floor, my back propped up against the large tub, I reminisce on the last time Vincent and I were in here, cutting our hair and *loving* each other, and this morning as we rubbed the delicious smelling Italian soaps into each other's skin, washing thrice to avoid having to leave the comfort of *us*.

I should have known it was too good to last.



“It needs to be soon,” my mother states in my office Thursday afternoon. “The girl will start showing within two or three months, and we all know the tabloids will try to back-date the birth to find the conception date. We need to cover this as best as possible. The wedding should be no later than the 20th of next month.”

Only a month away.

Ashlynn officially finished moving her belongings into my apartment yesterday, and I’ve been holding on for dear life since, my only relief being the office and, hopefully, poker night tonight.

“Now, normally we would do engagement photos and invitations, but this is too soon for all that. No, I think we can make some mock-ups, then release them to the press secretly after the wedding, saying it was a private, intimate ceremony — which it will be, by the way. We’re only inviting the closest cousins, and your father has generously allowed you to use our sanctuary despite the sinful actions leading up to this arrangement. Please, you must come to worship on Sunday. We will pray for you ...”

My cell phone dings with a notification, and I tune out my mother as a text from Theo comes in. I haven’t opened snapchat since Vincent left, unable to see the loss of our streak, so when he messaged me on that application Tuesday, I had Matthew send me his personal number instead. His chat is still unopened, but he hasn’t asked for an explanation.

Theo

Theo

Vincent finally responded to us.

He's fine.

Me

Fine

Theo

Are you going to tell us what happened?

My mother continues to drone on and on about Jesus and Church and sex before marriage, but I ignore her to contemplate Theo's question. Will I tell him? No. They can't do anything about Ashlynn's pregnancy, the blackmail, or Vincent and Michele. What good would it do to tell him? I ignore his question, falling for his first trap instead while changing the subject.

Me

Where is he?

Theo

Based on the snap he sent, Phoenix thinks Vincent is at his ex's.

Phoenix is not happy about it.

So, that's it then. He's run away with the ex who screwed him over so badly the first time — the ex he trashed our relationship for.

Another text comes in.

Theo

Can you take a work call?

Me

My mother is in my office.

A phone call would be mercy.

It shows he's read the message only moments before my new office phone rings. The poor IT guy had to get a whole new one after I destroyed the other by throwing it at the wall.

Giving my mother an excuse about work, and a fake apology, she whispers goodbye as I raise the phone, connecting the call from Theo.

"What's up?" I ask him.

I can practically feel Theo's ever-present smile, that bubbly attitude never gone for long. "Your contract with *Bernardi Security* comes with some tech upgrades, like malware and extra encryption. I can do some of it on-site, but I'd like remote access if possible. Can you have your IT people call me to get it all set up? If you don't mind!" He quickly adds before I can even think to reply. "I can always come spend a few hours in your building instead of at my actual job, but it would be easier if I could—"

"The," I shorten his name, using it to interrupt his rambling. "It's fine. I'll have them call you."

"Thanks." There's a pregnant pause before he lets out a whoosh of air. "Are you sure you don't want to talk to me about—"

I do the only thing I can think of to make him stop, hanging up the phone in the middle of his question. If he keeps pushing, I might just spill my heart out to him.

Thankfully, the rest of my afternoon is quiet, and I stay in the empty office until time to meet the guys at Adam's house.

Normally, I would go home and change into a slightly less formal suit, but I'm trying to avoid Ashlynn at all costs.

This morning, she thought she would make breakfast after taking up my entire bed and snoring all night long. She made some kind of protein pancakes that tasted like shit and dirtied up my kitchen. When Vincent spread flour across the marble countertops during our last weekend together while we made pasta — which is still stored in my freezer — I didn't blink one eye at the mess. When Ashlynn does it, I want nothing more than to yell in her face and kick her out of my apartment.

Jamison drives to Adam's house, apparently already knowing the address, and I'm surprised to see Matthew standing guard on the porch. I climb out of the SUV and make my way to the front door, unsure if Matthew will be treating me as a friend or foe.

He did tell Vincent and me not to hurt each other.

My new permanent guard follows behind me, but one suggestive nod from Matthew has Jamison entering the house before me. I slow my pace, stopping in front of my maybe-friend. "Matt."

"I'll pay you back as soon as I can. I don't want to be in your debt for any reason."

Based on his stoic expression, he hasn't found the half-million dollars I wired into his mother's bank account yesterday. Otherwise, his rage would break through his nonchalant demeanor. Still, I can tell he is unhappy just by his offer to pay me back for the apartment. "I don't want your money, and you don't owe me anything. As your friend, I—"

Matthew interrupts before I can try to correct any bad blood. "Honestly, Caiden, I don't know if we are friends right now. Neither you nor Vincent will tell me what went down, but I can tell it was bad. Until I find out who wronged who, you are both staying out of my life. Not to mention, your dumb stunt with Ibragimov means I am working overtime tonight instead of being at home asleep, so I wouldn't call us *friends*."

That tiny sliver of New Caiden retreats even further back into my chest. Here I am, with someone who has seen the new me and helped me grow in maybe even the slightest way, and he is acting as if we are nothing but strangers again. Old Caiden covers where my insecurities lay, and I straighten my posture more, looking down my nose as my father does to those he disregards. “Nice chatting, Matthew.” I leave him standing there, our mutual glares being the only thing between us until the door closes behind me. I don’t drop the faux confidence as I make my way through the house to the back patio where we gather for poker night.

My friends are already here in their usual seats, Adam in slacks and a loosened button-up and Jackson in a casual t-shirt and jeans. I can’t bring myself to look Phoenix in the face as I walk to my empty chair, but I catch a glimpse of his taught, broad shoulders underneath a black blazer, tattoos peeking out between the collar and his dark hair, which is growing out slightly, curling at the end in a way that reminds me painfully of Vincent — of running my fingers through those dark curls as we rock together under my silk bed sheets.

I don’t say anything as I take my seat, and neither do my friends. Adam deals our chips and the first round of cards like always, still no words spoken.

And we play like that, not speaking. Despite the rounds we lose and the rounds we win, not even a celebration or defeated sigh falls from any of the men surrounding this table. It’s so quiet, almost as if the animals and insects have adopted tonight to sit in silent vigil, I start to think we’re all suddenly void of the ability to speak.

That is, until, my phone on the table rings out loud, and Ashlynn’s face displays for everyone to see. I let it ring and tap the table for Adam to give me another card, but as soon as the chiming is over, it starts right back up again.

“Your *fiancé* is calling,” Phoenix grumbles. For him to be the first one to break a period of silence, I know something must really be bothering him. Perhaps it has something to do with Tessa or something to do with Vincent leaving his job high and dry to be with his ex. Either way, I finally let my eyes

settle on his face, shocked to see the rage dancing like fire beneath his dark onyx eyes.

“She’s fine,” I snap.

“I thought you weren’t even with Ashlynn anymore,” Jackson pipes up, folding his perfectly good hand to center his focus on me. His shaggy blonde hair flutters in the soft wind, whipping and curling the strands in a twisted version of Vincent’s hairstyle.

I ignore that resemblance and place my next bet before responding. “What gave you that idea?”

Adam pauses his dealing, one card extended face down in Phoenix’s direction. His chocolate-colored eyes meet mine with curiosity and something akin to accusation. “You told us in Italy when Gaia called you on your hickeys. You can’t tell us you don’t remember.”

Damn it to hell, I *do* remember. I remember everything about our trip to Italy so vividly I start to wish for some type of mercy from the memories, some amnesia to save me from the ache inside. Worse than a bullet wound to the chest, that pain. I’d hoped they would have forgotten about that. It would make the lies easier. “I’m with Ashlynn,” I state defensively.

“But *why*?” Jackson continues. He opens his mouth as if to say more, eyes darting around the occupants of the table, before hesitating. He seems to change direction. “She’s awful.”

As if to supplement his words, my phone rings again. With an aggravated sigh, I throw my cards onto the table without even checking them first, then bring the phone to my ear while simultaneously answering the call. “What?”

“You can’t speak to me like that,” Ashlynn’s nasally voice whines over the phone.

“What the fuck do you want, Ashlynn? I’m busy.”

A sniffle sounds out. “I can’t put the crib together. Will you come home?”

I use my free hand to rub at my eyes, pressing against the closed eyelids until I know I'll see black spots when they open. I take a deep breath to push my anger back, but my words still come out vulgar. "Fuck the crib," I seethe quietly into the phone. "Fuck the crib. Fuck the apartment. Fuck you in my bed snoring all goddamn night long. I'll be at *my* apartment whenever *I* damn well please. Let's get one thing straight, Ashlynn. You are not my keeper, and I am only with you for convenience, not because I like you at all — because I *don't*. If you want someone to decorate a baby-room-*whatever* and put together a crib, hire them. It's not going to be me." I hang up on her, slamming my phone onto the table and running my hands wildly through my hair in frustration.

When I look up, three pairs of shocked eyes are staring my way.

"What?" I snap just as viciously.

Adam is the first to speak up, probably relating to my situation the most as I'm sure Koda has been saying all those trigger words in preparation for their child. "Ashlynn is pregnant?" His question is slow, as if waiting for me to cut him off and correct his words.

I don't.

20 The Center Of My Dark, Broken Heart

Vincent Bernardi

LA always did bring out the monster in me.

My fists pound into the guy in front of me, watching through a red haze as he slips further and further from consciousness. Just as he's almost out, I switch to the knife beside me. The low-life gets a break as I use Zev's mini torch to make the silver metal blade red hot, and said owner of that torch bellows a wicked laugh throughout the damp cellar.

"Better tell me now, little piggy, or Handsome is going to make you squeal," Zev jests.

The broken and bleeding man hangs by chains in front of me, swinging slightly from the blows of my hands, his toes dangling just above the ground. He'd stolen some money from Ben's rented-out backroom delegated to the LA mafia, then sold information about some of their not-so-legal shipments to a local rival gang. Ben, Zev, and III — the aforementioned mafia, referred to as 'Tri' — had lost quite a bit of money from that, and they've come to collect.

Well, Zev has. Ben is the front face of their business, never to be caught doing anything that would make him look dirty in the publicity of the LA upper class. He's known only as a straightforward man owning a chain of clubs throughout the city. For the most part, they are free of any crime — the BDSM club for sure — but one or two harbor illegal activities amid the vibrant nightlife, which is where Ben and Zev make their fortune.

They work closely with the III mafia, who in turn provides them with protection. Not as members, but as business partners. They allow the crime to go on for a profit of the money, but when that's threatened, Zev enforces repercussions

on some of the less-loyal members, making sure they know exactly who they are dealing with.

It took me only a week to finally agree to accompany Zev on a job, and I've been doing more and more since. I never realized how therapeutic it is to take your anger out physically on someone else, not in a mutual fight, but totally and completely ruining them because they deserve it.

The high is almost as good as a pack of smokes.

A pack of smokes is almost as good as Caiden.

I force that thought away, hiding it deep below the aching hollowness in my chest, right underneath the blade that has been lodged in my aorta since I left New York.

When the knife is red hot, I kneel down and let the tip slide along the man's bare, dirt-crusted toes. "This little piggy went to the market," I murmur.

With a sinister grin, Zev joins in, chanting the old nursery rhyme loudly as I slide the burning knife along the knuckles of this guy's lower appendages. Zev forms the words in a sing-song, pausing plenty of times for the man to fess up. "This little piggy stayed home ... This little piggy had roast beef ... This little piggy had none ... And *this* little piggy cried—"

An ear-splitting howl reverberates around the empty concrete room, and Zev laughs as a severed pinky toe rolls toward him along the floor.

I feel the darkness in my heart expanding, leaking guilt into my bloodstream. That guilt mixes and boils into an excruciating poison I feel throughout my entire body. Doing this — hurting someone so badly — is the only thing that has made me feel *anything* at all these past two weeks, so I keep doing it. It overruns the numbness with a pain that reminds me of what Caiden had done, and how I had reacted.

Maybe I overreacted, but Caiden hasn't even tried to contact me.

"I can't hear you," I antagonize the guy, who is now muttering incoherently after several minutes of screaming. Standing in front of him, I hold his chin and make him look at

me as I tap my ear with the tip of the knife. The steel *dings* against the new daith hoop in my ear which sits in line with the cartilage piercing. It catches on the knife, adding physical fuel to the pain I already feel emotionally. This. This is when I feel *something* now that Caiden is gone. “What did you say?”

Looking at my partner, the man groans out a name before spitting blood onto the floor at Zev’s feet.

I watch Zev’s blue eyes, waiting to see if that is the answer he wants. When he nods, I know we are done with this guy, so I drop my knife, letting it clatter to the concrete floor. Zev opens the shackles and the man falls to the floor with a painful moan.

“Come on, handsome,” Zev holds a perfectly clean hand out for me. He’s in a crisp, all-white suit, not a drop of blood or speck of dirt on him. He looks like an angel, whereas I’m dressed in all black — combat boots, skinny jeans, and an oversized, sleeveless shirt that shows off my arms and sides. Across my tan skin is blood, splattered everywhere, and dirt coats my knees where I tussled while getting the guy restrained enough to bring him here. My knuckles are covered in blood, but all of it is from whatever-his-name-is. “Let’s go.”

Taking his hand, I let Zev pull me in for a quick kiss. He and Ben have both been very respectful of my reluctance to be intimate, only sharing kisses and touches as far as I will let it go and backing off as soon as I say our safe word. It has been more often than old me would have ever used it, but I’m not old me anymore.

There’s a shuffling sound behind me, and I spin around in time to avoid a sloppy swipe of my discarded knife by the man who previously lay prone on the floor. He’d snatched it up and lunged in desperation, but I’m quick to move both Zev and myself out of his reach. I roll my eyes at the man’s attempt, then my gaze falls on Zev.

His icy eyes are consumed with rage. Before I can think to stop him, Zev’s pulled the gun from my waistband at my lower back. He fires once, and a bullet whistles through the air for half a second. It lodges itself in the middle of the man’s

forehead, and he slumps to the floor immediately, glassy-eyed and not breathing.

This isn't the first time I've seen Zev kill. He's been upfront and honest with me about his job since we first started fucking, so I'm not surprised at this point. Does it feel wrong? A little, yes. He only goes after criminals worse than him, though. I can't really argue with fewer criminals out on the street.

Now, a drop of blood does stain Zev's suit as he takes my hand once again. "Good riddance. I was looking for an excuse to off him."

I shake my head at his bloodlust, and he leads me from the cellar as a male and female, part of III's clean-up crew, no doubt, pass through the doorway to clean up the scene. From what I've heard, this particular body will be sterilized and weighed down into the river, and they'll give the police an anonymous tip in about six months to sweep it for victims.

When the police are in the pockets of the local mafia, I guess anything is possible if you know the right people.

Zev has taken to letting me drive his mustang, rolling the windows down and blaring the music we both enjoy as I race through the city streets from the warehouse on the outskirts of town. It takes some time before we arrive at their mansion, and I pull into the circular drive after being waved through by two guards stationed at the gate. It's at an hour of the morning that Ben is already gone to his office. Zev and I managed to stay out later than planned, hunting down that guy and having our fun with him in the basement of that warehouse.

As we walk through the large front door, I listen for any sound of Ben or Rosemary still being home. We're both pretty sure Ben is gone for the day, but sometimes Rosemary goes on a jog in the mornings. It seems she's gone, too, as we enter the kitchen to see breakfast already cooked and two plates set aside for us. Two more rest rinsed in the sink, so Ben and Rosemary most likely shared breakfast before going their separate ways.

I hop up onto the oversized kitchen island, bringing a plate of eggs and bacon into my lap to devour. Most of our mornings are like this, except for when Ben has a day off work or Zev doesn't have a job to do at night. When we're all home, we cook and eat breakfast together.

Rosemary is a sweet girl, and she has been completely understanding with me here. We talk as friends every now and then, she doesn't seem to mind when Ben or Zev kiss me, and there has not been any animosity. Even when Ben invited me to sleep in their bed — the largest bed I've ever seen — Rosemary was all for the idea as well. She understands that I don't see her in any intimate way, and either Zev or Ben sleeps between us to reduce any awkwardness.

We look like something else — something indescribable — all four of us sleeping beside each other. I'm reminded again of Ben and Zev's offer to join them last summer, and part of me wonders if I'd like to try to explore that option since I am single again.

My eyes flick up to rake down Zev's muscular frame, taking in the way he has unbuttoned his shirt to reveal the scars along his collarbones. My eyes focus on one I know I gave him, and I recall the vicious fucking we did to make that mark.

Zev carefully sets his plate to the side and slides mine off my lap to join his, resting his large hands on my thighs. He wedges his body between my knees, squeezing his hands slightly. "I know what it means when you look at me like that, handsome," he murmurs in a low voice before dipping down to run his tongue along my neck.

We've gotten this far during the past two weeks, but I end up breaking it off each time. This time, though, I'm determined. Grabbing his throat, I tilt his head toward me and devour his mouth with mine. I thrust my tongue in to meet his, the ball of my tongue ring scraping along the ridged roof of his mouth as I shove my wet muscle far back until Zev can't breathe and his gag reflex is trying to trigger.

Only when he lets out a guttural groan around my tongue do I pull back. My fingers are squeezing his neck hard enough I might leave bruises, but neither of us cares. In fact, Zev loves when I take control of him.

As I stare into those blue eyes though, I find myself wishing desperately they were hazel. Sighing, I feel my grip loosen around his throat.

Zev grabs my face tight and kisses me deeply for a moment. Pulling back, he rests his forehead against mine. “It doesn’t have to mean anything,” he breathes.

“What?”

“Fucking me. It doesn’t have to mean anything. You’re so pent up, you need some release. Use me. Take what you need. Imagine I’m Caiden and you’re fucking some sense into me. We’ve been teasing each other for two weeks, handsome. You’ve gotta give me something.” His voice is low and quiet and seductive and persuasive. He knows all the right moves, all the right things to say, *knows me*, and I almost give in.

“I ... I can’t.” I bring my hands up to clasp over his holding my face, but he shrugs me off.

“Then stop playing with me,” Zev grabs his erect length through his jeans, and I can’t seem to tear my eyes away. “Stop leading me on. Stop looking at me ... *like that*.”

I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly dry as I think about thrusting my needy dick into his tight hole over and over again. Maybe a release is exactly what I need right now. “Like what?” I ask huskily.

Zev growls, opening his jeans in a quick movement, then brandishing his very thick cock. He pumps it with a large hand, fist clenched tight just how he likes it. The grip makes his velvety skin bunch up at the tip as he slides that way, then pulls taught as he pulls back, exposing the pre-cum dripping from the end. Zev is always so wet and ready. “Stop looking at me like you want to be gripping me like this,” his voice is almost unrecognizable.

Leaving my gaze on him, I let him jerk off under my scrutiny, knowing he loves it. Finally, I give him what he wants. “Look at you. So hard and wet. That can’t possibly only be from kissing me a minute ago. Did you get hard watching me torture that traitor?” My words feel so hollow, but I’m desperate to play this role, to find some relief, to take my anger out in more ways than cutting off pinky toes and using a body as a punching bag.

Zev grunts, eyes fluttering. “*Fuck, yes.*”

I click my tongue a few times. “That is *wrong*, pet, getting off on watching someone in pain. You’re so fucked up, you know that?” He moans as I reach down to cup his balls in my hand. They’re hot and hard and ready for me. “Who would want someone as fucked up as you?” This is what he wants when he’s with me. Every dark, shit piece of his upbringing makes him yearn for someone to fully trust, but he needs that person to break him down first. I know him — I’ve known him for years and I can name every scar and freckle on his body. Zev is like making *pastina* — a small pasta dish our Ma made any time we felt bad — from scratch, all comfort and muscle memory. It’s easy with him, and I can turn my brain off for a few moments to run on autopilot, instead of the constant aching in my chest.

“Tell me, sir.”

“Someone equally as fucked up — me,” I respond. My hand drifts to my waistband at my lower back, but I pause. “What’s your safe word?”

Zev halts as well, and he opens his blue eyes to meet mine. “Water.”

“Do you trust me?”

“I trust you.”

I smirk. “Do you want me?”

“*Fuck, yes.*”

Having his permission to continue, I wrap my hand around my gun and pull it out, pointing it directly at Zev’s forehead, only inches away. South of our waists, Zev’s cock stands high

at attention. North of it, my gun. Everything else is empty space between us, but we couldn't be closer right now.

“Strip.”

Gun to his head, Zev follows my orders perfectly, except for one thing.

I cock the gun. “What do you say?”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

When he's naked before me, I leave the gun pointed at him as I roam my eyes over his defined muscles. He's gorgeous to look at — scars and all. “Good, pet. Now, go to the bedroom and get yourself ready for me. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Zev walks off, staggering slightly due to the erect cock bobbing between his legs. When I'm sure he's out of earshot, I take my time to empty the clip and chamber of the gun, wipe it down with some vodka from the cabinet to sterilize it, then tuck it back into my waistband, bullet-less. I slowly walk to the bedroom, opening my jeans and pulling my dick out on the way, pumping it until I'm as hard as I know he is.

Taking my gun back out, I swipe some of my pre-cum down the barrel. When I enter the bedroom, I see Zev lying across the bed in a way that leaves him completely exposed to the doorway. His eyes devour me stroking my cock, and I watch him stretch his hole with two lubed-up fingers.

“You just killed that guy with this gun,” I muse, showing him the slick barrel. “And now it's covered in my arousal. See?” I pause and let him take in the pre-cum sitting on the metal. “Suck it.”

Zev groans out a quick ‘yes, sir’ before opening his mouth and taking my gun like it's my cock. He licks and sucks until I'm almost coming into my hand. Once it's clean and I'm tired of the games, I rip the weapon from his mouth and toss it aside.

“Get up,” I growl, and he obeys perfectly. He kneels in the middle of the bed, but I pull him until his knees are almost

falling off the edge. I take off the rest of my bloody and dirty clothes before joining him on the bed, behind him and in between his calves. He's already left a condom on the bed beside us, and I make quick work of opening the wrapper and sliding the latex down my length.

I look at Zev kneeling submissively before me. Lube drips from his crack, and I know he's added extra to make sure I go in nice and quick.

I do.

With a hiss, I bury deep inside his ass, and Zev roars out at the delicious intrusion. "Does that feel good, pet?"

"You feel so fucking good, sir," he moans.

With one hand around the front of his neck and the other pumping his cock, I start thrusting furiously into his tight hole. His words come back to me, and I imagine I'm fucking Caiden into submission. He's angry about something, denying his sexuality, and I'm fucking him so hard his thighs are trembling. It's enough to bring me to the brink.

I slow my strokes to check with Zev. "Were you serious about the Caiden thing?"

He nods against my hand around his throat. "Whatever you need, handsome. I'm just enjoying your cock filling me."

Languidly, I pull out completely before thrusting in slowly again. Zev groans as my broad head enters again and again, spreading him anew each time. "Yeah, you like my big cock in your ass, don't you, Cay?"

"Fuck yes, Vinz."

I almost stutter in my movements, not prepared for him to throw that nickname back at me. It doesn't take me long to realize he is playing his part, and I couldn't be more grateful. Once again, Zev is being the exact person I need him to be. "Do you like being my fuck toy?"

"Yes!"

Increasing my pace, I pound into Zev's ass harder and harder, until the only thing keeping him on the bed is my hand

around his throat and my ankles locked around his. I remember back to that day in Caiden's office, the vulgar slur he told those strangers. "Say your a fucking fag, Cay. Admit it. Confess it. Scream it, and maybe I'll let you come." I want him to *vow* his sexuality to me. I want him to want me so bad that nothing else matters.

"Fuck! I'm. A. Fucking. Fag. Vinz! I fucking love you." His words are broken by my thrusts. Each time I bottom out, his lungs dispel the precious air he so desperately sucks in around my hand constricting his throat. He gasps in ecstasy.

I close my eyes, ignoring the blonde hair, gravelly voice, large body, and tight ass Caiden would never let me fuck. "I. Love. You. Cay," I mimic how his voice paused at each thrust, and my thighs start to burn at my rough fucking. My balls slap his skin with every harsh movement, and I groan at the feeling.

Zev clenches his muscle around my cock, and I shudder. He feels so fucking good, and I can feel the pleasure building. He moans, head tilting back on my shoulder as I tighten my grip on his throat. The sound of the front door closing catches my attention, though I don't think Zev notices. I slow my pace.

Waiting, orgasm stalled for now, I watch over Zev's shoulder as Rosemary appears in the doorway, looking like she just got back from a run. Her auburn hair is knotted high on her head messily, and she's only wearing a sports bra and tight leggings, leaving no curve to the imagination.

We have permission to be doing this, but I still watch her with caution in case she goes into a jealous fit of rage or something. To my surprise, she devours Zev's exposed body with her eyes, and her cheeks flush.

Adjusting my hand so I'm holding Zev's chin, I make him look at the door. "Does your girlfriend enjoy watching me fuck you, pet?" I don't know how Rosemary would react to me addressing her directly, so I aim my question in Zev's ear, testing the waters.

He takes the bait and runs with it. "Rose, get over here and suck my dick," he commands to her in a voice he doesn't dare

use with me. It's dominant and forceful, similar to how I speak to him, and I'm impressed by how easily he switches between the two as he turns seconds later to beg me to fuck him harder.

I soften my strokes enough that Rosemary can kneel on the carpet beside the bed, spreading her mouth wide as Zev's thick cock slides in against her tongue. Women are not my thing, but the way Zev groans in pleasure has me picking up my pace again. I've edged thrice now, but I hold back even more so Zev can enjoy the mouth around his cock. "Does she feel good, pet? Is her hot little mouth swallowing you like I would?"

"She's ... learning," he grunts between my thrusts and Rosemary's bobbing.

"Can I tell her what to do?" I ask quietly in Zev's ear.

Zev groans at my suggestion, stopping Rosemary's movements with his hands in her hair until she looks up at him. "Rose, listen to what Sir has to say, and do exactly as he instructs. It's going to make me come so hard. Don't you want that?"

"Yes, Z," she says like a perfectly submissive, then looks up at me. "Yes, sir?"

I slowly fuck Zev as I give her orders. "Take off your sports bra, so Z can admire you bare." She does, and Zev breathes shakily, his hands twitching to reach for her. "You can touch her, pet."

Zev immediately starts fondling her breasts, and I lean down to bite his shoulder as my balls tighten with the intense need to come. I don't give in to the urge, though.

"Rose, open your mouth, tongue out. Let Z's fat cock slide in and out over your tongue until he comes all over your face and down your throat. Do it. Now." I can see the hesitation as I make the demand, so I address Zev again. "Does she have a safe word?"

Zev grunts out some type of flower and she murmurs it, too. Her nervousness worries me, so I back off.

"Rose, do you want to use your safe word?"

Zev comes out of his being-fucked stupor long enough to grab her chin and make her look at him. “Tell Z what’s wrong,” he demands.

“What if I do it wrong?” Her soft voice echoes through the room. The only other sounds are our heavy breathing and the slick noise of my dick pumping in and out of Zev.

He strokes a thumb over her full lips. “I’ll tell you, and we’ll fix it. Do you trust me?”

“Yes, Z.”

“Do what Sir says.”

I slide leisurely in and out of Zev’s ass as Rosemary hesitates again. “If she doesn’t want to use her safe word, then she better listen when we tell her to do something. Punish her.” Zev moves before I even finish, slapping his hand across one of Rosemary’s breasts. He smacks the peak of it, across the top and her nipple, and I’m sure it leaves a delicate sting.

Rosemary listens then, opening her mouth as I told her to, and I start thrusting with more force in a way that has Zev’s body teetering forward dangerously on the edge of the bed. One hand now free, I clutch at the bedpost beside us, trying to keep our bodies from toppling over onto Rosemary. Zev’s dick slides in and out of her open mouth, dragging along her tongue and going deep enough she gags. To her credit, she doesn’t pull away at the muscle spasm, but that might have something to do with Zev’s death grip on her scalp.

“Relax your throat,” I grunt to her helpfully. “Like you’re going to swallow water with your mouth open.”

There’s a little resistance with Zev’s body, our rhythm stuttering as he groans. “Fuck, she actually swallowed me down.”

“Save it for next time,” I snap. “Just let him fuck your mouth now.”

If possible, Rosemary extends her tongue even further out so it reaches down passed Zev’s base as he slides in and out.

“Cup his balls.”

She obeys, and I feel Zev start to tense everywhere. His thighs are already shaking, and I fuck him harder toward his climax.

“You feel so good quivering against me, pet. I love pushing your body to its limits.” To back up my words, I coat my index finger in a mess of saliva before pulling out of Zev and pressing the digit against the head of my cock and long the length. I slide in again, filling him even more with my finger and my dick. A few more thrusts, and Zev is coming so hard his release shoots all across Rosemary’s face and down her throat.

I grunt, pushing him down until he has to catch himself on Rosemary’s shoulders. Hopefully, she can hold him for a minute because I thrust relentlessly into Zev’s tight ass until I’m coming hard into the condom with a shout.

Ripping the condom off, I collapse onto the bed on my back, and Zev and Rosemary follow soon after. He places her on his other side, away from me, and begins fucking her to climax with his fingers.

I lay there, staring at the rotating ceiling fan and realizing why I haven’t been quite able to settle down to sleep comfortably at night. That ceiling fan has been on every night, softly clicking continuously just like Caiden always said they do.

My mind may be a wave of orgasm-induced happiness, but my heart aches more than ever.

Fucking Zev didn’t help at all. Hell, it’s made me worse. It’s like I’m physically sick, so I do the only thing I can think of to help.

I push every emotion down, down, down, far away into the center of my dark, broken heart, hoping it won’t come back for a long, long time.

21 Am I okay?

Caiden Augustus

“Ivory or eggshell?” Ashlynn holds up two different pieces of fabric as if I want to look at them.

I try to take a swig from the beer bottle between my fingers, only to find it already empty. Depositing the glass on the table beside the other three, I pull a new one from the box at my feet. “I don’t care.”

Ashlynn’s nose, a small thing she picked out by herself, crinkles in my direction. She’d borrowed some money from me two years ago to get the nose job she’s so proud of, and I regret giving her the cash. From the fillers in her cheekbones, lips, and chin to the botox in her brows and the nose job, she looks every bit ready for her close-up, but not too close. No, too close and without makeup, she looks like a twenty-first-century version of Frankenstein’s monster.

Is the plastic surgery that bad? No. The scars from her breast implants are cleverly hidden underneath right along where the skin connects to her sternum, and the fake lash line only looks bad after a few too many days without a touch-up. Anyone would be lucky to have her dangling off their arm like eye candy when she’s all dolled up.

Me? I do not.

To me, Ashlynn isn’t a pretty thing to show off in front of others. She’s a leech, latched on and draining me for every drop without care about where she’ll get her fix when I’m gone.

“You’re going to get a beer gut before the wedding at this rate, Caiden,” Ashlynn snaps. “You won’t fit in your suit, and then what would we do? You can’t be fat in our wedding pictures.”

Oh, don’t worry, Ashlynn. I won’t get fat. You actually have to eat in order to gain any weight.

These last eighteen days — yes, I'm counting — have been torture from all directions. Not only is Vincent gone, but Ashlynn is in his place, Jamison doesn't let me touch the elevator buttons, I've fucked up two major pitches, my friendships are in shambles, and I can't seem to eat anything other than toast and beer. I've definitely dropped some weight already, not that I really needed to. I've always been lean and healthy, my muscles worked enough to keep my partners happy, but now my ribs are more prominent on my sides, my cheeks more hollow. The dark circles under my eyes don't go away, and I don't sleep well at all.

I'm a wreck.

Trying for any reason to leave Ashlynn's presence, I check my phone for notifications. As usual, there aren't any, but the date displayed on my screen has me tensing. How did I go the whole day at work without noticing? Probably because I've been an absolute zombie, going through the motions like a copier spitting out reams of paper.

I stand abruptly, trying not to sway on my feet. The beer combined with little food hits me harder than I originally thought it would, and now I'm slightly regretting it.

Not that realizing the date this morning would have stopped me from tucking the silver flask into my inner jacket pocket for work today, but maybe I would have gone straight to my new destination after work without stopping at my apartment first.

Even though I thought I was in for the night, I'm still wearing my work clothes except for the vest and tie. My jacket lay discarded on the couch beside me, and I quickly slide it on over my loose sleeves. I've taken to wearing sleeve garters due to the extra fabric that bunches around my biceps now. Not what the garters are supposed to be used for, but it helps prevent the loose material from scrunching up beneath the arms of my jacket. The top few buttons of my collar are undone and my shirt is barely tucked in anymore, but I still totter through the living room, passed my dead plant, and toward the front door.

“I’m leaving,” I inform Ashlynn in passing, hoping to avoid hearing her voice.

It doesn’t work. “Where are you going? We have to pick colors!”

“I don’t care about colors!” I shout back at her.

Jamison appears in the hallway, clearing his throat, then coughing slightly before speaking. “Are we going somewhere, Mr. Augustus?”

“I’m going out” I snap. “Accompany me if you must.”

My bodyguard pulls on his holsters, wincing slightly at the movements. Old me — well, old me as in with-Vincent me — might have asked him what’s wrong, but I don’t. I just impatiently wait for him to grab the car keys before we leave a fuming Ashlynn alone in the large penthouse.

“Where to?” Jamison questions as he starts up the SUV.

“Just turn and drive,” I grumble, resting my head against the window. “I’ll tell you when to stop.”

There are flower shops on practically every street corner in New York. He’ll pass the right one eventually.

The setting sun bleeds deep yellow across all of the tall buildings full of windows, something I used to love about this city, but now it seems too bright ... too good. I close my eyes and try to keep my stomach from turning at the movement of the car. When I open them, we’re a few blocks away from my apartment, and my usual corner store is just ahead.

“Pull over here,” I gesture for him to pull into an empty spot, a lucky find in a place like this. Jamison insists on following me into the store despite how quick of a trip it will be. As we walk in, an older woman greets us without looking away from her arrangement.

“Welcome to Mae’s.”

I simply stand at the counter and wait for her to turn to me, not speaking.

Mae finally finishes her order, walking it to the far counter before giving us her attention. As her light eyes, surrounded by crinkles giving away her age, meet mine, I see the recognition cover her face. “Oh, honey,” she murmurs, and that’s all she says.

I’ve been coming here for the last eight years, and Mae has seen me at my best and my worst. Sometimes there are six months between my visits, sometimes less, but I always get the same thing.

It takes her only a few minutes to put together the bouquet, and then she is handing it to me. She may not know my name or why I get these flowers, but she knows my order and she’s seen my pain. She’s seen the days I can’t quite look myself in the mirror — the days I leave a ginormous tip to make myself feel better about the money burning a hole in my pocket. That money can buy everything except the only things I ever want.

It’s quite the pattern, the way I always lose people I love.

Today is the worst Mae has seen me, and she doesn’t need to tell me that to my face. I see it in her eyes, so full of sorrow for me.

I tip generously.

Back at the car, I give Jamison a generic description of where we are going, and he drives.

He drives until we’re pulling over in what feels like the middle of nowhere and the sun has set passed the trees. I don’t give him a second glance as I step out into the light rain that has started in the New York City dusk.

I walk that all-too-familiar path down the concrete and through the bright green grass until the headstone looms in front of me.

Over the last twelve months, I’ve gotten so used to thinking of Caroline’s death as eight years ago. It’s nine now.

Well, as of four days ago.

My family gathers on the anniversary of her death to visit her grave every year, so the flowers are still fresh when I set

mine down with them. I don't participate on the anniversary of her death, though. I can't bring myself to do so.

No, I visit on the anniversary of the day I ruined my soul for life — the day I missed my little sister's funeral.

That's me, Caiden Augustus, letting people down before and after death, fucking everything up in between.

Jamison stands off to the side, giving me privacy as I sink to my knees on the wet ground, not caring about my suit. I slide my hands through the blades of grass and push against the earth above my sister's grave as if I can somehow embrace her from six feet above.

Her gravestone has an angel carved into the expensive marble. What I wouldn't give to be that angel watching over her all day and all night, protecting and caring for her like I should have when she was alive.

My weight falls onto my heels as I kneel before Caroline's grave, head hung low, and emotion begins to flow before I can think to get a grip on it.

"Everyone always leaves me," I sob to her. "And it's always my fault."

My sister's leukemia wasn't my fault. No, that was 'God's will,' as my parents said when she was diagnosed. When they finally agreed to let me test to see if I could help her, they said it would be God's will for me to donate my bone marrow or not, and by some miracle — I guess God's — I was a match.

But it was my bone marrow that killed her.

The doctors say infection is the most common complication of a bone marrow transplant, and that Caroline was too stubborn to tell us she was sick until it was too late.

My parents say my donation killed her because I was enveloped too deeply in sin.

I can't believe I almost forgot to visit her today.

The tears streak down my face, unrepressed, and slide down my neck and into the collar of my shirt. They're thicker and warmer than the soft rain falling from the sky, but I

pretend I can't tell the difference — pretend I still appear strong on the outside. I can't keep it in; I can't contain it. Being here is like bringing a cigarette to a flame, lighting the chemicals, and drowning my lungs in smoke. It hurts. It's too much. Everything is too much. Everything that could have gone wrong in my life has, and now I don't know what is left for me. I sob. "Tell me it's not my fault," I beseech the undisturbed earth around my blubbering, longing for my little sister, the little girl who was the light of my life for years before she was stolen from me. She was my confidant, my friend, the only person who knew me better than I knew myself. I relied on her until I couldn't anymore.

Just like Vincent.

"Tell me it isn't my fault our parents are the way they are. Tell me it isn't my fault *I* am the way I am. Tell me there's nothing wrong with me," my voice falters into a broken whisper at the end.

"I'm a liar and a sinner, Caroline," I confess to her once I've gathered myself once again, as well as I can at least. "Homosexual, and lying to the man I love, the people I love — Vincent, our parents, my friends, *everyone*. I've fucked it up with all of them in one way, or another, or every way possible, I don't know. There's no hope left for me. The one time I'm happy since you're gone, and it wasn't made to last. Just like you weren't made to last, kiddo." My nickname for her slips out before I can stop it, and I have to bring a wet, dirty hand up to cover my mouth, stifling a loud sob.

"Ashlynn, the wedding, the blackmail ... Maybe it is my penance."

I sit there until the cold seeps deep into my bones and the rain sinks beneath my clothes. I'd sit longer if Jamison's wracking coughs didn't get closer together and more violent. Honestly, I had forgotten about him up until I notice how serious his condition is. He's a good distance from the grave where I sit, possibly out of earshot or possibly not. I find that I don't care at this moment.

“Come on,” I stand and address him. “Let’s get you to a clinic.”

Through a coughing fit, Jamison waves his hand as if dismissing my words. “No, don’t worry about—” He breaks off into another slew of coughs.

“Yes, I will worry. Let’s go.”



After a quick (it’s amazing what a little bit of money can do) visit to an all-night urgent care, I drop Jamison off at his house with a diagnosis of pneumonia, which he blames on his four-year-old son. He doesn’t seem mad about it, though he does try to tell me I can’t go to my high school reunion tomorrow night.

Of course, I argue. I graduated ten years ago, and I’m not going to miss out on catching up with a few old friends. I leave with the final word, saying I *will* be going whether I have a temporary bodyguard or not. When I get back to my apartment, it’s later than Ashlynn usually stays up, but there she is, waiting on me.

In some goddamn skimpy lingerie.

Still wet from the rain, mud plastered on my knees, and jacket slung over my arm, I trudge into the kitchen for a glass of water, completely ignoring Ashlynn sprawled across the couch.

Somehow, she isn’t deterred. She sidles up behind me as I press a glass under the fridge spout and starts running her hands all along my back, waist, and ass.

I flinch away. “What are you doing?” I can’t even enjoy my glass of water without her ruining it. With a huff, I slam it down onto the counter and run a hand over my face in frustration.

“Are you actually gay or something?” Her nasally voice shrieks out, bouncing off the sleek cabinets lining the kitchen.

My hand freezes for a moment, then falls away from my face to reveal the almost-naked woman in front of me. “What?” I hiss angrily. I must have heard her wrong.

Ashlynn gestures to my messy clothes. “You get home late after going out with Jamison, mud on your knees and hair all messed up, and he didn’t come back with you. Did you two fuck and get in a fight?”

I feel my teeth grind, my jaw working in anger. “I was visiting my dead sister’s grave,” I snap. “Is that all right with you, or are you going to accuse me of fucking her corpse while you’re here?”

She pops her hands up on her hips. “Well, if you aren’t getting any from Jamison, why aren’t you coming after me? I mean, hello,” she drags out the last syllable while gesturing over her body. “I’m practically naked here, and I know I’m hot. Is this about that time in the car? Sometimes older guys have trouble, you know. We can get you a prescription.”

“Will you just *shut up*,” I beg her slowly, my words short and staccato, really not wanting to talk about how much I don’t find her attractive anymore. I rub at my temples, but her voice still pierces my brain like a child asking ‘why’ over and over again.

Fucking annoying.

Raising her chin, Ashlynn spreads her arms wide as if challenging me. “Fuck me, and I’ll shut up. I’ll leave you alone for the rest of the weekend.”

“Are you serious?” I ask with a deadpan expression.

“Yep. Just you and me and some good ol’ sex. You’ll remember how much you love this pussy and come crawling back. I’m sure of it.”

“And if I don’t?”

She smirks. “My friend at the paper gets the picture of you holding hands with that guy. The rumors will spread like

wildfire.”

“Is this how our marriage is going to be?” I question her. “You’re just going to blackmail me every time you want some dick?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

After a moment of silence and lots of glaring, I finally narrow my eyes at her. “You don’t come to my class reunion tomorrow *and* you leave me alone for the rest of the weekend. That’s my offer.”

Ashlynn gives me a full-blown smile that makes my lip try to curl in a grimace. I look away. “Deal! Where do you want to do this? Counter, couch, balcony?”

I grit my teeth. This seems like a very bad idea, but I’m desperate for some peace from her incessant nagging. It’s not like I’m in a relationship right now, so it’s not cheating.

No matter how guilty I feel.

“Bedroom,” I growl, already planning how I can make this play out in my favor. “Take the box from underneath the bed, set it out, put on the blindfold from inside, and wait for me on the bed with your ass in the air. Go.”

She giggles and pushes up on her toes to kiss my cheek. “Yes, Daddy,” she tries to say sexily, and I have to keep myself from visibly recoiling. I’ve already told her how much I hate when she says that.

As she bustles off, I’m forced to figure out what to do with my currently flaccid dick. The thought of fucking her makes it even more lifeless, and I curse to myself.

Think, think, think.

Then it hits me.

I free my phone from my pocket, unlocking it with my fingerprint before flipping through my saved pictures. There are quite a lot in the folder I’ve dedicated to Vincent, but the ones I’m searching for are at the very bottom since they’re the oldest. I silently curse myself for never recording one of our intimate moments. In the past, I liked capturing the movement

of my dick entering and exiting my partner, but I never thought to do it with Vincent. He was always *there*, and I didn't need to refer back to a video when I got lonely.

Vincent's body comes into view as I open the first image. It's one of the pictures he sent in Italy the night of Gaia's bachelorette party, and I've thought about it a lot since then. He's leaned back on his bed, shirtless, black jeans riding low, the waistband of his boxers peeking through, and a black tie flows as smooth as silk over his tight abs. His hand is over his crotch, groping, and I mimic that movement on myself.

Almost immediately, my dick perks at the attention. Sixty seconds ago, it didn't want to do anything, but open a picture of my ex-boyfriend, and I'm well on my way to fully erect.

I pump my hand along my length a few times as I devour this picture with my eyes, then I let them flutter closed to recall the feel of his hot mouth sliding up and down my shaft. I grunt, balls tightening with the need to come already. Fuck, it's been two and a half weeks, and I am nothing but pent-up frustration.

I don't want to stop, but I have to if I want to get this deal over with. Tucking myself back into my pants as best I can, I lock my phone screen and make my way to the bedroom.

Ashlynn left the light on, so I flick it off as soon as I walk through the door. The only visibility comes from the city lights drifting in the windows, and I can only see an ass in the air on the bed, her feminine features almost completely cloaked by the darkness.

This might be easier than I thought.

Staying quiet, I hope Ashlynn takes the hint to do so as well. I feel around in the box for the items I've planned, pulling out each one and lining them up on the bed. Usually, I'd ask how she wants it, but this time I don't care. She wanted me, so I get to choose what we are doing.

I grab the gag first. "I'm going to gag you to shut that mouth of yours up." I don't even have to play a role for this part. Her silence will be music to my ears.

She goes to respond, but I put the gag over her mouth before she can. She isn't restrained, so she can pull away if she really wants.

"Now," I press a button on a vibrator, letting the sound buzz into the quiet room. "I'm going to put this in your cunt to shut it up, too." It slides in easily enough, and she groans. With her feeling good for now, I focus on my pleasure.

After rolling on a condom, I pick up the bottle of lube and cover my fingers thoroughly. Without warning, I plunge one finger into her asshole, and she recoils with a shriek.

A moment later, she settles and wiggles her ass back, relaxing into my fingers like she's familiar with this position. Good, that makes this so much easier.

I don't spend a lot of time stretching her. She's relaxed and squirming from the vibrator shoved inside of her, so I quickly add a second finger, scissor them to stretch her hole, then a third until I know I won't have to worry about her tapping out from discomfort.

My mind races far, far away from this bedroom. I'm in Italy, I've found Vincent, I'm holding him, and I'm never letting go. My fully hardened length slides into him as we whisper sweet nothings in each other's ear, but I'm not having that for long. He had the audacity to cheat on me, to leave me without an explanation, and that isn't something he can simply get away with.

I bottom out in his ass, all the way to the base until my balls are pressed almost too tight between us. When I swivel my hips in a circle, I can feel the vibrations on the other side of that inner wall. The appeal is there, the wonderful feeling buzzing against the bottom of my cock, but it only serves to remind me this isn't Vincent I'm fucking right now.

I shove that thought away.

Baring my teeth in a vicious snarl, I grab the hips in front of me, pulling out slowly before slamming in hard enough that the person under my hands groans loudly. I fall back into my fantasy as I fuck Vincent savagely. I pound into him hard

enough that he knows this is a punishment — punishment and pleasure all mixed together in an explosion, burning my muscles and bringing sweat to my skin. I think of Vincent and the way he likes to lap at the rolling sweat as it falls between my pecs, that tongue ring hot against my skin. *Fuck.*

Eighteen days of pent-up emotion has my release building quicker than ever, so when the muscles around my dick clench and spasm around me, I slam deep and explode at the same time.

Ashlynn might be writhing and screaming her release, but I don't give two shits about her as I roar, trying to hold Vincent's name back as it threatens to erupt.

Before the high is gone or my breathing is normal, I pull myself far away from Ashlynn and collapse onto the bed. I remove the condom and throw it somewhere on the floor, letting Ashlynn take out the vibrator and clean herself up without offering any help. She huffs in my direction, but I ignore her and slide under my comforter, waiting for her snores which hinder me from sleeping every night.

As I lay awake staring at the dark ceiling, I tell myself that no matter what she threatens me with in the future, I'll never do that again. It felt wrong, unsatisfying, and somehow like cheating. The hole in my chest aches so badly, I feel a tear slip from the corner of my eye.

A buzzing on my nightstand pulls my attention, and I check my notifications to see a text from Theo, telling me what movie series they're watching tonight. It's another cringe-worthy franchise, and his follow-up text explains exactly why they chose it.

Theo

Theo

Taking a shot any time an actor looks like they are constipated.

Me

Haha. Is that TJ's idea?

Theo

Hunter, but they're basically the same person.

So, yeah.

These last few Fridays, Theo has been texting me their movie night information. Just like tonight, I've snuck out of bed each Friday to go and watch whatever they are. I put it on in my theatre room and lay there getting shitfaced while pretending I'm spending the evening in the presence of my friends and Vincent.

Am I okay? No, not at all.

Am I alive? Barely.

22 Fire Burning

Vincent Bernardi

“Your brother is now calling *me* incessantly, V,” a voice mutters from behind me.

I don’t look back at Ben as I continue watching the scene in front of me, head cocked in interest. The couple who taught me the ins and outs of knife play has returned to Ben’s club, and they are not holding back. Tonight, they’ve brought in different impact weapons, and the submissive is suspended from the ceiling in chains — similar to how Zev and I restrained that man last week. Only this time, the person wrapped in chains seems to be enjoying it.

“So? Ignore him. Zev and I have.”

Ben scoffs behind me, and I feel his hard body press against my backside. He flicks my new daith with his tongue, an achy soreness stemming from that one movement, then nibbles on my earlobe before murmuring. “He’s been calling all night long, and it’s almost daylight. You can’t tell me it isn’t important.”

Since Monday, I’ve engaged in a few more *activities* with Zev and Ben, Rosemary observing or learning as well. I rub at the cigarette burn on the inside of my wrist, remembering yesterday afternoon in bed with Zev. We had to be quiet because Ben and Rosemary were asleep beside us, getting ready for an all-nighter at the club tonight, but that didn’t stop us from having our fun.

Even if, for me, that fun only turns into guilt and self-hatred only minutes after.

Zev and Rosemary are around here somewhere, enjoying themselves. Ben was with them, but apparently, he has now come to feel me up while talking about my brother.

“Sorry, V,” Ben kisses my neck and before I have a chance to question him, I feel the flat surface of a phone against my

ear.

“Ben, are you there? I need to talk to Enzo.”

I roll my eyes at Phoenix’s voice, but take the phone from Ben’s hand anyway.

“Hey, no phones allowed,” someone standing beside us admonishes.

Ben, ever the dominant businessman who hates to be questioned, curls his lips in a sneer. “I’m the fucking owner of this club. I’ll do whatever I want, whenever I want, and I’ll have you thrown out just because I want.”

Chuckling at Ben’s ego, I clap him on the shoulder before making my way through the throng of club-goers toward the back where I slip down the hall and into Ben’s office. “It’s me,” I grumble once I’ve replaced the phone to my ear.

“Thank God,” my brother sighs into the phone. “I need you to come back to New York.”

“It’s only been, like, two and a half weeks. Missing me already?”

“No,” he grumbles, but doesn’t provide any more information.

I sigh, sprawling across Ben’s empty desk and staring up at the white ceiling. We’d tossed everything to the floor earlier during certain *activities*, and since this is a night for fun, not work, Ben hadn’t deemed it necessary to clean everything up yet. The desktop, keyboard, mouse, stapler, and random pieces of paper are currently sprawled all across the carpet. The mess that should have been a reminder of a nice time now makes my heart ache.

Caiden would never have left the mess. Hell, I’d have swiped everything from his desk in the heat of a passionate moment, and he’d have complained with that pouty mouth in that slightly higher-pitched whine. I smile as I think of using the line that had become our thing any time he got that way during our love-making. I’d have looked him straight in the eyes, mouth hovering over his exposed erection, and muttered,

“shut the fuck up, Cay,” in the most loving voice to ever fall from my lips.

I shake those thoughts from my head. “Phoenix, you’re going to have to give me a little more information. I’m enjoying LA this time around, and I don’t want to go back to New York right now. In case you forgot, I asked for my year’s pay, which implies I’ll be gone for, I don’t know, a year?”

He grumbles something completely intelligible that I don’t catch, then huffs.

“Big boy voice,” I urge.

“Okay, so it has been a little rough without you. There is an event this weekend for some boy band that has all of my available guys busy, and I have a private client with a sick guard. I need someone to watch that client.”

There are six places void of any texture on Ben’s popcorn ceiling, and I know Caiden would have noticed them immediately. He’d probably yell at the contractors who wouldn’t correct it quick enough, so he would do it himself. In his suit. With a YouTube video telling him how to do it. Caiden loves to do research with videos instead of reading words.

“You cover the client,” I suggest. “Problem solved. Also, why is one event taking up every guard? Even if it’s a popular boy band—” they always have the most crazed teenagers doing anything to get 60 seconds with them, so they usually need a lot of security “—that should only take about 100 guys, right? I know we have 20 more who aren’t on permanent posts in New York right now.”

Phoenix lets out a groan of frustration. “I am lead on the band’s detail.”

That has me sitting up so fast my head spins, and I pull the phone away to stare at it like it has two heads before bringing it back to my ear. “*I’m sorry*, what? Why the hell are you lead on a *boy band* detail?” My brother hasn’t been lead on a job since the president visited New York for a week vacation.

I'd been lead on some other high priority cases as well, but not even I would bother with a boy band job.

There's some walking, a door, and shuffling, then it sounds like the phone has been put on speaker. Phoenix's voice sounds further off as a glass clinks and liquid sloshes. Of course, my brother is always sipping some kind of fancy alcohol whether he has a job tonight or not. "I have been doing *your* job!" He explodes.

"I wouldn't even be lead on that detail!" Unless everyone else was already out. Wait. "Phoenix, where are the other twenty guys who should be available tonight?"

I can practically hear him grinding his teeth through the phone as he grumbles his next statement. "Apparently, I approved their vacation for this weekend."

"*All* of them?" I can't help the laughter that flows from deep in my chest, the sound booming around Ben's office. Something on the other end of the line clatters and coughing erupts. At first, I think it's Phoenix, but I know that baritone anywhere ... "Phoenix, are you with someone?"

The coughing fades out as the phone is removed from speaker. "Just a friend."

I don't have the ability to be mad because the ache in my chest is worse than ever. I know without a doubt Caiden is there with Phoenix. Part of me wishes his sudden coughing fit was due to hearing me through the phone, but I don't let that thought find anything to hold onto. He chose to reduce our relationship to *platonic* and defended himself against being a *fucking fag*, his words.

I shouldn't still love him despite that, but my heart has fallen from my sleeve and is now on display for all to see if they only look closely enough.

"I'll run point at the concert," I monotone. It feels like Phoenix is setting me up to be Caiden's guard for tonight, and I don't want that at all.

I can't.

“Nope. That job starts at noon, and you will never be here by then. Plus, I am already clear on the plan for the band.”

I check my watch. “It’s only four in the morning. I can make it.”

“Time change, *stronzo*. It is seven here. Your flight is five and a half hours. You will not make it in time.”

“Who’s the client?”

“You know.”

“Phoenix, no!” I yell into the deserted office. “I won’t do it. *I can’t!* Please. Don’t make me.” It’s not often I beg or even use the word ‘please,’ so Phoenix has to see how much this means to me. Right?

A door clicks closed from Phoenix’s end of the line, and his next words are muffled as if he is in a closet. His voice is low, deadly. “Is there a single burn or scrape on your body, Enzo?”

Clenching my jaw, I try to focus on anything other than the singing sting on my wrist. Phoenix found out about the burning and knife play after last summer. We’d sparred at the *Bernardi* gym, and I’d taken my shirt off without thinking. The burn marks along my torso were still fresh and stood out like cherries on my tan skin, the small slashes from Zev’s knife like healing pink whiskers. Phoenix flipped his shit, threatened to kill Zev, and tried to take me to the hospital. It took a lot of explaining to make him understand everything was consensual — and I liked it.

Although he was still mad, he was content with me promising to never do it again.

Another promise I’ve broken.

“That isn’t any of your business,” I grit out.

There’s silence, and I start to wonder if Phoenix has hung up. Then, he speaks, still low and growly. “Get back here, or I am going to cut you off. No job, no apartment, *nothing*. Do you hear me?”

I laugh dryly, no mirth to be found. “You think Ben and Zev won’t take care of me? They have more money than you and Jackson Nightingale combined. I can stay here and live my life however I want with men who let me do my own thing. I can express myself in whatever way I see fit here. They *want* me.”

“And who do *you* want, Enzo? If you wanted Zev and Ben, you would have stayed there last year. Do you not want another chance? Do you not want to talk to him?”

“Why do you care? I fell for your best friend and you — what — want me to date him? He’s older than me and, oh yeah, *straight!* You’re setting me up for another Michele, is that it?”

“Damn it, Vincenzo! Do you think he might like you too, just a little bit? I do not know what went down between you two, but I saw him play the piano for you in Italy. That means something! He told us—”

A frustrated, growling yell explodes from my throat as tears threaten to fall from my lower lashes, and I throw my free arm wide in an attempt to dispel the emotions raging inside me. Phoenix thinks he’s so smart. Always the big brother, thinking he knows what is best for me. Not this time. My scream is enough to stop his words, so I can get a sentence in edgewise. “It’s a fucking piano, not a wedding ring — not that a wedding ring really means much to a straight man anyway! Michele was proof of that. Stop thinking you know what is best for me, Fenice. Sometimes, your little brother steps too far out on the ledge, and there is no stopping him from falling.”

Phoenix is quiet for a long, long moment. “Get here. Watch Caiden. Maybe talk to him, or not. I do not care. But he is my friend, and there are still people out to hurt him. If you care or cared about him at all, please, come keep him safe for one night.”



It's raining in New York, and the afternoon, basically evening, sun glints off the windows of the tall buildings, too chipper for my mood. Before everything ended, I'd sometimes look over to find Caiden completely entranced by the flickering light between each pane of glass as we drove through the city. He always seemed so enraptured by the sight that I couldn't bring myself to ever interrupt him, no matter what I'd needed to say to him at the time.

Now, simply remembering those moments sours my already bad mood.

I still have access to Caiden's apartment building, and I park my bike in the underground garage next to an SUV I recognize as belonging to my company as well as Caiden's dark blue BMW beside it. My jaw ticks. If there is a Bernardi SUV here, then obviously someone is watching him right now. Why can't they guard him for the rest of the night?

My internal question is answered as I reach the top floor to find TJ asleep on his feet.

"Hey, man. What are you doing? Why are you sleeping on the job?"

TJ jerks off the wall, half lidded eyes fluttering slightly as he squints to see me. I know he wears contacts, so they must be bothering him based on the way he rubs his eyes like a child does when they're tired. "Fuck, I'm sorry. I did an overnight at the hotel the band is staying in, then Phoenix called me this morning at three to come watch Caiden. He let me sleep inside in a spare bedroom for a few hours, but I'm still so tired. Please, don't fire me."

I shake my head. "I'm not going to fire you. Why don't you get some sleep here? You don't look awake enough to drive."

"And leave me with the she-demon? Hell no, I'll take a cab." TJ looks genuinely concerned, and I wonder to myself if Ashlynn is really that bad.

“He isn’t leaving for the reunion yet,” I furrow my brows. “You wouldn’t be alone with her.”

He rolls his eyes. “Right, because the arguing is so much better.”

Running my hand through my hair with a huff, I look away as I gather my thoughts. “So, what? They just sit there and argue the entire time? What are they doing together?” I try to make my questions as nonchalant as possible, silently praying it works.

“Fly on the wall?” TJ leans in toward me and lowers his voice, using the term we’ve coined for ourselves. As body guards, the rich tend to overlook us as important, spewing their secrets to each other without a care about which member of their security team might be listening. The rumor mill runs rampant through my employees, and I couldn’t be more grateful than I am right now. I nod for him to continue. “Apparently, the girl’s knocked up.”

My chin jerks back in reflex. “Knocked up? He hasn’t been with her ...” I try to remember, but short of that Thursday after poker when I took Caiden and my brother home from the bar, I can’t recall the last time he might have fucked her. Maybe that was it. They were going at it pretty hard in the back seat, but Phoenix was beside them. They couldn’t have really ... Not to mention, there were no used condoms or wrappers in the backseat of the SUV. Well, I guess that actually explains the whole situation.

Still doesn’t explain *why* he is with her. Child support is a thing.

“Wow, that’s ... irresponsible,” I settle on the word, not having anything else to say. Pulling some cash from my pocket, I slide it into TJ’s hand and clasp his shoulder. “Take a cab home. Get lots of rest.”

He blinks down at the money for a moment. “Thanks. And, Vincent? I’m glad your back. We’re all here for you, you know. We’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you guys, too,” I promise, pulling him in for a quick hug. My soul aches to think I ran off without any explanation to my friends whatsoever. They deserve a better friend than me.

TJ trudges off, and I take up guarding outside Caiden’s door, not quite ready to go in and face him. I’m dressed in a black v-neck, black jeans, and black combat boots that don’t really coincide well with the reunion Caiden will be attending later, but all of my clothes are at home. My duffle is still secured to my bike, though it doesn’t have anything suitable either.

Oh, well. Caiden is going to have to deal with an emo-looking bodyguard for the night. He’ll probably take the next two hours getting ready, so there won’t be any time to go by my apartment anyway.

I close my eyes, tilting my head back against the wall across from the front door as I imagine what Caiden is doing at this very moment. Most likely, he’s showering, rubbing his silly-looking silicone scrubber along his fair skin until it’s so full of bubbles he’s forced to rinse it out, only to apply more once he’s rinsed the first set of suds off.

Three times, Caiden will scrub his body. Then his face. Then shampoo and condition his hair.

The corner of my lips twitch as I remember that’s when his horniness kicks in, and sometimes he’ll rub one out after his routine is done. Those jerking movements of his fist will set off beads of sweat from his temple, the nape of his neck, and down the center of his spine. He’ll be compelled to wash again, but at least it’s only his body this time. He doesn’t have to re-wash his hair unless it dries in the process.

Then, he’ll get out of the shower and work on his mirror routine — lotion everywhere (the multiple scrubs in the shower dry out his skin), perfect his hair, and brush his teeth. After that, he’ll inspect his stubble. If it’s too long, he’ll have to shave ... which always leads to another shower.

When Caiden is finally done in the bathroom, he’s totally done. He turns off the light, and if he has to go back in there,

it's to take another shower.

Hopefully, he won't do that because I don't think we have enough time before he wants to leave. If we leave late, it might trigger an anxiety attack.

He'll go to his closet, pick out a matching set of underwear, socks, and a tie, then don them with his suit. That expensive spiced cologne he wears will fill the closet as he sprays it on his hot spots — his neck, wrists, and chest — before he carries his shoes to the front door. He'll be ready to leave, not walking in his socks too long in case they get too dirty to wear.

The door beside me flies open, and my eyes snap wide just as quickly. Still leaning with my head tipped back against the wall, I let my gaze fall upon the heartbreaker himself, and my breathing stutters.

Caiden looks absolutely gorgeous in a dark, dark blue suit and black tie. The smell that wafts across the hall to me hints at not spiced cologne, but mint and smoke and sage and bergamot. It's a delicious, heady scent that has my breaths coming in quicker as I try to soak in as much as I can.

Twelve hours. I have twelve hours with this man.

Will we speak? Will we ignore each other? I haven't thought this far ahead.

“That's what you're wearing,” are the first words he says to me after two and a half weeks. I feel my stomach drop, but my inner walls rise higher than ever to protect me. I can keep my composure, my stoicism, for twelve hours. I have to.

I curl one side of my lip up, letting my straight teeth flash for a moment as I purposefully trail my eyes over his clothes in return. “Oh, look. Blue. Could have guessed that one.”

Caiden used to have an amazing poker face — hell, he plays the game every week — but for some reason, it slips momentarily. In place of the cold, hard Old Caiden, I see my Caiden, hurt and longing to be held. It gives me the briefest glimmer of hope before he slams his emotions in check. “Black,” he observes my clothes. “About as interesting as your

personality, Vincent. Obviously, I wouldn't expect anything less."

What the hell happened to us?

Oh, yeah. He used me as an experiment, then turned us 'platonic' in the same breath as he basically called me a 'fucking fag.'

Idiot Caiden Fucking Augustus happened to us.

"Let's just get this over with," I grumble. "The fiancée isn't coming?"

"Nope. I'm a free man tonight." He starts to smirk at the words, then reigns in the expression. Whatever has him cutting emotion out, I don't want any part of it. If he wants to be miserable with some barely-legal social media influencer, that's all him.

To Caiden's dismay, we end up taking my motorcycle to the fancy school across town. It's only a high school reunion, but we walk in to see they've gone all out with an expensive ballroom, open bar, and decorations that somehow aren't too tacky. It's presented as more of a black-tie event rather than a school reunion, though I catch a photo booth tucked into the far corner with classic 2010s-themed props.

Caiden spends the first hour and a half socializing with various guests. He calls each one by name despite there being about 300 people total, including faculty. Apparently, he attended a private school, which doesn't surprise me one bit.

It's only after they're revisiting the yearbook memories that I realize exactly how popular Caiden was in school. He was the prom king, valedictorian, voted most likely to succeed and most handsome, and even received a special award for donating blood the most among his graduating class.

Of course, Mr. Perfect is always, well, perfect.

I keep my eyes along the crowd as Caiden is called up to be re-crowned next to the woman dubbed the prom queen of this class ten years ago. Slinking along the back corners of the room, I watch for any signs of danger. In fact, I observe everything so well, I'm not even surprised when the man who

has been side-eyeing me for the last half hour approaches from a break in the cluster of bodies.

“Hey, I don’t recognize you. Are you with someone or did you crash this *amazing* party?” The man is tall and lean, like a runner. His hair is sandy brown and slightly curled atop his head in a short mop. If I had to guess — compared to my natural curls — he most likely has a perm. It looks good. Not many people can pull off a perm and keep their hair looking smooth without frying it. His skin is tan and stubble lines his jaw, which leans closer to round than square. He is the opposite of Caiden in many ways, although he is still very attractive. Smooth brown eyes meet my own, and he winks, giving me a boyish grin.

Testing the waters.

“Yes,” I answer the two-part question with only one response.

The man holds his hands up on either side of his shoulders, surrendering. “If you actually think this party is fun, I’m sorry. I can’t associate with someone so lame.”

I snort and roll my eyes. I make sure to keep my client in my sights, but nothing seems life-threatening for him at the moment while he’s standing on the stage and waving like a dork. “You mean, we didn’t all gather to watch Caiden Augustus be crowned prom king for the second time?”

“Dammit,” he snaps as if his plans have been foiled. “You got me. We planned this whole thing with him in mind. Long live the king!” The man raises a cup of spiked punch, hollering his last bit a little too loud.

I’m too busy chuckling at him to notice the eyes glancing our way. He reminds me of a weird combination of Theo and Zev — someone I could talk to easily without any seriousness unless it’s needed.

“What’s your name, Mister Tall, Dark, Handsome, and ... Italian?” He guesses.

I hold my hand out for him to shake. “Vincenzo,” I offer my family name to affirm the Italian question.

His palm slides against mine as we clasp hands briefly. “Myles. I actually spent a semester of college in Italy. Study abroad program.”

Humming in feigned interest, I slip the drink from his hand to take a gulp for myself. It’s a lot stronger than I guessed, and the alcohol hits the back of my throat with a delicious burn.

“I realized after I already started my semester that I really fucked up. I should have gone to France, then I might be able to teach you some French.”

I cough against the liquid sliding down my esophagus. “Not going to lie,” I wipe the back of my hand across my mouth to get rid of any spit that may have come out with the cough. “That was pretty good.”

Myles gives a fake bow, flourishing his hand. “Thank you, thank you. I’m here all night, unless I’m at your place.”

Sipping my stolen drink leisurely, I let my eyes rake over Myles from head to toe, lingering anywhere that seems tantalizing enough under his black suit. It isn’t perfectly tailored like Caiden’s, but he still fills it well enough to see how much he takes care of his body.

Damn, what is in the water here?

Despite his obvious good looks, I can’t find myself focussing on him for too long. He’s attractive, but he can’t hold my attention.

No, someone else claims all of my thoughts, and that man is currently stomping his way toward us with fire burning in his hazel eyes.

23 Why is he here?

Caiden Augustus

As I step off the stage, my eyes sweep the large ballroom in search of the man who has been haunting my dreams.

To my dismay, I find him laughing with the man who haunted my young adult life, passing a cup of spiked punch back and forth like old friends. Before I can even get my head on straight, I'm making a beeline for the pair standing near the wall. Vincent notices me just in time to sober up his humored expression, but I don't let that phase me one bit.

No, I turn my attention to *him*.

Myles, wide receiver and co-captain of our football team my senior year.

And coincidentally, the first man I ever kissed, who happens to be hitting on the only other man I've ever kissed. What the hell?

"Hello, Myles," I greet coldly as I sidle up to the pair. Vincent takes one look at my stiff posture and steel glare, and I see the wheels in his head start turning. "Been a while."

He rubs the back of his neck, cheeks blooming with red. "Yeah, hey, Caiden," Myles' voice sounds as awkward as he looks. "How, uh, how have you been?"

I narrow my gaze on him. "Maybe if you had asked — I don't know — ten years ago, I might have answered. Now, I really just want you to get the hell away from me."

"I knew you were a fucking homophobe," Myles spits, lip curled up, as if defending Vincent from me. *Me*.

I blame my actions on a lot of things. Lack of sleep, constant irritation from the woman taking over my life, a bad breakup, said ex-boyfriend back in town after a two-week vacation where he did who-knows-what with the man he cheated on me with, and, okay, I have to give credit to my

temper. These last few months, I've let my anger swell and crest and break more often than I ever have before. Like now.

One moment, my fist is by my side, and the next, it is slamming into Myles' face. He staggers, then bows up to come at me. As he throws a retaliation punch, I squeeze my eyes shut and prepare for the blow. When it doesn't come, I crack open an eye to see Vincent capturing Myles' wrist before flesh can hit flesh.

Myles turns to Vincent now, rage twisting his features. He tries to throw another punch in Vincent's direction, but the trained guard dodges with ease, landing a blow right to Myles' jaw way better than my attempt.

He goes down — *hard* — drink splashing across the pristine ballroom floor. I'm pretty sure Vincent has knocked him out, and when I see the glint of metal across Vincent's knuckles, I know Myles never stood a chance. A crowd starts to form, gathering in on us until we're a swarm of warm bodies and claustrophobia. My classmates are checking on Myles, asking me what happened, asking if we're okay.

My anxiety starts closing in as well, and I find my breaths coming out quicker and quicker. Ever aware of my particulars, Vincent immediately tunes in to my struggle, sliding a hand into mine, then whisking us far away from the unconscious man, the crowd, the ballroom, and the entire east wing of the school.

We run hand in hand down the halls, through the cafeteria, through the gym, out the side doors, and down the path to the home side of the football field. I'm not sure who is leading and who is following as we make our way to the field house. We're standing outside the locker rooms before I even realize where we are.

My breath is coming out a lot quicker than Vincent's, my head spinning. Between not eating much and smoking cigarettes, I've apparently become even more out of shape.

“Caiden, are you okay?”

I nod, staring at the locker room door, panting. “I’m fine. Myles always was a hot head.”

Vincent chuckles. “You’re telling me.”

Not sure how to reply, I simply try the handle of the door to find it unlocked. Before I realize what I’m doing, I’m already walking down the locker room hallway into the large main room. The showers are on the far side of the room, partially hidden by a half wall we used to hurdle for fun despite the slippery floors.

“Caiden,” Vincent’s voice sounds from behind me, and I can almost hear a bit of a waver in the deep tone. “What are we doing?”

“This is the football locker room,” I gesture wide, refusing to look at him. “This is where the team—”

“That’s not what I mean,” he interrupts me.

This time, I let my eyes meet his, and my chest aches in the way that has become familiar now. “I ... I don’t know,” my voice is a whisper.

Vincent’s jaw clenches, and he looks away with thinly veiled emotions swirling in the depth of his dark eyes. “You are like heaven in hell,” he says finally, voice just as low as mine. “You are like drowning in the clouds, or falling from an ant hill.”

“What does that even mean?” My words are laced with irritation, concealing the desperation that embodies them. My breathing hasn’t slowed, and Vincent’s cryptic words aren’t helping my mess of thoughts. Why is he here? Why would he come back?

He stalks forward, capturing my face in his hands and locking our eyes in a fierce battle for explanations. “You don’t make any sense. You push and pull me, over and over and over again, and I’m the fool who lets you every time.”

“What are you talking about? *I* push you away? You—”

He rips away from me as if I burned him. “I overheard your conversation, Caiden. You told Ashlynn and her parents

that we are just friends — that we held hands ‘platonicallly.’ You stabbed me with that knife, then twisted it even deeper by making sure they knew you aren’t a ‘fucking fag.’ Yeah, I heard all of it! *You pushed me away.* You couldn’t even admit to people who were practically strangers that we were together.”

I’m shaking my head before he even finishes. “Vinz, no. No, no! You don’t understand—”

“Then make me understand!”

“*Then let me talk!*” I bellow over his words, my voice scraping my throat painfully. My outburst leaves him stunned, so I swoop in and speak while I can. “Those weren’t Ashlynn’s parents, they were *mine*. My Jesus Freak parents and my pregnant ex-girlfriend blindsided me in my office *with a picture*. I don’t know how they got it or from who, but Ashlynn had this printed-out picture of Theo and me holding hands *platonicallly* at the carnival. Seriously, of all the kissing we did there, Theo holding my hand is what got out. Yes, the fag comment was abhorrent, but my parents were sitting there and ... and—” I break off, my voice threatening to give out completely.

Vincent reaches a hand out to my shoulder, but I shrug him off. I *need* to say this, even if he doesn’t want to hear it. Even if it won’t change anything.

“I have — had, whatever — a little sister, Caroline. She died nine years ago. The doctors diagnosed her with leukemia, and I was a perfect match to donate bone marrow. I did, but ... *she died,*” my usual baritone cracks like a boy going through puberty. “The doctors said it was an infection, and that we didn’t know until it was too late.” I have to take a steadying breath, and Vincent’s eyes never leave my somber face. “But, my parents said it was my fault. I was too sinful, and it killed Caroline. It was not even a year after the locker room — *this* locker room — with Myles, and I blame myself, too. If my parents found out what I’ve been doing with you ... God, they would never forgive me. They haven’t forgiven me for Caroline, and I don’t know what they would do if I came out, Vinz. *I can’t.*”

“Fuck, baby,” Vincent wraps his arms around me despite my weak protests, and I end up sobbing into his embrace, burying my face in his familiar chest. His heart thrums steadily — if not a bit wildly — under my cheek. “It’s not your fault, Caiden.” He grabs my tear-streaked face and forces me to look him in the eyes. *“It’s not your fucking fault.”*

Vincent’s eyes flicker down to my lips, our faces impossibly close, but I jerk away as he starts to lean closer. “Fuck you,” I spit. “Cheat on me, then cheat on Michele? Just pick someone, Vincent.”

“*What?!*” He practically screams into the room, the single word echoing around.

“I— someone saw you with Michele before you even came back to my office that Monday. You had him pressed against some wall. Your bodies were all squished together, and his hands were on your chest. Then, you break up with me and run off to Italy to be with him. Why are you even back now? You should have just stayed away.”

“Michele—Italy—what?” He stutters. “No, Caiden. Michele cornered me, and then there were gunshots. I moved into cover, which happened to be where Michele was, and I pulled away as quickly as I could. I would have let myself get shot if I knew someone was going to misinterpret that to you. I swear.”

I study him, seeing the sincerity in his hurt-filled eyes. “So, you haven’t been in Italy with Michele?”

“No,” Vincent sighs. “I haven’t been in Italy with Michele.”

“Theo said you were with your ex.”

“Theo got his information from Phoenix, who never understood that Zev and I were never in a relationship. I was in Los Angeles this entire time with Zev and Ben.”

I huff, crossing my arms. “Fucking them?”

Vincent runs a hand through his already wild hair, fingers catching on inky curls. A combination of despair and agitation

rolls off of him in waves before he finally responds without answering my question. “Have you fucked Ashlynn?”

My mouth snaps closed audibly. He gives me a knowing look. I try to defend myself, of course. “I didn’t *like* it or *want* it.”

“Tiny Ashlynn forced herself on you?”

“She blackmailed me,” I admit. “She told me she would spread that photo of Theo and me to the media, and she offered to shut her mouth all weekend if I fucked her. So, I turned out the lights, gagged her, shoved a vibrator up her cunt to shut her up, and hate-fucked her ass while imagining it was you.” The words tumble out before I have a chance to assess if I really want to say them, and I blanch as the spiel ends. I’m so fucking dumb sometimes. This man makes me say exactly what is going through my head, no filter.

Of all things, Vincent cocks a smirk. “Zev let me call him your name, so I could hate-fuck you, too.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Fuck you, Vinz.”

Something akin to a growl escapes Vincent’s chest. “Are you telling me all this has been a fucking misunderstanding?”

No, I’m not. Ashlynn is still pregnant, and I still have to marry her. The threat of blackmail being released to my family and the press isn’t going anywhere, and that isn’t something I can let get out. I can’t be with Vincent the way either of us yearns to be together, but maybe for tonight, we can.

I can give him something.

I walk backwards through the locker room toward the showers, slowly removing my jacket, my vest, and my tie, then unbuttoning my shirt. Vincent watches with dark eyes, lashes lowered and casting shadows over his cheeks. He follows me step for step, ripping his t-shirt off a lot faster than I fumble with my own.

The last button finally comes undone and I untuck my shirt to reveal my bare torso. Vincent’s steps falter momentarily, eyes flickering from mine to my body. He takes in the sleeve

garters on my biceps and my ribs which show a little more prominently now, his jaw flexing.

“I am going to feed you all the damn pasta I can make,” he threatens darkly, and my dick twitches in response. He shakes his head as if to clear it. “We will talk about this later.”

I start to pull my shirt closed once again, self-conscious, but Vincent catches up to me then, forcing me one more step until my back meets the tile divider of a shower stall.

“Don’t you hide from me.” Vincent presses hard against me, the flat of our chests conforming to each other. The only things not melding together are our hips, separated by the growing erections between us.

Vincent captures my lips with his, hands working to get my shirt off around the tight garters. Finally, I wiggle free, small, humored smiles passing between our lips at the slight struggle. I feel Vincent grind his front into mine, and a moan falls from my lips as our erections slide against each other with a friction I’ve been craving for *weeks*. Given the opportunity of my lips parting, he licks into my mouth and devours me entirely. There isn’t a place his tongue doesn’t reach, lapping at the roof of my mouth, under my tongue, across my molars, and I’m a panting, melting mess in his arms. It’s all I can do to move my hands over his body, feeling along his toned muscles, mussing his hair, catching his nipples with my thumbnails, then finally attempting to free his cock from the confines of his black jeans.

His lips leave mine, allowing me to tilt my head back against the concrete wall and breathe sweet oxygen in lungfuls as his mouth descends my neck, drifting across my collarbones. As he focuses on my shoulder, leaving a dark love bite, my gaze lands on his ear through heavy eyelids.

My dick strains painfully hard against my slacks as I lean forward to flick my tongue over the new piercing in his ear. It’s a hoop near the center, and I find I can tease it up with a few skillful movements of my tongue. Once it’s pulled away from his ear slightly, I grasp it gently with my teeth and tug as hard as I dare.

Vincent releases a strangled moan against my skin, so I keep up my work as he does his. Our hips are grinding together, his free erection grinding into the front of my pants. I groan, feeling that pressure build already.

God, I'm going to embarrass myself.

I pull back as Vincent moves his lips further along my body, nipping at my pecs and the raised pink buds centered on them. I try to speak, to voice what I desperately want him to do, but my words are drowned out by my moans and gasps.

"What?" He questions, lips brushing my collarbones as he ascends back up my neck.

"*Fuck,*" I groan, rolling my hips for any relief. His hands are everywhere and no where, tugging my hair and palming my length from outside of my pants, never staying in one place for long. "*Me. Fuck!*"

"You like that, baby?" He taunts as he palms me again.

"No. Fuck, yes, but no. I don't mean— I mean—" God, what are words and why can't I seem to find them? "*Mother ... fucker ...*" I gasp breathlessly as his hand slips in my boxers to stroke me bare. "Goddamnit, Vinz!" I grab his face from where it's buried in my neck biting thin skin in sharp, teasing bites, and force him to look at me. "Do me. Please, *fuck me.*"

His dark eyes search mine for any sign of hesitation. "Are you sure?"

I pant with need. "I've never been more sure."

Having him here — right here in the very spot everything turned for the worse in twelfth grade — is like coming back full circle, poetic. I don't know where we'll be tomorrow or the next day or the next, but tonight he can erase all the negative memories of this room and fill our minds with new, good ones. Tonight, I can give him all of me, and we can be *us* completely.

Vincent groans deep in his throat, desire taking over as he fumbles around the back pocket of his jeans. They're unbuttoned and unzipped, resting low enough to expose his

hard cock to the entirety of the locker room. Finally, he withdraws his wallet, pulling out two small packets before tossing the whole thing away as if it's made of dirt.

He clamps the corner of the two packets between his canines, then uses his now free hands to rip at my slacks.

“Condoms? You don't need them. I used one with Ashlynn, and if you used them with—”

Shaking his head, Vincent manages to wrench my pants and boxers off. He pulls the fabric over my shoes, tugging roughly as it all gets stuck in a mess of soles and fabric. Once they're off, Vincent tosses the bundle of pants and boxers far away just like his wallet. “No, lube,” he corrects around his closed teeth before dropping the packets to hold them between two fingers. “You're the only one I take bare, and that will never change.”

Of course, Vincent carries lube in his wallet.

He slides his palms up my legs, heading straight for exactly where I want him to go. Except—

“My shoes,” I complain breathlessly. “And socks.”

“Take them the fuck off, Cay. You're a big boy.”

“I hate you,” I say, but the truth is far from that. Vincent chuckles as he watches me grapple with my shoes and socks until, finally, I'm naked in front of him.

He leans forward to capture my lips. “I love you, too,” he murmurs against my lips.

My flexibility is put to the test as Vincent lifts one of my legs around his waist, then opens a packet of lube to coat three of his fingers.

“Relax,” he coos.

I try to do as he says, getting lost in the feel of his lips on mine in deep, open-mouthed kisses and his hand traveling up and down my cock at a torturously slow pace. I barely feel his first finger enter me, the second stretches a bit, and he scissors his fingers to stretch me more. At the third, the stinging stretch is almost overwhelming, but I give myself into Vincent more. I

throw all my anxiety and nerves into our kiss, letting him lap them up with his tongue until all I am is putty in his hands.

I'm vaguely aware of his movements as he empties the second packet of lube all over his dick. The hard, velvety head slides against me as he urges me to wrap my second leg around his waist.

His tip presses against my hole, and it takes everything I have not to recoil. Instead, I relax into him even more — trusting him, always only him. Vincent pushes in around the mushroomed head of his dick, and I cry out at the sting. Tears drip from the corners of my eyes as we struggle to overcome the emotions tugging at our souls. I'm on the edge of pain, and I know Vincent wants nothing more than to slam into me brutally. It's hard to balance this moment.

“So tight,” he grunts softly, then kisses the tears from my face. “I love you, Cay. God, I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you, too.”

He continues to push his way in, but now his words are distracting me from the sting. “I want to wake up to you every morning and fall asleep together every night. I want to dream of you so much, it's like there's never a time I'm without you. I want to make pasta on the weekends, go to the farmer's market, and shower three times every single fucking time. I want to cut our hair together, and cover ourselves in paint as we make love on a canvas.” Vincent has given me a few soft strokes to get used to his size, now his pace picks up and he bottoms out with each thrust. The tip of his cock glides along that delicious spot inside that only his fingers have hit until now, and I swear I see stars. “I want to wake up burying my cock in you, Caiden. I want to wake up from a wet dream to have you wetting my dick with your mouth. Every. Fucking. Morning,” he thrusts with each word now. “You're. It. For. Me. Cay. You've. Ruined. Me.”

The burn long gone, I escape into a strange out-of-body type bliss, caught somewhere between his words and his thrusts. My pleasure is building to a new height I've never felt before, and my dick begs to be cared for.

“You feel so good,” he praises breathlessly.

I unclasp one hand from around Vincent’s neck, keeping my other to stabilize myself. My body is half pinned to the wall, half bouncing on Vincent’s cock, and I have no idea how he’s holding me up at such a glorious pace. I don’t care, I love it.

One hand free, I pump my dick only three times before I’m exploding between us. I cry out — screaming ‘fuck, fuck, fuck’ in ecstasy — and Vincent lets out a feral roar as his hard length twitches within my tightening canal.

“Oh, fuck, Caiden, baby!”

For once, I don’t mind my full name falling from his lips. It’s raw and ragged and sounds so fucking great tumbling out around his heaving breaths. He’s still holding me up, though his arms are trembling, a testament to his strength. I know Vincent will hold me as long as I need him to, and not just right now.

Forever. Vincent would hold me forever if I asked him to.

But, I can’t.

Pulling away, I drop down onto shaky legs. Reaching my hand up to his face, I hold him tenderly and place the deepest of kisses upon his lips. Not quick or sloppy, but slow and passionate. A tear slips from my eye and drops between our joined mouths seconds before I pull back. The tiny drop of saltiness stays on Vincent’s lip, just as my heart stays with Vincent, too.

“I love you more than anything, Vinz. You’ve ruined me, too. You’ll always be it for me.”

He cups my hand over his cheek. “I love you, too, Cay.” When I start to pull back, Vincent grabs my hand tighter. Fear clouds his eyes— something I’ve never seen from Vincent; I didn’t think he feared anything. “Why does this feel like goodbye?”

I’m silent as I break away and shuffle around the locker room, ignoring the ache in my ass, and gather my clothes

before slipping them on despite how dirty they feel now. Vincent lets me, not making a move to dress himself.

Only when I'm standing fully clothed in the locker room, do I finally meet Vincent's broken gaze.

“Because this doesn't change anything. I'm still marrying Ashlynn, and I can't come out to my family. This thing between us ... It has to be over now. For good. I—I can't risk everything. There's more you don't know, and I can't tell you, either. It's my burden to bear, and I hope you can find happiness somewhere else one day. It can't be with me.”

With that, I turn and walk away, already ordering an Uber to pick me up.

24 Fourteen Heads

Vincent Bernardi

There's a knock on my apartment door, and I groan into my pillow. It's Sunday, and I've been in bed since Saturday night after Caiden walked out on me — for good. I've ignored my phone, which has long since died, and have only gotten out of bed to piss, eat stale cereal, and brood at Koda this morning as she stocked my bare cabinets and fridge with food I have yet to touch.

Now, there's incessant noise coming from my front door, mirroring Koda's fists from earlier.

She could have come back for some reason, or there's any number of people who have access to my apartment — basically everyone at *Bernardi Security* — so it's a complete surprise who could be waiting for me on the other side of that wood. They haven't walked into my apartment yet, so that's something at least.

I think that thought too soon because the sound of my door opening reaches my ears, and I let out another groan, my unused voice cracking in the stale air of my bedroom. The sound of multiple voices reaches my ears, confusing my exhausted, over-slept brain. Why are there so many people in my apartment?

When my bedroom door creaks open slowly, I hear the distinct scrape of a lighter being flicked on and off, and I know exactly who is in here with me. Though I'm not sure *why* he is here.

“Zev?” My question is aimed into my pillow, my voice breaking until I clear my throat and try again.

“Good evening, handsome,” Zev murmurs into the dark room. My blackout curtains are drawn — have been since I returned to New York — and I have no idea what state the sun is in at this current moment. Based on his words, I must have

been closed from the world a lot longer than I thought. “There are some people here to speak with you.”

I groan into the down of pillow. “Is this a fucking intervention or something?”

The bed dips as Zev sits beside me, rubbing along the exposed skin of my back comfortingly. “Not for you. Jamison has some information he wants to share, and he thinks it will help solve the rift between you and Caiden.”

“Is there anyone at this point that doesn’t know about Caiden and me? Anyone at all? Shit.” My questions aren’t seeking any actual answers, and he knows that, ignoring them and my attitude completely.

“Come listen to what he has to say,” Zev urges gently. “If you don’t want to be involved, you can kick us out. Everyone is here for you, though — you and Caiden. We’re all on your team, and we want you two together.”

I finally crack one eye open to stare at him incredulously. “Who is ‘all’?”

He tucks his lighter away, opting instead to tug at his lengthening blonde hair around his ears. “Come see.”

Stumbling behind Zev on weak legs, I follow him into my living room. My mouth tastes of sleep, I’m only wearing low-hanging sweat pants, and I most likely have sleep lines across my face, but not one person squished inside the modest living room seems to mind.

Rosemary and Tessa let their eyes linger on my abs, though, before Matthew, sitting in between them, elbows each one in the ribs. “He’s gay and spoken for ladies,” he reminds.

“I can look, but not touch,” Tessa defends, and Rosemary just blushes. I’ve caught the latter admiring me a couple of times during our scenes with Ben and Zev, but nothing has ever happened between us for obvious reasons. Like I said, I’ve never been a vagina guy. I’m pretty sure Zev gets off to fantasies of Rosemary and I together, though he knows it would never happen. Still, that man is full of sexual daydreams, and Rosemary isn’t dumb. She can see the well-

defined body presented in front of her. No one should be faulted for that, even if she is the most innocent thing to ever fall into Ben and Zev's lives.

Theo chuckles from his place beside Tessa, nudging her with his elbow. The action makes the laptops balanced in their laps wobble, but they giggle despite the danger to the tech equipment. "I was looking, too," he snickers to her lightheartedly.

My eyes bounce around the room, taking everyone into account. Zev, Rosemary, Tessa, Theo, Matthew, Winnifred, TJ, and Hunter sit along my furniture, with Jamison via video call placed in the center of the coffee table. No Phoenix, which is good. I don't need him knowing anything more about Caiden and me than he already does.

Jamison coughs violently from his end of the call, and I furrow my eyebrows in his direction. "What's wrong with you?"

"Pneumonia," he wheezes, punching at his chest for a second. "Colby must have brought it home from school. Luckily, he's at Sarah's since I'm technically on assignment, and he doesn't seem too sick at the moment." Sarah and Jamison had a very brief romance after they graduated high school, leading to a now-five-year-old kid Jamison absolutely adores. He and Sarah get along relatively well, but they weren't made to be together romantically.

I nod my head at his words, then address the rest of the room. "What's going on?"

Every head turns to Jamison for him to begin talking, and he has to clear his throat — stifling a cough, really — multiple times before he can finally speak. "I think—"

The buzzer for my apartment goes off, making me quirk another eyebrow at the group gathered here. These guys had bypassed the buzzer earlier, either with Theo's building access or any of the Bernardi guys or Zev. I'm starting to regret giving all of them access to my apartment. Maybe I'll bump it back to two guests per the actual building rules set in place by the Bernardi contract with the building manager. Koda slipped

through behind another resident earlier and triggered an emergency at the fire exit of the stairwell to make it up earlier today, per her usual awkward self. “Who is it now?” When no one inside my living room offers an answer, I trudge to the device on my wall and use the intercom to the matching circuitry on the ground level. “Bernardi,” I growl into the machine.

“Sorry I’m late!” A feminine voice calls over the speaker.

I recognize that voice even over a staticky intercom, so I buzz her in and wait by the door to open it for her. After hearing the elevator ding, I swing the door open wide, ready to pick on her about not setting the fire alarm off again, only to be met by not only Koda, but Adam, Alexandria, and Jackson as well. I halt Koda as she tries to shove her way into my apartment as if everything is fine and dandy.

Koda peers up at me sheepishly, her slightly puffed belly bumping mine at our proximity. It’s adorable seeing her all mid-growing a baby, but I veil my emotions behind a hard mask.

“Koda,” I call her name slowly. “What are Adam and Jackson doing here?”

Her cheeks fill with air as if she is trying to hold back her words, but it expels two seconds later as she rushes out a quick explanation. Trust this girl to blurt everything under any kind of pressure. “They know. Everyone knows. Well, except Phoenix. But, everyone else knows. Sorry!” Her apology comes out as a squeak, and I can’t seem to stay mad as her big brown eyes widen like a puppy’s.

Sighing, I let the door fall open. The two couples dart their way into my apartment, joining the rest of the people. My friends shuffle to the floor to let the girls and their partners sit on the furniture. In their eyes, women should never have to take to the ground and the CEO’s suits probably cost more than my apartment. My friends are gentlemen, so of course they give up their seats without protest. It’s second nature for us to cater to these type of people — people like our everyday clients.

“Now, someone tell me what is going on,” I cross my arms and stand at the front of the room, trying to keep a semblance of control over the situation that has taken over my apartment like thirteen bulls in a china shop.

Jamison coughs again, and all eyes fall to him. “The other day, I heard Caiden say something about blackmail. I didn’t know you two were an item before I took over as his guard or even until I overheard him admit it, but it seemed the blackmail maybe have had something to do with it ending.”

A hand shoots high into the air.

I chuckle, shaking my head to myself as I meet Koda’s eager eyes. “Yes, Koda?”

“Okay,” Koda breathes in a rush. She turns to Jamison on the computer screen. “That leaves a lot to interpret — to guess on, really. Can you elaborate? Give it to us from start to finish, so we can come to the same conclusion as you. Please.”

Adam looks to his girlfriend with a reassuring smile and slides his hand into hers. The blush already crossing her face from speaking out in front of everyone only doubles at the attention from her man.

Nodding, Jamison starts his story from the beginning. “The first day I took over as Caiden’s guard, we made it to his house where he immediately dashed for his bedroom. Vincent, you taught me to observe, so that’s what I did. I noticed how he checked every nook and cranny of his bedroom, closet, and bathroom, but he didn’t check any other part of the apartment. Not only that, but the most strategic guest room — the one closest to the front door and the one I know you would have picked to stay in — still had cobwebs in the closet. I made my first assumption then that maybe something had happened between you two.”

“Dude, you two have been together since you moved back into his apartment?” Matthew pipes up, throwing his hands up in frustration at the fact that I kept the relationship a secret from him.

Jackson slaps his hands together. “Get this!” He calls to the man who just spoke, despite not even knowing his name. “They were together in Italy!”

“I knew those hickeys were suspicious,” Adam chimes in.

It really is something else seeing both groups — three, really, with Zev and Rosemary here — come together for me, for Caiden. Despite the age gaps, occupational differences, and societal status, here they are. All for Caiden and me.

Is our relationship even worth it? Does Caiden want us together as badly as our friends do? If that day in his office is any proof, he doesn’t. But, Jamison thinks Caiden might have been forced into the arrangement. I’ll give Jamison the benefit of the doubt before I rip his hope away from him.

The bottom line is no one forced Caiden to say what he said to Ashlynn and his parents.

“Let’s just get back to Jamison’s report,” Winnifred suggests, always the most focussed one of the group.

Jamison coughs out a ‘thanks’ before continuing. “Caiden found the song that, I assume, you left for him. I don’t know him that well, and he didn’t speak to me at all, but from what I could tell, he was *devastated* that you were gone. He listened to that song for over an hour on repeat, then dashed like a madman to buy the sheet music and play it himself until his fingers were split and bleeding. I had to physically pull him away from the piano. I’m pretty sure you broke him, boss.”

I clench my jaw at that, studiously ignoring the looks being thrown my way.

“Okay, maybe we need the part of the story before Jamison,” Adam says while staring at me.

Relenting, I give them a rundown of the events leading up to my leaving, including Michele’s ambush and Caiden’s rude words in his office when he thought I couldn’t hear. Then, Jamison carries on as the two techies start muttering to each other in hushed voices.

“Caiden seemed awful for the next two weeks — gaunt and barely alive — and Friday he got a little intoxicated before

abruptly leaving the apartment. He had me drive him to a flower shop, then to a cemetery. He found a grave and started pouring his guts out to it. I tried not to listen, but you know how the fly on the wall goes.” My friends all nod because we certainly do. “He was confessing some really deep shit about his past, then said ‘Ashlynn, the wedding, the blackmail ... Maybe it is my penance.’ I don’t know, something about the way he phrased makes me think there is something else going on.”

When he’s finished, the only sound left in the room is the clacking of keys. We all drift our gazes to Theo and Tessa as they both type on their laptops, occasionally whispering to each other and gesturing at something on the screens. After a few moments, Theo notices us staring and nudges Tessa.

She looks from her screen, to Theo’s, then to Theo’s face. “What now—” She starts, breaking off as she follows Theo’s gaze, which is flickering over each of us watching them. “Oh,” she puffs at the colorful hair drifting across her mouth. “So, we definitely think Caiden has been blackmailed,” she explains to us.

Theo jumps. “He gave me remote access to work on the security upgrades for his building, so I used that access to get into his work computer. I figured if this is related to the Mazza/Ibragimov situation, then something would show up on his company computer as opposed to his personal laptop — though that would have been my next place to check.”

“And?”

“And,” Tessa picks up. “We found some corrupted emails from the day everything went down, right before lunchtime.” She looks at me as if to confirm if that would be around the right time. I nod. “Like I said, they’re corrupted. From what we can gather, they were sent from some generic email account — I’m trying to get an IP address — and it appears they may have contained image files.” My stomach drops at the realization that Caiden might actually have been forced at least in some way to push me out of his life. If the images were blackmail that put him in a difficult situation, then my leaving at his harsh words probably sealed his decision to

break off our relationship. Hell, the images could *be* our relationship displayed digitally for his blackmailers to disseminate as they get the urge. If he thought his parents might find out about us ... Well, that's a major reason why our intimacy had been a secret.

Theo clicks a few more keys. "They *were* image files," he confirms. "And someone placed a bug in Caiden's system to delete the images from any of Caiden's servers once opened. They had to have installed it from somewhere in his building, but it could have been there for weeks before the email even got sent. Apparently, Caiden's IT department is really and truly shit. They have two different antiviruses installed, and they're stuck in a loop detecting each other as viruses instead of finding actual ones." He rolls his eyes and huffs in frustration. "Anyway, the bug they planted targets image attachments sent from this burner email, but leaves behind the email address and subject lines."

Tessa's turn. She scrolls and clicks on the laptop, eyes flitting across the screen only she can see. The rest of us sit silently, barely breathing, as we wait for her words. "The first one was sent a little after eleven am, and it says 'What would your mother think?' with one image attachment. The next was only a few minutes later, titled 'What would the press think?' with a decent amount of attachments." Of course, Caiden would be worried about the media, too. "And the last ..." She trails off, mouth twisting in a way that makes my stomach disappear completely.

"The last?" I urge in a voice that sounds one syllable away from cracking again.

"It says 'So you think you know your lover boy?' with one image attached."

All heads turn to me.

Caiden's words from Saturday night drift through my head in a new light. "*Someone saw you with Michele before you even came back to my office that Monday. You had him pressed against some wall, your bodies all squished together, and his hands were on your chest.*" That 'someone' must have

been whoever sent these emails, and they must have sent a picture from that exact moment. Hell, they probably fired the shots to purposefully make that half-second happen. The people threatening Caiden were right there, and I missed them.

“*Cazzo*,” I hiss, slamming one hand messily into my hair as I turn to start pacing the living room. I spin on the balls of my feet, but before I can take even one step, I slam right into a tiny body. “*Cazz— scusa*,” I stammer, completely thrown off by Rosemary.

The petite, auburn-haired girl stills, one hand frozen in the air where she was previously bringing a cold grape to her mouth. I recognize the bright green fruit as some of the groceries Koda dropped off earlier — though I refused to do more than wallow at the kitchen bar as she unpacked the bags. Internally, I wince and punch myself for letting her do all the work of putting groceries away with her belly and feet swollen in her state. I’d also paced my house for an hour after she left before giving in to rearranging everything alphabetically just like Caiden would have wanted.

I’m pathetic.

Rosemary shuffles from foot to foot, dropping the plump grape back into the bowl she must have scrounged up from one of my cabinets. My eyes flicker to the kitchen which had been to my back before I turned, and I take in the pristine counters, closed cabinets and fridge, and the still-dripping faucet from a recent use.

So, Rosemary had managed to sneak by me, open the fridge, wash the fruit, find a bowl, and replace everything without me noticing. I’m thrown off my game, sure, but not that badly.

I narrow my eyes, only somewhat playfully, at the girl I’ve come to know slightly more than an acquaintance. The other part of my gaze consists of accusation. “You’re sneaky.”

She gulps.

“That’s why I brought her,” Zev interjects in defense of his girlfriend. “In case my skills are needed. Rosemary is a

valuable asset to missions.”

“A mission? What exactly are we doing here?” Jackson eyes Zev and then me, tightening his arm around Alexandria protectively.

Matthew stands, walks over to me, and claps a hand onto my shoulder. *Hard*. “Boss. Respectfully, get your head out of your ass and be our leader.” He gestures across the packed living room. “We’re all here for you, gathered and at your disposal. This is the team you have. Use our assets and tell us how we are going to make Ibragimov back the fuck off our friend.”

Something inside my chest swells almost painfully, but different from the pain I’ve carried these last few weeks. No, this isn’t a punishment or loss or regret.

It’s pride.

These are my friends — this is my family — and they’re here to help me in any way they can.

My gaze bounces between each group, the unlikely-est of friends.

The techies, hunched over their computers and ready to hack any and every server we might need.

The elitists, able to throw their money and high social standing at any problem that comes their way. They handle things legally with a shit-ton of lawyers, respectfully with paparazzi stalking their every move, and with the greatest poker faces that would send every Vegas casino running for a new continent. Not only that, they have the greatest connections with two major players in this game: Caiden and Phoenix.

The muscle, otherwise known as my closest friends and coworkers. They have access through contacts in the police department and with local private investigators from long hours on jobs. Many companies have hired these guys to protect not only their businesses, but their families as well, and some keep retainers with *Bernardi Security* to specifically have their pick of bodyguards whenever the need arises. My

guys are discreet little flies on the walls of everything from high-profile backroom deals to popular boybands. They wear their badges pinned at the top of their security shirts and their duty weapons unconcealed on their hips — as well as some other carefully concealed ones.

Then, the mafia. All cards on the table, Zev and Rosemary's lives are tangled within that of the LA mafia group, III. His — also now her, apparently — job within that mafia is to take people down, any means necessary. They have underground connections, killers for hire — including Zev — and clean-up crews on standby. Though I can see in his eyes he is offering all of those to me now, I'm not sure that is the best direction in our predicament.

“I don't want to kill anyone,” I tell Zev in Italian, hoping he's been practicing the language since last summer. *“The last thing we need is the actual Russian mob raining hell down in New York.”*

He nods in understanding. “I'm owed a favor, and I can cash it in with one of the guys. We'll follow you every step of the way. Nothing gets done that you don't approve of first. So,” Zev gives his wild smile that shows too many teeth, glinting like skeletons in a dark closet. “Do you want Kaos, Meticulous, or Bloody?”

I roll my eyes at his question. Obviously, I want the most discreet of the mafia ‘brothers,’ if any have to be present. When it comes to this mission, I do think one of them will be helpful. The III mafia is well known, so if they can leave a threat with the Ibragimovs, it will have more of an effect than what our ragtag group could accomplish alone. “Meticulous. We'll need Meticulous.”

To the others, I start giving orders.

Each group contributes what they can, fourteen heads put together as we dive deep into a plan dedicated to figuring out what this blackmail against Caiden is and how we can resolve it.

First, we have to narrow down the Ibragimov headquarters. We have to figure out who is leading this New York branch of

their mob, and who within it is behind sending the blackmail to Caiden. We'll need serious intel. Theo suggests searching Caiden's business servers, Tessa offers to do all the internet research we might need, Jamison says he'll look into any *Bernardi* files we might have, and Adam pours himself a glass of brandy he must have brought while offering to set up a meeting with them. Jackson immediately starts shaking his head at Adam's suggestion, disagreeing as much as I am. No, not about how dangerous it is — that's a given — but at the fact that Adam has nothing to offer in publishing that Ibragimov would want. Jackson, on the other hand, can offer his services for marketing their hotel brand. Part of me hates dragging them into a potentially life-threatening situation, but the determination in their eyes is evident. They want to help Caiden as much as I do.

The rest of the plan is contingent on what intel the first phase gathers, and we sit in my apartment, each of us going through nervous ticks like pacing, rubbing sweaty palms on our jeans, or downing stiff drinks, while the beginnings of our plans become solid right before our eyes.

As Matthew scrawls across a large white paper spread out on the coffee table in front of Jamison's face on the computer screen, he maps out each and every job. Everyone takes turns leaning over the plans, offering suggestions or correcting Matthew's awful spelling (Koda), and soon we have the beginnings of a strong plan with many moving parts.

"I'll keep Phoenix distracted and off your back," Adam tells me. "He doesn't have to know about any of this."

"Same," Tessa pipes in, shooting a smile at Adam that says they just became partners in crime.

Zev cups my neck and kisses my cheek affectionately, though I feel nothing except platonic love for him. Zev has always had way too much love to go around. That's why he is the way he is. "I'll meet with Meticulous. We'll get him here and have him catch up on the plan. He may want to keep to himself, though." His eyes flicker around the people in the room. "I can't say he'll be happy, but he does owe me one."

“Do you and Rosemary have a place to stay? I have a spare bedroom. Or if Meticulous needs it.” I internally wince. Having the son of one of the LA mafia’s leaders staying in my home isn’t something I particularly *want*. I tried very hard to avoid the mafia princes during my time with Ben and Zev, but I’d crossed paths with each at least once.

Draven Mercurius, or Meticulous, is the oldest of the three mafia princes, though not by much. His ‘brothers,’ not by blood, are also princes of the crime family with him. Calix, the next oldest, has made it his mark to never use weapons whenever performing a job, which always ends in him coming out very bloody — ie the moniker of Bloody. Kyrell is the youngest. Appropriately dubbed Kaos, his crimes are always ... well, chaos. Each one would make Phoenix shake in his boots.

Well, maybe not, but I don’t ever want to have to find out.

“I’ll let him know you offered. He may not want to have to deal with any of the fingerprint and camera and phone shit you have going on security-wise here, though.”

“Makes sense.”

Does this plan, though?

25 More?

Caiden Augustus

At the end of this week, I'll be married.

The weekend after my night with Vincent passed in a blur of self-loathing and an unusual silence from Ashlynn, not that I am complaining about that at all. She was around the house some, cooked for herself, talked on her phone, snored in my bed, but like she promised, she didn't say a word to me. I assume she's taken more of the wedding matters into her own hands considering how little time there is until the actual ceremony.

Today, I've been at the office pretending to be too busy to go with her to the dress shop and some doctor's appointment after. She'd actually told me I couldn't go to the bridal boutique, not that I wanted to, and that the doctor's appointment was routine — she wouldn't even get an ultrasound today.

I don't know the first thing about pregnancy doctors, but I know the ultrasound is the most interesting part. If there isn't one, there isn't really a need for me to go and listen to them talk about vitamins and essential oil baths.

My phone vibrates on my desk, and I release my millionth heavy sigh of the day. The more Ashlynn charges on the debit card I gave her, the more notifications come across as reminders of that fact.

Who spends twenty five bucks at a coffee shop?

I glance at the useless contraption. I haven't had anyone to casually message in weeks, so I know the vibration has to come from either a spam email or my bank. One look tells me she's charged something for 500 dollars, but a double take has me sitting up straighter in my chair.

Unlike the other debit charges today, this one is from a separate account — a credit account with a shiny black card

that has not been in my wallet since Italy.

Since I gave it to Gaia.

Until now, it had gone completely unused in the states, but as I stare at the charge, I feel dread pool in my stomach.

Gaia's in New York, and she has a room at the Ibragimov hotel.

Cursing to myself, I start dialing on my work phone. Six digits in, I have to pause, my finger hovering over the 7. On instinct, I'd started dialing Vincent. Shaking my head, I redirect to the 5 and type in the rest of Phoenix's number.

"Bernardi."

I huff in exasperation. "Phoenix, you *know* it's me. Never mind that, your sister is in New York, and she's booked a room at the Ibragimov hotel. You need to get her out of there."

"How do you know this?"

"Because she's used the credit card I gave her when I told her to visit New York during her honeymoon, but then—" But then Vincent told her to stay away. "It doesn't matter. Someone needs to go get her and make sure she stays far, far away from that hotel."

Something clatters on his end of the line. "She used your card to check in at the Ibragimov hotel. *Your* card. The person they are trying to kill."

"*Yes!* We have to get her *now!*" I'm already grabbing my keys before I even realize, my office chair rolling to the bookshelf behind me from how quickly I stand.

Phoenix mutters some Italian curses before hanging up without saying anything to me. The move is so typical that I don't even question it. Instead, I bolt out of my office, passing the security guard posted in the hallway on my way out.

"Sir!" He tries to stop me. "You're supposed to have a guard—"

"Then fucking guard me," I growl out, barely giving him a backward glance as I press the button for the elevator. The

animosity and cursing come as a surprise to me as they fall so easily from my lips, and I wonder exactly how much Vincent has influenced me.

No, not influenced. He never *made* me change or convinced me to do something differently. With Vincent, I could simply be myself without worrying about fitting perfectly into the mold my parents and society have built for me.

With him, I could be the compassionate, bisexual CEO with a knack for learning new languages and who likes to hang out with young adults at a carnival or have all-night movie nights. I could learn to cook pasta and walk a farmer's market while naming each strange fruit or vegetable.

With him, the hole in my chest from Caroline's absence felt a little smaller.

Until he left me, too.

Since he's been gone, I've given my sexuality a lot of thought and research, something Koda would be proud of, for sure. I can confidently admit to myself that I identify as bisexual. I like men and women, and I know I have different preferences with each. The research — porn, mostly — gave me the opportunity to look at both genders in a new light, and I've been able to narrow down the types of bodies I find attractive. It's a mix of men and women, hard and soft, muscular and curvy, and I've never felt so complete just knowing that — knowing myself.

I don't have Gaia's number, so I dial Phoenix once again as I'm climbing into the driver's seat of my BMW. "Pick up, pick up, pick up," I mutter to myself as the engine rumbles to life beneath me. The guard following me barely gets his ass in the seat before I'm peeling out of the garage.

"She is going to wait outside the hotel," my best friend says by way of greeting. "I am trying to get there."

"Me, too. I'm closer. Don't worry, I'll scoop her up and bring her to my place."

"That is not a good idea—"

Ignoring my indicators, I weave in and out of the afternoon traffic. It isn't late enough for any backups on the business streets around my office, so at least I'm not stuck in a jam. "She's already on their radar since she checked in with my card. You know I have the security you recommended for my apartment. It makes sense for her to be with me in case they try to come for either of us. I'll pay for some extra security at my apartment if it makes you feel better. I know Jamison is sick, but Matthew or Winnifred or Hunter or TJ — they know me. They'll help."

A pause. "I did not know you knew their names."

"Of course I know their names," I snap. "That's ridiculous."

"Really? Because you did not know my brother's name even after he spent Thanksgiving and Christmas with us at Adam's cabin—" *mansion, not cabin* "—and it took you a year to remember your assistant's name. Koda played poker with us for six months before you learned her name. Your housekeeper —"

"Okay!" I whip around a corner, only a few blocks from the hotel now. "I get it. I've ... I'm different. I've changed. I know their names. I spend Friday evenings watching movies with them. I go to carnivals with them. They come to my apartment. I paid Matthew's mother's medical bills. I— They're my friends, okay?"

Phoenix is quiet for another moment. Only the sound of his Jeep Wrangler accelerating can be heard as he and I both fly through the New York streets as fast as they will let us. "You *have* changed. Is there something you need to tell me? I am your friend, you know—"

"I see her!" I cut him off. "I'm getting her. Meet me at my apartment, okay? We'll work this all out there." Before he can answer, I end the call and screech to a halt in front of Gaia and Valentino where they're standing on the sidewalk. I roll the window down. "Get in."

They don't question it. Throwing all of their luggage in first, the newlyweds climb over the disarray in the back seat

and slam the door closed only seconds before I peel away, leaving black marks on the pavement. Phoenix must have explained the situation because they remain silent all the way back to my apartment and up the elevator, the Bernardi guard branching off at my front door to stand watch.

It isn't until we're inside that Gaia looks around as if she's lost her shadow. "Where is my brother?"

"He's on the way. He called you? God, Gaia, I can't believe you showed up after we told you not to. Phoenix is going to lose his head when he shows up." I grab her shoulders and look her over as if searching for any damage.

She seems fine. More than fine, actually, as she slaps my chest. "Not Fenice!" She hisses. "Enzo! Why is he not here?"

Oh. She'd been searching for *my* shadow. "He, um," I clear my throat. "He's probably at his apartment or something. We aren't really—"

"Baby, I'm home!" The front door opens, and Ashlynn rounds the corner with her arms full of shopping bags.

Gaia glances between the young social media influencer and me once, twice, then promptly slaps me across the face.



After a few hours of holding an ice pack to my cheek, the bruising left behind from Gaia's slap is minimal and the pain has faded almost completely. Phoenix came and went, explaining the basics to his younger sister and her husband — he didn't even ask about my reddened face — before they locked themselves into one of my guest bedrooms. Based on Gaia's glare, I'm pretty sure I won't be seeing much of the couple during their stay with me. The plan is to have them on a flight back to Italy as soon as we're sure Ibragimov won't be looking for them.

How we'll figure that out, I have no idea.

Ashlynn splayed herself across my bed right after Phoenix left, so I took to the recliner in the theater room for a nap while holding the melting ice pack to my face. I hadn't managed to fall asleep, but the time spent icing my face meant the swelling isn't abhorrent. A bruise had been Ashlynn's main concern, not *why* I got slapped. She'll be happy, I guess.

At least one of us is.

Phoenix's instructions while I'm bodyguard-less were for me to stay inside unless I'm going to work, but the longer I sit alone, wallowing in self-pity into the darkest hours of the night, the more I realize what I need.

Who I need.

I know I told him it was over, but maybe, just maybe, it doesn't have to be. Plenty of people are in loveless marriages and see other people on the side. Vincent can keep being my bodyguard — hell, I'll hire him full-time so Phoenix can never take him away — and I can keep ignoring Ashlynn's advances. He can sleep in a guest bedroom and I can sneak in each night to spend a few hours tangled up in his warmth. He can sit in my office during the day, on my desk at lunch, and we can send our dumb Snapchats back and forth again like we used to.

The reasonable side of my brain makes an organized, bullet-point list detailing, in alphabetical order, exactly why none of that could ever work, but I ignore it for now. Hell, I'll ignore it forever if I can.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I'm across the city and using my phone to let me into Vincent's apartment building. I'm thankful someone either forgot or chose not to remove my access because the elevator deposits me at his front door and the fingerprint scanner installed there turns green before dumping me into the front hallway of his dark apartment.

Butterflies combust in my belly as I slip my shoes and jacket off in the entryway, placing the shoes delicately beside a new pair of black, wing-tipped boots and the jacket onto a hook. Steeling myself, I focus on my dark blue socks and count each step it takes them to cross the slick grey floor to Vincent's bedroom door.

I rap lightly on the wood of his closed door, entering without waiting for a response as my knock is probably too quiet to stir him. It's after midnight, so it's possible he is well into his sleep. Only the city lights and full moon illuminate the room, casting everything in a soft glow.

The ash from those burned-up butterflies settles heavily in my stomach, but I sidle up to Vincent's bed on borrowed confidence. He lays partially covered by a thin blanket, chest bare and a pair of short black briefs peeking out from the sheet. I drink in his sculpted muscles and the ink along his olive skin as if this is a desert and he's the only oasis.

Trying not to feel like a creeper, I climb into the bed more familiar than my own, drape my body along Vincent's, and bury my face into his neck where his ebony hair is just starting to curl. "*Vinz.*" I breathe in his clean scent of sage and bergamot. "My Vincenzo."

He stirs, body stiffening beneath mine before speaking in a raspy, tired voice. "Caiden?"

"I can leave," I immediately offer. His rigid posture beneath me makes me question whether he even wants me here in the first place. I did just break into his apartment and climb into his bed like some kind of stalker. I shift my weight in a move to get off him. "I'm sorry."

Strong arms latch around me, halting my movements. "No. Stay. Are you okay?"

I shake my head, hiding in his neck again instead of facing my problems. I release a shaky breath. "I don't think so."

"What's going on?" Vincent's hands find my face and force me to look him in the eyes, those dark depths open and begging for answers. I haven't kept up with shaving recently, so the warmth of his palms is muffled slightly by the longest beard I've ever grown. I hate it immediately. I want his skin against mine, everywhere.

Unable to find the right words to convince him to be my dirty little secret again, now and forever, I adjust my body more firmly against his and capture his lips in a bruising kiss.

“I need you,” I breathe against his mouth, then kiss him again. I roll my hips against his, my hardening cock seeking his out in the dark.

“Cay,” he prays my name while throwing his head back at the feeling of our bodies together again. My lips delve into his neck instead and I suck on every bit of skin I can sink my teeth into. Vincent gasps and shudders and thrusts his hips with mine, lost in the same ecstasy as I am.

“I need you,” I say again. My hands dive down between us to paw at every layer preventing the glorious contact I’m searching for, and I feel Vincent grab my hips to control our movements.

I’m kissing along his ear when he turns completely away from me to glance at the bedroom door. His eyes widen a fraction before he skillfully rolls until our position is reversed with me underneath him. I briefly feel his hard, muscular body against mine, then it’s gone just as quickly. With a peck to my lips, he crosses to the door and clicks it shut quietly.

Vincent turns to me, but doesn’t move closer to the bed. “What are we doing?” He stands, back to the door, dark eyes staring, bare chest panting, black briefs hitched up on his thighs and low on his hips, and I know I’ve never seen someone so fucking beautiful in my entire life.

I shake my head because I honestly have no idea either. “Please, Vinz.” The need to be close to him consumes me like a raging inferno, and I’m slipping my t-shirt from my torso and my sweatpants from my legs without a second thought. On my back, I bring my knees to my chest, baring my entire self to him. “Be with me,” I whisper into the dim room.

“We can’t do this,” he argues half-heartedly. Those long fingers mow through his black curls and I can tell he is holding himself back. Barely. “You said we can’t do this. You’re getting married, Caiden.”

My full name, not my nickname, falling from his lips is enough to send tears leaking from the sides of my eyes. I don’t dare lower my legs, don’t let the trembling of my muscles force me to back down. “I want you, Vinz. I *need* you.”

“You say that now, but what about tomorrow? What about Ashlynn and your kid?”

“Goddamnit, Vincent. I don’t know about the future, and I don’t know about tomorrow either, but can you please just be with me tonight? We’ll figure it out later.”

Vincent fixes his darkening gaze on me. “What do you need, Caiden?” His voice is low and dripping with heated promise. I start to answer with the same thing I’ve been telling him since I got here, but he shakes his head at me. Prowling around the bed, Vincent takes in every inch of my exposed body illuminated by the moonlight. My body quivers in its pretzeled position and I start to lower my legs. “Don’t move,” he growls and I freeze. He surveys me some more. “You’re unshaven,” he states. “You’ve lost weight. Your cheeks are hollow and your eyes are gaunt. You’re breathing is strained and you have tears soaking your hair.”

All of his observations are true — so true they hurt. I’ve been in a bad way since he left, and even worse since Saturday night. My mind won’t stop, my showers don’t make me feel clean, and my bed, when Ashlynn lets me have it, is too lonely, too cold without him.

I need him to make me feel something other than numbness and panic and disappointment. I need him to make me feel love and passion and *complete* again.

“Make me feel something,” I beg in a whisper.

The words linger in the thick air between us as Vincent continues to devour me with his eyes. My muscles burn due to my precarious position and my cock is hard and throbbing with need, precome dripping into my belly button, but I don’t dare move. I’m thankful for that resolve, too, because in the next moment, Vincent is on me like a viper striking to survive.

A guttural groan flies from my lips as Vincent’s tongue drags the crevice of my ass. He laps at my tight hole as if his life depends on it, kissing and sucking in no particular order I can predict. I twitch as he raises a hand to my hard cock and tight balls, hoping he is going to stroke me until I can’t take it anymore, but he only grasps me firmly in a large hand. He

pushes my dick and balls out of his way with a force somewhere between too hard and not hard enough, both painful and pleasurable all at once. The fingers of his other hand dig into my ass cheek until I'm sure I'll have bruises tomorrow, though I don't care.

I want more, more, more.

"More," I plead.

Vincent halts, peering up at me with his tongue still flattened against my hole. As we watch each other, he teases the tip into me, and it is the hottest thing I've ever witnessed. My neglected cock aches with need, but I don't dare question the man paying the rest of my body so much attention. "More what?" He asks, pulling back to kiss up my quivering inner thigh. He nips harshly at the sensitive space between my muscle and groin, and my back arches as high as it can in this position. I cry out at the sting of it even as another swell of precome beads on my cock. "More pain?" Vincent questions softly, meeting my eyes in search of an answer.

Yes, yes, yes, I want to say. Yes to all of it because when he does that, everything else is forgotten, and my mind is finally quiet. "Please." I'm reduced to one-word responses.

In the blink of an eye, Vincent has me flipped on the mattress, facing the headboard on my hands and knees. I don't even have time to register the aching relief in my legs before a sharp *smack* sounds through the room following the whistling of a hand whipping through the air. A half second later, my ass cheek is stinging harder than my face this afternoon.

I gasp. "Wha—"

"That's for breaking into my apartment tonight."

Another smack with a following sting on my other ass cheek. "Vincen—"

"That's for not eating as you should be."

Oh God, how fucking embarrassing is this? I am a grown-ass man being spanked — *spanked* — by another grown man, *and I'm enjoying it*. My ass burns with each hit and my cock sways heavily with the need to get off, but Vincent isn't

having that just yet. As the hits keep coming to either ass cheek and the back of my thighs, I know he is doing this not only for himself, but for me, too.

Everything falls away except Vincent's body so close, his eyes on me, and his hand meeting my bruising skin. Sweat rolls down the divot of my spine, puddling at my arched lower back, and it only adds fuel to our fire. He takes a moment to caress my stinging ass as he licks up the salty liquid from my back.

“That’s for not taking care of yourself.” *Smack*. “That’s for fucking someone else.” *Smack*. “For leaving me in that locker room.” *Smack*. “For not sleeping. For not reaching out to me. For getting engaged.”

Over and over he punishes me for weeks of indiscretions, and I cry out at each hit in both pain and pleasure. As I start to go numb to each slap, but the fire still crawls underneath my skin, Vincent finally relents. Three harsh, final impacts as he barks, “That’s for being a *fucking fag*. Say it, Caiden. Confess your sins.”

My face drops into the pillow below me, heat flooding my entire body from shame or desire or both or neither, I have no idea. The weight of my entire life slumps from my shoulders, far, far away, as I sob out my next words. “I’m a fucking fag,” I hoarsely confess as he told me to because I trust him to take this burden from me, if only for a little while.

I feel lighter, as if all my pain is gone despite the tenderness of my ass. All that is left is the rawest and purest version of myself, trembling under Vincent's kneading hands as he assesses the damage to my backside. I'm reduced to a trembling mess, but I'm overcome with the need to be with him as one. To give him my entire body. I know he'll care for me better than I cared for myself these last few weeks.

Vincent places a tender kiss on the sweaty skin between my shoulder blades, his tongue poking out to lap at the warm liquid there as if compelled to do so. “Are you done, baby?”

I shake my head into the pillow. “No. I need you now more than ever. Take me, Vinz. Use me.”

He listens. Thank God, Vincent fucking listens. With quick movements, he flips me to my back once again, and I wince at the feel of the sheets against my raw backside. “Hold on,” he murmurs into a kiss on my lips, slipping from the bed to dig in a bedside cabinet. He returns quickly with something cloth-like in his hands.

My eyes widen as he latches the objects to either of my ankles, then pulls my legs up one at a time to secure them to the headboard above me. I’m in the same position in which I began, but this time there are cuffs keeping me in place and a pillow placed beneath my hips.

As Vincent spits lewdly onto my hole, sliding one finger in to fuck me with it, I groan in anticipation. This. This is what I’ve been waiting for all night and it is so close, yet so far. Vincent is doing what he can to stretch me quickly, but it will never be quick enough for us.

My dick craves touch, and I lower a hand to fist it, but Vincent slaps it away.

“You’ll come later,” he growls. “But only once I’ve filled you with everything I have.”

Stretched as well as I can be in such a short amount of time, Vincent removes his fingers and hastily lines himself at my entrance. He slicked up at some point, but I still wince as I accept his thickest part first. After the crown of his dick enters me, his length slides in easier, only giving me a few pumps to get used to the intrusion for the second time in my life before he begins pounding into me mercilessly.

This is the Vincent that fucks men with the hilt of knives. This is the Vincent that presses cigarettes to flesh just to feel the pain of it. He let me explore his body, explore sex with a man, as vanilla as I was, and I know he enjoyed it with me. He enjoyed the grinding, the handjobs, the blowjobs, and me fucking him with absolutely no idea what I was doing, and I enjoyed it, too. It was us learning each other, but we didn’t learn everything. There’s a whole other side of this man that I have yet to meet, a side that desires to burn ropes off someone

or spank until the skin and muscle is numb, and I know I want to continue to grow with him.

I want to explore with him forever.

After countless brutal thrusts which have my eyes rolling back into my head, Vincent pulses inside me, hot seed spilling deep in my body in a way that has us both groaning in awe.

Vincent releases the cuffs at my ankles one at a time, letting my legs fall down, but instead of landing on the bed, I wrap them around his hips. Somehow, he's still hard, and I'm going to use that to both of our advantages. I pull him as flush against me as I can, and he captures my lips with his mouth, my dick with his hand. Slowly, lovingly, we rock and seesaw against each other, mouths consuming every bit of salty sweat on the skin we can reach, until he pulses in me again with another small orgasm that sends me over the edge, too. I come so hard that my release lands everywhere between my chin and belly button, and Vincent takes his time swiping every bit of it up with his tongue before sharing it between our mouths in a filthy kiss.

That night, we both sleep as if we'll never sleep again.

And we just might not.

26 There's Still Time

Vincent Bernardi

“What is fragolina?” Caiden asks me as I bring our lunch to his desk. He’s already cleared off the place where I sit — hell, he keeps it clear in case I get the urge to come over here at any point during the day — and I slide my ass onto the hard, wooden surface without complaint. After the first week of sitting here, my muscles got used to the discomfort, choosing instead to rush blood to a different part of my body any time Caiden is concerned.

I frown. “What, your fancy books don’t have that word in there?” Refusing to answer the question, I start unpacking the bag of food Matthew picked up from down the street today. We ordered that vegan place again, and Caiden has insisted I try the peanut butter soup.

Skeptical doesn’t even begin to describe how I feel about that recipe.

Caiden pulls the two plastic containers of soup from my hands, inhaling their scent like a kid in a flower shop. The smell of the soup is ... not unpleasant, but I’m still not confident I will like the strange concoction.

He lets out an adorable ‘hmpf.’ “Yes, it’s in here, but it doesn’t make sense in the context it was used. Why would Phoenix call you strawberry? You’re allergic to strawberries.”

My eyes snap from the utensils in the bottom of the bag to his face, searching his eyes for something I already know idles there for me, only me, just waiting for a chance to show itself. “You remember I’m allergic to strawberries?” A flash, and there it is. There’s the love we share, camped out in irises of green and gold unlike any other color combination in the world.

Caiden is unlike any combination in the world.

He's hot and cold, fast and slow, up and down in the best possible way. He loves hard and deep, but doesn't neglect the soft and warm parts that need attention, too. My eyes roam his body, seeing all of those hard and soft and warm and deep places I spend my nights worshipping, learning his body better than the back of my eyelids.

"Of course I remember, babe. I remember everything you tell me."

"Really?"

Nodding, Caiden grins at me with an adoring smile that I can't help but kiss. When I pull back, Caiden catches the back of my neck in a firm grasp. "Tell me something new for me to remember. I promise I'll keep it forever."

"Okay," I whisper, bumping our noses together. "One day, I'll put a ring on your finger, Caiden Augustus, and we'll make an honest man out of you, yet."

I feel his breath catch, stalling against my lips just as mine does, too. 'Personal space' isn't something either of us cares about when it comes to us, and I don't think we would have it any other way. I'd keep my lips attached to his, my hips nestled in his, and our legs tangled as passionately as our tongues if we didn't have to actually go out in public and be decent.

Fuck decent. I want to do all kinds of indecent things to Caiden Augustus.

"Do you promise?" He asks in a whispered breath.

"I fucking promise, baby."

Draven Mercurius passes me the manila envelope containing all the blackmail Ibragimov has on Caiden.

He'd been pissed about the other night, having been eating in the kitchen when Caiden broke into my apartment. According to Draven, he'd held his gun aimed at Caiden's

head while the latter counted his steps to my bedroom before slipping inside.

“I figured a burglar wouldn’t have taken his shoes and jacket off at the door, so I didn’t kill him. This time.” He’d grumbled to me that morning after Caiden snuck out before the sun even rose above the horizon. *“I thought about killing him on the way out, though. Because of you two, I didn’t get a blink of sleep.”*

The mafia prince definitely didn’t want to spend his week coordinating a heist with my group of friends, but the favor he owed Zev must have been pretty solid. He didn’t complain once.

Tuesday, Jackson managed to get a meeting with Viktor Ibragimov, the man in charge of all things Ibragimov in New York. Thanks to Tessa, he was able to slip a tracker of some sort into their afternoon coffee, though I’m not sure how good for the body that tracker was. Either way, we were able to follow his movements well enough to discover he only has a home office here, not multiple offices in corporate buildings or in the hotel they operate.

From there, my guys worked on blueprints for the residence, then Zev, Rosemary, and Draven concocted their plan for infiltration. Late Friday night — basically Saturday morning — Rosemary and Draven snuck into the house while my guys stood watch around the property. Viktor had his own guards who made their rounds routinely and without change — something that made it easy to plan around after only staking the place out for a few days. Reason number ninety-nine why *Bernardi Security* is better than any others out there. We would never have the same guard rotation three days in a row. Amateurs.

Theo and Tessa walked Rosemary through how to copy everything Viktor had on his servers onto a drive, then how to plant a nasty virus after. With Rosemary’s sneaking skills, she was in and out completely unseen and successful in her endeavors. My employees deserve a fucking award for their planning skills because not two seconds after she escaped through a window, the next round of guards came through.

Draven had gone in at the same time as Rosemary, though he had other plans. He went through a side door on the complete opposite side of the house. Armed with only a pistol, the mafia prince walked with the confidence of a god while making his way through the house without being caught. His goal? Find dirt on Viktor that we can use against him if we ever need it.

And he had found it, all right.

At the time of our invasion, Viktor had been high on drugs, out of his mind, and surrounded by child prostitutes in his private quarters. Draven snagged enough video evidence to put Ibragimov in some serious shit if it ever got out, and made plans to threaten them with his own blackmail, stamped using the III mafia seal, as a way of calling a truce between the two. Ibragimov stays quiet about Caiden, III stays quiet about Ibragimov.

I'm pretty sure we owe the LA mafia a favor now.

On his way out, Draven had encountered a few of Ibragimov's guards, but luckily Zev and I had a large, pyro-inclined distraction in the works which was able to give him enough time to get out without having to wound any of the men. That would have been a nightmare considering Draven left his clean-up crew back in Los Angeles when Zev told him about the 'no killing' rule.

Draven folds himself into the black rental sports car, his duffle slung into the backseat. "You all take care," he rumbles in that impossibly low, gruff voice of his. Between his towering frame, emerald green eyes, midnight hair, and sharp-as-hell features, I know without a doubt that if I was just a little further on the 'twink' side of gay, I'd have fallen head over heels for him. Now though, I hope he considers us acquaintances in a way that keeps Zev in the mafia's good graces, and hopefully we won't cross paths again.

As his car disappears into the rising sun, I stand there way too long watching the orange rays bounce between the skyscraper windows towering over the city. It's Saturday morning, only a few hours before Caiden's wedding, and I

want nothing more than to evaporate into nothing like Draven's Mercedes did only minutes ago. Maybe I can call him back and catch the flight with the three LA-bound people instead of facing what today means.

Caiden hasn't attempted to contact me since Monday night, and I know to take that as a sign he won't be reaching out. That night will remain in my thoughts forever, despite not knowing why he came back or why he left again. There's still a couple of hours for him to change his mind, but I know he won't. He loves his family and his image too much to risk them, not even for me.

Clutching the envelope tight to my aching chest as if it holds the cure I need, I stalk into the *Bernardi* building, then take the elevator into the soundproofed basement room connected to the gym. Down here, nothing and no one will bother me. At least, not on a Saturday morning. Come Monday, this place will be crawling with employees practicing their aim on the targets lined all along the back wall.

I don't come here often, not really needing to train myself any better than I already am. I'm a perfect shot with my weapons no matter when or where or what type of steel is in my grasp.

Today, though, I find myself struggling to even load the bullets into the chamber.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Gaia has been calling and texting all week, somehow having found out Caiden and I are over, but I've been ignoring her. Pulling out the device, I see it is her yet again, and this time I answer, though I'm not sure why.

"Are you okay?" Is the first thing she asks me.

"I don't know how to answer that, Gaia."

My sister gives a soft sigh. *"I'm sorry, Enzo. This is all so messed up, but he doesn't have to marry her. You two can figure something out—"*

"I answered to let you know I'm alive," I grind out. *"I'm alive, and you are safe to return back to Italy."* She starts to

say something else, but I angrily press the end call button before she can.

Then, I scream and shoot and cry and carve up targets until my throat is raw and my gun is empty. Bullet casings line the floor at my feet, but I kick them away as I search for my next weapon.

In the back of my mind, I play an entirely different scenario — one where Caiden isn't Phoenix's best friend and his parents aren't homophobic and everything hasn't gotten so fucked up. In my perfect world, Caiden and I live together in his ridiculously large apartment, playing piano all day and rolling in the sheets all night. Life with Caiden would be steady and constant, organized by his OCD to avoid any surprises, but also exciting and new as we navigated likes and dislikes with each other, growing together. We'd take trips to visit Ben's club in LA, or my family in Italy, or, hell, anywhere we wanted to go simply because we could. Friday movie nights would continue with stolen touches beneath the blankets as our friends drink themselves into a stupor, and we'd go back to that fun house with Caiden as my kick-ass partner. In my perfect world, I'm a winner, and the prize is Caiden's heart.

The last of my knives embeds itself into the wooden dummy halfway across the room at the same time my foot catches on a stray bullet casing on the ground. I slip unceremoniously onto the concrete floor with a yell of frustration due to more than only that small inconvenience I created in my own haste to chase away my pain.

Should have known nothing can help me now.

“You are buying the new supply,” a voice I know all too well says from behind me. “Bullets are expensive. Also, you fall like a penguin trying to fly.”

“Fuck you,” I spit at Phoenix without making a move to get off the floor or even look away from the concrete ceiling.

“Vincenzo.”

At my name, I let out a loud sigh and close my eyes. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to listen.” When I don’t reply, Phoenix takes that as a go-ahead for whatever it is he wants to say. “Caiden has been one of my best friends for close to five years,” he begins.

“I don’t want to—”

“For once in your life, Vincenzo, just listen to your big brother.”

There’s a tense silence, but eventually, I nod with my eyes still closed, resigning myself to hearing about the man I love, but can never have.

Phoenix clears his throat as if preparing himself for a long speech, something he has never done before. “Five years, he and I have been friends, and it took him four of those before he told me about his sister, Caroline.” He pauses like we need dramatic effect or some shit. “Caroline was diagnosed with leukemia when she was five years old. Caiden was thirteen. His parents refused to test him or themselves for a bone marrow transplant, which is what Caroline needed. In fact, they would not let the doctors try to match her to *anyone* because they said their god would handle it. They had Caroline on homeopathic treatments, then reluctantly moved to chemical treatment after a while when nothing was working. When Caroline was eleven and getting worse, Caiden realized that as an adult, he did not need his parent’s permission for medical decisions. He decided to get tested without their parents knowing. He was a perfect match and told them so. His parents said it was a God-given miracle. They went ahead with the transplant, and that should have been the end of a long journey.”

“It wasn’t,” I state.

“No. Caroline got sicker and sicker, then died of an infection. Yes, it was from the transplant, but there was nothing they could have done. She was on borrowed time anyway.” Phoenix takes a deep breath, then lets it out. “All of Caiden’s childhood, his parents forced him to take special

classes, have special tutors, or a personal trainer who even counted his calories. He was in any and every sport as a kid before they let him choose football, and they had him practice multiple instruments before they agreed to piano. He did not graduate top of his class because of his own work ethic, but because of his parents. They had retired football coaches training him, ex-Harvard professors tutoring him, and famous musicians teaching him the piano. Caiden was forced to grow up as a protege doing things he did not want.

“When Caroline was too sick to leave the house, she would watch Caiden with his tutors. Her favorite time was when Caiden practiced the piano. She would give him song requests and he would beg his parents to order the sheet music so he could learn it for her. They did that for years as kids, and on her death bed, little eleven-year-old Caroline asked Caiden to play at her funeral.”

I swallow hard, thankful that my eyes are closed as I can feel the wetness welling beneath the lids. “Did he?”

“No,” Phoenix whispers. “He went out the night before the funeral, got shit-faced, and missed the *whole damn service*. He was nineteen then, and never touched a piano again. He has always had one in that gigantic apartment of his, but it has gone unplayed for close to ten years now. Well, I assume not now, actually.” He coughs against the rasp building in his voice. “I saw you two that night in Italy, and I do not just mean at the piano. I saw him kneeling in front of you, saw you caress his cheek like you had done it a million times before and would do it a million times after. Then, Caiden pulled you over to that piano — you did not even ask him to — and he sat down and he played that dumb song from that dumb movie you love.

“I saw my best friend come to life, and I saw my little brother finally living again. For the first time since I met Caiden, he was happy. For the first time since Michele came along, *you* were happy. You started playing, too, over his hands, and that stupid song filled that entire foyer with a happiness I do not think that house has ever seen, or will ever

see again if you two do not get your heads out of your asses and make the fuck up.”

My heart hammers hard in my chest. “It wasn’t what it looked like,” I try to defend Caiden even though he isn’t here and despite Phoenix sounding very, very sure of himself. “We were just friends. Caiden’s *straight*—”

Phoenix laughs dryly, no humor to be found there. “You think Tessa did not tell me everything once she went through the blackmail you all stole from Ibragimov? You think she did not show me *this*?”

My eyes snap open and my head whips to the side to see him propped up against the wall with that manila envelope in his hands. My heart stutters because I know what is most likely in there, but I haven’t looked through it myself. “It’s not what it looks like.” I don’t know what it is exactly, but I can still defend Caiden.

Or lose all my oxygen trying.

Shaking his head, Phoenix flips through the papers inside. “This?” He holds up a picture of Caiden and Theo holding hands. “I know this is out of context. And this one, and this one, and this one.” Pictures fly through the air and onto the floor as he throws them one by one halfheartedly in my direction. Ibragimov really did take any pictures they could to blackmail him, including Hunter ruffling his hair or Matthew taking pictures with him at the ice rink. “But these—” Handfuls of papers soar through the room now, raining down around me as I take in every compromising situation Caiden and I have ever found ourselves in. There are photos from inside his work elevator — how, I’m not sure — of our first three kisses before we even began. There is the top of the Ferris wheel, sharing cotton candy, him clinging to me after I was shot, the farmer’s market, *in his office*—

God, I’d been such a bad bodyguard. How had I missed someone following us close enough to get all of these shots? We were practically a relationship of three with the way this unseen person lived our lives with us.

“—These are not out of context or fake. You and Caiden are *in love!*” Phoenix yells and his voice echoes in the soundproof room. He stalks toward me like a parent going to their disrespectful child, voice louder than I’ve ever heard. “Why did you not tell me? Why could Caiden or you not at least tell *me*, your brother and his best friend? I get keeping it from his religious parents for a while, but me? *Why?*”

He knows. Phoenix, my brother and Caiden’s best friend, knows about our relationship, and he isn’t destroying the city like we fully expected him to do.

I choke back my sobs, pushing myself up to my knees, but unable to stand any further. “W-we thought you would be mad.”

“Oh, I am *livid*, but not because you fell in love. I am *outraged*,” he ends in a whisper as he stops in front of me. “That you thought you could not come to me. And I am *furious* that he hurt you, and you hurt him. And I am *angry*—”

“I get it,” I sniff. He doesn’t have to keep pouring salt into the wound. He’s mad, just like we knew he would be.

“I am angry that you two could not put aside your overly-ginormous hearts to look at the facts and see that Ibragimov played you two like fucking fiddles!”

At those words, my sniffles pause as if they’re scared of his wrath, too. “W-what?”

Phoenix is standing in front of me now, one large hand on top of my head in a fatherly gesture I never received as a kid unless it came from him. The other hand still holds a bundle of papers he thrusts in my direction. “Look at them. *Look at them.*” I do. “Emails and bank transfers and media tips and—”

“Oh my God, these are—”

“I know!”

My entire body is frozen as I try to process what this means. “I-I ... I don’t know what to do.”

Grabbing my face, my brother pulls me up so we are eye to eye. “Yes, Enzo. Yes, you do. There is still time.”

There's still time.

“Go get him.”



The ridiculously large chapel sits like a gaudy couch discarded on the corner of two streets, the stained glass windows more pretentious than beautiful. Of course this is the church Caiden's parents chose for his wedding, nothing at all like what he would choose on his own.

I know the service has already started, the doors already closed, and a ‘just married’ getaway car sits idling next to the sidewalk, but I don't give any of those things a second glance as I climb the numerous amount of unnecessary stairs up to the front of the church.

Part of me wonders if I'll combust on contact with the ‘holy’ ground, and another part of me wonders if that will be less painful than what I'm about to do. With the ceremony already underway, there's really only one option to get Caiden to listen to me — to the truth — and that's to put it out there in front of everyone.

Hopefully, the preacher hasn't already bypassed the ‘if anyone objects’ part, or else this is all about to be very, very awkward.

Well, even more than I'm about to make it.

Evidence clutched tightly in my hand, I tug on the large wooden doors and let myself into the chapel.

Echoing words make their way to my ears, and at first, I think it is the exchange of vows portion because I recognize Caiden's voice and cadence immediately. Do the vows come before the objection part?

There's another set of doors just inside the first set, for what reason I don't know. It makes about as much sense as the

Bible does to me. My fingers wrap around the large handle, ready to yank the doors open and make a fool of myself.

“—I am in love, and there isn't anything or anyone who can keep me from loving,” Caiden's voice gets louder and louder as I tug the door open wider and wider.

This is it.

27 But, honestly?

Caiden Augustus

“Oh, shit,” Zev blurts, interrupting Phoenix’s shop talk with Ben about some security issue. Ben owns multiple clubs in Los Angeles and briefly mentioned an issue regarding the bouncers who stand guard outside their doors. Almost immediately, my best friend sprang into action, asking detailed questions and giving advice with more words than I’ve heard him speak all year. It’s obvious his job is his passion, and we all wear soft smiles at his childlike interest. Even as his voice starts to go hoarse and the ice cubes in our drinks start to melt, Phoenix spiels on and on with seriously good information for Ben’s security team.

That is until Zev’s words bring our entire relaxed conversation to a screeching halt of tented pants, thick testosterone, and possessive growls.

We’re lounging in the backyard of the Santiago’s mansion-like home, and we’ve been joined by a group of scantily-clad people.

Adam’s younger brothers and their girlfriends are already in the large, heated, in-ground pool which takes up half of the backyard, so we really shouldn’t be all that surprised when our significant others exit the house in bikinis — or in Vincent’s case, another man’s swim trunks. The other guys’ jealousy at their girlfriends’ exposed skin is nothing compared to mine. Not only can Ben and Zev — Vincent’s ex-lovers — bask in his gloriously shirtless and muscular torso, but he’s obviously wearing a borrowed pair of trunks that do nothing to hide his well-endowed member I have become all-too-familiar with these last few weeks.

Shit, Vincent Bernardi is going to be the end of me.

Despite the variety of tits and ass on display by the other swimmers, my eyes are so focussed on Vincent that everything

else blurs into the background like white static on a television. My zipper strains at the thought of going possessive caveman on his ass (no pun intended) and dragging him kicking and screaming back into the house, stripping him bare, and making sure he knows exactly who can see this much of his body and who can't.

I have to pull the reins back on my emotions, jarring them to an abrupt halt. Yes, Vincent and I are exclusive to each other, but I don't think he would appreciate me staking that kind of carnal claim on him in front of anyone. He's always been the independent type, and I won't be the one to try to force him away from that. It's one of the things I love about him, though I don't have to like it.

The other thing holding me back is the publicity. My best friends are here with me and have no idea of my feelings for a man, much less Phoenix's little brother. It only takes one person to interpret a heated look between Vincent and me, then share it with someone, and what's next? A rumor mill spreading further and further, not only through my friends including Vincent's brother, but to the media and, ultimately, my family.

I won't have them blame me for yet another devastating situation. With my luck, they'd divorce and accuse me of being the reason. The twenty-eight-year-old successful millionaire who no longer lives within the confines of their stiflingly hypocritical house will always carry the weight of their shortcomings.

House, not home, because those walls were never a safe place — for me, for Caroline, for anyone.

Even their cat ran away eventually.

“What the hell is she wearing?” Phoenix growls beside me, clutching his glass of amber liquid tight enough that I think it might crack under his large hand. The six-foot-five, heavily tattooed man I'm lucky to call my best friend has always been calm and composed, but is now brought, metaphorically, to his knees by a tiny college hacker with

rainbow streaks in her hair and an addiction to Twizzlers. Who would have thought?

Zev whistles. “Men, I am looking respectfully, I swear,” he says. Those ocean-colored eyes bounce from figure to figure, ass to tits to dick, as he devours them with a heated gaze. I shouldn’t feel threatened — I shouldn’t. Vincent assured me all afternoon that he feels absolutely nothing for the pyromaniac and his boyfriend, except platonic friendship, and explained that Zev is the type of person who loves everyone. There’s a long story there, one Vincent briefly skimmed over about a boy seeking love his entire childhood, giving it to any and every person or thing in a burning desire to feel it reciprocated back. Zev loves everyone in his own type of way, and he understands not everyone can return that love in the same way.

“Respectfully,” Adam grumbles in his brassy timber voice. “Get your eyes off my wife—” My friend breaks off, golden-brown eyes widening with a new light as if he didn’t mean to say those words.

Ben claps a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Did you finally make an honest woman out of Koda? I’d say I’m mad I didn’t get an invite, but Zev and I made a disappearing act of our wedding, too. I guess I can’t be upset at you for copying your little bro.” Ben and Zev meet each other’s eyes with an adoring and sickeningly-sweet look that has my gaze bouncing toward Vincent as he flips wildly into the pool, longing to share a moment like that with him.

“N-no,” Adam stutters. He looks around our gathered group with poorly masked nervousness. “But, I think I just made an unconscious decision to do so.”

At his confession, we all cheers our drinks, amber-filled glasses and bottles of beer coming together like pineapple on pizza — unlikely but not awful.

I wonder, then, if everyone makes a precipitous decision to propose to their significant other, or if sometimes you just know. Does it have to be some big revelation?

Because mine isn’t.

I've known since the beginning that Vincent is it for me, ring or not, out or not. I've found myself searching the local fine jewelry stores, telling myself that, of course, it's too soon, but one day ... One day I'd click 'buy' on that diamond-studded band I'd built using the online tool on the jeweler's website, and that ring would be waiting for me after work one evening. I'd ditch Vincent to the best of my ability, or maybe have Matthew or Theo distract him, then duck into the store and swipe my unlimited credit card because that ring, that symbol, that gesture, would be completely priceless.

My mother straightens my tie, her green eyes glassy whereas mine are impossibly dry, scraping like sand at every blink. We standing in a Sunday school classroom of the church where my father preaches. It's been converted slightly into a dressing room for the occasion. This occasion.

My wedding to Ashlynn.

I swallow hard against the now-tight tie, glancing down to make sure the black material is still the same shade as the black tux I wear. It's so unlike me to be in anything except blue, though I did try to incorporate it. I'd tried to slide on a pair of dark blue boxers, but as soon as the black socks slid over my feet, I knew I would have to change. Socks, underwear, and tie all have to match. Ashlynn wants me in a black tie, so my socks and boxers must also be black.

It feels like I'm hiding even more of myself now.

Words sit on my tongue — really just letters and spaces, unformed and unspoken. They threaten to press together into not only words, but full-on sentences and confessions and biting remarks. They burn and itch like my ass after my last night with Vincent where he gave me exactly what I needed to shut my brain up long enough to be myself for a few hours before I fell right back into this depressive state of *not-me*. The want, *the need*, to profess my truths to my mother as she stands before me is so dire, I have to squeeze my nails into my palms until it almost doesn't even hurt anymore.

I'm bisexual, I want to tell her. I like women and men. I find them both attractive, and I want to have sex with both.

But that's a lie. Maybe at one time in my life it was true, but now there's an even bigger truth blocking it.

I like Vincent — I love Vincent, and I want to have sex with him and live with him and marry him, not Ashlynn.

Those revelations can never pass from my lips to my mother's ears, though. It would be the end of our already precarious relationship. I can't lose my parents, too.

It isn't really because I rely on them, or need them, or want them, but they're the last of my immediate family with Caroline gone, though I have some aunts and cousins currently sitting in the church whom I haven't spoken with in years. My parents may be awful and uncaring and hypocritical, but ... No, that's it. They're all that, and they're also the last connection I have to my dead little sister. If I lose them, I lose her. Then, everyone is gone, and I would be alone, exactly how I always knew I'd end up eventually.

"You're doing the right thing," my mother offers in a shaking voice, though she tries to hide it. This is a rare time where Mom isn't pressed tightly against my father's side, and it's also a rare time where she shows she has feelings about things other than how her husband wants her to feel. "Everything will work out. It's God's will." She is perfectly done up with too-curved hair and inch-thick makeup to hide the lines forming around the botox she insists she doesn't get, but we can all tell.

Lying is a sin, unless it makes you look better — at least, in my parents' twisted version of it.

Before I can stop myself, my fingers are circling her thin wrist, halting her silly adjustments of my tie. Her gaze flits from our hands to my eyes before she has to look away as more moisture floods her tear ducts. "You don't believe that," I plea in a whisper. "You can't believe that."

"Caiden ..."

“You know I don’t want this, Mom. I-If you help me explain to Dad, maybe he’ll understand—”

“No.” She hisses the word over my own, then sniffs her nose.

I tighten my grip on her, the skin under my fingers warming with every second I hold her. “You’ve always done what he wants, what he says. We listened to him with Caroline, and she died, Mom. We could have helped her sooner, and maybe she would have been stronger for the transplant. It’s our fault — all of us — for not taking matters into our own hands sooner.” I’ve had days and days to think about this, and I know I’m telling the truth just as much as I know I love Vincent, but I can’t do this on my own. I can’t push them both away with no hope for the future. “If we hadn’t waited for a goddamn God-given miracle that never came, Caroline might still be with us today. *We* killed her.”

I push too far.

Mom snatches her wrist from my grasp, gasping and blinking away her unshed tears. “That’s the devil talking, Caiden. You best pray from now until the ceremony begins, lest you burden your marriage with the same sin you carry with you now. I can see it in your eyes, son. You’re full of perversion and sin, and your bastard child will follow in your footsteps if you don’t end it now.”

Recoiling from her words, I’m left in stunned silence as she stalks out of the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts. It takes a while, maybe minutes or hours or days, but ultimately the shock wears off and I slowly unfreeze. In this instant, I want nothing more than to fall into Vincent’s arms and cry for my dead sister. She would understand me. She always understood me.

Not only Vincent, though. My heart aches to be pressed against him, but my hands long to be grasped by Theo and Matthew on either side. My mind craves Adam’s calm thoughts, my emotions reach out for Jackson’s lighthearted humor, and my knees tremble to lean against Phoenix’s strength.

“It’s not perversion,” I say confidently into the empty room. Suddenly, Zev and I don’t seem all that different. I understand him even better now as I realize that love comes in so many different forms and strengths and places and *people*, and I need all of it in my life. “It’s love,” I whisper.

My heart is torn in two as I’m ushered to the altar by some kids whose parents probably made them volunteer at the church to make them look better. Half of me — no, fuck, *all* of me — yearns to leave now. I want to drop everything and walk away for a night of poker with my older friends, then a movie night with my younger friends, then a Saturday of farmer’s markets, pasta making, and haircuts with Vincent.

God, I want it all, and I’m about to lose every bit of it.

The only thing stopping me is my shared blood. Three people in this church right now who share my immediate DNA. Without them, I don’t have a family.

Do I?

Before I know it, a veiled figure in white is being walked down the aisle, a stranger at her side, and everyone is standing. She walks as if in slow motion toward me, planting her feet in front of me what seems like hours later. Her hand is placed in mine, though I remain stiff as a board, like I might hurl all over her dress if I so much as twitch the wrong way.

My father greets everyone, leads a prayer, then the pews creak as the fifty or so people gathered sit on the worn wood. I swallow against the triggering feeling in the back of my throat. Ashlynn would kill me if I threw up my non-existent breakfast on her eggshell lace and tulle. I grit my teeth as if that will keep everything inside.

“Should anyone present know of any reason this couple should not be joined in holy matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

A cough, but otherwise silence.

Had any of my friends been invited to the ceremony, I’m not entirely sure if they would have objected or not. Maybe

that's why my mom was adamant about not sending them invitations.

I can barely focus on my father's next words, forcing down my guts as they threaten to spill every-fucking-where. God, is my stomach supposed to be hurting this badly? Sweat trickles down the column of my spine, and it reminds me so much of my last night with Vincent that I actually see black spots dance across my vision. Is this it? Do I spontaneously combust on this holy ground as I remember my boyfriend fucking me until we were both spent, yet quivering for more?

"The bride and groom have each prepared vows, which they will now read." He nods to me, and again, I gulp down that feeling of puking.

I've memorized the vows Mom wrote for me, of course, but when I finally unclench my teeth, it's not the vows that come out.

It isn't my breakfast, either, but it is vomit — just of the word kind — and once I start, I can't seem to stop.

"I-I ... I'm in love," I stammer at first before speaking, surprised as the words escape me easily. "I am deeply, madly, and all-consumingly in love. The past few months, I've grown not only as a person, but as a friend, as a brother," I eye my father at that. Caroline may be gone, but I can still do right by her. She'd have loved to hear me play that piano in Italy, and she would have loved it even more that I was sharing the experience with someone who loves me, too. "I never knew what it meant to be loved so unconditionally that nothing else matters — not the press, not my family, and not some God who is too much of a coward to save a little girl from a fucking infection."

My mother gasps, but I'm too far gone. Stepping away from Ashlynn, I start backing down the aisle I never should have walked down in the first place. I don't even realize I'm loosening my tie until it dangles loose by a few inches, just as Vincent does with his.

I keep talking as I retreat further and further away. "Ashlynn, I'm sorry for the way things worked out, and I

promise to support our child with everything I have.” It’s the attendees’ turn to gasp now as I reveal that shocker, and I swear my dad’s face turns as red as a fire truck. He’s pissed. Good. “And, hey, if you don’t want custody, I’ll take all of it. I’m sure that kid wants to deal with your snoring and mood swings about as much as I do, and you see where I’m going.” I gesture behind me. “Out that door. Because I’m leaving, and I am going to be with someone not a single one of you people will approve of. *And I don’t give a damn what you think about that.*” I fix my gaze on my father, halting in the middle of the aisle, breathless but oh-so-alive. “Love is love, and I’m in love with a man.”

I think my aunt faints.

“I am in love, and there isn’t anything or anyone who can keep me from loving—”

The door behind me groans as it’s pulled open, and one glance over my shoulder has my heart thundering dangerously in my chest. For a moment, I think the man standing there might have to give me CPR again because my heart might just give out.

“—Vincent Bernardi, my best friend’s brother.” I smile as wide as my mouth will let me, probably resembling Zev’s signature look.

I don’t know why Vincent is here. I don’t know why he’s striding down this church aisle in the middle of my destroyed wedding. I don’t know why he looks angrily at the altar on the other side of the room as he approaches me.

And I don’t pause to ask.

He reaches me right as I turn fully to face him, and in the next moment, my lips are crushing his in a bruising embrace. I pour every emotion into our kiss, and Vincent reciprocates with what feels like even more. We feed off each other, gripping each other’s faces with frantic hands only slightly less enthusiastic than our tongues as they caress between us like two lovers meeting after years apart.

Pulling back only an inch, I rest my forehead against his. “I don’t know why you’re here, babe, but I am so glad you are.”

“I didn’t come here for you,” he growls.

I raise my head from his, still holding his face, and look at him questioningly. “What?”

Vincent stands like an avenging angel in the middle of my father’s church, black curls windswept and inky eyes just as turbulent. He sets his jaw, reaching into the pocket of his black leather jacket to retrieve a stack of papers. “Okay, I only said that to be a bit dramatic,” he confesses to me quietly, pecking my lips. “I did come here for you, but also to expose Ashlynn for the backstabbing liar she is.” He raises his voice at the end of his sentence, spitting venom, and all eyes flicker between him and the woman in white I just left at the altar.

I break the silence. “What are you talking about?”

Scrambling to grasp the papers he thrusts from his hands to mine, I glance down and read over them, flipping through each one, to find ... “What the hell is this, Ashlynn?” I glare accusingly at her. The papers in my hand crinkle as I tighten my fists in anger.

“What—”

“You set me up!” I yell, furious. Vincent lets me steal his thunder. “You sold my personal information so Ibragimov could make a move against me!” I explain each piece of paper as I toss them one by one to the floor in absolute disgust at her actions. “You told them where I would be at the Gala. You gave them access to my apartment. You told them which bodyguard would be the most strategic to shoot. You sent them all of the pictures they used to blackmail me. *You faked being pregnant with my child.*” The forged ultrasound and blood test hit the ground last, and I’m left seething as Ashlynn snuffles from behind her veil.

From the corner of my eye, I see figures filing in the entryway of the church, not stepping into the sanctuary, but waiting right outside the doors. My gaze drifts over Winnifred,

TJ, Hunter, Matthew, Jackson, Adam, and Phoenix — all my friends.

“Fuck you, Ashlynn,” I spit, and my mother lets out a sob. “Mom, Dad, you have my number. Feel free to call if you want your son in your life. If not, all I ask is that you leave me alone. Don’t try to crucify me or convert me because it isn’t happening. Vincent and I are going to go celebrate my freedom with our friends — our family.” I take his hand in mine and our fingers thread together as perfectly as I remember. My eyes narrow at my mother and father, daring them to say something. “I’m going to fuck my boyfriend,” I state with my head held high, and of all things, a blush dances across Vincent’s cheeks. I peck that warmth with an adoring smile before continuing. “All day and all night. And one day, I’ll get down on one knee, of my own volition, and claim him forever as my own. But, honestly? That isn’t any of your goddamn business.”

Epilogue

One Year Later

Vincent Bernardi

“Vinz!” My boyfriend yells from the kitchen. “I don’t think I’m doing this right!”

I roll my eyes. After all this time together, Caiden still thinks he can’t properly knead a ball of pasta dough. Okay, *maybe* he tends to work some spots too much while neglecting others, but the pasta usually tastes the same as when I make it.

He’s most likely extra nervous because of our guests tonight. Ma, Gaia, and Valentino have flown in from Italy and will be coming for dinner at our place — really Caiden’s penthouse, but I’ve been living here for the last twelve months. Matthew snatched my apartment as soon as it went on the market and, to my surprise, has managed to make every payment on time.

Along with our three Italian dinner guests, our friends will be joining us. With Phoenix, Tessa, Jackson, Alexandria, Adam, and Koda coming over more often, Caiden and I invested in a *large* dining room table shortly after I moved in. It’s convenient for when Matthew, TJ, Hunter, and Winnifred come over as well.

In addition to the table, Caiden and I have replaced several pieces of furniture in his house to match our life together. Every piece we bought was like wiping a slate clean only to fill it with new memories and experiences reserved only for us. For instance, the new dark blue couch in the living room is the same shade as one of the paints used on the large canvas hanging on the wall behind it. We’d made that painting together a few months ago for a surprise date night. The blue, white, black, and gold paint had been fun to spread across the

sheet on the floor, but the large splotch in the corner is a constant reminder of the way Caiden freaked at the feel of paint on his body. I couldn't stop laughing at his disgusted look after we'd decorated the sheet to our satisfaction and managed to smudge a section of paint with the guffaws shaking my body.

It hasn't been easy to move on from everything that happened last year. Even though Caiden is safe now, he still wakes up from nightmares in which either he or I have been shot, panicking and clutching me as close as possible. He spent months seeing a trauma counselor, and we spent about the same amount of time regularly seeing a relationship counselor. Caiden had a lot to work through after the threat and attempts on his life while we had a lot to work on in our relationship — the biggest being to stop and communicate when we have problems instead of jumping to conclusions, which is exactly what caused us to separate when Ibragimov blackmailed him last year.

We have grown together in the best ways possible — emotionally, physically, mentally, and intimately. Last month, we attended a show at Ben's BDSM club in LA, and Caiden is already asking when we can go back. Who knew the big, bad CEO would be into bondage and spanking? Though, I am *not* complaining.

"Baby," I hum as I come up behind him, wrapping my arms around his middle and admiring the way his forearms flex as he kneads the pasta. I kiss his cheek. "Are you nervous because my family is coming for dinner?"

"No," he exclaims a little too quickly.

I nudge him out of the way with my hip. "You know how to do this, but if you would rather walk Voscarr, by all means, go."

Caiden pulls a face, and I know it is because he hates picking up after the puppy on walks. When he first brought the mud-soaked, starving mutt home, I'd taken a good few minutes interrogating what I thought must have been a doppelgänger of my boyfriend. The words *Caiden* and *puppy*

don't belong in the same sentence, which is obvious seeing as I am the one who feeds, walks, and bathes the dog most of the time. Caiden does like to teach Voscarr how to do tricks, though. I can't really argue when Voscarr brings Caiden's house shoes to the front door on command, keeping him from panicking about dirty socks and shoes in the apartment.

"I'll do it after this," I chuckle.

After washing my hands, I stand at the counter where Caiden had been kneading the pasta dough. The beige, lopsided ball begs me for help and I send Caiden an inquisitive glance. He has struggled with this part of pasta making in the past, but never this badly.

My boyfriend is leaning against the opposite counter, wide, nervous eyes staring right back at me with flecks of green and gold sparkling in the overhead lighting. The way he fiddles with his flour-covered fingers leads me to believe there is something on his mind, and I consider asking if he needs to call his therapist for a quick phone conference. I decide against saying anything because Caiden has been doing well with everything. If something entirely different is bothering him, I don't want to add bad memories into the mix.

I crack my knuckles before digging into the pasta, stretching and pulling and pushing against the counter in an attempt to save the under, yet also over, worked dough. There's a large break in the whole thing as if it was ripped apart and hastily shoved back together.

If I didn't know any better, I'd think Voscarr got ahold of the pasta before I did.

"What the—" The heel of my hand presses into the pasta and something hard digs back. It's solid and unrelenting and definitely should not be in there. Using my fingers, I gently poke the half-spread ball of dough until I find the object again. "Caiden, what the hell did you put in here— Oh."

A silver band flaunting an innumerable amount of diamonds — because *of course* Caiden has to go above and beyond — rests between my fingers. Pieces of pasta dough stick to my hand and the ring, but it only serves to make this

moment more authentic. Nothing in our lives has ever been perfect and we wouldn't ever want it to be.

When my gaze finally pulls away from the stunning ring in search of my boyfriend, I find him down on one knee, his jeans pressed against the floor without worry of how much dirt might be getting on them. His nervousness suddenly makes more sense as I realize it wasn't about my family but *this*. This ring and his kneeling and—

“Cay,” I whisper, unable to find the words I want to say.

He opens his mouth, then closes it. Then repeats. “Shit, I had a whole speech memorized, but I'm looking at you and the only thing going through my mind is how much I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

My heart swells and tears threaten my eyes, but I can't let him do this. Not when I'd made my plan weeks ago. “Do you want some tiramisu?” I blurt unceremoniously, unsure how to segue the conversation to where I need it to be.

Caiden's brow furrows. “Right now? We're kind of in the middle of something ...”

“Yes. Right now.” Clutching the ring in my fist as if it might disappear, I stride to the refrigerator and retrieve the tiramisu I made earlier in preparation for tonight. It's divided into individual portions, and Caiden's is placed strategically in the middle so it wouldn't get lost and end up in the wrong hands.

I hand him the small glass and a spoon, and realization floods his features. Lowering his other knee to the floor and resting back on his heels, Caiden tentatively dips his spoon into the dessert and pulls out a big scoop. Despite the fluttering in my stomach, laughter bubbles from my chest as Caiden shovels the extra-large bite into his mouth.

His jaw works as he uses his tongue to feel through the tiramisu, and I see the exact moment he discovers the foreign object in his dessert. He retrieves it from his mouth, licking it clean until he's holding a titanium ring. It features a wooden

inlay dyed a deep blue, and costs more than I'd ever consider spending on myself. For Caiden, though, it's perfect.

Caiden's smile is at Zev-level. He chuckles almost disbelievingly, blinking at the tears filling his eyes as he stares at the ring held between his fingers. "You were going to give this to me tonight?" He asks.

I sniffle around my own swelling emotion. Based on the way my cheeks are burning, I bet my smile is just as wide as his. "Why do you think Ma and Gaia are coming in from Italy?"

He gives a wet laugh and I see the first tear fall from his eye. "My Vincenzo."

Meeting him on the floor, I tug the blue and silver band from him only to slide it onto his ring finger. "Please tell me it's a yes," I tell him.

"It's a *hell* yes," he nods enthusiastically. He reciprocates my motions with the diamond-coated ring, nestling it on my ring finger where it rests perfectly. "And you?"

"*Fuck* yes."

We meet in a whirlwind of kisses and hands, touching each other for the first time as fiancés. What starts sweet quickly ends with spilled tiramisu and a trail of clothes leading to our bedroom. And when the first knock comes from the front door, we're still naked and tangled in each other and the pasta is still half-destroyed on the countertop.

Caiden chuckles and holds me closer, nuzzling his nose against mine. "Pizza?"

"Pizza," I agree.

About The Author

Ajay Daniel

Ajay enjoys writing romance stories (with a sprinkle of steam, smut, spice, or whatever word tickles your fancy) where the main characters fall in love. Sometimes the main characters are opposite genders, and sometimes they're the same. Sometimes there are two partners, and sometimes there are more. Ajay doesn't discriminate because, between consenting adults, love is love. It doesn't need a fancy definition or strict guidelines of what should and shouldn't be, and who is anyone to judge? When the characters appear and offer their story, taking over the author's thoughts be it day, night, during the work day, driving, or trying to accomplish chores around the house ... Well, Ajay is just going to write it for them.

Books In This Series

Business, Casual

The Business, Casual series by Ajay Daniel is centered around four CEO best friends living in New York who gather every Thursday for poker night. It consists of romances between a variety of couples all experiencing their own trials and tribulations of life and love and will contain heterosexual and homosexual couples as well as varying levels of explicitness.

In chronological order within their universe, the series will feature Adam Santiago, Jackson Nightingale, Phoenix Bernardi, and Caiden Augustus (disclaimer: books may not be released in this order). Each of their stories may be read as a standalone, though they may have more than one book dedicated to them and those will be recommended to be read in order.

Caiden Augustus' story is released as two books: Dominance, Threatened and Dominance, Protected.

Other books in the series will include: Adam Santiago's Infiltration, Successful, Jackson Nightingale's Heiress, Interrupted, and Phoenix's Bernardi's Security, Hacked.

Welcome to Business, Casual, where we often mix business with pleasure.

Dominance, Threatened

Book 1 of Caiden and Vincent's story

Dominance, Protected

Book 2 of Caiden and Vincent's story

Acknowledgement

Thanks for reading, and be sure to keep an eye out for more titles from this author. Ajay has plenty of stories to share.