

TWO BEST MEN

A NOVEL

JUNE
HARDING



TWO BEST MEN

A NOVEL

JUNE HARDING

Copyright © 2023, June Harding

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. This is a fictional work, and any similarities to names, places, or events is purely coincidental.

Cover art by BooksAndMoods.com

Formatting by BooksAndMoods.com

Edited by Christine Tourigny

ISBN: 978-1-7781736-3-9

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[More books by June Harding](#)

PROLOGUE

PRESENT

CAMERON

The screaming rain was pelting against the hotel lobby window, obscuring my view of the parking lot. A sudden burst of lightning etched across the sky, giving me a split second glimpse of the palm trees lining the freeway, bent nearly in half in the torrid winds.

I took another sip of my scotch, allowing the smooth burn to melt away some of my nerves. The storm was worse than predicted, but all the weather networks agreed; tomorrow was going to be clear and sunny. I smirked to myself, actually putting stock in something a weather man said. Only weathermen and politicians could stand on TV spouting lies, and still keep their jobs. But I'd have to have faith that tomorrow would be beautiful, and my best friend's wedding would be everything he deserved.

"Cam!" a panicked voice said behind me. Rhett was jogging down the hotel hallway looking a little worse for wear. The suit jacket and the tie were long gone, and his dress shirt was completely untucked.

"Cam, you left your phone on the table." He had it stretched out to me, and there's a look on his face, a panicked, shocked expression. I immediately tensed.

"Your phone keeps going off, and, well...look."

I took the phone from him, scrolling down the missed calls and messages.

"Oh, fuck."

"Yeah," he whispered. "Oh, fuck is right."

CHAPTER 1

POPPING THE QUESTION

CAMERON

Three months earlier

I pulled up in front of Mike's house half an hour late and grabbed the six-pack sitting in the passenger seat as I hoofed it to his front door. I hated being late, even if it's just to hang out with the guys. We'd had a long-standing poker night on the first Friday of every month, and they wouldn't have dealt until I was there.

I rang the bell, and waited impatiently for someone to answer. In our college days, I would have just burst in and made my way down to the basement. But when Mike's girlfriend Melody moved in two years ago, the 'guys' vibe at the house made a quick about-face and now we rang doorbells.

"Hi Cameron," Melody smiled as she opened the door. There was something about her, an extra little pink in her cheeks as she greeted me tonight.

"Hi Mel." I planted a quick kiss on her cheek. "Beer?"

"Nah, I'm working on a Chardonnay. Good luck," She chipped, as she headed upstairs. I made my way towards the basement.

"Don't know why you'd want me to drain your boyfriend's wallet, but thank you!"

I headed down the lopsided wooden stairs into the basement. Mike's grandmother had left him the house when she passed away, and back in college we had the run of the place. But since he started dating Melody, the house started to look more like a home. There was a drawer in the kitchen just

for dish towels now, and plants all around the house. Though Mike's space was now confined to the basement, even that had drastic improvements. She convinced him to put in carpeting and proper lighting, and instead of the rickety folding table we used to play on, she'd bought him a real poker table for his birthday last year. Things in the house had changed for the better, and Melody was definitely the reason.

The basement smelled like wings and beer as I descended the steps, and I heard boisterous laughter over the grungy punk music we used to listen to twenty years ago.

"Hey, you made it!" Jesse shouted. I shot him a glare, not looking to come across any of his smartass remarks tonight.

"Sorry guys, had a really picky client and I just wanted to finish his fucking project." I ran a hand over the stubble lining my chin. It had been a long week.

"No worries, grab a seat," Mike offered, ever the diplomatic one.

I set one of my beers on the table and popped the rest in the mini fridge. I took my spot between Jesse and Shaan, and fished out a ten dollar bill from my wallet. Shaan held out the boob mug, a hideous mug with enormous tits we'd been using to collect the cash in at the beginning of each game. No one really knows where it came from, but the boob mug was sacred to us.

I stuffed my bill into the mug and Shaan set it aside as Mike started to deal. We shot the shit like it was any other Friday night, talking about work, or Shaan telling us the latest about his kids. He was the only one that had taken that plunge, and while the idea of being responsible for a whole human being terrified me to my core, Shaan absolutely adored being a

Dad. Pretty-boy Jesse on the other hand, probably couldn't keep a hamster alive.

As we played, the first two hands went down pretty normally, but by the third, I started getting suspicious, and by the fifth I knew something was downright wrong.

"Mike," I barked as Jesse scooped the stack of poker chips towards himself with a grin. "What the hell is going on?" He looked up at me with an innocent stare.

"What do you mean?"

"You've just lost the last five hands, and while I feel kind of stupid saying anything because I'm actually up for once, you're either throwing the game or something is up."

Shaan and Jesse turned to him expectantly now too, and his stare bounced back and forth between us.

"Fine," he laughed, tossing pocket Kings onto the poker table. "I was trying to find the right time to bring this up, but...I asked Mel to marry me."

There was a moment of stunned silence before Jesse was jumping up and tackling Mike into a bear hug, yelling his congrats to our friend. Shaan and I were equally excited, and he went to the fridge to get us all a fresh beer for a proper toast.

Mike's hair was ruffled from Jesse's affection, and Shaan was giving him huge smacks on the shoulder with a big grin.

"Thank you guys, thank you," Mike laughed, holding his beer up. "Now, I've asked Mel to be my wife so my next question is, will you guys be my groomsmen?"

There was a chorus of 'yeses' and 'of courses' and a holler for a bachelor party from Jesse, before we all clinked

our bottles together and drank.

The rest of the game was lost, but we celebrated our friend happily. After hearing all the hollering, Mel came down to the basement, a happy smile plastered across her face as she proudly showed off her new engagement ring. She stuck tight to Mike's side for the rest of the night, and whenever they'd catch each other's glance, there was that lovely doe-eyed look on either of their faces.

I was happy for Mike. He always thought he'd settle down and have kids, but despite several long-term relationships, it never seemed to work out. Not until Mel came along. She was temping for his secretary who went on maternity leave, so of course there was a bit of a scandal at first, but Mike and Melody were the real deal.

By eleven o'clock I was making my way out, Mike coming up to see me to the door.

"Hey, I'm really happy for you man," I said, pulling him in for a hug. He seemed shy for a moment before pulling away.

"Cam, I wanted to ask you in private, but will you be my best man?" Mike was looking up at me like I might actually say no.

"Of course I will." I chuckled and hugged him again.

"Just don't let Jesse have anything to do with the bachelor party, ok?"

"Absolutely not," I replied wide-eyed. We weren't in our twenties anymore, but no one seemed to have told Jesse that; he was a perpetual party animal.

"Mel already had some like, pinboard thing, so you know, be ready I guess."

It sounded an awful lot like a warning. “Hey, whatever you guys need, I’ll be there,” I assured him.

“Thanks, Cam.”

I didn’t know how much I would come to regret those words.

It was only seventy-two hours later when an invitation popped up in my inbox.

He put a Ring on it!

You are invited to celebrate the
engagement of Michael Wagner and Melody
Landon

Saturday June 8th at 7pm

Ristorante Bianco

1412 West Palm Drive,

Orlando FL

Please RSVP by May 21st

“Theo,” I called out through my open office door.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Block off my calendar on the evening of June 8th.”

“You got it, boss.”

I RSVPed to the dinner right away, and within seconds I had a reply.

Re: Engagement Party!

Yay! Can't wait for you to meet the bridal party!

-Mel xx

“Theo?”

“Yeah boss.”

“I'm sending you an address. Arrange to have flowers sent the morning of the 8th. Something...bridal-y.”

Theo scooted back in his rolling chair until he was in the door frame. He was a young kid from Trinidad who had been my barista for six months before I asked him to come be my assistant on a whim. I hadn't regretted it for a moment.

“Describe...bridal-y.”

“I don't know, something white I guess?”

He nodded, looking none too sure.

“K,” he said, rolling himself back to his desk. A few minutes later his chair rolled back into view.

“What do you want the card to say?”

I thought about it. *Sorry he's your problem now? Thanks for taking him off our hands?*

“Just have it say ‘Congratulations on your engagement’.”

“Gottcha.” Theo rolled back out of view.

My phone dinged with a text from a number I didn't recognize.

UNKNOWN

Hey, what's up? This is Rhett. Mel gave me your number, for like, wedding stuff I guess. She's my older sister.

I paused a moment. I was sure Rhett was a guy's name, but apparently I'd been spared some embarrassment.

ME

Hi Rhett, I'm Cam. Are you the maid of honor?

RHETT

Ha! Yeah, I guess.

A gif came through of a chesty blond in a bridesmaid's dress blowing a seductive kiss. Was this chick hitting on me?

ME

Well, I look forward to meeting you at the engagement party.

RHETT

Yeah, you too. No one's ever asked me to be part of their wedding party before, so if there is something I'm supposed to be doing, let me know!

I was getting a sinking suspicion that I was about to be babysitting Mel's little sister through this whole thing. Wonderful.

ME

Yeah, you got it. Let's find some time to talk at the dinner.

RHETT

Perfect.

Another gif came through, this time of a lineup of bridesmaids all shaking their asses. How old *was* this woman? I was rolling my eyes when Theo came in with our sushi orders, and Mel's weird little sister evaporated from my mind faster than a cold margarita on a hot day.

CHAPTER 2

ASSUMPTIONS ARE OFTEN WRONG, AND
USUALLY EMBARRASSING

CAMERON

Tiny fingers held tightly onto my hands as Shaan's one-year-old daughter toddled around the restaurant with me. Her bright smile and curly black hair elicited *oohs* and *ahhs* from all of the dinner guests we walked by. The whole back section had been reserved for the engagement party, and I was trying hard to remember all of Melody's family member's names. I met the other bridesmaids while we waited for Mel's grand arrival, and they told me Rhett was arriving with her since she wasn't here yet either.

I heard my phone ding with a message and slipped it out of my pocket, scooping up the little girl into my arms.

THEO

Check your email.

Ah fuck, that was never good news. I scrolled through to find the flagged email he was referring to.

"Shit," I muttered. The baby in my arms let out a giggle. "Sorry, you didn't hear me say that." Before I had a chance to respond, Theo's name came up on the caller ID and I swiped to answer.

"Yeah, I just saw it. Talk to me."

"She's saying that the final version we sent her isn't what you guys agreed on, and the ad goes to print tomorrow

morning.”

“That’s bullshit Theo, I have it in writing.”

“I know, I’m pulling up the email now, gimme a sec.”

I marched over to hand the baby back to Shaan or his wife, but they were dealing with their four-year-old who was having a meltdown because they wouldn’t let him put his hands into the butter dish. I decided to just keep the toddler with me since she seemed happy enough. I walked towards the reception area to finish my conversation with Theo.

“Ok, got it. Thursday at 4:37pm she said that she was happy with the latest version you sent over, and we replied with the invoice for the amount owing.”

“I’m guessing from this phone call she hasn’t paid it.”

“No, boss.”

“Fuck. Shit, sorry,” I said, apologizing to the baby again. “She just wants the fonts changed?”

“Yeah, that’s what she says.” I caught his skeptical tone.

“Right, well I have my laptop in the car so I think I can make the change by tonight. I’ll put my notifications back on so you can have the rest of the night off. Thanks, Theo.”

“You got it, boss.”

I hung up and made my way to the front door but as I reached for it, it careened open so quickly I had to jump out of the way to keep it from knocking right into the baby.

“WATCH IT, ASSHOLE!” I yelled. Immediately the startled baby began wailing. Some punk looking kid in a bad suit was on the other side.

“Chill the fuck out *Dad*, it was an accident.” He was laughing and I wanted to smack the grin off his face.

Tears were streaming now, and I knew I’d have to get the baby back to her actual parents. I glared at the little asshole who made his way to the bar without so much as a look back.

“She ok?” Shaan asked as I handed him his daughter.

“Yeah, some little shit just gave us a scare.” He grabbed her and she threw her arms around his neck. I turned to leave again, but the room suddenly erupted with applause as Melody turned the corner wearing a pretty, sky-blue dress. She blushed and waved as she made her way over to Mike, who pulled her in close and made a whole show of kissing her. My work crisis would have to wait.

Melody made her way around the table greeting guests with a bright smile on her face.

“Your flowers were beautiful,” she said with a hug when she got to me. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. Mike’s lucky to have you, Mel.” She blushed again.

“Hey, did you meet Rhett?”

“Not yet, no.”

Mel turned and scanned the restaurant, then lifted her arm up and waved.

“Rhett! Come here, I want you to meet Cameron.”

I think my heart stopped. To my absolute horror, the shit-head punk who’d nearly crashed into me was sauntering over to us with a drink in his hands. He tossed his head back with a laugh like he couldn’t believe his luck either.

“Cameron, this is my little brother Rhett,” Mel said.

Brother, not sister. I guess I just made the assumption that the maid of honor was a woman. The weird gifts certainly made a lot more sense now. We shook hands, both squeezing a little tighter than necessary in some dumb, macho bullshit.

“Nice to meet you,” I gritted out.

“Yeah, same.”

Our stare down was interrupted when Mike clinked his knife against his wine glass, getting everyone’s attention.

“Ok everyone, let’s have a seat so we can order!” he shouted above the din. I clenched my jaw angrily. I’d seen the little place cards set out on the table when I came in. They’d put me right next to this little asshole, and I was going to have to endure a whole meal next to him.

“After you, Dad,” Rhett said, holding out his hand. I get that there was an age discrepancy since the kid was probably in his early twenties, but that nickname was *not* going to stick.

We sat and I started reading through the menu. I couldn’t help but glance over at Rhett, who had his phone in his lap typing away the whole time. When the waiter came around to take his order he looked surprised.

“Oh, uh...what are you having, Cam?”

“The Calabrese salad and the funghi risotto.”

“Sure, I’ll have the same. And another vodka cranberry please,” he said, without taking his eyes off his phone.

“Important work down there?” I asked when the waiter moved on. There was a degree of ire in my voice, but he didn’t even notice.

“Yeah.”

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't.

“What do you do?”

His eyes finally popped up to meet mine. He was strikingly similar to his sister, the same sandy blond hair, the same light green eyes. “Videogames.”

“Oh, like a designer or something?”

“No, I play them.”

Thick skull on this kid. “I meant what do you do for work?”

“Yeah, that's what I do. I'm a streamer.”

“Wait, so you stream yourself playing videogames, and someone pays you to do that?”

He laughed. “*Lots* of people pay me to do that. Check these out,” he said, kicking his foot out from under the table. He tucked in the laces on a pair of black high-top sneakers with the word *Rapscallion6* embroidered in bright pink stitching. “These are from my latest brand endorsement with East Wing. Sick, huh?”

“You have a brand endorsement?” I asked, utterly shocked. He laughed and looked up at me.

“Yeah, you want a pair? They sent me like, fifty.”

“Not really my style, but thank you.”

I returned to my wine, thoroughly astonished that kids could make a career out of playing videogames. I'd never admit how old that made me feel. I still remember wasted night's playing Goldeneye 007 in Mike's parents basement, and this little shit had a shoe deal.

“What do you do?” Rhett asked to my surprise.

“Graphic design for marketing.”

“Well that’s vague. Is that code, like being an ‘accountant’ or something?”

“What’s wrong with being an accountant?”

He laughed again. “Never mind. What do you design?”

“Corporate branding for small businesses.”

“Oh, cool.”

I was surprised by how genuine he sounded.

When the waiter came back around with Rhett’s vodka cran, I snagged his attention.

“I’ll be taking care of the bill for the whole group, so could you make sure no one else offers to pay?” I asked him. He paused and gave me an apologetic look.

“Actually, the gentleman on your right already left his card with the maître d.”

I shot a glance towards Rhett, who didn’t look up from his phone as he winked at me.

“You get the next one, Dad.”

I seethed at his arrogant attitude and his stupid nickname.

“In that case I’ll take a glass of the Glenfarclas 25, neat. A double, please.” It was petty, but a looming sense of doom was settling over me at having to spend the next few months with this kid, and the drink would help with that.

“Right away sir,” the waiter chirped.

It wouldn’t be soon enough.

The rest of the meal was your standard mix of toasts and happy tears for the newly engaged couple. The food was fantastic, and I laughed to myself when Rhett scowled at his plate, murmuring something about hating mushrooms. I was saying my goodbyes when Mike pulled me aside.

“Hey I’m going to send you an email tomorrow with some dates,” he said.

“Yeah sure. What of?”

He took a deep breath. “Wedding shit. Mel’s pretty much micromanaged the hell out of this wedding already.”

“It was probably planned before you even proposed, Mike,” I said with a laugh.

“Yeah, I think you’re right. Anyway it’s uh...it’s soon.”

“The wedding?”

“Yeah. It’s going to be in two months, in August.”

“Oh shit, you guys really aren’t waiting.”

“Mel has been begging me to start trying, she’s thirty and I think she feels like the clock is ticking.”

“Wow, that’s huge. I’m happy for you guys.” I’d never tell him that the very idea of babies still made me slightly queasy, but if he was happy, then I was happy.

“Awesome, well I’ll see you next weekend.”

“Wait, what’s next weekend?”

Mike gave me a sheepish smile. “Cake tasting. Mel wants all four of us to go.”

“All four of us as in—”

“You, me, her and Rhett.”

Oh, fuck right off.

“You’re not already busy, are you?”

“No way, I’ll be there,” I said with a forced grin.

“Thanks man. And hey, I know Rhett can be a little much sometimes—but him and Mel are super close, so you know, got to keep the peace and all.”

“Nah, he’s fine,” I outright lied.

I should have ordered an even more expensive scotch.

CHAPTER 3

REMEMBER TO TREAT YOUR ELDERS WITH
RESPECT

RHETT

“That car is so obnoxious,” Mel chuckled as I hit the fob to lock the lambo. Admittedly, it was a little much, but a luxury car rental company had offered me a free six-month lease for prime ad space during a recent campaign, and I would have to be a fucking idiot to turn that down. They’d even given the car a custom wrap, my neon-pink gamer tag lining the black sides of the car.

“I’m hungry, let’s eat cake,” I said, wrapping an arm around my sister’s shoulders.

“Cameron isn’t here yet, but Mike is inside looking at the list that I’ve narrowed it down to.”

“I want chocolate.”

Mel glared. “That’s not one of the options.”

“What do you mean that’s not one of the options? It’s fucking cake!”

“It doesn’t go with the theme.”

“What the hell does chocolate have to do with a theme?”

“Ugh, you wouldn’t get it.”

I could admit as much. Mel was so Type-A it hurt my brain. She was the kind of student who handed in her essay’s a week early. She used to babysit me with a stack of flashcards to study for her tests, and whichever one I picked out of the box, she had to answer. She was too smart and too mature for her own good, but she’d always taken the time with her

annoying little brother, and so naturally I'd walk over hot coals for her.

Mel waved as a grey, Audi R8 pulled into the parking lot, and I tried not to sneer as the best man got out of his car.

"Hey Cam," she said, and he crouched down to give her a hug. He was tall as hell.

"What's up, Dad?" I held out a fist which he uncomfortably pounded. It was Sunday and the guy was wearing a dress shirt and suit pants. Was he coming from church or something? Who wears a dress shirt on a Sunday? His dark brown hair was combed neatly to the side, and if he didn't look so stiff and uptight, he'd almost be attractive. I knew then, that this was going to be hell.

"All right let's go!" my sister said, bouncing excitedly on her toes.

"After you, kid," Cameron drawled.

I laughed. How creative.

The bakery smelled amazing, and I was immediately starving for something sweet. We joined Mike at a table, who looked overwhelmed with a giant binder full of cake pictures in front of him. I swear I think his hair line had started receding ever since he asked Mel to marry him. Of course Mel took the seat next to Mike, so I was stuck sitting next to the effervescent Cameron.

"I'm so excited!" Mel squealed.

The woman who owned the bakery greeted us, and then came out with a huge tray of cakes. Whatever complaints I'd made about going to a cake tasting on a Sunday morning with my sister, were long gone at the sight of all that buttercream.

First there was a passionfruit cake, then a lemony one. Then there was something with coconut.

“Oh damn, that’s right. Cameron is actually allergic to coconut,” Mike said as Cam lightly pushed the plate away from himself with an apologetic smile.

Mel went a little bug eyed and stopped chewing. “I love the coconut cake,” she said, glancing between Mike and Cam.

“Mel, he’ll have to leave the venue if a hundred people are eating coconut cake around him.”

“You get that it’s not really fair for me, right?” she whispered to Mike, as if we weren’t sitting right in front of her.

“I mean, if you’re trying to send the best man home in an ambulance on our wedding day, then fine, get the coconut one.”

This was getting awkward as fuck. The cake woman gave a tight-lipped smile and excused herself. Then Cameron was tapping my shoulder.

“What?”

“Let’s step outside, give them a second.”

My sister was giving Mike the quiet rage-face I was all too familiar with, and even the idea of being alone with Cam was more inviting than sticking around for this fight.

“Yeah, good call.”

We headed out the side door of the bakery onto a small patio that led down to the beach, and there was a cool breeze rolling in off the water. I joined Cam at one of the shabby picnic tables.

“The coconut one was kind of shit,” I said laughing. “To be honest I don’t think Mel liked it either, but she hates to be told she can’t have something.”

“Yeah, Mike could definitely use help with his approach.”

We sat in an awkward silence for a bit, but I kept catching Cam’s eyes on me. Was he checking me out?

“Rhett, you have icing on your chin,” he finally said.

Oh. That was embarrassing.

I wiped the icing from my face and Cam gave me a pained thumbs up when it was gone. That’s when I saw them.

“Ah shit,” I muttered, clocking the trio of girls making their way over. Cameron looked over his shoulder.

“You know them?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“Are you really him?” one of the girls called out. I smiled and stood to greet them.

“Yeah, hi, I’m Rhett. Nice to meet you.”

They squealed excitedly to each other.

“Hi, I’m Nichole, this is Payton and this is Jade.” They beamed and shuffled excitedly. “Can we get a picture with you?”

“For sure!” I smiled for each one of the selfies they took with me, then autographed their phone cases.

“Oh my god, you’re so fucking nice in real life,” Payton gushed.

“Hey, I owe everything to the people that watch me. Are you guys going to be at Orange County in a few weeks?”

“Hell yeah!” they said, almost in perfect unison.

“Amazing. Well, wish me luck.”

“Absolutely. Thank you so much!”

I waved them off and sat back down with Cameron.

“What the hell was that?” he asked.

“My adoring public.”

“People recognize you in the street?”

“Look Dad, I know you probably grew up aspiring to be like the players on your baseball cards or whatever, but nowadays everyone wants to be a streamer. I just happen to be really fucking good at it.”

He was staring at me with a skeptical look when Jade rushed back over.

“I just wanted to—well, if you’re interested.” She quickly dropped a small piece of paper into my hand before turning and heading back to her friends. I stuffed it between the slats of wood in the table when I was sure she wasn’t looking anymore, but Cameron went right for it.

“That girl left you her number,” he said, more than a little shocked.

“Yeah, happens a lot.”

“You’re—you’re saying kids who play a lot of videogames get people’s numbers?”

“Really dude, how old are you?”

“I’m thirty-eight.”

“That username below her number is probably her Snapchat. Ever hear of that?” How many ways could I blow

this old guys mind today?

“Yeah, it’s like an app to send pictures, right?”

“Ah, so you’re not *that* old then.”

“You know, I’m about to start taking offence to your bitchy little one-liners,” he threatened. I shrugged apathetically. “And you’re not going to call her?” he asked.

“No way, sleeping with fans is way too messy.”

“So that happens to you a lot? Girls just offer to hook up?”

“Girls, gays, theys. Yeah. You should see my DMs. I have more nudes than Pornhub.” I tried to read the expression on his face, it was something between disgust and envy maybe. “Why, you jealous?”

He let out a sardonic laugh. “Of a bunch of horny twenty-year-olds? Absolutely not.”

“Still got the hots for the Mrs, then?”

“There is no Mrs.”

“Oh, you split up?”

“What? Split up with who?”

“You and the baby’s mom.”

Cam looked at me dumbstruck. “The baby at the restaurant?”

“Yeah.”

“That wasn’t my baby.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Is that why you’ve been calling me Dad?”

“Well you were an old guy holding a baby! I made a logical conclusion.”

“Thirty-eight isn’t old!”

“And twenty-two isn’t young!”

We came to some kind of weird stand-off before he rolled his eyes at me. And *I* was apparently the immature one.

“What’s in Orange County?” he asked, looking only partially interested.

“The convention center. I’m headlining a 1v1.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Man, I was really going to have to hold this geezers hand for everything, wasn’t I?

“This Japanese streamer who goes by DarkMatterMoon is flying in to challenge my title. In a videogame,” I added, just in case.

“I do not understand your world, man,” Cam said, shaking his head.

Mike’s face was suddenly peeking out through the door.

“I think we’re ready for you guys,” he said, more than a little exasperated. Who knew choosing cake could be such torture.

“Cool. Where did we land with the coconut cake?”

He glared at me. “*We’ve* decided that we can agree on a different flavor.” His stare was shellshocked.

“We won’t say a word,” Cam said in warning, as he pushed ahead of me.

“We certainly won’t.”

The next hour was spent sampling more cake, (none of which were chocolate), and Mike and Mel ended up agreeing on some kind of key lime thing. It was delicious.

“Guys, let’s go across the street for a cocktail,” Mel suggested as we made our way out of the bakery. I was really craving a vodka cran, but I hesitated. I had a game later today and alcohol and gaming don’t mix.

“Please!” she begged, grabbing me by the wrist. “Just one.”

“Fine, but I’m getting a mocktail or something.”

Mel and I made our way across the street ahead of Mike and Cam.

“So? You guys getting along ok?”

“Me and the old guy? Sure.”

Mel’s brows furrowed. “He’s the same age as Mike.”

“Yeah, Mike’s old too.” I winced as she backhanded my bicep. “I thought that was his kid at the engagement dinner.”

“Cameron?” she harped with a laugh. “Fuck no. I don’t think he’s ever even *been* with a woman.”

I almost tripped over my high tops. “Pardon?”

“Yeah, Mike said that even in high school Cam knew he was gay. Said he’s never seen him with a girl the whole time they’ve been friends. You didn’t know?”

“How the fuck would I have known? He seems just like every buttoned-up, repressed, straight guy I’ve ever met.”

“Well, he might be buttoned up, and may be repressed, but definitely not straight.” She was lost in thought for a moment. “Obviously don’t repeat any of this, but Mike said

his Dad took it really rough. He basically disowned Cam after he came out.”

I couldn't help my heart lurching at that, even though the guy *was* a fucking thorn in my side.

“You liked the key lime, right?” Mel said changing the subject, and I could tell there was a lot riding on my answer.

“Loved it. Great choice.”

I was three virgin vodka crans deep and dying of boredom as Mel scrolled through an endless Google Docs calendar of dates we needed to mark off. Apparently Cam and I were going to be working overtime with my eccentric sister, as we visited potential venues all of next week.

Although Cam's smile and enthusiasm were flawless with my sister, he punched each reservation time into his phone with increasing irritation.

My eyeballs were nearly about to melt out of my head when my phone chimed. I swallowed seeing Dan's name appear on the screen.

“Uh...be right back,” I muttered as I left the table. I tried to calm my prickling anxiety as I unlocked my phone and read his message.

DAN

Hey stranger. Just wanted you to know that I got a seat next week at the tourney. Didn't want to freak you out if you saw me there, or anything.

Right. Nice of him to warn me, I guess. I tried in vain to calm my racing heart.

ME

I'm happy for you. You deserve it, man. What time are you playing?

I suddenly wanted real booze to calm my nerves for this conversation. It had been nearly three months since I'd talked with Dan, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I'd fucking missed him.

DAN

I'm slotted in with the 1pm crew. You know anyone else playing in that round?

ME

Not off the top of my head, no. But I think they're still taking qualifiers, so who knows.

Oh yeah, and I fucking love you and miss you like crazy and I wish you'd figure your shit out and come back to me. Ugh. I scrubbed my hands over my face waiting for him to reply. The three little dots appeared and disappeared a few times on the screen, and my hand was starting to sweat on my phone.

DAN

Cool. I know Cherry is still in the running, so I'm hoping she gets a spot too.

Oh my god Dan, please say anything other than gaming shit!

ME

Yeah, she's been doing amazing. I still keep in touch with her every now and then.

I'd lost our mutual friend Cherry when we'd broken up since she'd been the one to introduce me to Dan in the first place. It was doubly hard losing a friend and boyfriend when he'd ripped my heart out and thrown it to the wolves.

I chewed the inside of my lip nervously and I was starting to feel like such a fucking loser, looking down so desperately at my phone just waiting for a message.

"You good, kid?"

I jumped, and my phone fumbled in my hands as Cameron came out of the bathroom behind me.

"Took a fucking year off my life, man. Yeah, I'm good."

He looked at me warily.

"Girl trouble?"

"Boy trouble," I admitted through gritted teeth. "I'm not gay," I blurted out. But that sounded awful and completely wrong, so I shook my head apologetically. "I mean I'm pan." I

don't know why I felt like I had to explain myself to this guy. Did he even know what that meant?

“Ok,” he replied, looking at me like I'd totally overshared. But I probably had. To my relief he headed back to our table.

ME

Anyway, let me know if Cherry gets a spot on the roster.

I bounced a leg nervously waiting for a reply, and my heart stopped when my phone chimed again.

DAN

Yeah. I will.

I typed out at least three more messages, deleting them all before getting the guts to hit send. I shouldn't look into Dan's message too much. He was only letting me know he'd be at Orange County next week, nothing more. It was a courtesy. But my zippy little rodent brain was already coming up with a hundred different scenarios of what might happen. Would he come say hi? Would he just ignore me completely? I wiped the thoughts from my mind as I returned to our table.

“Gotta get home, my stream starts in an hour,” I said by way of good bye. Mel stood and hugged me.

“Thanks for coming.”

“Sure. Bye guys,” I said, giving a quick wave to Mike and Cameron, then I was jogging back across the street to my obnoxiously sexy car. I felt better sinking into the leather seats. I was fucking Rapsca1lion6, and I was pulling out of the parking lot in a damn Lamborghini. Yeah, I had nothing to be sorry about.

CHAPTER 4

CRABS BELONG ON THE BEACH, AND
NOWHERE ELSE

CAMERON

I yawned, sending off what I hoped was my last proof for the day. I'd decided to just work late at the office before heading to the first venue visit with Mike and Mel. It was at some ritzy hotel that apparently had a stunning rooftop terrace.

“You need anything else, boss?” Theo called out from his desk.

“No, you can head out. I'll see you next week.”

I heard him close up his laptop and clear his desk for the weekend.

“Hey boss?” he asked from the doorway. “You think I could head out early on Wednesday the 20th?”

“Yeah, sure. You have an appointment or something?”

“No, I have tickets to a thing at the Orange County Convention Center.”

“What—uh, what's the show?” There was no fucking way, right? Theo gave an embarrassed chuckle.

“It's actually this big streaming event.”

“Ragamuffin-something-or-other?”

His brows shot up. “Rapsallion6, yeah. Sorry, I just didn't take you as a gaming fan.”

“I'm not. He's the maid of honor, or rather man of honor for this wedding that's taken over my life.”

Theo gaped. “You know Rapsallion6?”

“Rhett? Yeah. His sister is marrying my best friend.”

Theo now resembled a largemouth bass.

“You ok?”

“Yeah, that’s just like, super cool.”

“So explain to me what this is, people just sit around and watch two kids play videogames?”

“I mean, Rap6 and DarkMatterMoon are the headliners, but streamers from all over the country are coming to play a bunch of different games. There are qualifiers, round robins, 1v1 or group games. It’s huge.”

“What game does Rhett play?”

“It’s called Jungle Drop.”

“And what’s the objective?”

“It’s last man standing. Basically you’re one of fifty convicts on a flight, and you wake up after the plane crashes in the jungle. In order to escape, you have to kill everyone else on the map. That’s how you win the game.”

Sounded dumb. “That’s it?”

“I mean, I’m simplifying it. You have to find resources, avoid outside factors like jungle cats, and quicksand, and the prison guards that lived through the crash. Basically everything in the game is trying to kill you.”

“And Rhett is really good at it?”

Theo laughed. “Yeah, he’s fucking amazing. He’s ranked first in the world, and DarkMatterMoon is trying to dethrone him in next week’s game.”

I ran a hand over my brow. “This is a global thing?”

“E-sports?” Theo’s brows raised. “Yeah.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, getting the same sense of ‘old’ that I felt from Rhett. Then my mind flashed with a quick image of me playing solitaire on my computer while an arena of twenty thousand people cheered me on. I couldn’t see the appeal.

“Yeah, the 20th is fine, Theo.”

“Thanks boss,” he said, slipping his bike bag over his head. “Have a good weekend.”

“You too.”

My curiosity was officially peaked now. I typed ‘Rhett Landon’ into the search bar and hit enter. Immediately dozens of pictures of the blond kid popped up, always wearing his signature black and bright-pink merch. There were news articles, fan sites, thousands of videos. I scrolled down his Wiki page.

Rhett was twenty-two, born and raised in Florida and began streaming when he was only eleven. He started getting attention for his gaming skills at thirteen, and by fifteen he was being flown around the world to compete in international events. There were pictures of him on red carpets and product launches. I scanned the videos and clicked on a few. One was an interview from last year after he won the title of top player in Jungle Drop. The interviewer asked him questions about the game, as thousands of fans dressed in neon-pink screamed and hollered in the background. Somehow he looked so much younger than the cocky little shit I’d met last week. Then my jaw hit the floor.

“Twelve million!” I said aloud into my empty office. “This brat is worth twelve million dollars?” At twenty-two I

was scraping by, trying to afford my tiny one-bedroom apartment and pay off student loans. Rhett played fucking videogames and made more money than me. I mean, I certainly wasn't doing poorly, but I wasn't raking in millions a year either.

I closed my laptop harder than I needed to, and decided to head to the hotel early to grab a quick bite at the bar before our tour.

The hotel we were seeing was modern and sleek, exactly my style. Everything was muted grey and black tones, sharp edges and minimalist furniture.

I was finishing an espresso when a man who'd been sitting at the other end of the bar approached me.

"Hi," he said simply, with a devious grin. "Where you from?"

It had been ages since I'd been hit on, and while it was nice for the self-esteem, I'd have to find a way to let the guy down easy.

"I live here," I said with a conciliatory smile. "Just waiting on some friends." My lack of reciprocal questioning was apparently not enough of a deterrent.

"I'm in from Dallas. Been years since I've been to Florida, so much has changed."

Objectively, the guy was a nine. Tall and rugged looking, rich brown hair, and a hint of the tattoos covering his chest were peeking up through the collar of his white shirt. His fingers were toying with the label on his beer bottle, and my caveman brain took over for a second and pictured his hand around my cock.

“Yeah, downtown Orlando has been a nightmare to drive through with all the recent construction,” I said, peeling my eyes away from him.

The bartender came over to clear my empty plate. “Anything else?” she asked.

“Just the bill, thanks.”

“Let me buy you a drink,” the man interrupted.

I was tempted to say yes, as the blood in my body was currently rerouting itself south.

“Maybe next time. My friends should be here any minute.”

The guy didn’t move, he simply raked his eyes down my body and gave me a smirk. Fuck, he was a sure thing, maybe I could just give him my number. It had been a while since I’d gotten laid...

“Hi Daddy!” a young voice said from behind me. A pain shot through my chest at Rhett’s voice. I turned to see him coming over to me, dressed in a neon-pink hoodie and his signature black high tops. He came up to me from behind and wrapped his arms around my waist.

“How was work, Daddy?” he asked, glaring at the guy beside me. I paused while the two stared each other down, then Rhett started to stroke my chest. It was too much, and I brushed his hands off of me.

The guy nodded, looking defeated, and turned back to his original seat at the end of the bar with a bruised ego. Rhett popped into his now empty chair and turned to face me.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

“For...cockblocking me?”

“From Rick? Absolutely.”

“Wait, you know that guy?”

“Yeah, he trolls the hotel bar every Friday. Friend of mine got crabs from him,” he whispered with a disgusted look on his face.

“He told me he was from Dallas.”

“I’m sure he did. Hi Isabelle!”

The bartender shot him a warm smile. “Hey! The usual?”

“Nah, my sister is going to be here in a minute. You can put this guy’s bill on my tab though.”

“You got it, Rhett.”

Who the fuck *was* this kid?

“The hotel has monthly streaming conventions,” Rhett said, answering my silent question.

“How are your boy problems?” I asked. It was completely immature of me, but I just needed to bring this kid down a peg. His smile faded and I instantly regretted my question.

“Same shit, different day.”

I swallowed my guilt and tried to make up for the shitty subject change.

“Want to talk about it?”

Rhett chewed a lip considering my offer. Then he shrugged. “Was seeing someone for a while, they broke it off, and that’s all there is to say.”

His story may have been brief, but the subtext was glaringly obvious. This kid had his heart broken. And for a

half second, I saw Rhett drop his mask.

“I’m sorry. That’s tough,” I offered.

“Next week he’s playing at Orange County too. Nothing like having to run into your ex at a global event with two million people watching!”

“Two million?” I balked.

“Yeah, those are the early projections. Usually ends up being a lowball estimate, though.”

“My assistant is a fan of yours. He’ll be there next week.”

“Oh yeah? Here.” Rhett swung a bag off his shoulder and pulled out two little black cards. “Tell him to give these to the guys at the ticket booth and he’ll get upgraded to VIP.”

I flipped the cards over in my hand. They were blank except for a tiny QR code.

“Hey guys!” Melody’s voice rang out, and she skipped over to hug her brother. “Ready to go see it?”

We chirped our ‘yesses’ and were led up to the rooftop terrace. The disappointment on Mel’s face was immediately apparent. Yes, the space was gorgeous and chic, but it was too modern and cold, and ‘just not the vibe’ according to her. She told us not to worry, because the one we were seeing tomorrow morning was her favorite.

Mike mouthed a silent ‘I’m sorry,’ and I chuckled.

I woke up early the next morning to get a run in. The rest of the weekend was supposed to rain and I hated running on the treadmill at the gym. Made me feel like a hamster. I always

used the exit through the garage in my building when I went for a run, and I'd swiped myself in and was making my way to the elevator when I noticed something under my car.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” my voice echoed through the concrete garage.

A slick oil was leaking from somewhere under my car, running right to the drain. I raced up to get my car key and tried the ignition.

Nothing.

I made my way up to my condo and texted Mike.

ME

Think you guys could pick me up on your way to the venue? Car trouble.

MIKE

Shit, we already left. Bridezilla...I mean Mel, wanted to make sure there was no traffic.

ME

She knows it's Saturday, right?

MIKE

Oh, I reminded her several times. But you know the saying, “Happy wife...”

ME

I gotcha. I'll just hop in an Uber.

MIKE

It's almost a forty-minute drive, that's nuts. I'll text Rhett to swing by and get you.

The idea of being stuck in a car with Rhett already made my head start to ache.

ME

Don't worry about it, I'm fine in an Uber. Can get a head start on Monday's project that way.

MIKE

Oops.

RHETT

Hey, Mike said you needed a ride? I'll be there in twenty.

A gif of Paul Walker in the Fast and the Furious came through. My blood pressure rose.

ME

Great. Thanks.

I showered quickly and made my way downstairs to find a pink and black Lamborghini double parked and blaring some kind of techno music.

Just fucking kill me.

“Hey!” Rhett shouted above the deafening bass. I hadn’t realized I was wincing until he turned the music down when I shut the door.

“Morning, Rhett.”

The engine roared before I even got my seatbelt latched, and I was sure my guts were now in a pile outside of my building.

“Why am I not shocked that this is the kind of car you drive?”

“You like her?”

“No.”

“Well, she likes you.”

Rhett pulled such a tight corner that my nails were digging into the seat to keep myself from hurtling into the door.

“Is the whole ride going to be like this?” I grouched.

“Nah, just wait until I get her on the freeway.” He raised his brows in promise. Christ, I was going to need a Tylenol and a Tums by the time this trip was over.

But Rhett was right about getting on the freeway. The car was smooth as butter, and he expertly wove between cars.

“Now you see what she’s about,” he said to me with a grin. I wished I could clear the adrenaline from my system and wipe the smile off my face, but it was impossible, the car was a fucking blast.

“Ok, fine. I like the car,” I admitted, and he laughed.

“It’s impossible *not* to like her.”

We were driving in silence for a while, just enjoying the road when a videocall came through. Rhett swiped to answer it and the huge screen on the dash lit up with two naked chicks laying in a huge king size bed.

“Talk to me, baby,” Rhett said keeping his eyes on the road.

“Jill’s here, she says we need to leave.”

“Then you gotta go, Kio. Jill’s the boss.”

“But we’re hungover,” she whined. The other girl pouted and nodded in agreement.

“The fridge is full of those electrolyte waters, babies. Grab a coffee and something to eat on your way out, ok?”

Despite the fact that Rhett was currently evicting two naked women from his bed over a video call, he was remarkably diplomatic.

“I can’t find my shirt,” one of them stated. I was keeping my eyes on the coast, feeling like an unwilling creep.

“Take one of my t-shirts. Bye girls, miss you!”

One of them grunted in protest, but Rhett hung up on the call before they could argue.

“Rough night?” I asked.

“No, why?” Rhett darted a confused look over at me. Did the man not understand satire?

“Sarcasm, man.”

“Oh. Yeah, I don’t always catch that. I’m on the spectrum.”

I looked over at the kid sitting next to me. “You’re autistic?”

“Yeah, kind of.” He gave a nervous little shrug like it was no big deal. “It’s not like, debilitating or anything. I’m not great with social cues, but I’m pretty sure it’s why I’m so good at gaming. I’m actually happy you couldn’t tell. Sometimes people just think I’m rude, or think I’m weird if I tick or something.”

A little piece of the Rhett puzzle slid into place.

“You have ticks?”

“When I’m stressed out, yeah.”

There was that hint of the real Rhett, an actual person behind the internet persona, and for some reason, it felt like a relief to see it.

“Who’s Jill?” I asked.

“Jill is my manager and personal assistant. She basically runs my life. Makes my schedule, makes sure I get to places on time, does the groceries. My head would probably fall off if Jill didn’t make sure it was attached to my body.”

“And those girls were...”

“That was Kio and Gemma. They’re like, casual girlfriends.”

“What the hell is a casual girlfriend?” I could admit I didn’t know a lot about gaming, but I was pretty sure until now I knew how dating worked.

“Like, we hang out. And we...you know *hang out*. But it’s nothing exclusive.”

I tried to wrap my head around it. “I think I have more questions than answers.”

“Shoot, I’m an open book.”

“I don’t know if I *want* the answers,” I said, my mind picturing all sorts of things I didn’t want it to.

“Oh yeah, Mel said you’d never been with a woman. Do girls like, gross you out?”

“Sorry...Mel said what?”

“Fuck. That’s probably not something I should have repeated. Going to blame that one on the autism.”

I got quiet, a little irritated that people were talking about my sex life behind my back.

“I’m sorry. We weren’t gossiping or anything.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.” We watched the road in an awkward silence for a while.

“I have though.”

“Have what?” Rhett asked. I rolled my eyes.

“Slept with a woman.”

“Oh.”

“Women just weren’t my thing.”

“What *is* your thing, Cameron?” he asked with a playful smile.

“I’m not about to start talking to a twenty-two-year-old about my sex life.”

“Ah, so you’re not getting any.”

“Nice try Rhett. Not taking the bait though.”

“Worth a shot. You’re hot,” he said with a shrug. I stared at him.

“Come again?”

“Poor choice of words Cam, but I said what I said.” He glanced over at me and winked.

The GPS interrupted our strange little chat to notify us of our upcoming exit.

“Saved by the bell,” I muttered. Rhett looked down at his phone.

“What bell?”

CHAPTER 5

GRUNGE IS KING

RHETT

I pulled the car up behind Mike's truck in the driveway of the beachfront villa. You could smell the ocean, and feel the salt on your skin. The villa was enormous, and the next house down was at least a half mile away.

"Guys, it's so nice," Mel gushed, as she came around the side of the house. A woman with a clipboard walked down the arced driveway towards us.

"Ready to start the tour?" she asked.

"Yes!" my sister squealed. She rushed ahead of us and into the house. From the entrance, you could see straight through to the beach. The entire back of the property had sliding glass doors that led to an enormous outdoor living space.

We did the tour of the villa, Mel squealing happily the whole time. The lady with the clipboard said that the owners converted the house into an event space last year, so even though it looked like a house from the outside, the inside was mostly just one huge ballroom.

"What do you think?" Mel asked, turning to me and Cameron. Clearly there was only one right answer.

"It's beautiful," he replied

"Yeah, it's great," I added. "Looks expensive as hell."

"It is," Mike deadpanned. My sister whacked him on the shoulder, muttering something about coconut cake under her breath.

“Should we talk numbers?” clipboard lady asked.

“Nothing would bring me greater pleasure,” Mike said, faking enthusiasm. At least I was pretty sure he was faking it.

“It’s a nice spot,” Cam said, looking out at the beach.

“Yeah, it’s quiet.” The only sounds were the soft crashing waves and a few seagulls.

“You don’t get a lot of quiet, do you?” Cam asked. His hands were in his pockets and he’d turned his body to face me.

“Noise cancelling headphones, my friend.”

“Nah, that’s not what I mean.” He turned back out to stare along the shore. “People need quiet ever now and again. Slow the wheels in your head. An escape from the rat race.”

“Despite all my rage...” I sang quietly.

“Hold on a second, you know that song?”

“Bullets With Butterfly Wings? Of course, who hasn’t heard it?”

“But it’s *old*,” he said, ragging on me.

“But it’s a *classic*,” I countered. “Nineties rock bands were amazing.” Cameron gave me a funny look.

“What’s your favorite 90s rock band?” he asked.

“Damn, that’s hard. Pearl Jam, Radiohead and Soundgarden are all up there, but if I could only listen to one band, it would have to be Nirvana.” That got a smile out of him. I actually said something that broke the mold and made Cam smile. So he *wasn’t* dead inside after all.

“Nice,” he said under his breath. “Hey, how are things coming for the bridal shower?”

I froze. That sounded important.

“The...”

“Mel’s bridal shower? Are you serious?”

My blank stare must have been enough to let him know that yes, I was in fact serious.

“Jesus Christ, Rhett.”

“I told you straight up I needed you to tell me what I had to do!”

Cam pinched the bridge of his nose looking an awful lot like every teacher I ever had.

“The maid of honor—or man of honor in your case—is supposed to plan a shower for the bride. It’s like a baby shower—a bunch of women just show up with gifts and get drunk on mimosas.”

“Mimosas, gifts, I can handle that.” More like Jill could handle it, but whatever.

“It’s in the calendar. It’s in three weeks.”

Ouch. Poor Jill.

“Yeah, I got it. That’s more than enough time.”

“I’m sure Mel already has an invite list. Hell, she may have already booked a venue to have the shower. Check with her.”

“Sure. Of course.” I was definitely going to have to set a reminder in my phone. Luckily for me, the conversation halted when Mel started prancing over to us.

“Guys we signed! Now the owners just have to approve the request!”

“I’m happy for you,” Cam said, giving her a high-five.

“I know, but just look at this place! It’s like it was waiting for us to come find it.”

I laughed at how adorably dorky my sister was being, and I was happy she was getting what her crazy little wedding-obsessed heart wanted.

“Should we get champagne?” she asked.

“I’m on at 1 o’clock, so I have to head back into town. Sorry Mel.”

She pouted and looked at Cameron.

“Rhett’s my ride, so I’m at his mercy.”

“Fine. I’ll just have to get day-drunk with Mike then.”

“I’m sure he’ll hate that,” Cam said with a wink, and I knew *that* was sarcasm. Gross.

“Ok, well I’ll try and pop on later to watch your game,” Mel said as we made our way to the front door.

“It’s nothing exciting today. Doing a game demo to sell ad time. Bids have doubled since the tournament is so close. Trying to rake in as much as I can, in case I lose.”

Mel threw her head back and laughed. “She’d better be praying for a miracle to beat you.”

“Hey, you shouldn’t downplay her game. She’s one of the fastest rising players in the world.”

“Yeah but her defense is garbage. I’ve been watching her feeds.”

“Well, people love a good underdog story, so I’m not counting her out yet.”

“Whatever, Rhett, you’ll be fine.” Mel blew me a kiss as Cam and I headed to the lambo.

“I understood about ten percent of that conversation,” he admitted, looking more than a little confused.

“Yeah, yeah. Time to get you back to the old folks’ home, Grandpa.”

“Ok guys, that’s it for me. Thank you for watching, thank you for donating, and remember the epic battle between myself and DarkMatterMoon is just over a week away, so mark your calendars. And if you’ll be at the game in Orange County, swing by my table to come say hi. I’ll be meeting with people from 10-12 that day and I’d love to see you there! Be good everyone!”

With that, I logged off the live stream. It was always such a weird sensation, going from the hype and energy of thousands of people, to looking up from the screen to actually see that I was completely alone in a dark room with nothing but the gentle hum of the computer and some pink LEDs to keep me company. Most of the people I engaged with on a daily basis were digital, but frankly, people were just way harder to deal with in real life. Gaming gave me something to hide behind, and the confidence that gave me was irreplicable.

I stood up from my desk and stretched, sore pops and cracks escaping my bones. When I opened the door from my darkened streaming room, I was surprised to see it was still sunny outside. I made my way into the kitchen and pulled out some noodles that Jill had left me. Before the microwave had even beeped, my phone was ringing.

“Hey Mel, what’s up?”

“Rhett!” she said crying. I instantly panicked.

“What? What happened?”

“We didn’t get it!” she wailed.

“Didn’t get what?”

“The beach villa! Apparently it was double booked and the other people already put in their down payment.”

I was sad for my sister, but relieved it wasn’t something more serious. “Shit, I’m sorry. You’ll find something else.”

“I really wanted that one, Rhett. I wanted something by the water,” she whined.

“Mel, it’s Florida. There’s a lot of water.”

“But it was perfect.”

“I’m sure there’s an even better place out there.”

“You don’t understand, these venues book up years in advance sometimes.”

“Push the wedding?”

“Like hell, Rhett.”

“Did you call for help, or call to bitch?” I asked. There was a long pause.

“Bitch, I guess,” she groaned.

“So let’s talk a little about the bridal shower,” I said, pulling the steaming bowl from the microwave.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, where are we doing this thing? Who’s invited? Do I really need to be there?”

“Rhett, it’s all planned. And yes, you’re the man of honor, you need to show up.”

“Well do you need me to do anything? Set up a tacky game or something? I saw this hilarious game with an inflatable penis and—”

There was a laugh on the other end of the line. “Definitely not. That sounds like more of a bachelorette game. Like, Nana and Aunt Irene are coming. There better not be a single inflatable dick anywhere in sight.”

“Ok, well is there anything I *can* do?” By this point, I was feeling pretty fucking useless. Mostly relieved, but still useless.

“I didn’t think you’d really want to help. I pretty much planned it all. It’s all in the Google docs I sent you.”

The one I’d promptly forwarded to Jill. “Ok...what about the bachelorette party then? I was thinking a Tijuana trip.”

“That’s nuts. Not everyone can afford that.”

“Yeah, but I can.”

“Well good for you, Richy Rich.”

“No, I mean I can pay.”

“That’s ridiculously sweet of you, but we’re just doing a dinner and going to a Cabaret show after.”

“That’s fucking *lame*, Melody.”

“I don’t care, it’s what I want.”

“Liar.”

“Shut up. Hey, I gotta go, the florist is calling me back. Love you.”

“Love you.”

I started to dig into my Szechuan noodles as I texted Cam next.

ME

Are you organizing the bachelor party for Mike?
Or did my sister already plan that too?

CAM

No, I'm organizing it. Why?

ME

I feel like I should be doing more. What are you planning?

CAM

Steak dinner and then the casino.

ME

Why is no one getting strippers?!!!!

CAM

Because we're all adults?

ME

You guys are boring.

CAM

It's fine, kid. One day, when you can grow a beard too, you'll see it our way.

I scrolled through my options of old man gifs, and ended up sending an old guy with a walker.

ME

K. I'm sorry, but fuck all of your plans. Here's what we're going to do...

CHAPTER 6

THE SUIT MAKES THE MAN

CAMERON

Mike had chosen a swanky, upscale tailor for our suit fitting. Well, in honesty it was probably Melody, but all the better. Mike's wardrobe mainly consisted of sports jerseys and jeans, and if there was ever a time to get a brand-new suit, it was your wedding.

One of the shop attendants offered us espressos and champagne while we waited for our appointment. It may have been eleven in the morning, but Jesse never turned down free booze. He leafed through the dress shirts with his second glass in hand, feeling the fabric of each and giving his subtle nod of approval, as if he really knew quality from crap.

"Are you bringing your kids to the wedding, Shaan?" I asked, as we lounged on one of the leather sofas.

"Hell no. My mother-in-law is going to watch them. I don't get any alone time with my wife, nothing like a romantic wedding to get her in the mood."

"Careful with that," I chuckled. Priya had been pressuring Shaan for a third kid, but he wasn't convinced. Shaan gave me a look as though he hadn't considered that.

"Mike, tell me about these bridesmaids," Jesse said, wrapping a pink tie around his neck. Jesse was perpetually single and blamed most of his failed relationships on his girlfriends, when in fact it was *him* that was usually the problem.

"No way, man. Absolutely not," Mike stated bluntly.

"What! Why?"

“Because Lily is her best friend and Heather is her cousin. That’s too close to home and I’m not letting you anywhere near them.”

“Heather was the one with the green hair at the engagement dinner, right? Yeah, I liked her.” Jesse’s eyes lit up, and I swear he looked just the slightest bit like a hungry caveman.

“Nope. No fly zone.”

“You’re not seeing the bigger picture, Mike. Imagine all the family cookouts, and holidays!”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m thinking of Jesse. I’m thinking about how when you screw around behind Heather’s back, for the rest of my life she’s going to hate me for letting one of my best friends do that to her. I don’t need that kind of drama in my life. Not to mention Mel will probably keep you away with a trident or something.”

“Damn, Mike. Not like I have feelings or anything. I mean, you’d probably let Shaan date her.”

“I absolutely would let Shaan date her. Shaan doesn’t park outside of a woman’s house and honk when he picks her up for a date. He gets out and rings the bell. Shaan brings flowers. Shaan will tell your mother-in-law how great the casserole tastes even if it tastes like roofing tar.”

Jesse threw up his hands defensively. “Fuck it, *I’m* going to date Shaan.”

Thankfully the tailor popped in at that moment, sizzling the tension.

“Please follow me to the back gentlemen, we’ll get your measurements,” he said in an Italian accent. We made our way through the shop.

“I thought Rhett was supposed to be here?” I said to Mike. I brushed off the tiny pinch of worry that sounded in my voice. I was sure Mike hadn’t noticed.

“He’s coming. He texted saying he was going to be a few minutes late.”

“Hmm, we’re going to start with you,” the tailor said to me. “You’re going to cause me problems.” I didn’t take it personally. I was 6’4” on a good day, so it was difficult to find clothes to fit my frame.

The tailor put me up on the little round riser, and dictated my measurements to his assistant. I glanced at myself briefly in the mirror and pushed back some of my curls. There always seemed to be one long one right in the front that my mother had dubbed the ‘Clark Kent Curl’, and I loved it as a kid. Then she’d joke that coconuts were my Kryptonite.

They handed me a pile of shirts, jackets, and pants to try on and sent me to the changing room. Most of it was uncomfortably tight. Even though I knew it would be made to fit, I was getting frustrated. I was stripped down to nothing but my briefs when I caught a pair of green eyes peering in through the reflection in the mirror.

Rhett was standing there, his own pile of clothes thrown over an arm, and just staring with a blank look on his face. He noticed me staring back, and it still took him a moment to shake his head clear and rush away.

“Sorry, didn’t know anyone was in here,” he mumbled, closing the curtain quickly. I heard him shuffle into the dressing room next to mine.

I continued with the next pair of pants when I heard Rhett take in a few shaky breaths.

“You ok, kid?” I yelled over to him.

“Me? Yeah.” I could tell his voice was strained, but I didn’t want to pry.

I finished buttoning up a shirt that finally fit decently, and walked out to see it in the large mirror of the dressing room hall. When I made my way back to my stall, it sounded like Rhett was running a marathon. He was heaving big, deep breaths and I didn’t bother waiting, I ripped open the curtain to find him huddled in the corner, his head between his knees. I flew down to the floor, panicked.

“Rhett! What’s going on?”

“I—just...” He was gasping between each word. “Panic—attack,” he managed.

“Cam, what’s wrong!” Mike shouted behind me.

“It’s fine, just give him a minute.”

Rhett continued to breathe deeply, but suddenly the rest of the guys were clamoring into the small space to see what was happening.

“Get out, everyone!” I yelled. “The kid just needs some space!”

They backed away slowly and I crouched down to Rhett.

“Hey. Look at me.”

Rhett slowly lifted his head. He was flushed and sweating.

“What color is the carpet?” I asked.

“W—what?”

“What color is the carpet?”

“It’s—it’s red.”

“Good. What color are the curtains?”

“Black.”

“What color are the hangers?”

“They’re brown.”

“What did you have for breakfast today?”

He scrunched his eyes closed to think about it, but already his breathing had started to slow.

“A smoothie and a protein bar.”

“What kind of smoothie?”

“I don’t know, like—berries and spinach, I think. Jill made it.”

“Does she make all your food?”

“Yeah mostly. She’s a great cook.”

“What’s your favorite dish that she makes?”

“I dunno. Maybe her oatmeal cookies.”

“Does she put raisins in them?”

“No, I hate raisins.”

Slowly his shoulders relaxed and his breath returned to normal.

“Thank you,” he said quietly after a minute.

“Of course, kid. Is there anything else you need?”

“I think, a little air, maybe.”

“Sure. Come on.”

I helped Rhett up and headed towards the front door. The tailor and the guys watched us looking helpless, and Shaan passed us a water bottle on the way out.

Rhett took small sips from the bottle, and we both just watched the traffic roll by in silence for a while.

“I’m sorry about that,” he eventually said.

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I thought...I thought I had a handle on it. Haven’t had one in ages.”

“Did something set it off?”

He nodded solemnly.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Rhett swallowed, mulling over the question. “I just found out I might lose a massive partnership with Kid Linkz Foundation. They’re calling in a lawyer to cancel their contract, and I was a brand ambassador for them.”

“Shit. I’m sorry. Doesn’t mean you’ll lose it for sure though.”

He shook his head absently. “It’s not looking good. Apparently I don’t ‘align with their image’ anymore.”

“They’ll have to pay some kind of fine or indemnity though, they can’t just pull out for no reason.”

“What? No, it wasn’t about the money. It’s a non-profit organization for kids with learning difficulties. I donate a percentage of my winnings to them, do visits into classrooms and stuff. Apparently the newly elected board members don’t think someone who plays videogames for a living is a very good role model. So they’re cutting ties.”

“Hold up; you give *them* money, promote their services, and now they don’t want you involved with their organization anymore?”

“Yep.”

I couldn’t help how riled up I was feeling over that. What kind of fucking non-profit refuses money? I mean, Rhett was obviously disappointed about this, so it must have meant something to him. But I didn’t want his head to start reeling again, and I knew I’d have to drop it.

“How did you know how to do all that stuff back in there?” he asked me, taking another small sip of water.

“Used to happen to me a lot.”

“Panic attacks?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I had a bit of a nervous breakdown in my first year at college. Had to move back home for a while. My mom would help me through them by asking random questions to refocus my brain.”

“Right, like grounding techniques.”

“What?”

“Like naming five things you can see, four things you can hear, blah blah blah. Basically does what you said, refocuses your brain. I have meds I can take if I start to feel one coming on, but they make me feel so tired and out of it.”

Rhett leaned against the building, he was fidgeting and his face was still tense, but he quietly watched a bird bathing in a little puddle on the sidewalk. If his panic attacks were anything like mine used to be, it would still be hours before he felt normal again.

“Hey guys,” Mike said, coming through the door. “Just checking on ya.”

Rhett took a breath and stood. “I’m ready to go back in.”

“You sure?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

The kid gave me an amenable smile as we headed back inside, and I was forced to admit to myself that the cocky little shithead I’d met at the restaurant was starting to pull on the heart strings.

RHETT

We all went out for lunch after the fitting, and I was feeling awkward as hell about what had happened at the suit shop. Frankly, it was fucking embarrassing, and I was sure these guys already thought of me as Mel's weird little brother, my little episode only helped to alienate me even more. Now I was Mel's annoying little brother who occasionally flipped the fuck out. I was grateful that no one really brought it up during our meal, they seemed happy enough to pretend it never happened. All of them except Cameron of course. I kept catching his eyes on me, curious or concerned, I couldn't really tell which. But I fucking hated the extra attention. It was making me feel like the odd man out amongst these guys.

"Did you guys lock down a venue yet?" Jesse asked Mike. He took a deep sip of his beer.

"Not yet. Mel really has her heart set on something by the water, but it's such short notice that most of the nicer places are booked up already. She's really starting to stress out about it, and I wish there was something I could do."

I was grateful for Mike to be taking my sister's requests so seriously, as crazy as some of them were.

"You know," Cam said hesitantly. "I've been working with a client for a few years who rents out his yacht for events every now and then. Do you think Mel would be interested in having the wedding *on* the water?"

Mike kind of gaped at him for a second or two.

“I mean, yeah. I definitely think that would be something she’d like. Is it doable?”

“I’ll shoot him an email on Monday and feel him out. Don’t mention anything to Mel in the meantime though.”

“Absolutely. And thank you!” Mike gushed.

No wonder everybody liked Cam. He was the clutch player in everyone’s game.

The waitress dropped the bill and Shaan snagged it before anyone else could. It was kind of a nice change from the people who I hung out with that expected me to pay for everything. I’d discovered there were two tiers of people in my life, the OG’s that I’d grow up with that would have my back no matter what, and the ‘industry friends’ whose dedication to our friendship was dictated by my gaming stats. Sadly, sometimes it was difficult to tell the two types apart.

When Mike’s groomsmen started to say their goodbyes, he pulled me aside and asked if he could talk privately with me. Any sort of interaction like that immediately made my pulse rise, and I waited anxiously until it was just us left.

“You cool?” Mike asked, sitting across from me.

“Super cool, why?”

“You’re pale and twitchy. What happened back at the suit shop...are you still—”

“No, I’m fine. What do you need, Mike?” I put on my best fake smile, something that thousands of followers had fallen for over the years.

“I have a favor to ask, for Mel’s bridal shower.”

I relaxed a little, knowing now that this had nothing to do with me, or the episode earlier.

“Absolutely. What can I do to help?”

“There is a gift I want to give her, but I don’t really think that the wedding is the right time, so I’d like you to give it to her at the shower.”

“Oh. Yeah, sounds easy enough. I can do that.”

“You cannot fucking spoil this, Rhett. I swear to god.”

“Dude, it’s fine! I don’t even need to know what it is, just wrap it up and I can put it with the other gifts. Zero problem.”

“It’s not exactly like the other gifts.”

“Bro, your gift isn’t, like, *you* in a pair of backless Jockeys, right?”

“What? Fuck no! Your mom will be there!”

“Well I don’t know! You’re being pretty cryptic right now, Mike!”

He looked away from me and ground his teeth for a minute.

“The gift I want to give her is a puppy. We’ve always talked about getting a Basset hound, and I’ve been scouring shelter webpages for six months.” Mike pulled his phone out of his back pocket and pulled up a picture.

“Oh my god, that might be the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Staring up at me, was a floppy, caramel colored dog with a stuffed turtle in its mouth.

“Her name is Shelby,” Mike said, swiping to a second, equally adorable picture of the dog. “She’s eight months old and was surrendered two days ago. I’m picking her up tonight.”

“But the bridal shower isn’t until next week. Where are you going to keep...” But I didn’t need to finish that sentence, because my brain finally caught up with my mouth. “No way, Mike. I can’t take care of your secret dog for a week. I can barely take care of myself.”

“You’ll be fine, it’s a dog, not a child. A few walks, some food and water, no big deal.”

“Please Mike, why can’t Cam watch her?”

“He’s allergic to dogs.”

“Then can’t the shelter just keep her until you’re ready to pick her up?”

“That’s not how it works, Rhett. I’ll lose her if I can’t pick her up tonight.”

I ground my teeth, and eventually forced my head into a nod, agreeing.

“Amazing, thank you. I’ll drop her off at eight.”

CHAPTER 7

BESTED BY THE BEAST

RHETT

It was day three of Project: Keep Puppy Alive, and I had to admit, I was only barely succeeding. I'd started a mental list of all the things Mike was going to have to replace for me after the little hybrid shark had made her way around my loft, including all of my chair legs, an autographed baseball glove, the vacuum cleaner hose, four shoes (but only the left ones which I thought was really odd), and the baseboards in my kitchen.

At first, Jill fawned over Shelby as the floppy dog followed her around the house all day. But by now the rose-colored glasses were off, and she took to locking the dog in the bathroom so she could get work done. Shelby was *not* impressed. Her protest started with little yips, then became barks, and after an hour she was howling like a damn werewolf.

I had my headphones on streaming when my phone lit up with a message from Jill.

JILL

Your neighbor just came by to complain about the noise that little monster is making. It's her or me, Rhett.

I dropped my head into my hands. The wedding shower was still two days away, then she would be Mike's problem. For some reason I felt too damn stubborn to give up, or tell

him I couldn't handle this, so I reached out to the only other person I thought could help.

ME

You know anything about dogs?

CAM

Context?

ME

They're these four-legged creatures, covered in fur. Sometimes people keep them as pets.

CAM

Very funny.

I filled Cam in on the hellish details of my last few days; the chewing, the peeing, the barking, the sleepless nights. I'm not really sure what I was hoping to achieve by reaching out to him, but I certainly wasn't expecting the response that I got.

CAM

Bring her over to my place tonight around 7.

ME

Ok...I thought you were allergic to dogs.

CAM

No. Who told you that?

That motherfucker. Was this some sort of test from Mike? I spent the rest of the afternoon irrationally angry, and by 6:40 I was already pulling up to Cam's building. Shelby got googly eyes from the door guy, and from an old lady in the elevator, where she sat perfectly still beside me as we rode up to the eighteenth floor.

"You're not fooling anybody," I mumbled to her when we stepped out. The dog of course, not the old lady. She was fine.

"Hey, you're early," Cam said as he opened the door. "Come on in."

Shelby took that as a personal invitation and rushed inside, snapping the leash out of my hand. Cam chuckled as I cursed and followed after her. When I caught up with her she was getting coddled by some unsuspecting victim.

"Is this your dog?" he asked.

"Uh, not really."

"Rhett, this is Theo, my assistant."

"Wait—" the guy looked up from showering attention on the little she-devil and went wide-eyed.

"Nice to meet you," I said, reaching my hand out.

"Holy shit!"

"Right, Cam mentioned you were a fan. You got the passes I gave him?"

"Yeah! Thank you!"

Shelby kept things from getting awkward as she nipped at Theo's ankle and started tugging his pant leg.

"All right, *you* are coming with me." Cam snaked between us and scooped up the dog. She wriggled in his arms, licking his cheek.

Theo and I followed him out onto the enormous back balcony that looked out over a golf course. Because of course it did. Then he kicked off his shoes and socks and rolled up his dress pants.

"We need to properly tucker you out, Little Miss," he said, stepping into the small pool.

Shelby started an aerial doggy paddle as soon as Cam lowered her over the water, placing her gently on the first step.

"It's salt water," he told me. I don't know if it was to impress me, or if that had something to do with the dog, so I nodded like I knew what that meant.

Shelby pawed curiously at the water on the first step, and then (probably entirely by accident) plunged down off the step into the water. She righted herself quickly and started swimming in little semicircles, always coming back around to Cameron who held onto her leash. She'd pop back onto the steps, give a little shake, and plop happily back into the water again.

"Theo, offer Rhett a glass of champagne," Cam said, without taking his eyes off the dog. "We're celebrating Theo taking on his first client."

"That's amazing. Congrats. I will definitely partake in a little celebratory champagne."

Soon Theo was back with three glasses and what was left of their open bottle. We both decided to shuck off our shoes

and dangle them in the pool by the doggy-aquatic show.

“What’s the project?” I asked Theo. He blushed.

“It’s a little mom and pop juice bar opening up. Cam forced me to submit a proposal and they actually hired me.”

“Don’t fucking downplay it Theo, you came up with a great work,” Cam bit out. If he wasn’t actively praising Theo, I’d think he sounded angry.

“What about you? Tell me about Orange County,” Theo countered. Cam looked up through his brows, checking on me. I was a little surprised by his apparent kindness, but I could keep it light.

“I mean, I’m just trying to keep my head on straight. There is a lot of media stuff to do, meet and greets before the actual game. I think I’m going to sleep for a week once it’s all said and done.”

“Yeah, that’s a whole lot of people watching you. I could never deal with that kind of pressure.”

I was suddenly aware of the sound of my heart beating in my ears, and my mouth started to feel dry. The thought of millions of people watching my every move, every keystroke started to weigh on me...

“You guys want Chinese?” Cam said suddenly. “I think I’m going to order in.” I knew immediately he was trying to distract me.

“Nah, I’ll head out,” Theo answered.

“Give me a solid reason, and I’ll let you go,” Cam said to his assistant.

“Um—”

“Exactly. Here,” he said, handing me the sopping wet Basset hound. “I’ll go get you a towel.” Cam walked back into his apartment without another look back.

“How do you keep it together working for that guy?” I asked under my breath. Theo laughed.

“The tough guy thing is just for show. He’s actually pretty solid.”

Without warning Shelby launched herself from my arms back into the pool, drenching me. Theo laughed as I wiped the salt water from my face. Now Mike owed me my pride, too.

We finished the champagne before the Chinese arrived, and someone (it was me) decided we should do a round of shots to celebrate Theo’s contract. We went through about a dozen beers over dinner, and then someone (again, me) decided we should do another round of shots.

I snorted myself awake on Cam’s living room couch. It was still dark out and, it took my brain a few long seconds to boot up and remember where I was. The room looked like Shelby had been given free reign. There were take-out boxes and beer bottles all over the table, somehow a shot glass had ended up in my pocket and I had Theo’s glasses on my head.

Theo was asleep in the chair across from me, mouth agape and snoring like a bulldozer. Cam was gone, but my heart lurched into my throat when I realized that Shelby wasn’t around either.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I jumped up and crept around the room. Cam wasn't a regular bachelor, Cam was a single, rich, gay bachelor. Things in here were *nice*, and I was dreading the kind of damage the little demon dog could do unsupervised.

I made my way back through the kitchen, all the lights were off and the clock on the stove told me it was after two in the morning.

"Shelby!" I whispered as loud as I could. "Shelby, come here you little asshat!" Then the light coming in through the back balcony caught my eye. Oh shit, could she have gotten out? Could she have fit under the rail? My stomach burned with nausea that had nothing to do with the mix of MSG and alcohol I'd subjected it to.

I rushed to the door and was instantly relieved. Cameron was in the pool, wading around beside a happy Shelby.

I watched them for a minute as she swam circles around him. Cam baby-talked the dog quietly as he turned, always keeping an eye on her. Then he'd gently pick her up and put her on the first step. She'd give a little shake and the dive back into the water. The only light from outside was from under the water, and it lit everything in a dim glow. It was kind of peaceful looking.

I started to feel like a creep spying on them, so I slowly slid the glass door open, and stepped out onto the balcony.

"Ah, you're awake," Cam said with a smile.

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"Don't apologize. I wasn't going to let you drive home anyway."

"Did she like, pee on anything, or..." I could only imagine what damage she could have caused.

“Nah, she’s been a good girl. Peed in the flower bed over there, so I decided to clean off her feet in the pool. *She* decided it was time for another swim.” Shelby gave a big shake, whipping her giant ears around like two big sleeping bags.

“Come in,” Cam said, leaving the dog on the stairs and floating back into the pool.

I stalled. Was he inviting me into the pool, or *inviting me into the pool*? I was still pretty drunk and didn’t want to be misinterpreting his invitation. But a swim probably *would* help sober me up...

“Is that a ‘no’?” he asked, when I didn’t move or answer. His tone wasn’t teasing or seductive, it was as straightforward as anything else he said. But seeing him in there, topless and wet, I *wanted* to get in.

I turned and stripped off my shirt and shorts, and tossed them on the deck chair next to Cam’s clothes. I balled my fists in front of me, pretending to be cold as I made my way down the pool stairs. It was July in Florida and I was getting into a heated fucking pool, but really it was because I was hiding my half-chub beneath my yellow briefs, which now, soaking wet, were a terrible choice. I was internally rolling my eyes at my dick, one shirtless guy in a pool was apparently all it took to get its attention.

Shelby was suddenly ecstatic that I was in the pool, and churned her chubby little legs as fast as she could to get to me. She let out a contented sigh when I pulled her into my arms, and it was the damn cutest thing ever when she rested her head against my shoulder.

“She needs to get her energy out,” Cam said, smiling at the dog. “That way she won’t be so destructive.” His smile

brightened his entire face. How had I never noticed that before?

“You sure know a lot about dogs for someone that’s allergic.”

He laughed. “I honestly don’t know why Mike told you that. I’m not allergic to anything.”

“That’s just the kind of thing a person says before eating some kind of weird fruit and going into anaphylaxis.”

“Well, it will make for a really funny eulogy then.”

“There’s a fruit joke in there somewhere.”

Cam laughed and sent a massive wave crashing over me and Shelby. This time both me and the dog were shaking the water off our heads. I put her on the edge of the pool, and after whipping her ears fast enough that I thought she might take off, she toddled over to a towel and lay down on it. She was asleep within minutes.

“See?” Cam said coming up beside me. I was suddenly super nervous. He was close, and wet, and pretty. How had I missed how good looking this man was before? His dark blue eyes were soft as he watched the dog sleep, and I couldn’t help my gaze lowering to his full lips.

“Rhett, stop it,” he warned.

My soul jumped back into my body and I snapped my eyes back over to the sleeping dog. “Stop what?”

“Looking at me like that.”

Fuck. That was embarrassing. “Like what?” I asked, trying to play it off. Cam turned to me, eyes smouldering. Ok, maybe I just *wanted* his eyes to be smouldering, but still, I was definitely enjoying the way he was staring at me right now.

“You *know* what,” he said in a low voice that resonated straight down to my dick. Holy shit, grumpy Cam was an ass, but stern Cam was so fucking hot.

“Um, ok. Wasn’t thinking that at all, Da—”

“I swear to god if you call me Dad, or Daddy, or Papi, or anything like that, I’ll toss all your clothes over the railing and make you sit your naked ass in that pretty Lamborghini to drive all the way home.”

I swallowed. Scared, but equally turned on. “It’s a lease. I probably shouldn’t.”

“Good,” he huffed. “How’s your wedding speech coming along?”

“It’s coming—along. I mean, it’s coming along.” My brain was on strike, and I fumbled not to sound like a horny teenager. I couldn’t come away from the wall either, with things having *solidified* considerably below the surface. He wasn’t this attractive yesterday, right?

Drunk. It’s probably because I was still drunk.

“You haven’t started it, have you?” he said after a long pause.

“Haven’t thought about it until just now, Cam.”

He chuckled, and it was something throaty and sexy sounding.

“You’re expected to give a gift at a bridal shower as well, you know.”

“Oh that’s been ready for two days now. I signed them up for puppy lessons with some dog guru in Orlando.”

“Unexpectedly thoughtful,” Cam said, seeming genuinely impressed.

I tried not to take that as an insult.

“Well, I’m going to head to bed. You all right?” he asked.

“Yeah. Totally.”

I wondered where the hell this version of Cam had been hiding. He’d done a complete one-eighty. Gone was the grumpy, strict nay-sayer, and here was this calm, casual, and *maybe* flirty older guy.

I let myself sink slowly beneath the surface of the water.

Fuck. I had a crush on Cameron.

When I surfaced again, he was making his way towards the stairs, and I was glad I could openly gawk for a moment. The way the water ran down his hard body as he stepped out of the pool was fucking heavenly. And when he pushed back his hair to wring out the water, it was like watching a god damn cologne ad.

When he turned to grab a towel, I choked on my tongue. Cameron’s soaked briefs were doing nothing to hide the outline of his cock. He wasn’t even hard and the thing was as thick as my arm.

He ran the towel over his face before wrapping it around his trim waist. I was now white-knuckling the side of the pool as I stared. He grabbed his clothes from the deck chair, and I tried—desperately—to close my gaping mouth.

“There’s a guest room on the second floor next to the bathroom. You can grab some dry clothes and crash there. Make sure the puppy doesn’t pee on any of my rugs, Rhett.”

With that choppy warning, he closed the sliding glass door between us, and all I could see was my stupid, gaping mouth in the reflection.

CHAPTER 8

HAIR OF THE BASSET HOUND

CAMERON

At some point during the night Theo must have woken up off the sofa and cleaned the living room. I highly doubted it had been Rhett in any case. Theo's shoes weren't at the front door, so he was already long gone. Rhett's high-tops were still there, and I'd seen him sprawled out on top of the covers this morning when I cracked the door open to let the dog out.

I'd taken Shelby out for a good long walk before chopping up some leftover chicken and rice for her breakfast. She inhaled every bite and looked up expectantly for more as I sipped my coffee.

"No way, dog. Any more and you'll get the runs. And that ain't happening in my house." She cocked her head to the side as though trying to decipher my words, and her droopy little ear pooled on the floor. My cold heart cracked, and I sat down next to her and gave her scratches.

"Ugghhh..." Rhett groaned a few minutes later as he rounded the corner. He was wearing only a loose-fitting pair of my shorts. My eyes scanned quickly over his lean, naked torso, trying to make out the dozen or so small tattoos that decorated him. I paused the longest on the one etched onto his ribs that seemed to be a rat giving a thumbs up. Weird.

"Good morning, sunshine," I teased. He ran a hand through his hair which was sticking up in every which way, probably from sleeping on it wet. "Sleep ok?"

"Ugghhh..."

Part of me was relieved for his one word responses. Things in the pool last night...well it was encroaching on some very hazardous territory. I'd caught his lingering glances over dinner, split seconds that he didn't know I was watching. At first I thought it was adorable, this young kid with a Mrs. Robinson type crush. I was pretty convinced by his continuous harping on me as the 'old guy,' but apparently that was only covering something up, and he was rubbish at hiding it after a few drinks.

But later on, when I caught myself peeking as his shirt rode up his stomach while he was lounging on my couch, I'd flushed—embarrassed—and chided myself for letting him drag me into the ridiculous fantasy. I was only human, and yeah, objectively Rhett was a nice specimen.

I headed to the coffee machine as Rhett dramatically fell to the floor, Shelby immediately running to him and licking his face.

“How do you take your coffee?”

“Cream. Sugar. Lots,” he groaned.

I turned away and tried to stifle my smile. For all the smack talking this kid did about being younger than me, he certainly couldn't bounce back from a night of drinking.

When his coffee was brewed, Rhett pulled himself up off the floor and sat at the kitchen bar. I added a dollop of cream and a spoonful of sugar, and before handing him the mug, added a shot of whiskey.

“No! Why did you do that! I'm going to throw up if I drink it.” He looked down at the swirling brown liquid like I was trying to feed him poison.

“Trust me, you'll feel better.”

“Cam, really. If I even smell it, I’ll hurl.”

“Then block your nose.”

He looked up at me with a pitiable cringe, and this time I couldn’t hold back my laughter. I watched him hold his breath and sip. I’m not sure if it was for my benefit or purely for satire, but Rhett dry heaved immediately after he swallowed.

I grabbed the Tylenol from above the sink and slid the bottle across the bar to him. He tossed back two, and forced down another sip.

“I was going to offer you eggs, but I think we should stick with toast this morning,” I said, as I turned to the cupboard.

“No, eggs sound great actually.”

Was this kid going to fight me on absolutely everything? I held my tongue as I made myself busy.

“I didn’t even feel that drunk last night,” Rhett whined.

“You and Theo were singing ‘Sexy Back’ into empty beer bottles.”

“Touché. I like him. He’s nice.”

“He’s a fantastic graphic designer, but don’t tell him I said so. I want to keep him working hard to earn it.”

“No, dude, that’s wrong.”

“Why?”

“Build him up! He’s obviously a pretty timid guy, you should be convincing him of his own talent, not downplaying it.”

I took a sip of my own coffee and I digested Rhett’s words. Was he right? Was I an obnoxious hard ass for no

reason? Maybe I should take a closer look at that later.

“You like goat cheese?”

“I’ve never had it.”

“You’re twenty-two and you’ve never tried goat cheese before?”

Rhett’s mouth pulled to the side, and he gave a meek shrug. “I have some food aversions. Sort of an autism thing.”

I immediately felt like a fucking asshole. “Sorry. I didn’t know that was a...sorry. Here, try some, I was going to put it in my omelette. I can make yours without if you don’t like it.”

I handed Rhett a spoon with a little clump of cheese, and he put it in his mouth—again—like I was trying to poison him.

“The flavor is good, but it’s like...chalky.”

“It will melt once it’s in the pan.”

He shrugged and handed me back the spoon. “Yeah, sure.”

I popped the pan on the stove and hesitated.

“I was going to add onion and cherry tomatoes as well. That ok with you?”

He smiled at me like he genuinely appreciated me checking with him.

“As long as the cherry tomatoes are sliced, then it’s fine. I can’t handle it if they pop in my mouth. It’s more of a texture issue than taste.”

I thought back to the funghi risotto at the restaurant from the night of the engagement party.

“You don’t like mushrooms,” I said, more to myself than to Rhett.

“Yeah...how did you know?”

“The restaurant we were at for the engagement dinner. You barely ate.”

“Oh. Yeah. I learned that ‘funghi’ means ‘mushroom’ that night.”

Rhett went back to his coffee as something squeezed in my chest. I liked learning things about him, I didn’t know *why* I liked learning things about him, but it felt good. Fuck, was that something *else* I was going to have to take a look at?

I made sure to dice the tomatoes thinly before I dropped them in the bowl. Rhett scrolled his phone while I cooked, and every few minutes he would reach down and give Shelby a few strokes on the head.

“Let’s eat outside,” I said as I plated our breakfast.

Rhett took the forks and knives I handed him, and opened the patio door for me to follow through. Shelby followed as well, her fat paws flopping chipperly behind us.

“So tell me about growing up with Mel. She’s quite a bit older than you. What was that like?”

Rhett held up a hand while he finished chewing his massive mouthful of toast.

“She’s my hero, man. I was...well let’s just say I was a weird little kid growing up. I didn’t really fit in with the other boys my age, and every weekend Mel spent time doing stuff an off-beat little autistic kid wanted to do.”

“And what kinds of things did an ‘off-beat little autistic kid’ want to do?”

“Well, when I was eleven I had this thing for coin collecting.”

“Ok, that doesn’t sound too weird...”

“My fixation was specific to the Qing Dynasty between 1644 to 1911. So, it didn’t exactly win me a lot of popularity.”

“That’s...specific.”

“Yeah. But Melody was always game for whatever I was into. One weekend she brought me to this coin convention in Miami, and I absolutely lost my shit. It was amazing.”

“I’m guessing there are a lot of different kinds of Qing coinage?”

“Oh hell yeah. The alloys can be different, the inscriptions, even the mint that produced them.”

Rhett’s excitement over old coins seemed to take over his whole body. Suddenly his eyes were as wide as saucers, his shoulders were up by his ears and he was emoting with his hands. His enthusiasm was infectious, and I suddenly found myself enthralled over ancient Chinese coins.

“Anyway, yeah, I adore Mel,” he finished. “What about you? Any siblings?”

“No, actually. Only child.”

“Damn. How was that growing up? Lonely?”

I thought about it a minute.

“Sorry, that was rude, wasn’t it?”

“No, not at all. Just honest. It wasn’t very lonely, I don’t think. It’s all I ever knew, and I’m quite happy being alone, so I wouldn’t say I hated it.”

“Man, that’s lucky. I can’t be alone. Feels like a bee trapped in a jar when I’m alone with my thoughts for too long, like buzzing and echoey. I need someone to talk to.”

“I get that. I guess I just got so used to being my own company that it never bothered me.”

Somehow with all the talking he’d been doing, Rhett had managed to clean off his plate.

“Damn. I’ve got to admit, I think your hair of the dog trick worked. I feel fucking great.”

“Well, wait at least twenty minutes before you get in the car. Let the buzz wear off.”

He leaned back in the chair and stretched, muscles taut, and I tried desperately not to fucking stare for too long. I concentrated on my food instead.

“What’s with the rat tattoo?” I asked, staring intently at my eggs.

“This?” He twisted to show me his tattooed ribs at a better angle, and I nodded, still just playing with the food on my plate.

“Most people hate rats,” he stated plainly. “But they’re really misunderstood. They’re super intelligent and really emotional creatures.”

“Despite all your rage?”

“Ha! Yeah, maybe something like that.”

“Why is he giving a thumbs up?”

“‘Cause he’s cool,” he said with a shrug.

“Right. So then what about spiders?”

“What do you mean?”

“People hate spiders too.”

“Yeah but spiders are fucking gross.”

I threw my head back and laughed.

“What about you? Have any tattoos?”

“Nope. Never found anything I wanted to see on my body the rest of my life.”

“Who cares? If you don’t like it in a couple of year, then get something tattooed over it, or laser it off.”

“That’s not a good way of making permanent decisions, Rhett.”

“Of course it is, you know why? Because literally nothing is permanent.”

I stared at him. He really believed that, didn’t he? Ah, the joys of being twenty-two and feeling invincible.

“Anyway, what are you doing later today?” he asked.

“Meeting up with Mike and your sister to visit my client’s yacht. They didn’t ask you to come?”

“I have a set stream every Saturday.”

“All day?” I asked skeptically.

“From 2-8pm.”

It was impossible for me to hide the look of shock on my face.

“You play video games for six hours straight?”

“I mean like, I can go pee and stuff...but yeah.”

I tried not to insult him, even though I truly didn’t understand. I mean, *I* worked an eight hour day, why was it weird if Rhett played video games for money for six hours?

“Is this a competitive stream today?”

“Nothing huge, no. But most people have Saturdays off, so streamers log on to entertain the masses. You should watch sometime. I’ll send you a link.”

“Sure,” I said, outright lying.

“Hey, umm...do you think I could ask you a favor?”

I was immediately wary. What could Rhett possibly want from me?

“Going to need the details before I agree to anything,” I said, when he didn’t provide further information.

“Well I was kind of wondering if you could watch Shelby for me tomorrow morning? Mike wanted to do this big reveal thing at the end of the bridal shower where I bring out the dog, but I can’t leave this little demon alone for more than a minute without her destroying something.”

“Yeah, I can do that. What time should I bring her over?”

“Like, 2pm? It’s a brunch thing. I think I’m going to be the only guy there.”

“You will be.”

“Crap.”

I laughed. “It will be a lot of squealing, and a lot of mimosas.”

“Can I drop her off at around 10?”

“Sounds good.”

When I pulled up to the marina later that afternoon, Mike and Mel were already waiting for me. Mel bounced energetically over to me and threw her arms around me for a hug.

“Hi!”

“Hi Mel. You ready to see it?”

“So ready,” she beamed.

The two of them followed me along the massive boardwalk towards Victor’s boat.

“Oh my god Cam, *any* of these would be amazing!” Mel said, staring at the huge yachts we passed by.

“You see that one down at the end? That’s her, the *Wind Singer*.”

Mel’s jaw practically hit the deck as she turned back to me, gawking.

“That huge one?”

“That’s the one.”

Mike shot me an exasperated look.

“He’s going to give you a deal,” I assured him with a clap on the back.

“Hey there!” Victor called out with a wave. He owned a massively successful sunglasses company, and we’d worked together dozens of times over the last four or five years.

“Hi Vic. This is Mike and Melody.”

“Nice to meet you, and congratulations. Come on aboard!”

Mel hummed with excitement as we walked the plank onto the boat. Victor gave us the full tour, starting with the

upper deck. The space was open and clear, more than enough space to seat the small, seventy-person wedding. The interior of the main deck was glassed in, and had a state of the art kitchen. Two long dining tables with leather benches lined both the port and starboard sides. There was room for dancing and a head table on the seventy-five-foot yacht, and of course a built-in sound system for speeches and music.

When we were done, we settled on the back of the boat with some fresh squeezed lemonade, a treat from Victor's private chef.

"So, what do you think?" Victor asked with a smile.

"I mean...I obviously love it," Mel said. She turned to Mike. "You like it right?"

"Yeah, it's gorgeous. It's just a matter of budget at this point," he replied with a weak shrug.

"Well, how about this? You cover the cost of the crew and fuel, and she's yours for the night," Victor said.

I think all three of us sat stunned by his generous offer. Mel's eyes snapped to Mike, and she was nodding her head faster than a woodpecker after a grub. Mike gave a hesitant shrug.

"Yes!" she squealed. "We'll take it!" She leapt over to Victor and threw her arms around him, catching him in a huge hug. "Thank you! So freakin' much!"

Victor chuckled, tapping her on the back. "Goodness, you're very welcome!"

Mike caught my eye and mouthed a big 'thank you'.

"I'm glad it worked out."

“Mel’s been losing sleep over this,” he said. “Yesterday she dragged me to see a venue down in the Everglades. You ever been to a swamp wedding, Cam?”

The thought of Mike and Mel getting married in camo and waders flashed through my mind, and it was enough to make me chuckle out loud.

“So, I met the newest family member...” I whispered to Mike. His brows scrunched in question. “Shelby. She’s a bit of a handful.”

His eyes bulged. “How do you know? What happened?”

“Nothing, nothing, relax. I’ve been giving Rhett a hand with the dog, that’s all. He was a little overwhelmed.”

“Shit, I’m sorry. I really just wanted him to handle *one* thing.”

“It’s fine, honestly. He’s handling it really well, she’s just a lot.”

Mike shook his head staring over at Melody while she chatted with Victor, a mega-watt smile plastered on her face. “Mel told me everything you did for Rhett the day we went for the suit fitting. I’m glad you were there to handle that.”

Something clenched in my chest, a sore feeling remembering Rhett’s panicked expression as he sat on the floor of the dressing room. It was kind of like a sense memory, seeing someone else hurting like that. Like remembering the bitter taste of a lemon while you’re watching someone else eat one.

“Yeah,” I said absently. “She tell you that a kids foundation is about to drop him?”

“Kid Linkz, yeah. Rhett was one of those kids when he was young. He attended their programs when he was falling behind in school.”

I turned to Mike. “Oh. He didn’t tell me that.”

“As soon as he started making it big he was writing them checks. They asked him if he wanted to be part of the mentorship program and he was thrilled, the kids adored him. Now the new board of directors that was just elected decided to drop him. Didn’t think a guy who made his living playing videogames was a good role model for kids. Mel says he’s devastated.”

I was unreasonably angry about a problem that wasn’t even my own, feeling an increasing defensiveness for the kid. What assholes.

“It’s not for sure, right? There is still a chance that he could stay on with them?”

“I mean sure, but it’s only a two year contract, so next year they probably won’t renew anyway.”

“That’s so fucking shitty of them,” I said in lieu of anything intelligent.

“Right?”

“Who’s Dan?” I wasn’t trying to be nosy, but last night I’d noticed him scurry off to the bathroom after his phone chimed with a text from him.

“Rhett’s Dan? That’s his ex. He’s a streamer too, nowhere near Rhett’s caliber though. They met and formed a team in Jungle Drop together with Dan’s friend, Cherry. Then Rhett and Dan started seeing each other and dated for close to a year. Out of nowhere, Dan dumped him. Said he wasn’t ready for commitment. Although I’m not sure how it takes you a year to

figure that out... Anyway their little team all went their separate ways once the guys broke up. I only met Dan two or three times at family functions, but you could tell Rhett had fallen hard for him.”

That burned me too. Why was this poor kid getting it from all angles?

Mel bounced back over and sat in Mike’s lap. “Can we get going? I want to finalize the address with the vendors and on the invitations. I’m embarrassed it’s taken this long.”

“Yeah, sure.”

We said our goodbyes to Victor, all of us thanking him profusely for so generously offering his yacht for the occasion. I plugged my phone in when I got to my car, and noticed I had a missed text from Rhett, no description, just a link. I clicked on it and waited as it loaded. His face came on the screen a moment later, wearing huge neon pink headphones and sitting in front of a computer. This must be the link to his live stream.

A comment section at the bottom scrolled endlessly with hundreds of messages, all going by too fast to even read. In the corner, a counter flicked with the number of viewers. Six thousand, eight hundred and ninety-four. Twelve thousand, one hundred and eighty. Twelve thousand nine-hundred and twenty-two. The number rose higher and higher, and I watched transfixed until he had over twenty thousand viewers. These were fucking ridiculous numbers. Was online gaming really a new celebrity status? I mean, I guess it had to be if he gets recognized in the streets.

I watched the split-screen for a while, on the right side Rhett smiled and joked and interacted with the people in the chat room, on the left side his character wove his way through a dense jungle, deftly switching from swinging through tree

branches, to a rather grisly knife fight with another player. I watched him kill three more players with little more than a few fast taps on the keyboard—the game room chat going wild every time he did.

I caught myself smiling down at my phone. I liked seeing Rhett in his element, playing a silly game and entertaining the masses, as he'd said. His appeal was clear, he was charming and funny, and obviously really good at the game. And knowing the kind of shit he was dealing with behind the scenes, the kid was starting to earn my respect.

CHAPTER 9

BACK IN THE CLOSET...OR PANTRY

RHETT

I didn't know how much longer I could fake my enthusiasm over state-of-the-art kitchenware. The 'oohs' and 'ahhs' had grown tedious as my sister opened the eightieth gift during her bridal shower.

"Looks like you could use another one of these," Heather said, handing me another mimosa.

"Yessss, thank you." We clinked our glasses together and took a big swig as the gaggle of women started giggling over the latest gift; a set of black lingerie.

"I really didn't need to know about that one," I said, cringing and facing away from the crowd.

"Wait, stay turned around," Heather said. "It's more lingerie, I can tell from the bag."

I turned into the hedge in my parent's backyard while Mel opened the bag, and whatever was inside must have been extra scandalous because the crowd started whooping and cat calling.

"Yeah, you didn't need to see that one," Heather said with a chuckle. "Even your mom turned away."

"Gross."

My phone chimed in my pocket and I pulled it out.

"How many gifts are left to open?" I asked my cousin.

"Like, six or seven. Why?"

“Cause Mike got her a gift too. I’m supposed to bring it in last, and it just got here.”

Heather gave me a suspicious look. “Ok...”

“I’m going to keep it in the living room until it’s time, don’t let her come into the house.”

“Rhett...”

“Stop looking at me like that! I’m just following orders.”

“Fine, fine.”

I wove my way through the throng of Mel’s old school friends, work colleagues and Aunts I hadn’t seen in a decade, and walked around the side of the house.

Cameron was parked across the street, and I watched as he pulled a wiggling Shelby out from the back seat.

“Nice touch,” I said, pointing to the big pink bow he’d attached to her collar.

“It’s a gift,” he said shrugging. “I felt the need to wrap it. Or her. Anyway, how’s the party been?”

I rolled my eyes so far back I briefly glimpsed my prefrontal cortex. “I can tell you way more about kitchen mixers than I ever cared to know.”

Cam chuckled, and his GQ smile made my chest squeeze.
What the fuck, Rhett?

“So how do we do this?” Cam asked, snapping me back to reality.

“Follow me inside, I’ll make sure the coast is clear. Mel’s opening gifts in the backyard.”

“Lead the way.”

The house was empty as we snuck through, and creeping around with someone who'd been interrupting my shower thoughts, brought me right back to my high school days when I lived at home. Boys were so much easier to get into my bedroom, until my parents found out what I was doing with them. Then there was a strict, 'no closed doors' policy that they introduced. I may have always been the weird kid, but at least I was pretty enough that it didn't turn away too many suitors.

We dodged paper party streamers and empty champagne glasses as we made our way towards the back of the house. As soon as I was able to see out the large glass doors looking out over the back yard, I stopped dead.

Mel was headed inside, Heather tugging her arm with a desperate look on her face. Fuck.

"Stop! Go back!" I whispered urgently to Cam.

"What? Why?"

"Shh! Just move."

I slammed my hands against Cam's (amazingly firm) chest and pushed him towards the kitchen.

"Heather, relax, I just have to go pee." I heard Mel say, exasperated.

"Crap, crap, crap," I muttered. If she was headed for the bathroom then that meant she'd be cutting right through the kitchen to get there. Without a second to spare, I threw open the pantry door and shoved Cam inside, following him and closing the door quickly behind us.

It was nearly pitch black, and there was a long silent pause, then the sound of Mel's footsteps passing right by us.

“Umm, Rhett?”

“Shh, she’ll be back any second.”

I could hear the chuckle in Cam’s chest, and the sound went straight to my cock. Suddenly being trapped in this small dark space with him was extremely arousing, especially with the wafting scent of his aftershave. I tried to look interested in canned goods in order to save face.

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve been trapped in the closet, you know.”

“It’s a pantry.” I’m not sure *why* I felt I needed to make the distinction, but it felt important somehow. Defensiveness was my go-to in an awkward situation.

“Reminds me of seven minutes in heaven. You guys ever play that in high school?” he whispered.

I’m glad it was dark because I’m pretty sure the color drained from my face. Was he really asking me about making out in tight, dark spaces while we were, in fact, trapped in a tight dark space? I exhaled my lurid thoughts. Of course he wouldn’t be insinuating anything, he thought of me as a fucking kid.

“Yeah. Think it’s a rite of passage.”

“Keith Barns was the only other outed guy when I was in high school. Obviously we got crammed into a closet together, but we were both too nervous to do anything. We made a pact to lie and tell people we made out, but it never really happened.”

I could hear the smile in Cam’s voice as he recounted the story.

“So who was your first kiss?” I asked. I felt my cheeks redden like I’d asked him to tell me about the first time he’d had sex, and not some something so innocent. I was glad it was dark.

“His name was Jeremy. It was after a football game in senior year, there was a huge party at some kid’s house. He was actually the QB on the opposing team, but the party was at his cousin’s house, so he showed up with a few of his teammates. Obviously people were giving them a bit of a hard time. Anyway, I broke up a fight that some asshole was starting with him and his friends, and that’s how we met. We ended up alone on the roof drinking beers until sunrise, and I was so fucking nervous I just kept talking and making lame jokes until he leaned in and finally kissed me.”

I let the thought play through my mind. “I can picture the house party, the closeted football player, the rooftop beers, all of it. But I absolutely cannot picture you being that shy.”

“Oh I was a timid little shit,” he admitted. “There were no movies or TV shows or even the internet to give you any clue on how gay guys flirted or interacted. I knew what I liked, I just didn’t know how to pursue it.”

His voice went all gravely again, and my dick surged in my pants as I pictured how Cameron would flirt. I swallowed audibly.

“But now you do?”

Jesus, what a stupid question, you idiot.

“Yes Rhett, now I do.”

The air was suddenly hot and charged, and maybe I was just picking up on something I *wanted* to be picking up on, but suddenly the tension snapped as we both heard Mel’s footsteps

cross back past the pantry and towards the door. There was a last, strained moment of silence between us.

“Should we...”

“Right, yeah. Probably safe.” I cracked the door and peeked out before opening it fully and stepping out. Something felt dirty and hot, coming out of a dark space with Cameron, like we had a secret now. And my belly tensed at the excitement that brought me.

I scrubbed a hand through my hair to rid my head of the thoughts, and crept towards the back door. I caught Heather’s glance, and she motioned to two last gifts to open before I could come out with the dog.

I looked down at Shelby in Cam’s arms. Her tail instantly started wagging, thwacking Cam in the side methodically as I reached down and scratched her neck.

“I think I might miss you, little asshat.”

She tilted her head and licked my hand furiously.

“Here,” Cam said, handing me the dog. “You should be the one to bring her out.”

I took the squirming puppy, and Cam readjusted her bow. “You think anyone would mind if I stay and record her reaction for Mike?”

“I think that’s a great idea.”

Why did it instantly make me happy that he was going to stay? Was he looking for an excuse to stay? Oh my god I was being so pathetic.

I peeked back towards the backyard, and Heather waved me over. “Show time, Shelby!”

Cam followed behind me as I made my way out the back door. Mel's immediate stunned expression brought a smile to my face, and the crowd of women started squealing again.

"Melody, Mike wanted to get you something extra special for your bridal shower, so I have the great pleasure of introducing you to your new fur-baby, Shelby."

My sister's eyes were dewy with tears as she reached out and took the dog, her face squeezing into a happy cry as Shelby immediately licked her. I glanced around at the guests, who were all smiling wide as they came over to ogle the little hellraiser. Cameron too had a big smile as he continued to film Mel meeting Shelby for the first time. My stomach lurched when he looked over and caught my eye. He cast me a sideways grin and winked, before focusing back on his phone.

I swallowed my heart back down into my chest where it belonged.

I was so screwed.

Half an hour later (and two mimosas deep at the behest of my sister) I was walking Cameron back out to his car.

"Hey, I caught a bit of your game the other day," he said, turning to me.

"Oh yeah?"

"It wasn't really what I thought. You're narrating, like, the whole time. How do you keep that constant stream of dialogue going for so long?" he asked, chuckling.

"Man, I don't even know what I'm saying half the time. It's just a flood gate of every thought that crosses my mind."

"Well, you're very watchable. I was entertained."

My heart stopped beating in my chest and I just stared, completely frozen up at Cameron. I was reading into that, right? He thought what I did was dumb...but still, he was looking at me like a kind of proud older brother or something.

Cam knocked a fist into my shoulder as he opened the door to his car, and *that* finally dragged me out of my stupor.

“See you on Wednesday, kid.”

I wracked my brain, clearly I’d forgotten something. Shit.

“What’s on Wednesday?”

“Orange County, you idiot.”

“Oh, you—you’re coming?” Did I want him to come?

“Yeah, Mike and Mel have been hounding everyone they know to come show support. Plus my assistant is gone for the day so, figured if you can’t beat ‘em...”

“Cool, yeah. Then I’ll see you on Wednesday.”

“And the other stuff, the bachelor party stuff. Is that all...”

“Locked and loaded.”

“Perfect. See you later, kid.”

Cam tipped his head and started the car.

I really needed to check with Jill about the bachelor party stuff...

CHAPTER 10

SAVED BY A BLOBASAUR

CAMERON

“Hop in, babe!” Mel hollered from the passenger seat of the car. I climbed in and she handed me a tall Starbucks cup.

“Thank you, you’re an angel.”

“Hey, *I* paid for that,” Mike said with mock offence.

“You’re an angel, too,” I said, patting him on the shoulder as he pulled out onto the road. He stuck his nose in the air haughtily.

“Thank you.”

“So have you guys been to one of these before?”

“Mel has. I’m popping my cherry with you.”

“Damn Mike, I never would have guessed.”

“Shut up, you know what I mean.”

I chuckled into my latte.

“It’s gonna be...weird,” Melody warned. “There are costumes, and like, hardcore fans, and it’s kind of a lot.”

“Costumes?”

“Yeah. People dress up as their favorite characters from videogames, sometimes there are a few furies.”

“Furies?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know,” Mike interrupted. He shot me a scandalized look in the rear-view, and I looked down at my tan pants and white shirt. Was I over dressed? Or maybe...*underdressed*?

“You guys packed for tomorrow morning?” I asked, dropping my fear over how I looked.

“You’re really not going to tell me where we’re all going?” Mel asked, turning around to face me.

“It’s not my secret. Rhett planned everything.” I smiled.

“I find that hard to believe,” she said, rolling her eyes.

In fact I wasn’t sure exactly *how* much of the bachelor/bachelorette party Rhett had planned, but I did have confidence in his assistant, so there was that. He’d forwarded me the flight manifest and hotel reservations and I figured if we at least had that sorted out, the rest could be decided on the day.

When we got to the convention center, Mel produced more little black cards with QR codes, and the guy at the ticket booth handed us each a lanyard with an all-access pass. The place was buzzing and just like Mel said, there were weird costumes everywhere. A guy knocked me in the head with some kind of lightning staff, and I stepped on someone’s tail. All before we even made it inside the main area.

“Let’s see,” Mel said checking her phone. “He’s scheduled for autographs in room B7 right now.”

We wound our way through the convention center until we found the right room. At first I hadn’t realized what the long curving line-up was for, but as we got to the door I had to do a double take. There were at least a hundred people waiting in this long ass line just to meet Rhett for ten seconds and get him to sign an autograph. They clutched games, or autograph books or printed pictures of him. It was so utterly weird. We flashed our passes to the angry looking security guy and snuck into the room ahead of everyone.

Rhett sat at a table lined with a red drape over it, chatting with a girl wearing fox ears who was obviously enamoured with him. She handed him a picture to sign which he dashed a Sharpie over quickly before handing it back to her. The girl was nearly shaking she was so excited to be meeting him.

As soon as she left, a woman beside him called the next person in line forward. They chatted briefly, Rhett gave the guy his signature and then he left. When he noticed us approaching he motioned to the woman beside him, maybe a handler or something, to hold the line.

“Hey guys! Welcome!” he said with his megawatt smile. Mel rushed him and gave him a hug, Mike and I each got a handshake. “Have you walked around at all? Scoped the place out?”

“Not yet, figured we’d come find you first,” Mel said.

“There is this guy on the main floor who’s making Pokémon pancakes with different colored batter, it’s so cool. I had a Pikachu for breakfast!”

Something about that made me smile—Rhett’s silly excitement over a cartoon pancake. He was so different from me, I never would have known about Pokémon pancakes if it wasn’t for Rhett. It was whimsical, and I guess that’s kind of how I thought of Rhett: whimsical.

“Are you nervous?” Mike asked.

“Hell yeah, man. Did you see how many people are here? This shit is stressful.”

“You are a braver man than I,” Mike said.

“They played this whole intro clip for me this morning, the one they’re using before the game. It was so fucking cool.

And I'm like, legitimately terrified of Yuma, now. She seems like she's more robot than human."

"Who's Yuma?" I asked.

"That's DarkMatterMoon."

I nodded, thankful that I remembered the name of his rival today.

"Anyway, I gotta get back, don't want to keep people waiting too long. I'll be done in about an hour and a half and then I'll catch up with you!"

We said our goodbyes, and Rhett sat back down at his table.

"Ok, let's go explore!" Mel said excitedly.

We walked the rest of the way down the hall, each of the small rooms had been reserved for autographs from different streamers. None of them had as many fans waiting as Rhett did. Not until we got to the very end.

"Oh shit, that's her," I heard Mike whisper.

There was a huge sign with a young woman's picture by the door. She was pretty, Japanese with a short, angular haircut. Even from her picture I could tell why Rhett was afraid of her. In the picture she was staring straight forward into the lens, no smile, just a terrifying look of calm, sprinkled with a dash of a I'll-grind-your-bones-and-make-broth-with-them kind of look. There was a negative image of the moon on her sweater, and as I looked around I noticed the emblem everywhere. It was on people's t-shirts and shoes, on a necklace or a hair clip. Always black moons, never white, and I had to appreciate the smart branding.

The three of us kept to the hallway but craned our necks to see inside. Yuma sat at an identical table to Rhett's, scrawling her signature quickly over each item that was put in front of her. She gave each person a curt nod as they left, I supposed stifled from the language barrier here.

"How old is she?" I whispered to Mel.

"Only sixteen. Apparently she's still in University in Japan and studying bioengineering."

"Christ."

"Some people really *can* have it all," Mike uttered.

"So she's just an all-around genius?"

"Guess so," Mel said with a shrug.

We wandered through some more rooms, vendors and videogame companies advertising their latest games. There was a huge VR station and Mike waited in line to chop down about a hundred zombies with a flame-thrower. He was thrilled.

In the main space, there were dozens of people playing games that were being shown on huge screens. These were the tier 2 and 3 players, Mel told me. They had small crowds around them that cheered their favorites on. And that's where Rhett found us.

We first noticed him coming because people started to swarm and chatter around us, then we saw two hulking security guards over the tops of everyone's heads, and Rhett squeezing his way through the crowd as politely as he could.

"Hi! Did you find the pancake guy?"

My chest lit up when I saw him, then immediately following that, my stomach fell through the floor. I swallowed.

Did I have a fucking crush on Rhett? Where the fuck did this excited, nervous energy come from all of a sudden? I wanted to explain it away, rationalize it like I do with everything. Maybe it was the huge crowd, or all the noise. But I knew I'd just be lying to myself, making up excuses for feeling almost giddy when I saw Rhett.

I squeezed the bridge of my nose between my fingers.

“You ok?” Rhett asked, putting a hand on my bicep. It was warm, and I liked it there.

Fuck.

“Yeah, just a lot of bright lights,” I lied, smiling back at him. He allowed his hand to fall from my arm, and I missed it. I wanted him to keep touching me, I wanted to be able to reach down and hold his hand.

“Hey, that’s my friend Cherry playing right over there!” he said excitedly. “I wanna go say hi.”

The security guards pushed past us to stick close to Rhett, and we followed behind them.

Rhett stopped behind a redhead with glasses, laser focused on her computer screen. She was playing a game of Jungle Drop, and doing really well if the crowd’s excitement was any indication. Rhett stayed back, not interrupting the girl’s game, careful not to distract her.

I was watching him and not the game, when I saw his eyes slide over to someone else in the crowd, and the color in his face suddenly drained. Mel must have caught it too.

“Oh fuck. There’s Dan,” she said, squeezing my arm.

“Dan, the ex?”

“Yeah. I guess he came to watch Cherry’s game as well.”

I saw Dan, standing next to Cherry's chair. He'd obviously noticed Rhett, as his lips pinched into a thin line and he gave him a slow nod in greeting. Rhett gave him a listless wave, only looking away from his ex when Dan broke their eye contact.

The crowd around Cherry was getting more excited as the counter in the corner of her screen showed that there were only four players remaining. Cherry's character was hiding out in a hollowed out tree, popping up to try and shoot her opponents as they got closer to her. Suddenly there was a storm siren sound coming from the game and a monsoon of rain pelted down, blurring Cherry's view.

I looked from the overhead screen back to Rhett. He wasn't watching the game at all, his eyes locked on Dan only a few feet away, and a crowd apart.

There was a gunfight during the rainstorm, and suddenly the crowd around us was jumping and cheering for Cherry as a helicopter flew overhead and rescued her character from the game. She sprung out of her chair and flung her arms around Dan, pulling him into a crushing kiss. Dan quickly put his hands on her shoulders, pushing her away. He mouthed something to her, nodding towards where Rhett was standing, and the redhead looked horrified. She whirled around with her hand over her mouth.

"Oh fuck," I heard Mel say. In a flash she was surging through the crowd in an attempt to rescue her brother after he'd just witnessed his ex making out with their mutual friend.

Mike sighed. "We'd better follow."

Rhett stormed out of the main hall, taking the steps up to the second floor two-at-a-time. He was giving the two beefy security guards a literal run for their money as he raced to an

unmarked door and scanned a card on his lanyard. The lock beeped and flashed green and he tore the door open before slamming it shut behind him.

The security stayed put by the door and didn't even give Melody a hard time when she started banging on it.

"Rhett, please open the door," she called out. There was no answer. "Rhett! Come on." She stood and waited. Nothing. She banged her fist a few more times before turning back to us, and Mike pulled her into a hug.

"Those fucking assholes," she grit out. "How could they do that to him?"

"They didn't know he was watching Mel," Mike said.

"I *meant* how could they get together behind his back? Cherry fucking consoled him after Dan broke it off! Those fucking weasels!"

"He'll be ok, Mel. He's gonna pull it together," Mike told her.

"His game is in an hour. This is literally the worst timing. Fucking fuck nuts."

I was irrationally angry on his behalf as well. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, feeling like I had to at least try to reach out to him. He'd come to me for help with the dog, maybe he'd allow me to help him now.

ME

I don't want to badger you, but I don't want you to be alone right now. If you let me in, we don't have to talk. I can just sit there.

I watched my phone impatiently for a response, and I wasn't at all surprised that I didn't get one.

"Hey Mike, why don't you go get him one of those silly pancakes he was raving about."

"Really? You think a pancake will fix this, Cam?"

"Anything is worth a try right now," Mel chimed in. "Just go get the fucking pancake."

He rolled his eyes and set out to get one.

"That was rough," I admitted to Mel when we were alone.

"Shit yeah it was. I can't believe those two have the gall to be out together like that at Rhett's own event."

"I can't believe this is the way he had to find out."

My phone dinged, and my heart stalled when I saw Rhett's name pop up.

RHETT

No talking.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

ME

Promise.

I squeezed Mel's shoulder and gave her a look to tell her I've got him, just as the door clicked open. I went inside and quickly shut it behind myself.

It was a pretty small space, like a greenroom. There was a big vanity against one wall with dozens of lights around a big mirror. There were nice chairs around the room and a table full of food.

Rhett was grabbing something from off of the table, then he lay right on the floor and dropped a handful of M&Ms into his mouth.

I wanted to keep my word, and decided to just get comfortable in one of the chairs. I sat and watched as Rhett dug his hand back into the bag of candy and shoveled more into his mouth. He repeated the action until he'd nearly finished the whole bag, just staring up at the empty ceiling lost in what he'd just seen.

"Do you think I missed something?" he asked, tilting his head back on the floor enough so he was facing me. His blonde hair was splayed over the carpet, but even upside-down he was still attractive.

"Missed what?"

"Like, that I didn't catch on that they were into each other. Cause I'm bad with subtleties."

The poor kid just stared upside-down at me, waiting desperately for an answer I wasn't sure how to give.

"I don't really know what to say about that, Rhett. But I *do* know you don't need to be looking into yourself over this, this one's on them. What they did was shitty, and not telling you about it was worse."

He nodded awkwardly upside down before plunging his hand back into the bag. I desperately wanted to ask him what he was feeling, if he was ok, if he wanted to bitch about them to me, I would listen. But I also knew I was only invited in on

the terms of being silent, so I didn't want to break his trust. Ten more painful minutes passed before there was a knock on the door.

"It's Mike," he shouted from the other side. "I, um, have a pancake for you Rhett."

I was surprised when Rhett picked himself up off the floor and answered the door.

"It's a Blobasaur...or something."

Rhett chuckled and looked down at the Pokémon pancake. "That's a Bulbasaur." He took the pancake from Mike and swung the door open in invitation. Mel scooted in even faster than Mike could walk, and wrapped her arms around Rhett's middle.

"What do you need?" she mumbled into his side. "You wanna bitch? Cry? Want me to mail slugs to their house?"

"Eww, no. Poor slugs," Rhett chuckled. "I'm ok."

He was definitely *not* ok, but we all knew he needed to put up a strong front for his game. Then as if on cue, the woman who had been by his side at the signing was knocking on the door, announcing herself as she strode in.

"This is your half hour call, Mr. Landon" she said. "Need anything else?"

"No, I'm good."

"All right, I'll be back shortly."

"Thank you."

The woman left and Mel finally let go of her brother.

"K, you guys really need to go now. I gotta prep."

"I feel bad leaving you alone though," Mel said, worried.

“If you’re here, I’m going to be reminded of it. I need to get in my headspace and to do that, I need to be alone.”

“Fine.” Mel snaked her way over to the table, shoving a few snacks in her purse and grabbing a soda from the mini fridge.

“I love you, kid brother,” she said with a final hug.

“Love you too. You know the rules.”

“Yeah, yeah. Rhett, kick her ass, ok?”

“You got it.”

CHAPTER 11

THE SHOWDOWN

RHETT

My headphones were on, and I was blaring a dubstep remix of Mr. Sandman when Amy came to collect me. I'd done all my pre-game rituals; the matcha drink, the mind focusing exercises, and I'd set my mind away from seeing Dan and Cherry kissing.

No, that was definitely a lie. That fucking image was burrowing into my brain like a god damn mole.

"I'm so sorry, Rhett. It hurts me to hurt you, but I just can't do this anymore. I don't know what I want." That's what he'd said to me the night he broke my heart. Didn't seem like he was hurting too badly when Cherry jumped into his arms and laid a fucking kiss on him.

NO! Bad brain! Focus, Rhett.

Amy was leading me through the crowd of people to the backstage area. I turned up the music and let the heavy bass tickle my brain as I tried to shrink my world down to just listening to that sound, synching my whole body and pulse to the music. I flopped onto a leather couch backstage and stared down at my shoes, the pink laces criss-crossing over one another, the pink rubber sole. I couldn't help noticing when the greenroom door opened again and Amy ushered Yuma and her translator in. She wore a hoodie with DarkMatterMoon in chunky bold lettering on the back. To my surprise she walked right up to me. I paused my music.

"I want to wish you good luck, and good game," she said in a heavy Japanese accent, and she stuck her hand out for me

to shake.

“Thank you. You too.”

She gave a quick nod before heading over to the opposite couch and sitting down. She stared straight ahead at the wall and tapped on her knees, like she was maybe practicing keystrokes or something.

The girl fucking terrified me.

I scrolled through about a hundred ‘good luck’ texts from family and friends, and sent out a quick backstage selfie on Twitter. Within seconds it had thousands of comments and likes. I shoved my phone back into my pocket and closed my eyes.

Don't think about Dan, my stupid brain kept saying. He'd looked good, though, hadn't he? Had he started working out? His shoulders looked bigger. I hated that. How people always try to make themselves more appealing after they break up with someone, how they have to make some kind of change. Shit, I guess I wasn't much better. I'd gone off and gotten a tattoo the very next day. One right on my hip that Dan had never seen, and never would see.

Stop it Rhett! I scrunched my face and my throat grew sore and my eyes pricked with tears. It had fucking hurt, but I could *not* afford to feel these feelings right now.

There was a gentle tap on my shoulder, and when I opened my eyes, Amy was standing in front of me. “It's time to go.”

I nodded and followed her out of the greenroom towards the stage. It wasn't a huge stage since it was basically just two people on computers, but there were massive screens set up

over top of either player to broadcast the game to everyone who'd come to watch.

I tried not to trip on any wires or shit as we crossed through the dark wings on stage left. There were techies and crew all over the place with headsets and clipboards, some manning cameras that would zoom in over our shoulders while we played. It was bigger than last year's tournament when I won the title in Amsterdam, and since I lived in Florida it was my hometown that hosted this year. I wondered briefly if next year's tourney would be in Japan...

I shook the thought out of my head. I had this. I had way more experience than Yuma at this game. Her defensive stats were terrible and she had a damn blind spot when it came to the heavy artillery. *But*, she was ranked the number two player in the world, so I couldn't count her out.

What if it was *too* easy? What if I wiped the floor with her in, like, eight minutes? That wasn't very good entertainment. But there was a fifty-thousand dollar cash prize that I wasn't going to risk solely for the purpose of entertaining the masses. If she wanted the damn title, she'd have to come and take it from me.

Then the lights lowered, and I looked out across the stage. Yuma was standing in the wings of stage right, her fingers still twitching quickly in a repetitive motion.

I heard the player intro video start playing on the big screens. It started with Yuma, her stats, her past gaming career. There was a big reaction from the audience as the translation of her interview played against the epic music. Then it was my intro video. It centered heavily on last year's win against Liam470. He had held the championship title for four years

running, so it was a big deal that I'd knocked him off his throne. This year he hadn't even qualified.

Amy was in my ear again. "I'll let you know when, ok?" She had to yell over the swelling music.

I nodded. She held up a finger indicating I should wait then, "Ok!" She tapped my shoulder and I headed onto the stage just as the spotlights swooped down onto me. Yuma and I met in the middle, shaking hands before taking our seats.

My set up was just how I'd left it this morning, my chair, my PC, my headset. The crowd was deafening and we needed to be able to hear the sounds in the game, so these were perfect for cancelling out the noise. I slipped them on and briefly enjoyed the muffled silence. My eyes darted quickly out over the crowd.

Holy shit that was a lot of people. I usually made it a point not to look, but I was glad I didn't see Mel or the guys anywhere. That was the rule, I don't want to see anyone I know cheering from the front of the crowd, it stressed me out too much.

The game server started up as they controlled our computers remotely, to get just DarkMatterMoon and I into the same game together. I was anxious to see where the server would randomly leave me on the map. I usually liked being out by the water because the weapons and other resources were easier to find, but it left you completely exposed. I was sure they wouldn't drop us close together; that ran too high a risk of this being a quick game.

A big countdown clock appeared on my screen indicating I had thirty seconds until the gameplay started. I watched the clock and waited until there was only 10 seconds left before I set my hands on the keyboard.

9...

8...

7...

CAMERON

“Why do we have to sit so far back again?”

“He doesn’t want to see us,” Mel shouted over the crowd.
“It distracts him.”

I watched the giant screens over top of Rhett and Yuma as the countdown hit 1. Their screens both mirrored the interior of an airplane, Yuma and Rhett’s characters sitting across from one another, handcuffed and chained while an armed prison guard stood watch. Then the plane started shaking, and out of the window you could make out one of the plane’s engines catching fire and eventually exploding. The plane crashed in a giant ball of fire and jungle trees, and then their screens changed. They both slowly come into focus as if their player’s were waking up after the crash.

“Yes! Rhett loves landing near the water,” Mel said, hopping up and down and clutching my arm. I had no idea what that meant, and I know I didn’t have enough time for her to explain it to me.

Yuma’s character had woken up in the dense jungle, shrapnel from the crash surrounding her. Little icons started flashing up on her screen as she collected the items she found around her.

I think.

“Rhett found a Beretta!” Mike said excitedly.

“There happened to be an Italian made handgun on the plane?”

“Yeah. There is always at least one torpedo launcher during every game, but they’re usually buried so they’re hard to find. Plus they’re heavy as shit, so it eats up your weight limit. It’s not always worth lugging around.”

“You know this game too?” I asked surprised.

“Dude, my future brother-in-law is a world ranked multimillionaire at this game. Yes, I know it.”

Fair point.

We watched a while longer as Rhett fought a shark for a med kit (ridiculous), and then fought off a swarm of killer bees with a can of hairspray and a lighter. Gotta give the writers credit, this game was...creative. Then suddenly the crowd got quiet.

“What’s happening?”

“DarkMatterMoon is tracking Rhett,” Mel said.

“That’s bad?”

“Doubtful, I’m sure he knows. He has a weird sixth sense about where the other players are on the map.”

My eyes darted from the screen marked DarkMatterMoon, to the one marked Rapsca11ion6. They couldn’t see each other’s screens obviously, but the crowd jumped when Rhett became visible in Yuma’s game. Everyone held their breath when the two got into into a quick scuffle, a few shots were fired but neither of them hit their targets. Then just as quickly as she’d come in, DarkMatterMoon was swinging through the jungle vines away from Rhett.

“They’re both going to go heal up,” Mike said. “Not worth keeping the fight going with a quarter of their health gone.”

“Right.”

Once Rhett’s health bar was full again, he started doing something with trip-wires and grenades.

“This is what he’s really good at,” Mel said. “He sets up these elaborate traps and lures his victims in. It’s a smart move if DarkMatterMoon is going to be hunting him down.”

There was an encounter with a jaguar soon after that, which ended up tripping half his explosives, and an audible groan from the crowd as he lost so much of his work. Then Mel grabbed my arm again.

“Oh fuck! DarkMatterMoon found Rhett’s cache!”

“It means she can steal all his stuff, or destroy it,” Mike filled in.

There was a gasp from the crowd as she tossed a stick of dynamite into the cache, and a huge explosion filled her screen.

Rhett jumped in his chair, the character on his screen snapping around and seeing a billowing smoke cloud rising above the treeline. I could tell from the way his fingers started banging against the keyboard that this was bad news.

“Shit shit shit...” Mel cursed quietly, digging her nails into my bicep.

“Mel, was that all of his med kits?” Mike asked, nervous.

“I think he’s still got two on him.”

“Only two?!”

“She just blew everything up!”

“I know!”

“Guys, chill,” I said, trying to calm their anxieties over med kits...that he had to fight a shark for.

But I found that *I* was nervous too. Yuma was giving Rhett a run for his money, but he could get out of this, right?

“She’s going after him again,” Mel said. I was sure I’d have indents of her fingerprints in my arm for the rest of my natural life.

Rhett knew she was coming and was waiting perched high in a tree. As soon as he saw her, he dropped down onto her with a giant machete aimed at her head. She was ready, and slipped by him easily, pulling out her own gun and firing a few rounds at him. The edges of Rhett’s screen flashed red as a bullet skimmed him, his health bar dropping a few notches. He didn’t let it affect him as he deftly tossed a glass bottle at his opponent.

Whatever mixture was inside made DarkMatterMoon’s screen blur as though she was drunk, and her skilled swinging through the jungle vines got sloppy, leading her to miss a vine and fall to the jungle floor. Her health bar shrank from the fall, but she quickly used a med kit and healed herself. It was in the nick-of-time too, because Rhett was after her with his Beretta. She artfully dodged his oncoming attacks, getting a few shots off herself.

The two players swung through the trees after each other, scrapping and shooting and healing.

“That’s it, that was his last med kit,” Mel said. “Unless he can get Yuma to drop one or unless he finds her cache, he can’t heal.

It sounded dire, but I still had confidence in the kid. Watching his hands fly over the keyboard, and his character

sail on the screen above, it was obvious even to me that he was amazing at what he did.

“I think he lost her,” Mike said, as Rhett was now alone on the screen. He stopped, high on a branch and turned around, spotting DarkMatterMoon crouching from below with a sniper. She wasn’t even aiming at him.

She wasn't even aiming at him.

Everyone realized what was happening at the exact same moment. DarkMatterMoon had lured Rhett into his own trap, and now she was setting it off. She fired off a single shot into a grenade and that was it. A progression of explosions grew closer and closer to Rhett’s character, fireballs growing bigger and bigger on his screen. He tried to make a run for it, swinging through the trees away from blasts, but one of them knocked him right out of the tree, and the next explosion swallowed him up completely.

A skull and crossbones flashed onto his screen, and at the very same moment a gold crown flashed on DarkMatterMoon’s.

There was a burst of pyrotechnics from somewhere below the stage and the spotlights were projecting purple moons over the crowd. Mike, Mel and I stood stunned.

“He lost,” Mel said in a tiny voice. “Oh my god, he lost.”

I looked up at the stage, but Rhett was already gone, his computer chair spinning empty.

CHAPTER 12

FLIGHTS-OUT

CAMERON

I'd texted the kid all night, and Mel had texted *me* all night. No one had heard from Rhett since he left the convention center. His assistant Jill had hounded Mel for a good three hours after the game; Rhett was contractually obligated to do several interviews once the game was over, and he was supposed to be onstage when DarkMatterMoon accepted her trophy. But the poor kid had fallen off the face of the earth.

I'd faded into a restless sleep, hoping Rhett would call or text me in the middle of the night. He'd let me into his dressing room yesterday, and that had taken trust. I just wanted to know he was ok.

When I did finally roll over at 6am, I had more messages from Mel, even one from Theo asking if I knew what had happened yesterday. I wrote Mel back saying I still hadn't heard from him, and even checked Twitter, which I'd re-downloaded last night hoping he'd tweet something out to let people know he was all right, but there was nothing but the selfie he'd posted yesterday. The picture had over three million likes and thousands of messages asking where he went and what happened.

My phone rang and Mike's name came up. I rolled back into bed and put my hand over my face as I answered.

“Yeah?”

“She said she's not going.”

“What?”

“Melody said she not going on the bachelorette trip until she knows Rhett is ok.”

Fuck. “He planned this whole thing for her, he *wants* her to go.”

“I know, that’s what I tried to tell her, but she’s sobbing in bed.”

“Ok, tell her I’m going to text him again, but try and get her ready Mike, the car comes at seven.”

“I’ll do what I can,” he said with a verbal shrug as he hung up the phone.

ME

Look, I know you had a shit day yesterday. An EXCEPTIONALLY shit day, but Mel is so worried about you that she’s refusing to go on the trip. She loves you. Can you at least let her know that you’re all right so she can go on her bachelorette trip? You put a lot of work into this for her.

I tossed my phone back on the bed not expecting an answer, and trudged towards the bathroom to shower. To my surprise, my phone started ringing right away, with a Facetime call. From Rhett.

“Rhett?”

“Hey, you’re up. You ready to party or what?!”

Rhett was wrecked. He was in the same clothes as yesterday and his eyes were swollen and red, and I’m guessing it wasn’t from crying.

“You’re wasted.”

“Nope, not anymore.”

“Where are you? I’m coming to get you.” It was difficult not to be angry by his flippant attitude.

“Chill out Dad, I’m good. Already arranged to have the car pick me up from Kio and Gemma’s place. I’ll see you soon baby, yeah!”

He hung up and I stared back at my reflection in the phone. Well fuck.

I immediately phoned Mel to tell her Rhett was ok and still coming on the trip. She bawled and thanked me a million times and I had to rush her off so we could both go get ready.

I brewed an extra strong coffee for the trip to the airport, and when the limo pulled up outside of my condo, the rest of the squad was already inside.

Mel threw herself at me, hugging me tightly. “Thank you, I’m so glad he reached out to you. I love you, Cam,” she said into my shoulder. Her eyes were equally as red and swollen as her brother’s, but I knew for a fact hers were from crying. Shaan and Jesse had heard the whole story, as well as Heather and Lily. Everyone was a little shaky and on edge when we pulled into the private airfield, and Mel tried to look excited as the limo drove up to the private jet waiting on the tarmac.

“Guys! What the hell are you waiting for! Let’s go!” Rhett laughed from the door of the jet. His hair was wild and he wore dark sunglasses as he waved excitedly. He had his classic megawatt smile plastered on his face as he disappeared inside. Shit was bad.

I felt the others all sharing concerned glances with one another, but I kept my focus on the kid in the plane. He was manic, or on drugs, or *something*. When I made my way onto

the plane I found him lounging back in a chair, sipping on champagne with his feet kicked up and resting on a table. Everyone made their way in, uncomfortable by the mood.

“Rhett, are you—” Melody started.

“Champagne, Mel? I splurged for the good stuff.” He poured over the glasses, spilling all over the table without a care. “Here, drink!” he said, handing her a glass. She took it, but only to appease him.

“Rhett...” she pleaded.

“Mike, come get one!” He stumbled down the aisle with a glass to hand to Mike.

“You know what, I think I’m ok for now actually,” Mike said, rebuffing his offer. Rhett remained undeterred.

“Take it, man,” he said, shoving the glass into his chest aggressively. “Cam, you want one? Jesse! I fucking know you want one!”

Even Jesse knew better than to encourage him in his current state. But I couldn’t stand watching his self-destructive behavior. I marched forward and bulldozed him towards the back of the plane.

“What are you doing, man? Chill,” he said as he knocked into my chest. He stumbled and I righted him, forcing him all the way back into the tiny bedroom. I closed and locked the door behind us once I’d gotten us inside.

“What are you doing?”

He stared at me incredulously, holding back his anger with a snarl. “What the hell are you talking about? I’m getting everyone pumped for a stag party!”

“Rhett—”

“What’s your problem?”

“Stop.”

He squared his chest to mine and stuck out his chin.
“Stop what Cameron? What the fuck do you want?”

“I want you to calm the fuck down and answer some questions, for starters.” I was trying so hard to stay level headed.

“I’m fucking calm! What do you want to ask me?”

“Are you on anything?”

“I’m on an airplane!” he said with a facetious laugh.

“I’m serious Rhett. Are you medicated or manic?”

“I’m fine! Just let me fucking be, Cam!”

“Can’t do that, kid. Sorry.” I wasn’t going to allow him to sweep this away.

Rhett paused and looked up at me with such a bewildered expression, like no one had ever actually insisted on helping him before.

“Took a Xanny hours ago, made me too sleepy so someone gave me something to wake me up a little.”

“*And* booze? Jesus, Rhett.”

“I feel great!”

“I bet you do.” I motioned to the bed. “Go lay down. You’re sleeping this off until we get to Vegas.”

Rhett chuckled as he made for the door. “No way, Dad. I’m fine. Let me—”

I put my forearm across his chest and grabbed his shirt at the shoulder. “I’m serious. Go sleep this off. You’re making

everyone out there nervous.”

He glared at me, that I actually had the gall to put my hands on him, but I leaned into my arm and he let me push him backwards onto the bed. He flopped onto the pillows and threw a hand behind his head, running his other hand up and down his thigh suggestively.

“You wanna come help me sleep?” he asked with a cocked brow, changing tactics.

“You’re completely inebriated.”

“Promise you I’m not. Just need a little help drifting off...”

I rounded the tight corner of the bed and leaned down, planting my fists just beside his slim frame. His jaw and eyes were equally wide, thinking I may actually be giving in to his ludicrous request.

“I would never take advantage of you like that, Rhett,” I bit out. “If I were ever going to fuck you, you’d be stone-cold sober so I could watch every little flinch, hear every tiny moan your body gave me. And you’d wake up the next morning remembering all of it.”

Rhett’s eyelids fluttered and his Adam’s apple dipped as he swallowed.

“Now sleep it off, kid.” I hit the switch to kill the light, and didn’t look back as I closed him in the room.

Melody was waiting for me on the other side of the door when I came through.

“Is he ok?”

“He’ll be fine,” I assured her with a smile. I honestly had no idea how he was going to be when he woke up, but I didn’t

want her to have to worry about her little brother during her bachelorette party.

“I can’t help but feel like bringing him to Vegas in this state is a bad idea.”

“Mel, I’ve got him ok? I really want you to have a nice time this weekend, and so does Rhett. He planned all this out for you guys to show you how much he loves you.”

“I know, I’m just...”

“I’ll take care of him. I promise.”

She wrapped her arms around me gratefully.

“Thank you, Cam. He likes you. I’m glad he listens to you.”

That might not necessarily be true, but at least he did seem to be taking my advice and staying put in the bedroom.

“If you’d like to take your seats now, we’ll be taxiing out shortly,” the stewardess said, coming over to us.

“Sure. Come on, Mel, let’s get settled so we can get this thing started.” I gave her an extra wide smile. She nodded and forced a smile of her own.

“Despite all...*that*,” she said motioning to the closed bedroom door, “I’m actually really excited. I’ve never been to Vegas before.”

“Never? Oh man,” I laughed. “If you thought the convention center was full of costumes and noise and lights, you’re in for it.”

RHETT

Cameron startled me from a deep sleep. “We’re here,” he said, sitting next to me on the bed.

“Impossible, I only just fell asleep.”

He chuckled his stupid, sexy, throaty chuckle and lifted the blinds on the window. We were in the fucking desert.

“Damn, how long was I out?”

“About five hours. Nice touch with getting them to fly over the Grand Canyon.”

He handed me a water bottle and some Tylenol. Shit, Cam always seemed to be taking care of me, it made me feel like such a fuck up.

I *was* a fuck up.

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

“I was going to call some cabs to bring us to the Bellagio, and once we check in—”

“It’s all taken care of. There should be a limo waiting for us. The check-in was taken care of too, we can go right to our suites. Lunch will be brought in as soon as we get there.”

“Oh.”

“I told you, I took care of it.”

“For tonight...” he asked carefully.

“After lunch we head to the spa. The girls are booked for massages, facials and mani-pedis. The guys are booked for

massages and pedis, ‘cause you gotta keep that shit looking nice. Then a party bus is picking us up at seven for an hour of cocktails and driving the strip, then dinner at the Wynn.”

“The Wynn?” Now he was surprised.

“Yannick’s. You know it?”

“Of course I know it, it’s a fucking three-Michelin-star restaurant.”

“Yeah, Jill said that would impress people.”

“No expenses spared, huh?”

I laughed at that. “Yeah, maybe should have thought twice about how much I was spending before I lost my job.”

“You didn’t lose your job Rhett. It’s just a setback.”

“Can’t come back from a loss like that, Cameron. I’m the washed up kid who lost to a little girl.”

“That’s bullshit. You’re the second best player in the world.”

I sat up, angry as fuck that Cameron was trying to teach me something about a world he knew nothing about. “You know how much money Liam made last year after losing to me? Fifty-six thousand dollars. That’s it. After holding the title for four years. I only held it for one, so who the fuck is ever going to watch me again?”

I was in his face now, angry, but he didn’t back down, didn’t move away from me. I could smell his cologne and body wash, a heady ultra-masculine mix that shot straight to my dick. I didn’t give myself enough time to hesitate. I leaned in to close the small gap between our mouths.

He immediately backed away.

“Rhett...” he said in a warning tone.

“I wasn’t that fucked up before, Cameron. I remember what you said earlier.”

“No.”

“Why the fuck not?” I asked, my ego stinging from the rejection.

“Because we have to spend a lot of time together, and I don’t want things to get complicated between us.”

“It was just a kiss.”

“No, it wasn’t. If I’m going to kiss you, I’m going to fuck you. There is no in between. So I’d rather not pop the lid off of something I can’t close.”

I was shocked by his straightforward answer, but somehow it made me feel better. It wasn’t that he didn’t *want* to kiss me, it’s because if he did we were going to go all the way with it.

“Come on, I’m sure those guys are all off the plane already,” he said, getting up from the bed. He faced away from me as he took a deep breath and fixed the collar of his shirt, clearly taking a moment to center himself before going back out there. I enjoyed that extra minute of just watching him, the way his expensive shirt tapered down his back and tucked into his tailored pants. How the material strained a little around his muscular thighs and ass.

“Get up, kid,” he barked, without looking back as he walked through the door. But shit...I *was* up.

CHAPTER 13

HANDS ON EXPERIENCE

RHETT

“Oh my fucking god, Rhett,” Mel squealed when she saw inside the penthouse suite. She raced around the place like a bird let out of its cage. There was a big checkered carpet in the main room that ran through to the living area with two enormous tan leather couches. There was a fireplace against the wall and a giant balcony with lounge chairs. The bedroom had three king-sized beds and a jacuzzi, and I’d made sure they had a fully stocked bar. Even tough-as-nails Heather was squealing now.

“Where are the guys?” Mike asked.

“One floor up, let me show you.” We took the elevator to the sixteenth floor and I handed them all room keys. “I booked us two suites since we’re five people, but there’s a connecting door.” The layout was the same as the girls’ suite, and quickly the guys all claimed their beds. Mike, Jesse, and Shaan grabbed the first suite, leaving me and Cam alone in the other. It gave me a quick buzz of excitement to know that I’d be sharing the same bedroom as him. When I glanced over to see him setting down his suitcase, he looked tense.

“Are you ok with this? I can ask one of the other guys to swap if you want?” I really didn’t want to make the offer, but I didn’t want Cam to be miserable either.

Jesus, when did I start caring about what made Cam happy?

“No. This is fine,” he bit out tersely.

“Yeah,” I laughed. “Sure seems that way.” He shot me a look that was so stern and exasperated that I couldn’t decide whether I wanted to back off or keep antagonizing him.

“Just don’t try that shit like you did in the plane,” he grumbled, making his way to the bathroom.

“Can’t promise that,” I said under my breath.

Ten minutes later, three huge carts of lunch were rolled into our rooms. We opened a bottle of scotch and sat out on Mike’s balcony, filling our plates with pastas and weird fancy fries. I’d even ordered oysters for the guys, and after a shit load of harassment and goading about me trying one, Cam had barked at them to back off. I was as grateful as I was embarrassed, but I concentrated on picking the little green flecks of herbs off my fries.

By 3pm we headed down to the hotel spa. The receptionist gave us locker keys and told us to change into the robes provided in the dressing room. Someone decided it would be bad manners to walk into a massage smelling like airplane and seafood, so everyone jumped into the showers. I held my breath as I walked into the open shower stall. Cam was already soaping up under a shower head and I intentionally chose the furthest one away from him.

I kept my eyes on the dark tiles on the floor, on the shampoo dispenser on the wall, the shower head above me. Absolutely anywhere except the naked man across the room from me.

I felt my blood heating and my cock starting to get hard. Just seeing the quick flashes of his skin was enough to start turning me on, reminding me of watching him step out of his pool, or the way he’d hustled me into the airplane bedroom with his chest.

“Rhett, you almost done? We’re heading to the lounge,” I heard Mike call out.

“Be right there.” I ducked my head low in the shower and turned the water on cold, freezing away any last sense of my curious dick. It didn’t take long before I was softer than an overcooked noodle, and I was grateful for it.

Everyone in the lounge wore the giant hotel robes as we waited to be collected by our masseuses. The chairs were these giant overstuffed looking puffball things, and your ass pretty much got swallowed up. I wondered if anyone ever got stuck in one of these.

“I’m assuming there’s a plan for tomorrow as well?” Cameron asked me quietly so the others wouldn’t overhear.

“Heading to Rehab in the morning.”

“Sorry?” he asked, confused.

“It’s not what it sounds like. It’s a giant rooftop pool party that starts first thing in the morning. I figure we’ll head over around ten or something. The afternoon we can do some gambling and then we’ve got tickets to a show in the evening.”

“I’m guessing it’s not Cirque du Soleil show?”

I shot Cam a grin and a wink.

“Hey, thank you. For taking care of all of this. You really outdid yourself,” he said with a smile.

I wanted to purr at Cameron’s praise. It felt good not to be chastised or taken care of for once. Feeling appreciated by him was a whole new experience.

“Oh shit! No way!”

I spun around in my cloud-chair to find the voice.

“Rapsca1lion6! I can’t believe it!”

Two guys around my age, also in oversized white robes, were heading straight for me. If anyone had ever been swallowed up by these ridiculous chairs, now would be a great time.

“Dude, tough loss yesterday, that was hard to watch.”

“Yeah, was even harder to play.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

The question hit me like a slap to the face, they were expecting me to quit gaming as much as I was expecting myself to quit.

“Hey, how about you give the man some space,” Cam said gently beside me.

“Yeah,” Mike piped in. “He’s here to relax, not relive it.”

“Sorry, sorry. You’re right. Well, we enjoyed watching you.”

With that, the guys left, and I just sat there with my skin crawling, all the anxieties and stress squeezing at my throat.

I felt it happening, felt my heart start to pick up speed, the cold sweat that broke out over me. Suddenly I felt like I couldn’t get enough air, like my lungs were too small and I needed to breath faster.

“Shit,” I heard someone say, then before I knew what was happening, I was being hauled up by the collar of my robe and dragged into an empty massage room.

Cameron led me to bed and sat me down. “How many seats were on the plane?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” It was too fucking hot in here, my temples were already damp with sweat.

“Just take a guess.”

“Umm, maybe ten, twelve?” I said panting.

“Good. What brand of Champagne did they serve?”

“Du Pont.”

“That’s good, Rhett. What color is the sofa in our room?”

“It’s, like, green I think.”

“More, like teal but—”

“You’re going to argue with me about the color of the sofa right now?”

His face cracked into a smile. “Are you still panicking?”

I paused, my heart rate had settled and the shakiness in my muscles had calmed a bit. I shook my head, staring up at him. “No.”

Cam’s smirk faded as we maintained our gaze, something super-charged was dashing back and forth between us, and I *knew* he felt it too. I got another chill, this one having nothing to do with my fading panic attack and everything to do with the way Cameron was looking at me, like he was going to tear me limb from limb. And holy shit I was into it.

“Fuck...” he whispered as if he was conceding to the inevitable, and then he was on me.

His kiss was rough and demanding, but his lips were softer than I could have imagined for all the masculinity he oozed. One of his hands wrapped around the back of my neck and pulled me in tighter, the other gripped my waist and crushed us together.

I couldn't think straight, I felt dizzy and completely at his mercy, hot and needy and desperate for more.

And I got it.

Cameron reached for the slit of the robe and he thrust his hand between the fabric, gripping my already half-hard cock. He stroked me roughly, and didn't for a second pull his mouth away from mine. The hand at the back of my neck rose higher, and he balled a fist of my hair and pulled my head back suddenly, moving his mouth to my neck and dragging his lips and teeth across the skin there. The rough scratch of his stubble mixed with the exquisite strokes of his hand was too much to handle. He pushed me further back onto the massage table, spreading my legs wider as he worked my dick up and down, so hard it nearly hurt. Was he punishing me for hitting on him? Giving it to me hard enough that I wouldn't want more? Because it definitely wasn't working.

I wasn't able to hold back my moans as I felt my balls start to draw up, my orgasm closing in on me faster than a bullet train.

"Gonna come," I whispered, and he cinched back my neck even harder.

"Come for me, Rhett, come now," he growled. That was all I needed to send me over the edge. I felt his hand wrap tighter around me, and my cock rocked out each hot spasm. I had no idea where I was coming with his hand tilting my head to the ceiling, but I literally could not have cared less.

As my orgasm faded, Cameron loosened his grip on me. He turned immediately so I couldn't see his face, and went to the tiny sink in the room, washing his hands and rinsing off a spot on his robe. He tossed me the hand towel as he set his hand on the doorknob.

“You ok, kid?” he asked, staring at the door.

“I—yeah. I’m ok.”

“Good.”

Then he left.

CAMERON

I went straight back to the locker room instead of the lounge. What had I just done? Why had I felt so compelled to reach out and touch him? I wanted it, I wanted to feel him in my hands, see the way he melted under me, and now I wanted more. I wanted to watch how he'd come undone if I were to wrap my lips around him, or god, if I was to fuck him.

Picturing my cock sliding in and out of his ass was not helping my current state. I debated going into the washroom and taking care of this obnoxious erection that was making it extremely difficult to be walking around in a robe. Thankfully I was alone in here.

“Get yourself together,” I chided myself standing up. It was a handjob. I'd been giving guys handjobs since I was fifteen. Why was it that Rhett's desperate little pants and moans were ringing in my ears? I took a few deep breaths, mastering myself.

Fine, I could admit that I had a crush on the kid. He wasn't my normal type. *'Old'* I heard his voice say. And I smiled. So what if I had a crush on a younger guy? He was attractive, tall, slim, and he had an adorable smile that I wanted to wipe off his pretty mouth.

It took a few more deep breaths before my dick got the message, and I was really looking forward to having someone work out all the tension in my shoulders. By the time I headed back to the lounge the other guys were gone and there was a scary looking Russian lady waiting for me. Perfect. No chance of anymore unwanted boners.

An hour and a half later, my bones feeling like absolute Jell-O, I met up with the guys in the sauna.

“I can’t do it,” Shaan was complaining. “I can’t let someone touch my feet!” The guys were clearly giving him a hard time about our upcoming pedicure.

“You *need* it, Shaan!” Jesse said through a laugh. “Look at those claws!”

“No way. I’ll freak out. I’m ticklish guys, it’s not going to happen.”

It was pretty adorable to find such a funny chink in a grown man’s armor.

“Did the masseuse touch your feet?” Mike asked.

“Fuck no! No one touches my feet but me. Guys, you don’t get it. If I could wear socks in here I would.”

The three of them were howling at my friend, and I had to bite my own tongue not to laugh.

“Ok, ok. Do a manicure instead then,” Rhett offered.

“Oh sure,” Shaan mocked. “I’ll have them paint my nails a deep hooker red worthy of a trip to Vegas.”

“They don’t paint your nails, Shaan. They take care of your cuticles and stuff.”

“What the hell is wrong with my cuticles?”

Laughter erupted. Did my friend really live under that big of a rock?

I dashed a quick glance at Rhett. To his credit he’d been playing it very cool since I came in, and I was grateful. The last thing I wanted to do was create some weird tension between us when we still had to spend so much time together.

And fuck, sleep in the same room tonight. He seemed better though, calmer after the massage. Or maybe it was the handjob.

Later when we sat down to get our pedicures, Jesse was keenly interested to know what kinds of entertainment we would be partaking in while we were in town.

“Titties right? We’re gonna see titties at some point, aren’t we Rhett?” What a man-child.

The poor girls working on our feet didn’t even look the least bit scandalized.

“Yes, Jesse. We’ll probably see a titty or two while we’re here.”

Jesse did a happy wiggle in his seat. “Sapphire? Diamond Cabaret? Palomino Club?” Clearly he was well-versed in his strip clubs.

Rhett rolled his eyes. “Spearmint.”

“Spearmint Rhino? Yes! I wonder if Makayla still works there...” he muttered to himself.

“Where are the girls going?” I asked.

“I found a Magic Mike knockoff show that is apparently way filthier than just a bunch of buff dudes dancing without shirts.”

“Wait, what?” Mike chirped, finally clueing in.

“Full contact,” Rhett added, rubbing it in.

“Mel’s a good girl, Mike. You can trust her,” I said.

“It’s the male strippers I don’t trust. Bunch of hot guys dancing around hundreds of horny women?”

“Heather is still single right?” Jesse asked.

“NO!” Mike and Rhett said in unison.

“Damn guys!”

“Go bother Makayla.”

“Might still have her number,” Jesse said, fishing his phone out of his robe pocket.

CHAPTER 14

BEING INSULTED IN FRENCH IS JUST SEXIER

RHETT

I was happy when we ran into the girls back in the spa lounge looking like melted cheese, all spa-drunk and happy. Mel had hugged me for like a minute straight before we all ambled back to our suites to dress for the night.

“Not going to cut it,” Cam said when I came out of the bathroom, dressed and ready to leave.

“What? Why?”

“Because you’ll be turned away at the door if you walk into Yannick’s like that. This isn’t fucking Burger King we’re going to.”

“Yeah, but it’s not Buckingham Palace either.”

“Might as well be.”

“Dude, these jeans were \$700.”

“Don’t ‘dude’ me, Rhett. Change into dress pants. Now.”

His authoritative tone instantly made my dick jump. God, I was such a bottom. Even with women, I preferred they take over. I just liked handing off the reins to someone else, having someone else make the decisions for a while.

“Fine. Will these be ok?” I pulled out a pair of navy pants.

“Perfect. And a shirt?”

“What’s wrong with this? It’s got a collar and everything.”

Cam hemmed and hawed over it for a second before conceding. “Fine, you can keep the shirt.”

It had a cactus pattern, I liked it.

Ten minutes later we were climbing onto the party bus. The benches on either side were slick black leather and the whole roof on the inside was lit up with LEDs. There was a club mix of a Britney song playing, and the girls were absolutely losing their minds. As soon as we were all on-board, Jesse popped the champagne.

“Ok, ok,” he started, once everyone had a glass. “Time for an old classic; Never Have I Ever.”

There were equal amounts of booing and cheering, but Mel stood up first and cleared her throat.

“Never have I ever...had a threesome.”

Suddenly I deeply regretted playing this with my own sister. I tried not to balk when she drank, but then, all of us did except for Shaan and Lily. Next to go was Heather.

“Never have I ever...hooked up with someone of the same sex.”

Me, Cameron, and Heather drank. And then Mel burst into a fit of giggles and drank again as well. Jesus fucking Christ. Mike didn't seem at all shocked by the confession, which led me to believe maybe their sex life wasn't as pedestrian as I would have guessed.

“Shit, I don't know guys,” Lily said, red faced.

“Say anything. Whether you've done it or not,” Mel encouraged.

“Umm, never have I ever had a one night stand?” she asked innocently. Once again, everyone drank except her and

Shaan.

“God, you guys are all fucking sluts,” he said just loud enough for us all to hear it. Jesse was up next.

“Never have I ever had sex on the Eiffel Tower.” We all looked at him wide-eyed as he took a sip.

“How the fuck did you manage that?!” Mike yelled. Jesse mimed zipping his mouth closed, I’m sure just for the sake of the women.

“Ok Shaan, what have you got?” Jesse egged.

“Never have I ever had sex on my wedding day,” he said, excited that he could finally drink. Then Heather drank.

“What the fuck Heather?!” Mel shouted.

“Look, I came to Vegas when I was twenty-one and me and Brandon Shepard thought it would be funny to pretend to get married. We didn’t know it was for real!”

The whole bus erupted in laughter at my cousin’s idiocy, as Jesse ran back and forth filling everyone’s glasses.

“Wait, you’re not still married, are you?” Mel demanded.

“No. Mom got the marriage annulled, Dad still doesn’t know.”

More laughter, more drinking.

“Cameron, you’re up!” Mel giggled.

“Do I really have to?” he groaned.

“Absolutely!”

“Fine, uh... never have I ever slept with a co-worker.”

A few of us drank, including Cam. As much as he played the prude, Cam sure was taking a lot of drinks during our

game, and I desperately wanted to know the story behind each sip he was taking.

“Ok Rhett, your turn,” Mike said giving me a sweet and suspicious glare. I was really tempted to say never have I ever gotten a handie in a massage room, but I didn’t think Cameron would appreciate that too much.

Then the bus stopped.

“Hey guys, just sit tight. Looks like we’re getting pulled over by an unmarked police vehicle,” the driver shouted back to us.

The party died in an instant, and everyone shot around nervous glances. A moment later the driver opened up the doors and a cop stepped up and had a few private words with our chauffer.

That’s when “Pony” started blasting through the speakers. As soon as everyone realized what was happening, there was a brief moment of relief before the three girls started shrieking excitedly.

“Rhett...” Mike warned. “What did you do?”

I couldn’t help feeling pleased with myself for pulling it all off, and I sat back on the bench and winked at him.

The hired cop did a sexy striptease in front of Mel, using his baton in all sorts of suggestive ways. When he was down to wearing nothing but his tight Gucci’s (and Mel’s hands) he started dancing for the rest of us. Unsurprisingly Jesse was completely into it, and I wondered if he didn’t have a little bi-curiosity in him. Mike played along like a good sport, even letting the stripper unbutton his shirt and grind up on him. Both Shaan and Cameron were less receptive, and the guy was a total professional, leaving them alone and instead, basking in

the attention of the girls. And Jesse, who'd whipped out at least a hundred one-dollar-bills from somewhere.

After a steamy half-hour of more hip gyrating than I thought was humanly possible, 'Brad' thanked us and left.

"That was hilarious," Jesse said, punching me in the arm. "You totally had us going."

Vegas was loud and bright and really tacky. I loved it. Mel, Heather and Lily were red-faced and giggling like children when we stumbled off the bus and into the Wynn.

Whatever this Michelin Star shit was about, everyone was excited by it. I just wanted a burger or something. How disappointed I was about to be.

The guy who showed us to our table gave me a once-over, twice. I was glad Cam had insisted I wear a jacket, though I don't think my high tops were exactly appreciated here. Whatever. I ordered champagne as soon as we were seated, and I started reading over the menu. I was confused that maybe they'd given me one in another language. Cam apparently saw my panic.

"Get the pork belly as an appetizer," he whispered.

"What's head cheese?"

"Trust me, you don't want that."

I'd have to Google it later. I kept reading, trying to scan the menu for the few words I *did* understand. Why did it keep mentioning foam? How do you eat foam?

"Is the beef safe?" I asked him quietly. He shook his head.

"It's served raw. Go for the lamb as a main course."

“But it’s got foam on it.”

“Is that a texture thing for you?”

“I—I don’t think so?”

“Trust me, it’s the least weird thing on the menu.”

I *did* trust him. I trusted him a lot. I know the moment in the massage room didn’t mean as much to him as it did to me, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it. The way he’d turned all that focus and all that power onto me. *Me!* Being the focus of Cameron’s attention was like being under a spotlight. Everything about you left suddenly exposed and lit up, like he could see every facet of you, the good and the less good. And I wanted to bask in that attention, swim in it. It was heady and thrilling, and I knew despite myself that I was going to try and get his attention again. A manipulative part of my brain told me to fake a panic attack again tonight when it was just the two of us in the room. Maybe jerking me off was part of his tactics to calm me down. If it was, I wasn’t mad about it.

I downed a glass of champagne, partially in celebration of the trip, partially to keep my buzz going. Later when dinner was served, there was foam. So much fucking foam. What was this Yannick guy thinking with all the foam? Was this bougie French cuisine? Mel’s friend Lily had something that was served smoking and looked completely burnt, and Shaan had something that was served on a bed of moss. None of us were really sure if you were supposed to eat the moss, so to be safe, he didn’t. I *did* catch him trying a small piece when he thought no one was watching, but based on his scowl, it didn’t look like it was very tasty.

I’d just ordered a bottle of scotch for the table while we were waiting for dessert, when a group came in and sat across the room from us. I hadn’t been paying them much attention

until Lily leaned forward and asked; “Rhett, do you know those guys or something?” She nodded towards their table, they were about eight people, all immaculately dressed. Seriously, they looked like they stepped out of a fashion magazine. And they were all Japanese.

Everyone at our table had noticed now, and Lily cut them a sharp look before turning back to me.

“They keep saying the word ‘meinu’ which means bitch,” she very helpfully supplied.

“Rhett...just don’t let them get to you,” Mel said, trying to sooth my now searing ego.

One of them flagged down a waiter, with a huge shit-eating grin on his face, then he motion over to our table.

“I think I should go,” I said standing.” I really, *really* didn’t want to ruin this night. Cameron grabbed my arm in a vise-like grip.

“Sit down.”

I hesitated a moment before he started subtly tugging me back into my seat. I sat, trying to ignore everything happening around us, the other tables, the wait staff, even the people sitting at my own table. I focused on the dessert fork in front of me, counting the prongs over and over. I traced the tip of my finger along the gold rim of a saucer.

“Monsieur?” the waiter said startling me out of my exercises.

“Yeah?”

“Ze gentlemen at ze table have bought your table a bottle, sir. It’s a specialty import; Larmes du Chérubin.”

To my shock Cam grabbed the bottle from the man's hands and slammed it down on the table.

"Thank you, we won't be accepting any more gifts from that table," he warned the waiter, who looked surprised that the bottle had not been well received. When he left I turned to Cameron.

"It's just vodka Cam, chill."

He gave me a pitying glance before he explained their choice of bottle. "Larmes du Chérubin means 'the cherubs tears'. They're calling you a cry baby."

A sickly feeling of shame and embarrassment wove through my gut, and I heard the table of guys laughing.

I lost it. Someone else took over the driver's seat in my head and I grabbed the bottle, tearing out the cork, pouring some onto my water glass and taking a big sip.

"Rhett—"

"It's really smooth Cam, you want some?"

The Japanese male-models were barely containing their laughter as I stood from the table, Cam snapped his arm to reach for me but I dodged his grasp, heading right for them.

"So you guys must have seen the game, huh?" I asked, wobbling over to their table. The champagne and shots on the party bus making my knees feel pretty loose. They would barely make eye contact with me, just snickered quietly to themselves.

"Come on! I wanted to share the bottle!" I said, doling it out. "It's fantastic," More muffled laughter from them.

"No thank you," one guy said with a thick Japanese accent. "It's all for you."

I was vaguely aware that Cameron was at my back now. He had his hands in his pockets, seeming like he was waiting for the right time to intervene. His looming presence didn't deter me though.

“No, I *really* want to have at least one drink with you guys, just one.” I leaned across the table trying to fill some of their empty water glasses, when one guy shouted and knocked my hand away. The glass tipped over, the vodka splashing into the candles in the middle of the table and in an instant, a fire erupted on the center of their table.

There were shrieks from the other patrons as a hot yellow fireball went up, and then continued to burn over everything the vodka had spilled on. Everyone had fled the burning table, and within seconds, two people rushed out from the kitchen with fire extinguishers, quickly putting out the blaze.

The whole dining room was in shock, staring at me, at the table, at the blackened ceiling above. It was startlingly quiet and I felt numb, then I started to hear shouts, and saw a furious chef barreling out of the kitchen, screaming something in French and heading straight for me. A few people tried to hold him back, but he was a big dude, and he tossed them across the room. I had no sense of self-preservation as he approached me, it was Cameron that stepped in his path. He didn't even look Cam in the face, just grabbed him by the shoulders to toss him aside as well, only...Cameron didn't budge. His sudden immovable wall of a body finally gave the chef enough pause.

“It was an accident,” Cam said, staying calm.

“Impossible! Ce petit con a causé une putain d'explosion dans mon resto et il doit payer!”

The red-faced chef (who I assumed was Yannick himself) made a move to shove past Cam again, but Cam grabbed him

and heaved him away from me.

“It would be really bad for business if you take a swing at the kid and end up with assault charges,” he said, as the chef tried to wrestle away.

“Lâche-moi!” The chef was shaking with rage as Cam tried to diffuse the situation, and that angered him even more that he pulled back a fist and swung at Cam. Cam didn’t make it out of the way in time.

A split second after the man’s fist landed across Cam’s face Mike, Jesse, Shaan and Heather were all on their feet tearing the two apart.

Mel had grabbed me at some point and was dragging me out of the restaurant as a dozen of the hotel security guards were racing in. One of them grabbed us and made sure we stayed put by the exit.

“Rhett! Rhett, are you ok?”

I think that’s what she was saying. My ears were ringing so loudly that I was trying to read her lips. Then there was the distant sound of a siren wailing, and within a few minutes, two fire trucks screeched to a stop in front of us, firefighters racing down to assess the situation.

“Mike! Here!” I heard Melody yell as my hearing started to come back to me. The rest of the group joined us, followed closely by the Wynn security guards.

“Mel, you ok?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. You guys?”

Mike nodded, soaked in sweat and missing a few buttons on his shirt, but looking otherwise all right. Everyone else seemed to have gotten away unscathed, save for Cameron. He

had a small cut below his left eye from the chef's right hook, but it didn't look too bad considering. He was breathing heavily as he looked at me. I swallowed and nodded, not really knowing what to say, and he gave me a brief nod in return.

“Mel, I—”

“It was an accident, Rhett. We all know that,” she said, taking my face in her hands. Then suddenly there were red and blue flashing lights streaking across Mel's face. She darted her head over to where the cop cars were pulling up, and my heart sank as I saw the tears well in her eyes.

I'd just ruined everything.

CHAPTER 15

DESERT WALKS

CAMERON

It was after midnight by the time we all got back to the hotel. Everyone settled in silently. We'd had to make statements to the police and to the hotel management. They said they were going to review the tapes of what had happened in the restaurant and we would be contacted by our local police station if the restaurant owners decided to press charges. They'd asked *me* if I wanted to press charges against the chef for the shiner he'd given me, but he'd barely clipped me and it wasn't worth flying back to Vegas just for a court date. Of course the little shits that had instigated the whole thing had gotten off scot-free.

Rhett was lying in his bed facing away from me when I came out of the bathroom, fresh from a shower. His light was still on and the curtains were wide open as the Bellagio's famous fountains danced around below us, creating a pretty glimmer in the otherwise dark room.

What could I even say to the kid? I had absolutely no idea what he was experiencing right now, I'd never been a damn global phenomenon at twenty-two and had to deal with public humiliation or the possibility of my whole career being over. I sighed, feeling like I was failing somehow. I slipped into a pair of briefs and tucked under the covers of my bed.

"You know it costs the hotel about \$10,000 a day to keep the fountains running?" I said. Maybe that would break the ice.

"Yeah?"

There. My heart swelled a little that he was at least willing to talk to me.

“And apparently they have a real problem with ducks.”

Rhett rolled over in his bed and faced me, propping his head up on his arm.

“I’m sorry you took one to the face, Cam.”

“It’s fine Rhett, I—”

“No. It’s not fine.” His tone was so clipped, I’d never heard him speak to me that way before.

“Hey, calm down,” I said gently. “I guess I mean, *I’m fine.*”

“I never meant to put you in a situation where you would get hurt.”

His eyes searched the empty pillow in front of him, then he rolled back over.

“No way, kid,” I said, sweeping the covers off and coming around to his side. “You have a serious self-worth issue, and I need you to hear some things, ok?”

“You sound like my therapist.”

I stood blocking his view of the fountains. “Look at me Rhett.”

“Sure, Daddy.”

“Don’t fucking deflect.”

“Shit, *are* you my therapist?”

“Rhett, you’re a great fucking person.”

“Ok...I never said I wasn’t?”

“But do you know that you are?”

“Sure.”

“Then say it.”

“Say what?”

“One positive thing about yourself.”

“Fine, I’ve got great hair.”

“Something real Rhett. Something you’ve earned.”

“You think these highlights come naturally Cameron?”

“Deflecting.”

“Fuck you’re annoying!”

I stepped in closer to him as he stared up at me, blinking and unsure.

“I...I’m...”

“Something real, Rhett,” I encouraged.

“I’m loyal.”

“Yes, there you go.”

He was silent for a long moment, lost in his own thoughts. “Doesn’t feel so great to be loyal, come to think of it.”

I knew he was thinking about his ex. “You have integrity.” I knelt in front of his bed as his eyes looked past me and back to the fountains.

“Loyalty and integrity have only ever gotten me hurt.”

“Well, you’re young. Not everyone has learned to value those things. But hold on to them, they’re important.”

“What happened in the massage room?” he asked quietly, his eyes suddenly sliding back over to me. I was instantly

anxious, I hadn't planned on having a conversation about me, or us. Fuck, there was no us, right?

"Did I overstep?" I asked cautiously.

He scoffed. "No. But why all of a sudden?"

I chewed the inside of my lip working that over in my head. "I just...wanted to." It sounded like a brush-off of an answer, but it was the honest truth. I just wanted to touch him. I'd *been* wanting to touch him, and I knew the feeling was mutual.

There was tension now, so much tension I felt sweat beginning to gather at my temples. I wanted more, and he wanted me to take more.

"Why are you always holding yourself back?" he asked astutely.

I swallowed. "I'm not sure."

Rhett sat up on his elbows, his abs flexing and stretching his smattering of mismatched tattoos. There was a palm tree, and the word 'six' and pretty set of woman's eyes. I wanted to know them all, learn the story behind each one.

"The guy at the hotel bar," Rhett whispered as his eyes darted down to my lips. "You were ready to fuck him, so I know you don't have a problem with casual sex. So what's so wrong with me, then?"

My heart felt like he'd put it in a blender. How could he think that? "*Wrong* with you? Nothing is wrong with you, Rhett."

"Is it just because you're not attracted to me? Because you see me as just a kid?"

"No—I..."

“Then what?”

For all the self-reflection I was making him do, I knew it was time to do a little of my own.

“There is nothing wrong with you, and I’m incredibly attracted to you, but I—I think it’s maybe a little bit more than just something sexual for me, Rhett. And I can’t sleep with you if it’s going to mean one thing to you, but another to me. I’m not a masochist.”

Rhett’s brows bunched as he thought about what I’d just confessed. His lips formed into words, but he said nothing, and I started to panic. Anti-freeze replaced my blood and I felt suddenly nauseous. Without saying another word I pushed off his bed, but Rhett caught me by the wrist and pulled me hard into him.

He didn’t say a word, he just pulled me on top of him and leaned up to my mouth, catching my lips in his. It was like breaking a dam.

Suddenly we were kicking off the sheets and our briefs, groping and touching and grabbing in one sweaty, needy mess of limbs. His hand found my cock and I hissed when he squeezed me tightly.

“Jesus Christ this thing is huge,” he marveled, before slamming back into my mouth. I chuckled as I ran my hands through his hair, tugging lightly.

Rhett’s hips ground up into my thigh, humping me without a second thought for modesty or humility. With my knee, I knocked his legs apart and settled between them, smacking his hand off my cock so I could grab them both together. My whole body firmed up feeling his hot dick

beneath mine, feeling how soft his skin was against me. He tried sitting up to touch me, but I pushed him back down.

“Stay,” I warned. Rhett put his hands up, relinquishing his request.

“Anything, Cam, just please, don’t stop what you’re doing.”

When I fisted the tips of our cocks together, Rhett moaned. Loud.

“You need to keep your mouth shut. I’m not having those guys walk through that door to find the best man jerking it with the maid of honor, got it?”

“Yes, got it.”

I rubbed us together for a while, changing speed and tension. I loved watching Rhett come undone under my hand, watching his hips jerk as his hands went up into his hair. I was getting transfixed by the way his body was bowing and flexing. Then he moaned again.

“Rhett,” I said, dropping both our cocks. “You need to shut the fuck up.”

“Then shut me up, Cam, please. Stuff my mouth.”

I nearly came simply from his request. In a heartbeat, I dragged myself up his body. He immediately opened his mouth and I plunged home. Rhett coughed and choked on me, but his hands were firmly planted on my ass and he wasn’t letting me go. I didn’t need any more of an invitation, I put my hands behind his head and pushed further.

Holy shit he could deep throat. I was worried I might come before he even needed to come up for air.

Finally, he relaxed his hold on my ass and caught his breath.

“Oh my god, yes,” he said between gasps. He didn’t even wait to fully catch his breath, didn’t attempt to wipe up the tears racing down his face or even the spit lacing his chin, he launched himself back on my dick with vigor. This time he grasped the base of my dick with his hand, working me from the root, as my tip was hugged by the back of his throat. His other hand was splayed on my chest squeezing one peck, then the other.

The sweat grew heavier on me as I felt my body start to tighten up.

“I’m gonna come, Rhett,” I whispered. His only response was to nod furiously onto my dick.

I grabbed his head as I felt the first wave coming, and had to stifle my moan as the spasm rocked through me. I felt Rhett choke on my cum as I unloaded into his mouth, and because I’m an asshole, I held his head tighter to me, his nose pressing into my belly.

When the waves began to diminish, I let go. He didn’t take my dick out of his mouth right away, just kept it gently on his tongue as I started to deflate in his mouth.

I sat back on my feet, still seeing stars from coming so hard when I looked down at Rhett. He was red faced and sweating, and when I saw his chest I chuckled to myself.

“Really, kid?”

“Shut up,” he said with his arm thrown over his eyes. His chest and belly were covered in his cum, a fucking impressive amount. Then a smile cracked over his face and he started laughing, and I couldn’t help but chuckle as well. I leaned

down and I kissed him. It was slow and sweet, and toothy as we both couldn't help from smiling with how good we felt.

“Rhett, if we both come when you give me blowjobs, we're going to save so much time.”

He laughed. “It's been a long time, and I really, *really* liked sucking your dick.”

“Well, it was fucking mutual.”

Rhett reached over and grabbed the tissue box beside the bed and cleaned himself up.

“Look,” he started, gazing back out the window and avoiding my eyes. “I don't know what this is but—”

“Just spit it out, Rhett.”

“No, I already swallowed but that's not what I was talking about I—”

I punched him in the arm.

“Ow! Ok!” he laughed. “I'll leave the Dad jokes to you, but I—”

I punched him again, and again he laughed. This time he rolled back over to me.

“Sleep in my bed tonight. That's all I wanted to say.”

Rhett's simple request had my throat pinching. Yes, I wanted that, I wanted to sleep beside him tonight. Especially after what we just did.

I pulled the sheets up off the floor and spread them out over us, then pulled him into my chest. He smelled like the cologne he'd put on hours ago, and sweat and pheromones. It was the perfect scent to lull me right to sleep.

CAMERON

I woke up the next morning alone. The curtains were still drawn open and I was getting blasted in the face with the hot desert sun. I sat up and stretched, looking around the suite for Rhett. Where the fuck had he gone off to so early?

I threw on some joggers and checked the patio off the living room; not there either. So I made my way next door into the guys suite.

“Hey,” Mike said. Mel was curled up on his bed in her pajamas, crying.

“What’s going on?” I asked nervously. Jesse was seated at the bar by a big tray of breakfast that had been wheeled in, and he tossed me his phone. It was open to an article on Twitter.

Disgraced Gamer Sets Fire To Michelin Restaurant

World-renowned gamer Rhett Landon (22), better known by his gaming handle RapsCALLION6, was involved in a major fire last night at Las Vegas’s prestigious Wynn hotel. A video has surfaced of a disgruntled Landon, who appeared to be confronting a table with a bottle of vodka in his hand. Some witnesses state that the gamer (who recently lost his championship title to sixteen-year-old Yuma Kiama)

tossed the flammable liquid directly onto a burning candle, setting alight the table of Japanese fashion students. While police were on scene shortly after, no charges have yet been filed.

Against my better judgement, I click on the video. Someone a few tables away had taken it, and the table had already gone up in flames. I watched as the chef came rushing through the kitchen doors and couldn't help wincing as I watched myself get hit.

“He saw this?”

Mike nodded.

“Where is he?”

“Don't know. He texted Mel the article a half hour ago and then never responded, turned his phone off.”

“Shit.”

“Cam, can you find him? Please?” Mel asked.

“I'll do whatever I can.”

I raced back into my room and got dressed, wondering where the hell Rhett could have taken off to in fucking Las Vegas. This was the wrong city to be in if you were pissed off and looking for trouble, because you would find it.

When I went to grab my phone of the charger, I saw I had a text from him. My hands felt shaky as I unlocked it.

RHETT

Valley of Fire.

Well that was fucking ominous.

A quick Google search later, I'd learned that the Valley of Fire was a state park about an hour drive away. I requested an Uber and raided the fridge for some bottles of water before slipping out of the suite. I decided I would text the others from the car. There was a reason he'd told me where he was going and no one else, and I'm sure he didn't want the whole cavalry showing up to yet another one of this poor kid's misfortunes.

I called and texted repeatedly while the Uber took me out into the desert. It was already scorching hot and not even the lizards would be out in this heat. I crossed my fingers that Rhett was being safe out there.

Mel had a mini freak-out when I told her I thought I knew where her brother might be, and that I was going alone, but ultimately she understood. It was stupid to think she didn't suspect that *something* was going on between us, but all the same I was glad she wasn't asking me about it.

When the car pulled up, the driver pointed out the little information hut in an otherwise wild and abandoned landscape. He told me I'd need to go connect to their Wi-Fi if I wanted a ride out of here since reception was limited. He also mentioned that I would have a real bitch of a time getting an Uber to come pick me up all the way out here, but that was a problem for later. I left the safety (and exquisite air conditioning) of the car and flung a backpack over my shoulder, setting out to God knows where. The air was hot in my lungs, and immediately the arid landscape felt as though it was sucking the moisture right out of my body.

I walked through the parking lot up to a main path where lots of tourists were taking pictures of the stunning red rocks, an obvious clue as to where the Valley of Fire got its name.

But then the path sort of petered out, and opened up into a massive stony valley. There were about a million directions that Rhett could have gone. I pulled my phone out of my back pocket to see if I'd gotten anything from him, and just like the driver had warned me, I had zero reception. I took a deep breath, steeling my nerves before taking my first step into the valley.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

I spun on a dime to see Rhett, hands in his pockets sauntering over to me. I was too relieved to say anything.

“You think I'd wander into the desert alone? I'm not *that* stupid,” he said with a chuckle. “I was waiting inside at the info desk in the AC.”

Instinctually I wanted to take him in my arms and hug him, maybe more for my own peace of mind, but crowding him right now seemed like a bad idea, so I stayed put.

“Are you ok?” I asked.

Rhett sighed and shrugged, his eyes a little red and sleepless looking. He stared out into the red desert and started walking. I followed.

We walked in silence for a long time, staying in the shade as much as we could, and eventually we found a little alcove in the rocks. It was easily fifteen degrees cooler, and we sat with our backs against the rough walls and finished a few bottles of water.

“Tell me about your Dad,” Rhett said.

“My...Dad?”

“Yeah, Mel told me he was an asshole...wait. That was totally an inappropriate question, wasn't it?” He shook his

head apologetically.

“No, no. I mean, yeah kind of, but I don’t mind answering it.” I swallowed down the immediate anxieties that talking about my father brought on. “I was seventeen when I came out of the closet to my parents. I had a feeling that my mom knew—and she later told me she did—but I knew it would be a shock to my Dad. He didn’t even believe me at first. He argued that I was good at sports and that girls were always interested in me, and all kinds of other ridiculous things. I was lucky that being gay wasn’t as big of a deal to most people. I mean, don’t get me wrong, kids still called me every name in the book, and when we watched Philadelphia in a film study class, I was treated like a fucking pariah for the next few months. But eventually everyone got over it. I was popular,” I sneered, “really good at sports and got good grades. Me liking dick was the only thing that set me apart from guys like Mike or Jesse or Shaan.”

“But that wasn’t enough for your Dad.”

I shook my head solemnly. “Nope. After a year of trying to convince me this was just a phase, he stopped talking to me. And it might have been fine but...” my throat grew painful as I fought tears. “But I could see how it was affecting my mom. The next year, I left home for college and I was so fucking thrilled to get out of my house. I loved my tiny piece of shit dorm room, and my mom would come to visit me every weekend, bring me home-cooked meals and make sure I had enough money for books. But I could tell something was wrong at home. Finally, one day she told me she was leaving my dad.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. She said she couldn’t be with him anymore if he was going to cut me out of his life entirely.” I swallowed, remembering how I felt like my parents splitting up was all my fault back then.

“So, I helped her find her first little apartment, helped her build new furniture, and mowed her lawn on the weekends. But I could see she was heartbroken over my Dad; over the fact that he could just abandon his own son without a second thought just because I was gay. He blamed me for it, for being gay and for breaking up his marriage. That’s when I started having panic attacks. The first one happened right outside of the school cafeteria one day. It suddenly felt like I’d run ten miles, my heart was pounding, I started sweating, my skin was prickling. I thought I was having a heart-attack and was about to die. When I got to the nurses office, she was like ‘Nope, just a panic attack. You’ll be fine in a bit.’ I tried to tell her it was something more serious, that she didn’t understand I was about to drop dead.”

I looked over to gauge Rhett’s reactions to the subject matter. He was staring out unblinking across the copper-colored desert.

“Sorry, is this bothering you?”

My question seemed to snap him back to reality.

“No, I’m fine. Not a huge fan of your Dad’s, though.”

I chuckled. “No, me neither.”

“So that’s how you know all those tricks?”

“The grounding techniques? Yeah. Both my Mom and I started seeing therapists after that.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“At my Grandmother’s funeral. Must be like, five years ago now?”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“Not a damn thing.”

“What a prick. I’m glad my parents never gave a shit.”

I shoulder checked him beside me. “Me too.”

“How’s your Mom now?”

“Amazing, actually. She started dating a retired firefighter and they just moved in together last year. Karl. He’s the best. Makes her eggs Benedict every Sunday morning. I couldn’t be happier for her.”

A tiny lizard scampered by, stopping right by our feet. His little head darted around, looked at both Rhett and I. Then he licked his eyeball.

“Did you know that a lot of lizards tails match the size of their heads, that way it confuses predators and they’ll go for the tail instead of the head? Then, *boop*, their tail falls off and they can escape.”

“So the predator gets a snack, and the lizard gets his life?” I asked.

“Yup.”

“Are animals another interest of yours?”

“Heck yeah. That guy is just a Side-Blotched lizard. He’s really common, nothing special.”

“And he’s offended! So rude.”

Rhett laughed and the lizard licked his eyeball again. Then he did something I didn’t expect; Rhett leaned in and put his head on my shoulder.

My whole body warmed as I began to feel trusted by him, trusted and appreciated. And something else...but I'll be fucked before I ever use that word this early into a relationship.

I leaned my head against him and smelled his shampoo, kissing him softly on the top of the head. He was with me and he was safe, and I could let all the fear and panic from earlier go. Rhett had told *me* where he was going. Not his sister, me.

I snaked a hand around and took his, interlacing our fingers.

“How bad is the backlash?” he asked, as he stroked his thumb back and forth over my knuckles.

“I honestly have no idea. I saw one article, then came to find you.”

Rhett sighed, and his shoulders slouched a little as the stress left him.

“You have a PR person, right?”

“No.”

“Well you need one ASAP. They need to put out this fire.” I froze immediately realizing my mistake. Rhett started trembling beside me, and I couldn't tell if he was laughing or crying.

“Wow, Cam,” he said, looking up with a smile on his face.

“That was...I'm so sorry” I felt completely embarrassed and ashamed that I hadn't caught it before it left my mouth. *Idiot.*

“You usually know just what to say, but that one...”

“Yeah, I know, that was...”

“Bad.”

“Really bad.”

Rhett looked up at me, a one-sided smile tugging his lips into such a devious grin, and my mouth dried. I was actually getting nervous around him. He leaned in and pressed his lips into mine slowly. We just breathed each other in before either of us made a move, living in that moment, relishing in the proximity.

I’m not sure who moved first, but soon our tongues were working and our hands were exploring. It was sensual and slow, and so much like how our first kiss should have been.

Rhett wrapped his hands around my neck and squeezed us together like he was afraid of letting go. I *felt* how he was kissing me, what this meant to him and it made me a little less nervous to let my guard down around him, to let him in just a little.

I put my palm on his thigh and immediately he started writhing below me, anxious and needy. Getting frustrated when I wouldn’t move up his leg, he snatched my hand with his and put it up against his hard dick.

“Please touch me...” he whispered into my mouth. His desperation was making me ravenous. *I* wanted to be the thing he needed, and *I* wanted to be the one he needed it from.

I brushed my palm up and down his erection over his pants and he moaned into my mouth. He was practically panting by the time I made for his belt, and quickly brushed my hands away so he could do it faster by himself.

“You know patience is a virtue,” I teased.

“Fuck patience, Cam. I exploded before I could have your mouth on me last night and I am desperate for it.”

The possessive male-ego in me liked that very much.

We kept making-out as his jeans came down, he sighed and moaned louder into my mouth when I took his cock out and started stroking him. He wore such a pained expression, and I was absolutely delighting in torturing him. I gave him long slow strokes that had his jaw dropping, then short quick ones just over the tip. That made his lower lip tremble, and I loved watching each little reaction, each little adjustment. Rhett was absently grinding his palm against my own dick, probably for his own enjoyment just as much as mine.

“Stand up.”

His eyes shot open. “What? Why?”

“Because I’m not laying in the dirt to suck your dick.”

“Oh my god...” he rushed, as he stood against the red stone wall.

He wasn’t exactly slight himself, as I drew my tongue from his base to his tip. His hands flew down to my hair, flexing and releasing it like he didn’t know what to do with himself. I dragged myself up higher on my knees and slowly took him in my mouth.

“*Fuuuuck...*” he whimpered. I could feel myself smiling around him. I put a hand up against his chest to keep him pinned to the wall, and he leaned his head back. My other hand went to his balls, cupping and squeezing and I swear, I could feel Rhett’s knees trembling.

“Are you already about to come, Rhett?” I asked, staring up at him from my knees. His eyes were closed and his face was skyward. He nodded against the rock.

“I’m trying so hard not to,” he whispered.

I pulled my mouth off of him completely and his eyes flashed open.

“No! Why are you stopping?”

“Because I want to edge you,” I said with a smirk.

“Why? Why do you want to torture me like that?” He was so desperate it was actually adorable.

“Because most grown men need more than a three-minute blowjob to come.”

He gaped down at me, clearly wanting to argue, but also wanting to make this last.

“You good?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yeah but like, you’re not going to make me wait too long, right?”

“No baby, not too long.” I wrapped him in my fist and gave a gentle stroke. I watched as he tried to control his breath, taking slow deep inhales, and long exhales.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Fuck yes.”

I put him back in my mouth and he let out a long groan. “Rhett, we’re basically in a cave. Be fucking quiet, it echos.”

“Sorry, just please...”

I stroked his cock along my tongue, lightly letting him hit the back of my throat each time. Then I sucked the precum from the tip, tasting that delicious salty reward. My own cock was straining in my pants, desperate for attention, but I kept my focus on Rhett. I focused on the tip of his dick just long

enough for him to start wrenching over, and I pulled him out of my mouth again.

“No! Please Cam!”

I actually chuckled at his pleas. “Last one, I promise,” I said, kneading my fingers into his hips.

“Really?”

“Yes baby, don’t worry.” It hadn’t slipped my notice how easy it was to call him pet names. Nice ones, not just *kid*. When I thought he’d had enough waiting I traced the tip of my tongue along the grooves of his frenulum, and his eyes fluttered back closed.

“You’re like a fucking Dick Wizard,” he whispered.

“A Dick Wizard?” I laughed.

“Shh, no sorry. Please don’t talk,” he said, coaxing my head back to his waiting erection.

“I like it,” I said, plunging him deep into my mouth. He moaned so loud that I knew if anyone was walking close by, they would have heard it.

I worked his length with both my hand and my mouth with a quick, steady pace, finally with the goal of making him come in mind. I felt his fists tightening in my hair and his hips get jerky.

“I’m...I’m gonna...”

I nodded as I worked him, and it was only a handful of strokes before the first forceful spasm rolled over my tongue.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” he repeated as he came. And holy shit did he ever. I swallowed and swallowed, and still he was coming.

After what felt like an exorbitant amount of cum, Rhett finally pulled out of me. He dropped to his knees immediately and kissed me.

“That was, holy shit it—”

“Shut up, Rhett,” I said, pulling him in and kissing him.

We kissed for a while before he pulled me out of my jeans and returned the favor.

Then we sat there, in a small cave in the middle of the Valley of Fire and didn't say a damn word. Not a single thing for at least half an hour. And it wasn't uncomfortable, quite the opposite. There was no pressure to fill the silence between us, and I think we learned more about each other in that quiet moment than we had to date.

The Uber driver that eventually picked up our trip was forty-five minutes away, so Rhett and I changed all the cash we had on hand for quarters and played a Rocky Horror Picture Show pinball game. Unsurprisingly Rhett won, so I guessed his penchant for videogames spanned across game types, and consoles. Or it was just his lightning fast reflexes, one or the other.

As we drove closer to the city, we started replying to the dozens of messages and emails we'd missed out in the desert, and I'd be lying if I said I wanted to go back to the hotel. What I really felt like doing was ditching the outside world entirely, and spending a long weekend with Rhett holed up in a cabin somewhere with nothing to do but each other. I liked his company, he made me smile. And I think it had been a long time since I'd smiled.

I was relieved when we got messages from Mike and Mel saying they were all headed to Rehab. They'd sent a few

pictures of the VIP tent that Rhett had reserved for them, and everyone looked kind of miserable in the pictures. Even Jesse was having a hard time faking a smile, and this was basically the perfect habitat for him.

At one point Rhett sighed and unclipped his seat belt. He scootched over to me and laid his head back down on my shoulder, linking an arm around mine.

“You’re cozy,” he said.

“I don’t think anyone in the world has ever referred to me as cozy before. I’m prickly.”

“Only to someone who doesn’t know you.”

“And *you* know me?”

“Enough to know you’re cozy.” He looked up at me with a grin that melted my heart.

CHAPTER 16

TITTIES. FINALLY.

RHETT

We swung by the hotel to grab what we needed for Rehab, then jumped in another cab. It was barely 11 o'clock and the place was absolutely bursting with people. Every single one of them absolutely gorgeous.

A girl who *had* to be a model stepped out of the pool, dripping wet, and was caught perfectly in a sunbeam like even God thought she was fine as hell. Cam gave me a swift rap on the stomach to regain my attention.

“Not jealous, are you?” I asked obnoxiously.

“No, Rhett. By all means, if you think you have a chance with her then go buy her a drink. I’m cocky enough to know you have your eye on someone else.”

“You are *plenty* cocky...”

Cam rolled his eyes at me, trying not to smile as we approached the private tent. There were a few daybeds and loungers under a big white canopy, and several open bottles of champagne on ice. Mel stood from the daybed and grumpily stalked over to me. She punched me once in the shoulder and then hugged me.

“Stop running away, Rhett,” she grouched.

“Sorry. Just needed some space.”

“You know it will all get sorted, right? It wasn’t your fault.”

“It doesn’t matter, Mel. What matters is the court of public opinion, and to them I’m a sore loser who may or may

not be xenophobic.”

“Just hang in there. It will blow over soon.”

I squeezed her again before Jesse handed me a glass of champagne.

“Might need something a little stronger,” I told him.

His other hand reached out with an amber liquid on ice, and I took whatever it was. He leaned in.

“Look...uh, there are tiki torches lit over there so just be careful with that.” He winked and tousled my hair like an older brother would have. I had no idea if he was teasing me or if he was seriously warning me about the four torches on the other side on an Olympic-sized swimming pool, but before I could ask him about it, a waitress came over. The only thing to identify her as a waitress was a round tray under her arm and a “Kendra” name tag hanging precariously from her red string bikini top. Actually, *everything* was hanging precariously in that bikini top.

“Oh my god,” she said in a flirtatious tone. “It really *is* you.”

It was so hard to keep my focus on her face. *Eyes up Rhett, you got this.*

“Um, yep.” I could sense Cam silently grinding his teeth behind me.

“Well the owner said to comp your drink orders for your stay, so is there anything else you’d like?”

That bikini top between my teeth.

“Nope, think we’re all set, Kendra. Thanks.”

She looked down to note her cliff-hanging name tag and my eyes followed hers. Then she looked up and of course my eyes stayed on her amazing tits for just a moment too long.

“If you need anything else, I’m not far,” she said. She winked at me and turned to leave, and *of course* her ass was perfect too.

“So, next time Kendra comes over, you tell her I need, like, a whisky list or something. Anything,” Jesse whispered into my ear.

The rest of the afternoon at Rehab was undeniably great. We got roped into playing a guys vs girls volleyball game in the pool, and a champagne game of beer-pong with floating cups. By the time we made it back to the hotel, we were exhausted, sun-soaked and tipsy, and ready for a nap. Cameron quietly shut the door between the two suites as Shaan was snoring loudly from his bed. Pointedly, he locked the door. My brows shot up.

“No, no. No funny business,” he said, coming over to my bed. I was already naked under the top sheet. Cam stood in front of me and slowly peeled off his shirt. A fucking whimper crawled up my throat and embarrassed the hell out of me.

“Oh, you still like this?” Cam said. “Even though you were chasing girls all morning?”

“Not *all* morning Cam...” I thought back to our tryst in the cave and started to get hard again.

He laughed. “Fair point.” Then he stripped off his shorts and crawled in behind me. I clenched my jaw, trying not to moan again. He was a good big-spoon.

“Rhett?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for texting me.”

“Thank you for coming.”

“Always.”

“Why the fuck is the door locked?” Mike yelled from across the suite. He banged on it loudly and Cam shot out of bed, racing to his suitcase and throwing on a pair of briefs before going to unlock it.

“Habit,” he said, leaning against the door as Mike looked in suspiciously. I stretched and waved from the bed. Happy as a fucking clam.

Then Mike’s gaze fell to Cam’s bed and my heart froze up instantly. It was perfectly made and just how housekeeping had left it.

Shit.

“Need something?” Cam asked when Mike didn’t say anything.

“The girls texted. We’re meeting them down in the casino in half an hour.” He looked back at me, then up at Cam again.

“K. We’ll be ready,” Cam responded.

Mike gave a half-hearted smile before turning back into his room and closing the door. I flopped back onto the bed with an arm over my head.

“What’s the matter? You hungover?” Cam asked.

“No. Your bed is made.”

Cam looked over and sighed with his hands on his hips.
“Fuck.”

“Will Mike keep his mouth shut?”

“We’re fine, Rhett. I’ll tell him I was outside on the deck reading this whole time.”

He seemed confident that that would be enough of an excuse for Mike, but somehow it didn’t make me feel much better. As much as I was enjoying this *thing* with Cam, I knew he didn’t want anyone knowing about it, which—normally—would make me feel like shit, but somehow if Cameron was the one proposing it, it felt like the smart thing to do.

Ever the subtle dresser, I decided on a neon pink and blue Hawaiian shirt to meander around the casino in. Cam looked smoking in a charcoal suit with the top few buttons of his dress-shirt open, and I hoped desperately that I’d get to peel it off his body later. His dark hair was gelled back, and his skin was slightly reddened from our day by the pool. The extra sun suited him.

The girls were glammed up, wearing cute cocktail dresses and strappy sandals, looking ready for whatever trouble Vegas had in store for them.

“Ok, assholes, listen up,” I said, getting everyone’s attention. “The first \$500 is on me. After that you’re on your own. You win anything over \$10k and I’m taking a cut. Cool?” I fished out my wallet and distributed a bunch of Benjamins. I should have made a bet on it, but Cam refused.

“Just take it,” I insisted. “Everyone else did.”

“I’m not gambling your money away, Rhett.”

“Are you going to gamble your own?”

“No, probably not. I don’t like gambling.”

“Surprising, isn’t it?” Mike said rolling his eyes.

“Ok, everyone with me!” Heather said, herding us to the bar. “We’re here to celebrate and have a wild night. Can I get nine shots of tequila please? Top shelf,” she yelled to the bartender.

“I like where this is going!” Jesse cheered.

“Heather, we’re only eight people,” Mel said laughing.

“I know. Two are for Cameron because he needs to loosen up the most.” She shot him a shit-eating grin.

“Fine,” Cam said, holding his hands up. “Everyone wants me to misbehave, I will.”

Of all the things I thought I would hear out of Camron’s mouth, the promise of him misbehaving was not one of them. I leaned further into the bar to hide the jolt my cock just made. He downed his two shots to the happy cheering of our group, and a conceding smile took over his rugged face. God forbid he might actually have fun.

It took a little over two hours for everyone to lose the money I’d given them. Except Shaan. He was up about two thousand after he insisted on paying me back the original five hundred, and he was fucking pleased as hell. The next two hours were spent dining on the Spago terrace, drinking obscenely expensive cocktails and stuffing ourselves silly. We were lucky enough to be seated just by the fountains, and in an uncharacteristically romantic gesture, Mike pulled my sister out of her seat and slow danced with her. Mel cried, it was great.

Then it was the moment Jesse and Heather had been waiting for the whole time. Two limos waited out front with

my names on them, one to take the girls to Pex, the other to take the guys to Spearmint Rhino. We said a hasty goodbye before piling in.

“Ok, here’s the plan,” Jesse said as soon as the limo pulled away. “So tonight is *my* bachelor party, that way Mike stays out of trouble. Sound good?”

“And *you* get all of the attention?” Mike roared. “Hell no! I’m a few weeks away from locking it down with the same woman for the rest of my life, I’m going to enjoy the HELL out of this night!”

“Yeah, but what if—”

Cam patted him on the knee. “Let it go, Jesse. There will be enough women to go around. I have no doubt you’ll have a great time tonight.”

“Just trying to help,” Jesse shrugged.

“Yeah, I think I’ll be fine with this one,” Mike laughed.

When we pulled up to the club, we were brought right to our stage-side table (which had cost me a small fortune) and immediately were surrounded by girls. Pretty sure I saw Jesse’s eyes go into heart shapes, meanwhile Shaan was blushing fifty-shades of red. We barely had time to sit down before both Jesse and Mike were willingly dragged off by gorgeous women for private dances.

“Shaan, you’re not going to get a dance?” I asked.

“No fucking way, man. My wife would kill me.”

“Yeah but she doesn’t have to know.”

“She would bro. They know everything.” He tapped the side of his head like she could hear his thoughts. I was a little weirded out.

“You’re fucking cute,” a girlish voice said in my ear. At least, I think that’s what she said. The music was thundering, but the woman was really close. She smelled good.

“I’m Ruby,” she said, and she lived up to the name. The gorgeous dark skinned woman had fire-engine red hair, and a ruby rhinestone bikini. I swallowed my nervous jitters.

“Hi Ruby, I’m Rhett.”

“Aww baby, you seem so tense. Is it your first time?”

“Here? Yeah. But I mean, I’ve been to strip clubs before. Not like this though. This is nicer.”

Wow Rhett, you are rambling like an idiot. My guilty conscience made me peek over at Cameron who was lounging back in the booth, a foot resting over his knee while he stared at me with a cocked eyebrow.

“Sorry, Ruby, I think maybe I just need a little time to warm up to being here. My friend Shaan would really like to talk to you, though. Just talk,” I said with a wink before handing her a fifty. She slid lithely over to Shaan who gave me a death stare and a subtle middle finger beneath the table. I chuckled and slipped out of my side of the booth, making my way around to Cam’s side.

“Making friends?” he asked with a surly expression. I wasn’t altogether sure if the jealousy thing was an act or not.

“Uh, not really, why? Are you actually jealous?” Something about the idea of Cameron getting angry about a stripper hitting on me to try and get into my wallet and *not* my pants was deeply amusing to me. And I definitely wanted to exploit it. Cam looked over, making sure Shaan wasn’t within earshot.

“Look, I know you’re pan, but I don’t share. Ever. Not with men, not with women.”

His gruff possessiveness was making me absolutely feral, and I wished more than anything I could jump on him and straddle him in this fucking booth. But I wanted to play it cool.

“I really think I like jealous Cam,” I teased.

“Don’t test me, kid,” he warned, pouring himself a rye and coke from the bottles at our table. I poured one for myself and turned to him.

“Bros before hoes, if you know what I mean,” I said with a wink, holding my glass up. Reluctantly he clinked his glass against mine.

CAMERON

I was naïve to think that Rhett could behave himself in a strip club. The kid was twenty-two, and for all intents and purposes, single. I knew it was wrong of me to be getting jealous, and it was growing increasingly difficult not to let my sour mood infect the group. Mike didn't seem to notice; he had three new hickeys, ten shades of lipstick smeared on his body, and he'd lost his belt. I knew better than to think he was cheating on Mel with any of the girls he took into private rooms, but what he was doing onstage was enough to be embarrassed by. There was the whipping, the thing with the ping pong balls and a fire show that I was certain was extremely uncomfortable for the poor girl. It was barbaric, but admittedly, entertaining.

Rhett, though, had gotten pulled up onstage too. He was definitely the youngest looking guy in the place and had been dragged up by three girls dressed like Charlie's Angels. They'd tied him to a chair and spent a solid ten minutes grinding on him. My skin crawled when he'd had to cover up his hardened cock as he came back to our booth. He'd been hammering back the rye and cokes too, and was getting increasingly sloppy. Taking care of the kid had come easily enough when shit happened to him that was out of his control, but if he was about to start puking in a strip club then we were going to have a fucking problem.

"This is Candy," Jesse said, introducing me to a pretty blond that was sitting on his knee. She looked remarkably similar to him, it was bizarre.

"Nice to meet you Candy," I said politely.

“She said she’s going to take us to this freaky after party when she gets off the clock.”

“I think this is my last stop tonight, Jesse.”

“No you have to come! It’s like a weird sex show or something, it sounds amazing.”

“Really, I’m good.”

Candy pouted. “Baby, why doesn’t your friend want to come with us?” she said with her hands all over Jesse’s chest.

“Candy, how much is the cover to this weird sex show?”

She wiggled guiltily on Jesse’s lap. “Two notes a head.”

“Two hundred bucks? That’s outrageous!” Jesse snapped. I nodded, taking out two-hundred-dollars from my wallet.

“Here, there’s my cover.”

She happily tucked the money in her bra.

“Cameron!” I heard Rhett yell from the other side of the booth. “This song!” He was pointing up to the speakers as if I couldn’t hear Sexy Back blasting through the whole club. “Do you remember when me and Theo sang this in your living room?”

Frankly I was surprised *he* could remember singing it with Theo in my living room. Rhett stood on the bench and started singing, horribly off-key and mumbling all the parts that he didn’t know.

“Um, Cam.”

“Yeah Mike?”

“I think someone is going to have to take him back to the hotel pretty soon.”

I sighed. I knew that meant me. “Yeah Mike.”

I knew that if it wasn't his own bachelor party, Mike probably would have been the one helping his future brother-in-law into the cab, but tonight, it was me.

“Ok Timberlake, keep your head up while we drive, don't want you getting dizzy.”

“I'm fine Cam,” he said, a little too loud. He was quiet the whole drive back to the Bellagio. When I rushed around to his side of the cab to help him get out of the car, I was a little surprised with how easily he hopped out. He gave me a devious smile while I followed him through the doors. The whole ride up the elevator he wore that same smile, and down the long hallway to our room. When I closed the door behind us I hadn't even gotten my jacket off by the time he was pressing himself against me and trying to kiss me.

“Nope, no thank you, Rhett. I know you're drunk and horny from hours at a strip club, but I am definitely not interested in sloppy sex with you right now.”

“I'm not drunk.”

“Just horny?” I mocked.

“Yeah.”

He stood in front of me with his hands in his dress pants just staring at me with that same devilish smile. He wasn't swaying like he was at the club, his eyes weren't glassy, he was just giving me this knowing look.

“Rhett, what's going on...”

“I didn't want to be at some fucking strip club with Mike and his friends, I wanted to be back here, alone, with you.”

I was skeptical.

“All those things you said to me in the plane Cam, I want those.” His voice had gone quiet and he took a small step towards me.

“You were drinking all night.”

“Just the coke,” he shrugged. “I needed an excuse to get you back here alone.”

“Just the coke?”

“Only pretended to pour the rye. No one even noticed.”

“You planned this all night?”

Rhett nodded.

“You manipulative little shit.”

He looked up at me with a shy smile, hopeful that I may finally give in and kiss him. And I was only so strong, because I did.

It was magnetic and instantaneous, our lips sealing together, our tongues moving against one another. Rhett’s hands were on my hips as he pressed his erection into my belly, and my hands went up into his ashy blonde hair.

“Rhett...”

“Yeah?”

“You taste like strawberry lip gloss and I hate it.”

He pulled off of me, breaking the kiss. “Shit, sorry. Should I—”

“Shower, now.”

He gave a relieved little smile and almost ran to the bathroom. I heard the water start a moment later, and slowly kicked off my shoes before making my way into the bathroom

as well, already half hard at the thought of seeing him naked and wet.

Water cascaded down Rhett's thin, muscular frame as he faced the showerhead, rinsing the shampoo from his hair. It was a minute before he noticed me watching. When he did, he gave a little double take, jumpy and nervous. I sauntered over to the shower, pleased as fucking punch that I made him so jittery. It meant I could take over, take control of when and how the night progressed, just the way I preferred it. Too often, silly ego got in the way of a good night of sex, but tonight I had no doubt who was in charge.

I stripped down and walked into the enormous shower with Rhett. He was so still as he watched me approach, eyes wide and excited. His cock hadn't softened for a moment, and I watched now as it bobbed in front of him. Absently his hand skidded down his chest and grabbed it, stroking it slowly as his eyes roved over my body. I walked next to him beneath the stream of hot water, rinsing off the sweat from the club.

"Do you still taste like strawberries?" I asked, looking down at him. Rhett shook his head. "Good."

I gently lowered my mouth back down to his, and when he tried to rush up and meet my lips, I grabbed his wet hair, holding him back. He winced.

"Slowly, kid," I growled. I kept his hair taut as he pined upwards, reaching his mouth towards mine, and I pulled even tighter.

"Shit, ok, ok. Slow," he finally conceded.

I lowered down to his lips and kissed him softly, the kind of soft a person's first kiss should be like, sensual and delicious. I nipped at his bottom lip and he groaned into my

mouth, risking a tiny step forward so he could push his cock into mine.

We kissed and ground against one another under the hot cascade of water, and though it felt primal and amazing, there was an almost romantic aspect to it as well. I liked kissing Rhett, and based on the steel rod digging into my stomach, the feeling was mutual.

I traced my fingers up and down his back while we made-out, each getting needier and hornier. The pace of the kiss started to quicken and soon our mouths opened wider to take more of the other person in, tongues growing braver and exploring further into the other's mouth.

I trailed my hand down Rhett's spine a final time, like I was driving down the runway, and slipped my middle finger between his ass cheeks. He bent forward with a moan to make it easier for me to slide my fingers further down and he panted.

"So, I take it you're happy to bottom tonight?" I said, smiling into his mouth.

"Mm hm."

I spread his cheeks apart with my left hand as my right hand found his ass. I stroked around the edge with light pressure, and within a minute his knees were trembling.

"Stroke your cock, Rhett," I demanded.

Quick as lightning, he'd pushed his hand between our bellies and started jerking himself in a tight fist. With every stroke, a little whimper left his mouth, and I devoured the sounds hungrily.

"You have such a tight ass, baby. How am I going to fit inside of you?"

“Please, I can. I need you,” he gasped. I pushed the tip of my finger into him and his free hand reached out to the wall to steady himself.

“You’re about to come already, aren’t you?” I asked. Rhett nodded, closing his eyes with embarrassment. I leaned down to his ear and whispered; “Then get your hand away from your cock.”

Reluctantly, his hand dropped his cock and I pulled away from his ass. “Get on your knees and suck my dick, Rhett.”

“Yes, ok,” he whispered back eagerly, lowing himself to the ground.

I pushed his wet hair back from his face as he took my cock in his mouth. He stared up into my eyes, looking like he was trying so hard for me, wanting and needing to please me.

“That’s so fucking good, baby. Your mouth is heaven.” I saw the praise wash over him and his green eyes slowly closed as he took me deep into his throat, working my cock like it was his favorite thing in the world. I placed my hands behind his head and edged him onto me, encouraging him to take a little more with each stroke. He craned his neck forward and made it easier for me to push down his throat.

“Fuck yes, just like that,” I uttered. I closed my eyes enjoying the blowjob, but when I opened them again, I looked down to see Rhett with his hand on his cock again. I grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled him off my dick, forcing him to stand beside me. He was wincing, but it was pretty fucking unconvincing when he was moaning as well.

“Did I say you could touch your dick, Rhett?”

“No, but—”

“No. The answer was no. Get out of the shower and dry off,” I said, releasing his hair. He looked up at me like he was in trouble. “The faster you get on that bed, the faster you’ll get my cock in your ass.”

“Fuck Cam,” he lamented, melting as he rushed out to get us towels. I turned off the shower as he tossed me one.

“How long do you think we have until they’re back?” he asked, rushing to dry off.

“A while still. Jesse is roping them into some weird sex-show.”

“Damn, a little pissed I’m missing it,” he laughed.

I reached forward and tugged open his towel letting it hit the floor. I took his cock in my hand and started stroking him with a firm fist. He melted instantly.

“Don’t think we can have our own freaky sex show here?”

“God, Cam, you feel so fucking good. Even just your hand, I—”

He inhaled a sharp breath as I pulled down slowly on his balls, skating a finger along his perineum.

“I never want you to stop touching me,” he whispered.

I leaned down and dragged my teeth along his neck, nipping at the tender skin below his ear, then running my tongue along his collar bone.

“I want to keep touching you, Rhett, I want to know what each part of your body feels like against my hands or my tongue or my cock. I want to know what you feel like from the inside.”

“Yes...please.”

“Get into the bed.”

I could tell it was difficult for him to peel himself away from me, but he eventually did, and lay on the bed waiting expectantly for me.

I walked first to my suitcase, getting the necessary supplies and tossing them beside the bed.

“Up on all fours,” I demanded, and this time Rhett obeyed without a moment’s hesitation.

His pink little ass was on perfect display for me. Everything on him was waxed or shaved, because he was completely smooth and hairless everywhere. I parted his ass with either hand and brought my tongue down on him. He moaned into the pillows as his ass cinched tightly, and I ran my tongue round and round the circlet, enjoying each little jerk and buck and twitch he gave.

I reached around his body, taking his heavy cock in my hand and stroking him as I let my tongue explore.

“You’re a little anal whore, aren’t you, Rhett?”

“Yeah,” he admitted breathlessly.

I smiled as I lashed my tongue on him again. I liked discovering how compatible we were in bed. I liked that neither of us were going to have to fight to top.

Finally, I couldn’t take the wait any longer. I reached over and grabbed the condoms and lube from beside the bed. To my surprise, Rhett sat up and took the foil pack from me. He leaned his face up to mine and kissed me slowly. I ran my hands over his back as I heard him rip the condom wrapper open, then felt him as he rolled it down onto my cock.

“Will you please fuck me?” he asked, breaking the kiss and looking into my eyes. There was a pained desperation in his expression that made my cock surge between us.

“Hands and knees, Rhett.”

He bit his bottom lip and made himself comfortable. I soaked us both with the lube before leaning down over him. I kissed down his spine and gave his ass cheek a firm bite, then circled his ass with the tip of my dick, just teasing myself. I couldn't wait to press my cock into him, and I was trying to make this last.

“Please,” he whimpered. “Please, I want you inside me, Cam. I need to feel you.”

“Do you need me to stretch you out a bit?” I asked, pulling his ass cheeks apart. He blushed as he shook his head. “Fucking slut. I love it.”

I aimed my cock down, slowly pressing the tip into him. He was already gasping and pawing at the sheets like an animal in heat.

“Rhett, you'd better not come right away,” I said, inching myself in a little further.

“No, I can last, I promise.”

I didn't put a lot of stock in that promise, but I wasn't exactly willing to pull out either, so I pushed more. “Fuck baby, you're like a furnace.”

“Deeper, please, Cam,” he begged.

I gave a series of small nudges until I felt my balls pushed up against his. I took a deep breath as I seated myself fully inside of him, and he moaned in delight.

“You want me to fuck you now, Rhett?” I asked. His eyes were heavy and glossed over as he turned his head to face me.

“Yes.”

I pulled out and gave a short thrust back in. “Tell me you want it, Rhett.”

“Please, Cameron, please fuck me. I need you to move inside of me.”

I gave another small, experimental thrust.

“I think I like you begging. I might keep you begging all night.”

At that, he pushed his ass back into my hips. “Just fuck me, Cam.”

“No.”

“Yes, Daddy.” He turned and looked at me defiantly, and anger flared. He got what he wanted. I fucked him. Hard.

“Say it again, Rhett.”

“Oh my god,” he shrieked into the sheets.

“Say it again.”

“Daddy! Oh fuck!”

I railed into him again and again, giving hard, punishing blows. Eventually we’d moved so far up the bed that he’d steadied himself with his hands against the headboard, pushing back into me with each thrust.

“Cam, Cam, I’m going to come,” he panted.

I wrapped my hand around his body and onto his long cock, and jerked him in unison with my thrusts.

“Come, baby. Soak these fucking sheets and show me how much you like Daddy’s cock in your ass.”

“Yeah, oh fuck, just like that!” he squealed. I felt the first hard spasm in his dick and finally let myself go as well, my orgasm crashing into me like a tidal wave. Rhett’s ass was clamping down on me as he came, milking each heavy pulse my dick gave, and after a long few minutes, we were a heap on the bed.

CHAPTER 17

GAY BREAKFAST

RHETT

I woke up the next morning tangled in Cameron's limbs. Despite kicking off all the sheets, we were still damp with sweat, but neither of us seemed to want to pull away from the other all night.

"You awake?" he whispered behind me, because of course, he was big spoon.

I stretched and rolled to face him. "Morning."

Cam's lips pulled into a smile that lit up his face, and he leaned in and kissed me. "Good morning."

"What time is it?"

"Nearly eleven."

"I'm starving."

"Me too. Let's sneak out and grab something."

"No, not yet," I said, rolling on top of him. I looked down at his already-hard cock. "Damn, Cameron, that's nice to wake up to." He threw his arms behind his head, and the motion pulled his abs tight and made his biceps look enormous.

"Can't help it when I wake up to a hot, naked guy in my bed," he said smiling.

"What?! Where'd he go? You bastard!"

Cam bounced me roughly in retaliation, causing me to lean forward and our cocks to graze one another. My own dick was hard in an instant at that, and I thrust my hips over him slowly.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish,” Cam said in a low, growly voice. It was hotter than his normal growly voice; this was the sleep-rough growly voice, and holy hell it was sexy.

“Don’t worry Daddy, I’ll finish,” I teased as I took both our cocks in my hand. Cam took a deep breath as I squeezed us together, stroking us firmly. His dick felt so hot against mine, like he’d been hard for a while waiting for me to wake up.

“I think I could start every morning like this,” he whispered, closing his eyes and leaning his head further back into his hands.

I worked us faster and tighter, and after a few minutes, I saw the lube bottle on the nightstand. I squirted a healthy amount into my hand before returning them to our dicks and frotting us together firmly. Cam moaned at the addition of the lube, and I watched his ab muscles flex beneath his skin as he started to pump his hips up into my hand. It was so fucking hot, watching him, seeing our dicks hard and red and sliding over each other.

“I think I’m gonna come,” I whispered.

Cam opened his eyes and looked up at us. “Come baby, I want to watch you.”

It was another four or five pulls before I was lacing cum all over Cam’s chest and belly. He must have been enjoying the show because as soon as I finished coming, he started.

I kept the strokes light and just over the head of his cock as he came. His hands had fallen down to my thighs, and he squeezed them. God he was nice to look at. Just the right amount of muscle, and a patch of dark curly hair on his chest,

with a matching treasure trail leading down to his impressive dick.

By the time he opened his eyes and looked up at me, he was soaked with our releases.

“Jesus, that was nice,” he said quietly, still running his palms across my legs. He looked down to see the lake we’d created on his belly. “Rhett, you unleash a monumental amount of cum.”

I chuckled.

“No, really. Has no one ever told you that before?”

“I mean, not really...” Was I supposed to feel embarrassed?

“Well, it’s impressive. Now get the fuck up and get me a beach towel or something.” He affectionately slapped my ass to hurry me off.

Once we’d showered and dressed, Cam cracked open the conjoining door between our rooms. I snuck a peek inside. Both Mike and Shaan lay passed out in their beds over the sheets, dressed in their clothes from the previous night. And Jesse, well, Jesse was missing altogether.

“Should we be worried about him?” I whispered.

“No, he’s fine. This is par for the course for Jesse. I just hope he was smart enough to wear a condom.”

Cam shooed me away from the door and closed it again. “Let’s go, I’m buying you breakfast.” He dashed a quick kiss to my cheek, and didn’t my whole chest light up like a fucking Christmas tree. I was in fucking trouble.

We headed out down the strip, it was busy as hell already and we dodged tourists as we walked. Cam headed down a

small street that was much less busy and frankly a little run-down, and once we were away from the throngs of tourists, he reached back and grabbed my hand. Just to hold it.

I liked it. I liked it a lot.

He caught my eye and smiled again. “You’re going to love this place, just wait.” He gripped my hand tighter and tugged me a little closer.

“Is this ok?” he asked quietly.

“I—yeah, this is very ok.”

It was another five minutes of walking, in which my hand was getting nervously sweatier the whole time. Fuck me, what a loser. He was holding my hand and I was nervous. He’d had his dick in my ass last night, but somehow this was so much more intimate.

“Here we go,” he said, tugging me through a door. It was like we’d stepped through time.

“Where are we?” I asked, gaping as I looked around.

“This is Mama Betty’s Diner.”

The chairs were all a baby-blue vinyl, the benches were blue vinyl, the table tops were blue and the floor was blue. Everything looked like it had come straight out of the fifties. There was a record-playing jukebox against the far wall, and the waitresses wore adorable little blue uniforms with white aprons. Most of them looked like they came straight out of the fifties as well, and had the full Betty White thing going on.

“For two, please,” Cam said to the hostess while I ogled the place. We were seated in a booth by the window, and to my surprise, Cam pushed me into the bench, and sat down beside me.

“You’ve been here before?” I asked.

“Yeah, found it on like a BuzzFeed list of top ten overlooked restaurants in Vegas the last time I was here.”

“You know BuzzFeed?” I said, mocking surprise. Cam dug a finger into my ribs.

“What can I get you boys?” the waitress said, dropping off two coffees. I hadn’t even had a chance to crack the menu yet.

“I’ll have the full American breakfast, and the gentleman will have the rainbow,” Cam answered for us.

“Comin’ right up sugar,” she said with a knowing smile.

I gave Cam a confused look. “The rainbow? Is this some kind of gay diner?”

“What? No!” he laughed. “It’s an assortment of pancakes. Raspberry, blueberry and pineapple, thus, the rainbow.”

“Hold up, pineapple?”

“You’re going to love them,” he said, dumping sugar into his coffee. He didn’t strike me as a filter coffee guy, but then, I was learning a lot about Cameron over the last few days. “You remembered I like pancakes,” I said, slowly putting it together.

“Of course.”

My heart swelled. What was this man doing to me? I’d mentioned pancakes like one time (ok, maybe two or three, but still,) he’d remembered that when he said he wanted to take me out for breakfast. No one I knew was thoughtful like that, no one.

“You good, kid?”

Holy fuck, I was seriously about to cry.

“Yeah, I’m good. Still waking up.” I yawned and stretched, giving myself an excuse for my reddened eyes.

“So,” he said taking my hand under the table. “Tell me more about ancient Chinese coins.”

CAMERON

I couldn't even begin to explain why I felt like being so brazen with Rhett. I felt like I'd let something go when I decided it was ok to like him, something that had been weighing me down like an anchor. Was it silly, and reckless, and crazy? Sure. But was I getting fucking butterflies spending all this time with him? Absolutely. Maybe I'd never felt like this before because I'd never allowed myself to date a guy like Rhett; he was so much younger and in such a different place in his life, but that's really how we complimented each other. As strict and put together as I was, Rhett was my wild and free opposite. Where I saw rules and straight lines, he saw freedom and patterns. It was refreshing to be outside of my little box for once, and I was relishing in it.

It was after twelve when I got my first text.

MIKE

Where the hell is everyone? You guys all ok? Just me and Shaan here. I think I'm going to throw up.

ME

At breakfast with Rhett. What happened to Jesse?

MIKE

I have no clue. My last memory was leaving the hotel in the limo. Did I have a good time?

ME

You had a great time, man.

MIKE

Fuck yeah. GTG, really going to throw up.

I'd barely put my phone back in my pocket when it dinged again.

MELODY

Why is Jesse sleeping on the floor of our suite?

I laughed, relieved at knowing my friend was ok.

ME

He probably got the floors confused. Thanks for taking him in.

MELODY

I think I'm going to throw up.

ME

Makes two of you.

"Ok, we should head back and go get those guys into shape," I said, as Rhett finished his plate.

“Shit, I love gay breakfast,” he said, patting his stomach appreciatively.

“It’s *not* gay breakfast.”

“Cam, you had your dick in my ass last night then ordered me the rainbow pancakes. If it wasn’t gay breakfast before, it sure as hell is now.” He smiled and scooted out of the booth after me.

“You boys have a lovely day,” our waitress said, grinning. I put down a ridiculous tip in my good mood, and we left. It was Rhett that grabbed my hand first this time.

“Can I see you when we get back home?” he asked. He had a nervous puppy-dog look about him. I stopped him on the sidewalk.

“Rhett, of course you can. This wasn’t just a Vegas fling for me.”

“Good. Me either.”

He couldn’t seem to relax or look me in the eye so I pushed him into a small alley and kissed him. It was quick but steamy, and I’m pretty sure it got my point across. He stayed with his back up against the brick building with his eyes closed, seeming to just relish in the kiss.

“Come on, kid, we’ve got to get those guys moving. Plane to catch.”

“It’s not until three o’clock, I’m sure we can just sneak back into our room for a quickie.”

“With how loud I had you moaning last night, you’d give us away in a heartbeat.”

Rhett caught his bottom lip between his teeth and he gave a full body shudder.

“You have a magic penis.”

I cackled and swatted his arm. “Move kid, I’m serious.”

It was messy when we got back to the hotel. I went to collect Jesse first from the girl’s suite and he was very concerned because he had a nagging memory of being at the Elvis wedding chapel. A crisis for tomorrow, I thought.

The girls were in decent enough shape, Heather was even sipping a mimosa on the patio when I got there. Mike and Shaan were a little worse for wear.

Mike had indeed been puking, and Shaan was freaking out because his favorite shirt now had body glitter all over it, and he was debating just throwing it out over having his wife see it.

Getting everyone out the door to make it to the private air strip was like herding fucking cats, but somehow we made it in time. This time when we loaded onto the plane the champagne bottles remained corked, and I caught a look from Rhett when Mike went to go lay down in the bed at the back.

“Don’t think I’ll ever fucking forget those words you said in there,” he whispered as we did up our seatbelts. I flashed him a look to tell him to keep his voice down. The last thing I wanted was to raise suspicions.

CHAPTER 18

SUSPICIONS WERE RAISED

CAMERON

I'd spent the better part of that Tuesday morning working with Theo on his juice bar campaign. He was doing great on his own, but I didn't mind helping him out where I could. I decided to take Rhett's advice and encourage more than pressure the kid. By the end of the day he didn't even need me anymore, and I'd started back on my own projects. Theo was just packing up to leave when I heard him excitedly greeting someone at the front. A minute later his chair rolled into view.

"Hey, um, Rhett is here to see you," he said.

I don't know why my stomach dropped, maybe it was something about the way Theo said it, or the look on his face, but I could immediately tell something was wrong.

"Yeah, send him in."

Rhett's form filled my doorway a few seconds later, and he looked terrible; pale and defeated, nervous and all caved-in on himself.

"What happened?" I asked standing from my desk.

"I'm so sorry, Cam. I should have known better, I—"

"What Rhett?"

He opened his mouth but nothing came out. Instead he handed me his phone. I grabbed it from him and looked down at the screen as a roll of nausea came over me.

"What the fuck..."

"I'm so sorry," he repeated.

“I shouldn’t have let you...I should have—”

“Shut up, Rhett. This isn’t your fault.”

I scrolled slowly down the article.

**Shamed Gamer Rapsallion6 Pads Harsh Loss
With Mystery Man In Sin City.**

Internationally famous gamer Rhett Landon (Rapsallion6 of Jungle Drop fame) is back in the headlines after setting fire to Wynn Hotel’s restaurant this past weekend, but this time for a whole new hot and heavy reason. Landon (22) was spotted with an older mystery man yesterday getting breakfast at Mama Betty’s Diner with his hunky date. The two were seen cozying up in a booth together, and later caught making-out as they left the restaurant. Internet sleuths have noticed the man bears a striking resemblance to a man in Landon’s party from Saturday’s video, where the gamer is seen stumbling up to another guest’s table with a bottle of vodka in hand. We’ve all seen the video by now and whether it was an accident or intentional is still hotly debated, but as of yet there are still no charges filed in the case.

Landon and the mystery hunk were obviously not shy about their public displays of affection as they strolled the strip hand in hand. This will be the first

time the young gamer has been publicly out with another man since his breakup last year with fellow gamer Daniel Guerra.

Was this simply a Vegas fling, or something more? Keep following the story as it evolves.

There were three pictures, one of Rhett and I walking to the diner holding hands, one of us laughing together over breakfast, and the other was of the fucking kiss in the alley. I scrubbed my hand over my face.

“Cam?”

“Yeah?”

“You ok?”

I couldn't answer. Whatever this was between us we were still figuring out. It didn't need to be splashed across the internet like this. I realized how hot I was all of a sudden and I went to the AC and undid the top two buttons of my shirt.

“Does everyone know?”

He nodded solemnly. “Mel sent it to me, asked what the hell was going on. I came straight here when I saw it. I wanted to tell you face to face how sorry I was.”

“No, stop it.” I pulled Rhett into a hug. Maybe because I needed one, maybe for him, I wasn't quite sure, but he immediately seemed to relax into me.

“Cam—”

“Don't apologize, Rhett. We'll figure this out, ok?”

“I lost the Kid Linkz Foundation.”

I pulled Rhett away from me so I could look him in the eye. “What?”

“I breached a ‘public civility’ clause when the fire happened at the restaurant. My lawyer told me like, an hour ago.”

“But it was an accident, Rhett.”

“They don’t care. They’re using this as a way to get me out without having to pay any indemnity fines. I don’t want to fight it anymore, it’s getting embarrassing.” He sounded exhausted.

“Oh my god. I’m so sorry. I know how much that place meant to you.”

My heart was breaking for the kid. Once again life was just chewing him up and spitting him out, and somehow he’d come all this way just to apologize to *me*.

“Stay at my place tonight,” I said, pulling him in for another hug. I felt him nod against my cheek as he let out a big sigh. At least I could keep an eye on him and we could talk about this further.

I decided to leave my car at work and have Rhett drive us home. We were driving silently down the freeway when the car’s screen lit up with an incoming call. Dan’s name came up. It was like a kick to the gut. Rhett quickly swiped the call straight to voicemail, but a minute later, Dan called again.

“You can answer that if you want,” I said, trying not to sound affected.

“I don’t want to,” he replied angrily. “He’s been calling and texting all day. I have no idea what he wants but the timing is way too suspicious, I’m not answering.”

I wanted to ask him if he knew why Dan was suddenly reaching out. Was it because he'd been seen out with someone else? Was Dan just concerned for him, or did he suddenly have regrets about breaking it off? I kept all my questions to myself, though. I'm sure the very last thing Rhett wanted to talk to me about right now was his ex.

We pulled into my parking spot and we rode the elevator up in silence. I couldn't determine if it was an awkward silence between us, or a comfortable one. It felt like we'd both been through something together, but neither of us really knew what to say about it. Or how to feel.

"You want a beer, or maybe something stronger?" I offered when we got inside.

"Nah, just a soda or something. Drank enough all weekend."

Rhett made himself at home and went right out onto the patio, sitting down on one of the lounge chairs and hanging his head between his shoulders. I brought us both out some sparkling waters and set them down next to him.

"I don't really know what to say except I'm sorry," he said quietly. He looked so defeated.

"I'm usually the one doling out advice, but I really don't know what to say either," I admitted. "You need to hire a PR person, Rhett."

"I've never needed one before."

"Well, if there was ever a time to do it..."

Rhett shot me a look from beneath his brows, his lips cast downwards in a frown.

“You don’t even have to respond you know. You don’t have to say anything.”

“It’ll be worse if I don’t,” he mumbled. “People will keep hounding me.” His phone went off in his pocket and he took it out to look at it. “Case in point,” he said, showing me Dan’s name pop up on the screen. I wanted to chuck the phone in the pool. He silenced the ringer.

“So you have to make a statement, or respond to one of these ridiculous articles or what?”

“I have no idea. I haven’t been on any social media since I lost. I don’t want to look. But I have to figure out *what* I want to say before I figure out *how* I’m going to say it.”

“What you want to say as in...”

“I don’t know, just something about the pictures, I guess.”

There was a long pause and he looked at me expectantly. I was suddenly very hot under the collar again. Was Rhett subtly seeing if I’d want to be a public item with him? Because that scared the living shit out of me, there was no denying it. I’d only just come to terms with the fact that I had a crush on the kid a few days ago, now he wanted to be internet official?

No you idiot, that’s not what he’s saying at all. Right? Maybe I had to just lay that out there, gently of course.

“Rhett, this thing between us, it’s—it’s brand new and I don’t know what it is yet. *We* don’t know what it is yet. So how could we possibly make a statement about it? There’s really nothing to say.”

There was an awkward silence before he swallowed. “Right, nothing,” he said. “That’s pretty much what I figured. I guess that’s why it’s hard to make a comment about it.”

Fuck, this was gutting me. “Can’t you just ask people for privacy?”

He took a deep breath, regaining himself. “That’s worse than not saying anything, trust me. If I flick a crumb at the internet demons, they’ll leave me alone for a minute.”

I felt bad now. *I* was the one that made the move in the massage room, *I* was the one who took him out for breakfast and held his hand and kissed him up against a brick wall. And now *I* was the one unable to make any kind of commitment to the kid. The silent tension was broken with another phone call from Dan.

“Just answer it, see what he wants,” I said in the friendliest voice I could. Rhett huffed and went inside, answering the phone with a curt “What?”

I waited outside, watching the cars go by a few blocks away. Rush hour was still petering out as the sun started to cast long shadows through the city. The last few days were a blur, from Rhett’s horrible loss, to a private jet, a weekend on the strip and then back again, I was mentally and physically exhausted. And to come home to pictures of me on gossip sites because I’d made out with Rhett in public, I didn’t even know what to make of that. It upset me, of course. I didn’t want anyone knowing my business, especially Mike and Mel. How would they feel about me hooking up with Rhett in the first place? I mean, they had to be pissed off about it, we were keeping Jesse away from Heather for the exact same reason, and now *I* was the asshole that went ahead and fucked around with someone from the wedding party. However they felt about it, I was certain I wasn’t going to let it affect the wedding in any way, shape, or form.

God, maybe I was making a mistake. I knew the little bit that I'd just pushed him away had stung, and I felt guilty about it. I liked being the one to take care of him, now suddenly I was the one hurting him. I thought about what it would be like to say 'fuck it', let's throw caution to the wind and just be together. Hold hands, make out, be openly a couple.

Immediately my heart started pounding nervously in my chest. Well that certainly wasn't the right kind of feeling. Did I have a crush? Sure. Was I ready to publicly date Rhett Landon? Maybe not.

My own phone buzzed and startled me out of my daydreaming. The delivery guy was downstairs with our Thai food. I made my way inside to buzz him in, not at all intending to eavesdrop, but Rhett was on the phone facing away from me when I came inside.

"No, baby, it's not like that. It's nothing serious, ok? Please don't be like that."

My heart sank through my stomach.

He called Dan *baby*? That took me a moment to process. But then I started to feel very fucking vindicated in telling him I couldn't let him make a public thing of us, maybe instinctually I knew I couldn't do this with him.

I felt used, and angry. The first time Rhett is seen out with someone else, his ex starts calling non-stop? And he seemed to be really reiterating the fact that whatever was going on between us was just casual—which—I guess I'd decided it *was* but hearing it from his mouth still stung. This was fine. I'd made the right call.

Rhett finally noticed me walking to the front door and gave me a meek, apologetic smile before mouthing a quick

‘sorry’ and taking his phone call upstairs.

I busied myself setting the food out at the breakfast bar, not wanting to set the whole dining room table for shitty take out.

Yeah, I was angry. Angry about the conversation I’d overheard, and angry that even though I told Rhett I wasn’t ready to be a public item with him, that didn’t mean I was ready to be *nothing* with him.

I tried to take a breath to relax my nerves. I knew I was thinking irrationally, but nothing in my life had even come close to preparing me for dating someone on a global scale like this. Fuck it, I wanted wine. I pulled out a nice Chablis I’d been wanting to try, and poured myself a glass as I set into my food. It was spicier than I thought it would be, and the Chablis was the perfect antidote. For both my mood and the heat.

“Sorry about that,” Rhett said sheepishly, coming back downstairs. I wanted so much to ask him about his conversation with Dan, but I reasoned against it.

“You want wine?”

“No thanks.” He sat beside me and started picking at his food. There was an awkward silence that permeated the space now, and I couldn’t help but draw attention to it.

“Everything good with Dan?”

“Yeah. Just asking me about all the shit that’s been going on. And apologizing.”

“Apologizing for what?”

“Uh, breaking my heart and then dating our friend,” he said with a shrug. I’d suddenly lost my appetite.

“Rhett, I’m sorry. I didn’t think...I just didn’t think. Of course you need to talk to him, if nothing more than just to clear the air between you two.”

He nodded, picking sauteed mushrooms out of his food with his chop sticks. “Just awkward I guess. Being here but talking to him.”

“I don’t want to make things any more difficult than they have to be.”

He nodded solemnly but didn’t look up from his food.

“Rhett, if you want to leave, I won’t be insulted.”

“I think maybe that’s a good idea.”

I was really hoping he wouldn’t say something like that, and now that he had, dread melted over me. Had we fucked this up before we’d even gotten it off the ground? Had *I*?

“No worries then.” I stood and walked him to the front door.

“I’m sorry again, Cam. I didn’t want to drag you into any of this shit.”

“Please stop apologizing. I put us in that situation, I should be apologizing to you.”

He took a deep breath, standing in the doorway looking like he wanted to say more. “Well, see you on Friday for the final tux fitting.”

I was sure that’s not all he wanted to say, but I wouldn’t force the rest out of him.

“Yeah, see you then.”

And that was it.

CHAPTER 19

YOU MADE YOUR BED, NOW LIE IN IT

RHETT

Kio and Gemma were making an absolute disaster in my kitchen trying to make a coconut cake from scratch. They'd wanted to make a carrot cake to cheer me up, but I'd requested coconut. I didn't care if that was petty.

I'd called the girls over after leaving Cam's the night before, but we hadn't even slept together. I ended up just passing out while they got high by the pool. All I really wanted was to not be alone.

The shit with Cam yesterday had left me feeling raw. I wasn't expecting him to get down on one knee or anything, but he'd put such a big wedge between us that I couldn't quite get past it.

"Do you have an egg separator?" Kio asked me.

I was sitting on the couch scrolling after finally growing the balls to check the social accounts. It was rough.

"No, just do that trick with the empty bottle."

"What trick?"

"Just Google it, Ki."

I read through endless messages from people telling me how well I'd played, despite the loss, and a few nasty ones telling me I'd disappointed them. Then I got to the night of the fire and everyone was hammering me with questions about what had really happened. Had I started the fire on purpose? Had those guys at the table set me up? Did I have to go to jail? Was anyone hurt? *Then* I started reading all about the pictures

taken of Cam and I. Who was he? How long had we been dating? Other jealous messages calling him a cradle robber and a groomer. I hoped he wasn't reading this shit. I knew how to ignore it, but I didn't know if Cam would take it personally. These fucking keyboard warriors could screw with your mental health if you weren't careful.

“Is baking soda the same as baking powder?” Kio yelled from the kitchen.

“Oh my god, have you seriously never baked a thing in your life?” Gemma groused. I looked up and Kio was busy taking a selfie while she mixed the batter. At least the girls were a pleasant distraction.

“You know what Ki, let's just order the cake,” I told her.

“No! I wanna make it for you! Show you how great of a housewife I can be!”

I laughed. “Great, well, the en suite bathroom needs to be cleaned if you feel like it.”

“Eww, no...”

I was still scrolling when the front door opened. Mel peeked in apprehensively.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Can I come in?”

“You used your key, so...”

“You haven't returned a single text in, like, a full twenty-four hours, Rhett. I started freaking out.”

“We're making coconut cake!” Kio said proudly from the kitchen.

Mel paused before shooting me a look from beneath her brows. “Oh, I *love* coconut cake.”

I rolled my eyes and went back to my phone.

“Is baking powder the same thing as baking soda?” Ki asked again.

“Um, no,” Melody said apologetically.

“Shit.”

Gemma started cackling. “Come on, you dumb nut. Let’s go back to the grocery store.”

The two girls gathered their stuff and left Mel and I with a few minutes of peace.

“How are you?” she said, as soon as the door was closed. She’d plopped onto the couch next to me leaning her head against her arm.

“Shitty.”

She nodded, pulling her lips in behind her teeth like that would stop her from asking the questions she really wanted to ask.

“Just say whatever you want to say, Mel.”

“Is it serious?”

I swallowed. “No. It’s not even a thing. It was just a mistake.”

It hurt even to say it. It hurt because I was admitting it. It hurt because it wasn’t fucking true.

“I’m sorry,” she offered sincerely. “Was it going on for a while? You guys seemed...close.”

“No, we just got along. Then it went too far in Vegas, and now we’re here. I saw him yesterday...”

“You did?” she asked hopefully.

“Yeah. Just to clear the air. He’s dealing with it fine, I guess. Doesn’t want to make a bigger deal out of it. But...”

“But what?”

“Dan keeps calling.”

“Dan?! Why?”

“He broke it off with Cherry. He said he regrets everything that happened.”

“Wow,” she said, trying to calm her shock. “And how do you feel about that?”

“I fucking miss him,” I admitted.

“Are you going to see him?”

“He asked me to go to coffee on Thursday, just to talk.”

“What did you say?”

“I said yes.”

Mel nodded, staring down at a hole in her jeans as she poked a finger through it. “Are you going to take him back if he asks?”

I sighed before answering. “Look, you obviously have an opinion about it, so why don’t you just tell me what you think before I say anymore.”

She didn’t even hesitate. “Don’t give him another chance. I know, I know...you may hate me for saying it, but fuck him.”

“Damn sis, tell me how you really feel.”

“Rhett, the guy broke your heart and is only coming back around because of a rumor that you have another boyfriend.”

“He said he broke it off with Cherry after seeing me at the convention center.”

“I don’t give a shit! He shouldn’t have been hooking up with your mutual friend in the first place!”

I had to admit to myself that that sounded pretty fucking true.

“Look, see him on Thursday, or don’t. But he’d better be able to answer some tough fucking questions, Rhett.”

“Heard loud and clear, boss.”

“Friday though...”

“Yeah?”

“It’s the final tux fitting. You going to be ok seeing Cameron? I mean, there is a whole fucking wedding to get through still.”

“Hey, we’re both adults. Some more than others...but we’ll be fine. I don’t want you to worry about it at all, ok?”

Mel reached out and pulled me into a hug. “I love you, little brother. And when someone breaks your heart I get the urge to stomp on their balls, ya know?”

I chuckled and hugged her back, knowing full well that the one who’d just hurt me was Cameron, and not Dan.

“I appreciate your older-sister-over-protectiveness, but I assure you, I’m fine.”

“Good, because my boots are suede.”

There was an awkward pause while she just looked at me. Was it pity I saw on her face?

“Want me to wait for Thing One and Thing Two to come back from the store?” she asked.

“Nah, could be all night before those two get back.”

“This might be a dumb question but, are you streaming later? It’s Tuesday...” Mel knew I had a standing game Tuesdays, and I never missed a day.

I shook my head. “Can’t handle that right now.”

She headed for the door, her lips still pulled down into a grimace.

“Stop it. You’re going to need Botox before the wedding,” I joked. Her brows shot up like she was terrified by the notion.

“You have no idea what my skin routine looks like now. Between the night cream and the eye cream and the serums, I’m slimy by the time I crawl into bed.”

“Gross.”

“Yep. Love you, Rhett. And I’m sorry for what happened. It was seriously the best bachelorette party I could have imagined.” She landed a peck on my cheek before closing the door between us.

I’d barely made it back to the couch when I heard her knock.

“You forget your phone or—”

“Hi,” Dan said, standing in my doorway giving me an awkward wave. I held my breath, not knowing what to say or do. “Umm, can I come in?”

CAMERON

It was 5:41pm. I fucking hated being late. I was supposed to be at the tailors for 5:30pm and I'd already gotten a concerned text from Mike because I always showed up first. But the traffic on a Friday evening was killing me and by the time I found parking, it was 5:41pm.

I was hoofing it across the street when I saw a pink and black Lamborghini parked right out front. I swallowed down my nerves at seeing Rhett again. I'd wanted to text him a hundred times since he'd been at my house. *Hi. Good morning. I'm sorry I couldn't give you any kind of commitment. I miss you. Are you back together with Dan? Did you fuck him? I miss you. I saw goat cheese on a menu and it made me think of you. I miss you.* I took a deep breath as I walked inside.

Rhett was up on the pedestal, center stage while the guys all waited around for their turn. We locked eyes and I froze for a second. He looked sad. I'd done that, hadn't I? I'd taken Rhett's smile.

"Hey, you made it!" Shaan said, noticing me standing awkwardly by the entrance.

"Yeah, traffic was rough. Hey guys. Hey Rhett." I tried hard to sound as casual as possible. He only gave me a weak nod in return. The dresser had Rhett standing there with his dress shirt unbuttoned, his smattering of tattoos visible. The rat stared at me. But I was focus on his hips, and the way his pants hung on them. His lower stomach was perfectly flat, and

a pretty little treasure trail disappeared down the front of the material. Shame...

Rhett was looking down at his polished shoes now, but I could tell all of his attention was on me. He wouldn't look up and I couldn't get a read on him, but it looked an awful lot like shame. But shame for what? Fuck, maybe he regretted everything now, every stolen moment during the trip. Or shit, maybe it *was* Dan. Maybe they'd gotten back together since I'd last seen him.

The logical part of my brain told me to be happy for them, that maybe what had happened in Vegas had been the catalyst these two needed in order to get back together. But that part of my brain was quickly bowled over by the selfish part that wanted to be angry that he'd gotten back together with his ex.

"Eh, Cam?"

Apparently Jesse had been talking to me. "Double cheese or meat lovers pizza? It's my turn to order."

"Oh, uh, cheese is fine."

"And Rhett?" Apparently Jesse bolstered him out of some kind of daze as well.

"Sorry, what?"

"You want double cheese or meat lovers?"

"Meat lovers sounds good."

"Uh, Rhett's coming to the poker game?" I asked Shaan, leaning in close.

"Yeah, would be pretty rude to ditch him while we all go back to Mike's and play, don't you think?"

There was so much *We all know you fucked him, but you made your bed and now you have to lie in it* context in how he was talking, but I really didn't have enough energy to respond to it. "Right, yeah." I looked back up at Rhett just as he seemed to be looking away from me. Fuck, this was going to be awkward.

Shaan was called up next and the only available seat in the room was the one right beside me. Rhett sat, pulling out his phone to avoid me.

"How's streaming been going?" I asked, trying to make it sound casual. Rhett sliced me such a hard look that my stomach dropped.

"Hiatus."

It had been more than a week now since his loss, and he *still* hadn't played a game since? I knew Vegas had cost him a pretty penny and now he was refusing to work. Plus the foundation dropping him, plus the shit with me. I suddenly felt guilty that I was in any way a factor in his misery.

Before long I was dressed in my suit (which needed no additional alterations) and was being handed a box of pocket squares by the dresser. "The bride has chosen chartreuse for the pocket squares, would you like to choose your pattern, sir?"

"What in the hell is char-juice?" Jesse asked. He looked between me and the dresser and I was momentarily angry that he'd just assume I knew what that meant. I *did* know, but that wasn't the point.

"Chartreuse," the man repeated. "It's named after a French liqueur, and it's the color of the bridesmaid's dresses."

Jesse laughed. "Pickle-green? Mel chose pickle-green?!"

“I’ll take the hounds-tooth,” I said quietly to the dresser, who then handed me a pocket square. He looked mortally offended by Jesse’s comments, and I had to bite the inside of my lip to keep from laughing.

There were more almost-glances from Rhett, but as soon as each of us had been seen by the tailor, Rhett took off, the booming rev of his engine taking off down the street momentarily interrupting my conversation with Mike. He gave me a pitying look.

“You two going to be ok tonight?”

“Yeah, of course,” I said, shrugging it off. Mike nodded like he didn’t believe me and honestly, fair enough.

“Was it more than just sex?” he asked.

My immediate reaction was to say no, but I hesitated, and it must have been enough for Mike.

“Yeah, I thought so. Never known you to be a dine and dash kind of guy.”

“What? I totally dine and dash!”

“No, Cam. You don’t.”

I swallowed down my instant need to argue. Was it true? It’s not like I talked to Mike or the other guys that much about my love life, or lack thereof in recent months, but I guess more often than not, my dry spells tended to end with me seeing someone.

“Whatever it was got all fucked up with those pictures, and now I think he’s back with his ex. So it is what it is.”

“Shit. Mel told me she thought she saw Dan going into his building the other day. I’m sorry, Cam.”

Fuck. The confirmation that I'd been right stung more than I thought it would.

"I think I might bow out of poker tonight, Mike."

"No way dude, unless you're dying, you don't get out of poker. Come on, we'll get you tipsy."

He slapped me hard on the shoulder, effectively ending the discussion in his favor.

I made a stop to pick up beer before heading to Mike's, but I just sat there, unable to get out of the car once I'd arrived. I thought I'd made a mistake, and I was about ready to accept that now.

I had my elbow propped up against the window, my head resting in my hand with my eyes closed when I heard the passenger door open.

"Hi," Mel said, sitting beside me and closing the door again. She really was just a female version of Rhett. Less tattoos, but the same slim face and pretty green eyes, like beach glass with only a hint of green in them. My heart clenched.

"Hi, Melody."

"I know we're more like acquaintances because you're Mike's friend and all, but he's not the best with these types of things."

"What type of things do you mean?"

She finally turned to look at me, her curls bouncing as she swung her head.

"Matters of the heart."

I nodded. I really didn't want to talk about anything involving Rhett. Mostly just because there was nothing much to say. I'd fucked it up.

"He's miserable," Mel said.

"I'm sorry about that. Really."

"And based on the look on your face, you're miserable too."

Had to give her that one.

"If you're both miserable apart, maybe you'd be happier together?"

"Mel..."

"I know, I know. But I'm still just looking out for him. You made him happy, Cameron, really happy. And safe. He withdraws a lot, he's a lot more self-conscious about his *isms* than he lets on. I haven't seen him tic in years, and now all week he's been non-stop."

"Tic?"

"Little movements, you'll notice it now that I've mentioned it, but it only happens when he's really stressed, and the last few weeks have been a lot for him. With the game loss, the fire...I never thought he'd get through those things as well as he has, but I think a lot of it is because of you."

"Be that as it may, you and I both know that Dan isn't out of his life yet, and as long as he's in the picture, I won't be."

Melody chewed her lip and gave a little nod. "Dan isn't good for him like you are. Dan broke his heart."

"I broke his heart."

“It’s not the same and you know it. You’re both still finding your footing, and this whole article was just a hiccup for you.”

I sighed, trying to take Mel’s words to heart. “I know you’re looking out for what you think is best for him, but neither one of us can tell him who to date.”

She stared out the down the street and let out a breath. I took her hand and squeezed it. “Who knows what the future holds. Except for me sharking your darling fiancée and taking his money tonight.”

Mel smiled at that.

“You don’t have to date him, but don’t stop looking out for him, ok?”

“That, I can do for you Mel. He’s a good kid and I want nothing but the best for him.”

She leaned over and kissed my cheek before popping out of the car. “Last thing, Cam?” she said as I stepped out and locked the doors.

“Yeah?”

“Rhett’s gonna wipe the floor with all of you tonight,” she cackled.

CHAPTER 20

KNOW WHEN TO FOLD THEM

RHETT

The beers were sweating, Mike was shuffling, and a boob mug was being passed around. Jesse stuffed his money inside and handed it to me as I looked at it curiously.

“What the hell is this?”

“Those are titties,” Jesse said helpfully. I shot him the finger before stuffing a ten in the mug. I’d known about Mike’s poker games, but this was the first one I ever attended. I didn’t particularly like gambling, but I hadn’t told them that poker was a particular skill of mine. I’d even won a charity tournament for kids with cancer, but they didn’t seem to know that.

The boob mug sat ceremoniously atop the beer fridge for the duration of game. Straight guys were weird. It fell to me to deal first, and my unmatched three and ten weren’t worth the buy-in so I tossed the cards. The next hand I got lucky with a pair of Jacks, and the third I bluffed with an ugly hand, but ended up with a straight on the river.

I watched the guys, feeling them out to see if they had any tells. Poor Shaan was the easiest to crack. He got so stiff and quiet when he had good cards; the poor guy didn’t look like he could bluff to save his life. Jesse was loud and obnoxious almost the entire time, but he seemed to get just a bit more boisterous if he had a good hand. Mike was harder to read; he seemed pretty relaxed and easy going no matter the cards. Cam was just deadpan the entire time. The only smiles he cracked were when *I* won a hand. It irritated me. He’d been

so dismissive after all the shit that happened in Vegas, and now it seemed like he was trying to kiss my ass.

“Dude, you’re so twitchy!” Jesse barked suddenly. “What’s the thing you keep doing with your hands? Like, you do it when you have shit cards or great cards, I’m trying to figure you out!” He was laughing now, and I knew he meant it all in good humor, but I’d been ticking all night and didn’t think anyone had noticed. I instantly felt everyone’s eyes slide over to me, and my anxiety spiked. I could feel my cheeks burning up with embarrassment.

“Hey, leave the kid alone,” I heard Cam say.

“Fuck you.”

The words were out of my mouth so fast that even I surprised myself.

“Excuse me?” he retorted.

But it was too late to back down now, I really *was* irritated.

“Stop calling me a fucking kid, Cameron. Any time you try and step in to defend me, you belittle me. I’m not a fucking child, I have autism. I’m going to have autism when I’m seventy years old, so stop trying to be some kind of hero.”

I could feel myself trembling from having said all that. I looked down and noticed my fingers twitching and rubbing, and gave a frustrated grunt as I willed them to stop.

There was a long awkward silence where nobody seemed to know what to say or where to look, when suddenly my phone rang.

“It’s my lawyer, I have to take this.” Everyone gave me wide eyes as I stood from the table to take the call.

I raced up the stairs and went out into the backyard, the cool breeze taking the edge off my anger.

“Larry, hey, what’s up?”

“You did it, kid. The final word just came in.”

“What? Really?!”

“How’s that feel?”

“Fucking good. Amazing. Vindicating.” My mind was a swirl trying to pin down exactly how this news made me feel.

“I’m happy for you. Look, a few stipulations though. Nothing to be worried about, so don’t freak out.”

“Ok...”

“You can’t tell anyone yet. They want control over the announcement. All the PR stuff will be sent through to your team for final approval, but they’re twisting this around to make it look like it’s what they wanted.”

“What?!”

“It’s a consolation prize, Rhett. In the end, you’re getting what you want, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“No buts, just let them win this one. Trust me.”

I bit my tongue and let out a sigh. “Fine. As long as I get final approval.”

“Good. Now go crack a bottle of champagne or something. You deserve it.”

“Thank you Larry. Does the PR team know yet?”

“I’m calling them next.”

“Awesome. Have a great night.”

“You too. Congrats.”

I stared down at my phone after Larry disconnected, and when I looked up, Cameron was standing on the balcony.

“I just—I wanted to apologize and make sure you were ok. You’re absolutely right, Rhett—and I’m sorry.”

I ground my molars, forcing out my own apology. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that.”

“You had every right.”

“Still, it was nasty and I’m not like that.”

With the apologies out of the way, I felt at a loss as to what to say next.

“That was your lawyer?” Cam asked. His hands were in the pockets of his dress pants and his shirt was unbuttoned at the top, giving me the tiniest glimpse of dark chest hair, and I hated how even in this moment I was checking him out.

“Yeah.”

“Nothing about the fire, right?”

“No, nothing like that. All good news,” I replied, trying not to let him affect me.

“And you hired a PR team?”

“How long were you standing there?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Yeah. I did. Needed someone else to start cleaning up the messes in my life.” I wasn’t necessarily implying him, but I didn’t want to correct myself either.

He nodded thoughtfully and looked down at the worn, wooden deck. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have come out here.” He

turned and headed back inside and I *tried* to call out to him, to say something to stop him, but nothing came out.

I ran my hands through my hair a few times and looked up at the moon. It was perfectly sliced in half tonight, which was a little too close to how I felt. I watched a satellite blinking as it went by, and looked around for the Little Dipper, the only constellation I knew. It was so dark and vast up there, it made me feel tiny. My phone call from Larry, the nasty words with Cameron, and the stupid games I lost didn't really matter in the grand scheme of things. I was just a spec of floating stardust, and maybe it was weird, but the thought settled me.

“Pizza’s here!” Jesse yelled from the doorway, and I practically jumped out of my skin.

“You scared the ever-living shit out of me, man.”

He laughed. “Good thing you were outside then.”

CAMERON

Rhett swept us in record-breaking time. Frustrated, we'd all bought in another ten bucks worth of chips, and again, he'd wrecked us. Now it was down to just him and Mike. Jesse, Shaan, and I watched with bated breath as the two battled it out on the card table. Rhett was taking an aggressive approach, calling Mike all in before even seeing the flop. It had gone back and forth a few times, but Mike had so few chips that it was barely putting a dent in Rhett's stack.

Then, all of a sudden, Rhett *didn't* call him all-in. Mike looked over at us and we shrugged, not able to make any more sense of it than he was.

"All in," he said impulsively, shoving his small pile of chips into the center. Rhett gave a little shrug and flipped his cards over. He had a six and ten of hearts. Not the worst hand, but Mike seemed pretty excited. He turned over his cards, revealing a pair of Kings.

"I've got you this time," he said, punching Rhett in the arm. Shaan burned a card and dealt the flop. Mike was up out of his seat hollering when the first card he turned over was a King.

"Yes! Trips! Just hand over the chips, Rhett." but he immediately went quiet when the next card flipped was a four of hearts.

"Oh shit!" Jesse exclaimed. The third card was two of clubs and we all inched a little closer to the table. "Go, Shaan, I'm freaking out!" Jesse whined. He burned and turned. A

fucking ace of hearts. Now everyone was on their feet, except Rhett, who for the first time this evening, finally wasn't moving. He just stared at the deck like he was willing a heart to come up on the river.

“No way, there is no way...” Mike was saying, grabbing his hair into tight fists.

Shaan burned the next card, Jesse did a drum roll on the side of the table while we all stared down at the last card. If it was anything but a heart, Mike had him.

“Oh my god, flip the card Shaan!” Mike yelled as Shaan drew out the moment. We collectively held our breath as his wrist seemed to move in ultra slow-motion.

“Ohhhhhhhh!!!!” Jesse screamed, jumping up and down when he saw the eight.

Of fucking hearts. Rhett's lips finally broke into a smile as Jesse grabbed his shoulders and shook him violently. Shaan was handing out fresh beers in celebration, and Mike was leaning against the table on his fists in utter disbelief.

“How? How?” he kept repeating. I gave him a conciliatory smack on the back as I drank my beer. Mel had been right, Rhett had absolutely creamed us.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket and saw I had an urgent email from Theo. I excused myself and went upstairs to take care of it.

I was leaning against the kitchen island in the dark, with nothing but my phone as a light when I heard footsteps behind me.

“Hey,” Rhett said quietly. “I feel like I need to apologize again for biting your head off earlier. And then...you know, taking all your money.” He had a smirk on his mouth and I

wanted to kiss it right off of him. I put my phone down on the counter and leaned back into it.

He idled, keeping a friendly distance between us.

“Rhett, I know this isn’t the time or the place, but I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I freaked out that day when you showed me all those news articles, and I could have handled it better.”

He nodded thoughtfully, clasping his hands in front of him. There was an awkward silence between us now, and I didn’t know if I should keep talking, or shut the hell up and let him sort out his thoughts.

“I felt dismissed by you that day. It made me feel cheap.”

My heart and ego shattered simultaneously. “I’m so sorry Rhett. I never wanted that. I just freaked out at having to put a label on it right out of the gate.” I reached out and grabbed his hand, lacing our fingers together. “I fucked up, and I hope that if nothing else comes of this, that you’ll forgive me.”

Rhett stepped forward, slowly closing the gap between us until we were inches apart, his foot between my own, and our legs lightly pressed together. I could feel his warm breath on my neck as he looked up at me.

“Cam?” he whispered.

“Yeah, Rhett.”

“I know this will probably complicate things, but I really want to kiss you right now.” His cheeks flushed and I could tell he was nervous, nervous I might say no.

Slowly I inched forward and pressed my lips into his. Neither one of us moved at first, just letting the moment be, and enjoying the tightly drawn feeling of the tension running

between us. Finally, Rhett lost his patience and opened his mouth against me, and I readily returned his kiss. His hands roved up my belly and landed on my chest, and mine found my way down to his hips, pulling him against me and sealing our bodies together. I could feel my body heating, and my blood running south and hardening my dick. Rhett stepped out to straddle my leg and ground himself against me. He was already hard as a rock.

“Would it be wrong of me to invite you to my place?” he asked me, briefly breaking off the kiss before moving to my neck.

My Neanderthal brain wanted to throw him over the kitchen island and fuck him right here, but I didn't think Mike would appreciate me screwing his brother-in-law where he ate his Frosted Flakes in the mornings.

“Why don't you come to mine? I can—”

“No,” he said firmly. “I get that you're older than me, but I'm a fucking man and if you want this to be two sided, you can come to my house.”

I hadn't meant to insult him, but obviously I'd struck a nerve. I took his face gently in my hands, brushing my thumb across his bottom lip.

“Your house, my house, I don't care, Rhett.”

He swallowed and nodded. “Thank you.”

I kissed him again, hoping he understood it as something of an apology before I let him go.

“We should probably cool-off so we can say goodnight to the guys.”

“Yeah,” he said, letting his hand fall from my chest and intentionally graze across my hardened dick. I shot him a look and he only smirked. He mouthed a quick ‘sorry’ before stepping back from me, giving us each some much needed breathing room.

By the time both of our cocks were behaving, the guys were finishing up their beers in the basement.

“Rhett, it was fun playing with you, but you’re never invited back,” Shaan said, shaking his hand. “Good night, assholes!” he said, heading up the stairs. I said goodnight next, Rhett giving me little more than a wave as he stared down at his phone. I felt my own phone buzz as I walked out to my car. It was Rhett’s address, and my cock gave an eager jolt.

CHAPTER 21

KNOW WHEN TO HOLD THEM

RHETT

I gave Cam a good ten-minute head start, knowing I'd still beat him to my place. Sure enough, I spotted his Audi on the freeway. I pulled into the passing lane and floored it, smoking past him as I caught his double take from the window. I was chuckling to myself when the dash lit up with a call from him.

“Dangerous speed, Rhett,” he said in a warning tone.

“Can't keep up in your old-man car, Cam?”

“Hey, if you want me to stop with the ‘kid’ jokes, you have to stop with the ‘dad’ jokes.”

“I dunno, I seem to recall you liking me to calling you Daddy, once or twice.”

I rubbed a hand over my needy dick as I drove, my mind being flooded with memories of the hotel in Vegas. I wanted, no...I *needed* him again. I'd beat-off at least twelve times while thinking about that night, his hard body slamming into mine, his firm hand on my cock.

I had to snap my hand back from my dick because I was getting too excited again.

“Loser has to give the winner a blowjob,” I said as I hung up, not giving him a chance to argue. I kept speeding down the freeway when I got a text.

CAMERON

Winner gets fucked in the ass.

I laughed and pulled to the right, slowing down the Lambo and forcing Cam to pass me.

CAMERON

You once came giving me head, Rhett. You think you're going to have anything left if I make you suck my dick all night?

Fuck. He was right. And I really wanted his lips on my dick. I floored it again and swept past him.

CAMERON

That's what I thought.

We pulled off at the same exit, Cam's car just behind mine, and I caught myself smiling like an idiot. I tried to tamp down my own excitement, reminding myself he hadn't wanted to make a real thing out of us. But he'd wanted to come over, right? That counted for something. Hopefully more than just a quick lay, because I think my stupid fucking heart was as excited as my dick that he was coming over.

I pulled into the underground parking and Cam went to park on the street. I waited for him outside the building.

"You live, *here*?" he asked, trying hard not to sound like a total asshole.

"Yeah, not bad, huh?"

"Was that sarcasm, Rhett?" he asked, smiling.

“Hey! It was!” I laughed. I liked that he’d noticed. “But I’ll give it to you, there isn’t much curb appeal. The building is a converted box factory from the seventies. I bought it after my first huge paycheck and have been renovating it into luxury condos for three years. But don’t judge a book by its cover,” I said, unlocking the main door.

The interior was immediately different. A fingerprint scanner unlocked the secondary door for us, and I led him to the elevators.

“Wow, this is...”

“I know, right?”

I scanned my thumb again and the elevator doors closed, automatically taking us up to the top floor.

“Ok, consider me mildly impressed.”

“Mildly?”

Cameron smirked, not looking at me, but I could make out his smile in the reflection of the elevator doors. I know I had difficulties reading people, but I was pretty sure coming here tonight was about more than just sex for him.

I hoped so, anyway.

The doors slid open on the fourth floor and I saw Cam gawk a little. The main floor was pretty massive. The designers had incorporated as much of the original building as they could, exposed brick walls and massive wooden supporting beams in the ceiling. The floors were still just mottled, stained concrete, but with a high gloss, with rugs and runners all over the place to warm it up.

Subtle up-lighting glowed to life as we walked through, everything controlled by sensors around the place.

“Lemme give you the tour,” I said, catching the look on Cameron’s face.

We walked through the enormous living area with the giant daybed thingy in the middle of the room that Gemma insisted I get. The kitchen with the hidden appliances and the game room with the custom neon pink pool table with my gaming name scrawled in the middle.

“And here is where the magic happens,” I said with my hand on the doorknob of the last room.

“Really, Rhett?” Cam laughed.

I opened the door to my streaming room.

“Oh, that’s not what...were you being sarcastic again?”

“I’m getting good, huh?” I said, chuckling.

Cam walked in slowly, taking in everything around him. The shelf of trophies, the leather couch I used when I had to sit for a long interview. He went and sat right in my gaming chair, which irked me if I was being honest, *no one* sat in my chair.

He ran his finger over the pink keyboard, taking in the feel of the keys.

“So this is where you make your millions, huh?”

My gut twisted a little. It had been almost two weeks since I’d logged on and streamed anything, the longest I could ever remember going.

“Well, I used to.”

“Do you miss it?” he asked, looking up at me. It was a deep question, but Cam asked it with such gentle honesty.

“I really do. I loved my job, but I honestly don’t know if I’m going to go back to it. Which is a terrifying thought. If I’m

not RapsCALLION6, then who the fuck am I? I feel like I've lost my identity."

"Wow. That was deep." He got up and stood in front of me.

"You realize I don't know that kid, right? RapsCALLION? I only know Rhett. *He's* still there." He pushed his index finger into my chest at my heart.

"Yeah, maybe you know him," I said as my throat tightened, "but I don't think I do."

"Let me tell you about him," he said, pulling me over to the leather couch. He sat and faced me, closer than if we were just friends, closer than if we were just here to fuck.

"He's really funny, and absolutely adorable. He cares so much. About his family, his friends, and he'd do just about anything for them."

I was frozen, I couldn't move or say anything. All I could do was stare at Cam and listen as he kept talking.

"RapsCALLION can be a bit of a dick. I did meet him once at a restaurant for an engagement party. I found out that night that he hated mushrooms, but not because of the taste, because he hates certain textures, and you know what? I never noticed mushrooms are kind of slimy and gross anyway. And cherry tomatoes? Hate 'em now."

I swallowed again and again, trying to keep the tears down.

"What are you doing right now, Cam?" I asked. My voice didn't come out any more than a whisper.

"I'm telling you that there is more to you than just your job, because that's all it is, Rhett. People change their jobs all

the time. I know you've built yours off of this persona that you've created, but that persona isn't who turns off the light at the end of the day when you go to sleep. They aren't the person that got completely bested by a puppy, or the person who took off into the desert to clear his head when shit got hard. *That* person is Rhett. The other guy, the punk kid with the ridiculous car and the sneakers, is the guy with all the followers, getting girls numbers and Snapchat. Frankly, he's a bit of a pain in my ass, but that's fine, because it's *Rhett* that I'm falling in love with."

I kissed him. With tears streaming down my face, I kissed Cameron. And he kissed me back. It was slow and gentle, tepid and teasing. He laced our fingers together as our tongues wound, and our bodies started to simmer. I felt it everywhere, lightheaded and hard and buzzing all around. I felt like a nut he'd just cracked open, exposing all this good stuff that I didn't even know was in there, and it was amazing. It felt amazing.

At some point I straddled him, I wasn't even sure when it happened but I was on top of Cam, my hands on either side of his face kissing him with all the gratitude I felt for the words he'd just spoken, because I was falling in love with him too.

He started for my belt and undid my jeans, tugging them down past my ass so he could get my dick out. I'd never had a 'loving' handjob before, but the way he was running his palm up and down was so sweet, and so much more than just foreplay. I started thrusting up into his hand, growing needier in his firm fist, and I knew I was bringing myself too close to the edge.

"Can I suck your dick?" I asked in the most pained, pathetic voice I'd ever heard come out of me. I felt his lips

smile against mine.

“It will be a dark day when I say no to that question, Rhett.”

I shimmied down off of him and got his dick out. Fuck it was huge. I stroked him and squeezed out a slick, clear drop of precum at the tip, and took my time lapping it up with my tongue. Cameron inhaled sharply through his teeth, and I lowered my lips onto him. His hand immediately threaded through my hair and he held me while I sucked him.

“God your mouth is so perfect,” I heard him practically purr over me.

I added my hand to the base of his cock, and worked him simultaneously. He tasted amazing, like skin and body wash, and I urged him further into my mouth.

“Can you deepthroat me, baby?” he asked.

If he kept calling me ‘baby’ I’d do anything the man asked. I nodded on his dick and opened up my throat. He growled as he drove up a little, choking me, but I held on for another few thrusts.

“Oh my god, Rhett, that’s so fucking good.”

“Jesus Christ Cam, that thing is a weapon,” I said, finally pulling off him to catch my breath. He smiled and leaned down to kiss my wet mouth.

“Where are your condoms?”

“Bedroom,” I managed. The look he was giving me now, like he was going to hunt me down, was about to make me come all over my couch.

I pulled up my pants as Cam did the same, and I took his hand, bringing him to the bedroom.

“Rhett,” he said, stopping just shy of the door. “I need to know you’re not fucking him too. I really want to go in there with you, but I just can’t get involved if you’re still with Dan.”

My brows shot up. “No! I haven’t slept with anyone else. I don’t *want* anyone else.”

He swallowed and nodded, letting out a deep breath. “Ok. Good.”

I squeezed his hand and opened the bedroom door.

“Damn, kid, you have fucking orgies in here?” he said when he saw the California king.

“Not in a long time, no.”

“Was that one sarcasm too?”

I stared at him. Would it bother him to know I’d had orgies in this bed before? He’d obviously caught my hesitation in answering his question, because he shoved me back into the bed and crawled over top of me.

“I don’t give a shit who’s been in this bed, Rhett. As long as I’m the only one in it tonight.” He leaned down and bit my bottom lip hard, but the pain sent a jolt right to my dick. “Lose the clothes,” he said with his teeth still clamped. Then he released me and stood at the foot of the bed.

I shuffled up towards the pillows, shucking off shirts and pants and briefs like they were on fire, and tossing them onto the floor. Cameron was pushing each button slowly through his dress shirt, one after the other, his big hands deftly slipping the tiny things through their holes. I watched, enraptured as he peeled off the shirt over his thick, muscular chest and started for his pants.

“Rhett,” he whispered as he pulled them down over his sculpted ass. “Close your mouth.”

I snapped my jaw shut, wanting to be embarrassed but unable to feel anything except the burning desire I felt for Cam in that moment. My heart was racing and my skin felt tingly. It almost felt like I was about to have a panic attack, but in the best possible way. It was a good feeling, something I wanted to dig my nails and teeth into.

When he was naked, Cam crawled up on the bed beside me. He took my dick in his hand as he lowered his mouth onto me. As soon as my dick hit the back of his throat, I had to distract myself from coming.

Didn't they just release a new season of Pokémon? Man, that show has been going on forev...fuck, Cameron is sucking my dick right now. Ok, ok, cold showers, grannies. God, I think the Squirtle was my favorite growing up. If only I'd known that—holy shit what is he doing with his tongue right now?! It's like his tongue is wrapped around me like a hotdog bun on a wiener! I need to try this, this feels so fucking good... too good. Shit. Squirtle...or something right, oh my god his hand is feeling up my chest, god that's good, finger in the mouth? No problem sir, I will suck that finger like it's my damn job. Oh fuck he's so deep I—

“Cam stop, please, holy shit!” I gasped. My dick popped out of his mouth while he smirked.

“Condoms?” he asked again.

“Bedside table.”

He leaned over to get the necessities and I watched as taut muscle pulled over his ribs. He was sculpted like a Greek fucking god, whereas I looked more like a damn pencil. It really wasn't fair.

I pulled the foil wrapper out of his hands and sat up. "Let me do it. I like doing it for you."

He groaned into my mouth in approval of my request. I opened the little packet and rolled the latex down over his cock, going slower and taking longer than I really needed to. He didn't seem to mind.

When it was on, I rolled over, hiking my ass into the air in front of him.

"No baby, I want to see your face when I push inside of you." Lightly, he rolled me back over, inching a knee between my legs to spread them apart. He got cozy between them and took the lube, squeezing a healthy amount into his hand before lowering it down to my ass. His fingers were warm, and he circled the tight muscle, smearing the lube every which way before finally sliding a finger inside.

"Is this where you want me, Rhett?"

I groaned my approval and nodded. Cam leaned down and kissed me, slipping in a second finger.

"Right here, baby?"

"Please Cam, yes," I moaned into his mouth.

"You know how to ask me then..."

My dick jumped thinking of what he wanted me to say. "Please Daddy, please fuck me."

"That's better," he growled, kissing my shoulder. He lined his cock up with me, and with a sudden, rough jerk,

pushed inside me, at the same moment biting down on the skin of my shoulder.

“Ah, fuck!” I didn’t know whether I loved it or hated it, but my body was on fire with sensation. His cock stretching me, his weight on top of me, the light kisses he was peppering my skin with over the spot he’d bitten. A rush of goosebumps ran across my skin as he began to move.

“You’re so fucking tight, Rhett.”

“Well you’re swinging a horse cock, Cam, of course I’m tight.”

He chuckled, leaning down and kissing my mouth. It was slow and full of need, warm and impassioned. Cam kept a steady rhythm pushing in and out of my ass, and my hand went down to my dick and I started tugging myself. Everything Cameron was doing, the subtle kisses on my neck, how he gripped my hips or ran a hand through my hair, everything just felt so *good*.

Then I felt his hand over mine. “Move your hand,” he growled into my ear. “I want to be the one to make you come.” I pulled my hand away and immediately his found me. He was so warm and I could feel him everywhere, Christ, he *was* everywhere.

“I’m—I’m gonna...”

“I know baby, me too.”

He sealed our mouths back together with a searing kiss as I felt the first shockwave of my orgasm. I saw a flash behind my eyes as my body lit up like a damn Christmas tree, each pleasant pulse sending ripples through my body.

When I finally had the wherewithal to open my eyes, Cameron was hunched over me, barely supporting his weight

as he caught his breath.

“God damn, kid,” he uttered. His dark hair was falling forward on his head, and he looked probably the most dishevelled I’d ever seen him, sweaty and exhausted. It was sexy as hell.

When he finally pulled out of me, we fell back into bed with one another.

“Was it ok, everything I said earlier?” he asked.

“Honestly Cam, no one has ever said anything like that to me before. I think Rhett and Rapscaillon were just so intertwined in my head that I forgot who was who. So, thank you, for reminding me.”

He gave a sleepy smile.

“You staying the night, old man?” I asked.

“That ok with you, kid?”

“Yeah. It’s very ok.”

I think he had fallen asleep before I even turned out the light.

CHAPTER 22

FROM DADDY TO GRANDAD

CAMERON

I woke up alone the next morning in Rhett's massive, warm bed. The pink glow of sunrise told me it was an ungodly hour to be up, but I got worried. Maybe he was upset about last night, maybe he regretted us sleeping together. Or maybe some of the stuff I'd told him had gotten to him. It was incredibly personal shit, and I'd only known him a few weeks, who the fuck was I to be coming into his life and picking it apart like that? I pulled on my briefs and decided to go look for him.

Everything was still and quiet in his place as I wandered around. There were a lot of spaces he hadn't shown me yesterday; I found a game room with half a dozen old arcade games and pinball machines, and a little theatre with a projector. Then towards the west side of the house I found the stairs leading up. They led me to a rooftop terrace, not a huge space, but I found Rhett there. He was in an endless lap pool, swimming long strides against the strong current. He didn't notice me at first, and I took a seat in one of the loungers and just watched him. He looked beautiful and strong. I realized he had a perfect swimmer's body, long and lithe. When he came up to take a breath, he did a little double take, finally seeing me, and let the water push him to the far end of the pool where he reached for a button and turned off the running water. He looked nervous, so I shot him a reassuring smile which he immediately returned.

He climbed out of the pool, picking a fluffy towel up off the back of a chair and scrubbed it over his face and hair, before wrapping it around his waist and making his way over

to me. He walked over timidly, and I got the distinct impression he was as worried about everything that had happened last night as I was.

“You have any regrets about yesterday?” I asked.

“Not a single one. You?”

“None.”

I saw him let out a breath and I pulled him down into the lounge chair with me.

“I have a really important question for you,” I said. “But first I want to clear the air a little bit.”

“Ok...”

“I want to say I’m sorry for how I acted when the tabloid thing came out. I was only thinking about myself and not how my words would affect you, so for that, I apologize.”

Rhett’s pretty green eyes looked up at me and he held back a little smile. He’d clearly needed to hear me say that, and I’m glad I did.

“Next, I want to say I made a mistake in thinking we could just go back to the way things were before Vegas, because honestly—I really fucking missed you. I was miserable last week and I don’t want to pretend like it didn’t bother me, when it did.”

Rhett pulled my hand to his mouth and started kissing the pads of my fingers. I took a moment to just enjoy the soft touch of his lips before speaking again.

“Rhett, is everything with your ex settled? For good? I don’t want to walk into something that isn’t truly over, and I’m not going to wait in the wings either. I need to know before I give anymore of myself to this.”

“Is that your big important question?”

“No, but—”

Rhett’s confident smile told me all I needed to know. “I got hurt, Cam. I hurt for a long time, and when Dan came back around, I’ll admit I didn’t know what to do at first. But the more I thought about it, about being with Dan again, the more I didn’t want that for myself. The pining and the keening and the never knowing if I was enough for him. And I don’t feel that way with you. I feel appreciated and cared for with you. I’m not worried that if I don’t text back right away that maybe you’ll be upset with me. All these tiny little specks of stress and negativity that I didn’t notice were actually weighing me down. You’re not like that, Cam, you lift people up.”

I bit down on the inside of my lip to keep from crying. That was without a doubt one of the sweetest and most honest things I’d ever heard in my life.

“Ok. Good,” was all I could muster.

Rhett sighed as he nestled back into my arms.

“And?”

I hesitated. “And what?” Was there more he wanted me to apologize for? He chuckled.

“You said you had a very important question for me.”

“Oh, right. I want to ask you out. On a real date. Would you go on a date with me, Rhett?”

He smiled, putting his hand on my jaw and kissing me. His body was cool and wet from the pool, but he was warming me from the inside out, so I didn’t mind.

“Yes. I’d love to go on a date with you.”

I was happy. Not altogether surprised, but still happy he'd said yes.

Rhett's phone chirped on the table beside us and he rolled over me to look at it.

"Jill's here," he said, noting the security app on his phone.

"Shit, she starts early."

"Yeah, I don't sleep a lot. Too high strung."

"Damn. Wanted to get a quickie in before we had to start the day."

In a split second Rhett was up and stripping off his towel and swim trunks. Then he made for mine.

"Ok! Ok! Down boy!" I said laughing.

I could definitely appreciate the eagerness of youth.

We crept back down into Rhett's place after messing around on the rooftop, and snuck back into his bedroom without Jill noticing. When I started to redress in my slacks, I caught a look of disappointment on Rhett's face.

"Are you busy today?" he asked. He looked like a puppy that had just been kicked.

"No, but..."

"But what? Stay. For a little while, at least. Have breakfast."

"Yeah, but Jill..."

“She doesn’t give a rat’s ass. Come, let’s find you better pants.”

Rhett pulled me into an enormous closet that looked like something out of Sex And The City. The whole back wall was a stack of his merchandise.

“Here, these should fit,” he said, tossing me a black pair of sweats with Rapsca1lion6 written down the leg in pink lettering. At least the t-shirt was a little more subtle, just solid black with a QR code on the back.

“You like decking me out in this? Am I you’re ultimate fan-boy now?” I laughed, looking at the clothes in the mirror.

“Absolutely sick threads,” he laughed. I think that meant ‘good’ but I wasn’t entirely sure. My pride kept me from asking.

“K, coffee first, come,” he said, grabbing my hand. I liked it. As we wound our way to the kitchen I fully expected him to drop it once we were around Jill, but he only held on tighter.

“Jill, this is Cameron,” he said with a proud grin.

“Nice to meet you, Jill.”

She gave me a skeptical glance. “And you, Cameron. Would you boys like coffee?” she asked, heading to the fancy espresso machine.

‘Boys’. I laughed inwardly at being called a boy because I was now associated with Rhett.

“Coffee would be great, thanks,” Rhett said heading to the fridge. He pulled out a big bottle of some kind of green smoothie, turning back and ushering me to follow him.

“We’ll be in my room, Jill. Thank you, you’re the fucking best!” He smacked my ass as he passed me, throwing his head back and laughing.

So, this was relaxed and happy Rhett. I liked it, he was cute. He pulled me into his gaming room and shut the door behind us.

“What are we doing in here?”

“I want to see you play.”

“Play what, exactly.”

“Jungle Drop.” His smile could only be described as beaming and naughty.

“I don’t play videogames, Rhett.”

“You do now. Sit,” he demanded, pointing to his gaming chair. I let out a huff, knowing I wasn’t going to win this one.

“Fine. Ten minutes. That’s all the embarrassment I’ll take.”

“I’ll take it. Start the computer.”

I looked at the tower, completely confused by the buttons. I’d never seen a computer like this before. With an eye roll, Rhett leaned forward and pushed a button.

“Really, Cam?”

“I’m a Mac guy. What do you want?”

“I want you to—”

“Only nine minutes left, thank God.”

Rhett clicked away at the keyboard, putting in passwords and eventually opened the game. I had to admit, I liked watching him bent over the table that way.

“K, here, you’ll like this part. You get to design your character,” he said, backing away and giving me access to the keyboard and mouse.

There was every appendage to choose from, every hairstyle, tattoos, clothing, accessories.

“Really, Cam?”

“What? Just making it look true to form,” I said laughing.

My character was as old looking as I could get him, snow-white hair with a snow-white beard. He was hunched over and wearing his trousers up over his belly button.

“This went straight from Daddy to Grand-Daddy, and I’m not sure how I feel about it,” he laughed.

Despite looking like he belonged in a geriatric home, ‘Old Man Cam’ was nimble and spry. Rhett showed me which keys to press to jump and run, which keys I could hit when I was near a jungle vine to swing from, and how to pick up items and weapons.

“Ok, think you’re ready?” he asked me after about ten minutes.

“Ready for what? I thought we were done!”

He chuckled looking at the screen. “No baby, that was a training session. I’m putting you in a game.”

“Rhett, no. I don’t think my ego can take it.”

“You’ll be fine,” he said laughing. Which led me to believe I would in fact *not* be fine.

I recognized the same graphics as when I’d seen him play at the convention. ‘Old Man Cam’ fell from the blazing plane and landed in dense jungle.

“Ok, the start is going to be hectic so—”

“Hectic?!”

More laughter. “There is a cave just to the south of here, go camp out in there.”

I set the old man running, embarrassing myself by hitting a few trees on the way.

“Cam.”

“What?”

“I said south.”

“Am I not going south?”

“That thing up there is a compass. You’re headed due North.”

I grumbled. “Shit...” I turned Old Man Cam around and raced the other way, but as soon as I did, I got mauled by a jungle cat. I yelped and jumped like an idiot in the chair, and Rhett threw his head back laughing. I shoved the chair back roughly and threw him over a shoulder, landing him on the sofa and leaning down over him.

“All that training and I die in two minutes by getting mauled by Shere Khan?”

Rhett’s laughter lit up his face. “Shere Khan is a Bengal tiger. You got mauled by a jaguar,” he corrected.

I grabbed his wrists, pinning them above his head and the whole mood in the room shifted in an instant. Suddenly Rhett was panting below me, his muscular chest rising and falling quickly, and his eyes skated across my face before falling down to my lips. I leaned down, just breathing him in.

“Ask me to kiss you,” I said.

“Will you kiss me? Please?” he said breathlessly and without hesitation.

“Please, what?”

“Please, Daddy.”

I leaned down slowly, running the tip of my nose against his, running my lips against his sharp jaw, and down his neck. I licked the bulge of his Adam’s apple before tracing my lips over his chin and finally resting them against his.

He exhaled slowly and the tiniest moan crawled up his throat, vibrating against my chest.

I ground my hips into his, his hard cock already pressing back needily against me. I kept his wrists locked with my left hand, and my right I lowered down his body. I snaked my fingers beneath the elastic of his gym shorts and held him firmly in my hand. Rhett’s eyes fluttered closed and he moaned again, rocking his hips into my fist.

“Oh god, oh fuck. Cam...”

“Rhett, I have your coffees,” Jill was suddenly yelling from the other side of the door. We stopped kissing and looked at each other, feeling equally childlike and naughty for getting caught.

“I’ll get it,” I whispered to him, laying a peck on his cheek before peeling myself away. “Thank you so much, Jill, these look amazing.”

Rhett sat up on the sofa, a pillow resting conspicuously over his crotch while he gave Jill an appreciative looking smile.

When she’d set the coffee down she turned back and gave us a final look, one eyebrow raised straight up. “Smells like

sex in here,” she said disapprovingly, before closing the door behind herself.

Rhett slapped a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing.

RHETT

An hour later (and about ten more embarrassing deaths in Jungle Drop), Cam was dressed to head out. I walked him to the door, not even trying to hide the dumb grin I had on my face. Even Jill was laughing at me from her spot at the table behind her laptop.

“So where are you taking me on our date?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to think of something special.” He grabbed the back of my hand and kissed it. My stupid heart fluttered.

Then the doorbell rang. The security screen lit up, showing a black and white figure waiting in the lobby downstairs.

It was Dan.

Cam stared at the screen, his jaw locked and his nostrils flared.

“I have no idea what he’s doing here, I swear,” I said, sounding way too desperate and pathetic. I pushed the button on the screen.

“It’s not a good time Dan, go home.”

He looked up at the camera. “Is he here?” he asked.

Then Cam pushed the fucking button. “Yeah, but he was just leaving, so he’s all yours, Dan.” Without a look back he started to unlock the door. I grabbed his wrist.

“No. I’m not letting you leave like this.”

Cam threw my hand off violently, and Jill shrieked at him.

“Jill, it’s fine,” I said, putting myself between Cam and the door. His blue eyes bore straight into me and I had to keep from shrinking under his gaze. “Please, just let me explain.”

“Rhett, I don’t care what’s going on up there, I just have the NDA for you to sign,” said Dan’s disembodied voice.

Cameron seethed, and I could tell he was trying to decide between tossing me out of his way or calming down enough to hear me out.

“Please,” I whispered, hoping he would choose the latter. There was a humming, static energy between the two of us now, nothing like the immaculate sexual tension we’d had for the last twelve hours.

“Say your piece and then let me go,” he ground out.

“Thank you,” I breathed. “I just need to sign a paper for Dan’s Dad, and then he’s gone. Nothing more.” Without looking back at him, I buzzed Dan up. Cam looked at me skeptically, but once he heard the truth I knew he’d be ok. Only, the NDA kept me from telling him the whole truth. Dan looked startled as all hell when he walked in and saw Cameron sitting by the breakfast bar, one leg hiked against the stool and the other on the floor. He rested against the bar with arms crossed over his chest, and if he weren’t so terrifyingly angry right now, he’d be fine as hell.

“Umm, Cameron, Daniel. Daniel, this is Cameron.” Dan nodded in Cam’s direction, but he didn’t move from his stone stance.

“Just give me the papers,” I said, reaching for the manilla envelope in Dan’s hands. I wanted so badly to tell Cameron what it was all about, but I knew I couldn’t do it in front of

Dan, not now. Part of me also just wanted Cameron to trust me—to take me at my word that there was nothing going on anymore between the two of us.

“Dan’s Dad does commercial real estate. He’s helping me with a purchase,” I told him. “That’s really all I’m at liberty to say.”

I flipped through a few of the pages, signing and dating everywhere I needed to. I turned back to Dan.

“Not really sure why you felt the need to bring me all this on a Saturday morning,” I said with just enough annoyance to let him know his timing was complete fucking shit.

“Congratulations on whatever it is, Rhett,” Cam said, standing and heading to the door. “I’ve just got to...I’ve just got to get some air, ok? I’ll call you later.”

He grabbed his coat from the rack and left. I’m pretty sure he took my heart with him.

“Wow, he’s morose,” Dan quipped, heading into the kitchen.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Dan looked at me like I was missing something. “Nothing, was just going to hang for a bit—unless you want me to leave?”

“Yeah, I do want you to leave.”

“Rhett, come on, don’t be like that.”

“Honestly Dan, just shut up and go. Please.”

“What the fuck man!”

“What the fuck? Are you serious? Four months ago you broke my fucking heart telling me you just needed space. Then

I find out at the fucking convention it had nothing to do with space, you just wanted to date Cherry. Don't you feel a little guilty that that's how I found out about you two? Five whole minutes before one of the biggest games of my life? And that maybe, *just maybe* my head wasn't in the game like it should have been that day?"

"You're right baby, and I'm sorry for that, but I—"

"No! No more 'baby,' Dan. No more anything! We're over, I don't want to see you anymore, it's done."

Dan scoffed. "Rhett, up until the day of the Con I was still getting messages from you begging me to take you back. Am I supposed to believe that you've completely changed your mind now?"

"I absolutely fucking have. I see who you really are now Dan—you're only someone who wants what he can't have. You couldn't have Cherry because you were dating me, so you broke it off. Now you don't give a shit about her or you wouldn't be here. I start seeing someone, and look who keeps showing up at my door like a little lost dog. Where were you when I was bawling over the phone saying I missed you and I needed you? Where was your interest in me then?"

Dan just nodded slowly as I unleashed everything I'd been keeping pent up, spewing out all the ugly leftover feelings that had been buried inside of me.

"Get out of my house, Dan. I'm not going to let you fuck this up for me." I had tears in my eyes and I could feel myself needing to tick, but I didn't want to do it in front of Dan. I didn't want him to know how much all of this was getting to me.

"Dan! Go!" I shouted.

“Fine! Fine, I’m leaving. For the record, you’re wrong, Rhett. I really do miss you.”

All I could do was wrap my arms around myself and shake my head. “You miss me needing you, and I don’t need you anymore Dan. So move on.”

He scoffed again as he made his way to the door. “I’ll let my Dad handle the rest of the paperwork then,” he said as he let himself out.

I waited until the door was closed before I crumpled into a ball on the floor.

CHAPTER 23

STORMS A BREWIN'

CAMERON

I was glad I'd lied to Rhett. I'd known exactly where I wanted to take him on our date, but I wanted it to be a surprise. Now I didn't know if we'd ever make it there.

It was a rainy weekend, and by Sunday night, I'd already done nearly half my week's work; I finished up the design for a cookbook cover, created a whole ad campaign for a local sweet tea company, and built a mascot for a carwash that was opening up around the corner from my house. He was cute, made up entirely of bubbles with tire eyes. But I was still restless so I kept sketching. First I flooded the canvas black, and then I opened up the color wheel for inspiration. The only color that kept grabbing my attention, was the brightest fucking pink. I doodled Rapsca11ion6, trying to imitate the rough, scratchy spray paint font of his gaming name.

Then I went a different way, sketching instead, his rat tattoo. It reminded me a little of one of the Banksy rats, but the face had a lot more charm, a devious sort of grin, and the signature thumbs up. Then I gave him an upgrade. On his back, I drew a massive jet pack—smoke furling from the bottom. I smiled to myself thinking of how Rhett would react if he saw it. Then I slammed the tablet closed.

A bright flash of lightning momentarily lit up my darkened condo, and I held my breath until I heard the booming crack of the thunder that followed. It was gearing up to be one hell of a storm.

I pulled my phone up, feeling guilty that I hadn't at least texted Rhett since leaving his place yesterday.

ME

Hey.

Zero points for creativity.

RHETT

Hey.

At least the score was even.

ME

I'm sorry for the way things ended yesterday. I just need a little time to cool off.

RHETT

I'm so sorry that happened Cam. You have to know, I had no idea he was coming.

ME

I know, I believe you. It just felt like a slap in the face after our conversation.

RHETT

Again, I'm sorry.

A gif popped up of a puppy giving huge whale eyes at the camera, and I had to laugh. Were gifs Rhett's love language, I wondered?

ME

The Wednesday after next.

RHETT

?

ME

That's when I'm picking you up for our date.

The three little dots popped up and disappeared several times before a text finally came through.

RHETT

☐

Then my phone chimed with a text from Mike.

MIKE

So, you hear the news?

My stomach bottomed out.

ME

What news?

MIKE

Isaac.

ME

Who the fuck is Isaac?

MIKE

You go on holiday or something, man? It's the hurricane that is rattling your window panes right now!

ME

Oh. No, I heard it's headed south.

MIKE

DOES THIS FEEL LIKE IT'S HEADED SOUTH TO YOU, CAMERON?

ME

Admittedly...no.

MIKE

Mel is freaking out.

ME

It's Sunday, I'm sure it will have passed by next weekend.

MIKE

Oh my god Cam, look at the fucking weather!

With an almighty eye roll I pulled up the weather app. It definitely wasn't looking good. Based on the projections, hurricane Isaac would be hitting land by Friday morning. Friday as in, the day of the rehearsal, Friday.

ME

I really wish I had some words of wisdom here for you Mike, but Mel insisted on having her wedding in the middle of hurricane season.

MIKE

NOT HELPFUL.

ME

What could I possibly do to help hold back a hurricane?

MIKE

Pray? Witch doctor?

ME

I'm on it.

ME

The witch doctor, not the other thing. But look at Saturday, supposed to be sunny and gorgeous. Plus we'll be out on a boat, so we won't have to see any of the ugly damage the hurricane leaves in its wake.

MIKE

That's true...

ME

It'll be a beautiful day out at sea.

MIKE

Ok, I can work with that. See? I knew you were the right person to text and complain to.

ME

lol. Thanks?

MIKE

You're welcome. Ok, this is great. It's all going to be fine.

It was not fine. It was so far from fine, that fine seemed like an impossible pipe dream. It was the morning before the wedding, and things were already a complete disaster. Like, forgot to put the lid on the blender, kind of shit-storm.

First, there was an issue with the flowers. Parts of the 408 were blocked off when someone's roof had ripped off their house and landed right in the middle of the expressway.

Luckily no one was hurt, but the shipment of all of Melody's flowers was stuck on a refrigerated truck in the midst of the disaster. The driver had called the florist and said the truck was about to run out of gas, which meant the truck would start to warm up, which meant all the flowers would start wilting and wouldn't make it to the ceremony tomorrow.

Then there were the family members stuck at airports across the country. Aunts and uncles had been re-routed as all of the Florida airports were shut down until the weather cleared.

By 11am, the cake lady called. Her shop had just lost power while Mel's cakes were baking so she'd have to find somewhere else to start over from.

"Ok," Rhett said, handing me a bourbon and flopping into the couch beside me. "Mike convinced her to take something to calm her down and now she's having a nice little nap upstairs."

Rhett and I had come to the command post at Mike and Mel's to try and help sort everything out.

"What's the latest?" Mike asked, sneaking quietly down the stairs. He looked completely frazzled with his hands on his hips just staring at us.

"Well," Rhett replied, pulling out Mel's phone. "The cake lady said if she can't get the cakes done, she has a baptism cake that she can try and scrape the icing off of, but it's not lime."

He walked over and swiped the bourbon out of my hand, tossing it all back.

"Good. Ok, we have a backup cake. A baptism cake, but still."

“Michael, you’re all out of cream cheese,” Aunt Irene said from the kitchen. “I’ve only done half a bagel, what am I supposed to do with the other half?”

“I don’t know, Aunt Irene. Just put butter on it or something.”

Aunt Irene—who’d been graciously invited to stay with Mike and Melody—didn’t seem at all concerned that the entire wedding was being sucked into the spiral of hurricane Isaac. She marched out from the kitchen with the naked half of her bagel.

“Oh my god Michael, are you drinking alcohol at this hour? What would your mother say?” She tutted, swiped the glass from him and brought it with her into the kitchen.

“Ok, great,” Mike muttered with fake enthusiasm. “Any news on the flowers?”

Rhett shook his head. “Nothing.”

Mike started to smile through the crazy, he was definitely having his Joker moment. “Catering?” he asked me.

“Victor said the weather at the docks was really bad, and so they’re keeping all the food refrigerated in the marina until the storm calms down.”

“That’s ok, right? That’s probably for the best.”

“Exactly. It’s for the best. Remember, tomorrow is going to be a gorgeous, sunny day.”

“That’s right,” Mike said, his eyebrow up high in his hairline. “It’s going to be a beautiful day and Mel is going to be so happy. You guys want bourbon? I want more bourbon.” He started to wander away in search of another drink.

“Wait, Mike, there’s more.”

“More?” he said with a laugh. I swallowed.

“So, Victor said that the water was too choppy for them to bring the catering on board.”

“Right, we established that,” he retorted aggressively.

“*And* he said it’s too dangerous to have the rehearsal on the boat.”

Mike let out a strangled laugh. “He’s cancelling the wedding rehearsal on us?”

“He doesn’t have a choice. He said it’s not safe on the boat right now, we’d get tossed around like ragdolls. Now before you—”

“What? Go crazy? Lose my mind? Freak the fuck out?”

“Before any of that happens, I already called the hotel where the rehearsal dinner is happening, and they’ve rented us an event space for the afternoon. We can have the rehearsal there, and then not have to drive in this weather more than we need to.”

“Oh,” he said, seeming a little impressed. “And did you tell—”

“The priest, both of your parents and the wedding party. It’s covered.”

He gave a forlorn nod. “I still think I’m going to have more bourbon though.” Mike meandered off to the kitchen and we heard a hushed argument with Aunt Irene before we heard ice hitting an empty glass.

“We have to get him to the hotel for the rehearsal in a few hours,” Rhett said, staring straight forward. “You think he’ll be able to stand by then?”

“Oh, Mel will make sure of it. If she has to shove a metal rod up his ass, Mel will make sure of it.”

Rhett chortled, and I took a quick peek around for Aunt Irene or Mike before laying a soft kiss on his lips. I breathed him in, and his scent seemed to settle my nerves.

RHETT

I loved my sister. To death. But the tiny, feral, T-rex she'd turned into was scary as shit, and I had spent the entire day trying not to get bitten. She and I were in the back seat of Cam's car as we drove to the hotel for the rehearsal ceremony. His windshield wipers worked furiously as we got pelted with rain, the wind howling and pushing the car around as we pulled into the hotel.

"I'll drive you guys right to the door, then go park," he said.

"What about the bags?"

"I'll bring them, just go with your sister to check-in."

Smoke furred from out of Mel's ears, as she opened up her door and helped to scare the hurricane away a little faster. Cam and I shared a look in the rear-view before I got out and followed her.

We were nearly drenched after walking the twelve feet it took to get inside, but, unperturbed, Mel stomped right to the front desk.

"Landry," she barked at the receptionist, who gave a terrified look at my sister before typing away at her computer. She handed us a stack of room keys, motioning to the elevator and I mouthed a silent 'sorry' in her direction. We got off on the sixth floor and Mel gasped, looking down at her phone.

"What? Holy shit, what, Mel?"

“The cake lady sent me a picture from her house! She finished baking all three tiers and is about to start a crumb coat!” Mel threw her arms around me and started sobbing.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry. What’s a crumb code?”

My sister pulled herself back from me. “What? This is a good thing, you bonehead.”

“Oh. Then why are you crying?”

“Because I’m relieved!”

“Ok, yay!” My paltry attempt at enthusiasm was met with an eyeroll.

“Here. You’re 607,” she said, handing me a room key. “Oh, Cam is 609, might as well give him his room key since I’m sure you’ll see him before I will. I’m down the hall in 620. Don’t come in unless you have champagne or good news.”

“I’ll order champagne.”

“Good bet.”

Mel went off down the hall without so much as a glance back, and I unlocked the door to my room. It was simple, two neatly made queen beds and a mini fridge. No door connecting to 609, sadly...we’d have to be sneaky.

“Hey.”

I whirled to find Cam in the doorway. Ok, *not* sneaky it is.

“Shit, let me help you with all of that.” We rolled in suitcases and dumped bags, then I helped him get all of his stuff into his room. Suddenly, the darkened room lit up with a bolt of lightning, and Cam pulled me in, pressing his lips lightly against mine. I immediately felt it in my dick, and sadly

lamented that we didn't have a quick ten minutes to mess around.

“You taste like rain,” he said in a seductive voice. How did he make rain sexy? “You ready for the next twenty-four hours? It's going to be a whirlwind.”

“It's going to be a hurricane, Cam. A literal hurricane.”

“Ok, that too. Come on, let's get Mel her bags before her hair starts falling out.”

CHAPTER 24

THE LONGEST TEN MINUTES

CAMERON

Before Melody had any more reasons to lose her poor mind, I went down to the banquet room the hotel had rented us for the rehearsal. I arranged the chairs like they would be on the boat with a small aisle down the center. Soon the other members of the wedding party started showing up, as well as the parents. The weather had calmed slightly, and I was hopeful we'd seen the worst of it.

“Good news,” Rhett said, his phone in his hand. “The florist said the delivery truck made it out ok, and doesn't think that the temperature dropped too much to ruin any of the flowers. They're ready to load everything onto the boat at first light tomorrow morning.”

“Thank god. Does Mel know?”

“Yeah. She actually smiled.”

“Wow.”

“I know.”

“Your parents just got here. They've been eyeballing me.”

“Did you say hi?”

“Not yet. Have they seen the pictures?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Fuck.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Yep.”

Rhett laughed. “Really?”

“You think just because I’m older than you, meeting a guy’s parents doesn’t still scare the shit out of me?”

“Oh my god you’re adorable, Cam.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said what I said. Come on.”

Rhett confidently grabbed my hand and led me over to his parents.

“Cameron, this my Mom Shirley, and my Dad Bill.”

To my surprise Shirley stepped forward and gave me a big hug. “So nice to finally meet you, Cameron,” she said.

Then, to my even greater surprise, Bill came in and gave me a big hug too. “Good to meet you,” he said with a firm clap on the back. I liked them both instantly.

“It’s nice to officially meet you both.”

“How’s Melody doing?” Shirley asked us.

“Oh, you know, if you ignore the fact that her whole wedding is falling apart, I’d say she’s doing all right,” Rhett said with a shrug.

“Oh dear.”

“Excuse me, I think that’s the priest coming in just now. I’ll be right back.” I went and introduced myself to the priest, leaving him with Shaan and Jesse so I could let Mel know everyone was here. (And frankly hoping he could perform a miracle on Jesse.) When Mel finally made her way down to the banquet room, there was a long pregnant pause, waiting to see if Bridezilla was still lurking, or if we had Mel back.

Luckily for everyone, Mel came in with a huge smile, and went to hug her parents.

After a few minutes of polite hellos, the priest took over. “Alright everyone, gather round, let’s get this show on the road!”

Rhett

It was an hour later when the wedding rehearsal had finally wrapped up, and we made our way to the hotel restaurant for cocktails and dinner. The restaurant was surprisingly full with another wedding party, and guests stuck in town waiting for flights out. The groomsmen and I all made ourselves at home at the bar before finding our seats for the meal. Mike had gathered us around for a toast.

“Gentlemen, and Jesse, I want to raise my glass to the finest group of guys a man could ask for. It’s been a fucking day. You guys are my family, and family isn’t always pretty, but it’s always there for you, so thank you.”

We cheered and tossed back something that tasted like shoe polish and cigars. I’m sure it was expensive. When I took my seat next to Cam at the dinner table, he leaned in close.

“Anything you don’t understand on the menu, just let me know, ok?”

Butterflies flitted about in my chest.

We ate, we toasted, we ate more, and eventually Mike’s Dad got up and started making an embarrassing speech about him. That’s when Cameron leaned into me.

“Wait ten minutes,” he said, reaching into my breast pocket.

“Wha—”

“Ten minutes, Rhett.”

I still didn't understand until he got up and left the table. I reached into my breast pocket and felt a card. I snuck a subtle peek, it was his room key.

Immediately I started getting hard, and scooted under the table so no one would notice. I checked my watch. I drank some water. Checked my watch again. Ate a breadstick and waved at Shaan's kids. And checked my watch again. Still nine fucking minutes?!

I turned and talked to Jesse for a bit, but he dropped me mid conversation to ask the waitress with the abnormally huge tits for more water, even though there was a bottle right in front of him. I rolled my eyes. What a dog.

Finally, the ten minutes were up. I didn't even bother waiting for the elevator, I hoofed it up all six flights of stairs. Hell hath no fury like a guy who might be getting his dick wet.

I composed myself outside of the door, giving myself a quick second to catch my breath. Cam knew I was desperate for him, but he didn't need to know I'd run up here like my pants were on fire.

The room was dark when I opened the door, except for one of the bedside lamps. As I wandered in looking for Cam, suddenly big hands shoved me against the wall. Cam's body followed, pressing me into the wall with his barrel chest.

“Hi baby,” he whispered into my ear. My hands felt back for him, he was still fully clothed, but as soon as I tried to turn around to face him, he braced me harder and crossed my arms

behind my back. I let out a pathetic little moan as my cheek pressed into the cream wallpaper.

“Now what on Earth were you expecting to happen when you came up here?” he growled, smoothing a hand over my ass and grabbing my hamstring.

“Honestly, hoping for just about anything like this,” I muttered. I could feel my body going simultaneously limp and hard at the same time. All I wanted was to please him. I wanted him to use me, take from me what he needed. That’s where I’d find my own pleasure, being needed by him.

Cam’s hand came around to my front and he rubbed me firmly. “Is all this for me, baby?” he said, grinding the heel of his palm against my erection.

“Mm hm.”

With quick motions, he undid my belt and pants. He teased me, just running his fingers back and forth beneath the elastic of my briefs. I groaned.

“Impatient, greedy little whore,” he crooned into my ear. I nodded and tried to push up into his hand. I could feel my pulse hammering in my dick and he was so close...I just wanted him to touch me. Instead, he raised his palm, feeling over the muscles of my belly and chest.

“Take your shirt off,” he instructed, releasing my arms. I undid the buttons on the dress shirt as quickly as I could and tossed it aside. Cam had unbuttoned his shirt too, and now he pressed his naked chest against my back, kissing and biting my neck and shoulder.

“Take your cock out,” he whispered. I slid my pants down around my waist and released my painfully hard dick. Then he brought his hand up to my mouth. “Spit.”

I complied, and he put his wet hand around me.

“Ahh! Yes...” I hissed as he stroked me. His hand was light at first, just teasing over the tip. Then his wrist worked me harder, wrenching down the entire length with long, steady strokes.

“That feel good, baby?”

“Fuck, you know it does.”

Cam sped up ever so slightly, increasing the pressure every time he did. I was panting with my forehead against the wall now, sweating at the temples.

“Cam, you know I can’t do this for very long without breaking.”

“That’s the whole point, honey. I want you to come now so you last longer when I fuck you in the ass.”

I cried out, maybe from the promise of an ass fucking, maybe because of the hottie behind me jacking me off, who knows, but suddenly I was right on the edge.

“Tell me when,” Cam whispered into my ear. I held out for another fifteen of sixteen strokes before I felt it coming.

“Fuck, now.”

In a flash Cam spread my cheeks and shoved a thumb up my ass, continuing to stroke me at the same time. I cried out as I came, sweating as full-body shivers wracked through me with each pulse. When I was empty, Cam took back his hands, giving me a quick smack on the ass before heading into the bathroom.

“Naked, on the bed,” he demanded from behind the closed door. I hurried to clean off my cum-covered pants as well as I could, and then headed to the bed.

My mouth went dry as he came out of the bathroom. The light glinted along every sharp line, every smooth muscle as he stalked towards me. I snapped my jaw shut, as soon as I realized I was ogling him.

“Lay back, head on the pillows,” he ordered gruffly. I quickly did as I was told, and Cam hopped on the bed beside me. Before I knew what he was doing, he swung a leg across my chest, straddling my face between his thighs and forcing his cock into my mouth. I happily complied, opening my mouth for him. Cam groaned and let out a deep breath, putting a hand against the wall to support himself.

“That’s right baby. You suck Daddy’s cock so well.”

I groaned at his praise, humming onto his dick as it met the end of my throat. Cam gave tiny thrusts forward with his hips, and I met him with a craned neck and an open throat on each pulse.

One of his hands came down to tug at my hair, pulling me harder until I gagged on him.

“That’s my good little whore. Again, Rhet, deeper this time.”

I did as he asked, forcing him past the point of comfort into my mouth. I choked again, sputtering to catch my breath. But he held me tight by the hair giving a snarl before he finally allowed me to breathe again. Then he snaked down my body, rubbing himself against me as he went.

“You love when I use you, don’t you, baby?”

I was still panting, still regaining my breath as I nodded.

“Such a perfect, good boy for me,” he growled. Then before I knew it, I was in his mouth.

“Oh fuck Cam!” I shot up onto my elbows to watch his perfect pink lips sliding over my dick, to feel how the stubble on his chin scratched at my balls when he took all of me in. I was rock hard in no time at all. He sucked me off slowly for a few minutes, never going too fast or too firm, and I eventually lay back onto the bed and just enjoyed his hot mouth.

“Ready baby?” he asked as my dick slipped out of his mouth and hit my belly.

“Yeah.”

Cam grabbed the lube and a condom from somewhere beside the bed, keeping me weighed down beneath his heavy frame. “Here,” he said, handing me the foil packet. “I like when you do it.”

I sat up and tore the packet open with my teeth, carefully rolling the condom down onto him. Then to my surprise, he got down off the bed. He sat in the big armchair next to the window and crooked a finger at me.

“Come here and sit on my cock, kid,” he said with a devious grin. Didn’t I used to hate being called ‘kid’? If I did I couldn’t remember. Cameron had a way of making everything that came out of his mouth sexy as hell.

He sat there looking like a king, heavy chest with dark curls, wide arms and big thighs. And a thick cock just waiting for me. I walked to him, placing one leg on either side of him in the chair and straddled him.

“My dick needs some attention, Rhett. Would you give it some attention, baby?” he asked quietly, stroking my cheek with the back of his hand sweetly.

I nodded, lining myself up with the heavy, flared tip. It was tighter in this position, harder for me to get him inside.

“Come here, lean forward,” he said, pulling me gently down to him. I buried my face into where his neck met his shoulder, and let out a mangled cry as he pushed up into me from below. “Relax sweetheart, just relax.” He wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, and brought his other hand down to my cock, stroking me.

Finally, he was fully seated inside me. I started to rise on him, to move, but he held me fast by the hips.

“Not yet, just let me feel you.” He nuzzled my face with his own, finding my lips and kissing me softly.

My cheeks burned hot and my throat swelled. Cameron broke the kiss and pulled back.

“Are you crying, baby?”

I nodded, burying my face back into his shoulder.

“Don’t be shy about it,” he said, putting his hands on either side of my face and making me look him in the eyes. His lips parted and he smiled, kissing each cheek before pulling me back to his mouth. Then his hands dropped down to my hips. He worked them back and forth, setting a slow pace. When we were both eager and panting, he held me up off of him, leaving just a few inches between us. Then he started to drive up into me from below. The impact of each heavy thud along my prostate was more than I could handle, and my face must have given it away.

“You gonna come again?” he asked, breathlessly. I nodded, closing my eyes and tilting my head back. “Do you want my hand?”

“No, I’m gonna come just like this,” I whispered.

Cam started to speed up his pace, and my orgasm rushed towards me like a freight train. It *hit* me like a fucking train,

too. I lost myself in the delirious waves of pleasure, the push and the pull and all the tension exploding out of me all at once. I was loud as I came, I knew that much, but he didn't let up the delicious strokes against my prostate until he had found his end as well. He cried my name as he came, and it was blissful to hear.

It was Cam's hands, slowly stroking my back that were the first thing I recognized. Up and down, on either side of my spine. My forehead was pressed against his when I opened my eyes, and he was looking up at me with such love and reverence that it made me want to cry again.

"Welcome back," he said with a smile.

"Wow...that was..."

"I know, Rhett. I know."

CHAPTER 25

ALL'S WELL...

CAMERON

I'd made love exactly two times. Both of those times were with Rhett Landon. As we cleaned off and hurried to get ready to go back downstairs, that was the fact that dawned on me. Yeah, sex had been good before, it had been *great*, but it had never been the kind of fulfilling it was when it was with Rhett. There was something so open and beautiful about him, something so unguarded and willing to give, and that's exactly the part of him I was falling in love with. It was starting to make me see how old and stuck in my ways I was, and it was starting to make me want to be more like him. More open to life, to love. More open to some cocky, videogame playing millionaire who—for some reason—*liked* me.

I held the door closed when he reached for it, turning him to face me.

“I want to give this a try, Rhett.”

He looked up at me with those green, puppy dog eyes, and muffled up hair.

“I know.”

And he kissed me.

The kiss at first was chaste, and romantic, but we both had to pull ourselves away when it started to get a little too hot and heavy. Besides the ability to drink as many beers as I wanted without getting hungover, I think I missed the instant-hard boners that came with youth the most.

“Ok, down boy,” I chuckled.

“Sorry. I’m ready.”

As we rode the elevator back down to the restaurant, Rhett surprised me again by grabbing my hand.

“This ok?” he asked, just as the doors slid open. I smiled, and squeezed.

“Absolutely.”

Things had gone slightly downhill since Rhett and I escaped for our little ménage. Uphill maybe? Anyway, things were getting wild on the dance floor. Apparently our bridal party had merged with the other bridal party, and everyone was getting down to ‘Sexy Back.’ How was this song following me everywhere?

As soon as Mel saw us walking in, she swung an invisible lasso around her head and tried to rope us in. I mimed ducking out of the rope, but wound it tighter around Rhett before smacking his ass, and sending him off to the dance floor. Instead, I went and had another round with Mike, settling his nerves that everything was lined up for tomorrow; scheduled to board the boat at 6am to be ready for the wedding at noon. The day had been an undeniable disaster, but everything was in place now.

I took my drink and wandered down one of the halls, taking a quick peek at the weather outside. Rain still pelted the windows, but it was maybe a little lighter than it had been earlier. I took one, final peaceful sip of my scotch.

Present

“Cam!” a panicked voice said behind me. Rhett was jogging down the hotel hallway looking a little worse for wear.

The suit jacket and the tie were long gone, and his dress shirt was completely untucked.

“Cam, you left your phone on the table.” He had it stretched out to me, and there was a look on his face, a panicked, shocked expression. I immediately tensed.

“Your phone keeps going off, and—well...look.”

I took the phone from him, scrolling down the missed calls and messages.

“Oh, fuck.”

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Oh, fuck is right.”

I handed him my drink and hit dial. I could barely hear Victor on the other end when he answered.

“Victor?”

“I tried calling, Cam! For, like, an hour! I’m so sorry!” he yelled into the phone. The wind was making it nearly impossible for me to hear a thing.

“Just slow down. Tell me what happened.”

“It—she...she’s gone Cam. The Wind Singer sank!”

The blood drained from my head and Rhett grabbed my shoulder when I swayed a little.

“Sank, as in...”

“Another boat came loose. Smashed right into her and ripped a massive hole in her hull. She went down in less than twenty minutes. The wedding, Cam, I’m so sorry!”

“No, please. Don’t be absurd, you just lost your boat. I—I’ve got to go, though. I have to try and fix this.”

“I’m sorry, Cam.”

“Don’t worry about it. The food and everything...”

“Everything is still loaded and waiting in the marina.”

“You have keys?”

“I’ll be here all night if you need.”

“Ok. I’m going to hold you to that.”

“Say the word.”

“I’ll call you back soon.”

I hung up the phone, and Rhett and I just stared at each other.

“The fucking boat sank?”

“The fucking boat sank.”

“Come with me,” I said, taking off back down the hall. Rhett raced after me as I made my way to the reception desk.

“Hi, how can I help—”

“I need to extend my reservation on that banquet room, please. The one from the wedding rehearsal this afternoon,” I said desperately.

“That won’t be possible unfortunately. The other wedding party has all of our banquet rooms reserved as of 8am tomorrow.”

“A conference room, then?”

“Sir, we don’t have *anything* available to rent tomorrow. I’m terribly sorry.”

“That’s—thanks,” I mumble, heading to the chairs in the lobby.

“What do we do?” Rhett asked nervously.

“I don’t know. Flowers were one thing, the cake was one thing, but the fucking venue sank. How the hell are we going to fix this?” I scrubbed my hands through my hair, thinking.

“How many are on the guest list?” Rhett asked.

“Seventy-six.”

“I think I might have a place...”

“What do you mean? Where?”

“Would a school gymnasium be good enough?”

“I’d take a barn right now if it were an option, Rhett, yeah. Where is the school? How soon can we get in? Who do we need to talk to?”

“You’re not going to like the answer.”

RHETT

“Of course he still has to live at home with his father,” Cam grumbled in the driver seat beside me.

“Most kids don’t own property at twenty-two, Cam.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Call yourself a kid.”

I glanced over at him, but Cam kept his eyes on the road. The rain had died down significantly, but we were still getting hit with heavy winds.

“It’s your next right,” I said to him, smirking a little at his new defensiveness over me. We pulled into the driveway and the porch light turns on.

“I’ll be two seconds,” I told Cam, trying to get a read on him before I left the car. Of course it was Dan that greeted me at the door.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Sorry I had to bother you so late.”

“It’s fine. Here you go.” Dan handed me a big ring of keys. “I have no idea which one opens the front door. My Dad is at his girlfriend’s house tonight; he told me where to find your keys.”

“Well, thank you,” I said, taking the keys from him. He eyed Cameron still sitting in the car, and there was a tense stare-down between them.

“If it doesn’t work out between you guys—”

“Dan, I’m going to stop you there.”

“Right.”

“Thanks again. I’ll see ya.”

It wasn’t an *I’ll see ya*, really. It was an *I won’t see ya*. My chapter with Dan is closed, and I was finally ok with that.

“Good luck, Rhett!” he shouted as I climbed back into the car. I didn’t know if he meant with the wedding or with Cam, but I thanked him and we drove off.

“Pretty painless, right?” I asked Cam, when we get onto the freeway.

“If you say so.”

“Cameron, we just had hot sex in a hotel room. You can’t be jealous of him.”

“Oh, you misunderstand me, Rhett. I’m not jealous of him. I’m angry with him because he hurt you.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling, but he’d already looked over at me. He reached over and grabbed my hand. We spent a few minutes like that, just quietly driving through the end of the hurricane. It was bizarrely nice.

When we pulled into the parking lot, we each took a deep breath.

“Hey, however this turns out, I’m really fucking proud of you, Rhett. *This*,” he said, motioning to the school building, “this is amazing.”

We stepped out of the car into the wind and walked up to the Kid Linkz building, now newly in my name, and I tried the first key in the door. Nothing. The second and third key were

wrong as well, and I just keep going through the ring when Cam's phone rang.

"Hey, Mike. What's—"

I could hear Mike's panicked voice on the other end of the line.

"Could they have found out about the boat?" I whispered.

Cam shook his head. "No, listen everything is fine. We just...yeah I'm outside but...no Rhett's fine too. There was just a little hiccup but it's being taken care of."

I swear I think I could hear Mike's hair falling out over the phone.

"I don't care what you have to say to Mel, tell her we're just upstairs fucking or something, don't tell her anything is wrong."

Mike said something garbled.

"Ok, tell her we're upstairs fucking *again*," Cam said with a smirk.

Then, all of a sudden, the right key slid in, and the main door was unlocked. Cam gave me a thumbs up.

"Mike, I'll call you later. I'm just a little busy. You guys should head up to bed soon; it's going to be a long day tomorrow. Ok, goodnight." He hung up rather abruptly with an eyeroll as we got whipped about by a massive gust.

"Well, you bought the place, you should go in first," he said, holding out a hand for me. Instead, I grasped his hand and brought him in with me.

The halls were dark and cool, and strangely lined with hundreds of potted plants.

“Is this all hurricane prep?” he asked. The flowers were in all shades and sizes.

“Yeah, they do a lot of gardening. I guess they brought everything in to keep it safe. Come, the gym is this way.”

With the wind howling and the dim lighting, it felt like walking through a creepy haunted house. I opened the double doors and there were even more plants, including a few tall trees in nice pots.

“Rhett,” Cam said, walking around and taking in the space, “I think you’ve just saved the wedding.”

It was nearly 5am when I crawled into bed beside Cam. He’d been busy drafting an email to send out to the wedding guests with the change of address. We were completely exhausted. Between Jesse, Shaan, Cam and myself, we’d managed to move all the food and flowers from the marina to the school, and set up seating for the guests. It was a little tacky, but the alternative was currently at the bottom of the ocean.

I yawned, pulling myself up beside Cam to see the screen.

“Hold on, you created a whole new invitation?” I looked over the pretty page he’s created. On the top left corner of the invite there was a tornado, pulling up the previous address, and the top right corner had a tiny boat, sinking behind the date. “This is adorable.”

“Couldn’t just send a mass email for a wedding.”

“Under the circumstances, I think you could have.”

“Not when I’m a graphic designer,” he said with a tired smile. “The business center downstairs opens in five minutes, I’m going to have these printed and slip them under the doors of everyone from the wedding that stayed at the hotel. The rest...” he wiggled a finger in the air, then hit ‘send’, “all have the email in their inbox.” With a yawn, Cam closed the cover of the tablet.

“Wait, wait, wait... I just saw my name.”

“Hm?”

“There was a file, with my name on it. Show me.”

“Oh, right,” Cam said, seeming a little embarrassed. “It was just a little mockup, but it’s nothing.”

“Show me right now, or the whole wedding is off. I’ll lock the doors and throw away the key.”

“Fine, fine, Jesus.” Cam opened the file, and he sheepishly searched my face for a reaction.

“It’s my tattoo...”

He looked back to the tablet, with the picture of a pink rat with a freakin’ jetpack, Rapsallion6 scrawled below in neon pink spray paint.

“Cam, I love it. Did you make this for me?”

He smiled and looked down at me. “Yeah. When we weren’t talking. I couldn’t get you out of my head, Rhett.”

My whole chest warmed hearing him say that. He leaned in and kissed my lips slowly, and all I could do was breathe him in.

It was really shaping up to be a nice moment until we heard scratches on the door.

“What the fuck is that sound?” Cam said, jumping down from the bed. It sounded like something straight out of a horror film.

“Wait, where are you going? It’s probably Freddy Kruger on the other side of that door!” I whispered, as Cam put his hand on the knob. He looked through the peep hole and shrugged.

“There’s no one there.”

“Then it’s a freakin’ rat or something, keep it closed.”

Cam turned to me with a smile. “Thought you liked rats?”

Before I could argue, he swung the door open, and in trotted Shelby. Her tail immediately started wagging when she saw Cameron, and he bent down to pick her up.

“What are you doing out here, little one?” he asked, petting her wrinkly head. I walked passed them and into the hall. Sure enough my sister’s door was open. I poked my head into her room, and both she and Heather were passed out in their beds.

“Little magician somehow got the door open,” I said, coming back to Cam’s room.

“Here, you take her for a pee, I’ll head down and get the new invites printed,” he said, handing me the wriggling dog. He went back in and grabbed his tablet before we headed for the elevator.

“Ready for the day, Man Of Honor?”

“Definitely not, Best Man.”

CHAPTER 26

...THAT ENDS WELL

CAMERON

I sat straight up in bed before I was even awake when there was a wild pounding on my hotel door.

“Cameron! Cameron, what the hell is going on?”

I could hear the trill of panic in Melody’s voice. Rhett didn’t even bother going to his own bed, and I peeled myself away from him to answer the door. The jig was up a while ago.

“Mel, don’t freak out—”

“Cam what happened?” she said, charging into the room in a fluffy hotel robe with curlers in her hair, and the new invitation in her hand. “Where is my boat?!”

“It’s at the bottom of the ocean,” Rhett mumbled into his pillow.

“This is a joke right? The boat didn’t really sink.”

My mouth flattened into a line as I nodded. “Victor called me during the rehearsal dinner last night. Another boat came loose and smashed into it.”

Mel’s eyes were wide, as tears welled.

“Don’t freak out, Mel,” Rhett said, knowing his sister was about to blow a gasket.

“We have another place to do the wedding. It’s all set up,” I rushed to tell her. Maybe I could stave off the tears. “But if you want to postpone it, we understand.”

Rhett finally sat up, his blonde hair mussed and adorable.

“No we don’t, we don’t understand. We spent all night moving topiaries and canapés. And before last night, I didn’t even know what a topiary or a canapé was, so you’re getting married today, Mel.”

A damn tear raced down her cheek and my stomach dropped.

“You did all that for me?”

“Yeah. We tried to save the whole wedding. So if you don’t get married today, I’m not coming to the next one.”

Mel jumped on the bed next to her brother and wrapped her arms around him.

“Thank you. You really took ‘save the date’ literally.”

Rhett yawned and kisses his sister. “Go do you eyelashes or something, Cam and I need to sleep,” he grouched. “And take your damn dog!”

“Hey, that’s no way to speak about the ring bearer!”

“Oh my god, you’re kidding, right?”

“Rhett, it’s in the Google docs.”

“Never opened them, Mel.”

“What?!”

“Not once.”

“Well,” Mel said standing and heading towards the door, “I suppose I should thank you for taking care of my little brother. Again.”

I smiled. “It’s been exhausting.”

“Don’t I know it.”

She scooped up the dog and headed out.

RHETT

We'd pulled it off. I couldn't believe we'd pulled everything off. I was currently finishing a lobster dinner in the school cafeteria surrounded by my entire family, and I couldn't be happier. All of the guests had shown up to the right place, and it went off without a hitch. Mel was stunned when she saw how we'd transformed the place. You could barely recognize the gymnasium with how many plants we'd packed in, and we'd created a pretty aisle for her to walk down. The cafeteria looked great too; each of the long tables was covered by white cloths, and we'd pulled out a teacher's desk to act as a head table for Mike and Mel. While everyone ate, the other groomsmen and I stacked the chairs to make a dance floor out of the gym. The topiaries (still proud to know what those are) had battery operated lights through the branches, because Mel is crazy, but they created great mood lighting for dancing.

"You almost done?" Cam asked. We were trying to rush through our meal to join the others in the gym, but I just wanted to savor it all. "Mel is going to do the father-daughter dance."

"Yeah. Just a last...uughh god that's so good," I moaned with a full mouth. Cameron smiled and nodded down the hall, leading the way out of the cafeteria.

"Um, Cam, you're going the wrong way. The gym is down here."

In answer, all he did was shake his head with a crooked smile. The subtext was clear, and I rushed to follow him.

“Where are we going?” I whispered like we were doing something we shouldn’t. I mean, I did own the whole building now, I could do whatever I wanted, right?

“I heard you’ve been struggling in French class,” he said. “I wanted to give you a quick lesson. But in the principal’s office.”

My cock immediately throbbed at the game he was playing, and I surged past him and into the office. I found the door marked ‘Principal’ and quickly sat in front of the desk. My skin was tingling already, and I heard Cam quietly close the door behind me.

“So, Mr. Landon. You’ve failed your last two French tests,” he said, coming around the desk and settling into the chair. He looked like he belonged there.

“I just can’t get the hang of it. My tongue gets all confused trying to roll my Rs.”

“Your tongue is the problem?” he asked, steepling his hands in front of his mouth. “Come around the desk for me, son. Let me see.”

I slowly stood, feeling real nerves about our little game. Cameron was so serious, so in character that my knees were shaky as I walked around the desk.

“Open your mouth and stick out your tongue,” he instructed. I did. “I can’t see you all the way up there, kneel in front of me.”

I knelt on the hard linoleum floor, and opened my mouth again.

“I’m going to put my fingers in your mouth now, just to feel your tongue, all right? Keep your mouth open for me.”

I nodded and he slide his middle finger along my lips before feeling his way down my tongue.

“Hmm, that seems fine, but there is a better way for me to tell if there is a problem. It’s a little more intimate though. You’ve heard of a French kiss?”

I nodded eagerly as he pulled his finger free from my mouth. My cock was immediately bricked up.

“Have you ever experimented with a French kiss before, Rhett?” he asked.

“No, never.”

“Come a little closer, just between my legs here, and I’ll explain it to you.”

I shuffled forward on my knees, stealing a quick glance down at Cam’s crotch. It was clear he was enjoying our little game as much as I was.

“What we’re going to do is press our lips together, and then my tongue will explore your mouth. Does that sound all right?”

“Yes,” I tried to say, but it came out all mangled and I really *felt* like the pubescent boy I was pretending to be.

Cam put his hand on my chin and guided my face forward, towards his. “I’ll do all the work, all right? I have to see how responsive your tongue is against mine,” he whispered. Then our lips finally touched.

It took everything I had not to push forward into him, but I wanted to play by his rules. I allowed his lips to part my lips, and then I finally felt his tongue breaking into my mouth. I licked up against him slowly, and he pressed back firmly. Before long, our sweet little kiss turned into a hot fucking

make out session, and I couldn't help but run my hands along my dick through the outside of my pants. Cameron eventually broke the kiss, leaving his eyes closed for a moment.

"That was very good," he whispered. "Oh..." He finally noticed my raging hardon beneath the suit pants.

"I couldn't help it," I said by way of apology.

"It's fine, Rhett. It's just your body's reaction to the kiss. Look, mine's the same way."

Cam leaned back in his chair and showed me how hard his dick was.

"Can I...touch it?" I asked tentatively.

"If you'd like to, I'm not embarrassed by it. It's just biology."

I raised my hand slowly and palmed his cock.

"Does your dick get hard often?" he asked while I rubbed him.

"Yeah, I have to touch it at least once a day. It feels so good."

"It can be very gratifying. You know the French kiss we just did with our mouths? Did you know you can French kiss a cock as well?"

I swallowed. "You can?"

"Certainly. It would help give me a better understanding of why you may be failing in class as well. Should we try that?"

"Yes please."

"Perfect. Why don't you go ahead and undo my pants for me. Take my cock out."

I nodded hungrily. I was so turned on by his game that my hands trembled as I made for his belt.

“Don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not nervous, I’m excited.”

“Oh. Have you fantasized about licking a cock before?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting.”

Cam groaned when I pulled his dick out, and he settled back in his chair to watch me. It was all still so new, so fucking exciting, and my cock was pulsing hungrily in my pants.

“Stick your tongue out, Mr. Landon. All the way. There. Now lick up the base,” he instructed. I did as I was told and he hisses a breath. “Very good, son. Again.”

He instructed me like that for several minutes, having me lick him and suck him gently. “You’ve done so well. Would you like to see how it feels?”

I nodded eagerly.

“Take your pants down and sit up on my desk,” he said. I hurry to comply, and he made himself comfortable between my legs. Soon he was groaning with my cock in his mouth.

“See how nice that feels, when I swipe my tongue over the tip like that?”

“Feels fucking amazing.”

“Do you want me to keep going?”

“Yes, please.”

I was hardly aware of the paper on the desk that I was squeezing and crushing in my fists. Fuck it, I own the school now. Cam kept working his mouth up and down my shaft, and I knew if I didn't stop him soon it would be over.

“S-sir? I think, I'm going to...I mean I'm getting close to —”

“It's all right son, just let it happen,” he whispered, and it was the hottest thing I'd ever heard. Before long I was lost to my orgasm, shuddering with each pulse as Cameron swallowed my cum.

I was leaning back on the desk panting when I finally open my eyes. Cam was sitting back in his chair stroking himself slowly.

“Did you like that, Mr. Landon?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“I'm glad. Now that I've done something for you, you're going to do something for me. Get off the desk.”

I slid down and he stood from the chair, pressing up against me. He grabbed my sensitive cock and pushed it against his own and began stroking us together.

“I—fuck, it's...”

“Spit it out, Mr. Landon.”

“So fucking sensitive.”

“What is?”

“My dick.”

“Oh.”

I ground my teeth; he was clearly just fucking with me. When he'd tortured me enough, he spun me around and

whipped me down onto the desk. He leaned down, pinning me there beneath him and whispered into my ear.

“There is one last thing I want to show you, and I really think you’re going to like it.” Without warning, he spread my ass cheeks and circled me with a finger. I clenched and moaned. He shuffled through his pockets, and I hear the tear of a foil packet, then the cool drip of lube a moment later.

“It might be a little uncomfortable at first, but trust me, there is this one spot so deep inside of you that feels amazing.”

With that, I felt the crown of his cock right at the entrance. He pressed so slowly, like he was really taking me for the first time.

“You’re very tight. Once the head is in it will get easier.”

I was sweating and nodding into the desk, just enjoying the stretch and feel of him. Finally, he pressed in enough and I could feel him *there*, that spot that made me weak in the knees. I let out a groan.

“You’re doing extraordinarily well, Mr. Landon. You fit me so perfectly.”

Chills ran across my body, maybe from the slow ass fucking, maybe from the praise, but either way I loved it. It felt like Cam was inside me everywhere; my body, my blood, my bones. He was moving with such a tenderness and I knew it had little to do with our roleplay, and everything to do with how we were genuinely falling for each other. I twisted around. I needed him to kiss me, and he did. It was as deep and passionate as the love-making.

I could feel Cam begin to thrust harder as he got needier, and he whispered my name into my mouth.

“Rhett...Rhett...”

“I know, I feel it.”

I felt his abs harden against my back as he came with a final push, and I felt each incredible surge of his powerful dick inside of me.

A few drips of sweat fell onto the back of my neck while he caught his breath, and I brushed my hair up against him, feeling it catch in his stubble. He leaned in, kissing my face and neck.

“I’m getting dangerously attached to you, kid,” he said. My heart swelled and I felt a dumb grin on my face the whole time we cleaned up.

“Do you think we missed the father-daughter dance?” I asked.

“Oh, sweetheart. I made that up so I could accost you in the principal’s office,” Cam said laughing.

The halls were dark as we made our way back towards the gymnasium, but a funny little shadow at the end of the corridor caught our attention.

“What the hell is that?” I asked. “It’s moving...”

Cam knelt down on the floor and made a kissing sound. Suddenly the shadow bounded happily over to us.

I laughed. “Shelby, I’m glad they have you as a practice child, because they’ve got some serious work to do.”

We made our way towards the gymnasium, Shelby under Cams arm and my hand in his. The booming base grew louder as we got closer.

“You have to be kidding me,” he mumbled, irritated.

I held the door open for him as I start gyrating my hips.
“This song really does haunt you,” I laughed.

Cam set the dog down and pulled me in close, doing his
best Justin Timberlake.

“I’m bringing Sexy Back...yeah!”

I threw my head back and laughed. This love thing, felt
quite alright.

EPILOGUE

TWO WEEKS LATER

CAMERON

The gas pedal in the Lamborghini was so touchy it was like firing a gun. The slightest touch and we were blasting down the freeway. The force pushed me back into the leather seats and a bubbly thrill worked its way through me. This car was *fun*.

“Cam, baby, can you slow down a little?” Rhett asked, while he white-knuckled the passenger seat beside me.

“No fucking way, this car is great,” I laughed. “Besides, this isn’t nearly as fast as you drive it.”

“Yeah, but I’m used to it.”

I shot him a quick glare. “Rhett, I’ve literally been driving since before you were born. I’m more than qualified to drive your flashy little car.”

“K, well you don’t have to insult her, damn.”

“*Her?*”

“Yeah, her name is Becky.”

I howled. “Who the hell names their car Becky?”

“Cam, you’re going to hurt her feelings.”

“Ok, I’m sorry. I love Becky.”

A call came through from Jill and Rhett swiped the screen to answer.

“Talk to me, Jill.”

“I have three new interview requests, two from on-line gaming magazines and one from In Style. You taking them?”

“Yes to everything.”

“Good. Cameron?” her voice crowed over the speakers.

“Um, yeah?”

“You have to have him home by 7:30 so he can be ready to stream for 8:00. You cut it too close last night.”

“I will, Jill,” I said nervously. The woman terrified me, and if she set a curfew, I’d have him back on time.

“That’s what I thought. Ok, see you boys later.” She hung up without waiting for a good-bye from either of us.

“Three more interviews, Rhett? You sure you can take all that on?”

“Easy-peasy,” he said confidently.

Rhett had gone back to streaming right after the wedding, and contrary to his earlier fears, it was going great. His fan base had welcomed him back with open arms, and though he’d seen a slight dip in sponsorships, he was still making double what I was.

“Still not going to tell me where we’re going?” he asked, again.

“Don’t need to, we’re here,” I said, taking the exit.

Rhett looked around, probably not recognizing where we were. It was a little strip of beach-town that you wouldn’t have a reason to come to unless you lived here.

“Where the hell are we?” he asked.

“Sunset Grove.”

“What the hell is in Sunset Grove?”

“This...” I said, pulling into the parking lot.

Rhett’s jaw dropped and his eyes lit up with fireworks. He was out of the car before it was even in park.

“Baby, what is this place?” he asked, rushing forward. Just ahead of him was a quaint little boardwalk with out-of-date shops, a little surfing school, and at the end of the pier, an arcade that time hadn’t touched since the late nineties. It was decrepit to say the least, but clinging to it was a sort of old-world charm.

“This is where I used to spend every dollar I earned when I was a kid.”

I grabbed Rhett’s hand as we marched straight towards the bright, flashing lights. The sun had just started to set, making the little arcade at the end of the pier pop like a miniature version of Vegas.

An old woman stood by the ticket counter, and I lay a twenty-dollar bill down which she wordlessly exchanged for a cup of worn, gold tokens.

“Twenty bucks Cam?” Rhett said wide-eyed. He shook his head and handed the lady two, crisp hundred-dollar bills. I thought she may just have a heart-attack.

“Thanks,” Rhett said, dashing off with an armful of cups filled to the brim with tokens.

Rhett raced around like a madman from one game to the next, the machines spitting out hundreds of orange tickets for him. He handed each strip of tickets to a kid nearby, until he had a little herd of children following him around, cheering him on and reaping the rewards of his gaming skills. The kids were thrilled, Rhett was thrilled, and I was so fucking in love.

The kids grappled for the latest strip of tickets, and Rhett carefully tore a few off the end.

“K that’s it guys! That’s all we’ve got!” he told them. They whooped and hollered and thanked him.

“You’re fucking adorable, you know that, right?” I said, stealing a quick kiss.

“Cam, that was so much fun!” he blurted out excitedly. “Ok, come.” He tugged me over to the little prize counter.

“Hi, can I get one of those, please?” he asked the kid working behind the counter. Rhett handed over the last few tickets and took his prizes. “Here,” he said, holding out his hand.

I smiled at the silly blue heart ring, and he slipped it onto my ring finger.

“Be my boyfriend?” he asked with a smile.

“Of course I’ll be your boyfriend, Rhett.”

And with under the colorful flash of neon lights, I kissed him.

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I need to thank my amazing alphas, betas, and sensitivity readers for pouring your time into this book. Laura, Dani, Jayce, Graham, Janine, and Carter, thank you all so much for your input.

Next, a huge thank you to Christine for going through this book with a fine-tooth comb. You are an editor extraordinaire.

Lastly, to my lovely reader, thank you for taking a chance on a queer little rom-com. I hope it was as enjoyable to read as it was to write.

MORE BOOKS BY JUNE HARDING

The Gold Series

-

Thicker Than Gold

Brighter Than Gold

Stronger Than Gold