

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CREA REITAN

A photograph of two shirtless men in a dark, blue-lit environment. The man on the left is looking down, and the man on the right is looking towards him. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting their muscular physiques. The background is dark with some bokeh light effects.

For Your
HEART

FOR YOUR HEART

FOR YOUR LOVE

BOOK II



CREA REITAN

dragon fire fantasy

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For Your Heart

For Your Love | Book 2

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I'll begin by saying that I didn't warn readers about a potential cliffhanger because I didn't consider it one. I apologize for that miscalculation! Yes, there were loose ends not tied up but... it wasn't concerning Simon/Quin's romantic story arc so I hadn't thought to look at it that way. I'm sorry for misleading you.

This story starts off much like the last. It is about friendship and what that means for different people. No two friendships look alike but that doesn't mean that one is wrong and another is right. Friends are those who support you through everything and pick you up when you need it. In this story, you'll find friends to the extreme and while there might be some other feelings involved, the friendship is always there as a priority.

For those who decided that they hated everything about the friendship between the twins and Simon, and determined that it IS wrong because you feel you have the right to determine what's NORMAL and NATURAL, this statement is for you - you don't get to decide what friendship looks like for everyone! You don't get to determine how someone deals with death and how they choose to heal. You just don't get to decide that their friendships are worthy of being considered real or fabricated for a story. You're part of the toxic problem in the world.

But I digress. This story is also about how people deal with grief and loss, not necessarily due to death but other circumstances. When they've grown so attached to someone that breathing without them is difficult. There's friends that play such an intimate role in your life that losing them can feel like a true internal wound that won't heal.

It's about blaming someone else when you can't deal with the consequences of your own actions. How do you deal with your denial and pain? How do you channel your anger into something constructive? More importantly, how do you learn to heal? How do you learn to apologize?

It's also about falling in love and redefining the relationships already in your life. Sometimes you can't see

what's in front of you but if you're willing to take a chance, then maybe you'll find a new happily ever after. Even if that looks very different from what you once thought that looked like. That doesn't mean that the past that you once strived for has been erased; it means that maybe you might need to edit what you once thought of as the only option.

There's an examining look at the bond between Declan and Damon, identical twins, and what that means to them. What it looks like to them and those around them. How they're so integrated with each other that it might feel like they live one life. A note so that there's no confusion: when they're in hive mind, "*This is Declan,*" and *This is Damon*. Note the quotation marks differentiate who is 'talking' in those moments.

There's also a nasty parent in this story. One who made their child feel like he's not worth anything if he can't be her 'perfect straight son' that she demanded she have. There are some nasty moments with this woman and lasting trauma on the character. Be prepared to hate someone.

This story is a whole lot of everything with a long list of topics, tropes, themes, and elements. To name some so you're not caught unaware: bondage, gags/blindfolds, orgasm denial, begging, cock cage, dirty talk, strict top/bottom, BFF/sibling co-dependency. There's also hinting at twin taboo with some minor on-page moments. Minor. Nothing graphic.

Please note that while there are some themes and elements of the BDSM lifestyle, this isn't a true representation of it. This is my story and I'm making up/being lax with rules and shit (not *grossly* but a little flexible). Keep that in mind for when you read and DO NOT try what you read here unless you do a lot of research and all that! This is fiction; not reality.

If anything you just read bothers you, makes you uneasy, or isn't what you're looking for (or you think you get to determine how friendships should be seen), please do not read this book. I *don't want you* to read this book. I'm not the author for you. Otherwise, enjoy this story about love, friendship, grief, and bonds.

One

DAMON



WE WAITED for Simon to come back. As the minutes passed, my vision grew darker and darker. As if Simon had been my light. Minutes became hours, and he didn't return. He never came home.

Over the next several days, we kept waiting. Every sound in the hall, we'd look up and stare at the door, but the sound would pass. He didn't answer our texts, our calls, or our social media messages. It was as if Simon had simply jumped off the face of the earth.

Stommer lives a few complexes down from us, but we never bothered to ask which condo was his. We don't even know his floor. We know nothing because we chose to know nothing.

Simon never came back for clothing. For toiletries. Not even for the bare necessities to live. He didn't come back for anything.

One thing has become very evident, though. My brother and I deal with grief and heartache very differently. Declan is like a lost puppy. His eyes are empty; I'm not sure he's aware of what's going on around him most days.

Thankfully, he secured a job just after Simon left. Ironically, he was hired at Rainbow Dorset University, so he's working on the same campus as Stommer. He's in the athletic department, which he says is across campus from Stommer's building. They'll likely never run into each other. I'm incredibly glad that Declan found a job when he did. I wasn't

sure what would happen if either of us would have had to be left alone for too long.

Not with the resounding silence in our building that no amount of noise can fill. All that's there is a hollow spot where Simon belongs.

Me? Every day that passes, I become a much angrier person. All I can feel is my fury at Stommer for causing this. If he'd have preyed on a different fucking student, none of this would have happened. If he'd have backed the fuck off, Simon would still be here.

Instead, he has to show up like a goddamn saint, with our mother here, and pretend that he's done nothing wrong. This is his fault. His fucking fault. And somehow, he gets to keep Simon.

My anger does nothing to dislodge the massive cyclone of red-hot rage inside me. It churns like a storm, ready to let loose. I'm not sure when it's going to come out, but I'm almost afraid to let it. It's stupidly hard to even think straight.

Sometimes it's hard to catch my breath and I have to stop until my vision clears enough for me to see straight. To stop my mind from tricking itself that the ground is coming up to meet my face. That helpless falling feeling gives way to anger again soon after.

Every day I find a new way that I'd like to kill Stommer. Every hour, maybe. It's become a new obsession—imagining ways to hurt him. To make him bleed. To just get rid of him so Simon will come home.

When I leave work on Thursday, it's only three, so I drive into the quaint downtown and park outside the bookstore where Simon works. It's crossed my mind that I could just follow him home. It'd take a few steps to find which condo he's in. One day to catch the elevator stopping on his floor. The next to be on that floor when he or Stommer comes home so I can see which door they go to.

But I don't want to see Stommer. I'm seriously concerned that if I do, I might turn violent. He took the most important

thing in my life. The only thing that could hurt worse is losing my twin.

I stop across the road and pull a hoodie over my head. It's hot out, which means it'll call enough attention to myself, but it's not one that Simon will take notice of. I bought it specifically to stalk him with.

No, not stalk. I only stop at his work to see him. Somehow, I have enough presence of mind not to go inside. I wouldn't compromise his job like that. He doesn't hate me. I don't think he hates me. But if I did that, he might.

First, I make sure his car is in the shop parking lot out back. The gray Jetta is easy to spot. It has a little rainbow around the VW logo on the trunk. His support for Declan and I. My chest aches enough that I stop and rest my hand over my heart. Will I have a heart attack from this? It'll be worth it if it brings him home.

When I confirm that he's there, I pull my hood up and move as casually as a stalker can, while wearing a white hoodie on an eighty-degree day. I pause at the door and look in. Hoping to catch even a slight glimpse of him.

There are two employees on the floor. One behind the register and another pretending to arrange shelves. He should not be getting paid to shift books an inch back and forth. In as many times as I've come here, I can tell they have as much personality as a bag of kidney beans. Seriously, they're dry and dull on the best of days. They don't even wear any color!

I stay there for a minute and just stare inside. Hoping for any sign of Simon. Any at all. When I don't think I'm going to see him and I've gathered enough attention, I turn away and head back for my car, the pit in my stomach growing.

The desperation to take him in my arms is another skin I wear. One I can't seem to shed no matter what I do. Tearing off my hoodie, I toss it aggressively into the backseat and fall behind the wheel. Angry tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to shed them. I'm not going to cry. I won't. I'm going to get Simon back.

Fuck that asshole if he thinks he's won.

It takes me a minute to calm down enough to drive home. On the way, I stop for something to eat and then stop again when I can't see beyond the rage-induced hue that colors my vision. I'm aware this isn't healthy. I know I can't keep going on like this. But what the fuck am I supposed to do? Barge into his place of employment and demand he come home? I might consider that if I knew which of the 132 condos was his, but I can't do that where he works. I can't.

I can't make him hate me more than he does already. I hope he doesn't hate me but the way I can't catch my breath says that I think he might. He never came home. He doesn't answer. We don't exist to him anymore.

Declan's home when I pull in, keeping the spot between our cars empty for Simon's. Black and white. The spectrum in between is missing.

Trudging upstairs, I push the door open and kick my shoes off next to Declan's. There are clothes strewn all over the apartment, as if Declan stripped as soon as he walked in and on his way to our bedroom. Following the trail, I find him right where I imagined I would—laying on our bed.

He's in his underwear, hands folded over his stomach, staring at the ceiling. He's not home, even if he's physically here. I feel too much and Declan feels nothing at all.

My stomach growls and clenches and I frown. I literally just ate. Why am I—

I'm not. Declan is.

Moving to the bed, I sit next to him and bring my forehead to rest against his. His hand immediately curls around my arm. We've become just as touch starved as Simon was as a kid. His hand on me is enough that I take the first almost settling breath all day.

“Eat something. You're making me hungry.”

Declan's quiet huff of a laugh hurts. I can feel it all over. “Come on,” I say quietly and pull him up. He moves without

argument and I get him to his feet. For a minute, we just wrap each other up and let the mutual grief overtake us.

There aren't any tears, but I can feel his sorrow as it eats away at everything inside him in the same way I'm sure he can feel the rage that burns everything inside me. For a minute, I let his hollow feeling sweep through me and douse the flames. Holding my brother with his arms around me, I pretend it's just us again. Like it was when we were toddlers and in first grade. Before Simon.

When all we needed was each other. This would have been enough then. Enough to heal any little hurt or sliver of sadness.

Now it only compounds on each other's pain because we share the same grief.

We don't speak. I pull him from the room and lay three slices of cold pizza in front of him. Sighing, he sits and picks at the food I give him. After a minute, the absence of touch makes me feel like I'm free-falling, so I shift closer and wrap my arm through his. Declan links our hands together and then lays his head on my shoulder while he slowly gets through his food.

I make him go to the shower after. We'd chosen this particular condo because of the enormous rain shower head that would allow enough room for the three of us to shower at once. That was our routine. Morning, shower. Before bed, shower. I'd take one before I leave work, too, so I don't come home smelling like the gym.

We don't wash. We just stand under the water, our shoulders pressed together as we stare at nothing. Simon should be between us. I can almost feel him there from muscle memory. Does he shower with Stommer now? Is he the one washing Simon like we did? Does he make Simon give sexual favors under the spray of water, despite knowing that he doesn't like sex?

Hatred ignites through me again, so violently my fists curl, then Declan chokes and grips my wrist.

“Fuck, Damon,” he says, shivering.

“Don’t look,” I say, trying to keep him away from the thoughts I just imagined. “Just don’t.”

He nods but eyes me warily.

Over the years, we’ve read a lot of studies about twins and their weird bonds. It wasn’t until we were about eight that we realized that not everyone can feel what their sibling feels and *hear* what their siblings think. What they feel and need. There aren’t any words; that’s not what we hear. That doesn’t mean I don’t know the exact words with which he’d say something if he were communicating it verbally to me.

I know Declan better than I know myself. I’m sure he’s the same way. We spend so much time with each other mentally that it’s like exploring all their dark recesses. Even the ones they can’t reach. I feel the bright and the sad. The horny and the angry.

Speaking of horny, that’s a damn trip. When his arousal echoes loudly in my head, I can’t stop the heat that rushes through me most of the time. That’s probably why we always hook up together. Gather our partners for the night and meet in the same corner. It’s kind of a pain in the ass when we’re not on the same page. Besides, who doesn’t want to feel super intense and blissful orgasms coming from everywhere inside you?

Not that it’s mattered in quite a while. This is probably the longest dry spell we’ve ever had. There’s very little interest, never mind arousal, within either of us. Our sole emotional bandwidth is concerning Simon and the gaping hole he’s left in our lives.

We leave the shower and pull on underwear before crawling into bed. No Simon between us makes sleep almost impossible. It always has.

It also makes our bed feel stupidly big. Of course, it’s not. We’ve slept on a full size since we were kids. All three of us. Wrapped around each other.

Declan and I tangle together, face to face, and for a while, we just stare into each other's eyes. It's like a book open between us that we're reading together. I can feel everything he's been through today, though he doesn't strictly recall any part of his day in detail. Just floated through. Did his thing.

His breath catches frequently as he reads my day, though. How I have to keep tamping down the anger so it doesn't turn as destructive as a wildfire. A single source of water wouldn't even touch it. Not even a little.

"What are we going to do?" he asks.

We've stopped texting and calling Simon. The chat between the three of us is dead. There hasn't been anything in three weeks.

We're almost in July now. His contract with the predatory asshole is almost over. Will he come home then?

No. I don't need to ask to know this.

The thought makes me struggle to breathe. Declan's grip on me tightens, our faces squished painfully together. His lips hover over mine as if he's trying to lend me his breath.

Finally, I manage a sharp inhale and blink rapidly. Is this what a panic attack feels like?

"I don't know," I whisper because I don't have the strength to actually use my voice. "I don't know what to do, or how to get him to talk to us."

"It hurts," he whispers. He doesn't cry. Not outwardly. But I swear I can feel his wracking sobs echo in my chest. It almost forces the tears that have been threatening to come up. "It hurts so much. I can't live without him."

I don't speak because if I do, the tears will become dislodged. Instead, I dig my fingers into his back and close my eyes. Together, we dump all our grief into one single mind and drown in it together until we're so exhausted from the emotional onslaught that we finally fall asleep.

Two

DAMON



THE WINDOW over the desk is open, letting the cool fall breeze move around our room. A car door opens outside, though I think nothing of it. Not until I feel the quiet panic and anger surge through my brother. I look up as he turns to face me.

“Simon’s dad!”

His thoughts are loud, and I nearly flinch. We both look at Simon. He’s laying on our bed with headphones in as he scrolls through his phone. He’s wearing the jeans I wore last week and the hoodie Declan wore two days ago.

There’s something almost comforting about him wearing our clothing. Our parents buy him his own, but usually, he just throws on ours. I glance at the two dressers, noting that his rarely gets opened. He pulls clothing from ours instead.

I crawl onto the bed and pull one of the buds from his ear. He glances at me, his usual smile on his pretty face. “We’re going to get some snacks. Stay here, okay?”

It might have sounded suspicious to absolutely anyone else, but Simon just smiles a little wider and nods.

“I want to kiss him.”

It’s not the first time the thought’s gone through my mind, even if that was Declan’s thought and not mine this time. As I leave the room, I reason with myself that it’s not like I haven’t kissed him before. We kiss him all the time. The strange swirling in my gut says this is not the same thing.

Declan stops at the top of the stairs so he can watch the door as I silently race down them. Mom is in the kitchen. "Simon's dad's here," I say.

Her sharp gaze flickers to the door, expression hardening. She wipes her hands on a dishrag. "Go back upstairs. Keep Simon busy."

I nod and head for the stairs, but I stop after I've climbed a few when there's the knock on the door. Looking up at my brother, I find him looking through our bedroom door. The echo in my head tells me Simon hasn't moved.

Mom opens the door and I turn back. Even from where I'm standing, I can smell the alcohol on him. Sweat. Whatever other disgusting shit is caking his grungy body. Is he wearing the same shit he had been three years ago when we last saw him, passed out in his own vomit?

Oh, that's what that smell is. At least, part of it.

I try not to gag and move up the stairs a little further to get away from the rancid odor.

It's not just his smell, but he looks homeless. His clothes are disgusting and in tatters. Stained with some very questionable spots. His hair is long and knotted; his face looks like he's been to war and hasn't seen a bar of soap or a razor in months.

I've never been more horrified.

"My son," he says, his voice raspy. From disuse? "I can't find him. He never came home from school."

I'll give it to him. He actually looks concerned.

I can't see my mother's face since her back is to me, but I can hear the disapproval in her voice. "He comes home from school every day, Mr. Everett. If you weren't passed out in your own drunken vomit, you might have noticed."

He doesn't seem to hear the venom in her voice. "Is he here? I'll take him home now."

"No, you won't, Mr. Everett."

“You can’t keep my child from me. I’ll call the police.”

There’s a pause and by the way my mother’s head moves slightly, I imagine she’s looking him over. “Please do. I’ll be sure to tell them that I found him three years ago surrounded by dozens of empty beer cans and liquor bottles, covered in filth, starving, while you were passed out on the floor in front of him. I’ll be sure they know he thought you were dead. That he hadn’t eaten in a couple days. That he was wearing a single ratty shirt because all his clothes were dirty and you hadn’t remembered you had a child. Please do call the police, Mr. Everett. I’d love to talk to them.”

Mr. Everett stares at my mother. The one thing he chose to question was, “Three years ago?”

“Go home, Mr. Everett. Stay away from Simon. He’s already lost both his parents, and he doesn’t deserve to lose one for the second time.”

“But I—He’s my child. The only thing I have left of my wife.” A tear tracks down his cheek.

“That’s a shitty reason to remember you have a child. Go home. Don’t come back. If you seek him out anywhere, I will be there with a team of fucking lawyers, Mr. Everett. Do you understand?”

He doesn’t answer. For a long time, he just stares. Finally, he stumbles back toward his truck. My mother watches him drive away before shutting the door. She looks at me and frowns. Then beyond me to Declan. “Did he see?”

Declan shakes his head.

Mom sighs. “Good. Don’t tell him.”

I nod and bound down the stairs again. Declan follows and we gather snacks and drinks. Back in the bedroom, we find Simon right where we left him. His dark eyes turn our way, and he smiles a little more. For a minute, I can’t move as I just stare.

Stare at the boy laying in our bed.

Dropping the bags of snacks onto the table, I climb on and hover over him. His smile is still there. Still dancing. Finding me amusing.

“You okay?”

Now he’s even more amused. “Yeah. Why? Are you?”

Sighing, I nod. “Yeah, Simon. Everything’s good.”



I WAKE SWEATING. The room is still dark. Though I don’t look at my phone, I imagine it isn’t even past midnight yet. I’d be lucky if it was even eleven.

“What did you dream?” Declan asks quietly.

“Same thing you did,” I say because I can still feel the echoes of the memory running through his mind.

We never saw Simon’s father again. I’m not sure whether he took Mom’s threat to heart or maybe he just forgot about his son once more. Whatever the reason, he never came back. He never sought Simon out. Not even in the last five years since he’s become an adult.

I used to fume about his father missing out on his life. Simon’s such a fucking ray of sunshine. He’s always smiling. So easy going. Fucking happy.

No thanks to that man. I always wanted to find a way to shove it in his face that he fucked up, and yet, we were able to give Simon a happy childhood. We made him smile. We loved him so much that we rendered his father redundant.

Well, once we did. I’m not sure what he’d see if he looked at Simon now. I haven’t seen him smile like he used to in ages. He’s been tense for months.

We added to that instead of taking it away like we once did.

It’s Stommer’s fucking fault. If he wouldn’t have fucking barged into Simon’s life, then none of this would have

happened. He'd still be happy. He'd still be in bed with us.

Declan coughs. "Fuck, Damon. You're giving me a headache."

Sighing, I turn so I can press my face into his neck. Let his scent surround me and maybe drown out my misery for a while. Or just drown me entirely.

"Stop," he whispers, gently brushing his fingers through my hair. "We won't leave each other. And we're never leaving Simon. Don't even think those things."

"How do we get him home?" I ask. It's not a question I expect an answer to. If we knew that, he'd already be here.

"I don't know, but I suspect our anger isn't a very hospitable environment. He won't stay even if he comes back. Not until we..."

"Get over it," I say, tone bitter. "How are we going to get over it?"

He snorts. "I don't know," Declan repeats. "Though I'd really like a fucking night's sleep. I'm not opposed to drugs at this point."

"Yes, let's call the doctor and tell him the man we've been sleeping with for more than a decade is fed up with us and we can't sleep without him. We need drugs to knock us out and keep us out for a solid eight hours."

"I'd be happy with five at this point," he mutters.

We're lucky if we get five between us most nights. I swear, we alternate sleeping. When one sleeps, the other is awake. Listening to the dreams the first is having. Then we switch out after a brief commiserating moment shared between us.

"I don't know how to stop hating him," I say. "He took everything from us."

"Yeah," Declan answers. There's no heat in his voice. No fight in his entire body. I have all the fight while he has all the defeat.

As if we were mirrors. We're not. Usually, we're pretty identical. Exact duplicates of each other. We like it that way. It feels good. Whole. How we're supposed to be and feel and live.

The cause and what it's about aside, this just feels foreign. Add this on top of all the fucking shit that rages inside and we're beyond a hot mess. We're a disaster of apocalyptic proportions.

"Sleep," I murmur, and try to think of something mundane. Like sheep. Jumping over a fence. Baaing.

Declan snorts. "Really?"

I smile. Just a little. "I don't know how to make the thoughts stop. How to turn off my brain."

"I think mine keeps yours up and vice versa."

"Fucking twin," I hiss.

His arms tighten. "I can't live without you, Damon."

I squeeze him in return. "I know. Neither can I."

Maybe we ought to be psychoanalyzed. We're just chalk-full of co-dependent relationships. I feel like at least between twins, it's okay. Right?



WE WAKE at least another half dozen times between us. When we stand under the spray of water the next morning, I feel heavy. Like I haven't slept for a month. Which is exactly what my life has become. I keep waiting for exhaustion to just overtake me and to pass out for an entire day, but I suspect it's exactly as Declan said. His brain keeps me awake and mine does his.

Maybe Simon was the wall between us. He dulled our connection enough to allow us to sleep.

I mentally roll my eyes. That's not at all what he did. Nothing interferes with Declan and I. Ever. Simon just brought

us peace. He settled all the restlessness. All the high energy. He wrapped us in his arms and trusted us to be exactly what he needed.

Until he grew out of us and found someone else to fulfill what he'd never allowed us to give him. We would have. We'd give him anything.

Did we not tell him that? Did we not make that clear? Can we try again?

"Eat today," I tell Declan at our cars. "I don't want to feel your hunger."

He looks at me and frowns. "I'll eat."

It's a lie, though he doesn't intend it to be. I wish I knew someone on campus. Someone I could actually reach out to and make sure my brother eats something. Yeah, it's for his own good, but man, does it get confusing when I can't figure out why I have increasing hunger pains *after* I've just eaten.

You'd think there'd be something to tell us who's feeling what. Most of the time, that's not the case. We know because we know. There are times, though, when we're really not sure who is responsible for a thought or emotion. Talk about a wild ride.

We've never considered turning it off or finding a way to dampen it. Even as the thought passes through my mind, I can feel Declan stir and get angry at me. It brings a smile to my lips as I glance back at him. I offer him a kiss through the air, and he rolls his eyes as he drives off.

I never want our connection to go away or change. Something that I think really loudly until I feel him flinch. With a grin, I turn toward the gym and try to concentrate on harassing my twin for a minute. It feels good to take a break from the anger and hurt inside.

Pulling into the parking lot, I park and then take a minute to try to keep myself in this mindset. Not happy. Definitely not happy. But concentrating on Declan means I'm not focusing all my energy on Simon. It means that for just a second, I can feel something besides the despair that I might not see my best

friend again and the all-consuming rage at the man responsible for making that my new reality.

And just like that, I'm falling down the dark rabbit hole.

Slamming my car door shut, I step inside. It's still early so there aren't many patrons here yet. Just the trainers and staff.

"Good morning," Carly at the reception desk says, smiling.

I blink at her, trying to focus so that I see her clearly and not the shadows of my anger hanging around. Maybe the smile I offer her is more of a grimace. "Hi," I say. "My eight o'clock here?"

She nods and gestures to the training room.

"Thanks," I say and take a deep breath. When I smile at her again, it doesn't feel quite as harsh. I must succeed at least a bit because she smiles in return.

Heading for the staff lockers, I drop to the bench and slip into my gym shoes. Then I try to concentrate on my breathing and reach for my brother inside my chest. In my mind. He's like one of those weird wolf mate bonds that you see in movies.

I feel him snort in response. *Mate. You stupid fuck.*

It makes me grin for just a second.

"Whitaker."

I look up to find the golden retriever walking in. He's a big guy, filled with muscles for days and a pretty nice bulk. He wears compression shorts under his looser ones, but they cup his junk in such a way that I know it'd be nice to choke on. Big. But is he thick too? Does he grow?

His hair is golden, just like his personality. He's an excitable dog. Loves praise and smiles. Even his eyes are a golden brown, just like the dog I'm mentally comparing him to.

Once again, Declan snorts in my head.

"Hello, Rossi," I say. I'm not sure why the locker room last name thing is a thing here, but whatever. I'm used to being

called Whitaker. When you can't tell twins apart, you at least get their identity correct when you only use a last name.

“Your first client's here. Did you know?” he asks, standing beside me and grinning. His eyes are wide, reflecting his smile back at me.

“Yeah. I know. I'm going.”

“Oh, I'm not rushing you,” he says, raising his hands. His face is so expressive that I'm almost amused at the alarm there. “It's not even eight. You can take your time. I just wasn't sure if you knew.”

Once again, I feel Declan laugh a little. I appreciate his fuller presence inside me today. Maybe we can both get through the day easier if we're mentally holding hands. Fuck, I need his hand for real.

It brings a frown to my face before I feel the warmth of his affection surge through me. I'm nearly chuckling at his response, except that Rossi is still staring at me. “Thanks for letting me know.”

His smile is beaming again. Like a fucking star. I blink a couple times, trying to adjust my eyes. Chuckling, I walk by him.

At least it's Friday.

Three

SAGE



THE ONLY REASON I answer the phone without looking at the screen is because I'm running out the door. I'm not late, exactly. The gym is twenty-one minutes from my house. But I'm leaving forty-two minutes before I'm supposed to begin, as opposed to my usual forty-five minutes. I blame the bananas. They were giving me a hard time this morning.

"Good morning," I say into the phone as I open my car door.

"Hello, baby."

I flinch at my mother's voice. She's got a nice voice, but I certainly don't want to hear it at 7:18 on a Monday morning. This is going to set a bad tone for the entire week. I can already feel it.

"Hi, Mom," I say, trying to keep my voice chipper.

"Where are you off to this morning?"

"Same place I go every morning, Mom. Work."

"At that gym?" I can hear the disapproval in her tone. She's hated nearly every aspect of my life for as long as I can remember. My high school grades, though an A- average, weren't good enough. My college GPA of 3.89 wasn't good enough. My decision to go into exercise medicine, training, and nutrition wasn't a good career choice. Moving 18 miles from her was too far for her to see into my windows when there was a perfectly good vacant lot right next to hers.

“Yes. I still work at the gym,” I say. And I make a good fudging living. I don’t say that. Money is only to brag about if you make it in a respectable way. Like my cousins the lawyer, the doctor, and the actor. Apparently, acting is more respectable than helping someone achieve good health. He’s the one hiring people like me.

My mother gives me a labored sigh. It’s cut off when my Bluetooth momentarily pauses before connecting to the speaker. But then I get the pleasure of hearing her surround me in the car. Taking a sip of my morning shake, I put my car in reverse and head out. Nope. Not late at all. Not letting my mother put me in a mood.

“So, I’ve been thinking about your little predicament.” I tense immediately and it causes me to nearly slam my foot on the gas instead of stopping at the stop sign. “I recently met a woman whose son had the same affliction, and she says that he went to a church psychologist, and they prayed it right out of him.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to remind her that sexuality isn’t an affliction. And there’s no amount of praying (to a God she doesn’t believe exists, mind you) that’s going to make it go away. I don’t tell her that this woman’s son is still gay, but now keeps that part of his life from his mother. I could be like him. Is that what she’d prefer?

But I don’t say it. Most of it would be a repeat of many previous discussions.

“Did I lose you?” she asks.

My chest tightens because my immediate answer is *a long time ago*. Again, I keep those thoughts to myself.

“No,” I say. “And I’m not going to church. I don’t believe in a god any more than you do.”

“Oh no,” she says, laughing. “I don’t want you to go to one of those.” The only thing she puts a more negative connotation on than my sexuality is anything religious. Thank you for small favors, I suppose. Being gay isn’t as offensive as

organized religion to my mother, anyway. “But have you considered therapy?”

“I’ve been in therapy for three years,” I say. “My therapist is the one who encouraged me to tell the world my truth so that I can live my life as I should be.”

I can nearly see the way her face scrunches. “A real therapist, honey.”

“He’s got his doctorate and is licensed in three states.”

“No, dear. The kind of therapist that can help you.”

I pray to no one for patience. And for my mother to get her head out of her ass. Pulling into the parking space that I’ve claimed for my own every morning since I started, I push the car into park and then close my eyes, letting my head fall back onto the headrest.

“Listen, Mom. I’m gay. You accept it or you don’t. But I’m not having this conversation anymore. I refuse to live the way you want me to live. The next time you call, it better not be about my sexuality or anything else that you disapprove of in my life. *You* are the toxicity in my life that my therapist says I should cut out.”

“That should be enough to convince you he’s not a real therapist, dear. No one should ever tell you to leave your parents. I shudder to think about his poor parents and what they think of his chosen profession.”

“Again, no more. I have to go.”

“Sage, I love you. I just want what’s best for you. I want you to live your best life and have no regrets,” she says empathetically.

No, you want me to live exactly how you want me to live without my own thoughts, feelings, or goals.

“Love you too, Mom.” I hang up before she can speak again. Then I tap my phone until it’s on silent mode. Not even a fucking vibration!

Once I might have cried. I might have been hurt by how she thinks I’m defective. I might have actually tried to

convince myself it's not so bad to pretend to be straight for her.

That I don't do that now, means I've come a long way. I'm not so soft and eager to please someone else at my own expense anymore. That someone else has always been my mother.

I remain in my car for a minute and try to let it go. To wash this morning's conversation out of my head with my practiced breathing. It's fine. I'm fine. I don't need her approval or her support.

Just because I want it doesn't mean that's what's healthy for me.

"I love my career and I'm beginning to love my life," I say to no one. "I'm not ashamed that I'm gay."

My cheeks heat, but not from embarrassment or even talking out loud. My cheeks heat because I'm still desperately trying to work up to my first gay hookup. Toys are all well and good, but I desperately want to feel someone else.

I'm just not sure how to go about doing that. I've never considered myself shy or nervous before. Hell, when I was pretending I was straight and living the life of a closeted gay man trying desperately to hide what he was, hitting on women was easy. Finding hookups was easy.

I mean, yeah, I always closed my eyes and pretended it was a man sucking my dick. And thank fuck, I only ever had to fake interest in sex with one person. Don't ask me how I managed for all those fucking years. Thankfully, she didn't seem to have a very high sex drive.

Nope. Not going there. I won't fall down the rabbit hole that is my fucked up past.

"I'm right where I want to be," I tell myself as I finally shut off my car. Grabbing my gym bag and breakfast shake, I head for the door.

I'm ten minutes early as opposed to twenty. Not just because I was two minutes late walking out of my house this

morning, but because of my darn mother. That means I need to cut my routine in half.

“Good morning, Carly,” I say when I walk in.

She gives me big eyes and a super wide smile. “Morning, Sage. I didn’t think you were coming in today.”

See! Even Carly knows I’m late.

Nope. Not going to let that deflate me or affect my day. I’m in control of my day.

“Just running late this morning.”

“You’re still here in plenty of time. It’s always great to see your smile first thing in the morning.”

I’m pretty confident that she flirts with me. Although I’m not sure why since I’ve made it pretty clear that I’m gay. I tell everyone I can that I am, just because I had to keep it quiet for so long.

I beam a wide smile at her, and her cheeks pink. “You too, Carly.” Without encouraging any more conversation, I head back to the employee locker room. It’s not as quiet as usual. There are other people there now. Others who start at eight and arrive ten minutes early. The chatter reminds me why I arrive twenty minutes early, so I can have a minute to myself.

This too will not dampen my mood today!

I sit on the bench to change my shoes when Damon Whitaker walks in. My response to him is visceral. My heart jumps, my stomach flips, my breath catches, my dick plumps. He’s everything I’ve ever dreamed about.

Not quite as tall as me, and though he can lift and bench with the best of them, his body is lean and trim as opposed to being bulky and built. He’s like a swimmer or a surfer. He’s just got that look to him.

And he’s so freaking pretty with his hair falling to his cheeks in the front. Perfect pouty lips that I’m dying to taste. And his eyes!! I could stare all day. This unique shade of green or gray or something in between.

However, since the day I met him, he's been a dark cloud. Broody and off-putting. He's good with his clients and he manages a polite indifference to anyone he speaks to, but I can almost *feel* the angry energy radiate from him.

That doesn't mean I'm not crushing hard. I'm fairly certain he's gay. Like, really close to being positive. Of course, that doesn't mean I have the courage to approach him. Though, it's not his disposition that holds me back. It's my lack of confidence and nerves.

That doesn't stop me from talking to him.

"Good morning, Whitaker," I say, offering him a wide smile when he looks my way.

His smile is weak and not at all genuine. But he gives me one, anyway. "Hello, Rossi."

Have I mentioned his voice yet? Jeez, I could get off to that alone.

Blinking away my thoughts, I ask, "Have a good weekend?"

I immediately regret asking since he stiffens slightly. I'm watching closely enough that I see him take a deep breath. Maybe he's so down because he's going through a breakup? Maybe he has a rotten mother like mine who's overbearing and overstepping.

"Yeah," he answers and though we've only exchanged pleasantries mostly, I swear that's a lie. He doesn't say anything else until he sits on the bench across from me to change his shoes, too. "How was yours?"

I know it's just polite talk, but it makes me smile all the wider at him. He asked me! He's keeping the conversation going!

"It was great," I say. "Ran around the park and then took a hike on Sunday with some friends. The weather was great for hiking."

Damon nods, his focus still on tying his shoes. When he's done, he sits back and looks at me. His expression is empty.

Devoid of anything at all. Even his eyes look vacant. And tired.

Now that I'm looking at him, he looks exhausted. Which means I blurt that out because I have no chill at all. "You don't look like you slept this weekend." I meant to tie in like, partying or something. But the way his lips quirk up at one side kind of freezes my tongue.

"You saying I look like shit?" he asks.

I'm too horrified by that suggestion to hear the teasing in his voice. I jump to my feet. "No! You're gorgeous. Perfect. I just mean that... Oh, my gosh, what did I just say?!"

He's smiling now, which once again renders me speechless as I stare at him. I can feel my skin heating up and I want to stick my head in the oven that I swear is sitting around me, making me sweat.

Damon gets to his feet and shuts the locker behind him. "Thanks."

I watch him leave the locker room and refuse to let myself watch his perfect round ass as he does. What did I just say to him?!

Okay, I know you're not supposed to blame your parents for everything, but I'm really sure that it's my mother's fault that I have no filter this morning. She's disrupted my peace with her horrible babble first thing. None of that would have come out of my mouth otherwise.

Except, maybe the comment about him being tired.

Biting my tongue so I don't say something else stupid, I leave the locker room. I don't have a client for another hour, so I meander through the gym; offering advice to those who aren't quite hitting the right posture with certain machines or exercises. The entire time, I monitor Damon. Keep him in my peripheral.

Throughout the day, I watch as his manner gets darker and darker. The storm clouds grow over him until he looks almost dull and listless. Except that the tension in his body screams

something else. The stiffness of his jaw. The permanent frown on his pretty lips.

Anger. Everyone can see it.

I lose track of him after a while, but when I find him toward the end of the day, he's outside on the track running. I watch him, transfixed. Then I find I'm running to catch up with him.

Oh my fuck, I'm going to do it.

When I catch up and keep pace with him, he glances my way. There's no offered smile this time. Not even a hint. "What's up, Rossi?" he asks, expecting that I've caught him for business purposes.

"You're gay, right?" I ask.

He slows and I'm happy that at least he looks amused. It manages to clear away some of his anger, anyway. "Yeah. Why?"

I shake my head. "My gaydar malfunctions sometimes and... I just wanted to be sure."

Damon nods slowly. He's just walking now, still looking at me with amusement. Probably because I'm turning every shade of red.

"Okay, so. I'm gay. Like, for real." Damon chuckles and crosses his arms. "But I..." I what? I'm a gay virgin? Am I really going to blurt that out? "Ugh. Okay, here it is. I want to be fucked. A lot."

His expression at least remains entertained. I'm glad to know that I can act like a fool in front of him and he doesn't think I'm an absolute, bumbling idiot. Or maybe he does. Hard to say. I've spent so long avoiding looking at men at all that I have no idea what I'm looking for anymore.

"Sounds good," he says. "But why are you telling me this?"

"Oh," I say, realizing I missed one crucial thing. Yep, that oven cranks itself up to 400° around me right now. "I want *you* to fuck me."

I watch as one perfectly shaped eyebrow raises. “What makes you think I’m a top?”

My mouth opens a few times, and I don’t have an answer. Wishful thinking. That’s all I have right now. So I just stare and blink while I foolishly try to find anything at all to say in answer to his question.

Four

DAMON



I HAVE to hand it to him—Rossi makes me smile. He's got such excitable energy that he's almost exhausting to be around. But I get the impression he's very unsure in his own skin. He shouldn't be. The man's stunning.

When he continues to look at me adorably red in the face and at a loss for words, I take pity on him. "That's flattering, Rossi, but I'm really not in a place to consider dating right now."

There's a moment that he remains behind after I resume my jog, but it isn't long before he catches up. "No. I don't mean dating. I'm not looking for—it's not that I'm not interested in you for a date or anything. I mean, that would be cool. I'm not only into casual hookups. It's not that."

I chuckle and pause again, turning to look at him. He's flushed. Flustered. "Calm down, man. I get it."

He blows out a breath, his cheeks puffing. "I just want sex. That's what I'm asking. And yes, now that it's out of my mouth, I hear how... horrible I sound. I'm sorry. You can ignore me. But it doesn't negate that I want sex. With you. Uh. On top."

The smile that climbs my face can't be helped. He's adorable.

"If you don't top, that's okay. I... will. I mean, if you want me to. It's just that you're pretty perfect and I want you to... I've never..."

I take pity on him and hold up a hand to stop his rambling. “Rossi,” I say quietly and he falls silent. His shoulders drop as if I’d just told him I hated his drawing. “I’m really flattered, but I don’t think I’m in a place for any kind of relationship.”

“No strings,” he says quickly. “Just sex. You can work off some anger and I can get... fucked.”

When I start to shake my head, he takes a step back. His cheeks are bright red. The red travels down his neck and up his ears. “You can think about it. No pressure.” Then he turns and runs away.

I watch him, still amused, until he disappears back into the gym. Declan’s amusement inside me matches my own. *Puppy*.

A chuckle breaks free as I return to the track and run. That’s exactly what I’ve always thought about him. He’s an excitable puppy. Exuberant. Adorable.

“Flexible?”

That’s not something I’ve ever noticed.

“Hung?”

Possibly? Glancing at the door that he disappeared into, I try to think if I’ve ever noticed more than just a hint before. Like I’ve really been in any state of mind to be checking out someone’s junk. Eventually, I might have taken a look. Hell, maybe I should have when he was running next to me.

Declan sighs and I feel him slip away, back into the hollows of his mind. *Eat*, I remind him when I feel the twinge of hunger that I know isn’t coming from me. Wait, it’s not, is it? Taking a momentary internal inventory, I decide that it’s not. So again, I urge *eat* until he responds. There’s a flash of a sandwich and then he’s distant again.

Lost in himself. Miserable.

My chest aches all the more and I stop, bending over with my hands on my knees. It’s bad enough to feel my own misery, but feeling my brother’s also is too much. Fresh anger sweeps through me, and I use that energy to continue around the track.

It does nothing to satisfy my pent up energy or my desire to physically cause pain to Stommer for doing this to us, but it keeps me going until the manager waves me in. That means I'm here past hours and I should have clocked out.

Jogging over to my manager, I accept the towel he offers me and wipe my face.

"I didn't realize you're a dedicated runner," he says.

I huff. "I'm not. Sometimes I just want my muscles to scream at me for making them do something they hate."

He laughs. "Fair enough. But you've been working those muscles all day. Clock out and go home, Damon."

I nod. "Yeah, sorry. I didn't mean to stay late."

His eyes are studying me, and I hold my breath. I've kept my emotions from leaking into my interactions, right? Please tell me I've done that!

"You okay?"

Sighing, I nod. "Just tired."

"Get some sleep. We'll see you in the morning."

As if it were that simple. I nod and move past him through the door. When I walk into the locker room, I strip out of my sweaty clothes and grab my towel and body wash shampoo all-in-one. I'm the only one in here, so it's just me and the spray of water as I stand under it. Letting it wash away the first layer of sweat.

After a few minutes, I wash, but the movements feel too much and I'm catching my breath. Until recently, I never showered alone. Simon and Declan were always right there. Pressed into the too-tight area.

I squeeze my eyes shut and try to stop the shallow breaths that come in quick puffs. My hands clench and unclench over and over, shaking as if I can't control my muscles to keep them still. I lean my shoulder against the wall so I don't fall. The world spins for a second, and I focus solely on breathing for a moment.

It takes a minute to pass. The world spins, so I slowly sink down until I'm crouched against the cold tile. Concentrating on Simon makes it worse, because I know he's not here. He won't be at home. He's not going to answer our calls.

So I focus on my brother instead. I need to be okay for him. I need to be able to get home to him.

"Damon."

The feeling of his voice in my head finally allows me to take a full breath. Fuck, what the hell is this bullshit?

"Are you home?" I whisper.

It feels like there's a weird fluttering of confusion inside my head before he agrees.

Wiping my hand over my face, I stand and then hold still for a minute. Am I okay? Am I going to face-plant? No, I'm okay. It's all good.

Making sure the soap is off me, I turn off the water and half-heartedly dry before slipping into clean clothes. The ride home is too far today, though it's only a few miles. I practically run up the stairs and shove open the door.

I look around as if Simon will pop up from behind the couch. My chest gets tight when I remember that he's not here. He's not going to be here.

Declan's in front of me then. He pulls me inside and shuts the door behind me before wrapping his arms around my waist. But he pulls back a second later and yanks my shirt up until it's off. Then we twine around each other again.

Now skin to skin, there's a sense of calm that tries to wash over us. Like we're back to how we were when we grew at the beginning of our lives while we became people instead of tadpoles. There are ultrasounds that show us just like this. I'm convinced that it's how we came into this life and it's how we'll leave it.

Our hearts wildly skip around eventually finding the exact rhythm together and slowing to what's normal. His fingers dig into my back.

“I’m so tired,” he whispers.

“I panicked in the shower,” I say.

His arms tighten. “I know. I felt it too.”

Of course he did. We feel everything together.

“I have sleep aids,” I say. It’s just over-the-counter shit, but right now, I’m so fucking tired that it’s making me dizzy.

“Yeah,” Declan agrees.

He doesn’t let me go, so I move us around while I kick off my shoes and lock the door behind us. There aren’t any lights on, so I shove us in the direction of our room and we stumble, but our grips don’t loosen.

We stop in the bathroom and stand under the stream of the shower together again. I’m still not dry from the one I took at the gym, but I think I also still have soap in my hair. We’re still leaning against each other, not speaking, just letting our bodies sync and calm the fuck down.

When we fall into bed shortly after, we each down two mouthfuls of whatever nighttime sleep shit I picked up. Then we wrap around each other until we might as well be a single person. Sleep doesn’t take us right away. There’s a few minutes when I think that even that isn’t going to help. Maybe we need more. Maybe we need prescription strength.

Maybe we just need Simon to come home.

I’m not sure if that’s Declan’s thought or my own. It was probably both.

That’s the thought we finally fall to sleep with. Our dreams are filled with Simon.



THE NEXT FEW days are the same thing. My life feels repetitive, but not in the way I used to enjoy. Repetition was always something that I drew comfort in. I enjoyed knowing

what to expect every day. Where I was supposed to be and when I'd be with Simon and Declan again.

Our times apart were never long, but it was long enough to make me itch. To feel a little lost and like something was missing. My fingers twitched, constantly reaching out for who wasn't there.

Before it became unbearable, we'd be together again. The relief of that feeling, how it swept over my entire body, was nothing short of euphoric. I'd always known that we'd be together. That we belonged together, the three of us. After short times apart, the liberation that came from finally wrapping our bodies into one only solidified that.

We were always meant to be three.

Everything inside me feels too tight to bear now. Nothing fits. Everything just wants to come undone. Unravel. Being with Declan after a long day on my own now only takes the edge off. We are still incomplete. Still missing half of us. Declan and I aren't a third of three. We made an entire half together. We are two people who were always meant to be one. Simon is our answering half.

Work is a decent escape to an extent. The clients force me to focus on anything other than Simon. On something other than how my brother is falling more and more into the darkest recesses of his mind. And fuck, something other than how fucking tired I am. The sleep aids work for four hours but after that, it is still hit and miss.

Rossi is always watching me. I can feel him, the way his eyes are constantly trained on me. Tracking my movements. The desire in him that I'd obviously missed before since I was too angry to notice. I'm still furious, still plotting torture and murder, but now I can see what I didn't pay attention to before.

I'd be lying if I said I'm not considering it. Not that I've been interested in sex much since we've been fighting with Simon. The unease in my world seems to have shot my libido. But now that Rossi's brought it up? My cock remembers that it's being neglected.

By Thursday, I'm seriously contemplating whether it's a good idea. Not only is he my coworker, but he's a nice guy. I'm not the kind of guy nice guys should get involved with at all. Not before our fall out with Simon and surely not now.

His promise for *just sex* is going to backfire. I know that. Everything in me knows that.

But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't seriously attracted to him. He's got a big body, bigger than me, stronger than me, and I want to render him helpless as I feed him pleasure.

There it is. My dick is fucking happy with that idea.

Sighing, I turn away so that my back is to him. This is almost worse because I can practically feel the way he's looking at me.

I'm going to fuck this guy, I tell Declan.

"The puppy?"

Chuckling, I nod. He feels it. He feels everything.

With the decision made, I try with a lot of extra effort to push away the anger that simmers just under the surface. My cock stays half hard throughout the rest of the day. For the first time, I'm trying to pay attention to Rossi without actually doing so. It's difficult to keep tabs on someone and still focus on work.

It's pure luck that I manage it and end up walking out of the gym with him. He's parked where he always is, and I made sure to take the spot next to him this morning.

"You live close?" I ask.

His big, happy eyes look at me. Wide. Excited. Nervous. "Yes. Eight miles."

I nod. Licking my lips, I watch as his eyes fall to them. I smirk and his cheeks heat as he tears his eyes back up to mine. They widen more. Definitely an excitable puppy.

"Are you still interested—"

"Yes," he answers before I can get the words out. I smile at his enthusiasm. Seriously, he's jumping on the balls of his

feet! “You want to follow me? Or I can give you my address? Oh! Or you didn’t mean right now? I’m sorry, I’m just—”

“Easy,” I say. “Take a breath, Sage.” He shouldn’t be Rossi for this, right? He should have an actual name.

I watch as his lips form his own name. He swallows and nods.

“I’ll follow you.”

He slips into his car, and I do the same. Sage lives relatively close, but in the opposite direction from our condo. He lives in the suburbs, in a cute ranch house. There are rainbow curtains in the front window, but the rest of the house is dark blue with white trim. His flowerbed is meticulously manicured, as is the rest of his yard. I’m guessing he’s a hobbyist, or it’s HOA regulation.

The smile he flashes at me when I step out gives me the impression he’s excited that I actually followed him. Like he doubted I would, or that he imagined it.

Sage leads the way through the front door and once again, I get the impression that he’s a puppy, ready to jump and play. It makes me want to tie him down and work that energy out of him until he’s limp on the bed.

Yep, cock is still totally into this.

We step into a small entryway that’s blocked off from the rest of the house. There’s a small table on one side and hooks hanging on the other, though there’s only a single hooded sweatshirt there. Opposite the front door is a closet that I imagine is where he has his coats and shoes, since there’s nothing right inside the door.

Taking his lead, I kick off my shoes when he does and follow him. I’m led into a living room kitchen combination. I can see a table on the far end that appears to look into a backyard. Sage pauses for a second to let me look around and then nearly bounds down the hall.

There are five doors in the small hall. The thin one is likely a linen closet since it’s not the proper width for a person to walk through, much less one of Sage’s size. Because all of

them are open, I can see that there's a bathroom, an office, and two bedrooms. One is very nondescript, and I assume that's a guest room.

The bedroom he leads me to has an enormous bed. There's a closet without doors, but it's completely neat and tidy. The other door that's ajar, I'm guessing, leads to a bathroom. Then there are sliding doors that look into the backyard, but immediately outside them is a hot tub.

"So," he says nervously when I finally look at him. He's standing at the end of his bed with wide, innocent eyes. It makes me smile.

"Condoms. Lube," I say.

He nods and turns to the bedside table. Predictably, he pulls them out from the top drawer and sets them on the bed. Then he turns back to me.

"You want me to undress you, or would you like to undress yourself?"

Sage swallows, his eyes tracking down my body. "At the same time?" he asks.

I nod and pull my shirt over my head. He does the same. I shove my gym shorts down and Sage mimics. I pause when I see he's in a jock, a familiar fire pushing through my veins.

"Keep that on," I tell him.

His cheeks heat more. I don't think he's been without a blush since I asked him if he was still interested. He nods, but watches as I push my underwear down. His pink tongue pokes out as he licks his lips.

"On the bed," I say. "Hands and knees."

There's hesitation, but I don't think it's because he's unsure. I think he's nervous by the way he's breathing. I approach and gently touch his chin so his eyes meet mine. "When you said you've never... you meant sex."

The way his skin burns beneath my fingers is too cute.

“I have had sex, but not with a guy. And... I have toys. I’ve used them.” I swear, he’s going to burn me if he gets too much hotter.

I press my lips to the corner of his mouth, and he sucks in a breath. “Relax, Sage. There’s no pressure here at all.”

He shakes his head subtly. “You don’t understand. I want this more than I can tell you. I’m just... a little nervous.”

“Then get on the bed. I’ll make you feel so fucking good; you won’t remember your name.”

The whimper that leaves him makes my dick twitch in excitement. He pulls away and does what I told him to. Hands and knees with that perfectly fine ass facing my way. His skin is smooth, thighs thick and hairy. His tight little hole is puckered up, the muscles constricting as he waits nervously.

It’s been a long time since I’ve had a virgin ass. I glance at the bedside table and wonder about these toys. Bigger than me? The same? Smaller? I’m not huge. Not quite seven. Nor super thick. Not like what I glimpsed straining inside his jock.

I’m going to choke on that before the night’s through. But for now, it’s time to deflower this ass.

Five

SAGE



MY ENTIRE BODY feels like a live wire. This is it. It's happening. It's finally happening. With the perfect man that has a perfect dick. It's bigger than what I've been brave enough to try on my own. Something I'm both excited about and a little terrified.

The bed dips behind me and I'm shaking.

"Relax," Damon says and I shiver. It travels through my entire body, leaving raised gooseflesh in its wake. Relax! Pfft. I'm ready to explode right now! He hasn't even touched me yet.

The sound of the cap flipping on the bottle makes a moan leave my throat. Damon chuckles and one of his hands goes to my ass. I groan this time, already too deep into my arousal that I can't even be bothered to flush.

Damon is touching me!

I jump a little when I feel the slickness of his fingers in my crack. His hand that's on my ass cheek gently pulls it away from the other, exposing my hole to him. This time I flush. He's looking at my asshole! Oh my god I might just die.

Does he like what he sees? Should I have kept myself hairy? Should I have tanned? Fucking hell, should I have like, used mouthwash down there? God, I think I should have insisted on another shower when we got here.

My thoughts scatter like startled mice when his finger presses against my hole. I groan and drop my head down,

letting it hang between my arms as he works his way inside my body. Just his finger feels too good.

I'm going to be a slut for this feeling. I can already tell.

This is entirely unlike when I use my fingers on myself to prep for the toys. There's something better about this. Another man's heat. The way his other hand gently pats my ass cheeks, as if he's trying to comfort me. He doesn't need to. I'm totally good with a single finger.

He pushes it deep inside me until the rest of his hand stops its progress. It's not enough. I'm so ready for more. I just want his dick inside me. Can I ask for that or is this expected?

Maybe he knows that one finger is too easy because he only glides in twice before he's adding a second. Obviously at the angle he's at, he can reach a whole lot more than I can. It feels very different but the familiarity of it is golden. There's a slight sting. So very little. Probably because I was jumping on my mini vibrator this morning. It's similar in size to his two fingers, I think.

I'm caught off guard by the third though. I groan, my ass immediately clenching at the bigger invasion. Jesus, it feels good! So, so good. He spends some time moving three fingers in and out of me. Spreading them apart and pushing them deep.

I nearly jump out of my skin when he suddenly curls them and brushes my nerve endings with clear intent. I cry out, nearly jumping away from him at the sudden shock of pleasure that courses through my body with fire.

He chuckles and pulls himself out of me. Finding my breath and courage, I look over my shoulder and watch as he wraps his dick in a condom. His eyes find mine while he strokes himself with the lube. Covering his dick.

The dick that's going to be in my ass soon!

His smile is unassuming. Amused. He's so beautiful.

Damon comes closer again. He kicks my knees apart with his and taps my ass with the head of his cock. His other hand

on my hip. I hold my breath when he places his cockhead at my hole and gently, ever so gently, pushes it inside me.

My eyes roll as my arms give out and I faceplant into my comforter with a groan. So good. Perfect dick. These are the thoughts stringing through my mind until he's reached the point where I feel a bit of pain. It bites, burns. The way he stretches me stings and my eyes water.

"You okay?" he asks and I realize I'm whimpering.

Turning my face into the bed to hide the embarrassing sounds I'm making, I nod. He continues to ease his way in, being so fucking gentle I pretend that's why there's tears in my eyes. It feels good even through the pain of it. It's not real pain, just a new discomfort that I'm not used to. Like the first time I used toys.

"Come here," he says as he pulls me up onto my knees. His arms wrap around my torso as if he's hugging me. "That's it, Sage. Now move your ass over my dick."

I whine a little, my hands dropping to his ass cheeks behind me. Closing my eyes, I pull off his dick a little. Not much, but some. Then I push backwards, taking the whole of it in my ass again. "Oh, gosh," I say, my eyes falling shut as I lay my head back on his shoulder. Because he's got my legs spread so wide, I'm at the perfect angle for this. To feel his dick. For him to hold me up. For my head to relax back on him.

He groans when I keep moving, the sounds he makes spurring me on. Encouraging me to keep going. Each slow thrust backwards there's a little less discomfort. The sting fades a little more. The dull burn cools and it starts to really feel good for me. His groans tell me that he enjoys it too.

I ride him until it's only pleasure I feel. My fingers dig into his ass as the fires inside me pick up. My balls are drawn so tight. My dick throbs and I'm a little thankful for the jock keeping me from swinging. Would it hurt to have my balls flying free when they're so heavy and full?

My orgasm crashes over me before I fully expect it to. I cry out and writhe on his dick, grinding my ass back so he's clenched between my tight cheeks.

His weight falls into me, and we move down onto the bed. I'm on my side, though my hips are twisted so my dick is pressed into the blanket. His legs spread between mine, opening me wider though his arms keep me well in his control. Holding me exactly where he wants me.

He's moving again. His hard dick moving over my far too sensitive prostate. It's so intense that I grip him so fucking tight my finger joints strain. It feels like he's forcing the coals that have died down inside me to reignite when they're already spent.

It aches though, the feel of his dick inside me is still so good, even as it makes me cringe with the way he hits my prostate with every thrust. Forcing my body to do what he wants. To take more pleasure right after it's just released.

I'm not that young anymore. My body needs a fucking minute, but Damon is not allowing it to recover. The way he moves, the way he holds me, the way he presses soft kisses to my shoulder and neck, I'm pretty convinced that he's not paying much attention to me. Me, Sage. He knows there's a body under him but his hold on me is far too intimate.

I don't know why I feel this way. Why I'm so sure. But as he coaxes my body into submission, I'm positive I'm not the one he's actually having sex with right now. Not in his head anyway.

Not that I have the brain power to give it much thought or let it bother me. Not with the way my cock is throbbing again or the way he's urging an orgasm to build so soon after the last.

The noises coming from my mouth are indecent at best. I'm begging for him to get me off. To make me come. At some point, he trapped my hands in his hold, too; so I can't even reach down and jerk my dick. Or fuck, even rub it.

He's got me twisted up in such a way that one knee is bent, keeping my left hip from the bed. Meaning that my cock has no contact at all. Nothing but the slick feeling of my underwear. They're already sticky and uncomfortable with the way my cum is drying. I'm just adding more with how much I'm leaking.

"That's it," he says, his voice low and sexy. "Come for me, perfect boy." He's definitely not talking to me at all. That doesn't stop me from doing exactly what he says. I come again. This time, I'm practically shouting as my body convulses. There's a strange feeling of pain in the release since my body was not at all ready for another orgasm so soon after the first.

Damon groans through his orgasm before I've completely come down through mine. I feel a rush of heat spread through my skin as he holds me still so he can empty inside me. Well, into the condom, but he's doing so inside me. I don't know why that's a rush.

His quick inhale has me freezing. No, he definitely wasn't with *me* while we were having sex. His breathing becomes ragged for a second as his arms tighten. Then he releases his hold on me, though he doesn't pull out right away.

I want to ask if he's okay. If he needs me to move. If he wants space. But I'm afraid that my voice will spook him. So I swallow and wait, holding perfectly still.

When he gently pulls out of me, I wait for him to get up and disappear. The seconds tick by and the bed remains completely still. I wait. And wait.

Finally, I can't just lie still like that anymore. My underwear feels awful as my cum dries. Turning over, I glance at him.

Damon is laying on his back, staring at the ceiling. I was right in thinking that he'd been far away. The way his eyebrows are knit together. There's a slightly pained look on his face.

Wait, could that be from me? Is there such a thing as a too tight ass?

Before my anxiety can kick up about this, Damon pulls himself to sitting and drops his face into his hands, his elbows on his knees. What do I say? Or do I stay quiet? Fuck, there should have been a rule book for this!

My breath catches as he moves off the bed. I watch him as he moves to the bathroom, taking his condom off on the way. I close my eyes, not sure what to do right now. How do I make it better? How do I make it all go away?

I'm startled when the bed shifts. Damon's fingers gently pull my jockstrap off and toss it aside. Then with a wet cloth, he very gently cleans the mess I've made on myself. I stare with wide eyes, not breathing as he does. Unsure what to do or say. Why is he doing this? Is this normal? Is it customary for the top guy to clean up the one he fucked?

He doesn't clean the lube from my ass but he does wipe up all the excess from my cheeks and spread through my crack and over my taint. When he's done, he leaves the bed for the bathroom again. I'm still staring when he comes out and gets dressed.

Once he's fully clothed, he meets my eyes. I must be looking at him like a kid just seeing the ocean for the first time because he chuckles. "You okay?"

Me?! "Yes," I say. "You have a great dick."

His smile grows as my face heats again. What's wrong with me?! Why can't I control what comes out of my mouth with this guy?

"You have a nice ass," he says, smirking.

I try to smile but I just don't know how right now. Me? Do I? "I—Thank you?"

Damon chuckles and moves toward the door. His smile fades. "You're okay, Sage? I didn't hurt you?"

Shaking my head, I sit up. The wince that I feel makes me smile at him. Too wide, I think. I can feel it in my cheeks. "I

can still feel it. That was amazing. You can fuck my ass any time.”

And now I want to hide under the bed. I need to just not talk at all.

He sighs. “I’ll... see you tomorrow.” When my eyes light up, he clarifies. “At work. Yeah?”

Oh. Right. I nod. “Yes. Tomorrow. Okay.”

Damon nods. It looks like he wants to say something else, but he doesn’t. offering me a smile that once again doesn’t look real, he leaves the bedroom. I wait. Listening. A minute later, the front door opens and closes.

I’m alone in my house again but the smile on my face doesn’t change. I can’t make it go away. It’s a good thing I don’t have a roommate, or they’d know. They’d know I finally rode a dick, and it was everything I imagined it’d be. It was better. The best.

Leaving the bed, I’m still smiling at the way I can feel my body reminding me that things aren’t supposed to be in my ass for that long. I don’t care at all. I want things *like that* in my ass all the time. Looking down at my spent dick, I muse that maybe a few minutes in between isn’t a bad idea though. Jeeze, that last orgasm was intense.

He made me get off twice!

Stopping in the bathroom, I move the door so the mirror faces the one above the sink. Then I shift to look at my ass in a very awkward and embarrassing position. I just want to see what my asshole looks like now that it’s had a dick in it.

It’s not as tightly puckered and when I shift just right, the ring still looks loose enough that it’s not closed all the way. Stupid that this makes me excited. Stupid that I’m still loving that there’s lube in my ass from when he was inside me just ten minutes ago!

I stand, still grinning like I just won the lottery. I just lost my gay virginity! I want to scream it. For everyone to know that I finally did it. I finally am living the life that’s true to me.

My hookup was with a man, not trying to force it with a woman. I feel good after; not gross.

“I’m pathetic, aren’t I?” I ask my reflection.

It’s just sex. I shouldn’t be this excited over it. But when I step out of my bathroom to get dressed, the reminder in my body that there was a dick in it is enough to have me grinning like a loon for the rest of the night.

Fuck yeah! I just had sex with a hot guy.

Best. Day. Ever.

Six

SAGE



DAMON AVOIDS ME ON FRIDAY, and I obviously don't hear from him over the weekend. Monday he meets my eyes once. Just once. I give him a big smile, which he finds amusing or whatever, and I receive one back. A little one, but it's there all the same. I try to catch his eye a few times during the day, but I'm fairly certain he actively avoids me.

Tuesday I'm feeling frustrated and a little antsy. I want his dick again. I want to feel him and the ache is all gone.

However, he doesn't look at me once. Even when I say hi, he doesn't meet my eyes, though he answers the greeting all the same.

I can feel his bad mood readily enough and I have to think something is happening at home to affect him in such a way. What is he like when he's in a good mood? When he smiles? I'd love to hear him laugh.

Damon Whitaker is gorgeous when he's brooding and contemplating murder—I think I'm only partially joking but sometimes I swear, the look in his eyes could kill—but I bet he's completely irresistible when he's just... himself.

Then again, I might be projecting what I want to believe. My bestie says I do that all the time. I can imagine just about anything and want it with my whole heart enough that I have myself convinced that it's true.

But maybe this is just how Damon is. Maybe there's nothing going on with him and he's just a negative Nancy. Or

maybe a long-ago trauma manifested in his personality like this.

I don't know Damon. He's been working here for almost two months, and I don't know Damon at all. Nothing. Except that he's gay, has a magical dick, and cleans me up after. I know what's on the surface. I don't know where he came from, why he moved to Glensdale, whether he has a significant other.

Oh, no! I really hope he isn't having an affair. Am I the other guy? OHMYGOD, what if he's a closet gay and I'm his... secret hookup?

No, wait. That can't be right. Can it?

"See you tomorrow, Rossi."

I'm startled by Jennie's voice and look at her with owlish eyes. She chuckles. "Get out of your head, you teddy bear. It's not safe to drive like that."

Looking around, I realize I have my hand on the front door. When did I even get here? I feel water dripping down the back of my neck and decide I clearly even managed to get through the shower. Or I'm sweating. Please, don't let it be sweat.

"Bye," I say absently, now a little distressed that I was so lost in my head that I missed an entire chunk of my day.

Sighing, I get into my car and concentrate extra hard on my surroundings. The people in the parking lot moving towards the gym. The traffic isn't too bad right now and I pull out easily enough. I pay extra attention to everything going on around me and ignore everything else in my head until I step inside my house.

When the door is shut, I lean back against it, letting my head hit with a soft thud. I can't be obsessing over the first guy I have sex with. That's like, high school crud, right? I'm older than that. Much older. By more than a decade!

Do not become obsessive about your first hookup!

I pull myself from the door just as there's a knock. It startles me enough that I freeze where I am. Did I imagine that?

My eyes dart around for a second before I bolt into the other room and peek out the window. *Please don't be my mother!*

It's not my mother. There's a black Jetta in my driveway. Damon's black Jetta!

Oh bananas, I really hope I cleaned properly. Raising my hand over my head, I take a quick sniff of my armpit as I make my way to the door just as there's another knock. Louder this time. Deciding that I didn't put on deodorant, but I at least smell of soap, I fling the door open and stare at the most gorgeous man I've ever seen.

Wait. I think that's obsessive. He's just...

"Hi," I squeak and then clear my throat. "Hello, Damon."

There's that smirk. The one that says he finds me amusing. "Hi, Sage. Is this a bad time?"

I shake my head a little too emphatically. "Come in? Do you want to come in? Or did you need—"

"I'd like to come in," he says, still with that smile.

Nodding, I step back and let him inside. I shut the door behind him and wait. He looks around for a second before his eyes meet mine again. They're so pretty.

"You want to have sex again?" I ask, noting the hopefulness of my voice. "It's okay if you're here for something else. Or nothing else? We can just hang out. We can get food, or something. You don't need—"

"Sage," he says, stepping into my space. It's not just my name on his lips that renders me speechless, but his proximity. My cock does not miss the feel of his body heat on mine. "Take a breath, Sage," he murmurs.

I do, letting it whoosh out of me.

“I’m being a little presumptuous, but yes, I’d really like to have sex again.” There’s a pause before he adds, “If I wasn’t clear, I’d like to have sex *with you* again. Now. If you’re up for it.”

“I’m so up for it,” I say and then feel my cheeks heat.

His smile widens. “In the entryway, or would you like to go to your room?”

“My room?”

“Are you sure?”

Am I? This man makes me mindless and babble when trying to speak. “Yes,” I say and take his hand to pull him through the house. Oh, maybe that was too forward. Was that off-putting? Is he going to be angry? Will we fight? Will he leave before he even touches me? Maybe he won’t want to look at me at all now.

His hand on my hip makes me startle. But his lips at my ear as his chest presses firmly to my back makes me heat up stupidly fast. “You’re very high-strung, aren’t you?”

I take a deep breath and shrug. “I... yeah. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. But you can take a breath and relax, Sage. I came to you, remember? I want to be here. For sex. With you.”

His assurance calms me a little. Enough that I believe at least that part of this.

“Undress, pretty boy. Let me see your sexy body again.”

My face heats again. Or is it more? I don’t think I’ve stopped burning since I opened the door. His body releases mine and I strip down. I’m not wearing a jock today. I’m not wearing anything. Did I just skip underwear in my daze after the shower I don’t remember?

“Sit on the bed,” he says.

I move that way, watching as he goes to the nightstand table and pulls out a condom and lube. I swallow, my cock throbbing in anticipation.

“I didn’t get to choke on you last time,” he says quietly as he drops to his knees in front of me.

“If you do, I’m probably going to spill right away,” I blurt.

He smiles and my stomach jumps. Crikey, he’s beautiful.

“No, you won’t,” he says. “You won’t come until I’m in your ass. You’re going to let me choke you down until I’m satisfied, and then I’m going to fuck you. Only when you’re riding my dick are you allowed to come. Understand?”

My eyes are too wide as I stare at him in awe. In horror. Utter disbelief. “How do I stop it?”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“But I—” His hand on my dick stops my words and makes my hips heave off the bed.

“Uh, uh,” he says. “Stay still.”

The whine I let out when he strokes me is pathetic. I don’t stay still, even through the first few strokes. How can I? Damon Whitaker is touching me!

“If you can’t stay still, I’m going to make you.” His eyes flick to mine and I can see that he’s serious. A thrill races through me and my dick leaks. “Keep your ass planted on this bed. Keep your hands on either side of your legs. And you will not come until my dick is buried in your sweet, tight ass. Am I clear?”

I swallow and nod. What choice do I have?

Then his mouth is on me. He wastes no time with his tongue or teasing. He just brings my length to the back of his throat. My hands are tangled in the comforter so tightly that every muscle in my arms strain as I try desperately to hold myself still for him. My jaw already aches from grinding my teeth as I try to hold my orgasm back.

It’s right there. Teetering on the edge.

He swallows my dick to the base, and I cry out. My hand comes off the bed, but he’s obviously paying attention and grabs my hand, slapping it back beside me where he wants it.

It's a true act of strength to abide by his demands. What I'm leaking as he swallows and chokes on my dick—yes, he's making delicious choking and gagging sounds that only make my balls drive tighter to my body—it's more than pre-cum. This is like a pre-entrée. Or maybe a side dish. More than an appetizer, but not quite the full event.

His efforts make me whine and then words begin to tumble out of my mouth as I beg him. I need release. I *need* to come. "It hurts," I whine. "Please, Damon. Please. Please. I need to come. I need it. It hurts."

He doesn't let me go until I'm almost in tears. When he finally pops off, he's smiling at me. His lips graze mine and I groan, my hand moving to my cock. He stops it before I touch myself. "No. This is mine tonight. You don't touch unless I tell you to."

"You're trying to kill me," I say.

He chuckles and gets to his feet. "Hands flat on the bed. Keep your legs spread."

I do as he says and watch him slowly take his clothes off. Slowly. Did I say slowly? It's not exactly a show, but he's aware that I'm raptly watching, holding my breath as he reveals another inch of skin. Will he let me lick him all over? I want to taste every bit of his body.

Then I get to suffer through the torture of watching him jerk his cock. It's so perfect. So incredibly my exact unicorn size. Aches, but doesn't really hurt. Stretches, but not too much. Fills me just right so he hits every inch of sensitive nerve endings, keeps me blissfully aware that he's there.

Damon rolls the condom on and then strokes himself again while he lubes up. "You want me to prep you?"

I shake my head.

"You want to do it?"

I shake my head again.

He doesn't answer as I stare at his cock, watching the movement of his hand. Though he doesn't answer right away,

his hand doesn't stop moving either. "You don't want prep at all?"

I shake my head.

"Look at me, Sage."

It takes a good amount of effort to do so, but I finally tear my eyes from his glorious dick to his eyes. "No prep," I say, breathless. "I... uh, played this morning. I'm fine."

The half smile he gives me makes my stomach flutter. "Move up the bed."

I do. Scrambling in my haste and probably looking like a fool as I get tangled in the blankets. But he follows me right away. There's a thrill in the way he looks at me. Like he's going to devour me. Wreck me. Own me.

"Yes," I moan as I drop to my pillows.

He moves between my legs, pushing them up so my knees are at my armpits. He moves my arms so that they basically tie me into a pretzel with my ass on full display for him. At his complete mercy.

Damon doesn't prep me since I said he didn't need to, but he does make sure I have some lube in my ass, which he gets there by shoving his finger inside me. He doesn't play fair though, because he makes frequent passes against my prostate, making my eyes roll and me jerk and squirm.

"I'm going to have to tie you up, aren't I?" he asks, almost as if he's sad about it.

I don't answer. Too afraid I'll let him see how hard that makes me. The idea of being at his complete mercy so he can do whatever it is he wants to my body. Fuck, I'm going to make myself come just thinking about it.

He lines up. As the tip of him puts pressure at my entrance, I try my best to keep still for him. "Can I come?" I ask. "I'm on your dick now, so I can come, right?"

Damon's chuckle makes me weak. "For today, yes. You can come as many times as you want on my dick."

Then he shoves inside me. Deep. One solid push and I'm crying out as the sudden invasion of his perfect dick demanding room inside me. When I don't allow him in easily, he takes more. It takes only three thrusts of him slamming into my prostate before I come all over myself.

I never stop panting through my orgasm or after. Damon keeps going. He's not fast or particularly hard, but he keeps going in deep, making sure I feel every perfect inch of him. And he always slams my prostate and makes me see painful stars as my body tries to readjust to being overly sensitive now that I've already come.

It knows what to expect now. My body knows that he won't take mercy on me because we lost it too soon. He's going to make me come again.

Because he's hovering over me, I can see his face. I can see the moment he's no longer there. He's not seeing me anymore. He's not with me. His dick might physically be inside my body, but he's not having sex with me anymore.

If I wasn't so wrung out underneath him, I might have been upset about it. If he didn't deliver me the best damn orgasms I've ever felt, I might be offended.

But I asked for sex. Just sex. He can fuck me as often as he wants, give me all the orgasms, and work out some of his anger while doing so. I said nothing about him being invested in me. That's fine. This is all I need.

I completely lose myself in how he uses my body, stirring up another orgasm that sways at the edges until I can't take it anymore. The second is just as blissful as the first, but my body is hypersensitive from being shoved back into arousal so soon that there's a thrill of pain that goes with it.

Damon empties inside my ass shortly after. Another dozen thrusts and he's done, filling the condom.

Then he stills, panting. His eyes are closed and lips parted as he composes himself. It's several long minutes until he finally pulls back.

Once again, he doesn't look at me. Not as he pulls out of my body or leaves to the bathroom, removing the condom as he does. Nor when he comes back and cleans me up. Not when he dresses. Only when he stands at the door and looks at me, telling me he'll see me tomorrow.

Maybe I should feel used. Dirty. Like I'm not good enough for him to admit he's having sex with. All of that should sting but with the way my body aches in the most delicious way, I just don't care. Not today, anyway.

This becomes the pattern for the next few weeks. He's here three or four nights a week; sometimes more, but never less. He delivers me euphoric orgasms, cleans me up, and then leaves without much else.

I'm waiting for the moment I fall for him. It's coming. I can feel it.

It's going to be a disaster.

Seven

DAMON



WE'VE BEEN KISSING Simon since we were kids. Well, younger kids. Our parents would say that we're still kids. Just because we're teenagers doesn't mean we're kids. Try telling that to a freshman, though. We just roll our eyes.

We're not kids. It's been a long time since we were kids.

It's summer, and the sun beats down on us in the backyard while we lay squished together on a lounge chair by the pool. This is the first summer with the big pool and I think we've spent forty hours in it over the last two weeks since school got out. It's by far the best investment our parents ever made!

Simon sighs, his arm shifting on my skin. The sun is too hot and we're already dry. Not our bathing suits, but the droplets that had been on us are.

Simon tans nicely, like his skin is programmed to take it in and reflect it back in the most gorgeous bronze. Declan and I... not so much. We go from white to red, then back to white. And we burn stupidly easy. We spend a lot of time making sure we have sunscreen on.

It's the only time Simon rubs his hands all over us with intention. I mean, we lotion each other too. We don't always ask Simon to. We've never wanted him to feel uncomfortable. Two gay kids asking their straight best friend to rub their bodies can be a little assholish, no? But he doesn't mind. Never complains, or even gives us a look.

Simon also doesn't seem to care if we want to put sunscreen on him. He lets us. He doesn't hate our hands on

him. Sometimes he even asks when he feels he's gotten enough sun for the day.

It makes my growing libido go haywire. I'm not sure which my overly frazzled and horny teenage body likes more—his hands on me or mine on him. Simon has known we're gay since we were eleven and I don't think it's ever occurred to him to be bothered by our closeness.

There was no hesitation in telling him because we shared everything. When he came into our lives, it was natural just to fit him between us. Declan and I were always close. It's hard not to be when we're identical twins that had at one time been a single organism. As kids, we were always in physical contact. Sometimes it was just a brush of our shoulders, our linked pinkies, or something.

But we needed that contact to feel settled. Otherwise it was like a tornado was going off in my mind, a hurricane in Declan's, and together we were a lot of chaos, both mentally and externally. We learned how to self soothe early and that was with each other.

Simon came along and he became part of that. As if our single set of organized cells didn't just break into two, but into three individuals, and someone took that third copy away. We found our way back to each other, but it was different now. He wasn't the third brother he was supposed to be—he was something more, something else entirely.

Something we were obsessed with.

He fits perfectly between Declan and me. I stare at him, his eyes closed, as I brush my fingertips through his hair. He nearly purrs. Melts completely into us. The sound he makes goes straight to my eager cock.

I try to ignore it. Simon doesn't seem to care. But for fuck's sake, it's not fair that our body's sex switch gets turned on so young. What am I supposed to do with this now?

So I ignore it and continue to smooth his hair back. I can feel Declan's hands rubbing over his skin. Softly. Gentle caresses. It's like my hands are there, too. Feeling his silky

skin under the pads of my fingers. The way it's heated from the sun.

Simon's leg moves up and I shift to let him get comfortable. His leg goes between mine and I have to stifle a groan. I'm fine. Everything is fine. My stupid, overactive dick can take a damn chill pill.

Declan snorts and I know he's not only fighting the same thing I am, but he's amused at my internal monologue.

I think I'm going to kiss him.

"We always kiss him."

His answer makes me smirk. He knows what I mean. I can feel the way his heartbeat kicks up a little at the prospect.

"I think you're happy," Simon jokes. I'm not sure which he's talking to. There's a smile on his lips. There's always an easy smile on his perfect fucking lips.

"It's impossible to turn this thing off," Declan complains.

Simon laughs, but we've both noticed that he doesn't seem to have the same issues we do. When he first pointed out that we were always hard now, he just shrugged that maybe his lack of arousal was due to being surrounded by the two of us. "I'm not into guys the way you are. Why would I get turned on?"

It was dampening but not off-putting. Besides, he was still sandwiched between us, not at all upset that our growing hard-ons were pressed against his ass and hip.

Growing up is a pain in the ass. Or in the crotch. Whichever. When you lose control of your damn body, it's a nightmare. Popping a woody in class for no reason? In the grocery store? Walking to school? Hell, at the fucking dinner table with your parents? Yep, welcome to being a teenage boy! I almost envied being a girl. Sure, they have to curl up in a ball every month while their bodies tear themselves apart and bleed everywhere, but at least they can hide their arousal.

Okay, no. I don't want that. I'd rather deal with my errant dick. Damn thing.

“Simon,” I say, digging my hand into his hair and pulling his face up.

He opens his eyes and my dick twitches. Something he notices since, as I said, it’s pressed against his thigh. “You going to take care of that?”

“No,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “Be glad boys don’t turn you into a nympho.”

“You aren’t a nympho.” He laughs. “You haven’t had sex yet, Damon. You don’t even know if you’re going to like it.”

Declan snorts. “What’s not to like about an orgasm?”

Simon rolls his eyes.

“Can I kiss you?” I ask.

“You asked him?!”

I ignore my brother in favor of studying Simon’s amusement. “You kiss me all the time. Why are you asking me now?”

Yes, but those are the same kisses I give my parents. My brother. Licking my lips, I nod. Just once. A single bob. Then I pull his mouth to mine.

And hold him there. I feel his eyes widen more than I see it. His surprise. The way his hands still and then tense. But it all goes away as he sighs against my lips.

There’s no tongue. Just our mouths moving together. I kiss him for a long time until Declan has had enough of being left out. Then he shifts Simon under him and takes over. I’ll hand it to him; he doesn’t dry hump our best friend, which is a feat in itself while kissing.

I keep myself wrapped around them as they kiss, staring at where their lips meet. Loving that Simon lets us do even this.



I WAKE UP GROANING. Declan is sprawled across me, scowling. “Stop dreaming about him,” he says.

“It was your dream,” I say and roll us back to our sides. We tangle together again, trying to hug away the hurt of his continued, prolonged absence. Maybe if we hold each other so tightly we can’t breathe, it’ll all go away.

“Was it my dream?” he asks.

“I think it was mine, actually. This time.”

He huffs, wrapping himself around me more thoroughly. When we’re like this especially, it feels like we’re a single person again. That we never split apart in our mother’s womb. I can’t feel just my legs but four legs, four arms, twenty fingers. I’m not sure if his fingers are scratching my back or mine his. Or whose breath is puffing where.

“I love you,” he whispers.

My chest tightens and I try like hell to hold him tighter. My muscles aren’t happy about it since I’m already straining from continuing to hold this grip. I hate when he hurts.

“Love you more,” I whisper in return.

I’m not sure if the shaky breath is his or mine. Maybe we take it together. Eventually, we get up and pass through the shower. We hug a little longer at our cars before driving in different directions.

He knows without me saying that I’m heading to Sage’s after work. I need the release. I need him to take away the pit in my stomach. Sage somehow manages to do that just by being his squirmy self. So eager. So excitable. So responsive.

I smirk thinking about it.

But fuck, he’s a wiggly little shit. He can’t stay still for the life of him. No matter how many times I threaten to restrain him...

Hmm. Maybe I’ll do that.

“You’re going to tie up your hookup?”

I roll my eyes. *Get out of my head, you damn snoop. Besides, I know you've recently fucked someone. Want to talk about it?*

Silence answers me. I smirk as I pull into the parking lot next to Sage's car.

"No."

I love when he pretends he doesn't like it.

"Stop getting off on my sex life."

Not a chance. You get off on mine. We share everything.

He snorts and I grin as I make my way to the gym. I don't seek Sage out, but there's no way to miss how he bounces around the gym. The man has far too much energy. It just pours out of him in waves. His smile is so damn wide all the time. His eyes wide and happy. Glittering.

He's fucking adorable.

I don't follow him home right away. Instead, I stop at Simon's bookstore and put on my stalker hoodie. At least today I'm not disappointed. I see him as soon as I reach the window and peer in. He's healthy. He looks like he's taking care of himself. I can't see his eyes. I wish I could.

My stomach drops as I stare at him. Turning away, I pull out my phone and scroll until I find the chat with the three of us. If I text him now, will he pull out his phone? Will he read my text? Or does he have the chat muted?

Deciding I can't stomach the idea that he's going to ignore me, I close the chat and drive to Sage's house. My chest is in knots. My eyes burn.

Sage is a distraction when he literally throws open the door. I can't help myself; I smile at his exuberance.

"Hi!" He bounces on the balls of his feet, his smile so damn wide I swear he's shining. "Come in?"

I nod and take a step closer. He backs away as I walk inside, shutting the door while I slip out of my shoes. He takes

my hand as he always does and pulls me through his house. It seems to be our routine.

Once there, he strips and gets on the bed to wait until I decide what I want to do today. I should ask what he wants. I don't. Instead, I tell him, "Lay on your back, diagonally across the bed. Hands above your head. Legs spread."

His cheeks flush. I don't wait to see if he does as I tell him to. He will. After pulling out a condom and lube, I head for his closet and start poking around. Sage doesn't ask while I snoop, in search of something. Something specific and yet not really.

I find a hanger with a few ties on it. Smiling, I grab them and head back into the bedroom. They don't look expensive, but I'll replace them if needed. Standing at the corner of the bed, I take his hand and wrap one tie around his wrist, keeping it tight but not enough to cut off his circulation.

His head is back as he watches me with wide eyes. "I warned you," I tell him. "Can't behave? I'm going to tie up your sexy ass."

The red that colors his face is hot. I keep my smile contained as I secure his second wrist with the second tie. Then I knot them together around the short post at the end of his bed in such a way that the knot won't come undone while he's yanking on it, but we won't have to cut it off, either.

When I come back around and climb on, he's almost shaking in anticipation. And still very, very wiggly. I sigh. "I'm going to need more ties to make you immobile, aren't I?"

"Or a rope," he says, then stares at me in shock, as if he just heard the words come out of his mouth.

"You like that idea, do you?"

He presses his lips together, but as if he doesn't have complete control over his volition, he nods excitedly.

"Noted. But for now..."

I remove the condom from its wrapper and roll it on. When I uncap the lube, he says, "I already prepped."

Chuckling, I shake my head as I lube myself but then I look at him. “Can you roll over?”

Sage nods before he even tries. I watch, amused and oddly turned on more, by how he scoots and wiggles before managing to turn onto his stomach. I pull his body down the bed so his arms are taut and haul his legs out straight before straddling his thighs.

“Are you sure you prepped yourself?” I ask, sticking a finger into his hole. Sage moans, nodding. The muscles in his arms bunch as he tries to move. “Look at how much you like this. You can’t keep yourself relaxed for anything.”

I push my finger in deeper and curl it against his prostate. Sage shouts, his body jumping under me. But I have him in such a way that he really can’t move much. He can still wiggle. I’m determined to find a way to keep him completely fucking still. So he can do nothing but feel what I’m doing to him.

Reaching under him, I wrap my hand around his dick and give him a rough squeeze. He whines and the sound goes straight to my balls. Leaning over him, I put my lips next to his ear. “You don’t come until I tell you to. Understand?”

“Damon,” he whines.

“Not until I tell you to or you don’t get off for the next week. Do you understand?”

The quiet little sob that leaves his mouth is accompanied by his head bobbing. I really just want to see how good he can be. How well he listens. There’s something stupidly intoxicating about denying his orgasm.

Removing my finger, I press my dick into him, slamming my hips down to his ass. The delicious way he cries out has my blood burning. My name never stops falling from his lips.

I slip in and out of my conscious thought while I take him. One moment I hear Simon’s moans, but the next I’m listening to Sage beg for release. In and out. Off and on. I’m not sure which moment I’m in most of the time as I fuck Sage into the bed.

“I need to come. Please let me come. Please, Damon. Please. It hurts. My balls hurt. Please. Please.”

His words are like a symphony in my head driving me on and on and on. My stamina has always been good, but there’s something almost maddening in what his begging does to me. The way I keep driving, keeping my own climax at bay.

When I finally let go, I’m gripping his dick so tightly he’s crying out. He can’t come yet. Not yet. Not until...

I groan as I finish and then pull out. Without shifting Sage’s position, I make my way under him and lick up his angry shaft. “Now you can come,” I tell him and swallow him down.

All the way down. Sage’s hips go crazy as he thrusts hard into my throat. I choke and swallow around him, digging my fingers into his plump ass cheeks. He only has two pumps in him before he holds himself in my throat and empties with force. His cries are exhilarating as I choke on his cum, unable to breathe.

But I don’t push him off. He’s earned this. And fuck, I could get off again with this beast in my mouth. Down my throat. Dominating my airway. Fuck yes, Sage. Take me with you.

Eight

SAGE



I NOTICE the first time Damon stays with me during sex. The entire time. It feels even better than all the rest. Though I swear he's trying to kill me by refusing to let me come when I need to.

It's been three times now that he's tied me up with my hands over my head while he fucks me into oblivion. Painful oblivion. Fuck, not coming when you need to is a sick, sexy kind of torture. I don't know if I love it or hate it.

What I'm loving right now is that Damon is still here. He's already cleaned me and is examining my wrists. I bought a rope for him to use but it's made my wrists raw. They hurt and not in a good way.

His fingers going over the skin makes my stomach flutter. His eyes meet mine for a second and he leaves the bedroom for the bathroom again. When he returns, it's with lotion that he's reading the back of.

Damon sits back on my stomach, his now mostly soft dick laying across my skin. I want to touch him. Will he let me? I want to know what he feels like.

I'm distracted when he begins to gently rub lotion into my wrists. "We're going back to the ties," he says. "I don't want to actually hurt you."

"I don't mind," I say.

"I do. Sex should be good, only leaving marks that we want. I don't want ones like these on you."

How am I supposed to take that? Does that mean something? The way my stomach flutters and my chest warms, I want it too. I can't want that, though. I can't.

“Maybe we can try the ropes again in a different way?”

His pretty eyes meet mine. “No.”

I bite my lip. I'm so damn surprised when he takes my lip between his teeth that I moan. Damon chuckles. “I'm going to keep tying you up, Sage. You move far too much. I want you perfectly still while I use your body. I want you helpless under me.”

My head is dizzy with this promise.

“Does that sound good?” he asks.

“Yes!” I say far too loudly, then shiver and reach for his legs, gripping him tightly. “I want that so much. I'll do anything. Please let me come, though.”

He chuckles. The sound goes straight to my balls.

Damon clicks the lotion shut and moves off me. I almost whine at the loss but I'm taken completely off guard when he lays next to me. My breath comes in shallow, short bursts as I try to think what this means. What am I supposed to do right now? Should I stay quiet? What is he thinking?

He sighs and tugs me to him. “You're a very loud thinker, Sage. Stop thinking so much. Just enjoy the moment, all right?”

Swallowing, I nod and try to shut it all down. It doesn't work. Every bit of me twitches. My foot. My fingers. Then my thigh. My arm.

Damon laughs. “Jesus, Sage. Do you consume too much sugar?”

“No. I'm just... excitable. Over hyper or something, the doctors called it.”

“Ah.” He shifts and wraps me in his arms, his legs, his entire being. His voice is soft when he speaks. “Listen to my

heartbeat and relax. Think of nothing else but my heartbeat and my breathing. Can you do that?”

“No,” I say, but turn my attention to doing just that. It’s impossible. Unfeasible. Ridiculously hopeless. And yet, I find myself lulled into a moment of peace where all I’m aware of is Damon. It feels good. Like... happiness. The way he fits against me. How his steady breaths calm me. It feels so good.

Too soon, he pulls away. There’s a soft smile on his lips as he touches mine with this thumb. “Much better. I’ll see you tomorrow. Okay?”

I nod, staring at him. Wanting to say something but too afraid of what’s going to come out of my mouth. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep it in. I don’t want to push him away. A feeling in my gut says I will if I get too... invested.



THIS CARRIES on for a few more days. Damon comes over every single day after work, ties me up with my ties, refuses me an orgasm until he’s done using me—and fuck, he can go on forever!—then holds me for a while until I’m completely lax and dazed in his arms.

Then he leaves.

But there’s another very distinct difference now—he’s never in his head anymore. He’s looking right at me, talking to me through my incessant whining and begging, my pleading for him to let me come.

When I get too close, his hand wraps painfully around my dick as he pulls out of me. Do I sob when he does that? Yes. Like a damn child!

Now it’s Saturday and I don’t expect him here at all. This is an after work exercise. Not a weekend activity. So I go for a run and then come home, but I’m far too jittery to sit in the house.

Taking my keys and phone, I head for the door just as my phone rings. This time I have the presence of mind to look at it. My mother. Dread, dark and gripping, settling in my chest. I hit the reject button and stuff the phone in my pocket.

No way I'm letting her bring me out of this good mood. There's a guy in my bed delivering me more pleasure than I've ever felt. In his weird way, he takes into account my needs. My wellbeing. He makes sure I'm taken care of physically.

He accepts that I'm gay!

My phone doesn't stop ringing as I drive four miles deeper into the subdivision I live in. I contemplate leaving my phone in the car but decide against it. What if someone else calls me? What if Damon texts? He never has before, but that doesn't mean he can't, right?

Bounding up the walk, I knock on the door.

It opens a minute later, and River greets me with a smile.

"Hi," I say and wrap them in my arms. They're smaller than me by about four inches. Hovering somewhere just under six feet. "Am I interrupting?"

"No," they say, patting me on my chest and letting me in. "Sparrow just got to sleep, though, so keep your voice down, okay?"

I nod and follow them into the house, where I find Jordan sitting on the couch with their baby in his arms. He looks up at me with a wide grin.

Sparrow is only five weeks old. He's a tiny little thing. I'm right in love.

"Hey, man," Jordan says, his voice quiet. "Did I miss your text?"

I shake my head and sit next to him, being mindful not to drop as I usually do. He very carefully places their little bundle in my arms.

For a minute, I stare at the sleeping face. I'm not sure which DNA made this little one; they don't know either. Sometimes I see both Jordan and River in him. They used IVF

to fertilize donor eggs and then a surrogate, emphasizing that they didn't want to know whose sperm fertilized the egg. They wanted a mix implanted.

The result was this perfect little boy.

“What happened to you?” River asks as they sit on Jordan's lap. They take my hand from where it rests on Sparrow and touch the still healing part of where the rope chaffed my wrist a week ago. This spot had bled a little. Apparently, I was completely unable to settle while Damon took me. Hell, I can still feel the reminder of him in my ass.

I quickly push that thought away as I glance at the sleeping newborn. Not appropriate right now!

“Nothing,” I say and pull my hand back.

“That's a lie,” River says, narrowing their eyes on me.

Sighing, I try to contain the excitement inside me. Instead, I focus on Sparrow. I've been told that my overeager energy can be disrupting, so I take extra care to try to tamp it down.

“I... I've been sleeping with someone.”

“A guy?” River asks, grinning.

My cheeks burn as I nod. I can't contain the smile. “Yeah.”

“Is it everything you imagined it would be?” Jordan asks, resting his chin on River's shoulder.

For a minute, I study them. Jordan and I have been friends since high school. He was the only friend who knew me for what I am. Even back then, he knew I was gay and that my family wouldn't accept that. He knew that my mother insisted that I have a girlfriend and found me one. He knew that I was miserable.

Jordan was the only person who ever truly encouraged me in everything I did. I had his unwavering support in anything that made me happy. It was because of him that I finally went to a therapist and found the courage and strength to admit my truth and live the life I want to live.

He met River in college. I watched him go through his own existential crisis because while River identifies as neither gender (or both on certain days), Jordan freaked out about what's in their pants. But he loved River with everything in him. Even from the early days.

We used to stay up for hours talking about it. His distress and confusion were painful to watch, to witness, while I was helpless to do anything but lend him my support and my shoulder.

As cliché as it sounds, love won in the end. Jordan loved River far too much to care what they sported under their clothes. That didn't mean we didn't have some awkward conversations as he worked out his own feelings on the matter.

I've also witnessed a few of their conversations on it. Not just on the sexual stuff, but on other things that might have been better off in a private setting. River explained they had an arrangement. Whenever one of them was uncomfortable, insecure, or otherwise needed to express something, they stopped what they were doing and talked about it.

Honestly, it always made me long for what they had. Their connection, even in the early days of their relationship, was so strong that I sometimes thought I could feel it. Their love was so great, that I was sure I could physically see it around them like a cloud.

They trusted me in those moments when they needed to speak, so they never saw the need to go somewhere private. Their friendship and relationship are the only real example I've ever had in my life of what love really is.

Secretly, or maybe not so secretly, I long for what they have in a most desperate way. Very, very secretly, I kind of want it with Damon.

“Yes,” I say, sighing. “Better. So much better.”

“Better than toys?” River asks, winking at me.

My cheeks heat, but just a little. I'm overly conscious of a baby in my arms. “Yeah. I never knew... I hated sex before,” I

say quietly and shake my head. “This is like something entirely different.”

Jordan grips my hand tightly. “I’m so proud of you, Sage.”

His words fill me with love for him. This is what I was supposed to have from my family. But the only place I ever got it was from my best friend. “Thanks. I think that... maybe I’m into it more than he is,” I admit.

“You have to participate a little,” River teases.

I laugh, cheeks heating. “Uh, no. Not that. The sex part he’s into just fine.” I think. “I mean... I think I’m into him more than he is me.”

“He’s not a closet gay, is he?” River asks, disapproval in his voice. “Is he cheating with you? Do I need to—”

Laughing nervously, I shake my head. “Well, I guess I don’t know all those answers. I’m positive he’s not in the closet. From what I’ve seen, he’s pretty open about his sexuality. But... I don’t know the other answers. Maybe?” I debate telling them what I know. What I’ve witnessed. When I look up to see the way they’re looking at me, I cave and let it all spill out.

We’re interrupted once when Sparrow wakes up. Jordan leaves to change him and returns with a bottle. He offers the baby and bottle to me, and I eat up this moment of domesticity. When Sparrow is settled again, River takes my hand, making me look at them.

“I can already tell you’re falling for this guy, baby boy. You need to be honest with him. I get that you’re excited to get the dick you’ve always wanted, but it’s not worth a broken heart. There are plenty of dicks in the world.”

Sighing, I know they’re right, but my mind is kind of set on Damon. Now that I’ve voiced everything out loud, I can see that. I know it to be true. When I look at Jordan, I think he knows. The smile on his handsome face says he knows. He kisses River’s cheek.

“Sometimes when you meet the person you’re supposed to be with, you just know,” he says. River shifts to look at their

husband. “Just think of all the reasons I kept telling myself to run away from you. Everything about you terrified me and threw my entire existence into question. In the end, I loved you more than all that fear. I knew you were mine. I knew you were with absolutely everything in me. Sometimes you just know.”

“There’s a big difference in our situations,” River says. “I knew you were mine too. I’m not sure Damon is in the same spot. Your fight and mine, it was the same, though you struggled with everything about me while I fought to convince you I’m a person, not a gender.”

Jordan winces. “I hate thinking about how stupid I was,” he grumbles.

River gives him a sweet smile. “You weren’t stupid. This wasn’t a matter of gay or straight for you. It wasn’t about sexuality. I turned everything you knew about people, the world around you, and yourself inside out. I was a unicorn and you’ve been told your whole life that I don’t exist. Damon isn’t confused about anything in the same way, from how it sounds. His struggle, whatever it is, is something entirely different.”

“We don’t know that,” I say.

River looks at me, giving me a demure smile. “Sweetheart, it sounds to me like you two need to have an actual conversation that doesn’t involve dick.”

I flush. Yes, they’re right. Everything they’ve said is right. But that doesn’t stop the pit from growing in my stomach at the thought of actually bringing it up. Because I’m sure that if I do, that’s it. It’s over.

I don’t want it to be over. Not now. Not ever.

If he doesn’t feel the same way I do, it’s going to hurt too much and I’m just not ready for that.

Nine

DAMON



“I THINK I’m going to go out,” Declan says.

I glance at him, shifting just slightly so I can look at his face from where we lay in bed. There’s something slightly different about our hold these last few days. It’s still completely tangled and somewhat desperate, but there’s almost a note of resignation in it.

We haven’t heard from Simon in two months. We stopped trying to get in touch a month ago. The pain doesn’t stop. It doesn’t get easier to live with, though I’m learning how to push it aside for a little while at a time.

When it comes back, I feel like I’m going to fall apart completely. That’s when the rage takes over. I seriously wonder if I’d actually murder Stommer if he was near during those moments. It’s frightening how irrational I am when my fury comes roaring back to me after I ignored it for a while.

No matter what I do, no matter how much time goes by, nothing changes. Sometimes I forget when I walk in our front door and look for Simon. Occasionally my mind plays tricks on me, and I’m sure I catch a whiff of him in bed. Sometimes I can pretend that he’s in the kitchen, rummaging around in the fridge.

The way I can’t catch my breath after is a bit alarming. It’s like my body forgets how to breathe and there’s a moment of panic that I think I might die.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

Declan sighs. “Wilder’s. Gay bar down the road. Want to come?”

I consider it. Really, I do. We could hook up easily. Twins dancing together always gathers attention. But that feels like far too much energy.

Shaking my head, I say, “No. Have fun.”

He nods but doesn’t move. Just as my mind starts to wonder and I think he’s changed his mind, Declan pulls away from me. There’s a brief moment where I want to pull him back and ask him to stay. He would. Just like I would go if he really wanted me to.

Declan pauses, waiting for me to ask. He looks at me, studies my face. I wave him off. “Go. Or I will change my mind.”

The smile he gives me isn’t real in the least. I listen to him move around our room, into the closet to change. At the door as he slips into his shoes. The door opens and closes.

Silence falls around me. Gripping the blanket in my fists, I squeeze my eyes closed and try to clear everything. No anger. No sadness. No loneliness.

When I can’t take the silence any longer, I grab my phone and pull up the streaming app. Because I have no self-control, I log into the settings to see when the last time Simon’s logged in. My stomach falls when I see he hasn’t in months. Many months.

Why does that bother me? Why do I even care? It’s just mindless shows.

Because I am feeling a little stalkery and possessive, I start systematically going through all of Simon’s logins. His credit card has a recent fuel charge of \$38.02. He couldn’t get the even number at the pump. There’s already a pending payment to clear the charge.

But when I click on it, I see it’s from an unknown bank number. He opened a new account?

A sick feeling forms in my stomach as I open the bank app and sign in, my heart pounding as the circle spins. Did he change his login? He changed banks entirely, right? He needed to erase us from his life.

But it opens and I almost let out a sob. There's almost \$30,000 in his account. I click on the activity to see that he rarely has any money going out, only deposits. The last one from Stommer was July 1. Every week since then, he's had a deposit of \$653.12.

That's not a huge amount. What did he tell us he was hired at? \$40,000 a year? Is that worth being the manager of a bookstore? I suppose if it's your first job ever, that's not a bad deal, right?

I sign out and stop snooping. Going back to the streaming app, I scroll until I find something mundane to watch. It's not meant to keep my attention, so my mind rolls lazily through nothing as my eyes train on the television.

Simon is doing fine without us. He doesn't need us. That hurts, maybe worse than anything.

While I'm wondering what he's doing right now, I feel a moment of bright, hot panic race through me and I sit upright, my tablet falling to the floor with a *thud*. My vision loses focus as I gasp for breath, my mind going haywire with fear.

No condom. I haven't been using a condom. What the fuck am I doing? What am I—

Wait. I have been using a condom. There hasn't... oh.

Declan!

Silence and then he's breathing easier again. Jesus, this man is going to give me a heart attack.

"Clean."

"Fuck's sake," I mutter and reach for the tablet. Thankfully, the rubber case around it kept it from cracking. Settling back in, I'm monitoring my brother instead of thinking about Simon. That's a bit of an improvement, right?

I mean, I'd kept myself as checked out with him as I could because I knew he was going to hookup and I'm not in the mood to get hard right now. But fuck, no condom? What's he trying to do here? This is a new kind of reckless.

“Sorry.”

I humph and stare at the screen. That's where I remain for the rest of the night. Keeping an eye on my brother and watching the figures move on whatever show this is.

Declan gets home close to midnight. He strips, showers, and climbs into bed, curling up against my back. We lay in silence, with the only sound being the show I put on.

“You want to talk about it?”

“No,” he says. “I... fucked up. He says he's clean, so I'll get tested tomorrow on campus.”

“You don't sound concerned anymore,” I point out.

He snorts. “I don't have the energy to be concerned, Damon.”

Clicking the show off, I roll to face him. He looks so incredibly sad. His eyes are listless. He's completely slack in my arms. “Love you,” I say.

His lips tick up slightly. “Love you too.”

Do we say it just to hear the words? Usually, we tell Simon and he responds. We don't usually say it to each other, because we don't need to. We can feel each other in a far more intimate way. I *know* Declan loves me. I don't need to hear the words from him.

Except, maybe I do. Maybe I just need to hear the words from someone who does.

There's a part of me that keeps thinking *we'll get through this; we'll get through this*. But I don't want to get through anything. I want Simon to come home. I'm almost so desperate for it that I don't even care if he brings Stommer along.

Almost.



OVER THE NEXT COUPLE WEEKS, my brother and I disappear from the house around the same time. I can feel it inside me that he's doing the same thing I am. Filling the void in our chests and lives with someone else. Someone we're not sharing.

When I think about it, it's kind of weird. I'm not sure that Declan and I have ever *not* shared someone. Even when we were choking on separate dicks, we were next to each other. Even when we were fucking, it was in the same place.

This is the first time we're fucking outside of the other's presence. It's... weird. I don't hate it, but the more often I'm actually seeing Sage instead of Simon, I swear, there's a longing inside me for Declan, too. I don't think it's sexual. Not in the same way I enjoy fucking Sage.

But I need my brother there. His absence is almost as loud as Simon's.

Yet, I kind of like not seeing Simon under me. Because he's not there. He's never going to be there. I've lost him entirely and imagining him there only hurts more. Not that I can always help myself. Sometimes I slip and I'm not sure why.

As I did tonight. It'd been weeks since I saw Simon under me instead of Sage. Which, really, Simon and Sage are nothing alike. Sage is easily thirty pounds heavier, bulkier, wigglier. Everything about their shape is different. Hell, everything about the way they speak or moan or make any sound at all is different.

There's no mistaking Sage for Simon. Not even a little bit.

But after I unload and the vision of Simon fades, I'm left feeling dizzy and a little sick. Swallowing hard, I slip out of Sage and move down his body to choke on his cock. He immediately reacts because the man is so fucking responsive, it's heady. He releases with a shout as soon as I swallow him

down and begin gagging on his girth. Fuck, his cockhead is fat. I love it.

I release him and pull back, resting my face against the inside of his thigh while I catch my breath. Fuck, he doesn't even smell like Simon. What's wrong with me? Why do I have to continue to punish myself like this?

Moving from the bed, I dump the condom in the trash and return with a wet cloth to clean up Sage. He's quiet and still, which almost never happens. I didn't even tie him up tonight. I wanted to, but I was too... I don't know.

That's probably why I slipped into pretend land where I'm making love to my best friend. The thought makes me sick as I bring the cloth back to the bathroom, wiping myself up on the way. I'm never going to have the future I want with him. Never.

I need to stop pretending it's going to happen. That's not an option. If for no other reason than he doesn't want it.

Nausea rolls over me and I pause for a second to let it pass. Who knew not having your love returned was so painful?

I fall into bed next to Sage and we lay in silence. He doesn't move. For a very long time. When this finally registers, I turn to face him. His eyes are closed but I can see the aggrieved look on his face.

"What's wrong?" I ask, brushing his damp hair from his face. "Did I hurt you?"

He presses his lips together before shaking his head.

"That's not very convincing."

Sage takes a deep breath and looks at me, though his eyes only meet mine for a second. They're trained on my mouth and then he ducks his head further so he's not looking at my face at all. "I thought... I thought you were enjoying this."

Frowning, I say, "I am."

"With me."

"Yes," I say, smiling a little. "I'm aware of who I'm with."

His eyes flicker up to mine and away again. “Are you?” he whispers.

Oh. I pull him close, my hand in his hair. “Look at me.” He does and I can see the hurt in his eyes now. Fuck’s sake. “I’m sorry. This is going to sound lame but it has nothing to do with you.”

“It’s not you, it’s me?”

I snort. “As I said: lame. But at least sometimes, that’s the case. I swear, Sage, this is entirely on me.”

“I didn’t... do something wrong?”

Jesus, this man. But he’s asking in such a way that I feel like he’s been told that before. I frown. “No, Sage. I’m in a really bad place right now.” I tip his face up because he keeps looking down. “Did you know that I’ve never slept with the same man more than once?”

His eyes widen. “How many men?”

I smirk without answering. “Listen. I’m in no way able to offer you more than fucking. But I like what we do. I like how excited you are. How much you smile. How eager you are to please. The way you beg to come.”

He grumbles. “You’re mean.”

Grinning, I rub a thumb over his lip. “I’m enjoying exploring some things with you, like tying you up. I want to do more of that. But this is all I can give you, Sage. Please understand that if I even considered trying anything more right now, I’d be hurting you a lot. I don’t want that and you don’t deserve that.”

Sage stares at me for a long time. He’s such an open book that, now that I’m looking, I can see that this might mean a lot more to him than it does me. It would be kinder to end it now. Especially now that I see the way he’s looking at me.

I’m selfish enough that I don’t want to.

“Can we be friends too?” he asks with so much hope in his voice that I feel like I’m dealing with a puppy again.

“Yeah,” I say and I’m surprised to feel that I mean it. “I’d like to be friends.”

He nods. “So we can do friend things too?”

“What did you have in mind?”

Sage sits up, a smile on his face once again. “Want to put together a puzzle with me?”

For a minute, I think he’s joking. But the way he’s staring with his wide golden brown eyes, his big smile, the slight blush on his cheeks... he’s not joking at all.

When’s the last time I did a puzzle? Have I ever done a puzzle?

I’m surprised again when I find myself nodding. “All right.”

Sage beams and jumps out of bed. No, really. He *jumps* out of bed. Excitable puppy indeed.

He doesn’t dress as he leaves the room, his junk swinging between his legs. Well, at least I can look at that when I want to. While I enjoy being mostly naked, I’ve gotten used to underwear, so I slip mine back on and follow him out. I don’t find him in the main part of the house, so I head back into the hallway.

He’s in what I thought was an office. As I step in the doorway, he’s still butt naked as he sets up a card table. Then he opens the closet door and I’m faced with shelves. A whole lot of shelves. They’re stacked with boxes of all shapes.

The man looks at me shyly, his face heating deliciously. “I like puzzles,” he says quietly. “I have a lot. Want to pick one?”

It’s clear that he wants me to, so I move into the room to stand next to him. He’s fidgeting because he’s nervous, so I wrap an arm around his waist and pull him close, kissing his cheek. “I’ve never seen so many in one place.”

“I love to do puzzles,” he admits. “It’s calming. The patterns and repetition allow me to relax.”

“You don’t relax?” I ask, teasing.

He flushes deeper and Jesus, I want to lick him. Instead, I press another kiss to his cheek, this time hitting the corner of his mouth. “I like that you’re bouncy,” I tell him quietly. “I like to tie you up and force you to be still so I can fuck you properly.”

His breath catches.

“But you’re still so damn wiggly. We’re going to have to do something about that.”

He nods, his eyes unfocused. Grinning at how easy it is to get him ready for sex, I pull him back to what we’re doing. The closet is seriously filled with every kind of puzzle—normal cardboard, wood, wooden shapes, 3D of different materials. There’s even a few paper and metal ones. “Which is your favorite?”

Sage blinks a few times and turns his attention back to the closet. “I want you to choose one.”

I could just choose at random, but I think I’ve upset him enough tonight by checking out of us fucking to mentally be with someone else. His hurt actually bothers me. I don’t want to do that again. He’s already self-conscious about his puzzles.

I take a few minutes and pull some out, looking at the picture and the piece count. Their shapes. I finally choose one that’s shaped like a sea turtle with lots of little images inside. The way Sage beams at me has me smiling.

Ten

SAGE



I DON'T TALK to Jordan and River about Damon again, even when they bring him up. I know that I'm making mistakes on many levels. Damon told me that he isn't in a position to give me anything more than sex. He said it outright. I believe him. I really, truly do. Everything I've observed about him since he stepped foot in the gym on his first day supports that.

Which is why I'm constantly kicking myself when I ask him to hang out. He almost always agrees, something that delights me to no end. It gets my hopes up that there could be something more.

Our evenings together always involve sex. He's gone back to using my ties because he doesn't like how the rope chafes. I'm not upset about the change back because my wrists were sore for weeks. The way it rubbed my skin raw was not fun.

There's something stupidly exciting about him tying me up. It's thrilling. To be restrained. To be at his mercy. I love everything about it.

I love spending time with Damon. Even though I shouldn't love it as much as I do. I know that. I know I'm setting myself up for heartache because *I know* that this time we spend together means something very different to me than it does to him.

But I can't stop myself. Not from staring at him while we work. When he catches me, I blush furiously, even as he smirks and goes back to what he's doing. We talk at work now. Joke a little. Sometimes, we even hang out at work, having our

clients close so we can talk while they do whatever we tell them to.

I love the easy way we've kind of fallen into this routine. Every afternoon when we get off work, he tells me if he'll be over or not. Most of the time, he is. Sometimes he comes by after he stops at home.

But in all this time we're spending together, I know very little about him. I know he has a brother he's close with. They're roommates. I know he recently finished his degree, and that's what brought him to Glensdale. I know that something that hurt him deeply recently went down in his life and that's why he's so angry.

He's still angry but I think he's learning to deal with it better. I'd like to think that maybe my proposition for sex helped with that. That might be a little arrogant on my part, but maybe, right?

That's all I know, though. To be fair, we don't spend time talking about our personal lives. We talk sex and puzzles. We talk work and fitness and nutrition. My favorite thing is when we collaborate on ideas concerning work. Different regimens and routines. It's fun to see what we learned differently and how our ideas work together.

The first Saturday in October, I'm woken by my bed moving. My eyes fly open with my heart racing as I think someone's here to murder me. I laugh in hysteric relief to find Damon crawling onto my bed. "You really should lock your doors," he says.

"I—" I don't even know why I didn't. Were my hands full last night? Did I not follow Damon out and lock up behind him? "I don't know what happened, but I swear, I normally do. Right after I walk in!" I don't add because if I don't, there's no barrier between me and my mother. She'll barge right in.

"Hmm," he answers as he slowly strips off his clothes in front of me. My gaze is locked on how he's revealing his sexy skin. My mouth salivates. I want to lick him. So badly! Why haven't I licked him yet?

“Stop touching yourself,” he says, and my hand freezes where it’s wrapped around my dick. I hadn’t even noticed I started, but I pull my hand away. He nods in approval. “So, I’ve been doing some research,” he says and reaches for a bag I hadn’t seen until just then. He pulls two lengths of rope.

Not the rough kind. These almost look like paracord. But thicker. One is purple and the other is green.

“Want to try this with me?” he asks.

I throw my blankets off and nod excitedly. The idea of being restrained by him is fucking exhilarating. My dick leaks as if there’s an extra hole in it.

Damon nods and pulls out his phone. I watch without seeing the screen as he pokes around and then props it on the pillow next to me. “I’ve never tied someone up like this before, so it’s probably going to be a little rough. You trust me?”

“Yes!” I say as I hover in front of him on my knees.

He chuckles and has me kneel on my haunches. I watch, mesmerized, as his hands move the ropes over my skin. Sometimes he’ll stop and study the picture. Sometimes his attention moves between the screen and the ropes. Every few minutes, he’ll look at my eyes and check in. Making sure it doesn’t hurt anywhere.

I know I shouldn’t be falling for him right now, but the way he’s so conscious about how he’s tying me and how I feel about it just does things to me. I’ve never had that before. It was always me checking in. To make sure she’s happy or why she’s upset. What I can do to make it better. If something feels good.

There’s never been anyone to ask me these questions in return. Never.

The ropes go across my chest, one double line over my pectorals, and a triple line under them. There’s a single rope that goes over each shoulder. On either side, they wrap around my biceps in three different places that come together at my ribs, holding my arms close to my side. Though I can’t see it,

the ropes continue down my forearms to my wrists, where they're secured behind me. Again, I can't tell, but I think the ropes somehow cross along my back a few times and then hold my wrists with the ropes that go over my shoulder. But there are still loose ropes at the joint between my arms and my chest.

Damon's hand travels down my back, and I shiver. He moves in front of me, his pretty gray-green eyes locking with mine. "Feel okay? Nothing hurts?"

"Feels like I'm tied up," I say, grinning.

He chuckles. His fingers along my jaw have me nearly moaning as he gently touches my face. "But do you hurt anywhere?"

I shake my head.

Damon nods. "Okay. Let's lay you back so I can finish."

"Finish?" I ask, looking at the ropes hanging from my ribs.

"Yep. I told you. You're far too squirmy. You can't control yourself." His face is right in mine when he lays me down. I'm breathless as I stare at him with wide eyes. "I want you helpless so I can fuck you and you can't move an inch."

An excited shiver races down my body. He grins.

"You like that idea, don't you, Sage?"

I nod.

He chuckles and continues looking between his phone and the ropes. I watch, enthralled, as he ties me just how he wants me. He has both of my legs bent. Not uncomfortably, but in a position that keeps me completely open for him. My face is hot while he ties the ropes from my chest to just under my knees.

You'd think this would be it. Nope. With two shorter lines of rope, he then ties my thigh to my calf, hooking the rope under the arch of my foot. On both sides. When he's done, he sits back and looks at me, a satisfied smile on his face.

"Feel all right?" he asks.

I take inventory, but don't feel like there's anywhere biting into me. I'm not bent or twisted in such a way that it hurts. Even laying on my arms is fine. I nod.

He mimics the movement, his eyes still traveling over my body. "You're so sexy like this, Sage. You have no idea."

Another shiver travels over me, and I flush. That only means sexy. Not anything else!

He picks up the bag and pulls out something he's wrapped in a piece of cloth. When he lets me see it, it's a little silicone ring. "Are you familiar with what this is?" he asks.

"No." My brows knit together as I try to figure it out.

"It's a cock ring. To prevent you from orgasming until I want you to."

"Oh no," I say, already feeling myself begin to whine.

He crawls over my body and for a moment, I forget I can't move. And I can't. At all. I stare with wide eyes as his smile grows. "Are you familiar with safe words?"

I shake my head again.

"It's a word that we agree upon that if you say it at any time, it means you want me to stop whatever it is I'm doing immediately. And I will. Everything stops. I won't be upset or punish you or anything for using it, but we will talk about it so I know exactly what it is you didn't like. Do you understand?"

I nod. "What's it for? What are you going to do?"

"I'll tell you what I'd like to do and if you're okay with it, then we'll proceed. If not, I'm more than happy to keep you just like this and fuck you until you're screaming to come."

A whimper falls from my lips, but I nod eagerly.

"You mentioned you have toys. Where are they?"

Swallowing, I glance at the side of the bed. "There's a drawer under my bed."

Damon backs away and moves off the bed. I watch as he pulls out all my toys. There aren't a lot. Just three different

dildos, a couple different sized butt plugs, and a vibrator wand. He sets them on the bed.

Then he climbs back on so he's between my spread legs. My dick jumps in excitement. "Here's what I want to do to you, Sage: I want to put this cock ring around your big, leaking dick. Then I want to use your toys on you, bringing you so close to orgasm over and over, you're going to feel like you're coming apart. Then I'm going to fuck you while I use this vibrator against your dick. And again, bring you painfully close to orgasm, but never let you reach that satisfaction. Once I've filled my condom while I'm buried in your ass, I'll take your cock ring off and swallow you down so I can choke on your cum while you fill me with your release."

His words make my entire body tremble. I swear, even my toes are trembling where they're curled.

"Are you okay with that?" he asks.

I nod.

"We'll agree on a safe word. It can't be 'no,' 'stop,' 'don't,' or anything that generally means stop. From what I've read, many times when you say those in these moments, you don't really want it all to stop. That's not to say that people just say them and don't mean them. I'm talking about this particular situation. Between you and me. So, if you say anything like that, I'm not going to stop. What word do you want to use if you want me to stop?"

"Pepsi," I say.

He blinks at me. "Pepsi?"

Nodding, I say, "I hate Pepsi. It's a gross bubbly sugar drink that makes you burp and tastes like corn syrup. It's gross."

Damon chuckles. "Okay. You say 'Pepsi' and everything stops. Obviously, I can't untie you quickly, but everything else stops. I'll untie you after."

"I don't want to be untied."

He moves to get between my legs and settles in as if this is going to be a long ordeal. I'm nearly whimpering already and he hasn't touched me.

"So, you're okay with everything I said I want to do to you?" he asks, running his fingers over my bare skin. The sensitive places between my thigh and groin.

"Yes. I'm more than okay with it. Do it all, Damon. Do everything. I want everything."

Damon chuckles again, bowing his head. His hair falls into his face, but I'm easily distracted as he runs his fingers along my crack. My body tries to jerk or jolt or something, but I'm held firmly in place. Something he doesn't miss and grins at.

Taking my cock in his hand, he slides on the cock ring, stretching it wide to fit down my length and over my balls. When he puts it in place, I feel like I'm being choked. Like my throat is being choked. I whine and try to wiggle again, as if I can find some position that will relieve the feeling.

The pleasure at having me helpless before him makes Damon smile wickedly. "Want to be blindfolded?" he asks.

I must be possessed because I nod. Damon moves and returns with one of my scarves. He's gentle and careful not to get my hair caught in the knots.

"Now all you can do is feel," he says, his voice close to my skin. I can feel his breath over my lips, but he doesn't kiss me.

The popping of the lube bottle is the next thing I hear. Then I wait. Listening to nothing but my blood pump in my ears. He's not touching me. I don't feel any movement at all.

Then his hand is on my ass a moment before he's shoving in a butt plug. I gasp in surprise as it settles into place, my ass clenching around it. His hand remains on my ass, but the other moves to my cock, rubbing up and down it. Tweaking the loose skin. Pinching my slit. Fondling my balls.

I whine a little, and then he's pulling the plug out. I don't hear anything for another minute and it's sudden when he shoves something else in my ass. A dildo. In one deep thrust, he's got it wedged inside me. His hand moves from resting on

my ass cheek to gripping my dick as he slowly fucks me with the toy.

“You have no idea how hot this is,” he says.

I shudder at his words, trying to concentrate on my breathing. This is the smallest dildo. It’s a little bigger than the plug. It was my first.

He’s slow with it, using it to stretch me.

I’m not sure how he manages it, but it feels like maybe he’s got a third hand. He never releases my cock, but the little dildo vacates my ass and the next is shoved in without more than a second between.

I moan, trying to buck up into him. Trying to push down harder on the fake dick. But I can’t move. It’s a rush. It’s frustrating. My dick throbs and my balls hurt already. There’s tingling throughout my entire body.

He finally slides it into and out of me at an excruciatingly slow pace. I need more. Again I try to move my body to get the friction I need, but I’m at his mercy for my pleasure. He pulls it out and I whine at the emptiness.

The bed shifts and abruptly the biggest of my dicks impales me hard. Over and over and over as I writhe beneath him. Babbling as he plays with my dick and abuses my ass.

Then he’s suddenly not there and I gasp. The room feels cold. My breathing is the only thing I hear until I whimper. “Damon?” I ask quietly.

“Yes. You’re not alone.”

I release a tense breath and work on calming down my body. My mouth is so dry. My muscles ache and burn from me trying to use them to no avail.

“I’m going to give you some water so you’re not ready to pass out before we get to the good part,” he says.

The good part. What was this? A warm up?

His hands are very gentle as he moves me, angling me so I can drink. I swallow it, trying not to chug. He lets me drink

until I've had enough, then he lays me back down. I'm left alone again, and I hear nothing. No condom wrapper. No movement on the bed. Nothing.

But he's still here. I know he is.

I don't know how he's done it. Maybe having my sight darkened means I'm stupidly stunted in my senses but he's just there, shoving his dick into me. I cry out, my entire body trying to respond, but I can't.

He chuckles, his lips on my skin. "I fucking love having you like this," he says, his hips snapping against my ass again and I cry out once more. He feels so good. So hard and deep. "The way you can't move. How badly you want to. How angry, hard, and red your dick is for me. Ready for more?"

Nodding because I don't know what else to do, I prepare myself for his dick to punish my ass. I've apparently forgotten about the vibrator, though. The next thing I know he's rubbing it up and down the length of my hard, weeping dick.

I managed not to beg for the first part of this game but the words begin tumbling out of my mouth as he fucks my ass in a hard, steady rhythm while he uses the vibrator on my dick. Up and down, swirl around my cockhead, pressed between my balls, massaging right below them on my taint.

Over and over in different patterns until I'm sobbing. My skin burns. My entire body shudders and shakes with the desperate need to come.

"Please," I cry. "Damon, I need to come. Please let me come. Please. Please. I'll do anything. Please let me come. I need to come. It hurts so much."

But he doesn't let me. He doesn't stop. Later, I'll seriously question his stamina. But right now, I'm nothing but a babbling, crying mess as he tortures me with no orgasm. He holds my balls in his hands with the vibrator on them. Then he stands up my dick and circles it with my vibrator in a screwing pattern. Slowly up and down while going around and around.

Then he has his hand cupped around my cockhead with the soft round top of the vibrator pressed hard to my slit, holding it

there as he pounds into me.

I'm almost screaming. Maybe I am screaming. Begging. Pleading. Praying. Worshiping him like a god and promising things that don't make any sense.

I'm so lost in the entire thing that I don't realize when he's come or that he's moved out of me. Or even that he's removed the vibrator from my cock and the cock ring from strangling it. I don't know anything until I hear his words, "Come for me, Sage," in a low, husky, demanding voice.

But I'm not sure I can now. I'm not sure—

As soon as my overly stimulated and sensitive dick hits the soft, wet heat of his mouth, I'm done. I cry out, my body spasming as my muscles try desperately to respond as my orgasm crashes around me. My vision blacks out as does the rest of me while I come in the most deliciously painful experience of my entire life.

Eleven

DAMON



“YOU... TIED HIM UP?” Declan asks.

We’re sitting on the couch, him between my legs as I wrap around him. While I’m not opposed to cuddling Sage, I’m not sure what kind of message that’s sending him, so I try not to for too long. I miss cuddling. I miss Simon between my brother and I.

It’s not weird cuddling my brother. I mean, it’s a little weird since we’d gotten out of the habit in favor of having Simon between us. But I love having my brother here too. I shift lower behind him and link one of my legs over his, tightening my hold on his chest.

His arms cover mine. We’re technically facing the television, but as usual, we’re not actually watching whatever’s on. I think this is a serial killer documentary, actually.

Kissing the back of his head, I sigh. “Yes. It was fucking hot.”

He chuckles. “That seems like a lot of work.”

I told him about Shibari when I was looking it up. We looked at different positions together. So he knows exactly what I’m talking about. Besides, he was not blissfully unaware of what I was doing while I was doing it. My anticipation and excitement was through the roof.

My dick’s never been so hard for so long. Ever. And I enjoyed every fucking minute of it.

Declan laughs quietly, already privy to all my thoughts just then. And I know he doesn't miss the way my cock twitches at the thought of it now. "I took a picture," I say. "With his permission. Want to see?"

My brother nods and I release him long enough to let him reach for my phone. When he's situated back against me, he opens it and thumbs through the apps until he finds my photos. He knows right where they are. I'd be willing to bet if I picked up his phone, it'd be set up exactly as mine is.

He opens to the first image, which is Sage's back. The way the ropes cross and hold his hands by the wrists low on his back.

"It's a little sloppy," I say, "but I'm really pleased with it for the first time."

"You're going to do it again?" he asks as he scrolls to the frontal view with Sage on his back, blindfolded, hard and dripping, and absolutely helpless before me.

I shiver at the sight, my blood burning with need all over again. My cock chubs and my hips rock on their own.

Declan chuckles. "I'm guessing that's a yes."

Groaning, I reach for the phone and turn it off. I can't keep looking at it or I'm going to be stupidly hard. "Yes. There's like a dozen other positions I want to try. The high of having him beneath me, that big fucking man, at my complete mercy, is so fucking intoxicating, Dec."

He sighs and wiggles back against me. I clench my arms around him to hold him still and stop his teasing. Declan laughs quietly and settles. "Good," he says quietly. "Love you."

"I love you too. More than life."

My brother smiles and closes his eyes. I'm sure it's my erection that refuses to deflate that has me dreaming sexy dreams. However, it's my inability to let go of Simon that they're not about Sage or someone faceless. Or fuck, even my brother.



I kind of thought sex would be better. I mean, it's good. Don't get me wrong. But I like a dick down my throat more than I like actual sex. As far as anal is concerned, I won't be taking it again. Fuck that shit. The way my brother grimaced at me, I'm pretty sure he's on the same page.

We get home, the three of us, and my cock is so fucking hard. I glance at Simon, who looks idyllically unaware. I almost envy him for not being attracted to men. He's completely oblivious to my problem. From the way I can feel Declan's tension in my mind, it's not just my problem.

I blame our stupid situation more than anything for what comes out of Declan's mouth next and what transpires over the next fifteen minutes.

"Shower?" Declan asks, his voice straining.

Simon looks at him, raising a brow. "All right," he says, frowning. "You okay?"

Declan takes Simon's hand and nearly pulls him upstairs. Really, what should happen is we should just jerk off in the shower and be done with it. With Simon between us, not touching us as we do our thing, it's enough.

He's fucking gorgeous. All prettily sun kissed. Hard, lean body. His dark eyes. Those perfect lips. Thinking about my best friend naked has been enough fantasy fodder for a lifetime. I get off to those thoughts pretty easily and frequently.

Something I'm sure he's not only aware of but finds amusing.

Declan pulls Simon's clothes off quickly, making Simon laugh as he tries to keep his balance in Declan's haste. I turn on the water and then work on mine as Declan does his. When we're in the shower, I'm not sure how our positions got fucked up, but I'm somehow between them.

This doesn't concern Declan in the least. He reaches behind me, momentarily pressed against my front with his. The fact that this is my twin brother does nothing to chill my burning blood. What it is, is a hot body, wet and rigid, against mine.

He pulls Simon to my back and wraps Simon's hands around my chest. Declan drops to the floor and he looks up at me, his hand wrapped around his dick.

I groan. With Simon's hands on me, even though they're barely moving (and not at all in a sexual way) has me stroking my aching dick as if this is my last orgasm before I die. But my gaze is locked with Declan's and our jerks sync up.

More than that, the arousal in my body fuses with his and the twin groans we release are loud in the tiled space around us. Simon chuckles behind me and presses his face to my neck.

I can feel his lips on me, though innocent, and it's a drug. I whimper. Declan whimpers. I can't look away from my brother's eyes. It's almost like looking in a mirror. It might feel that way more if he wasn't on his knees but standing in front of me.

This should feel gross. Awkward. But fuck, it feels good.

The acknowledgment of that has me coming. I twist just slightly, spraying my release over his shoulder. Declan moans and I realize he's coming too. I fucking shudder.



I WAKE with a start and grip my dick. Fuck.

“Seriously, what the hell, Damon?” Declan asks, laughing. But I don't miss the strain in his voice.

We'd only done that twice. The first time was during our junior year of high school; afterward we apologized profusely to Simon because that was stupidly inappropriate, and we didn't want to ruin anything with him. And the second just as we started college. Declan and I hadn't really figured out how

we were going to hook up. It sucked, needing something you didn't understand and didn't know how to ask for.

Was it going to be weird trying to find guys to hook up with together? High school was enough of an experiment to know that's exactly what we needed. Hookups were best when we could do it together. But that left the challenge of figuring out how to accomplish that.

The first visit to Stripes wasn't exactly a disaster, but we didn't know what we were demanding. We got home frustrated and asked Simon for a shower. He kind of rolled his eyes as if he was irritated that we were even asking.

It wasn't the shower we were asking for, but even that he knew. He just didn't care. Our positions were reversed this time. Declan had Simon's arms wrapped around him as I went to my knees before him. Our eyes locked. It was a fucking whirlwind fuck storm in our collective mind.

His hand landed in my hair as he sprayed my face, and I came with a yelp at the surprising pleasure it brought me.

Declan groans again and pinches me. "Fuck, Damon. Stop."

I take a breath and roll further into him, burying my face in his neck and pinning him beneath me. He laughs. "You're not tying me up."

Grinning, I kiss him lightly. "Love you, brother."

His arms wrap around me instead of trying to hold me off him. Not really trying. I'd move if he didn't want me there or was uncomfortable.

"I'm not uncomfortable," he says quietly, once again completely in sync with my thoughts. "Maybe I should be, but whatever. Love you, twin."

I smile a little and let my hard dick throb all it wants against his hip. Fucker won't let me be. Miserable and missing Simon, my dick still demands attention. Part of me wants it to be Simon. I'm surprised when another part sees Sage instead.

We doze for a while longer, sharing dreams about nothing at all. I know we're sharing them because there's a strange echo in the dream when we're together. It's different than when one of us is asleep and dreaming while the other is awake and doesn't have a choice but to experience it too. The echo isn't of the dream happening twice, once over the other. It's an echo of my presence there. Like my shadow has come alive.

We take separate showers in the morning so we can jerk off. I muse about how we sometimes shower separately now that Simon isn't here between us. That's just a "with Simon moment," I guess. Declan looks at me when that thought skitters through my head and I shrug.

"I get off tying a man up to fuck him while he's entirely helpless *and* don't let him come until I'm ready for him to. Leave me alone."

Declan chuckles, shaking his head.

We hug at our cars, and I hold him in the parking space that's between them, the one that belongs to Simon. Tangling my fingers in his hair, I squeeze him extra tight this morning. "I really do love you, Dec. You know that, right?"

"As long as you're not thinking of me when you're fucking someone tied up, I'm cool with that kind of love."

I laugh quietly. "Nah. But it'd be cool if you were there. Watching. Or fucking someone else."

He pauses, his head tilting to lean on mine. "Yeah. Fuck, what's wrong with us? That's what I fucking need right now!"

I can't hug him tighter, but I try to. "Nothing, Declan. We're a single person. We're better together. That's always how we've been. Nothing is wrong with us, twin."

"I love you too," he whispers and kisses my neck where his face is squished. "More than the air I breathe."

"Mm," I say.

As I drive away, I wonder if the complicated friendship with Simon isn't the thing that would stand in my way of

having a relationship. Maybe it's the relationship between Declan and I that might be too... intimate for someone else to deal with.

Not that I want a relationship. So why does it even matter...?



THE DAY IS quiet at the gym. I'm standing with Carly behind the counter when a woman shows up at the outside door and knocks. Carly, the ever-cheery woman that she is, hits the intercom button. "You need to use your member tag, darling."

She's not here for a workout, though. She's dressed in a pin-stripe business skirt suit with a shiny purse between her arm and ribs. There's a chance that maybe she wants to sign up for a membership, but somehow, I don't think that's it.

I suppose she's conventionally attractive. Her hair is bright blonde like the kind you get from a box but based on her skin tone and the shade of her eyebrows, I think it's natural. She's short, not quite five and a half feet, and slim. Curves? I tilt my head and glance at Carly. Not as much as Carly. I'm not sure where that puts her on the attractive scale though.

"I'm here to speak to my husband," the woman says with a smile as she touches the intercom button. "Sage Rossi."

Narrowing my eyes on her, I glance into the gym. I can just barely make out Sage in the other room, standing over a patron with a big smile as he instructs them on the proper way to use the machine.

"Oh," Carly says. I glance her way to find that she's no longer smiling. In fact, there's a tension in her shoulders. "Will you get Rossi?" she asks me.

"Are you going to let his wife in?" I ask.

The frown she gives me almost makes me flinch. "Sage isn't married, Whitaker. He's never been married. He's not

seeing this woman anymore but apparently, she's not willing to accept that. Aren't you two friends?"

We are but apparently, we aren't the kind of friends that share that information. Then again, it's not like I've shared anything personal like that about my life.

Giving Carly a nod, I turn toward the room where Sage is. He's not looking my way but as he always does, he glances toward me. He's not expecting me to be heading for him or looking at him so he gives a double take and then breaks out in a grin.

My stomach flips at the sight. He's a beautiful man. I can't wait to tie him up again. "Hey," he says when I get close enough. His voice is low, though he's bouncing on the balls of his feet. "That's my favorite color on you."

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, his cheeks flush and he starts to babble again. I let him for just a second because it's fucking adorable. He still hasn't stopped that. I love every time it happens.

After a minute, I take pity on him and touch his arm. "Thank you." Then my smile fades. "Your wife is at the front door."

His confusion is evident as he stares at me. "My... wife?"

I nod. Hovering my hand at about her height, I say, "Blonde business woman? Says she's here to see you, her husband."

"But I don't..." The moment the situation registers, his gaze moves beyond me to the door and his face turns red. But not the cute embarrassment I'm used to.

I've never seen Sage Rossi mad until now. He kind of looks scary. I'm totally here for this. He looks back at me. "Come with me?"

"Sure," I say and follow him to the front.

He doesn't look at anyone except the woman outside. She's smiling hugely at him, apparently blind and oblivious to his anger. Sage pushes open the door and stares at her.

“What are you doing here? At my place of work!”

She hesitates before taking a step backwards. “Honey”—she glances behind him at Carly and me—“are you going to introduce me to your friends?”

“No. You’re going to leave and stop telling people we’re married.”

“But we’re engaged.”

My heart sinks. The reaction is visceral enough that I feel my brother shift his attention to me.

“We haven’t been in any kind of relationship for over a year, Sammy. I told you already, I’m gay and that’s not changing. Go away.”

“But Sage, I can help you—”

My anger flares again and I step forward before Carly reaches for me and shakes her head. “Not your business, sweetheart,” she murmurs.

“Go away!” Sage yells, startling this Sammy girl and the patron on the machine closest to the door. “If you don’t stay away, I will file a restraining order. Don’t ever come to my place of work again.”

He pulls the door shut, making sure it latches, and storms off. I watch, a little dumbfounded, as he disappears into the back. I turn my attention to the girl, Sammy, now in tears and on her phone acting all dramatic as she cries into it. She meets my eyes and freezes. Her eyes widen and she backs away again before turning and hurrying through the parking lot—whatever look she saw on my face discouraged her from sticking around.

I leave Sage alone. I’m not sure what he needs, but I don’t want to make it worse. It isn’t until the end of the day when I see that he’s still completely unlike the man I’ve come to know that I decide that maybe he needs someone after all. Not everyone likes to deal with things that upset them on their own.

But since I'm still unsure what he needs, I don't say anything at work. Or in the parking lot. I follow him home, instead. Unsure what I'll find. But curiously enough, I want to be the one to be there for him. For whatever he needs right now.

That's... new.

Twelve

SAGE



I'VE LIVED MOST of my life doing as my mother wanted of me. That included pretending I'm not gay until just over a year ago. That means twenty-eight years of being something I'm not, just to please my mother.

It was never enough. I began to see that in high school when an A- was enough to have her disappointed in me. When I didn't win any individual awards for a team sport. When the kind of girl I hid my sexuality behind wasn't the kind of girl she liked.

In an effort to make my mother proud of me, I told her to pick my girlfriend. She chose Sammy. There wasn't anything inherently wrong with her. She was sweet, tiny, smart. My mother doted on her, giving her praise and affection that she'd never shown me since the moment I agreed to go out with this girl.

I was sixteen.

I never told Sammy the truth. Not that I agreed to date her because that's what would make my mother happy. Not that I was gay. Not that I was never going to be good enough.

There was never one thing that bothered me about Sammy. She wasn't overly snooty or spoiled. It wasn't until I stopped trying to live up to what my mother wanted four years later in college that Sammy became something other than my partner.

She became an obstacle. Always passive aggressive with her remarks about my decisions and how things such as my

career choice should be a decision we discussed together. Which really meant, she wanted that control.

Then there were the subtle comments about how much I'm upsetting my mother. How she's such a wonderful woman that I shouldn't want to disappoint her. That she's given me every opportunity and I should thank her in a better way.

Just after my college graduation, Jordan and River convinced me to try counseling. Therapy. Anything as long as I start talking to someone outside of my family life. When I announced to my mother and fiancée I'd found a therapist, at first there was a riot. They were genuinely upset that I would let the world see that I wasn't perfect.

"But I'm not perfect," I told them. "You've done nothing but make that perfectly clear my entire life."

Boy did that comment come with a heavy guilt trip on how my mother tried and tried to give me everything. Every push or shove in one direction was only because she wanted what's best for me. She wanted for me what she never had.

My therapist said she wanted control. I've given her control my entire life and now she was going to dig her claws in trying to keep it.

Mom suddenly became super supportive of my therapy. A self-proclaimed advocate that people should talk to someone when they feel the need to. She was *proud* of me for taking that step and knowing my own mental insecurities better than anyone else.

Sammy was back to being the perfect girlfriend. Perfect partner, companion, friend.

I knew it for what it was. Well, I knew as soon as my therapist made it clear. Manipulation. If they behaved in a way that made me feel good, then clearly there was nothing wrong.

Except that no matter what lie I lived for them, it was a lie. I don't like women and I'm fucking miserable at home. Not because Sammy is awful. But because I'm not straight and I hate pretending to be.

Even acknowledging this, it took me almost six years to find the courage and strength to tell them. Yes, that long. When I did, it felt like a house had been taken from my shoulders. I was near tears that I could breathe for the first time. When I broke off my engagement to Sammy and moved, for the first time in my life, I felt like everything was going to be okay.

That was not even close to being the case. Personally, for me and my mental health, I was a whole lot better. But my mother became a monster, and Sammy never went away.

Honestly, I hadn't seen her for three months or more, so I thought that *maybe* she'd figured it out. Obviously, I'd been wrong.

I'm a pretty easy-going guy. I'm usually pretty happy and painless to get along with. It takes a lot to make me mad. Truly mad.

Showing up at my place of employment and calling me her husband, acting like the last year hadn't happened just because that's what she and my mother want? Yeah, that's enough to put me into a tailspin.

Even after she left, I kept spiraling. Why can't they just leave me alone? Why does everything have to be so fucking difficult? Why can't I have their support and love like a normal family gives their child?

I don't even know what my mother has against homosexuality. It's not religion-based, since she vehemently doesn't believe in any god. Seriously, her words on organized religion are worse than what she has for 'the gayness.' Yes, that's a thing in her mind.

The only thing I've gotten from her is that it's unnatural. To her, that's what it means. "You can't give me a grandbaby with another man." Who said I wanted a child anyway?! And if I had one, you think I'm going to let them around you and your toxicity?

These are not things I've said. There's an eight-year-old boy inside me who didn't hit a home run at their very first

baseball game ever that still desperately longs for their mother's approval and pride. So I keep these thoughts to myself. Though it doesn't make them any less true. If I had a kid, I don't think I'd let my mother around them. In fact, I'm sure I'd have to move very, very far away, never give her my address or place of employment, just to assure that she never comes near my child.

Hell, I'd probably change my damn name.

I'm so blinded by my anger and lost in the misery that always follows a visit with my mother or Sammy now that I don't notice I'm home until there's a knock at my door. It takes me several minutes to blink through the fog inside me and look around. I'm still in my entry hall, slipping out of my second sneaker.

Turning around, I brace myself at the door. If it's my fucking mother—

It's not. Damon stands on my steps and looks at me. No smile. No greeting. Just looks at me, waiting. What does he want me to say right now? Did I do something in my angry haze that I don't remember? My chest tightens.

"Shh," he says and is in my space within the next second. I want to break down. I can't do that in front of Damon, though.

I'm distracted when his mouth covers mine. It's a hard, hot, demanding kiss that has me immediately groaning and all my blood rushing south. It's sloppy, full of excess tongue and clashing teeth.

The door slams shut and then my clothes are coming off. I try to help but I can't. I'm just a fumbling mess as I try to keep up and maintain his hold on my mouth. Sucking out my breath until I feel light-headed.

Damon slams me against the wall, pulling one of my legs up and wrapping it around his thigh. His slick fingers are shoving into my ass. I groan, bucking my hips against him. My fingers dig into him, dragging down his arms as I try to get more. More. This isn't enough.

Then his mouth is off mine and he spins me around. We shuffle, but I'm so lost and I know the only thing holding me up is his hands on me. He pulls me to his chest and spreads my legs. His legs stretch between mine as he leans back on something.

His dick presses at my ass and I nod. It doesn't take more than a little nudge to move his cockhead past the tight muscled ring at my ass. Then his hands cover mine on my hips and he pulls me down hard.

My entire body convulses as I cry out. Everything in me shakes at the heat and burn as I grip him tightly, my body writhing on top of his.

"Take a breath, Sage," he murmurs at the shell of my ear. He repeats it until I do. "That's better. Now ride my dick with all your anger and energy. Use my cock in any way you need."

"Can I come?" I ask.

He chuckles, the sound moves through my body and circles in my balls. "As many times as you want."

For a second, I remain just like that. Keeping his hard dick inside me. But then I move, putting myself upright, taking a couple experimental bounces. The way he spears me through is good. How hard he is. How deep he goes.

Groaning, I lean forward and brace my hands on the opposite wall. Using my leverage and our position, I begin bouncing on him in earnest. There's rhythm at first but his words keep ringing through my head. *Use my cock.*

I let go. I let my frustration and anger come out through tears as I squeeze my eyes shut and ride him with abandon. The sting is delicious. The way I keep hitting everything and nothing is dizzying. I ride him until I can't hold myself anymore and nearly topple over.

There's no cum yet. Apparently, I'm not good at giving myself an orgasm this way.

Damon's arms circle me, and he holds me to his chest. "What do you need?"

For it all to go away. I want it to just... never have happened. No mom. No Sammy. I don't say any of that because I don't want him to leave. I want him to fuck me until I don't remember anything else.

Maybe I said those words. The next thing I know he has me face down on my couch as he fucks my ass with all the force and exacting thrusts that I needed but couldn't manage on my own. I come hard, crying out into the cushion beneath me.

It's not much longer when he pulls out and I feel the hot spray of his come on my back. No condom? Should I be upset about that?

Fuck, I don't have it in me to care right now.

His breaths are hot on my cooling skin, his hands still pressed to the backs of my shoulders, holding me in place. After another minute, he stands and walks away. Though he's only gone for a minute, I begin to feel like I'm falling again. Damon's hands letting me go make me feel unbalanced. Unanchored.

Then he's back and gently cleaning me. My back first, then he rolls me over and cleans my stomach, my cock, and then the couch under me. He tosses the dish rag onto the counter before climbing on the couch with me.

I'm bigger than Damon. I outweigh him by at least twenty pounds. I'm stockier, too. His body is lean and hard, not built to show off muscle but to maintain the shape he's in. I love his shape. Mine is exactly the opposite. Where Damon's worked on keeping himself trim, I've concentrated on gaining muscle mass.

But when he lays on top of me, tangling his fingers into my hair and pressing his face to the side of mine, I feel like I'm the smaller one that he's holding.

For a while, we lay in silence until I give a deep sigh.

"Want to talk?" he asks.

I shake my head but then words come spilling out anyway. "I've forced myself to be my mother's perfect straight son my

entire life. She didn't want a gay son. She didn't sign up for a queer. She wanted a straight son with a pretty little daughter-in-law, and many grandbabies by them. I just... I couldn't take it anymore. For so long, I hated what I was because it made my mother disappointed in me. My entire being offended her. She gave me life! How could I not be what she wanted? But it was too much. I tried and tried and tried but it was never enough. Maybe I finally snapped one day, and I broke it all off. No more pretending to be straight and liking women. I hate it. It's gross. It does nothing for me. I've even pretended that I'm just not into sex so I can get out of it. That was a year ago and they—They just don't... They won't stop. They won't let it go. I can't live with them hanging over me like a storm cloud."

His grip on me tightens and for a second, I think I'm going to sob. I promised myself when I first broke off my relationship with Sammy that I would allow myself to cry once. For the stress and relief. For the way I hurt someone who didn't need to be hurt; it wasn't her fault. She didn't know. I allowed myself to cry for the way my mother looked at me—betrayal, disgust, disappointment, anger, hurt. I cried because I knew that no matter what I did, no matter what I do, I will never have the love and support from my mother that I've always craved. Because the woman in my mind, *that* mother, never existed.

But that was it. Once. I'd allowed myself one time to cry over this.

To be fair, I cried for a very, very long time. And I'd never needed to again.

I don't know what made it all boil up this time. I don't know if it's just that Damon cared enough to follow me home or that I just reached another tipping point. Maybe I was more stressed than I thought. Whatever it was, my tears were right there. Threatening to fall.

"I'm proud of you," Damon says, and my breath catches. I can't take another breath. "You're very brave, Sage. I'm so proud of you for sticking up for yourself. I can't imagine how hard that was."

That's it. Tears streak down my cheeks. Besides my therapist and Jordan and River, *no one* has ever told me they're proud of me. Not for this. Not for something that matters.

For the first time in my entire fucking life, someone new sees me for who I am. For my struggles and my strength. And my weakness. And they're *proud of me*.

I grip Damon tightly and let my tears fall silently. Fine, I'll give into the tears but I'm not going to sob like a damn baby.

Damon's proud of me. Of me!

"Thank you," I whisper. "You have no idea how little I've heard those words in my life."

Thirteen

DAMON



NOT FOR THE first time am I thankful for the family I have. Declan and I came out to Simon first, of course. Because why wouldn't we? But when it was time to tell our parents... there hadn't been any hesitation. We weren't concerned that our parents wouldn't still love us just the way we are. There was no doubt in my mind that they were proud of us just for being us. We didn't have to earn their approval or love. It was freely given.

Sometimes I forget that's not always how the rest of the world works. There are bad parents out there. Horrible parents. Parents who drink themselves so deep into a blackout mess that they pass through three fucking years without remembering they have a child who needed them.

Needed. Past tense.

"What the fuck?!"

I smirk a little at Declan's response. As I process Sage's words, I can feel my brother turning inward to listen. Maybe we shouldn't during these times since they're supposed to be private. But hell, it's not like we always have a choice. We're one mind more times than we'd like to be. Or maybe we would rather not be two separate minds. That sounds pretty lonely.

Remind me to tell our parents we love them later, I think back to him.

"For fucking real. Is he okay?"

I don't know. His tears have stopped and his breathing is even again. My fingers still gently card through his hair as I try to lend him as much comfort as I know how. This is how I'd comfort Simon, isn't it? Well, not entirely.

"I'd be there too. Team effort."

Grinning again, I almost nod. But if I were going to comfort someone alone, this is how it happens, yeah? What do I do next?

"Fucked if I know."

Helpful. I feel his chuckle.

"Tell him about Simon."

I immediately cringe at the thought. I don't want to talk about it, never mind to someone outside of Declan. A stranger.

One that's told me about his skeletons.

Licking my lips, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "Did I ever tell you that I have a brother?" I ask.

Sage shakes his head, but then shrugs. "You've mentioned a brother. You live together, right?"

Declan snorts. *"Yes, roomie. We're just roommates."*

Shut up! But a smile twitches on my lips. "He's my identical twin," I say. "We're exact duplicates of each other. Right down to the tattoo we have on our ass cheeks."

There's a pause and then Sage shifts. "What? How have I not noticed that?! I look at your ass all the time!"

Now my brother laughs. Rolling my eyes, I try to shoo my brother away if he's going to keep distracting me.

"We're close. Together all the time. Do everything together. Until... recently," I pause, not sure where to go from here. We've never spoken about this to someone else. Where do I even start? How do I start?

"What happened?" Sage asks quietly.

Sighing, I say, "I don't know, really. We share everything. Including a best friend. But it's more than that. We're more

than friends, but not in the way you're going to think." I pause. "Okay, not entirely. Simon's been in our lives since we were eight. As soon as we met, Dec and I just knew that he was a piece of us in much the same way Declan and I were a single unit."

"Do you have some freaky twin things? Can you communicate silently?" he asks, excitement in his voice again.

I laugh and nod. So much more than that. "Yeah, we can. Simon calls it hive mind."

Sage laughs and for a minute, it's like this awful day didn't happen to him. It sounds light and happy.

"So, Simon. We're really close. Very, very close."

"How close are we talking?"

"Lying like this with him is normal."

There's a pause before Sage asks, "Naked? After sex?"

"Up until we were teenagers, yeah. Then our parents decided being naked all the time was inappropriate, so we compromised and wore underwear. But no, we've never had sex with him."

"*Penetrative sex,*" my brother adds helpfully. Is now the time to mention that? Do I need to mention it?

"But it's a little different too. My brother and I, as I said, did everything together. We were never apart. Ever. For anything. Not hookups. Not math tests. Not driving tests. Being apart really sucks. It makes us feel itchy and uncomfortable. Gives us a headache and shit."

"You're never with him here," Sage says quietly.

I nod. Which is probably what adds to my bad mood, I muse silently.

"*Well fuck.*"

"So, Simon. When we cuddle like this on the couch, it's always Simon between us. When we shower, it's Simon between us. Sleep, dance, play video games, shop... whatever we're doing. It was always the three of us. With Simon

sandwiched in the middle. In a way that the world says isn't okay for friends to be."

Sage doesn't speak, so I keep pushing on.

"Simon... lost his parents when he was ten. Our parents took him in. I'd like to tell you he became like a brother to us, and I suppose in the way Declan and I *brother*, that's the case. But... there's nothing sibling about us with Simon." Any of us, actually. "As we grew older, Simon became increasingly aware that he's *not* our sibling. He saw the way my parents took care of him, how we take care of him, as freeloading. It caused him a lot of stress and frustration, something we didn't understand and, I think, didn't try hard enough to make him feel better about it. At least, not in the way he needed from us."

"You love him, don't you?" Sage asks, his voice quiet. Tense. Maybe even a little hurt.

The way my chest tightens at the tone has me frowning. I feel Declan's sympathy and understanding.

"Yes," I say. "I've loved him since we were sixteen. I mean, I've always loved him, but in the way you're asking, since we were sixteen."

"Declan too?"

I nod. "Yep. Everything together."

"What happened? Where are they now? Did they run off together?"

I laugh quietly. "Honestly, if that were the case, I'd likely be in a much better place. This might sound weird and freaky, but I can feel everything my brother feels. *Everything*. So if he was with Simon, in a very strange and ethereal sense, I would be too."

There's a pause and then Sage shifts under me so excessively that I prop myself up. The way his eyes are comically wide and his mouth hanging open tells me that he's caught on to exactly what I'm meaning.

"He really is adorable."

Yeah, thanks, Dec. Go fuck around with your own guy for a bit, yeah?

“I can do both.”

He’s not though. I don’t think he’s with the guy at all right now. Which stings a little. I hate when he’s alone.

“I’m not alone. I’m with you.”

Weirdo.

“Yes,” I eventually answer Sage. “Just what you’re thinking.”

His cheeks flame. It’s fucking cute the way I watch it rise from his neck to cover his face and reach to the tips of his ears. I kiss him lightly. “You want to talk about the freaky twin thing, or Simon?”

“They go together, don’t they? You’re not with either of them right now.”

I nod. We shift on the couch so he has me pressed between his big body and the back of it, squishing me between the two. I actually appreciate the slight claustrophobic feel right now.

“In January, Simon fell into another anxious state when he received a tuition bill. Declan and I paid it, which only made him more upset. He didn’t have the money, though, and we weren’t about to let him not graduate over such a small amount. We’ve paid for a lot of things over the years, which has always weighed on Simon, no matter how many times we tell him we didn’t care about money. He started talking about getting a work-study, which didn’t work out; then he got a job. The next thing we knew, he was spending a lot of time out of the apartment. Away from us. Keeping secrets.”

Sage frowns.

“This was made a bigger deal because we’ve never kept secrets from each other. Over anything. We have complete access to everything in each other’s lives. Bank accounts. Student portals. Grindr accounts—not that he has one. Simon is straight.”

“That’s why you’ve never told him?” Sage asks.

“That and he’s never given us even an inkling of indication that he’s interested in either of us. Nothing. So we opted to maintain our friendship and not fuck it up with unrequited feelings.”

“It’s like a tragic love story, Shakespeare style,” he says, his eyes sparkling.

“No one dies,” I say, frowning. “I don’t appreciate your excitement here.”

Sage laughs and kisses me. It’s so easy and natural, he doesn’t realize he’s done it until he pulls away. Then the panic starts to flood his face. I continue talking before he feels like he needs to fix it.

“He refused to tell us what job he got, but that he definitely found a job. He wanted to do it on his own. Because he seemed happy again and whatever, we let it go. Tried to. But he was spending so much time away, it was making us anxious and lonely. Well, turns out he entered a relationship contract—a sugar daddy, sugar baby contract.”

Sage’s eyes go wide. “No way! Those things are real?!”

I chuckle. Fuck, he’s cute. I brush my finger over his cheekbone. “Yes, they’re real. I can take you to some websites to show you how to find a sugar daddy, if you’d like.”

“Nooo,” he says, cheeks reddening again. “I’m good with this. No exchange of money or anything!”

Laughing, I nod. “So, yeah. The thing is, well, there are a lot of things that aren’t really mine to tell. But he got into a contract with a fucking man, one of his old professors, and apparently fell in love with him. Declan and I... we didn’t take it well. And while I spend a lot of time blaming the professor, we know that the fallout is our fault. We know that. We know that’s why Simon left and hasn’t returned. Not even for his toothbrush. We’re why he won’t answer our texts or phone calls or social media messages. We know. It doesn’t make us hate the fucking professor any less.”

“That’s why Simon’s not with you, but... why aren’t you with Declan?” Sage asks.

I shake my head and shrug. “I don’t know. When I tell you I can count on one hand the times we’ve hooked up separately, I mean that. Until you. It wasn’t good without each other. But Simon left and our world just kind of fell apart. We dealt with it differently. I suspect that we kind of went separate ways because of this new stage of life. We *can’t* be together all the time now. He works at the college. I don’t. Simon works with neither of us.”

“Does it still hurt when you’re not with your brother?”

“All the time,” I say, and close my eyes. “While I’m not one to care about what the world thinks or deems appropriate for siblings or friends, I have to think that maybe some of our codependency is *a bit* unhealthy. I should be able to breathe without him and not feel like I’m having a stroke, right?”

Sage’s eyes go wide and his lips part. I smile, shaking my head. “Yeah, it’s hard. And yeah, that’s why I’m... angry all the time. Why I kind of check out from time to time. Because I hate the reality my life has fallen into. I hate living without Simon. Time is supposed to heal all wounds or some shit. My wound is still fucking gaping. Every day, salt is smeared on it when he doesn’t answer us and it hurts all over again. Renewed.”

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly.

Shaking my head, I say, “Don’t. Don’t do that. I’m telling you because you told me something and I... maybe it’s good to tell someone. It clearly doesn’t change anything, but...” I shrug.

“Does it make you feel any better to have told someone?”

I take a minute to think about it. Does it? Do I feel lighter or like I can see clearly now?

“No.”

I bow my head a little at Declan’s answer. He’s not wrong. And I don’t feel any different. Except that I’ve had this man tied the fuck up while I used him for pleasure. I’m glad I told him. *That part* feels good.

“Not in a way that might be helpful,” I admit, and cup his cheek. “But I’m glad I told you.”

Sage smiles. It’s loud and boisterous for a second before it softens. “Thanks for trusting me.”

I nod. “The thing is, the three of us, we made all these future plans. Where we’d go. What we’d do. How our life would look. And it was always together. The three of us. I know Simon interpreted that differently than Declan and I. But we used to talk about it all—the house we’d build. The kids we’d have. The places we’d vacation. There was never someone else involved in those plans. It was always three—Declan, Simon, and me. I suppose, in a way, that kept our hope alive. That there’d be a future where Simon would be ours. Like, really ours. Our husband to share. The father of our children. But now... I don’t see any future at all. It’s completely blank. Empty. It feels like I’m stuck in this one spot, moving nowhere.”

“Because he’s with someone else?” Sage asks.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Because he walked out of our lives and didn’t turn back. I know it’s our fault. I get that. But if we’re ready to apologize, is he going to want to hear it or did we fuck it up so bad that he’s just... gone? For good?”

Tears sting my eyes as my voice wavers on the last few words. He can’t really be gone, can he? The pain that echoes through my entire body isn’t just from me. Declan feels the loss more right now, too. Because I’m talking about it.

Sorry.

“Love you.”

I smile and cover my face. Fuck, I feel like an idiot.

Sage’s hand wraps around my wrist, and he gently pulls my hand away. “I think when enough time passes, he’ll come around. And your empty future? That just means you get to build it with another dream, Damon. Mine was written for me once, too. But now I get to write it how I want to see it.”

“You’re a really great guy, Sage,” I say. I slip my hand free and wrap it around his neck, pushing my fingers into his hair

again. “Thanks for this. I think we both needed it.”

He nods. “Can I kiss you now?”

Laughing, I nod. For the rest of the evening, we make out. And I don't let him come again until I'm ready to leave. I enjoy leaving him sated from a hard-earned orgasm right before I walk out the door.

Fourteen

DAMON



I'M EXHAUSTED by the time I get home. The day itself wasn't anything extraordinary as far as physical exertion is concerned, but it was emotionally draining. I feel wrung out in a way that is completely unfamiliar.

I'm used to the emotional stress. I've been living with it since Simon got his 'job' and it's only escalated every single fucking day since. It's recently settled into a dark emotional pit of misery, but at least it's remained consistent. Not lessening, but at least it's not growing anymore. Consistently miserable and lost.

It could be worse, right?

I'm not sure anything inside me has changed. The hurt and absence that's clung to me like a second skin since Simon walked out the front door hasn't left. It's still there, making my skin too tight. Or maybe too loose. Is there a difference? Both are equally awful for different reasons.

I'm still standing just inside the door, taking mental inventory when Declan walks in. I don't have time to turn and he's on me, wrapping his arms around my stomach and pressing his face to the back of my head.

"You're fucking exhausting," he says. The fatigue in his voice is just as clear as it is throughout my entire body.

"I was thinking that," I say.

He snorts. Yeah, no kidding, right?

"Shower," he says, and we strip along the way.

I like the routine. Something that hasn't changed even since Simon's departure. Does he still shower as soon as he gets up? And then right before he goes to bed? It wasn't so much about getting clean as it was a place where we decompressed together in the silence. Rested in the quiet harmony that was the gently falling water.

We stand together under the spray and close our eyes. I can talk as if we're one because *I know* that's exactly what he's doing. I know, as if I were doing it inside his body.

"You glossed over *this*," he says, his fingers slipping into mine.

"Yep. I figured one weird ass relationship at a time," I answer.

He laughs quietly, but we stand still. Enjoying the water and the quiet. The calm.

"Are you going to tell him?" he asks.

"Are you going to tell this guy you're fucking?" I counter.

He snorts. "Should I? Does it matter?"

But I can feel what he does, so he can't lie to me. Declan sinks into my side and I wrap my arm around his waist, pulling him close. "I don't know," I admit, kissing his shoulder. "Maybe it does."

"Do you feel profoundly different?"

"I feel like Sage didn't immediately run away when I said we sleep together and shower together. And I like tying him up, so..." I shrug. "It feels good that he knows to some extent about Simon and you. I wasn't exactly hiding it before, but... I don't know. Yeah, it feels good. I'm not sure what that means, though."

Declan exhales heavily and pulls away. We get out of the shower, dry off, and step into underwear before falling into bed. It's still early. The sun has barely gone down. I suspect that means Sage and I left work early, though I wasn't really paying attention.

"You were right," Declan says.

I nod. “Usually. But what about?”

He pinches my thigh. “How you see our future. It’s completely fucking empty.” He grips my hand, and it’s hard. “Damon, I don’t even see us together.”

There’s panic in his voice and it echoes through my body. I roll over, wrapping him in my arms, pinning him between my body and the bed. “We’re always together, Declan. Nothing will change that. You’re my heart and soul.”

“Yeah, but... why don’t I see it anymore?”

“Because we don’t know what’s happening in our lives. We spent so long *sure* of where we’re going and now, we just don’t know.”

“But we’ll be together,” he says. It’s almost a question but I think he tried to keep the inflection out of the last word, changing it at the last second to be a statement instead.

“Always, Dec. I can’t live without you.”

His arms are tight around my back as he nuzzles his face into my neck. “No,” he says. “It’s bad enough throughout the day.”

“Do you want to watch me fuck Sage?” I ask.

He snorts. “No. But thanks.”

I laugh and we’re quiet.

“That’s the first time I actually *don’t* want to be with you while you’re fucking someone,” he muses. “I’m not sure how I feel about it.”

“Because you want to be fucking someone else. It has nothing to do with me and you, but with the ‘who’ on the other side.”

He relaxes. “Yeah, okay. Because I *do* want you there. But I want to be the one fucking. Not your Sage, though.”

“You mean your Zarek, yeah?”

He grins. I can feel it as he presses his face into my hair. “Yeah. Think they’ll let us fuck them together? In the same

room?”

“Sage might. I don’t think he really cares who’s around when I have him tied up and begging.”

Declan chuckles.

For a while, we relax in the quiet of our room. Feeling the other’s heartbeats drum in tandem with our own. Our breaths synced. The aches inside us are the exact same shapes.

“Do you think he’s right?” Declan asks. “We can build our own futures?”

“We were always doing that. I think that maybe our future looks so empty because we don’t know if we’ll ever have Simon back. I can’t imagine a life without him. And I really don’t want to.”

“How much longer do you think it’ll be before he answers us?”

“Depends. You think we can have a conversation with him where we’re not trying to tear Stommer apart?”

Declan sighs and it sounds tired. Sad. “I don’t even care about him at this point. I’ll do anything to get Simon home. Even tolerate his stupid professor. But why can’t he see the way Stommer preyed on him?”

“Was he, though?” I ask, nipping at his neck. “Simon approached him for work. Simon agreed to Stommer’s contract. I’ve picked apart everything Simon has ever said. Everything Stommer has said. I think we’re projecting more onto their situation than actually happened. In reality, I don’t think the dick actually hunted Simon at all. In a way that I’m not sure Simon intentionally meant to when he kept approaching Stommer, Simon encouraged him.”

“I hate all of that,” Declan says. “I don’t even care that I think you’re right.”

“So, you think we can keep this neutral? If not, we’re going to cause more damage than is already here, I don’t think I can deal with that.”

“Yes, but... he hasn’t answered in months.”

“We haven’t tried in ages.” I shift off him and roll to the side so I can grab my phone. I hate that I have to scroll for a while until I find the chat with the three of us.

Me

Simon. Can we talk? Will you come home for a bit? Please?

I stare at it and wait. No change. He hasn’t read it. Nothing. Just as the pit in my stomach begins to churn, the little bubble that says he’s read it shows up and my heart jumps.

Again, I wait. *Please answer. Please.*

I refuse to apologize over text. That’s not enough.

Another minute passes as I hold my breath. I wait some more. When I’m ready to fucking scream, the little dots that say Simon is typing pop up. They dance. Disappear. Dance again. And then we receive a fucking message.

Simon

Okay.

That’s it. One word. Does that mean now? Is he coming over? Does it mean next week? Next month? On Christmas?

“When?” Declan asks.

Pulling up, I sit so I’m straddling him and just stare at the ‘okay’ on my screen. I shake my head. “I feel like it’s too pushy to ask. Jesus, I’ve never been afraid to fuck up so badly in my entire goddamn life!”

Declan pulls my hand down to take the phone from me so he can see the screen for himself. He bites his lip and just stares.

“Is he coming now?” he asks.

I laugh. It sounds jittery to my own ears and I absently rub at my chest where my heart is threatening to punch its way out from between my ribs. Fuck, I don’t know!

“What do we say?” Declan asks. “Do we start with an apology?”

“Probably best. But what then?”

Declan drops my phone beside him and covers his face with his hand, letting out a frustrated groan. “Why did we let this get so fucked up that we don’t even know what to say to him? I’ve never *not* known what to say to Simon. Now I don’t even know how long we have to plan what I’m going to say.”

I grip his wrists and pin them to the bed to stare down at him. He smiles in amusement. “You really into domination now, hm?”

I snort. “I just want you to stop squirming so much and stop covering your face, Dec. Panic with me, but don’t hide behind your damn hands.”

He laughs and closes his eyes.

“Is this a new game?”

My head snaps up and I’m staring at Simon at our bedroom door. His hands are in his pockets. Pockets of jeans I’ve never seen before. And a shirt I’ve never seen. He’s still sun-kissed perfection with his dark eyes and pretty, perfect lips.

The thudding of my heart is so quick and loud I can only hear the *whooshing* of blood in my ears for a second. Beneath me, though I still have his hands pinned to the bed, Declan’s twisted slightly so he can stare at Simon, too.

Simon has his usual amused smile on his lips and I desperately want to lick it. He looks no different except... tired.

“No,” I say, breathless. “But he’s a lot more restless these days. I’m trying a new tactic to hold him still.”

Simon’s smile grows a little as he looks at Declan. “I like it.”

I shiver, my fingers itching to pull Simon close.

He takes his lip between his teeth and looks over his shoulder. I can see out the door but I'm not sure what he's looking at.

Why does this have to be so awkward? Why can't he just take his clothes off and get into bed with us like he used to?

"Is... your professor waiting for you?" Declan asks.

Simon looks back at us and nods. His lip is still between his teeth as he chews it a little. "Yeah," he says after a second. "I... I guess I wasn't sure..." He sighs and closes his eyes. There's a subtle shake of his head. "I don't know. I just wanted him here. In case I needed him."

My stomach flips. He shouldn't need someone else to comfort him. Not from us.

"That's how badly we've fucked up."

I take a breath and let Declan's hands go, sitting back. Simon's gaze turns back to us, and once again, he's amused. I love the little curl of his lips as he takes in our position. "Kinda hot like that. Freaky twin thing, indeed."

He's teasing. A laugh bursts out of me from the relief of it. Fuck, I've missed him.

His smile softens. "So..."

I climb off my brother and sit at the edge of the bed. "I really, really need to hug you." That's not what I meant to come out of my mouth, but hey, there it is.

Simon smiles, but he doesn't move. There's a beat where no one moves. Declan and I aren't breathing at all as we wait.

Then Simon comes into the room quickly and he's in my arms, climbing into my lap and we're falling backwards. Declan is on us in the next second and I'm pretty sure we're all teary. Jesus, my heart can't take this. Too much fucking emotion in one day.

"I love you," Simon says, his voice cracking. "So much. I missed you so much."

Okay, now I know there are ugly tears running down my face. Declan and I smother him the best we can, but I can't get my words out. Not without him hearing how much I'm torn up over this.

"He needs to know."

"I'm sorry," I say, my voice shaking as I bury my face in his hair to breathe him in. "I'm so fucking sorry, Simon. I didn't mean... I didn't mean to lose you. I didn't mean to push you away."

"I didn't mean to hurt you," Declan says as if he's been the one speaking, picking up where I left off as I catch my voice. "I'm so, so sorry to have made you feel like your only option was to leave. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Simon shudders as he tries to catch his breath. "I didn't mean to—"

"Don't," my brother and I say together.

"You really have absolutely nothing to explain, excuse, or apologize away," I say.

"We fucked up," Declan says. "Out of jealousy and possessiveness. Desperation. Fear. Everything. We didn't know how to keep you, and clearly, we chose the wrong way to do it."

Minutes go by in silence until Simon wiggles between us and, reluctantly, we give him space so he can sit up. He straddles me just as I had been Declan when he walked in. But Declan sits behind him until Simon moves him around so he can look at both of us.

He wipes the tears from his face, his eyes moving between ours. "I'm not going to apologize. Not for what you think I might. But I am sorry I kept so many things secret from you. If I hadn't, maybe things would have been different. But I was still learning a lot of things about myself and they scared me. I didn't know what it meant or... or how to feel about it. This thing with Quin was still new and you two were being fucking crazy. I couldn't take it." He shakes his head. "I know you can't see it, but Quin's been a huge force of good in my life. I

get that you don't like how it came about, and I won't even argue that maybe you're right. But then, if my mother hadn't died and my dad hadn't drunk himself into oblivion, I wouldn't have moved in with you and I wouldn't change a day of being with you for anything."

Leaning up on an elbow, I wipe away an errant tear that trails down his cheek. "I'm sorry," I whisper. "We didn't mean to make you feel like we were a wall instead of your net."

He laughs a little. "I know. But I don't think that this was going to happen any other way. You were too angry, and I was too much of a mess to figure out how to get you to listen to me without being assholes."

"Are you feeling better now?" Declan asks.

Simon laughs quietly and nods. "Yeah. Besides being so fucking tired I could sleep for a year, I'm feeling much better."

"Ugh," I say with my brother.

"For fucking real," I mutter.

"So fucking tired," Declan agrees.

A warmth spreads through me, knowing that Simon still needs us to sleep as much as we need him.

"But... before we really get into all the missing you shit, I need to know," Simon says, and it hurts that there's a guarded expression on his face. "There's no way I can live with your hostility towards Quin anymore. I love him. I didn't mean to, or plan on it. But I do. I want to be with him. Are you going to accept that and support me? Can you do that?"

That shouldn't still hurt, so why the fuck does my heart feel like it's being ripped from my chest right now?

Fifteen

DAMON



WE ALREADY KNEW that this question was coming. And we already agreed that we'd do whatever it took to get Simon back and keep him. We *knew* that meant being civil to Stommer.

It doesn't mean that everything inside me doesn't rebel at the mention of it. Realistic or not, I still blame Stommer for this entire thing. If he'd just said no, he wasn't awarded a work-study position in his department and been done with it, Simon would have moved on. He'd have either gotten an actual job or let it go until we graduated.

There'd be no secrets.

"Except the ones he's been struggling with that we didn't know about."

Declan's thought makes me flinch. He's not wrong. How did we not figure out that our best fucking friend is asexual? I feel like a fucking idiot.

"Yes," Declan answers before I can pull my thoughts together.

Truthfully, I don't want to accept this tool into our lives. I want Simon for ourselves. I don't want to share him with anyone. I sure as fuck don't want him to love someone else.

But I want him here.

Taking a breath, I nod in agreement with my brother. "Yeah," I say a second later.

Simon looks between us. It's not unreasonable to see that he doesn't really believe us. I mean, I'm not sure I really believe us, either.

"Really?" Simon asks. "Just like that?"

"You underestimate how much we want you back," Declan says. "I'd sell my kidney on the black market if it meant you'd come home."

He raises a brow. "I'm not sure how that has anything to do with this."

Declan snorts. "It doesn't. But I'd sacrifice a kidney."

For you.

Simon sighs, shaking his head. The hint of a smile touches his lips and I can't do anything but stare. "Really? This is it? You're going to be nice to Quin?"

I can't help the scowl, though I desperately try. Simon doesn't miss it and I see the disappointment color his face as he starts to back off me. Sitting up, I wrap my arms around him and pull him close. "Listen to me," I plead quietly. "I *will* be nice to him. I'll do whatever you want. Please don't go."

"Why don't you like him? What did he do that made you hate him so much?"

"He took you," Declan and I say together.

Simon sighs. "You didn't like him before that."

"We didn't *not* like him," Declan says. "What we don't like is other people touching you. We know you went to Stripes for us. Usually you were at the bar being left alone. So finding you in a dark corner with him all over you pissed us off. You don't like men and suddenly there was one basically sucking your neck. Yeah, we thought he'd somehow forced or coerced you there. Our *straight* best friend who comes to gay bars for us. Not because he wants to hook up."

I'm surprised when Simon flinches. He glances away before sighing. "Yeah. Alright. That's fair. But I told you he didn't do anything."

“Nothing, huh?”

Simon rolls his eyes. “Nothing I didn’t ask for.”

“You asked him to suck your neck?” I ask.

He laughs quietly and huffs. “Okay, fine. You want to know what happened, just remember you asked for it. I’ve listened to you two talk about sucking dick for years. Seriously, that’s your favorite topic.” He’s not wrong. “And I’d been struggling with the fact that sex does nothing for me. So, I thought that maybe I’m gay and didn’t know it?” He shrugs. “Once you two went off, I decided to see if sucking a dick did anything for me.”

“And Stommer volunteered?”

Simon smirks and shrugs. “Yeah, I guess. I wasn’t sure how to... ask for it, you know? So I kind of stood there and stared around me for a minute, knowing that eventually someone would dance with me. I thought then it might be easy to suggest moving to a dark corner. That person was Quin. So, yes, I sucked him, but it was my suggestion. Invitation? Whatever. I initiated it. Not him.”

“Except by dancing with you,” Declan says.

“Yeah, well, if it wasn’t him, it would have been someone else.”

I don’t say it out loud, but my brother and I both think *we’d rather it had been a random stranger.*

“We’d have been just as angry to find someone else all over you. For the record,” Declan says. “And every time we found him with you, it just pissed us off more. He was your teacher!”

“Was. The previous semester. Not then,” Simon says. “And regardless of whatever bad guy things you want to put on him, he never forced me, guilted me, bribed me, coaxed me”—he waves his hand in an ‘etcetera’ gesture—“into anything. We talk about everything, especially when it has to do with sex because of how I am. He checks in with me so much that I now just volunteer how I’m feeling in any given situation before he can ask.”

The way he talks about Stommer has my stomach churning. I hate it. The soft tone. How his eyes sparkle. The way his lips can't help but form a smile.

It falls away when he looks at me. "He's not the evil predator you think he is."

"I know," I force myself to say. "I've known that all along, even if I've refused to admit that."

"He took you from us," Declan says. I can hear the pout in his tone. "It's impossible not to hate him for doing that."

"I wasn't going anywhere," Simon says. "The only reason I was spending so much time away—"

"Was because we were being dicks," I finish for him.

Simon nods. "You don't understand what kind of position that put me in." He sits back to look me in the eye. "I'm going to spend my life with him."

Fuck, I can't breathe.

"That doesn't mean I don't want what we've always planned, too. It just means that it's going to have to change a little."

"You want—" Declan starts, but I can feel the chaos inside his head as his thoughts bounce back and forth. Our future together, the three of us. A future with Stommer. Together or with Stommer. Never 'and' but always 'or.'

"How will that work?" I ask, trying to catch my breath.

Simon shrugs. "I don't know. I haven't really thought about it because thinking about you was too... painful, so I ignored what was further ahead than a week."

Sighing, I rest my head on his shoulder. "I want to fix this," I say. "I want you to come home. How can we make that happen?"

"If you'd stop being such assholes, I wouldn't have to split my life so fully, you know," he says.

I almost miss his words because his hands are moving on my back. Jesus, I've missed his touch. Gentle and sweet.

Filled with his love for us.

Declan is at my back a second later and wraps around me so he can touch Simon, too. I feel Simon smile and his arms stretch further so that he can hug my brother. It's strange being the filling in the sandwich. I don't hate it, even if it is a little weird not to be squeezing Simon between us.

"No longer a twin sandwich."

Of course, it is. Just the two cookie pieces are stacked together, and the cream filling is now the frosting on top.

He snorts inwardly and I smile, shifting so I can rest my head against his, too. We stay like this for a while. No talking. No tension. Just the peace and familiarity of being together. How we've always been.

"Will you stay the night?" Declan asks.

Simon doesn't answer right away. Finally, he sighs and says, "Yeah. I'm so fucking tired."

Declan and I groan. There have never been truer words.

Simon begins to pull away, and it takes everything in me to let him go. "I'll be right back."

We nod, watching him step out of the bedroom. He rounds the corner and we lose sight of him. There's a moment where I feel suspended, like we'd just imagined him here. He didn't actually come home. He hadn't actually been in our arms.

As though the entire conversation was fabricated from the desperation in my head and fueled by my exhaustion. Thrust into a hallucination because of my brother's exhaustion compounded on my own.

"No," Declan whispers. He's still behind me. Still wrapped around me. Holding me to him like a lifeline in the storm that my mind kept trying to create just now. "He's here. Simon came home."

But I don't hear him. I can't see him. The warmth where his body was has already faded and I'm cold again.

Was he really here?

Was he?

We both jump when Simon steps into the room again. He pauses to look at us, his gaze trailing over where we're hugging. His usual small smile, slightly amused, rests on his pretty lips.

"That really is cute," he says and pulls his shirt over his head. "Quin's going home. He'll be back in the morning to take me to work."

We don't answer as Simon continues to take his clothes off until he's standing before us in his underwear. They're new too. Not the brand we normally buy. They're... purple and gray. They fit him like skin but look comfortable. Soft. I don't recognize the brand that's just a bunch of blocky shapes going around the thick elastic that sits low on his hips.

"What's cute?" Declan asks after a minute while I try not to lick my lips.

"You two all curled up together," he says and turns to face us. He's smiling still. It's a little bigger now. "It's really adorable. I like it."

Declan rolls his eyes but doesn't move. Simon smiles wider and comes closer. We reach for him and pull him back into my lap.

"Is your professor going to be mad that you're in bed with us, mostly naked?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No. He knows this is how we sleep."

"And we can still touch you?" Declan asks.

Simon smirks. "As much as you ever did."

"And kiss you?" we ask together.

He laughs. "Yeah. He's never had an issue with how we display our friendship."

"How does he know whether he has a problem with it?" I ask.

It's Simon who rolls his eyes this time. "Like he didn't see us around campus? Or when you waited for me every day

outside his classroom? Or at Stripes? Come on. Subtlety and privacy are not concepts either of you are familiar with.”

I huff.

“And he doesn’t care?” Declan asks.

Simon shakes his head, shrugging. “But I’ll make a deal with you. You can touch me, kiss me, whatever, in whatever way you touch each other.”

“That’s bold,” I say, teasing. “You’re assuming we have boundaries.”

“Don’t you?” he asks.

“No,” we say together, but I can’t contain my smirk.

He’s not convinced, but since this isn’t about proving a point, we don’t go any deeper into proving it.

“You’ve—”

“No,” we say together again.

“But not because... of any particular reason except that we just don’t,” Declan says, shrugging.

“If I wanted to see you two making out, you’d humor me?” he teases.

I fucking love that he’s teasing us. The giddy feeling inside me far outweighs the need to push this subject aside. It’s not exactly uncomfortable, but talking about it outside of our own minds feels a little... exposed. But fuck, if it keeps Simon talking and smiling and giving us a hard time, then fuck. We’d talk about whatever he wants.

“Sure,” I say. “But we’re going back to your rules. If we kiss, we get to kiss you in the same manner.”

Simon laughs and my heart melts. He scoots forward on my lap and grins when he feels my dick slightly hard against my thigh. He’s never mentioned it before. I’m not stupid enough to think he doesn’t notice. I’m not huge, but I’m definitely more endowed than what’s considered average.

“Seems you like this conversation,” he says, teasing again. I love the way his eyes flash with mirth. I’ll talk about whatever the hell he wants if he keeps smiling like that.

“Or I’m just happy to see you,” I say back, smirking.

He laughs, bowing his head a little. Then he lets out a heavy sigh. After a few seconds pass, he says, “I really don’t care about whatever goes on between you two. You know that, right? I won’t judge or—”

“Simon,” I interrupt. “You’ve seen exactly what goes on between us. We’ve never been away from you long enough to do anything together. And again, we haven’t. It’s not... it’s not like that.”

He might have believed me if not for my hesitation.

I sigh. “Seriously, it’s not. We’re brothers.”

Simon snorts. “No, you’re not. You’re an individual split into two bodies.” He rolls his eyes as if that’s the most obvious thing he could possibly say. “It’s almost weird that you’re not lovers too.”

Okay, now I just don’t know what to say. I’m far too stunned by the turn of this conversation.

“That’s an entirely new level of ‘inappropriate’ to stick onto the stack of ones we already have,” Declan deadpans.

Simon looks up, meeting my brother’s eyes. There’s a strange challenge in them when he looks at him. Though his eyes aren’t on me, I can still see them as if they were. Through Declan’s. He’s not wrong. It’s weird that we’re kind of a single being in two bodies.

“When have we ever cared about what others consider ‘inappropriate’?” Simon asks. I’m right. There is a challenge to his tone.

The air rushes out of me and suddenly the embrace my brother has me in feels like a very different kind of intimate. I swallow, unsure what to do with this. What is Simon even saying? He wants us... together? Why does that even matter right now? All we want is for Simon to come home!

Simon smiles a little. “It’s funny that you’re uncomfortable with this conversation,” he muses.

“It’s a little weird that you’re pushing it,” I answer.

He laughs and climbs from my lap with a yawn. We watch as he moves into the bed and burrows under the covers, his eyes closing. “I’m not,” he says, tiredly. “Not really. I’m actually surprised we haven’t talked about it before.”

“We’re brothers,” I say, hearing how weak that argument sounds from my lips. Not like it’s inaccurate. But, like any of us in this room care about that? No. “There’s a word for that.”

Simon laughs quietly.

Declan and I shift, looking at each other. What just happened here? What are we even talking about? There’s a very heavy silence that stretches for many minutes until we move toward Simon, sandwiching him between our bodies like normal.

He sighs and relaxes into us. There’s so much more that needs to be said—twin things that take *freaky* to a very different meaning aside—but I’m so tired. Tired of the hurt and anger and the gaping hole in my chest. So fucking tired of it all.

All I want to do is sleep with our best friend right where he belongs.

We can talk about whatever weird shit Simon wants in the morning and every day after that. No matter what happens, Simon isn’t going anywhere. We’ll do anything to keep him. Anything at all.

Sixteen

SAGE



I'M NOT sure what happened but the day after Sammy showed up and then Damon and I spilled our secrets to each other on the couch. Damon is very... different. When he left, I thought for sure that something happened between us. Something exciting and deep and... maybe he might feel something for me.

He trusted me with his secrets!

That means something, right? It's a big deal.

But he's completely checked out the next day. Like, absent completely. He looks at me and offers me a smile, but his thoughts are miles away. He's not there at all. I'm not sure he even realized I was the one who said anything to him.

I'm trying not to let it bother me. I mean, we dug up some deep shit, right? It sounded like maybe he was coming to terms with something as we talked about it. The whole thing was hard for him to say, so why do I have a new pit growing in my stomach right now?

Why does something that felt like it connected us together on a deeper, more intimate level now suddenly feel like it actually created a gulf between us? What do I do about it?

It's like we hit a peak in our relationship—whatever it is—and then came crashing down to where we're just passing each other by again. Like we were when he first started. Strangers in the same workplace where I'm totally crushing on the new guy.

By noon, when he still hasn't looked at me, I'm freaking out. I take my lunch outside and sit on the bleachers overlooking the track and dial Jordan. It's only once it's ringing that I remember they have a newborn and cross my fingers that I don't wake Sparrow.

I nearly squeal when Jordan answers.

"I'm freaking out," I squeak into the phone, trying to keep my voice down because I'm not sure how close he is to the baby, but don't want to take the chance that I do wake him. "I thought we shared something deep, and I told him about Sammy and he told me... stuff... but now it's like I don't exist again. It's like I'm less than the stranger I was. I don't think he's doing it on purpose. He left on good terms. I just don't want to be nothing to him. I don't—"

"Easy, Sage," Jordan says. "Take a breath, man. Calm down."

I try. I really do. But it feels like something is sitting on my chest. Squeezing my eyes closed, I concentrate on breathing. Each breath. One at a time.

"You okay?" Jordan asks.

No. I'm not okay. Not even a little bit.

"Sage," he says gently.

I take a shaky breath and nod. "Yeah, okay. Sorry."

"Don't apologize, man. You can call anytime. You know that. Tell me what happened."

"I don't... I just thought that..."

"Further back. You said something about Sammy?"

Nodding, I give him a brief recap. How she showed up spewing her bullshit about being my wife as if the last year never happened. I was so mad and then Damon was there. How he helped me through it (I didn't go into detail though I wanted to because, man, sex has never been so good). Then how we talked. How I told him everything. And he told me some deeply personal things—which I don't repeat.

He fucked me good again, made me wait to come, and then left after he cleaned me up and cuddled me for another minute.

“He was so nice. He pet me and told me everything was going to be okay. Jordan, he said he was proud of me!”

Jordan sighs. It’s quiet and I’m sure he doesn’t really know what to say.

“Do you think I—”

“No,” he says, cutting off my moment of doubt before I can voice it. “No, Sage. I don’t think you did anything wrong. I think, based on what you said now and how you’ve talked about him in the past, that he’s going through some shit. It’s entirely possible that your conversation with him, allowing him to unload on you, helped him. And that he’s now forced to think about it.”

“Yeah?” I ask. That sounds hopeful, but I don’t know if I can trust that. Can I?

“Take a breath. Take a step back. Let him make the next step. If he’s really going through something, he probably doesn’t realize he’s being weird,” Jordan says.

I know he’s right. I do. Deep down, I know all that without having been told it. He *is* going through something with his bestie and brother. It’s hard on him. He’s angry. He said as much.

I’m being overly emotional and sensitive. This has nothing to do with me.

“Okay,” I say and take a deep breath. “You’re right. I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

“You don’t have to do that, Sage,” he says quietly. “Don’t pretend you’re fine if you’re not. It’s completely okay to feel hurt right now.”

That right there is thanks to River and lots of emotional validation that went on at the beginning of their relationship. Watching them grow and become the solid team and couple goals they are now is seriously one of my favorite parts about being in their lives.

It also causes constant heartache because more than anything, I want what they have. I want someone to look at me like I'm their world. Like what I say makes a difference to them. I want them to remember things I tell them because what's important to me means something to them.

I want to be looked at the way Jordan looks at River—like they're the best thing in the entire world. No, that they are his world. That there's no one who has his heart more than this person. For a while there, I was convinced I was in love with Jordan because of the way he looked at River.

Because I want that. More than anything, I want to be that person for someone.

I think my heart says that I want that someone to be Damon.

Glancing back at the gym, I sigh. The entire building is cased in glass except the locker rooms and a large storage room. That means there's natural light no matter where you are in the building. It also means people outside can see in.

I imagine that Damon's there, on this side of the building, looking out. Watching me. I can even pretend I see him close to a window where there's a figure with light hair overseeing someone on one of the weight machines.

“Sage?”

Sighing, I turn away so my back is to the gym. “Yeah. I think I didn't heed your advice last time we spoke about him. Now I'm...”

“Hurting.”

I nod. “A little.”

“Time to talk to him.”

“Not right now. If he's going through something, I don't want to add to it. That's not fair.”

“I don't disagree, but make sure you don't wait too long, either. There's no reason that you need to hurt just so he doesn't. You've spent enough time doing that.”

I huff. He's not wrong. When you live your whole life to make someone else happy, there's nothing you do that doesn't hurt on some level.

When I broke it off with Sammy and told my mother I was going to live my best gay life how I wanted to, there was a certain level of healing that came with that. And I also promised myself I wouldn't live my life at the expense of others' feelings again, either.

But is this the same thing? Is it fair to really put that on Damon when he doesn't know what I'm going through and he's already knees deep in his own shit? In reality, I'm afraid if I tell him that maybe I'm feeling something for him, he'll tell me we're done.

He outright told me all he can offer me is sex.

"Jordan, if I tell him, then that's it," I say quietly. "He already told me he's in a bad place and can't give me more than sex. If I tell him..."

"Give me the phone," I hear River say and I flinch. Uh oh. "Sweetheart, don't take this the wrong way but if you're waiting for him to come around when he's already told you he's not going to, you're in for heartache. That's not at all what you deserve. You know that."

I sigh. "Yeah, I know. But I really like him."

"I know you do, babe. I get it. But I want you to answer me honestly. Painfully honest. Okay?" I nod, though they can't see that. "Has he given you any indication that he's feeling something other than enjoying breaking in your asshole?"

Snorting, I laugh. "I don't know," I say. "I mean, he told me something he's never told anyone, right? Does that mean more than I want it to mean?"

"He told you after you told him, yeah?" River asks.

"Yes."

"Maybe it was more to put you at ease than it was a moment of trust." The pit in my stomach grows. "Maybe he wanted you to know that he's going through shit, too, so he

understands. A bro solidarity thing, and all that. Hell, maybe just a friendship thing.”

I don't want that to be true. But am I projecting what I want and reading into the situation for more than it is? Is that what's happening right now?

My phone beeps, telling me lunch is over.

“Maybe you're right,” I say. “So... I should just let it go. Right?”

“I can't answer that,” River says gently. “Only you can.”

There's a rustle and then Jordan's back. “Sage, I'm not saying this to encourage you to get hurt, but I also think that if you feel strongly about this guy, you need to tell him. I know that sets you up for the potential of heartbreak, but it could also mean you don't miss something right there in front of you. You don't know how he's feeling right now. Just keep it in mind. All right?”

“Yes.”

“Want to come over for baby snuggles later?” he asks.

I smile. “Yeah, okay.” I really want adult snuggles. But they've never snuggled me. “Thanks. I'm sorry I called during nap time.”

Jordan chuckles. “It's always nap time. We'll see you later.”

Hanging up the phone, I smile a little. Knowing I'm lucky enough to have found some good friends, even if they left me a little more confused than I was. I don't feel so out of control though, so that's something. I also don't really want to face Damon.

When I head inside, I go to the boss and tell him I'm not feeling well. I don't have any clients this afternoon anyway since the one I had needed to reschedule for tomorrow. He lets me leave and I basically run out of the building with my tail between my legs and don't look over my shoulder.

I don't look at anyone. Don't make eye contact. I feel like an idiot. A little helpless and out of control.

For a second, I sit in my car and close my eyes, resting my head back and just breathing. Thinking over everything my friends said. Over the conversation with Damon yesterday. Was there even a little smidge of something in his expression when he left that said I'd fucked up in spilling all that on him?

But he came after me! That means something, right?

"No," I say to myself out loud. No more. I promised I wouldn't do this. I want someone to love me for me. As I am. And I don't need to fall in love with the first man I sleep with. Who does that?! Good grief, I'm a sappy teen movie. Where's the love triangle?

Snorting, I start my car and pull out. I suppose there already is one. Damon's in love with his best friend, after all. That's already an epic level tragedy.

I don't drive to Jordan and River's house right away. They said later. I'm sure they didn't mean in ten minutes. But I also don't want to go home. So I drive around aimlessly for far too long, spreading my carbon emissions into the air like it's perfume and not toxic.

It's supposed to clear my head but instead, everything that's happened since Damon agreed to have sex with me just keeps repeating in my head. Playing over and over and over again. By six when I pull into my friends' driveway, I'm hard as a rock, there's a phantom pulse around my wrists where he had me tied up last time, and my head is a damn mess.

Stepping up to their door, I knock and wait. Urging my body to calm down. This is very inappropriate.

River opens the door and smiles. When they go to hug me, I kind of turn sideways, which they don't miss. River looks at me, their eyes trailing down my body before meeting my face with a smirk. I'm a darn oven again by the way my skin is on fire.

"Happy to see me, sweetheart?" they ask.

I flinch.

River just chuckles and lets me in. I stall while I toe off my shoes before following. Jordan takes one look at me and grins.

“Look at you, waving hello.”

“Oh jeez,” I mutter and quickly sit, adjusting myself in my gym shorts. Honestly, the only way I wouldn’t be more obvious was if I weren’t wearing underwear.

They chuckle. “Put your weapon away and you can cuddle our son. He’s far too young to be introduced to that.”

I roll my eyes. “Keep talking. You’re helping.”

River laughs and I can’t help it. I smile. They don’t actually wait until I’m back to normal. As soon as River approaches with Sparrow, I may as well have been doused with icy water; my stiffy deflates immediately. They set Sparrow in my arms, and I immediately cuddle him close. Breathing in his new baby scent.

“Has he done anything exciting yet?” I ask.

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” River says as they sink onto the couch next to Jordan. Jordan wraps an arm around their shoulder, tucking them into his side. “Sleeping for three solid hours is exciting, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Honestly,” Jordan mutters, yawning.

“I’d volunteer to babysit while you nap, but I’m not sure I’m ready for diaper duty,” I say. “Or feeding.”

“Just keep him covered until you’re ready to put a new one on,” River says.

“And always keep your mouth closed,” Jordan adds. “Piss in your mouth is disgusting. Don’t ask how I know that.”

It’s a struggle not to burst out laughing.

My phone pings in my pocket, so I shift to pull out my phone. My heart stops when I see that the notification is from Damon. I just stare, unsure what to do. Do I open it? Ignore it? Read it then ignore it?

“What’s wrong?” River asks.

“If that’s your mother—” Jordan starts, irritation thick in his voice. He doesn’t like my mom. The indignation and

protectiveness he has over me concerning her always makes my heart swell. But I shake my head, cutting off his threat.

“It’s Damon,” I say.

“What’s he want?” Jordan asks, voice still slightly aggrieved.

Biting my lip, I open the thread.

Damon

Boss said you went home early. You okay? Do you need anything?

My heart shouldn’t skip like this, right? It’s a friendly thing to ask. He’s just being friendly. It’s not a declaration of his undying affection.

“What’s it say?” River asks.

I repeat it and then look up at their faces.

“You left early?” Jordan asks.

Nodding, I shrug. “Yeah. I just... staying there felt too difficult. I didn’t have any clients and I have plenty of sick time, so I left.”

“Aw, honey,” River says. The sympathy on their face doesn’t make me feel small or pathetic like so many others do. It makes me feel like they actually understand what I feel. The confusion and hope and maybe a little excitement. Terror that it’s not real and will all slip away.

“Answer him,” Jordan says.

“With what? That I couldn’t stand to be around him when he was acting like I didn’t exist?”

“Sage, your boss isn’t going to volunteer that you left early. That means he asked about you. He noticed you were gone,” Jordan says.

I shiver. That’s true. It’s all true. He noticed. Biting my lip, I try like heck to keep my nerves and excitement down.

Me

Yes. I just needed to get out of there. I'm okay.

He answers back right away, which also makes me feel like I'm not some random guy. Maybe I mean *something* to him, even if it's not what I want it to be.

Damon

Did the ex give you more of a hard time? Your mother?

Me

No, no. I'm all right. Really. But thanks for checking.

Damon

You don't need anything? Soup? Rope? Wanna talk?

My heart swells and I hug Sparrow a little tighter. I swallow the feelings growing too rapidly inside me. The last thing I want is to end up heartbroken. I need to keep reminding myself of that.

Me

Thank you. Really. I'm having baby snuggles right now, so I'm okay. I really appreciate you checking on me, though.

I erase 'it means a lot' and then send before I say something too clingy.

Damon

Sure. See you tomorrow?

Me

Yes.

I wait for anything else. It doesn't come, so I close the app and gingerly set the phone on the arm of the chair as if it might explode. Then I face Jordan and River. They're watching me expectantly. Biting my lip, I can't explain the hurt curling in my chest.

I'm already too far gone. No matter what happens, he's not going to look at me like Jordan does River. This is going to end with me in pieces. I can feel it.

But I can't do anything to stop it.

Seventeen

SAGE



WHILE I GO to sleep feeling a little better about the situation, even though I'm trying like heck not to read too much into it, I'm even more confused the next morning. Damon and I have exchanged numbers, of course. But our text exchanges had always been minimal. Are you there? Want company? That kind of thing.

Yesterday evening was the first time that it'd been about something other than hooking up. And this morning? I woke up to a text. Though I tried to ignore the way my stomach jumped and my heart raced, it couldn't be helped.

Damon

Good morning. Are you feeling better this morning?

"No, I'm not reading too much into this," I say as I smile too widely at my phone. My hands are shaking, so I ignore the text for a minute. Completely ignore it.

By that I mean I just don't respond yet. It's not like I can stop thinking about it!

Finally, on my way out the door, I send a reply.

Me

Yes, thank you. I'm on my way to work.

The screen is still awake on my phone when I set it into the holder so I see the bubbles bobbing.

Damon

Have you ever heard of a chastity cage?

I frown and watch the road for a minute. A what? At the stop sign, I type out a quick ‘No, what is it?’ and then close the screen so I don’t get in an accident. I might have broken several traffic laws on my way because my mind is solely focused on my phone that pinged almost right after I sent the text.

By the time I pull into the parking lot, I barely put it into park before I have the phone out of its cradle and I’m swiping it open. What I see stops my heart. There’s a text image of a soft cock trapped in a metal contraption. A little lock on the top.

It looks horribly painful. Or... constricting? Why would you do that?

No, wait. Why am I getting hard looking at this?

I tap out of the picture and see the text that follows.

Damon

Want to try it?

Oh. Oh, oh, oh. I’m panting, staring at his words and the picture when there’s a knock on my window. I jump, dropping my phone in my lap, and stare at Damon outside my door. Clicking the phone off as I open the door and step out, I know my face is ten shades of red. Maybe a hundred.

And jeez, his smile does nothing to assuage that.

“So... what did you think? Want to try it?”

“I... uh, I...” Biting my lip, there’s no mistaking that I want him to trap my dick in a metal torture device for him. Shivering, I nod. “Yes.”

He grins. “All right.”

His smile fades, though, as he looks at me. “You okay?”

I nod and swallow. Seeing that thing, I'm hard, but I'm definitely okay.

Damon gently touches the side of my face, and my heart skips. "You sure?"

It's only then that I realize he's talking about yesterday. "Yes, I just needed to get out of here. I didn't think you'd notice."

He frowns and takes a step forward, officially invading my space. *More please.* "Of course, I did."

No. Be still, my thundering heart!

"What happened? You're sure you're okay?"

"I..." I can't tell him. Not here. How do you tell the guy who only wants to be your fuck buddy that you're falling for him? Not in your work parking lot, that's for sure. I'm positive that's like rule number one, right? At least in the top eight. "We're going to be late for work," I say instead, feeling how my skin flushes.

Damon stares at me, and I really desperately want to look away. He's seeing too much. I just know that he is. His eyes move all over my face before he nods. His hand is still on my cheek and he rubs it with his thumb. "After work, then? Want to get dinner and we'll go back to your place?"

Yes. I want that so badly. But I'm setting myself up to get hurt. I should say no. I should say—

"Yes," I say, ignoring all the warning signs and giving him a big smile.

Damon smiles in return and then leans over to kiss me. Right there in the parking lot. He kisses me! It's light. A brush of his lips that lingers, but he still kisses me.

"Good," he says quietly. He nods toward the door and I follow him.

The smile on my face doesn't fade at all. I feel like I'm bouncing out of my skin, especially when he looks at me throughout the day and smiles. Man, I just *beam* at him. All

the while, my heart races, and my brain is telling me to calm down.

Don't fall in love with the first guy you do butt stuff with!

I'm pretty sure that voice needs to be gagged. Hogtied. Thrown in a dark closet and never let out.

By the time our shifts are over, I'm ready to run eight miles just to get rid of this excess energy. Damon waits for me at the front door and he kisses me *again* when we get to our cars. I'm beaming so brightly, I might as well be a star in the sky. Or a sun. An exploding sun.

"You look happier," he says, his hand trailing down my arm until he squeezes my hand.

"You do too," I say.

He huffs a little and bows his head, his smile falling some. I silently curse. Great. Look what I did now.

"Want to eat somewhere or get take out?" he asks.

I look at my gym clothes and he nods. "Yeah, let's just get back to your place."

There's a moment I wonder if he has that cock cage with him. Will he put it on me in the car? Jesus, not if I'm already hard! How do you stuff a hard one in there?! Oh, will I fit? Will he have to force it?

"Where's your head at, Sage?" he asks, and I blink him back into focus. I flush and he smiles.

"Sorry. I just... I'm glad you're feeling better. You looked—I mean, yesterday you looked..."

Damon nods slightly, a gentle, almost absent bob of his head. "Want to ride with me?"

I glance at my car.

"I'll pick you up in the morning."

My heart does a little dance and I nod. "Yes. Okay."

He kisses me again and I'm fucking flying! It's wild how high I soar. He's kissed me three times in the parking lot!

Three. In a single day!

Damon lets me go and rounds the side of the car to open the passenger door. I thought my smile couldn't possibly be wider. Yet, it does. My cheeks hurt at this point as I climb in. He waits until I get settled before shutting the door and going to the driver's side.

We're quiet as he drives for the first few blocks until we get to a stoplight. "What do you want to eat?" he asks.

I'm suddenly questioning whether this is a date. I'm wearing gym shorts and thinking about my dick being in a cage... on a date? Our first date? Pretty sure when I look his way, my eyes are owlish.

Damon chuckles. "Okay, what don't you like?"

"Artichokes and fish," I answer quickly.

He nods. "All right. How about hot subs?"

"Sure," I say and then we're quiet again. My mind starts racing all over. If he invited me, am I supposed to pay? What if he won't let me? How much am I supposed to insist before it becomes rude? What if I don't offer and he thinks *I'm* rude? What if I order something smelly? Ohmigawd what if it gives me gas?!

"You're thinking very loudly, again," Damon says and I flinch, my cheeks burning. Yes, they might as well be painted red at this point.

When his hand covers mine, I practically melt. "Take a breath," he says quietly. "You're very anxious all of a sudden."

"Sorry, I just... is this a date?" I cover my face with my other hand. Way to be cool, Sage!

Damon's lips on the back of my other hand make me look at him. I'm going to combust. That's it. I'm going to.

"I don't know," he says, giving me a sheepish smile. "Can it just be us spending time together?"

"Without sex?" I ask, and then wince. "Not that I don't want sex. 'Cause I do. I love your dick. I love—My god I need

a muzzle, so I stop talking.”

Damon chuckles as he pulls into a parking lot and sets the car in park. He twists to face me and pulls my mouth to his. I freeze, eyes going wide, and then I practically become goo in his lap. I’m going to be dripping off him.

“Sex, maybe,” he says against my lip. “But let’s start with dinner, okay?”

I nod. “Do you want me to pay? Should I? I don’t know what I’m supposed to do in a gay… friendship thing.”

Damon laughs again. It’s quiet and reaches all the little dark places inside me, lighting them up. “I don’t know who’s *supposed to* pay, but since we’re in the twenty-first century, I think we can pay for our own whenever we want, regardless of the status of our relationship ‘thing.’” I squint at him. Yeah, I said ‘thing.’ I’m an idiot. “But tonight, I’m going to pay. All you have to do is come with me, choose what you want, and hold my hand while we wait for it. All right?”

My voice is breathless when I ask, “You want me to hold your hand? In public?”

He laughs again and kisses me once more. “You’re adorable, Sage. You know that?”

Damon climbs out of the car and I’m staring after him, slightly stunned. Speechless. Stomach dancing—I highly doubt I’m going to be eating anything tonight. Then my door opens, and he offers me his hand. I take it, feeling… like *everyone* is watching me now.

Is this a gay thing? Do you always feel watched? I didn’t feel this conscious when I went places with Sammy. Or is it because I’m blushing far too much and that’s what’s drawing people’s attention to me? That I’m the shade of a boiled lobster?

Damon doesn’t let go of my hand once. Not once. Not when we review the menu or when he orders for us—my heart wouldn’t stop racing and my smile was embarrassingly wide when he did this—not when he pays by tapping his phone on

the checkout. And not while we wait, as he stands super close and we talk quietly.

For a while, I feel like we are in our own world. So much so that I'm a little disoriented when Damon's name is called and I'm jarred back into reality.

I hold the bag in my lap as he drives to my house, my leg bouncing the entire time. Our conversation is light and remains so when we sit at the table and eat the subs. Then he moves close, in the chair next to me, and offers me a piece of cookie, by holding it to my mouth.

His eyes lock with mine, a sexy smile on his pouty lips. Swallowing, my fingers shaking, I open my mouth and let him feed me the bite of cookie. We share the whole cookie this way.

It's sudden when he pushes my chair around and straddles my lap, his hands boxing in my face as he kisses me hard and deep. I groan, gripping his ass and pulling him in tight, thrusting my hips against him. Damon chuckles into my mouth but doesn't stop kissing me.

He pulls me to my feet and we stumble our way into the living room, where we drop on the couch again. That's where we stay for a very long time, just kissing. Though I may also drive myself crazy by thrusting my hips to his, grinding my hard dick against his equally hard length.

After a while, when I'm too light-headed to think anything at all, our kissing stops, and he lays on top of me, just as we did two days ago.

"Want to talk?" he asks. "Tell me what happened yesterday?"

I wince and shake my head.

"Were you upset with me?" he asks.

"No," I say. "I thought I did something wrong because you wouldn't look at me." Fucking hell. Now I sound just as desperate as I feel. And childish. I'm a teenager all over again. I'm that scared gay kid whose mother hates him for being gay,

so she assigns him a girlfriend so no one knows about the shameful family secret.

Damon sighs and perches himself on his arm to look down at me. “I thought that’s why you were upset when I saw you run out,” he says quietly. “I promise you, my mood had nothing to do with you at all.”

I nod, but it doesn’t change how tight my chest feels. He stares at me for a long time and I wonder if that’s why he asked me to dinner. Is it an apology? Did he feel bad for being distant? Like, pity? Is he just taking pity on me?

“Sage,” he murmurs, his lips brushing mine again. “Your mind always goes to the worst-case scenario, doesn’t it?”

I groan, and not in a sexy way. “Sorry. I guess...”

“That’s how you’re used to being treated,” he answers when I don’t, and I nod. “I’m sorry. I...” He licks his lips. “After I left here the other night, my brother and I talked. We... I don’t really know what we even agreed on, but Simon finally answered a text. He came over. We talked and he stayed the night. He’s been answering our texts again. He comes over again. So... yeah, I’m a little all over the place after that conversation.”

My heart plummets. It’s good he reconciled with his best friend. It is. But no matter how much I insist that it’s good, I still feel like I’m going to be thrown away. *He’s in love with someone else.* There’s no room for me in that. What am I doing falling for a man in love with someone else?

“There you go again,” he says quietly, his fingers brushing over my lips. “You look like I just slapped you.”

“Sorry,” I say, my voice choked.

“Sage, he’s got a boyfriend. Remember the part where I said it was unrequited bullshit?” he asks.

I nod. I really, really understand that. Because I’m pretty sure I’m living that life right now.

“He’s keeping his boyfriend,” Damon says, closing his eyes. “He wants to make a life with him. And us.” His laugh is

bitter and his face turns to a grimace. “I hate that man with every fiber of my being, but if I let anyone other than my brother know that, I lose Simon. How do you play nice with someone you hate more than you need to breathe?”

“Maybe that’s not the right question,” I say, and his eyes meet mine. “Maybe you need to ask what it’s worth to you to keep the man you love in your life?”

Damon nods. “Yes. We play nice. We support him and be *nice* to the asshat professor.”

“Is he really that bad?”

He sighs in exasperation. “I need you to be fully on my side, Sage. Yes, he’s awful. Commiserate with me.”

“Awful man,” I say, shaking my head. “Disgusting. He’s so horrible.”

Damon laughs and presses his face to mine. “Thanks. And no, I don’t think he is a bad guy. I so desperately want him to be, so my hatred is justified.”

“Damon?”

“Mm?”

“Why are you here with me?” I ask, my heart in my throat. Both because I actually fucking asked that and because I *actually fucking asked it!*

He takes a deep breath and brushes a soft kiss to my jaw, following it until his lips are at my ear. I shiver when his breath ghosts my skin. “Because I like you, and I enjoy the time we spend together. Sex or not. Is that okay?”

There are so many other questions I need to ask, but thankfully, they get stuck in my throat while I nod. Yeah. It’s more than okay.

Eighteen

DAMON



WE STILL WATCH Saturday morning cartoons. Why when we were about to turn fourteen? Because why not? It's something we've done for so long, it just became routine. Like your favorite shirt you can't stand to get rid of even though it's threadbare and basically transparent at this point.

There's comfort and familiarity in it.

We sit on the couch, shoulder to shoulder, and eat our Cocoa Puffs while we watch something that's really not at all interesting. It's too bad manga wasn't popular in the US and available on popular networking. They actually have gay kids in those. God forbid we let gay kids feel normal by seeing ourselves in cartoons or books or some shit.

My skin feels itchy this morning. That familiar feeling that tells me my brother is too far away, which is stupid since he's literally like two feet to my right on Simon's other side. I glance around Simon, and Declan meets my eyes. I can feel the way he's uncomfortable in his skin too.

Maybe it's growing pains.

Sighing, I face the screen again and continue to munch on my getting-soggy cereal until there's nothing left but the chocolate milk. I bring my bowl to my lips at the same time my brother does, making Simon laugh.

My lips curl, and my stomach flips at the sound. I love his laugh. I love the way it makes me feel. And the amusement that glitters in his eyes as he looks between us.

You'd think that's maybe why we're so in sync. Because we like Simon to smile. But it just feels off when we're not. If we're on different pages or in a different book altogether, everything feels chaotic and unmanageable. It's hell.

We pile our bowls on the table and then sit back, moving a little closer. Squishing Simon uncomfortably between us to close the gap a little more. He never complains. Never. In fact, a smile touches his lips as he loses himself in the mindless television.

I try to pay attention to the cartoons, but this morning, something inside me just feels unsettled. Everything feels twitchy and out of place.

Mom comes through the living room and looks at us. I half expect her to say, "Let him breathe, boys," but she doesn't. Instead, she says, "Take care of your bowls," before disappearing around the corner with a basket of bedding.

We don't move as we stare absently at the television. Eventually, I get up and take our bowls into the kitchen, depositing them in the dishwasher. Then I stand there, trying to figure out why my body feels unbalanced. Declan is fine. He's right there! Simon is right there too. Why do I feel so... itchy?!

Sighing, I return to the living room and stare at them for a minute. I need something, but I don't know what it is. Declan meets my eyes. Even if I couldn't hear his thoughts, I can read it in his face. It's making his hands fist and his jaw tight.

"Growing pains?"

My brother snorts in my mind. No. Well, maybe.

I don't know what I'm doing when I get back to the couch and pull Simon to his feet; my brother following. Simon rarely questions anything. He just does what I want him to and then waits for us to rearrange. I lay down on my back and then pull him toward me.

Simon laughs, but falls to his knees on the cushion. I pull him further and he drops with an 'oomph' on top of me. That's a little better. I look beyond him at Declan and he nods.

Hovering over us, he shifts Simon, so he's fully on top of me, our legs tangled together, and then Declan piles on top of him.

Laughing, Simon buries his face in my chest for a second, and my heart skips. His hands curl under me and he sighs, looking back at the television.

I grip my brother's side above Simon and instantly feel better. Right here, with Simon still between us and I can physically feel Declan. My weird turmoil inside calms the hell down.

Leaving my hand on Declan, I tangle the other into Simon's hair. As expected, I feel him practically purr. Declan's hand joins mine and we're connected in two places now. This is how it's always supposed to be. The three of us. It's like a current that's finally been closed. Completed.

Declan meets my eyes, amused at my thoughts, but doesn't argue otherwise. Not verbally and not internally.

I kiss Simon's head and then turn to watch the cartoons, once more at peace.



WE DECIDED that Friday nights and most of the day on Saturdays belong to the three of us. Without Stommer. So Simon comes over and at first, it feels almost weird. Like we don't know how to act around each other. There's a brief hug and an awkward kiss when he walks in and I'm not sure if this is still supposed to be his home too, or if he's now a guest here.

It remains weird as we eat and then sit on the couch. Separately. Declan and I are still nearly right on top of each other because how else are two men supposed to sit? Don't answer that. But Simon is in a chair.

He glances at us a few times and then sighs. Getting to his feet, he leaves the room for a minute and I'm chewing the inside of my lip.

Why is this weird?

“Fucked if I know.”

Because despite our reconciliation and best fucking sleep of my damn life, and that he’s talking to us all the time again, there’s still a lot that we haven’t said. For all of us. I’m afraid that’s all having to do with his professor, and he doesn’t want to bring it up since it’s a sore subject and we don’t want to bring it up in case we slip and become assholes again.

“We can’t lose him.”

Declan’s thought is so desperate that my chest aches and I rub it. Simon returns with a bottle of water that he sips on. His dark eyes are on us, flitting between us. When he pulls the bottle away and caps it, his usual amused smile is on his pretty, perfect lips.

“You’ve gotten closer,” he says.

“Have we?” I ask, looking at my brother.

Simon nods. “You’ve always been freakishly close. I should know. I’ve had it pointed out to me enough times to think it’s a universal opinion.”

I snort, and Declan rolls his eyes.

Simon grins. “But now you’re like... attached. It’s—”

“Adorable?” we say together, cutting him off.

He laughs. “It is.” His easy mood is what makes the next few seconds happen. He comes back into the seating area and sets his bottle of water on the table, then stands before us. Declan and I reach for him, bringing him onto our laps. Together. His legs spread wide to accommodate us both.

“This okay?” I ask.

Simon rolls his eyes. “When hasn’t it been?”

When you didn’t have a boyfriend.

His expression softens. “Nothing has to change. Nothing.”

“That means you’re still going to sleep with us naked like we always do?” Declan asks.

“We’re not naked, but yeah. Quin doesn’t care about that. And he also knows about us showering together. I’ve told him all about our relationship.”

My heart stutters when he uses ‘relationship’ instead of ‘friendship.’ It feels like he acknowledges that this is something more than just friendship. There’s nothing *just* about this. It’s more. It’s always been more.

But it never got to the ‘more’ we wanted. The ache in my chest says it never will, either.

“Why doesn’t he care?” Declan asks.

“Because he trusts me. Because he believes me when I tell him that what we have between us isn’t the same as what I have with him.”

There’s a whole lot more we want to bring up for this specific line of conversation, but I think it’s far too raw. Even as mine and Declan’s questions bounce around inside us like a hundred bouncy balls going wild in a small, enclosed space.

Instead, we nod and move the conversation to something safer. Work. He tells us all about his job and we let that carry us through until we’re ready for bed. We shower together and wash him as we always have. When we climb into bed later, there’s a breathless, desperate need when we pull him tightly between us.

Once again, we sleep peacefully. This time when we dream about past moments with Simon, we don’t wake up choking on the pain of losing him. It’s pleasant and happy. Almost like nothing ever disrupted our lives together.



I STARE at myself in the mirror and determine that this is stupid. Not for the first time do I think this. My thoughts are echoed by Declan’s as he comes up behind me. His hands land on my waist, pushing me to the side a little so he can stand in the mirror too.

It's prom. We weren't planning on going, but our parents practically begged us to, claiming we'd regret it later if we didn't. Simon didn't care. When it became apparent that he was going along with it to humor my mother and didn't put any effort into procuring a date, we decided Simon would be our date.

We even asked him, making a big show of it and everything. He just laughed at us, but when we pressed for an answer, he shrugged and said, "Who else was I going to go with?"

I don't think it occurred to him to even ask someone else. He gets enough attention that he could probably have had any girl he asked. Hell, he could probably have half the guys, too. Simon is just one of those people that others like. He's happy, he's attractive, he's easy-going. He's smart, thoughtful and sweet. It's all rather natural for him, too. There's no real effort put into it.

He's even effortlessly flirty. Hell, I've seen girls drool over him as he walks away after unintentionally flirting with them. He has no idea. It's really fucking adorable.

Simon's had a couple girlfriends, but it always ends the same—with them jealous of our friendship with him. They don't like how close we are. And they don't even know how close we really are.

High school has been relatively uneventful since the few times in junior high when older kids thought they could bully the queer kids and Simon for being our friend. As it turns out, it's hard to keep track of two pissed off identical kids that move in unison. We kicked enough ass before reaching high school that our reputation preceded us, and we've been left alone since.

Fortunate because we enjoy staying fit. Strong. We're not gym rats or anything, but we love to swim and we enjoy running. It makes us fast, strong, and agile. Add that to our 'freaky twin thing' and we're not easily bested.

"This is dumb," Declan says, frowning at the way his tie sits. "I hate everything about this. Far too many layers."

I laugh, but he's not wrong. Turning him to face me, I fix his tie. Then brush his hair from his face and stare at him. I don't have to be looking in the mirror at our reflections to know that his wan smile matches mine exactly.

"Love you," I whisper.

Declan leans his forehead against mine. "Love you."

"Let's go find our date."

The excitement that rushes through me is compounded by Declan's matching enthusiasm. Leaving the bathroom, we head into our bedroom to find Simon looking at his reflection with a frown. But fuck, I'm breathless.

We're colored for the rainbow. I'm wearing a red tie with orange seams lining my black tux over a white shirt. Declan wears a green tie with yellow seams. And Simon is wearing a purple tie with blue seams. We've covered all six colors in the flag.

But fucking hell, the hard-on in my tight pants that offer no give at seeing this man in a fucking tux is painful. The way he fills it out, his broad shoulders and dark eyes under his dark bronze hair. Jesus, I'm going to bust just staring at him.

Simon's gaze meets ours in the mirror, and he smiles before turning. "You're hot," he says, winking.

I laugh. A breathless sound at the fact he has no idea what he does to me. My brother and I pull him in, trapping him between us and press our mouths to his neck. Simon chuckles, but his body is completely lax in our arms. His complete trust in us, in the way we touch him, how absolutely comfortable and at ease he is with us, only make me fall for him more every single second of every damn day.

"Ready?" I ask.

"I don't know," he says and glances at the mirror, his brows furrowing. "Do I look okay?"

"Really?" I ask, frowning.

He meets my eyes and, yes, he's serious.

“Simon, you’re fucking gorgeous,” Declan says, pulling his face around and planting a kiss on his lips.

“You’re not biased at all,” Simon mutters, but wraps his arms around Declan all the same. “If I were wearing a dishrag, you’d say the same thing. It’s a requirement of being my best friend.”

“No, if you were wearing a dishrag, we’d be saying you’re gorgeous for an entirely different reason. And you’d know it to be true by the twin tents in our pants,” he says, making Simon laugh. He thinks we’re just horny gay boys, and that’s why we’re always turned on around him. On some level, I suppose he’s not wrong. But the thing about Simon is we can tell him the absolute truth, and he just doesn’t get it.

“You look amazing every day,” I say at the shell of his ear. He shivers at my breath on his skin. “But you really are breathtaking right now. I had no idea how good you’d look in a tux. I’m dying to take it off you later.”

He laughs and closes his eyes. “Thanks.”

See? I’m completely honest and he just doesn’t get it. Which is remarkable because we will be undressing him later. We always do.

Our parents take the obligatory pictures and then we head out in the limo we rented. It’s the first real thing we’ve ever spent our own money on. A limo that we’ve rented for like eight hours. Or did we settle on ten? Twelve? Hell if I know.

We only plan to stay at prom for an hour. Then we’re heading to the beach where we’re going to do just what we said and strip Simon to his damn underwear and cuddle nearly naked under the stars.

We’ve danced with Simon before. Individually and together. Not just at school dances, but at home. We went to our first gay club the other weekend once we turned eighteen and Jesus, I’ve never been so damn hard in my entire young life. So many hot men, nearly naked, gyrating all over each other.

Better yet, Simon didn't care in the least that we wanted to dance with him like that. He danced sandwiched between us. And I think he even had fun. Though he was constantly telling others he wasn't interested and that he's not gay. Yeah, I'm sure that looked really convincing, given that he was flattened between two men with their hands all over him.

But there was something different about this. It was slow and intimate. Despite how little we were moving, just rocking back and forth, with our hands mostly stationary, there was something seriously more surreal about this than dancing in the gay club. Or laying in bed together. Showering together.

I wasn't sure what it was, but with a fleeting glance and meeting my brother's eyes, I knew he felt it, too. Of course, he did. After a while, our hands tangled together, my brother's and mine. And with Simon between us, we stayed at prom longer than we intended.

Not that we didn't have fun laying under the stars later and pressing kisses to Simon's lips until the sun started to rise. But nothing would ever trump those dances at prom. Nothing.

Nineteen

SAGE



I'M NOT sure why I'm so desperate. My cock aches so painfully there are tears in my eyes. But I do know. It's because Damon's been here every night this week, and he hasn't put his dick in me. He hasn't tied me up and fucked me until I can't see straight, denying my orgasm until it's torture.

He's been spending time with me, and I love every minute of it. We don't talk about anything specific as we do one of my puzzles or watch television. It's a nice, comfortable companionship. He answers whatever I dare to ask.

It's like we're getting to know each other. I keep trying to tell myself that friends do that and this is not the beginning of something else. I try to make myself believe that. I do believe it. Everything inside of me wants it to mean more than that.

I'm also trying not to read into him not wanting sex. He's choked on my dick two out of his four visits this week. But besides the image of the painful cock cage he sent me and a few flirty, teasing texts back and forth, there's been nothing overly sexual.

Hell, there hasn't even been a lot of kissing since the night we had dinner and he hand fed me a cookie, where we made out on the couch after.

This entire thing is driving me crazy. I need to know what's going on between us, but I'm far too terrified to ask. He told me he can only give me sex. He told me Simon is home. That's why he didn't come over last night. He told me "Friday nights are for Simon, Declan, and me."

It shouldn't have hurt. It really shouldn't have. He's been over here other nights that Simon is there. But I can't stop picturing them in the shower. In bed. Touching him like Damon touches me.

I let out a frustrated, choked screech as, once again, the silicone cock in my ass slips out. This pushes me over the edge because I'm so out of my mind exasperated, tears streak down my cheeks. I'm sure I'm quite the ridiculous sight to behold. I've tied two ties to the posts at the end of my bed, and my back is arched as I try to fuck the dick that keeps slipping out while holding the ropes as if I'm tied down.

But fuck, I can't keep that thing inside me and ride it how I want to while forcing myself *not* to touch myself.

I'm practically sobbing with the aggravation of it all when I open my eyes and almost scream. Damon is standing in the door, his light eyes almost entirely drowned out by his blown pupils. My breath is shaky as I stare at him.

"You forgot to lock your door again," he says, his voice low and deep.

It's only been unlocked for an hour. I'd gone out to check the mail. Obviously, I really should have locked it with all the sounds I'm making.

"Di-did you lock it?" I ask like an idiot.

"I did," he says. He doesn't move as his eyes rove over my body. It makes me ache all the more and I whimper. "You want some help, Sage?"

I whine and all but shout that I do.

Damon wastes no time taking his clothes off while he moves around to the other side of the bed and throws things on top. Condom. Lube. Butt plug. Vibrator. Rope. Lots of rope.

He climbs on the bed again and removes the offending dildo that keeps slipping out. He replaces it with the butt plug and I hiss at the sting of it. Damon gently pats my ass cheek, soothing me with a quiet, "Shhh."

As he ties me up, not nearly as meticulous as he did last time, I blurt, “Why haven’t you touched me?”

His hands pause and he looks at me. This may come as a shock, but my face turns bright red. “I am touching you.”

“No,” I say, quieter this time. “All week. You’ve barely touched me. Are you... are you not into this anymore? You don’t have to be. It’s okay. If you just want to be friends—”

“Oh, Sage,” he says and stops with the rope to lay his body across mine. His mouth covers mine and I moan at his deep kiss. The way his tongue owns my mouth. How thorough and consuming it is.

I don’t stop moaning. My body moves under him, trying to feel more of his body. I can’t touch him. He’s already got my hands secured. But my legs are free, which gives me some movement. Really, it’s his hands smoothing over my body, touching me softly everywhere. Like he wants to touch me.

“I’m sorry,” he says against my mouth, licking me in a filthy way. “I definitely still want this. But I didn’t want to... I don’t know. I didn’t want you to think that’s the only reason I’m coming over here.”

“To tie me up and fuck me?” I ask, breathless.

He nods. “Yeah. I like you. I don’t want you to think that I just want to use you for sex.”

The question is right there on the tip of my tongue to ask what he wants this to be between us. What is it that’s already between us? But I’m too afraid of the answer. I’m afraid that if I push it, he’s going to leave, and honestly, feelings aside, I might break down completely with how badly I need to come.

“Okay,” I say.

“I need you to promise me something,” he says.

I swallow and nod.

“If you need something, sexually or otherwise, you need to tell me. I’m pretty sure I mentioned that I’ve never been with a guy more than once. I’ve never done this with someone regularly. My needs might not match your needs, but that

doesn't mean we can't see where we're at. All right? Promise me that?"

"To tell you if I want sex?" I ask.

He smiles and brushes my lips softly. My heart flutters while still dancing like the drums of war. "Or something else. Kiss. Hug. You want to cuddle. Hell, I want to know if you're hungry or upset. If you want to talk about something."

That sounds an awful lot like a relationship. And now I'm panting for an entirely different reason.

"Right now, you want to be railed. Yeah?" he asks.

I nod wildly.

He kisses my lips again and climbs back to his knees. After giving my raging hard cock a quick jerk that leaves me blubbering and whining, he goes back to securing me in the ropes. This time, he includes one around my dick. Wrapping it gently but firmly until I'm gasping so hard I might have a stroke. Lung failure. Is that a thing?

The rope from my dick is tied around my neck, so the tug on it is in direct response to how I move my head. I look at Damon with wide eyes. He smiles wickedly, his finger rubbing over my slit and making me tremble almost violently.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

I swallow, my eyes darting down to my cock. "I don't think I can come like this," I say.

His wicked smile gets bigger. "That's the idea, Najee."

"I don't know that word," I say, looking up at him. My movement pulls on my dick, and I gasp, a shudder moving through my body. Why does that feel good?

He chuckles, continues to rub the head of my cock, and kisses my lips. "Want to roll over for me?"

I look at him like he's grown three heads. How does he want me to do that? The only thing I can move is my head, and it's literally attached to my dick. I don't want to pull it off.

“Might tug on your cock a little in that position. What do you think? Want to try it?”

I nod. Damon is gentle and careful when he rolls me, arranging my pillows in such a way that I’m not forced to rip my dick off. My face is off the bed next to the pile of pillows beneath my chest. I have free range of my head while the rest of me is forced to remain completely still by the combination of the position he has me perched in and the way he’s tied me up, which is almost too bad because I know when he starts to actually fuck me, I’m going to be losing my mind.

His hands move along my back, over my ass. His fingers slide through my crack and press on the plug in my ass. I whine, but his hand moves lower, cupping my balls. “Najee,” he murmurs again.

“What does it mean?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer as he taps my dick and I whimper. Loudly. Fuck, I need to come. Everything inside me hurts and not from the ropes. The ropes feel like I’m being grounded. Centered. I’m not so out of control.

Handing Damon complete control over my body should be a little terrifying; but having him make every single decision for me, including how much I can move and when I can come, is a strange breath of fresh air. It feels good. It feels freeing.

Seems counterintuitive to have all my power taken away as freeing. But it’s a choice to let someone else do it for me. It was my decision to give up every mechanism to someone else. And I chose that someone else.

No one made any of these decisions for me. Not who decides something or who the other someone is. It’s all me.

That’s what feels so liberating. Like I can breathe freely, unobstructed for the first time in my entire life. I’m in complete control in this situation. If I say ‘Pepsi’ everything stops. That gives me complete and total control over this situation.

When his hands move back up to my ass, he gives it a little slap and I moan, my head jerking and yanking on my painful

cock. My moan turns into a yelp.

“This is about control,” Damon says, as if he’s reading my mind. His body shifts so he’s leaning over me. For a minute, I melt as I feel his lips across my skin, trailing kisses. “You’re in control of what happens to your cock right now. It’s up to you whether there’s pressure on it, pain, or you just feel the soft cords wrapped around it.”

I start to nod, but stop.

“You get to control your orgasm today, Najee. Ready?”

Whimpering, I don’t dare nod or shake my head. How do I come with my dick wrapped tighter than a present? I take a breath and whisper, “Yes.”

“Good.”

He doesn’t move off me. He doesn’t do anything different from what he already is. His body weight slightly on me as the hand that’s not holding him up moves over my skin. Caressing me. His lips brush my shoulder and neck.

I feel wanted. Sexy. The way he touches me makes me feel warm and cared for. Like he sees me. He knows what I need and how to please me. I feel like Damon *wants* to please me. To make me feel good right now. I’m the center of his attention and I almost sob.

His hand finally moves to my ass, and he plays with the plug for a minute. Pushing on it, wiggling it inside me. Pulling it so that the ring of muscle there stretches to release it, only for him to let it go and it snaps back in place.

Damon continues to tease me until I’m crying out because I keep jerking my head and pulling on my cock. I don’t know if it’s pity, or that’s just the point he was waiting for. But he pulls the plug out and I nearly sob at its loss.

Before the sound is even out of my mouth, his cock has replaced it. Pushing in deep, completely burying himself in one swift thrust. The clap of our skin echoes in the room as I cry out. My head jerks up and my cock is pulled tight, making tears surge in my eyes.

The throbbing in my dick isn't just from the pain of not getting release anymore. It's from the way I keep yanking on it. It hurts. I don't hate the hurt. I don't hate it at all.

Damon's hands plant themselves on the bed right over my shoulders. He gives a few gentle thrusts as he works his way in and out, making my body adjust to him. Then he's fucking into me with purpose.

Everything inside me wants to move. Wants to get away from the harsh pleasure that overwhelms me. My mind is spinning a thousand miles an hour with the way he makes me feel. How he hits every bit of pleasure in my body. Every little point. Every nerve ending, setting it on fire.

With every hard thrust, my head snaps, tugging on my cock. I'm so breathless, my body held tightly in the position it's in no matter how much my muscles strain against the restraints, that I can't see straight. It's not even from the tears in my eyes.

I'm begging. But I'm not begging for release. I can hear my words as if I'm watching it from the outside. Fuck, I want to see what we look like. Those words get mixed into my begging, too.

"Don't stop, Damon. Please don't ever stop. It feels so good. I want to see what this looks like. How you have me tied up and fuck me so good. It's so good. You make me feel so good. Please, please don't stop."

He doesn't stop. Neither does my begging. I'm blathering. A complete and totally wrecked mess. But Damon is like that damn bunny. He just keeps going and going.

"You've got such a perfect ass," he growls in my ear. "So fucking good, Sage. My sweet Najee. You going to come for me?"

I whine like a dog in heat. Now that he's mentioned my orgasm, I want it. I start begging for that instead.

His body weight comes down on me, making my legs spread painfully wide. The new sensation only adds to the pleasure. The painful pleasure that makes me tremble. He

tangles his hand in my hair and pushes my chin to my chest, relieving all the pressure and pull I've been putting on my cock.

I only get a second of relief though because the next thing I know, he's moved the vibrator to my dick. I cry out, almost screaming, as tears streak down my face. So good. Too good. It hurts too good.

"That's it, Sage," Damon says. "Fuck, I love when you're like this. Look at you. My big guy bent in half as I tear into his ass. You like this, don't you?"

"Yes," I scream. "Keep fucking me. I need to come."

"Then come, baby. My sweet, sensitive, funny boy. Fucking come for me."

"Yes," I cry out, warmth spreading through my body at his words. "Please. Don't stop. Don't. Stop. Fucking." My words die as my orgasm takes my breath. Every muscle in my body convulses and then stiffens as it overtakes me.

I can't make a sound. My breath is lodged in my throat as the waves of my orgasm wash over me time and time again. Maybe because he doesn't stop fucking me. His perfect dick slams into my prostate over and over. His words, sweet and dirty, continue to fill my head as he talks in my ear. The vibrator at my dick, that's wrapped securely in a cocoon, continues to fill me with obscene amounts of pleasure.

It's too much because I miss the end of my orgasm. I miss Damon's. I miss the cleanup and when he unties me.

When I open my eyes after what I thought was just a minute, Damon has me wrapped in his body as he hums quietly to me, his fingers carding through my hair. I almost cry because it feels so good. Like he wants me. Like I mean something to him.

Like this isn't just sex.

I bite my lip so I don't ruin the moment with questions I'm far too terrified of the answers to ask. Wrapping my arms around him, I press my face to his chest.

“Feeling better?” he asks.

I nod. “Yes. Thanks for taking care of me.”

He chuckles. “I’m not going to pretend it was a hardship. You’ve got a perfect ass. A perfect, massive dick.” Damon sighs, his gentle fingers not moving at all. “You’re pretty perfect, Najee.”

This isn’t just sex anymore. Not to me. I squeeze my eyes shut and pray to every god I don’t believe in that it’s more to him too.

Twenty

SAGE



I PEEK in at Sparrow and grin at the sleeping baby. Jordan is pushing the stroller with one hand and his other is wrapped around River, keeping them close. It's no wonder my heart pangs every time I'm around them. Their love is palpable. I'm not at all envious.

Over the last week, I've been trying to tame my mind and my heart and every other thing in me so I'm not so completely focused on Damon. That means spending time with the only other people who like me the way I am.

They don't seem to mind, though I try not to hang around too much. While they're not newlyweds or anything, they do have a newborn. They've started their family.

"Have you finally let your sister come over?" I ask River.

River nods. "She's claimed the right of first refusal for babysitting," they say with a smile.

"Hmph," I answer. "We'll see. Maybe until he's potty trained."

Jordan chuckles. "You're afraid of diapers now, but wait until you have one of your own. It's very different."

I'm not convinced and yet, when I look down at Sparrow, I know Jordan is right. If I had my own child, of my own making, with the man I loved more than anything, everything would be very different.

But one thing I know for sure; I'll have to move far away and never give my mother the address. She will never have

access to my child.

Not that I think she'd want to, because as far as she's concerned, being gay is blasphemy. She'd die if I married a man, never mind have a child with him.

I'm not at all picturing myself in Damon's arms while we're looking down at a little boy who is a mix of the two of us. Obviously, I know that's not real. If for no other reason than we can't have a child that mixes my genes with his. Science hasn't advanced that far yet.

"Your parents?" I ask, trying to push the thoughts away.

"After getting over being offended that we wouldn't let them come over until Sparrow was a month old, they've decided we're forgiven since they're absolutely in love with their grandson."

I grin at them smugly. I was the only one they'd let come over after they brought Sparrow home. I got to meet him when he was only six days old. And no, I didn't just show up on their doorstep. I'm not that kind of person. I waited until I was invited.

"Don't tell them that," Jordan says, as if he knows why I'm grinning smugly. "We really don't need to hear their complaining."

I mime zipping my lips and tossing a key over my shoulder. But I can't stop the way I bounce on my heels with the warmth that spreads through me, knowing that they chose me to come over first. They introduced their son to me first! It's one of the best feelings and one of my most precious memories to date.

"What about you? Has your mother backed off?" Jordan asks.

"When you called from work the other day, you mentioned Sammy," River says.

I sigh. I'm surprised they'd heard anything with the way I blathered to them. And also surprised that they haven't asked until now. So I give them a brief overview of what happened.

Sammy showing up at work and the things she said. How mad I was.

We don't rehash Damon. That had been the point of my call. It's already been discussed.

"I really think you need to consider a restraining order," River says. Jordan nods in agreement.

"She's not hurting me," I say. "She's not actually attacking me."

"She's harassing you," River says. "Which is just as much an attack as anything physical."

"River's right. She went to your place of employment, Sage. In no way is that acceptable behavior," Jordan says. "You work there. That's your livelihood. If your boss wasn't cool, he could have reprimanded you for your personal life interfering with work. For her behavior and how it looked to the patrons there."

I suck in a breath. Obviously I hadn't thought of that. "Oh," I say, swallowing the new lump in my throat.

"Maybe you ought to consider one against your mother too," River says gently.

They know about my mother. They know everything. I needed to tell someone about how miserable I was and they were the unlucky party that had it all dumped at their feet in a moment of weakness.

While it was really shitty of me to put my burden on them, I'm so incredibly thankful for their support and love over the years. There's been no one else to talk to about it. Not until they convinced me to get a therapist.

I'm not sure what state I'd currently be in if I hadn't broken down and told them all the details of my miserable life.

"I just ignore her calls," I say. Since the morning she told me I needed someone to talk my gay out of me, I haven't taken her phone calls. I've gotten very careful about looking at the caller ID before answering now. "I can block her number."

"And if she shows up at your door?" Jordan asks.

It's not like she wouldn't do that. She would. She has. Not in a while, but she has. The sour feeling in my stomach returns and I look around for something to distract me. I don't want to think about my mother right now. Or Sammy.

"How's it going with Damon?" River asks, probably sensing my distress and changing the subject.

I sigh and try to fight the smile. "I... haven't said the things I need to," I admit, but add quickly, "but I have said some things. I asked why he was coming over and we weren't having sex. He said he likes me and wants to spend time with me."

Jordan smiles, though River continues to study my face.

"And last weekend..." My face flushes as I remember the situation Damon walked in on. "Without getting into details. I, uh, well, he said that if I need something from him, then I should tell him. Because he's never slept with a guy more than once. He's never done this. And the other reason he was coming over and we weren't hooking up is because he didn't want me to think that's all he was interested in."

I know that the way I'm looking at them is with hope and pleading for them to tell me I'm not wrong. So desperately do I need for one of them to tell me this is a good thing. That he feels about me the way I feel about him.

Jordan continues to smile, but River's expression is more reserved and thoughtful. I know they just don't want me to get hurt. It's not like *I* want me to get hurt. But it's pretty clear that I'm stupidly invested in Damon and I'm not sure what else to do about it at this point, except follow this path I'm on with him.

And hope he feels the same way.

"I really wish you'd have a conversation with him," River says.

"I do," I say, almost whiny. "We talk all the time. We text all the time and usually, he texts me first. Every morning and then before we go to sleep. Almost as soon as he leaves my house, he texts me."

There are probably stars in my eyes as I tell them all the little things I've kept to myself this week. "He checks in with me all the time at work. I catch him watching me sometimes like I watch him. He's even brought me a new puzzle that has the image of two men on it because he knows I love puzzles. He does puzzles with me."

Am I projecting what I want to be there? Maybe I'm reading too much into it. I sigh in frustration because I know they're right. I wouldn't have so much doubt and be questioning things if I just talk to him and tell him how I feel. If I tell him what I want.

River takes my hand and squeezes it gently. "Sweetheart, it *sounds* like you're moving somewhere with him that you want to, but I'm still worried you're seeing things through rose-colored glasses. I just don't want you to get hurt."

Sighing, I nod. "Yeah, I know. I was just thinking that too."

My phone rings and I almost ignore it, but when I pull it out and see Damon's name blinking on my screen, a smile splits my face so widely, I can feel it in my temples. When I meet their eyes, the excitement just pours out of me. "I'm going to take this. I'll be back."

Jordan is still grinning and while River smiles too, I know they're worried about how incredibly besotted I am. I'm glad they're concerned for me. I'm probably not concerned enough about myself.

I answer the call before it goes to voicemail. When the screen blinks, I see that I've missed several texts from him too.

"Hi!" I say, far too enthusiastically.

"Hey," he answers and I swear, I hear a smile in his voice. I'm imagining it, right? I'm just too excited that he's actually calling me. "Am I interrupting?"

I look around as I head for the nearest exit. "No?" I ask, unsure what he means.

Damon chuckles. "It's pretty loud there. You didn't need to answer. It's not an emergency."

“It’s okay. I’m at the mall with my friends. They have a baby and needed to get out to stretch their legs since they haven’t left the house in six weeks,” I explain. “We’re not really doing anything but talking as we walk around.”

“You can call me back,” he says. “I don’t want to take you away from your friends. It’s really not an emergency.”

I bite my lip. “No. I want to talk to you.” My face heats as I step outside, and I pretend it’s the sun.

“Good,” he says quietly. “I want to talk to you too.”

“You do? About what? Is everything okay? If you can’t come over later, that’s okay. Is that what you were texting about? I’m sorry I didn’t hear my phone. I—”

“Easy, Najee. Take a breath.”

I do, my heart skipping at the word he keeps calling me. I keep forgetting to look it up.

“I called because I was worried when you didn’t answer, yes. But really, I just wanted to hear your voice.”

Okay, now my stomach is doing acrobats. He wanted to hear my voice!

“You do?” I whisper.

He chuckles. “Yeah, Sage. Is that okay?”

“Yes!” I flinch at the way I almost shout it. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be—”

“Just be you, Sage. I like you the way you are. I love when you get nervous and ramble. When your cheeks turn pink after you’ve said something you didn’t mean to. You’re adorable. Perfect.”

Tears sting my eyes. No one has ever told me that. No one. “Are you trying to get in my pants?” I blurt. “Because you don’t have to say nice things to me to get that.”

Damon is quiet for a minute and my mind is racing as I try to find something to fix what I just said.

“You don’t take compliments well,” he says after a minute in which I almost give myself a coronary trying to remember how to breathe. “Listen to me. You’re amazing. Don’t you dare change. Say whatever is on your mind. Keep blushing for me. Keep rambling. I love it.”

I blink several times as my heart tries to break out of my chest. “I—Okay.” I sniff and then wince. No one wants to hear someone sniffing in their ear. “But did you call for something? Did you need something?”

“No. I really just called because...” he pauses and I hear a quiet sigh. “I wanted to hear your voice, Sage. I, uhm. I miss you, I think.”

My heart races, and I grin like a lunatic. “I miss you too,” I say quickly then bite my lip. “We’re probably not going to stay much longer if—”

“Don’t you dare rush through time with your friends. But yeah, let me know when you’re headed home. I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay,” I say.

“I mean it, though. Don’t rush.”

“I won’t. But I did say they have a newborn, right? It’s their first baby. They’re stupidly calm when I’d be freaking out over every single thing at all minutes of the day and night. But I don’t think they want to keep Sparrow out too long with all the strangers and stuff.”

“That’s a cute name,” he says.

“Yeah. His real name is River, like one of his parents, but to avoid confusion, they call him Sparrow. I love it.”

“I can imagine you holding a tiny baby. My big man with huge muscles and a tiny little human.” He hums. “It’s such a cute image.”

“I have a picture,” I say. “Of me and Sparrow. If you want to see. You don’t have to. But if you want to, then I—”

“Yes, Najee. I’d love to see it. You can show me anything. I want to see it all.”

My heart leaps. My chest tightens. He called me his.

Don't read into it! Don't read into it. Don't. Read. Into. It.

"I really like you," I blurt. "A lot."

Oh fuck. Fear overtakes me, and I sink to the bench. My vision darkens as I try to catch my breath.

"I like you too," he says softly. "More than I think I should."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because my life is complicated, and I don't want you to get hurt. I don't think I can promise you what you want, Sage."

"It's not complicated. You already told me—"

"Sage," he says quietly. Sadly? "You knowing and you seeing and accepting it are two different things. You understand that, right?"

I swallow. "Yes."

"You think, based on the little bit I've told you about my relationship with Declan and Simon, that you'd be okay with that? I can tell you, not many people are; the vast majority of people who have an issue with what they see, not only don't see us behind closed doors, but our lives also have no bearing on them. It would be very different for you. Everything I do will affect you, and I don't want you to hurt because of me."

"Does that mean—?"

"Let's not talk about this over the phone," he says and my heart sinks. "Don't think that means I don't want to talk about it, but I think this conversation deserves more than a phone call."

"Okay," I say. For some reason, I want to sob.

"Don't do that," he says quietly. "I'm not telling you I don't want this. That I don't want you. I do." He laughs quietly. "Fuck, those are words I never thought I'd say to anyone."

Everything inside me feels like a rollercoaster. Hope flares so brightly inside me I nearly choke on it.

“I like you too, Sage. I really, really do. We can talk tonight. When you’re done with your friends. Who you aren’t going to rush your time with. Right?”

I smile. “Yes. I won’t rush.”

“Good. Then I’ll see you later. All right?”

“Damon?”

“Yes?”

“Will you tie me up tonight too? I really need... I need you to...”

“Absolutely, Najee. There’s nothing I want more than to make you completely helpless while I fuck you into the bed until you come so hard you pass out in my arms. How about we try a gag tonight?”

I groan, my dick liking that a lot. “Yes, please.”

His chuckle is dark and sexy. “Go enjoy your friends. I’ll see you later.”

My chest heaves with arousal as I blink into the bright day, seeing nothing and no one around me. Jesus, this is an amusement park ride. No matter how much I think I should get off, I just hang on and keep going.

When I turn back to the doors, I find River and Jordan waiting for me inside. I return to them, stuffing my phone in my pocket and give them a wide smile.

Neither are quite smiling.

“I’m not sure what to make of all the emotions that played over your face just now,” Jordan says.

“Well, I can tell you I’m pretty sure I’m in love with him, and I know he likes me. He told me so. Just now.” My stomach dances so violently, I think I’m going to be sick. “But that doesn’t mean it’s going to be forever.”

“He told you that too?” River asks, frowning.

“No. We’re going to talk later. And have other activities. I just... I really do love him. I want him. He’s my person.” I look at River with wide, pleading eyes. “Tell me how to make him mine.”

Twenty-One

DAMON



WHAT'S TAKING him so long?

We already know what's taking him so long. Her name is Tabitha. Simon has a girlfriend and while we have been good gay best friends and supported this new venture in his life, we hate it. I've never felt such raging jealousy in my life.

I stand beside Declan against our dad's car. We just got our licenses, all three of us, but our parents don't want us to have our own cars yet. Not even one between all of us. Mom won't even let us buy one with our own money! She's cruel. I totally mean that in the most loving way possible.

She doesn't want the new freedom to get in the way of school. She's not wrong. It totally would.

We see the moment Simon walks out of the school. There's a blonde at his side, a smile on her face as she looks up at Simon with fucking doe eyes. She's clutching his hand, their fingers linked, as Simon says something to her. She's literally hanging on every single fucking word.

There's no doubt in my mind that I hate everything about it. I kind of want to run her over. Can I call it an accident? A moment of psychosis?

No one should be able to hold his hand but me.

"Fuck you."

And Declan. Obviously.

His disgruntled response is only half-hearted because his focus is just as hard on the same place mine is. I hate someone

else touching him. My entire body tenses, as if I'm getting ready to pounce.

They join us and Simon flashes us a smile. A smile that belongs to both of us. But then the damn girl gets his attention and turns him; bringing her mouth to his and fucking kisses him.

We knew this day would come. That our straight best friend would eventually become interested in girls and we'd not get to have him 100% like we have always had. We knew that. But when her mouth touches his and then she presses her fucking body to his and his hand lands on her hip, something inside me snaps.

I hurt everywhere. Declan announces the realization inside us before I make the connection.

"I love him."

Fucking hell. What gay god allowed us to fall in love with our best friend? Why did we have to be that cliché?

Worse, why do we have to watch this?

At the end of what I can stomach without freaking the fuck out, I grab Simon's hand off her hip and yank him away. There's a wet little pop that makes me cringe as I shove him into my brother's chest and then basically become a barrier between the two of them.

Simon, my sweet innocent soul, just laughs off our jealousy. Tabitha does not find it funny at all. Her glare would be just as lethal as ours.

"You're going to have to get used to him having a girlfriend. There are things you can't give him that I can," she says, and the smile she gives us is triumphant. She's wrong, of course. There's not a fucking thing she can give him we can't.

You know, except a vagina. I'm reasonably certain I can make that irrelevant, though.

I don't answer, and Tabitha rolls her eyes. "Call me later, Simon." She turns, flipping her hair over her shoulder, and walks away, sashaying her hips.

“I do that better than she does,” Declan mutters.

Simon laughs again and steps away from Declan before turning for the car. But he kisses my cheek on the way and then Declan’s. I’m going to pretend that’s a thank you for rescuing him from the stupid girl.

Who needs girls?

But when he shuts the door and looks at me through the window, my heart stops entirely. Fucking hell, I’m in love with my best friend.

Meeting Declan’s eyes, I can feel his panic race through him as mine does. For a second, we link our hands together, letting the contact calm us both.

We’re screwed.



THERE’S A VERY strange war going on inside me. My entire being has been connected to Simon since we met. I love him with everything inside me. There’s a part of me that I think would still throw everything away to be with him and Declan if he said that’s what he wants.

And yet, I don’t think I’d be completely happy anymore. I don’t think that’s what *I want* anymore. Though I’ll never *not* want him. I’m pretty sure.

I look at Declan, and he raises a brow. Not because my thoughts surprise him. Fucker thinks and feels them too. He can’t lie to me. He rolls his eyes, a smile playing on his lips.

Simon is squished between us as we pet and shower him with kisses, almost absently. Because this is where he belongs. This is his home. This is our home. I only feel completely right when it’s the three of us.

But then, why the fuck does Sage keep flitting through my mind? Why do I have a strange ache inside me that wants him

here, too? And this other face that I don't actually know, but have memorized. Zarek. Declan's man.

Is it weird that we even fall for two different men at the same time? Like we can't even do that separately. He snorts in my head and I bury my face in Simon's neck.

The issue isn't how I feel about Sage. Not at all. I'm completely fine... Okay, I'm flailing and slightly panicky. It helps me remain somewhat rational when I talk to him because he's an excitable and easily flustered puppy who needs to be redirected and reassured.

I have a feeling he hasn't told me the true depths of his hurt. It runs deep. It's given him so many insecurities that I don't think he's even fully aware of them. Not before they come up and are falling out of his mouth.

The only time I've ever felt such a strong need to protect and avenge someone has been regarding Simon. Not even Declan, since he's never needed it. I would. Without a doubt. Hell, if someone ever hurt my brother, I don't think I could be held responsible for my actions after. I'd lose my fucking mind.

There'd be blood on my hands.

"Love you too, psycho."

I smirk but don't look up to meet his eyes this time. This is what happens when we're not allowed private thoughts. I never thought it would bother me. Hell, it still doesn't bother me.

Sage is the first time I'm doing something on my own. Without Declan. I feel his absence the entire time and it... fucking sucks. Yet, though he's not there physically, I know he's there in my head. I know he feels, sees, hears everything. He's there.

When I told Sage that my life was complicated, I didn't mean in a traditionally complicated sense. I have very strangely shaped baggage. But truthfully, I don't really think Sage can accept this the way Stommer has.

I glance at the man in question. He's sitting on the chair perpendicular to where the three of us are tangled together on the couch. There's zero tension. His expression is open and unbothered. Fuck, even when he looks our way—at Simon—there's a fond, affectionate smile on his stupid face.

What kind of man can accept this about their boyfriend?

Maybe that only makes this ache all the more. I don't think Sage is going to be like Stommer. I don't think he's going to be able to sit there and just *see* it. It's going to hurt him. So if I plan to keep Sage, my option is to keep the two lives separate completely.

And I don't want to do that. Jesus fuck, I don't want to do that.

I'd be more than just frustrated if I didn't feel my brother going through the same war I am. He likes this guy. Zarek. He likes him like I like Sage.

We haven't told Simon. Hell, we haven't even told each other. There's been no conversation. Nothing. We just know, because how can we not?

Then there's the weird elephant in the room. This borderline taboo relationship with Declan. How will Sage accept *that*?

"They have to, or this is going nowhere with either of them."

His words sting. I feel that echo inside him, as well.

"You two are really tense tonight," Simon says.

It's only been a few weeks since we've had our reconciliation. This is the second time Stommer has been here with him. Which also means it's the second time I'd rather be anywhere other than here. And take Simon with us, of course.

My irrational hate for that man is consuming. I can play nice. Especially if I don't look directly at him for too long. If he doesn't speak a lot. Neither happens, so that's fortunate.

"Sorry," Declan says when I still don't pull myself from my thoughts.

Simon sighs and sits up, so he's looking down at me. Declan is strewn over his back and his eyes stare down too.

Yeah, thanks for letting me be the one he stares at.

Declan smirks.

"What's wrong?" Simon asks.

"It's a secret," I say and then wince. That was low.

Simon frowns; the hurt on his face makes my chest ache so I pull him down and kiss him. "I'm sorry. That was shitty."

"Yeah, it was," he says.

"I love you. The only one I love as much is Declan. You're everything. You know that, right?"

He frowns still, staring at me. I can feel the tension start in his hands that are plastered to my chest to keep him at a distance where I'm not blurred because we're too close.

I'm crossing more lines. I feel it. It's a train wreck.

"It also feels like a lie."

Shut up.

"I love you too," Simon says hesitantly.

"I just mean, this is all our own. This is between the three of us. Always. Right?"

There's no answer as he continues to stare at me, but eventually, he nods. "Right. Just as what's between Quin and I is just between the two of us."

I pretend that the irrational anger that sweeps through me is due to something else entirely. Not because he has a relationship with someone else that I'm not a part of. Not because it hurts that he went elsewhere when he needed something instead of us.

"Yes, like that," I say. When his frown doesn't deepen, I think I did rather well keeping my voice neutral and void of the hostility inside me. He wasn't wrong. I am filled with that angry violence toward Stommer. Warranted or not.

In my mind, he's always going to be the person who took Simon. It will always be his fault that things broke between us. I don't even care if that's an outright lie, a stretch of the truth, or something in the middle. It will always be his fault. Period.

"Okay, but why do you feel stressed tonight?" Simon asks.

"Because we're falling for someone else and it hurts."

I try to ignore Declan's thoughts. *I'm not falling for anyone.* Then squint, completely ignoring Declan's scoff.

"I... don't want to say," I say eventually.

"You think I'm going to be mad?"

"No."

"You think it's going to hurt me?"

"No."

"Does it hurt you?"

"I hate that you eventually hit the truth," Declan mutters.

Simon twists to look at him. "What hurts? Tell me. Please."

"I don't... I met someone." Declan holds his breath. I do too.

Simon's lips twitch. "I meet people every day. It happens in the fields we chose."

Declan bites into his neck, making Simon squeal and laugh. For a minute, we forget the conversation and sink our teeth into his soft flesh as he squirms and laughs between us. Just like when we were kids.

But then he twists, and he circles his arms around us both. Holding us tightly to him. Our foreheads press together. "I love you too," he whispers. "What are their names?"

"Sage," I say as Declan answers, "Zarek."

He smiles. "It's cute that you can't meet people on your own time."

“I wasn’t using ‘cute’ as the word to describe it but yeah, I was just thinking that,” I say.

“Why does it hurt?” Simon asks, his fingers pressing gently into our heads, massaging our scalps like we always do for him. I’m not purring like he does, but it feels good and reassuring all the same. I can see why he likes it.

“Because... I’m afraid that it’s going to fall apart. You might have gotten strangely... lucky.” The way Declan says the word is clear that it wasn’t his first choice. “To have found someone who accepts this. Us. The way we are. But if growing up together for the last fifteen years has taught us anything, it’s that Stommer is an exception and sure as fuck isn’t a rule to how people feel about this.”

“And I’m not willing to change it,” I add. “This is ours. It’s as necessary as breathing.”

“Have you told them about us?” Simon asks and I can’t help the way my heart stutters. Us.

“Yes,” I say. “But hearing it and seeing it are different. Hearing it and then getting involved with someone and expecting them to be okay with it, support it, and not get angry or jealous or whatever, is just...”

“Unlikely,” Declan finishes.

“Not impossible,” Simon says. He kisses us both quickly before giving us what I feel is a flirty smile but I’m not sure that’s intentional on his part. Now that I think about it, I don’t know that I’ve ever seen him flirt. With anyone.

We pull away in unison, leaving Simon smirking at us. No doubt he feels our twin chubbies growing against him.

“You really think someone is going to be okay with this?” Declan asks, rocking his hips against Simon’s ass.

Simon pats his cheek. “You’re going to have to work on your dick control; but...” He looks at Stommer and I fucking hate the heart eyes he gives that man. “Yes. I think someone will. If it’s the right someone.”

While everything in me wants to tear Simon's gaze away from Stommer and not let him look at that man that way, I'm not going to lie and say that the need that flares inside me is for that alone. I want that person to be Sage. I desperately *need* it to be him.

"You're okay if we love someone else?" Declan asks.

Simon turns his attention to us again. At least *this look* is ours alone. "I know that no matter how much you love someone else, no matter how much they mean to you or how much time and room they take in your life, that you love me and that love will never change. Just like mine won't change. And Damon's won't either."

"It would be easier if you just loved us how we love you, you know," Declan says.

He snorts. "I'm not built for you," he says quietly. His arms tighten on us. "I'm... not into sex in the way you are. No matter how much you're okay with my sexuality, I can't give you what you need. That's just not how I'm made."

"You're wrong that you think that would be an obstacle," I say.

"Hmm," Simon says, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "You're right. Your sex drives match each other's."

I glare at him, my stare matching Declan's. It makes Simon laugh. But his next words have me catching my breath. "I think that maybe you're concentrating on the wrong parts of this. It's not that our love is the wrong kind. It's that we have too much love to keep between us. I love you with my entire being. I always will. Always. But I love Quin that much too. It's different. Very different. But it's just as strong. I bet that's exactly what you feel for Sage and Zarek. Isn't it?"

"Fuck."

Fuck.

Twenty-Two

DAMON



IT'S SATURDAY AFTERNOON. Sage and I are in my car, heading forty minutes away to a destination I haven't told him about. My head is a fucking mess as I can't help but mentally listen in on Declan and Zarek having a conversation that I recently had with Sage.

Ours was... interesting. I was caught between stress and fond amusement as I watched the expressions play across Sage's face. While he didn't talk about anything in his past at all, I gathered a few observations about what he's been through. Primarily, he didn't think he was going to find a man to love him the way he was.

I'm not sure if it was his parents or the crazy ex who made him feel like his best wasn't ever good enough, like *he* wasn't good enough, but one of them sure as fuck did. Or maybe both. If his mother set him up with that woman, there's a chance that she was just like his mother.

The thing that bothers me most is that Sage is such a sweet, kind, and sensitive man. That means the guilt trips and manipulation they played on him were extra fucking cruel. To make him feel so inadequate in his own skin. So unsure of what he feels and everything he says.

The anger I have towards Stommer has now expanded to include the anger I have toward the people in Sage's past. No one gets to hurt this man. Never again. I won't fucking have it.

That being said, it was a rough fucking ride talking to him about Declan and Simon. I skipped the Declan conversation

for now. That's an entirely different kind of discussion. In some ways, I'd like to say that it might be easier because we're brothers. It's easy for a psyche to overlook any kind of intimate touch and interpret it to be harmless and platonic.

Declan snorts in my head and I know he's paying attention to me alongside his conversation with Zarek. Because we're always in each other's heads, we've learned to split our attention pretty damn well. Sometimes we make each other background noise and yet nothing goes unnoticed. Not a damn thing. But more times than not, we're just equally tuned into whatever we're doing in person and what our brother is doing. As if we're a person split in two.

As with everything else in our lives.

"I know we're focusing on Simon, but I wonder if it would be better to introduce them to each other first. Meeting one new person is better than meeting three who we have personal connections with."

I nod at Declan's suggestion. *Double date?* I wonder. *Yeah, that's probably a good idea.*

"Yeah. Let's do that. Tomorrow? Or want to wait for next weekend?"

Tomorrow. Yep, no need to wait. Oh! I think you should dress your boy in a cock cage. I'm totally going to have Sage wear one during our date.

His laughter makes me grin.

"You're smiling a lot," Sage says quietly and I glance his way. He's watching me with his wide golden eyes and a nervous smile.

I reach for his hand and lace our fingers together. "Listening to my brother is amusing sometimes."

"You can hear him? Right now?" Sage asks, wide eyes filled with wonder.

Grinning, I nod. I've never tried to explain our connection to anyone except Simon, but for the first time since then, I kind of want to try. When Declan doesn't have any objections,

I say, “It’s a lot like hearing your own thoughts, but knowing they’re not yours. I know what he’s doing, saying, what he sees and hears. How he feels. Declan is an extension of me in every way.”

Sage tilts his head, his smile broad. “That’s pretty wild.”

I nod. “Yeah, it can be intense sometimes.”

“I always wanted a sibling.” He frowns. “But then I was pretty glad I didn’t get one. No one else should have to suffer through my mother like I did. Although, they’d probably have been straight, so they’d have been the favorite.”

“You don’t know that. My twin is as gay as I am.”

“*Gayer.*”

I chuckle and shake my head. “It’s not an odds thing, like gender. It just is.”

“You think so?”

Nodding, I squeeze his hand. “Yep. Some families have all gay children, others have none. Some have a mix. But more than people would like to admit, there are a whole lot of different sexualities within the people you speak to every day. They just don’t broadcast it because of the stigma against anything other than straight.”

Sage sighs. “Yeah. It’s kind of stupid. Making so much of the population feel like shit because they don’t love the same way the majority does. Who cares who I have sex with? Why does it matter?”

I nod and a conversation that we’ve had jokingly with Simon pops up in my mind. Declan pauses as well when the words echo. Biting my lip, I glance at Sage. He’s watching out the window at the trees and the signs we pass.

“Sage?”

He looks at me, and I can feel his excited energy. Always excited. I smile because I love it.

“You know that I’ve been with a lot of guys, right?”

Sage deflates a little, but his brows knit together in confusion as he nods. “Yes?”

“I just mean, I was a pretty big slut.” I smirk, especially as Declan rolls his eyes and then has to explain why he did to Zarek. “Especially when I got to college.”

“Okay. Yes, I think I knew that.”

I glance at him to find him watching me. “If it comes up, I didn’t want you to be caught off guard. That’s all.”

“Oh,” he says and turns thoughtful as he stares at me. Studying me. “How many guys?”

I grunt and feel Declan smirk this time. “Umm... I have no idea. I rarely went back to the same dick twice.”

“Because they weren’t good?” he asks. The innocence in this man is adorable.

“No. I don’t know. Sometimes my brother and I would trade off and the guy wouldn’t know the difference during the second time. Even though they see us together when we hook up.”

“You always hooked up together?”

Even though I feel this conversation is going to lead somewhere I’m not sure we’re ready to discuss, I answer anyway. “The first handful of times, no. But it was... frustrating. It took us a while to figure out because we weren’t together, everything felt... off. But once we figured that out, yeah. Always, together.”

Sage sighs. “That’s not weird?”

Licking my lips, I shake my head. Words. I need the right words, so he’s not spooked. “No, it’s weird *not* to be with him for anything. It feels like my skin is constantly itchy. It doesn’t fit right. An ache inside me expands the longer we’re apart. Especially when something is high effort or energy, physically or mentally. Like sex. More than that, the turmoil in our minds becomes unbearable. I’m a tornado and he’s a hurricane. When we’re together, the two storms seem to cancel each other out.

But when we're apart, they feed on each other, and we can get... rather belligerent."

"That's really... interesting. But... he hasn't been here when we..." His words cut off as he stares at me with wide eyes. "Have you ever swapped? Has it always been you? Are you *you* now? How will I know?"

I laugh quietly and kiss the back of his hand, biting his knuckles lightly. "Easy, Najee. Eventually you'll learn the difference between us."

"But... how?" There's panic building in his voice.

Maybe we need to get different haircuts.

"No."

The idea makes me grin though, and I kiss Sage's palm. "Sage, I'll never, ever let you think my brother is me. I promise."

He takes a breath and nods, though his eyes flick to me nervously several times.

"To answer your first question, no, Declan has never been there physically when we're together; but yes, he's always in my head. Feeling exactly what I feel. Seeing what I see. In some ways, he experiences it the same way I do."

Sage's face turns bright red as his eyes turn to me in near horror. I laugh and reach for the back of his head, bringing his face toward mine. For just a second, I'm an extremely unsafe driver as I quickly kiss his lips.

"I feel like that's something you should disclose to your hookups," he says.

"Most people, though they like to marvel at the 'freaky twin thing' when we move and speak in unison, don't believe in our hive mind or whatever else it is we have. It would be a wasted effort *and* probably get in the way of hooking up. Also, because we experience it from each other too, it's another reason that we've always hooked up at the same time, in the same place. There's nothing more frustrating than feeling his orgasm when I'm in the middle of class."

“That’s never happened!”

But, fuck, imagine if it did! Or when you’re meeting with one of the teams? Trying to massage a player’s muscle and I’m over here sticking it in Sage and you’re listening to him—

“All right, stop. I don’t need to be hard right now, either. I’m glad we’re cognizant enough never to do that to each other.”

There’s a slight threat in that. A warning. If I fuck with him during business hours, he sure as fuck will return the favor. It’s a fortunate thing that we’re close and don’t hate each other. Life could be fucking miserable for twins with this kind of thorough connection if they didn’t get along.

“Imagine twins separated at birth that have this connection! What a fucking wild ride!”

I shiver at the thought. I already have a hard time determining whose hunger pains I feel. What a goddamn mind fuck if I didn’t know I was a twin.

“He sees you tie me up?” Sage asks after a minute. “He sees that you don’t let me orgasm?”

Grinning, I nod. “Yep. And he feels how tight your perfect hole is around my cock. And how raw you make my throat when I swallow your dick.”

Sage’s face is bright red again, and he covers it with his other hand. “Oh, my gosh! I’m never going to be able to look at him again. Worse, I’m going to be picturing him when I picture you naked. OH MY GOSH, what if I don’t know I’m imagining him instead of you? OHHH! What if I see him and instantly get hard because he looks like you?!”

Declan’s laughter in my head makes me chuckle. My chest heats with warmth as I veer off the interstate and cruise to a red light. Stopping, I shift in my seat and take his face in my hands, bringing his mouth to mine. I kiss him slowly, deeply, claiming him with my tongue so he knows that he’s mine and not my brother’s.

I’m glad he’s not focusing on the fact that it goes the other way too. Declan might experience every little thing that I do

with Sage, but I also feel everything he does with Zarek. Jesus, talk about a relationship that could cause a whole lot of jealousy that there's nothing we can do about. Nothing at all.

I pull away when the car in front of me starts to roll forward. "I know that there's going to be some growing pains and awkward moments for us," I tell him, brushing my thumb over his slightly swollen bottom lip. Bringing my hands back to the wheel, I move along with traffic. "But like we talked about the other day, we'll go slowly. Little doses at a time. All right?"

Sage nods. I can feel his nervous energy as it fills the car. He's biting the inside of his lip, worrying about all of this. But I don't know how to take it away.

"How about we start soon?" I suggest, and his focus turns to me. "We'll go on a double date—the two of us with Declan and Zarek. Sound good?"

He takes a deep breath and nods. "Yeah, okay."

"Tomorrow evening? Or do you want to wait until next weekend?" I ask.

Sage doesn't answer for a while, but eventually he says, "Tomorrow works."

I nod and Declan already knows the answer, so he follows up by asking Zarek if he's interested. I can see the way Zarek looks at my brother. Like he hung the stars. He seriously sees no one but Declan.

My chest fills with warmth because that's the only way my brother should be looked at. Nothing less. He's the best thing in the world.

"Sappy psycho. Stop admiring my man. Focus on your puppy."

His thoughts directly conflict with the way his chest tightens. I know he loves how I love him. How protective I am over him. It's the same way I feel about his love and protectiveness for me.

We pull in and I park the car. Turning the engine off, I twist in my seat to pull Sage close again. “I’m really glad you want to meet my brother. You’re the only man I’ve ever brought home to him.”

His eyes light up. “I am?”

Chuckling, I kiss his lips. “Yeah, Sage. There’s only you.”

His hands tangle in my shirt as he presses his mouth hard to mine, pouring every built-up emotion inside him. I know how he feels about me. I know the parts he hasn’t said out loud. This man wears his feelings in his eyes. On his sleeve. Written across his gorgeous face.

Sage Rossi loves me.

The feeling of his rough hands moving from my shirt up my neck to hold me to him, have me kissing him harder. Wanting to devour him. Own him. Make sure he knows that he belongs to me and me alone.

“Don’t kid yourself. He’s mine too.”

I ignore Declan’s tease, though I know he’s right. We share everything. *Everything*. I’m seriously fucking curious and anxious to see how we handle each other’s lovers. There’s no jealousy yet. I think that’s because we have our own guy to focus on while our twin concentrates on theirs. But as I told Sage concerning Simon, knowing about it and seeing it is a very different thing.

Am I going to like Declan looking at someone other than Simon? Touching someone else? For the longest time, it’s always been us and Simon. Us *with* Simon.

Feeling him touch someone like I’m the one doing it while he does is different. Seeing it through his eyes and thoughts is different. Experiencing it as if I’m him is different. There’s a strange, detached sensation about it. Much like when we hook up with guys in clubs together.

It happening in front of me knowing how he feels about a man that’s not Simon? I might lose my fucking mind. I’m not even sure why but it’s a very real possibility.

And yet, I might also just fall in love with Zarek myself. Who the fuck knows?!

I also might be in love with Sage too. It's not that I don't know how I feel. It's more that I'm not sure I can bring myself to examine those emotions yet. I can feel Declan's love for Zarek though, even though he's ignoring it in the same way I'm ignoring my maybe-love for Sage.

Taking a breath, I break our kiss.

"You're going to share your brother with me," he says, breathless.

I feel Declan inhale at the words and chuckle. I'm not sure which I'm laughing at because I know Declan heard the words that Sage didn't mean the same way we took them. And yet, I answer, "Yes. I'm going to share Declan with you."

Declan shakes his head, muttering internally. I don't miss the way his excitement jumps, though. We'll have to talk about this later. I wonder how this is going to work between us. Not just the four of us, but the six of us. Declan is step number one. Number two is Simon, which I know is going to be a fucking hurdle.

My brother and I need to talk about the idea of sharing, though. Like, truly sharing. We need to be prepared for whatever comes up.

But for now, I kiss Sage's lips again and then climb out of the car. I round the front to open his door and pull him to his feet. "Ready, Najee?"

Sage nods, his cheeks flushed from kissing.

Taking his hand, I pull him toward the door to the store and open it, letting him step inside. His eyes widen. He sucks in a breath. His skin—his entire body, I swear—turns bright red as he looks around.

"What is this?" he asks, his deep voice turning into a squeak.

"Adult toy store," I say. "We need to find a cage that fits your monster cock. Maybe a ball gag, since I don't want to

keep ruining your ties. Then we'll see what else we find that you might enjoy."

Want me to grab a chastity cage for Zarek?

There's a moment of amusement before an image of Zarek's soft dick floods my mind. "*Find one that fits. They can wear them together tomorrow night.*"

I groan, blinking away the sudden rush of heat that sears through my body.

Twenty-Three

SAGE



I SHIFT UNCOMFORTABLY in the car seat and grimace at the way my dick is being tortured. After a very intense orgasm—following what felt like the entire morning that Damon wouldn't let me come—I woke up with my cock trapped in the metal cage that he'd bought when we went to that adult store.

Admittedly, I was instantly fascinated with it. One bar went under my balls while the cage itself wrapped my entire dick inside. There's a little lock at the top with a key that dangles on a chain around Damon's neck. I immediately spotted it as soon as I looked up from my trapped dick.

He was sitting in front of me, smiling in the most sexy way. It made my dick twitch, and I was immediately terrified of becoming hard in this thing.

Damon took me to the bathroom to wash me, dry me, rub my entire body with lotion, and then led me back into my bedroom. Then he dressed me. He. Dressed. Me. I have never felt so damn taken care of in my entire life as he dressed me.

But now, I'm sitting in his car and everything feels really tight. The way my jock presses against my trapped cock. The way my pants stretch and the outline of the ribs of the cage hint against the fabric. How the seat belt presses uncomfortably against my dick.

When I look up at Damon, I'm surprised to see his brows knit together and him chewing on his lip. My heart races. Is he upset about something? Does he not like the way my dick fits

in this trap? Did I do something to make him uncomfortable? My palms become sweaty as I stare.

“Damon?” I ask.

He glances my way and flashes me a quick smile before looking at the road again. “Yeah?”

“Are you okay?”

Damon huffs quietly, a smile touching his lips. “I’m a little nervous.”

That makes my stomach drop. “That he’s not going to like me?” My entire body tenses and tears spring to my eyes.

“Jesus, Sage,” he murmurs and takes my hand. More than that, he pulls over and puts the flashers on before pulling my face to him. “Stop thinking you’re not good enough, my sweet Najee. You’re way more than good enough. You’re epically amazing. You are beautiful and kind and so innocent; I want nothing more than to wrap you up and protect you from this cruel world.”

My heart skips as I swallow the lump in my throat. “Why are you nervous, then?”

He kisses me. It’s soft and filled with something warm. I feel it pour into me and I sag into him a little. “I’m concerned with how you’re going to feel about my brother and I together. That’s all.”

“You really think I’m not going to like it?” I ask.

Damon doesn’t answer as he presses kisses to my jaw and down my neck. “I don’t know,” he admits. “Like I said, I’ve never introduced anyone to my brother. To our hookups, we’ve remained relatively anonymous—the Whitaker twins. Nothing, no one, has ever been granted a name, never mind shared personal time with us.”

“Except Simon,” I say.

He chuckles. “Najee, Simon is an entirely different entity that we’ll really talk about when we decide it’s time to get together. All right?”

My heart hammers in my chest. Sure, I know all about their friendship. Damon's told me a lot. I'm not opposed to it. I think it would be really awesome to have had a friend that close while growing up. Someone to share everything with. All my secrets and fears. To have my back and support me. Someone that I can protect and love and cuddle with whenever I need it.

Heck knows I needed it a lot growing up. I never had any of that. I never had anyone like that until I met Jordan when I was older.

Damon's told me how physically close they are. I'd like to say that I'm not overly bothered by it. He assures me that while it looks physical, it's not. It's emotional. Their friendship is deep. They have always expressed it the way they did because Simon lost his parents and the twins didn't want him to turn angry and bitter from being touch-starved. Feeling unloved. Unwanted.

If I had friends like that, I'd never let them go.

But yeah, I'm a little nervous to see *that* in person. But how bad could this thing be with his brother? I'm really not understanding the concern.

"Yes," I say.

I hate that he lets me go again to pull back into traffic. Thankfully, it isn't long until we arrive at our destination.

After turning off the car, Damon kisses me softly again and I sigh into it. He could kiss me all day. With a smile, he climbs out of the car and I take a few deep breaths before he gets to my side. I learned last time we drove somewhere together that he doesn't like it when I open my own door. It makes my heart flutter every time he opens it for me.

Damon pulls me to his chest, but then his hand drops and cups my caged cock. I grunt, feeling the stirring of arousal pool low. My dick swells in the cage and I nearly whine.

"Fuck, it's so hot knowing you're trapped inside this thing for me," he murmurs against my ear. "So. Fucking. Hot." He rubs his semi against my thigh. "See what you do to me?"

I moan quietly, gripping his shirt tightly. “Please don’t make me hard,” I whimper. “My dick hurts already.”

His low chuckle is a darkness that sweeps over my body and makes me shiver. Damon kisses my lips and then twists our fingers together. “Come on, Najee. Let’s go meet my brother. Remember what I’m wearing, Sage.”

I take a close look at his shirt and pants as we make our way across the parking lot. While I knew that Damon has an identical twin, I wasn’t expecting an image of his exact copy. There’s no mistaking who I’m looking at when I see the man waiting at the door.

He’s exactly Damon. I squeeze Damon’s hand, just to know he’s there and hasn’t miraculously crossed the lot to plant himself in front of me. He’s more than identical. I swear, there needs to be a stronger word. They’re exactly the same. Right down to the shirt he’s wearing.

I stare, probably rudely, for a long time. I even recognize the amused smirk that ticks up the other man’s face. Holy heck, in a handbasket, I’m in trouble. I’m not going to be able to let go of Damon’s hand all night, or I’m going to get them confused.

“Do you always dress alike?”

The question reminds me that there’s another man there. I tear my eyes from Declan to look at him. He’s... cute as fudge! Several inches shorter than Declan, with dark blond hair that’s styled on top of his head and shaved sides. He’s wearing a very low cut shirt that shows his smooth chest and a string of pearls around his neck. Black-rimmed glasses frame his deep chocolate eyes. There’s the brush of stubble along his jaw that only hints at growth.

His face is young but there’s also maturity in it. He’s really pretty. And staring at Damon the same way I imagine I was just staring at Declan.

“No,” Declan answers, looking at Damon with bemusement. “I didn’t even know we had two of these shirts.”

“One must be Simon’s,” Damon says, shrugging. He looks at me and his smile ticks up a little. “Promise, it wasn’t intentional. Opposite of that. I swear.” He squeezes my hand and then looks at his brother. “This is Declan, which I’m sure you figured out. My Sage.”

Declan smirks with amusement, pulling the shorter man into his side. “My brother, Damon. And my man, Zarek.”

Zarek rolls his eyes, but I don’t miss the grin on his face. His eyes turn to me and his smile picks up a little. I almost feel like we’re friends already. We’re both experiencing the weirdness that this meeting is with twins who unintentionally managed to dress alike.

“Ready to go in?” Declan asks.

Zarek nods and we head for the door. We’re led to a round booth and the twins move into the center, sitting close together. I watch, transfixed and somewhat mesmerized, as they look at each other with identical smiles.

My stomach flips at the weirdness, and my eyes shift to Zarek as he moves to me. I can read his expression easily. *Fucking wild.*

Then he grimaces as he shifts in his seat, causing Declan to turn a smirk on him. Damon does too, though his smirk is in my direction as he leans in close. His breath tickles my neck. “He’s wearing one too.”

At first, I’m not sure what he’s talking about until he taps his finger on the cage holding my dick prisoner. I suck in a sharp breath at the way it made my cock shiver. Then I lean forward to look at Zarek with wide eyes. “He’s wearing one too?”

My voice is louder than I meant it to be and immediately I flush as he meets my eyes, his skin pinkening as he turns a frown on Declan. “What did you do?”

Declan grins and shrugs. “We wanted you both on equal ground, so we might have made sure you had a reminder of who’s allowed in your pants. We made sure the keys are

different.” He picks up the key on the chain around his neck while grinning at Zarek.

“I thought—” My voice cuts off as heat floods my body. We’re not talking about sharing. And *I’m not* bringing it up. It’ll sound like I want to. I don’t.

Then I look at Declan as he and the others stare at me. I don’t, right? I mean, he looks exactly like Damon. Would I even know the difference? Would I know I was with the wrong twin? Oh my holy heck, what’s wrong with me?

Damon chuckles, pulling me into his side. He kisses just below my ears. “We’ll discuss it later.”

“You’re talking about the twins’ weirdness when it comes to sharing their lovers, aren’t you?” Zarek asks me.

I meet his dark eyes and nod. He frowns, but only for a second. Then the corners of his lips curl a little as he eyes the twins. “I’ve always wondered what it would be like to be the cream filling of a twin sandwich.”

Damon snorts, though his lips are still skimming my skin.

“Oh, you want to talk about this now?” Declan asks just as the waitress comes over. The twins order for themselves and Zarek and I. Then we’re left alone. “We can talk about sharing.”

“Tonight, we can see how that goes,” Damon says, making my stomach flip wildly. I’m not going to be able to eat at this rate.

“T-tonight?” Zarek asks.

“Yes, didn’t you get the memo?” Damon picks up his head and looks at Zarek. Zarek’s cheeks are flushed as my twin calls him on his bluff. “This is an overnight meeting. Dinner and then a slumber party.” He leans closer, dropping his hand below the table, and I can just barely see it land on his brother’s thigh. “We share a bed. A full size. We like to be close.”

“Always touching,” Declan agrees.

Zarek looks between them, eyes wide. I know for sure that's something he already knew, but I wasn't aware of the slumber party, either.

"We're really doing that?" I ask, looking between the three of them. How do I feel about this?

For a second, the twins' focus stays on Zarek. Then Damon turns to me, kissing my lips softly. "Maybe," he says. "I admit it's something Dec and I discussed because it's been a really long time since we've... gotten off together while we're in the same place." He cups my face. "If you're not ready for that, we can wait."

I'm slightly startled by how he says it. Not 'if I'm uncomfortable with it, we don't have to do it.' It's not an option as to whether it's going to happen. It's a matter of when. Zarek picks up on it too.

"It's not a choice," he says, his voice flat.

"No," Declan says quietly. "I told you; it's always going to be my brother and me. That's not an option, Zarek. That's why we're here tonight. This is more than an introduction. I need to know you're going to be good with whatever goes on between Damon and I."

Zarek looks between the two of them before meeting my eyes. I just stare, dumbfounded. A little flustered. And stupidly turned on as my dick throbs in the too-tight and now too-small cage it's trapped in. Am I trying desperately to keep images of two Damons going at it out of my head? Yes.

Jesus, what's wrong with me?

When I blink back into focus, Damon's looking at me and for just a second, I'm the only one he sees. I can tell by the intense way he's studying my face. "Do you have a hard limit here?" he asks quietly.

I swallow and shake my head.

"How do you feel about a... weird foursome?"

I laugh nervously and shrug. "I don't know," I admit, breathlessly. He smiles at that, his eyes dropping to my lips. "I

—” Biting my lip for a second as I try to decide what I want to say. I have no idea what I want to say. “I’m okay with a sleepover tonight.”

The way his eyes flare with hunger makes me take a sharp breath. My dick likes that look. The cage is unforgiving.

“You’re good with sex in bed with two other men?”

“I’m completely, totally gay,” I say, grinning foolishly. “I’m definitely okay with men in my bed.”

I hear the others chuckle.

“How do you feel about touching?” he asks. His finger traces my jaw, making my entire body shiver. “Declan touching you. Zarek touching us. Touching you.”

Another shiver races through me. What I’ve always wanted is to be loved. I wanted to be a part of something bigger. To be surrounded by people who are mine. My community. My family—different from the shit I grew up with. Deeper. More intimate. My heart stutters.

“I don’t care about touch,” I whisper. “I mean, who touches who. But for now, can I ask for only your dick in me?”

“My sweet Najee,” he murmurs, pressing his lips to mine. “That might never change. Your ass is mine.”

I shiver and I like the way I feel owned in those words.

“Then I’m totally down with an orgy.”

Declan snorts. “Not an orgy if the dicks stay in one lane, sweetheart,” he says. I can hear the teasing in his voice. It sounds just like Damon’s. At least I’ll be able to recognize when he’s teasing. “But yeah, this is a good start. If you’re in?”

I look their way to see that Declan is looking at Zarek. His face is scrunched and for a minute, I get concerned that he won’t want to do this. Does it hurt already? Just meeting these men and his denial of wanting to do this already stings like I was just slapped.

Rejection. Am I feeling rejection?

But then he shifts in his seat and grimaces, throwing a glare at Declan. “I’m going to make you wear one of these and try to sit through a conversation about sex,” he hisses. It’s at that moment that the waitress returns and freezes, staring between Zarek and Declan, her face heating.

“He’s wearing a—” Declan begins before Zarek slaps a hand over his mouth.

“Don’t you fucking dare or I swear, you’re going to get a spanking this time,” he growls.

I also recognize the hunger that flares into Declan’s face, since I’ve seen it many times on Damon’s. I squirm uncomfortably as blood continues to flow south.

“We both know that’s not going to happen, Ehsan. You love falling apart for me. You love when I leave your body covered in my marks,” Declan says.

“Jesus,” I whisper, shivering. Because, hot fuck, I want to see that!

Damon chuckles and wraps an arm around my waist, kissing my neck as the waitress walks away, having deposited our meals. Poor girl was flaming red.

Twenty-Four

DAMON



I'M NOT GOING to lie. I'm flying high over this development in my relationship with Sage. The expansion to include Declan and Zarek is just... so good. It fits so right. I've not stopped thinking about it.

The first sleepover after our date, we stayed up most of the night fucking. Dicks didn't cross to partners where they didn't belong. Declan kept Zarek's ass, and I kept Sage's. But hands were everywhere.

This was entirely different from anything we've ever done before, me and my brother. It was another kind of maddening arousal that was so fucking intoxicating. Addicting. We pressed our men against each other constantly, their backs together. Their fronts together. A front and a back.

Seeing them kiss and grope each other was enthralling. Seeing Declan kiss Sage was fucking hot. Kissing Zarek was exciting.

And hands were everywhere. Goddamn it was so hot.

It's been three weeks since that first night and we've repeated it no less than half a dozen times. When we don't get enough sleep on those nights, it's not because Simon's missing. Or not *just* because Simon's missing.

It's a little frustrating that there's still the sting of Simon's absence. Even in those moments that I'm not sure he can be a part of. And yet, everything inside of me isn't complete without him.

"A different kind of maddening."

Very much. There's a part of me that doesn't want to expand this further. Because with Simon comes Stommer. I don't have any desire to have him in our bed. If I could just get Simon, though. Yeah. Then we'd be fucking perfect. Everything would be exactly perfect. To have all the men I love in one spot.

I look up as our front door opens and the man we've been musing about steps inside. He smiles and my heart leaps. There's also an echo of pain because I recall all too well what life is like without Simon. I remember him walking through that door looking miserable. Tense. Defensive. I remember when he'd walk in and not sit with us.

Thankfully, as he kicks off his shoes and locks the door behind him, he climbs into my lap, wrapping his arms around my waist. He rests his face against my neck and sighs. "Where's Declan? I thought he was on his way."

"He was called in for a meeting with the football team," I answer. "Trust me, he's not at all happy about being late."

He smiles and I hug him tightly. It's Friday night. Our night with Simon. It's a strange custody battle that I sometimes want to laugh about. I might if I didn't still have so much resentment towards Stommer.

"I missed you," he says quietly. My chest pangs at the words. I know he doesn't just mean over the last couple days, since he was last home. He means the months we spent apart.

"I missed you too. Simon, I'm sorry. I—"

He shakes his head and sighs again. "Don't apologize again. I know you're sorry. I am too. Maybe if I—"

"No," I say, pushing him up so I can look at him. "Don't you ever apologize for any of it. You told us over and over and we refused to listen to you. This is our fault."

"Fucking Stommer's fault!"

Simon huffs a breath as he stares at my face. His fingers come up and he traces every line. Every curve. As if he's memorizing what I look like. How I feel. There's a strange feeling of finite ending in it that makes it hard to swallow.

“Okay, I agree that it’s like 95% your fault,” he says, a smile playing on his lips. “But if I wouldn’t have lied to you about so many things, maybe it all wouldn’t have happened.”

“You don’t have to tell us whatever you don’t want to,” I say, though it’s a struggle to say the words. Nothing hurts more than knowing he didn’t feel comfortable talking to us about aspects of his life. Of his personality. His sexuality. Of things that bothered him.

“That’s the part you still never hear,” he says, and I can hear the frustration in his voice. “I *do* want to tell you everything. But... I’m not comfortable talking about it.”

“With us.”

I try to ignore Declan’s words, instead keeping my gaze locked on Simon’s. I’m not sure I’m able to ask the next question and keep my voice neutral. It’s something I need to ask, but I don’t want to take a chance on fucking shit up with Simon again.

“Don’t fuck this up. Please, Damon.”

Taking a breath, I ask, “Why do you feel comfortable talking to Stommer about it and not us?”

He gives me a bemused smile. “You’re still jealous.”

I roll my eyes and nod. “Yeah. I am. But I’m not letting that dictate my behavior anymore.”

“Thank fuck for that,” he says, smirking. His smile falls. “Okay, it’s not what you think, you know. It’s not that I would rather talk to him about it than you. It’s that I don’t even know it’s coming until it’s already out there and I’m freaking out until he talks me down.”

I nod. He kind of talks in riddles because he doesn’t want to tell us things. I’m not sure what he’s saying. What he’s getting at.

Simon leans his forehead against mine. “Okay,” he murmurs and brushes his lips against mine. “Want to know something?”

“Everything,” I say, hugging him close again.

“I need you to promise me something first.”

“Anything at all.”

“You and Declan.”

“Yes.” I nod Declan’s agreement.

“I know you well enough to know that your immediate reaction is going to think that Quin is an asshole and forces shit on me and whatever. You’re convinced that he stole me and you can’t see past that.” Picking up his head, he gives me a bemused expression, even as I try to look innocent, like that’s not the case anymore. “I promise you, though I’m going to suck at explaining everything about me, it’s not at all what you think. I just don’t know how to put it into words. So I need you to promise that you’re not going to go off the deep end and immediately freak out, ready to hurt Quin before I have a chance to tell you in clear details. Promise?”

“I promise.” Though his explanation makes my skin crawl. I just *know* I’m going to hate him all the more. I can feel it.

“Declan?”

“I promise. I hate him already.”

I don’t repeat the last part. I just nod my brother’s agreement.

Simon takes a deep breath. “I’m going to tell you the thing that I feel most comfortable with, though I don’t understand it any more than other parts. It’s just more comfortable, I guess.”

I nod and Simon goes back to running his fingers across my face. “It turns out that I’m pretty submissive. I fall into subspace pretty easily.”

My eyes go wide, but Simon doesn’t look at me. Everything in me races and tenses, ready to jump out of my skin that Stommer made him become this. Made him submit. Made him—

“There you go,” he says, and I force myself to look into his face. He’s watching me, frowning. “Doing just what you promised not to do.”

Taking a deep breath, I try to force it all down. “Sorry.”

The left side of his mouth quirks up a little. “We’ve been doing some reading about submissive behavior, and I’ve exhibited it my entire life. Especially since my mom died. I’ve always been completely fine letting you make my decisions for me. From the little things like what I’m going to wear and what I eat. To the biggest things like where we went to college. I want you to take care of me. I always have and I’ve always let you. It’s something I always want you to do. I like when you spoil me and make me feel loved and wanted. While I’ve always kind of thought that this piece of me is due to my mother’s death, I think it’s just a part of my personality. I’m a submissive person by default. I *don’t want* to decide anything. Not what we watch on television. The games we play. Hell, I don’t even want to decide how we cuddle. I like those decisions made for me.”

His words trail off as he watches my expression. My mind races. Races side by side with my brother’s; and as our lives streak behind my eyes, I feel like a fucking idiot.

“Fuck,” I mutter, closing my eyes and laying my head back. I’d like to be able to say that if Simon had ever told us he didn’t like sex, we’d have mentioned asexuality. He didn’t tell us, so it’s easy to say that we overlooked that. We kind of just assumed he wasn’t always horny because he was straight and constantly pressed against men, which wouldn’t have any effect on him.

But Jesus motherfucking Christ, there’s no goddamn way we should have missed this. Simon’s absolutely right. He’s displayed his submissive nature his entire fucking life. Right in front of us! With us. Towards us.

Hell, he’s basically said as much without saying it since he didn’t know that it had a name.

“We don’t know him at all. How fucking blind and stupid can we be? How self-absorbed are we?”

It makes me sick. We’ve done Simon wrong for years. For so fucking long.

“It feels weird knowing this about myself,” he says quietly. “It’s even stranger when I fall into subspace. I didn’t know that’s what it’s called. Quin didn’t realize at first either. I just call it my cozy place. Somewhere I feel safe and warm and just... happy. Nothing can touch me there. I know Quin is with me and won’t let anything happen to me. Even when I’m there, deep inside myself, I can feel him and hear him and know that I’m safe. I’m loved.”

I take a breath. “He’s a Dom?”

Simon smirks. “Not really, although what we read suggests that maybe he’s a soft Dom. He focuses on pleasure and care as opposed to discipline and obedience. Which is good because we’ve determined that I’d turn into a brat if he gave me rules.”

His smile beams at me as he teases. The glint in his eyes tells me that those moments are important to him. And he’s sharing them with me. With us.

“I’m glad he takes care of you,” I say, though I think I’m talking through my teeth. “Though I’m going to really suck at keeping my voice even, please know that I mean this.” Simon gives me a bemused smile, but nods. “I can’t stop myself from blaming him for taking you away, even though *I know* it’s not his fault. I know he tried to stop it from happening. Several times. He basically begged us to get our heads out of our asses, but we were so angry, so desperate and furious, that we couldn’t get beyond it.”

“He begged you?” Simon asks, his brows knitting on his forehead.

“He never told you?” I ask.

Simon shakes his head.

“He barged in here one day when mom was here and yelled at us,” I tell him, smiling with amusement at the look of shock on his face. “Obviously, we didn’t listen.”

He snorts. “Obviously.”

“You didn’t know he did that?”

Simon shakes his head again. “No. He never told me.”

I sigh at having to admit this shit. Declan walks in the door then and falls into us, wrapping his arms around us both. Once, he might have sat behind Simon, his touch focused on our best friend. Recently, his touch—our touch—is always for each other, too. Something that Simon does not miss at all. Something he clearly approves of, though we all ignore it for the time being.

“He’s always been protecting you. And I’m really... thankful”—the word is painful to say—“that he’s been there for you this entire time. That he helps you through everything. While it hurts to know you didn’t come to us, and that you kept these things from us, I’m really, really glad you had someone you trusted enough to talk about these things with.”

Simon sighs. “I like the compliments,” he says, “but I need you to understand it wasn’t really a choice of telling you *or* him. He was there as I stumbled across these things and he saw—still sees—me freak out and then we spend time trying to figure out why I feel the way I do. I promise, it’s not that I don’t want you to know some things about me. It’s never that. I hate the secrets I keep.”

“I have a secret to tell you,” Declan says and Zarek’s bare ass marked with red welts flashes through my mind. His thoughts, not mine. His memory, not mine. So I give him one of my own—Sage bound tighter than fucking gorilla glue.

“What?” Simon asks.

Declan studies his face for a minute before saying, “I like to leave Zarek covered in welts. Bites. Bruises. It turns out that I love impact play.”

Simon’s eyes are wide. “Impact play?”

“Spanking,” Declan says, smiling slightly. “My hand, crops. Floggers, cords, paddles.” He shrugs nonchalantly, but I can feel his nerves making his heart race wildly. “I love the way he breaks down. How he cries and just... releases everything.”

“I love him.”

I swallow at the words that Declan doesn't say out loud. For the first time ever, I understand Simon's hesitation to speak about some things. I feel the struggle of wanting to, but too afraid to put it into verbal words. That you say out loud. To someone you've been in love with for years.

"Does he like it?" Simon asks.

Declan smirks. "So fucking much."

Simon smiles and looks at me. "Do you like that too?"

I shake my head and then shrug. "Maybe? But I prefer bondage."

Simon's eyes go wide again.

"I tie Sage up like a fucking present until he can't move a muscle. Until he's helpless. I love to hear him beg when he's completely under my control and at my mercy. I love to take my pleasure in him when he can't do anything at all, but feel everything I do to him."

His lips are parted as he stares.

Before he can ask, I nod. "Yes, he likes it."

Simon exhales a quiet laugh. His deep sigh is filled with relief and I swear, I feel that, too. I feel how deep it runs.

"One more thing," Declan says and I tense, knowing what he's going to say. Simon looks between the two of us, clearly feeling the tension and hesitation, too. "We... like to share our partners with each other."

Simon smirks. "I already knew that."

"No," Declan says and I'm thankful he's able to talk, even though his voice is slightly strained. The lump in my throat refuses to let me say the words out loud. "Those times were just in the same place. This is... very different from that."

Simon tilts his head and I can tell he's trying to picture it. I lean forward and press my mouth to his as I say the words. "We like to fuck them against each other. Together."

Simon shivers. Swallows. His eyes are closed. "That's really..." His voice trails off and my mind races as I wait for

his answer. Please don't let him be disgusted. Please don't let him be— His smile cuts off my fear-filled thoughts. “Why haven't you invited me to this play time?”

My eyes widen, and Simon laughs quietly before wrapping his arms around my neck and hugging me. He kisses me and it's not just the simple peck that we used to do. But I realize as he kisses me that those pecks morphed a long time ago.

It's not deep. There's no tongue. But it's still intimate and meaningful.

“You don't like sex,” Declan says quietly, his words pausing my kiss with Simon.

Simon sighs and I realize that there are still things he hasn't said. He nods but doesn't expand. “Yeah,” he answers. “I don't like sex. Not like you do. Not in a way that has a place in your bed with your boyfriends.”

“Our bed,” Declan and I say together. Simon looks between the two of us. “It's always going to be our bed. The three of us. Always.”

He smiles. “You know, I still want the future we've always planned.” His voice is quiet, almost sad. “I want a house and kids and vacations and all that. But I want that with Quin too. I don't know how to have both. I don't even know that I should want both. Is that how friends are supposed to feel about each other? Is this the kind of future they're supposed to want? I don't think this is supposed to directly compete with a future with a partner or impact those future plans. It shouldn't be taken into consideration when we talk about the future. So why does it?”

I'm pretty sure I'm going to have a heart attack. The emotions he has made run wild inside me are giving me palpitations. I thought that future was erased. I thought it was no more, and we were on borrowed time until he was ready to leave us permanently to be with Stommer.

He just lit that up in technicolor. I can see it all. But it's no longer simple to just say, yes, let's do that. I understand his confusion.

I want Sage too. I want to give him everything I want to give Simon. How the fuck do I make this work?

The turmoil in Declan's eyes matches mine. For the first time in a long time, the three of us are on exactly the same page. Same line. Same word. Fuck, the same syllable.

There's no answer in sight.

Twenty-Five

DAMON



“YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” Dad asks.

Declan and I don't even look at each other. We're so fucking tired. That happens when you don't sleep for two nights in a row. Why didn't we sleep? Because our bed felt empty without Simon. Even as we curled around each other, the weird feeling like there was something empty, hollow, screaming at us to fix it, just wouldn't go away.

His dreams kept waking me. And then when he finally woke up and I could fall asleep, my dreams kept him awake. It's not like we're not used to sharing dreams. Talk about a freaky twin thing. That one probably takes the cake. But fuck's sake, did it make for a long night.

We're sitting at the side of our bed, folding the massive mound of laundry that we pulled from the two dressers—ours and Simons. We've had two dressers for four years and Simon has pretty much outright ignored his in favor of ours. I'm not sure he's worn anything from his own since he moved in.

As I hold up a pair of shorts that are a kids size twelve, that only further proves that this is a good idea. I toss them on the increasingly growing pile of donation clothes. Our closet is next.

“Yeah,” I say. “We don't use two, so we should just get rid of one.”

It's not that we were getting rid of one. We were getting rid of both of them in favor of a single one slightly bigger. This

isn't something we discussed with Simon. If we had, he'd have just shrugged.

When his grandparents on his mother's side contacted our parents to take Simon for the weekend, we had the idea to redo our entire room. Let it grow up a little, and surprise Simon in the process. Our parents were on board with it considering we hadn't asked for anything new in years. So many years.

As far as furniture went, anyway.

It was tricky hiding all the new boxes of furniture that came in, but we have a large garage that Simon, Declan, and I rarely have reason to go in. So besides an afternoon delivery every now and then that we had to distract Simon from, it wasn't too difficult.

Our parents tried to talk us into two beds at least. Or letting Simon have his own room. The panic that spiked through us must have been visible to our mom and she raised her hands. "You can have a little space, you know," she said. "You're growing up. It's alright to have separate rooms."

We'd known from a young age that the second room was for the two of us to split into when we got older. When we took Simon in, it was for Simon when he was ready for his own space. Our parents just didn't understand that we liked being on top of each other all the time. We constantly needed to be touching and in contact.

Like right now, as my brother and I fold laundry, our ankles are linked together where they hang off the bed. It's that little bit of contact that just makes us feel right.

Except we're a little wild inside without Simon. Two fucking days! Two really long nights! Thankfully, he'll be home in a few hours.

We already have the two desks set up by the window and the new bed. Because we chose two desks, we weren't able to fit in a larger bed. Something my mother thought was necessary more than we did. Honestly, it didn't even occur to us to want a bigger bed. We were relieved when we couldn't fit it after choosing two desks.

Our argument of needing somewhere to do our schoolwork outweighed the need for a bigger bed, worked. While we got a new mattress and frame, it was still a full-sized bed as opposed to the queen she wanted.

The argument that we didn't need bunk beds had been a struggle too. The fact that we were adamant that we were never going to use the second bunk and therefore it was a waste of money and space really had to be driven home.

In the end, it was our father who came through as our support. "It's their room, dearest. If they decide they need more room later, we'll expand into the second bedroom. But for now, this is what they want."

Our parents weren't usually on the 'your closeness is inappropriate for your age' train, but as the three of us grew older, it became more obvious in the way our mother watched us with concern that she was growing worried. We weren't going to encourage a conversation, though. When she came to us, we were ready to defend our relationship to our mother if need be.

The bag of old clothes went with my father as my brother and I began loading the drawers with the clothes we were keeping. There was very little from Simon's dresser that even fit us anymore. But we'd also gotten new clothes when mom saw how much we were getting rid of. Especially when she realized that the reason we were getting rid of it was because we outgrew it.

Now we had a new wardrobe as well, all neatly folded in the basket mom dropped off as she helped dad carry down what we were donating. Silently, tiredly, we continued filling our drawers. One with shorts. Two filled with pants. One with short-sleeved shirts. Another with long-sleeved shirts. One with pajama bottoms and sleep shirts—something we never wore, but mom insisted we have, anyway. And the top two were for underwear and socks.

As I fill the underwear drawer, I wonder if it's weird that we share even those. Declan looks at me at the thought, though it doesn't appear that he's actually seeing me. Is it

weird? *I have no idea. But... they're clean. It's not like we put them on after the other wears them. So... that makes it okay, right?*

Speaking out loud feels like such a chore today since we're fucking exhausted; so we just stare at each other as we toss back and forth whether this should concern us. In the end, whether it's because we're exhausted or because we really don't care, we just pile the underwear in the drawer and call it a day. It's not like we'd know whose is whose at this rate, anyway. We're all the same size. Short of writing our names on them or wearing color-coded clothing, we'd never remember.

We just finish fixing the bed with our new bedding when Simon stands in the door. He looks around silently and then glances into the hall as if he's trying to determine whether he's in the right place.

I laugh and pull him into the room, wrapping my arms around him. Declan is there a second later, pulling his bag away and wrapping around him from the other side.

"I'm so tired I can't tell if I forgot what our room looks like, if I'm in the wrong room, or if everything is different," he says.

Laughing, I nuzzle my nose into his neck, enjoying when he sighs and turns boneless in our arms.

"Didn't sleep either, huh?" Declan asks.

"Not at all. It was the longest two nights of my entire life," he says.

"How about we take a nap and then we'll talk about everything after," I suggest.

"Yes, please."

We don't bother to undress. Just pile onto our new bed, on top of our new bedding, in the room with new furniture, freshly painted walls, and brand-new carpet. With the curtains drawn, we fall asleep and end up sleeping through the night, despite it being only four when we closed our eyes.



I LOOK at our single dresser in the closet of our condo and smile absently. Simon grinned at us when we told him what we did all those years ago. He loved the single dresser, the two desks, and the new bedding. He was relieved that our mom didn't make him move into the room next door or make us get bunk beds.

I was sure to tell mom that later. She needed to know this wasn't something that we chose for Simon. He was completely on board with it. He felt the same way.

When mom greeted us the next morning concerned that we slept for fourteen hours, we were more than happy to make sure she understood that we don't sleep well when apart. Those two nights were fucking miserable. I think Simon's agreement and decision not to spend the night at his grandparents again without us, finally made our mother see that this wasn't Declan and I being overbearing. We weren't smothering Simon. He was affected as much as we were.

That's when we started to hear the word 'codependent' pop up around the house. At fourteen, we didn't know or care what it meant, and we didn't look it up. By the time we were seniors in high school, we knew and we didn't care. Even if we understood that maybe, *maybe*, it was slightly accurate. Like, a smidgen.

But Declan and I are twins. How the hell are we supposed to act? Just carry on as if he's not always in my head? Like my skin doesn't crawl and my stomach doesn't turn sour when he's too far away for too long? I can't fake that shit. My head turns into a goddamn lightning storm until I can touch him again. That's just how it is.

You can't turn off that connection. It's not something that's just going to go away with time. We were supposed to be a single person. Some of those things remained a single person, and it's painful to be stuck in two separate bodies.

I finish hanging the few hoodies that came out of the dryer and return to the living room to find said brother on his phone, typing away with a smile on his face. We're expecting our mother within a few hours, which is why we actually did laundry instead of leaving it to pile up until we ran out.

In all honesty, not waiting until we ran out of clean clothes before doing laundry would save us an entire day wasted on actually doing laundry. And really, it was nice to see all our clothes in our drawers and hanging in the closet. There was the added benefit of everything smelling fresh too.

That we didn't recognize every third article of clothing told us that Simon really had reintegrated back into our shared home. He wasn't here now, but he and Stommer would be here later. After mom got here and settled.

While we wait, I pull my phone out and dial Sage. I've been calling him more when we're apart. Just because I want to hear his voice.

"Hi!" he greets when he answers, and I grin at his unbridled enthusiasm to talk to me. Or be around me. Or hell, just meeting his eyes across the gym.

"Hey," I say. "Did I interrupt anything?"

He laughs, the sound making me grin. "No. I don't know why you think I live the kind of life where you're ever going to interrupt something."

"You could have been with your friends. Or running," I say.

"Yeah, I guess. I'd still take a break to talk to you."

Is that my stomach that flips or Declan's?

"Yours."

Liar. His did too. Did Zarek say something sweet like that at the same time Sage did? Is that why we're getting all sappy and mushy at the same time?

Blinking through his eyes for a minute, I can see the text conversation and I decide, yes, Zarek is.

“Nosy psycho.”

Grinning, I don't even argue. Instead, I turn away to let him have the living room to himself while I fall back on our bed. “What are you up to today?” I ask.

It's Saturday and we don't always get together over the weekend. Simon was here last night, but he left this morning on a work errand and said he'd swing by to pick up Stommer before he came back to see mom. It was on the tip of my tongue to say that his professor didn't need to be here. This was a family gathering.

Thankfully, I managed to keep those words in. My self-control was improving.

“I don't know,” Sage says. “I think I'm going to get some groceries for the week and then hang out with Jordan, River, and the baby this evening. Is your mom there yet?”

“Not yet.” I pull the phone away to check the time. It's later than I thought it was. “Soon,” I say when I put the phone to my ear again.

“Did your dad come with her?”

“Nah. He hates planes, but we'll be back home for Christmas. We decided to do Thanksgiving here, though. If our parents want to come out, then they can.”

“That's good.”

I nod. Declan and I have discussed inviting Sage and Zarek to spend Thanksgiving with us. It would distract us from the fact that Stommer would be here. At least he was bringing that big hunk of a pastel pretty with him. Vulcan. Talk about a sweet man.

We haven't invited our guys yet because we didn't know how they were going to get along with Simon. It's coming up, though. We need to introduce them soon.

“Next weekend.”

I nod. “Hey, do you have plans next weekend?” I ask.

“No,” he says, and I can already hear his excitement. If I could see him, I’d bet he’s bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Think you’re ready to meet Simon?”

There’s a pause before he says, “Yes! I’m so ready. I want to meet your best friend!”

I chuckle and sit up when there’s a knock at our door. “Mom’s here. I’ll message you later. All right?”

“Okay. Have fun with your mom.”

“Enjoy your friends,” I say in return as we hang up. I’m barely on my feet when a text comes through. I’m surprised to see it’s from Sage when we just hung up.

Sage

I miss you.

Sage

Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have said that.

Sage

I was too nervous to say it aloud. On the phone.

Sage

Sorry. I think I sound like an idiot. But I do miss you. Just so you know.

I grin and shake my head. He’s such a damn puppy.

Me

I miss you too, my sweet Najee.

I even add a little kissy emoji.

Mom is already inside with Declan when I get into the living room. She wraps her arms around me, too, and we hug her tightly. “I swear, you two grow every time we’re not together,” she says, squeezing us tightly.

“I don’t think we’ve grown since we were seventeen,” Declan says.

“I know I weigh the exact same as I did when we moved here,” I say. “I weigh myself regularly.”

“He has to keep his sexy shape for the twink,” Declan says.

I snort. Actually, Declan and I like to keep the shape we have. We’re quick and agile. Not incredibly strong, but by no means weak, either. It’s just our preference. This is the shape we like so we make sure to maintain it.

Mom steps back to look at us. We don’t miss her sigh. “You two look a lot happier than the last time I was here.”

The answer to why that is opens the door just then. Mom turns, and Simon wraps his arms around mom, picking her feet up off the ground. “Missed you, Mom,” he says.

“Aw, honey. I missed you too, sweetheart. Look at you!”

“Mom’s playing favorites again,” Declan and I say together.

“He doesn’t tell his mother about the twink he’s keeping in shape for,” Mom says.

Simon laughs, putting mom down. “Twink? Trust me when I tell you that twink is not at all what they’re interested in.”

“Hey!” I say.

“Way to keep our secrets,” Declan says, shoving at him playfully.

Simon sways but walks into Declan’s arms, laughing.

Mom sighs with a smile. “Much better,” she says.

Simon meets my eyes, a smile on his sexy lips as he looks at me. I don’t need to be able to read his mind like I can Declan to know what he’s thinking.

“Yes. Much, much better. How it’s always meant to be.”

I don't even care that Stommer is leaning against the doorframe with his hands in his pockets and a stupid smile on his stupid face right now. Not even he can break this moment.

Twenty-Six

SAGE



IT'S BEEN a few weeks since the first sleepover with Declan and Zarek. We've repeated it six more times since then, every time it gets hotter and hotter. While it's very, very different from when it's just me and Damon, it's maddeningly sexy.

There's a lot of confusion about which brother is which when they're completely naked though. I literally don't take my eyes off of Damon until he's touching me, afraid that I'm going to lose track of which Whitaker twin I'm looking at. Which one is mine.

But perhaps one of the hottest things ever—the time I've come so hard outside of our own playtime—was when they had Zarek and I on our knees, pressed against each other, while they took us from behind.

Kissing Zarek. Damon kissing Zarek. Declan kissing me. Hands everywhere.

I groan at the memory. It's fucking hot. So hot that I even find myself cursing internally. Something I try not to do. I'm not sure if that's something that's left over from my mother's constant nagging about how her perfect son should behave or another reason. It doesn't matter at this point. I am what I am.

Tonight is going to be different, though. Tonight, we're meeting Simon and his boyfriend, Stommer. Though I'm pretty sure that's not his actual name. Does it mean something? Is it slang for something? Like Najee is?

I still haven't looked it up, but I keep getting the feeling I should. What if I don't like what it means, though? Declan

calls Zarek something too. Ehsan? I don't know what that means either.

I'm nervous and my legs bounce while I wait for Damon to pick me up. It's comforting to know that I'll have Zarek there too, and he's meeting Simon for the first time with me. There's solidarity in that, right? And Declan will be there. I like Declan.

Taking a deep breath, I hold it for a minute. This is probably a bigger moment than meeting his parents. Simon is a part of their lives, like the brothers are connected. I've seen Damon and Declan together. The more time we spend together, the four of us, the more comfortable they are showing us just how close they are.

I don't hate it. At all.

Will I feel that same way regarding Simon, though? He's *not* their brother. And I know both twins are in love with him. That changes things, right? Will I be able to handle that?

"I have to," I say aloud to no one. "Because I want to keep Damon. I want him to keep me."

Besides, I know that we have something. I know there's something special between us. He tells me he misses me now when we're apart. I get morning texts and ones right before he falls asleep. Sometimes, he texts me just to tell me he misses me. And he calls, too. Just to hear my voice.

"That means something," I emphatically say. I just need to get through this night.

I'm so deep in my insecurities that I don't hear Damon pull up and startle when he knocks on my door. Bounding to my feet, I practically run and throw my door open. Damon smiles, and it makes my entire body hot.

"Happy to see me, Najee?" he asks.

I nod. My limbs are so jittery, I'm practically shaking. I manage to hold myself in place for approximately three solid seconds before launching myself at him.

It's a true testament to how strong Damon really is because he catches me. "Mm," he hums, running his fingers through my hair. "You nervous, Sage?" His voice is soft, and I nod wildly, keeping my face buried in his neck.

"We've decided to do dinner first. Somewhere quiet where we can talk and hear each other. Then we'll go to the club. All right?"

My nerves settle slightly. Yes. That's a much better plan than meeting at a place where we have to scream to hear each other. I know that a lot of people meet that way, but clubs have always been overwhelming to me. Gay, straight, whatever, they're all the same. Loud and packed with sweaty bodies.

Damon pulls back and cups my face. He studies me for a minute, and I wonder what he sees. "You okay?"

"Yes. I'm just nervous. What if he doesn't like me?" I ask.

He smiles. "He'll love you, Sage. Promise."

"How do you know?"

"Because you're an adorable puppy, something he'll absolutely love." He brushes my hair back and scratches the back of my head. "Relax, baby. Everything will be fine."

Damon takes my hand and leads me out of the house, shutting and locking the door behind me. He settles me into his car before moving to the other side and climbing behind the wheel. As soon as we're on the road, he takes my hand again, brings it to his lips, and kisses my knuckles.

"You have nothing to be nervous about. Trust me when I tell you, I'm the one on the edge of my seat," Damon says.

I look at him like he's crazy. Though he's watching the road, the corners of his lips quirk up. "I've told you about my relationship with him," he says quietly. "Hearing about it, knowing how close we are, and seeing it are very different things."

His thumb runs over my skin soothingly. He's right. I was having those exact thoughts as I waited for him on my couch. What happens if I can't do this? What happens if I can't

stomach seeing it? Does it matter that *I know* it happens outside of my presence after I see it? It's going to feel much different then.

My stomach flips at the idea. Hearing how they pile together on the couch to watch television, shower together, then sleep together practically naked and tangled together is something else entirely to witnessing it.

It's abstract right now. A myth. A story. It's about to become real.

Thankfully, I don't need to see that. All I'll be seeing is maybe some hugs. And dancing. Right? I should be able to get through this easily enough. It's just hugging and dancing. Not so bad.

When we pull into the parking lot and park, I see Declan and Zarek right away and can't help beaming a smile at them. Zarek is really cute. He's a couple years older than me, but he looks younger. There's something youthful in his face and yet, I can see that he's older. More mature. Maybe it's in his posture. Or his smile.

He grins at me from under Declan's arm as I wait for Damon to open my door. I love that he does. I love that care and attention. He pulls me up and straight into his chest, where he kisses me. "Ready?" he asks.

I nod, not sure I can trust my voice not to squeak right now.

Damon links our fingers, and we move toward Declan and Zarek. When we're there, Damon's free hand wraps loosely around Zarek's neck and he brings their lips together, making Zarek blush prettily. Of course, in the next second, my cheeks heat as Declan's thumb runs over my lip before he takes it between his teeth.

"Hey, sexy beast," Declan murmurs against my mouth.

I nearly groan at the way my dick throbs suddenly. What I wouldn't give for the four of us to go home and just... fuck.

"I'm really thankful you didn't ask us to wear the cock cages tonight," Zarek mutters as he steps back from Damon

and nearly disappears into Declan's side. To be small enough to do that!

And yet, I fucking love that Damon is smaller than me, yet can throw me around like a doll. It's so hot.

"Night isn't over," Damon says. "And I brought a couple cock rings. Just in case we need to spice it up later."

My cheeks flush hotly again. "Please, no," I beg.

He chuckles.

The twins kiss each other next, which I think is more for our benefit than it is something they usually do. By the way Zarek groans and I have to palm my growing dick in my pants, then the way they look at us with twin grins, says that I'm likely right.

"You're jackasses," Zarek says, a delicious shiver making his body shake for a minute as he glares at Declan.

When we pull apart and stand a couple feet from Declan and Damon, the twins stiffen slightly. I look between the two of them to find their eyes wide and their mouths frozen, with lips slightly parted. Following their gaze, I find who can only be Simon.

He's...not what I thought. I'm not sure what I was thinking, but this man is pretty damn gorgeous. With sun-kissed skin and golden blond hair. Dark eyes and a smooth, lean face. The way he's staring at the twins with a smug smirk clearly means something. Another quick glance at Damon and I realize he's been caught. The slight blush on his cheeks says so. I rarely see him blush.

What was he caught doing?

Simon drops his arms where they're crossed over his chest and comes over to us. His smug smile just grows as he wraps Damon in a hug first. I watch, waiting for the jealousy to kick in. Even as their lips meet in a quick kiss, it's nothing like the way Damon kisses me. Or Zarek. Or even Declan. It's quick. A peck.

Simon gives the same hug and the same kiss to Declan. Then he stands back and looks between the brothers. “So... you’ve been keeping some kinky secrets from me, twins.”

“Fuck’s sake,” Declan mutters and lets out an exasperated sigh.

Simon laughs and I kind of like the sound. It makes me smile and rock on my feet as I look between the three of them. My movement draws Simon’s attention and I suddenly freeze. For a second, I wasn’t actually there. I’m suddenly inside this moment and *now* I’m not sure how to feel about it.

Damon’s arm wraps around me, pulling me to his side. “Sage, this is Simon.” Simon’s grin gets wider as he looks me over. His eyes flicker to Declan before I can speak, and Declan makes the same introduction with Zarek. Once more, Simon takes in all of Zarek.

Then he chuckles. He steps aside and reaches behind him. That’s when I realize he’s not alone, either. The man with him is roughly his same height with messy blond hair that’s pulled back in a loose elastic, strands falling out all over the place. His eyes are very light. Pretty. He’s actually very pretty.

“This is Quin,” Simon says.

“I thought Stommer was the name of his boyfriend,” Zarek says, looking at Declan.

“Quinlan Stommer,” Quin says, nodding.

“Oh,” Zarek says, mimicking the movement. Then he tilts his head to the side. “I just realized I’m a fucking idiot. You work at Rainbow Dorset, don’t you?”

Quin nods. “I do. You’re in the science department?”

Zarek grins. “Yeah. I’m an actuary by trade, but I teach computer science.”

Quin grins. “Ah. That’s why I recognize your name. The cost reports and analytics had your name all over it.”

“Yep.” Zarek grins. “And the new acreage of the school is entirely yours. Even the science department is excited with what you’re doing.”

I'll hand it to Quin. He's humble. He just shrugs and smiles. "I suggested some ideas, but they've been well received."

"Don't do that," Simon says, rolling his eyes. "He's a master at what he does and is building it up amazingly well."

Quin looks at me. "How about you, Sage?"

I suddenly feel a bit inadequate. I didn't know what Zarek did, but damn, I think he's really fucking smart. Maybe my mom was right. Maybe I should have gone to school for something respectable.

"Don't," Damon says, pressing his lips to my cheek. "You love your job and you're good at it. You have nothing to feel like that about."

Quin shook his head, holding a hand up. "I'm really just asking. Simon didn't tell me what you do for a living."

"Damon didn't tell *me*," Simon says.

"I didn't tell Zarek, either," Damon says, bringing my face to his. "Your job is just as important as Zarek and Stommer's. Just as impressive too."

I press my lips together before I say, "I'm a physical trainer and nutritionist."

"Like my twins," Simon says, grinning.

There's a moment where I bristle slightly. *His* twins? I swallow and nod, turning my focus to him. "Yes."

"I think that's really awesome. All through college, they gave me workout regimens. I've put on some pounds since... over the last few months." His voice turns dull for a second and a quiet lull meets us. But he quickly adds with a smile, "I didn't listen to their food advice, though."

"Ever!" Declan says, exasperated. "He'd live off chocolate milk if we let him."

Quin nods, chuckling.

"Let's go in," Zarek says.

Dinner goes by surprisingly easy. There's pleasant conversation, laughter, and teasing. I don't hate Quin at all. As much as I'd like to support Damon and think he's an awful, selfish man, I don't find that he is. He's constantly doing little things for Simon. Things that I realize Damon does for me. And though he's trying not to glare at Quin for doing them, he doesn't miss the opportunity to treat me the same way.

It's not just a show, though. When we're alone or every time we've gotten food or something, this is just how Damon is. He's a good man.

I'm feeling really comfortable with everything by the time we head to the club. The six of us are relaxed and while Damon and Declan don't outright ignore Quin, they also don't talk to him at all unless he says something to them. Which I don't think he has more than once.

It's slightly awkward, but not bad. Not enough that Simon does more than gives them wary looks on occasion.

We drive to Wilder's and park. I stare at the sign with trepidation.

"We've been with them all evening," Damon says as he studies my new anxiety.

Shaking my head, I take a breath. "I've never actually been to a gay bar."

"Ah," Damon says and looks at our destination. "I've never been inside this one. Declan has though, and he says it's not bad. There are rooms off the primary space for a quieter conversation." He gives me a sudden wide, wicked grin. "And plenty of dark corners for hookups."

I flush. "Or we can just go back to my house for that. Or yours."

Chuckling, we get out of the car and meet the others at the door.

"I haven't been to a club since the last time we went to Stripes," Simon says as we approach, looking at Declan.

"Back at college?" Zarek asks.

Simon nods. “Yep. They’d drag me along because I’m incapable of staying home alone.”

Declan snorts. “Yeah, that’s why.”

Simon grins and shrugs. We’re let in a minute later and I take my time to look around. The door dumps us into a (far too) loud bar area with a dance floor—which is packed with bodies. Male bodies. Half naked. There’s one man in nothing but a jock! Do I stare? Shamelessly, but only because I can’t believe what I’m seeing.

Damon chuckles, his lips on my jaw. “Like what you see?”

“I... yes?”

He laughs more and pulls me to the bar with the others. I just stand there and realize that I might have to dance. I’ve never danced before. Even when I went to straight bars, I usually remained at the bar. I drink a club soda and watch the hot bodies grind together. Swing and sway and grope. It’s stupidly arousing and I have to adjust how I’m sitting.

“Ready to dance?” Declan asks, pulling Zarek from his stool.

Zarek nods with a smile and allows Declan to pull him away. Quin and Simon follow. I turn to Damon with wide eyes.

“You want to dance or stay here?” he asks.

Honestly, I want to stay here. But I nod and get off my stool. While I’m still shit at keeping myself from blurting things, at least I manage to keep my words in sometimes.

He leads me out, close to the guys we came with, and pulls me against him. “Just relax, Najee. Let me lead you.”

I nod again and wrap my arms around his neck.

Remembering that I haven’t danced before and letting myself go as if I have is a very strange feeling. But I love being pressed against him like this. The way his body aligns with mine. How his hard dick presses against my hip and mine his. His mouth skims my sweaty skin, his hands trail over my body, squeezing my ass.

We dance until I can't breathe, but instead of heading to the bar for a drink, I find that I'm dancing with Zarek instead. He's grinning at me as he nudges his head and I follow where he's looking. At the twins dancing together. By the way they glance at us, I'm sure it's for our benefit that they're all nasty dirty dancing and turning me the fuck on.

I dance one song with Declan before insisting that I really do need a drink. I think I've sweat eight pounds of liquid from my body. Zarek joins me and I order another seltzer. Sipping on it, I look at Zarek.

"This isn't bad," I say.

He shakes his head. A minute later, Quin joins us and orders the same. I finish one and ask the bartender for another, noting that this isn't quenching my thirst at all. With the new one in hand, I turn toward the dance floor, looking for Damon.

My heart stops when I spot him and everything in me goes cold. The way they have Simon pressed between them is indecent. How they're touching him. Their mouths on him. How they *kiss* him is not the simple peck like at the restaurant. The sight of them makes me hurt everywhere and all I can think is that Damon is in love with his best friend.

His best friend that's pressed between them, head back and eyes closed. Letting them touch him. I somehow manage to glance at Quin and I'm surprised to find he's watching them with a strange, small, *fond* fucking smile as he sips lazily on his drink.

But when I look at Zarek and see his slightly green complexion, I know I'm not alone in how I'm feeling right now.

"I'm going to be sick," Zarek says.

My stomach churns in agreement and while I don't want to look back at all, I find I can't help myself. And I stare as the man I'm in love with basically dry fucks his best friend on a dance floor. In front of me.

As if I'm not even here.

Twenty-Seven

DAMON



EVERYTHING HAD BEEN FINE. Everything was great. Perfect. The entire night was going better than I ever hoped. But when Simon, Declan, and I move off the dance floor after dancing together, one look at Declan tells me the entire night just went up in a dumpster fire.

Declan breaks away and chases after Zarek who is making a quick exit. Sage just stares at me. The look of hurt, betrayal, and horror that covers his face makes me feel sick. I reach him and cup his face in my hands. The way he flinches at my touch makes my chest tight.

Dancing with Zarek is fine. Dancing with Declan is fine. Dancing with Simon between me and my brother? Clearly not fine.

I was stupid to think that this was going to work. That Sage could accept this relationship. That he'd be okay with how things are between us and Simon.

I was very, very wrong.

Words don't come. I won't lie to him and promise that it won't happen again. That's just stupid. You don't lie to someone you're seeing. About anything. But I don't know that there's anything that's going to make this better.

"Want to dance?" I ask.

His eyes get glassy, and he blinks rapidly, shaking his head. I don't hear his answer but read it on his lips. "No."

I study his face, seeing every line of hurt I just put there. How could we have thought this was going to be a good idea? I can feel my brother's panic rise inside me, which only fuels mine brighter.

"We're going to go," Simon says.

His voice is quiet and I nod. I need to look at him. To tell him I love him and will talk to him later. But I know if I look away from Sage right now, to look at Simon for any of that, this suddenly very fragile thing between us is going to shatter.

"I'll text you tomorrow."

"Okay," Simon says. He pauses and I know he wants to say something. But eventually he just leaves.

We don't move as Sage tries to catch his breath. I continue to hold his face, rubbing my thumbs across the smooth planes of his cheeks, catching the quiet tears that fall.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"I want to go home," he says.

Those words I hear, and they sting. I nod and take a step back, reluctantly dropping my hands from him. I reach for his hand, relieved when he lets me take it. His grip is tight but the fear in me says I feel finality in this touch.

I'm not ready for this to end. I don't want it to end.

The silence outside should allow me to catch my breath, but I'm still struggling to breathe. I need to say something. Anything at all. But words don't come. I'm not sure what to say to fix this. In my head, I can hear Declan practically yelling over the music into Zarek's ear. Assuring him that it's just a dance. It's just how we dance. It doesn't *mean* anything.

I'm not sure if that's a lie or not. Is it?

"No. It's not."

It's just how we've always danced. How we'd dance with him before we went to find someone to get off with.

Fuck, this isn't a good thing.

The drive is quiet and I clutch his hand in mine tightly, not wanting to let it go. At a stoplight close to his subdivision, I ask, “You can’t do this. Can you?”

Sage flinches and turns his face away to look out the passenger window. His inability to look at me only makes my chest hurt all the more.

“I want to,” he says quietly. “You don’t know how badly I want to. But I... I don’t think I can look at that again. Or know that’s how you touch him when I’m not there. Especially since that’s how you touch him when I *am* there.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say I’ve been touching Simon like that while we’ve been together since Simon finally came home but I know that’s only going to make this worse.

So I try something else. “I danced with Zarek like that,” I say. “Just like you danced with Zarek and Declan. I danced with my brother like that.”

Sage looks at me but because it’s late and dark, I can’t safely take my eyes from the road. “I understand why that should make this better and make me, maybe see reason... but it’s very different.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because you told me you’re in love with Simon,” he says, his words choked. Silence settles around us, and I get more panicky the closer we get to his house. I’m surprised when he speaks again. “Maybe it feels and looks so different because, even though Declan and Zarek have their own thing, we kind of had something with them too.”

Had. Past tense.

Fuck, please don’t do this.

“I don’t know how to make this better,” I say as I pull into his driveway. I throw it into park and grip his arm before he can bolt. “Tell me what you need from me.”

Sage shakes his head and his eyes glitter in the moonlight. But I know they shine like that because they’re filled with tears.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. You know that, right? I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you intentionally, Sage.”

He nods and sniffs. “I know,” he hiccups. “I have to go.”

Sage pulls his arm from me and practically bursts from my car. I watch, helpless, as he rushes inside, shutting the door behind him. Lights don’t turn on. Not a single one.

What do I do now?

Numbly, I drive home and find myself sitting in the shower under the hot water when my brother joins me. It’s hard to know where my heartbreak ends and his begins.

“That was a mistake,” I say dully.

Declan drops in front of me and pushes my legs apart so he can get closer. His entire body shivers as if he’s got a fever. I hug him tightly, his arms gripping me with all his strength.

The parallel between this moment and the one where Simon left is all too familiar. So fucking close to déjà vu that my head spins and the contents of my stomach threaten to come up.

“When did we fall in love?” I ask, breathless.

The choking sound he makes has me gripping him tighter, kissing his head. I’m thankful that we rarely run out of hot water. I couldn’t pick myself up, much less my brother right now if I tried. One or both of us would end up with a broken neck.

Which would hurt a lot less than this.

“I don’t know,” Declan says. “But fuck, my heart is going to stop if it keeps hurting like this every few months.”

The better question is the same we’d been asking ourselves for months in a different yet eerily similar situation: what do we do now? How do we fix it?

Bottom line is that Simon isn’t going anywhere. We won’t fucking allow it. There’s no way that we’re going to be able to keep our lives as separate as we have been. Somehow we

survived when it was temporary, but it can't keep going like that.

Not when Sage will want more and more time with me if we're an actual couple. How do you tell the man you love that you're going to be spending intimate time with someone else when you know how hard that affects him?

This is set up for failure. Apparently, only Stommer can find it within himself to accept this relationship with Simon.

Fuck, I wish Simon were here now to help take away some of the pain. Yet, that feels like a betrayal too.

"Jesus fuck," Declan mutters. I flinch when his teeth sink into my collarbone. Then he sucks the spot before licking it. I'm not sure if he's trying to mark me, punish me, or comfort me. "All three," he says.

"Let's go to bed," I say.

We get to our feet and it's awkward as fuck trying to stand upright when my legs suddenly feel stiff. I shouldn't feel so out of shape considering my job is literally to stay fit, but apparently dancing uses a very different set of muscles. And then sitting on a hard tile floor in an awkward position around my brother compounds on that.

It's not more than a few minutes later when we're still slightly damp and clad only in underwear when we climb into bed. The bed we share with Simon. The one where we've shared Sage and Zarek.

I groan and squeeze my eyes shut. This is fucking miserable.

Twenty-Eight

SAGE



HIS TOUCH BURNS. I practically run from his car and through my door because I can't let him see me cry and I'm about three seconds away from bursting into tears. As soon as I'm safely behind my door, I slam it shut, lock it, and slide down until I'm crouched behind it.

I let the tears fall. With my eyes squeezed shut, all I can see is the three of them dancing. The way that the twins' hands are on him. Moving over his body. Their lips on his skin. The way Simon is just putty in their hold.

He looked relaxed. At home. Like that's his spot between them. Where there's no place for me or Zarek. It's the three of them.

I'm stupid. Of course, it's the three of them. It's always been the three of them.

"But I think he wanted me too," I sob into my entryway.

Headlights flash through my windows and I know the pattern all too well. He's leaving. He's driving away. That hurts even more. Do I want him to fight for me? Do I want him to bang on my door until I answer and beg me to understand? For to say *anything at all* that would convince me to stay?

Maybe I want all of that.

It's a good thing he leaves, I reason to myself. In this state, I might have believed absolutely anything he told me. Even an outright lie. I'd have believed him if he told me that there's nothing between them at all. That he exaggerated when he

claimed to be in love with his best friend. It was all just some amped up emotions from learning that Simon found someone else.

They were angry at this new guy and thought that if they told Simon they were in love with him that Simon might choose them instead.

The tales I make up to convince myself that this isn't so bad are wild. Complete and total bullshit too. You don't tell someone you're in love with that you also love someone else for funsies. Given the conversation we had where we shared our secrets, I have no reason to believe it was fabricated at all.

It wasn't. Isn't. That's just their relationship.

The worst part? I'm pretty sure that's the tamest thing. He said they shower together. They don't wear clothes in showers. What then? Do they keep several feet between them? Do they keep their faces turned? What happens if one of them accidentally brushes up against another?

I'm stupid. I'm so stupidly stupid. Of course, I just *had* to fall in love with a man in love with someone else. I *had* to fall in love with someone who has all sorts of intimate relationships.

Then there's the fact that they sleep together, mostly naked. I know how small that bed is. None of them are small men. Then there's all the other things they do that Damon had alluded to.

In my mind, that kind of thing should be between two people. What's the word—monogamy?

There's a voice in my head calling me a hypocrite. It wasn't exactly monogamous when we fooled around with Declan and Zarek. Why is that different? Can I convince myself it's just sex? Is that what makes it different? Because dicks were involved?

Scrubbing my hands over my face, I force myself to get up and move deeper into my house. I don't look around. Damon has been everywhere. There's nowhere safe to look right now. Except that as I stand in my bedroom door, I cannot make

myself cross the threshold. I teeter there for a minute before backing away.

The lump in my throat, the heaviness in my chest... I can't go into that room. Instead, I turn and move into the guest bathroom where I stand under the shower. I need to wash this night away. I need to get the feeling of his hands off me. The way they burn. How my skin feels empty without them.

The sudden image of Damon, Simon, and Declan in the shower, naked, soapy, hands everywhere, has me practically falling from the stall and onto the tile floor. A pathetic sob echoes around the room.

Without bothering to get dressed or even so much as dry off, I shut off the shower and head into the guest room, where I fall onto the bed. My eyes burn. My breath is shuddery; making my lungs hurt. I can't breathe with all the stupid congestion that comes with crying.

While I lay there, the only thing I can think about is the entire night we spent together. The six of us. I really liked it. I liked the entire thing. The way they teased each other and laughed. I loved that there wasn't ever a point in the conversation where it turned awkward. Declan never let me feel left out or like they were always pausing to explain something to me and Zarek.

I never felt outside of their conversation looking in. I didn't feel like an outcast because I was part of it all.

The conversations were all easy, and I loved to learn about them. Nothing felt inappropriate or too close. Not even their kisses and hugs and absent touching.

It's difficult to explain, but it was fine.

Damon kept me in his arms. He was always kissing me and hugging me. Murmuring to me. Sometimes he did explain something to me, but I think it was more for his benefit of doing so than that I was lost in what they were talking about. I knew enough from the context to follow along.

It felt like he wanted me to know some details, though. He wanted me to feel like I was a part of it.

Everything about the night was perfect.

And the dance floor was too. The way he led me through dancing for the first time. How he showed me to move with the beat and just feel it. How he touched me and kissed me. It wasn't any different with Zarek and Declan. I mean, the kissing was. But the rest wasn't. Not really.

It wasn't any different when they danced with each other, either.

I'm not naïve enough to think that they were actually dancing with Simon any differently, either. So why does it hurt like there was something deeper there? Is it all the other stuff that I haven't seen? Was it in that moment that it became real to me? How inappropriately close and intimate their friendship is?

These thoughts keep me awake most of the night. I might doze here and there, but it isn't much or for very long. When I wake in the morning, everything in me hurts as if I've spent hours crying.

Because I have. Not over the life that I finally grew the balls enough to leave. I really am done crying over that.

This time, I'm crying over a broken heart. I won't even say my *first* broken heart. I don't want it to be my first or last. I want it healed. I want Damon to choose me.

I wait as long as I can before digging my phone out of my pants and calling Jordan. It's early, but hopefully not too early.

"Sage," he says, voice thick with sleep. "What's wrong, buddy?"

I swallow and look at the time. It's barely past seven, so I managed two solid minutes. "I'm sorry," I say and try to steady my breath. "You have a baby and you need sleep. I'm really sorry. I just—I don't know who else to talk to and I really need to talk to someone."

There's rustling and then the quiet click of a door. "It's alright, man. What's wrong? What happened? Do you need me to come get you and bring you home?"

“No,” I whisper. “I’m home.” Curled up on my guest room bed, but I’m home.

“Tell me what happened. Why are you crying?”

Taking a deep breath, I launch into last night. It’s a damn mess in the way I’m telling it. Bouncing between the club and what I felt then remembering that this was a date and going backwards to give some context. I jump forward again to dancing and then back up to tell him that it was all great. I like Simon a lot. And then seeing them dance together. But they all danced like that with me too. Back to the date itself where I loved to see their friendship for real. To see what it’s really like. Then to the dance floor, where it looked really, really different. But should it? Should it look or feel different? Because it was the same. Am I projecting?

When I run out of breath, though I’m sure I’ve left out a whole lot of stuff, Jordan asks, “You’re upset about how they were dancing, right?”

“I’m sorry,” I whine. “I am really bad about explaining my shit but... yeah. Then I feel stupid for it because they all danced with me like that. Except that I know that dancing is just... Well, it’s nothing. I know they’re closer than what I see on the dance floor. I know they shower together and wash each other. I know they sleep together practically naked. They don’t even have two beds, Jordan! It’s like all those moments that I haven’t seen but have been told about manifested in this little glimpse and I’m suddenly panicking because it hurts too much to see it. But do I have the right to feel that way when he told me all along how close they are? I feel like an idiot for being upset.”

“Okay, okay. Hold on.” I take a breath to let him talk. “First, yes. Whatever you’re feeling, you have a right to feel. I don’t really care if you *think* you shouldn’t. If you feel that way, then you do. And you even know why.”

“Yes,” I say, though I’m not quite convinced that he’s right and I should be allowed to feel this way over something I already knew happens.

“Also, just because you know about something doesn’t mean that you’re required to accept it. If it makes you feel bad to see the man you’re seeing with someone else in that way, you’re entirely entitled to feel that way. Whether he told you about it or not.”

“Even when I know he wasn’t doing it to make me feel bad? Or to make me jealous?” Sammy wasn’t a vindictive girl, but I knew there were moments where she was trying for both. If I was into her as I was supposed to be, it might have worked. As it was, it was a wasted effort on me. You can’t make a gay man upset in a straight situation like that. At least, not this gay man.

“Even then,” Jordan assures me. “Sage, I know you’ve kind of beaten around this topic, not wanting to tell us the truth, but do you love him?”

“Yes,” I whine, drawing the answer out. “I’m so dumb to fall in love with the first man who has sex with me!”

He chuckles. “No, you’re not. It’s not the sex you fell in love with, but the man behind it.”

“Behind me,” I mutter.

He laughs again. “Have you told him?”

“No,” I whisper. “I didn’t want to push him if he wasn’t ready. So I didn’t tell him.”

“I know that we’ve been telling you to have a real conversation with him for weeks. Maybe months now. And you keep avoiding doing so. Sage, it’s time to talk to him.”

My eyes widen in horror. “NOW?!”

Jordan chuckles. “Yes, sweetie.” He rarely uses terms of endearment for me. That’s always River’s thing. I know that doesn’t mean he cares about me any less. When he uses one, it means that he’s about to lay some hard truths on me that he knows I don’t want to hear. “If you don’t tell him and this ends before you do, you’re going to be left with a whole lot more than heartache. The regret and always wondering ‘what if’ will be there forever. It has the potential to really fuck with any future relationships. You’ll always compare them to

Damon. You need to find some courage and go to him. Tell him what you feel. And see what happens.”

The words ‘I don’t want to’ almost spill from my mouth in a perfect imitation of a three year old. He’s right. I know he’s right. That doesn’t change the fear inside me that insists I’m about to lose it all. Then again, maybe I already have. I ran away last night instead of talking.

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay?”

Nodding, I repeat the word. “Yes, okay. I’ll... I’ll go talk to him.”

“Right now?”

“Well, I—Yes. Right now.” I jump to my feet and then scramble to my door before I suddenly freeze. “Jordan?”

“Hm?”

“Tell me to go in my room.”

There’s a pause before he says, “Go into your room, Sage.”

Taking a breath, I step inside and then look around. Nothing is different. This is still *my* room. Even if it’s where Damon has done very dirty things to me.

Swallowing around the memories, I duck my head and rush into my closet, where I dress quickly. Then duck into my bathroom and brush my teeth. I’m out of my room in no time at all. I don’t think I even hit the five-minute mark.

“You okay?” Jordan asks.

“Yes. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m here for whatever you need.”

“Okay, then I need you to tell me to go find his address. However necessary.”

He doesn’t pause this time. “Go find Damon’s address by whatever means necessary, Sage.”

Swallowing, I nod. “Stay on the phone with me?”

“Yep. Go.”

I slap the phone into its cradle in my car and drive to work. Full-time trainers don't work weekends, but we're allowed to use the gym as part of our employment benefits. I let myself in and wave to Jenny before moving to the back.

The time clock is actually a computer. Although reception isn't our responsibility, we're taught how to create accounts and look them up. Just in case it gets super busy at the front and the ladies need backup.

So I log in and ignore the fact that I'm breaking all sorts of rules and laws as I pull up Damon's account and make a mental note of his address before shutting it all down and rushing out. I feel sick all over again.

“I'm back,” I tell Jordan when I start the car. “And I have his address. I'm driving there now.”

“Good. Drive safely.”

I do. It doesn't take me long to get there and I park in guest parking. Without giving myself time to think about this, I push my way through the front doors and run up the stairs to the eighth floor. I pause in front of his door, though.

“Jordan?” I ask, voice strained. “Tell me to knock.”

“Sage, you got this. Knock on that door and tell him exactly how you feel. I'll stay here long enough to make sure you do. Then you can call me and tell me what happened later. Okay, Sage? But no matter what, don't forget to call and let us know you're okay.”

“Thank you Jordan, I will.”

Twenty-Nine

DAMON



WE KNEW we were gay at a young age. Before that word had meaning. When boys naturally began to pick on girls they liked, we picked on boys we liked. When girls got cooties, they really had cooties for us. We just didn't like them at all.

They were fine in the broadest sense of the world. It's not like we had an issue with them as a whole. Or even one in particular. Except Maci. She had a crush on us from the beginning and no amount of us telling her we didn't want to play with her could convince her to go away. Seriously. It's been five years now. Five. Sure, it was adorable when we were six, but come on. We're not six anymore. She should really take a hint.

I think the first real sign that something was different with us was when the adults started commenting on how cute it was that Maci followed us everywhere.

"Mark my words, she's going to marry one of them one day."

"Think of the stories they'd tell their grandkids. How they met as babies and fell in love."

Of course, Maci couldn't tell us apart. No one could. No one but Simon and our parents. That didn't matter to Maci. If pressed, she'd say that she likes Declan. Not that she was sure which one of us was Declan.

Then, around the time we were eight, everything inside us really turned up the cooties factor in that area. We sure as hell

weren't going to have wives. No wife at all. Ever. Then what would we have if not a wife?

The question wasn't overly important. But when it would come up later in class or in play, we determined that, yeah, we wanted kids, but we didn't want a wife. No girls, thanks.

"Just us and Simon," I'd say.

"You need a wife. Who will have your babies?"

We didn't have an answer for that, but our answer never changed. No wife. We were the kids that would simply grow up without girls.

We learned what it meant to be gay in the same way every other kid does—from adults and our peers. While it was said mostly with derision or as if it were a bad word, we quickly realized that's exactly what we were.

This is why we don't like girls. We like boys instead.

It would turn out to be the only thing we ever kept to ourselves for any real length of time. Not because we weren't sure, or because we were worried about what others would think. But because we were still learning what the term meant. If we needed to use it. Can't we just be boys that like boys? Do we have to call ourselves gay? Does that really matter?

Apparently, it does.

This discovery was pushed to the side when Simon stopped showing up to school. We were instantly concerned when we tried to call him after the second day and the number was disconnected. It took us several days to convince our mother that we needed to go check on Simon. The teacher was worried enough that she asked us if we knew where Simon was!

Our gayness was pushed aside when we found Simon how we did.

But it's been a year now. Simon isn't the happy, smiling boy he once was. He still smiles and laughs sometimes, but there's always sadness in his eyes. Sometimes he still looks out the

window as if he's waiting for his mom to pick him up from a sleepover.

He never talks about either of his parents. We're not sure if he should, but if he doesn't want to, what kind of friends would we be to make him? So we don't push. We do what we always do—hold him tightly between us and make sure he knows how much we love him.

That's where he is now while Declan and I mentally argue how we're going to tell our best friend that we like boys and not girls. It's not that it needs to be said. Yeah, it needs to be said. Right now, Simon might be preoccupied with his family hurt. But eventually, he's going to notice. We don't want that moment to come where he feels like he needs to ask us.

Already we've heard comments. Those that aren't about Maci are about how we tease the boys. As we get older, I can only imagine how they're going to talk about us.

We don't want Simon to learn that we're gay by someone else.

"Simon?"

"Yeah?" he answers, his fingers absently play over my stomach. He does that a lot; wherever his hand is, it's like his fingers can't keep still. I don't even think he realizes he's doing it. Like our hands in his hair, I think it soothes him.

"We want to tell you something."

He shifts and picks his head up so he can look at me. "What?"

"Just say it."

You say it!

I don't continue to argue with my brother. Instead, I take a breath and say, "We're gay."

Simon just stares. He doesn't comment as he looks at me. Finally, he says, "Gay?"

"You know how you like girls? You think they're pretty or whatever?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Yeah, sure."

"We like boys. Like that."

"You think boys are pretty?" he asks, amused. "They're dirty and they smell bad."

I laugh and kiss his cheek. "You don't."

"Because you wash me. I did when—" His words cut off as he sucks in a breath. A second later, he lets out a long exhale. "Yeah. Okay."

Declan wraps around him tighter. "Love you."

Simon smiles. "I love you too."

"You don't care if we're gay?" I ask. I don't really want to push this conversation except that I need to know if this is going to get in the way of our friendship.

He shrugs. "Why would I care if you like boys instead of girls? Does it bother you that I like girls instead of boys?"

"Boys are clearly better," Declan says.

Simon laughs. He shrugs again. "No. I don't care who you like."



SUNDAY FINDS US sitting on the couch. Miserable. Last night was sleepless for more than just the fact that Simon wasn't here. The ache in my chest that I fell in love with someone and lost him just as quickly sits far too heavy.

It's been a very long time since I've cried. The frustration at this entire situation has me nearly there. Losing Simon and then getting him back but it's still weird. Maybe if it wasn't, I'd feel a little more stable. Then realizing I love this other man and not knowing how to even do that the right way. My first decision is something that clearly fucked it all up and I lost him as soon as I had him.

To make it worse, I feel everything twice. It's not just my pain and heartache. It's not just my tears I'm fighting or just my breath I'm trying to catch. I feel Declan's too. It's all well and good when we feel compounded happy feelings. But the bad? They can be downright debilitating.

Declan takes a shuddering breath and I pull him to me. He loses balance a little as he falls into my lap and then slowly rights himself so he's practically straddling me. His dull, almost lifeless eyes stare into mine.

"I love you," I say. "I'm never, ever going anywhere."

He swallows. Nods. Words we need to hear, but they don't help the emotions coming from each other. We already know that. Living without each other isn't an option.

"Love you too," he whispers. His fingers brush my jaw. Just a featherlight touch as I watch tears form in his eyes. "I hate this hurt. I'm not built for this."

I laugh. The sound is fake and maybe a little bitter.

His lips hover over mine as he stares into my eyes. It's one of those strange mirror moments. Where you're seeing yourself in the mirror and then another copy in the mirror within the mirror. And it just repeats endlessly. I see Declan. But I also see myself through Declan's eyes. It echoes over and over and over.

Then we're jumping as a rapid, hard knock on the door startles us. Our hearts jump as we stare, eyes widening. Were we expecting company?

Declan takes a deep breath and climbs off me to get the door. I lean forward, pressing my forehead into my palms, my fingers digging into my hair and my elbows on my knees. I take a deep breath. Need to be sane to socialize with whoever showed up uninvited and unannounced. The door opens and Sage's voice makes my head snap up.

"I didn't sleep at all. I really think I'm falling for you and don't know what to do about it because I can't see that again. It hurts. I didn't think it would hurt, but it does. But I can't just

tell you it hurts because he's your best friend. I know it's not fair, but I need to tell you how I feel. And I feel—”

“Sage,” Declan says and Sage stops talking.

His rambling is adorable. My chest hurts all over again. Fuck, it's hurt so much these last months, I'm pretty sure I'm weakening my heart with all this emotional shit going on in my life.

I'm on my feet coming near them when Sage says, “Declan?”

Declan nods, gives him a small smile. He gently touches Sage's cheek and Sage closes his eyes. Then I'm there and Sage looks at me. For a second, he sways, but then he practically falls into my arms.

I catch him. My big man is heavy and shaking; I shouldn't be able to hold him, but I do. Because I'll never let him fall.

We don't speak as Declan closes the door and returns to the couch. I just hold Sage as he trembles. I think he's crying. It makes the unshed tears in my eyes sting more.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper. “In hindsight, maybe the club wasn't the best place for a first meeting.”

“No,” he agrees. “But I don't know if working up to that moment would have helped. I can't stop seeing it.”

I sigh. What am I supposed to do right now? “I don't know how to choose between two people I love, Sage. I can't be without either of you.”

He springs from my arms and looks at me with wide eyes, so I wait. When he doesn't talk, his mouth opening and closing several times, I hedge, “What's wrong?”

“Y-you love me?”

Oh. Yeah, what a way to say it.

“I don't know. That was pretty memorable.”

I'd say fuck you, but we're in a fragile state right now, so I'm just going to flip you off instead. Enjoy my finger, twin.

Declan smiles, but it's not from the banter that I feel between us. It's his warmth. His love. His sadness.

"Yes," I tell Sage. "I love you. I'm not sure when I fell in love with you, but I've loved you for a while now."

I'm a little startled by the tears that drip down his face. Many. Quickly. Should I apologize? I don't think that's the response I was prepared for.

"I love you too," he says, his quick, beaming smile spreading across his face. I'm not sure if it's his familiar exuberant look and tone or that he loves me too that has me filled with a heavy feeling of *mine*.

Reaching for him, he falls back into me, and I hold him tightly. The reality isn't this realization and declaration, though. This won't be a magic fix. If it adds anything to this situation, it's a further complication.

"I want to be with you," I tell him. "But I don't know how to make this work. Simon is a permanent fixture in my life, Sage."

He shivers. "I know." His voice is barely a whisper. "I don't know what I wanted when I came over here." He pulls away to look at me again and his eyes are wide once more. "You should know that I broke the law and went into the computer system at work to find your address. You can press charges against me. But I didn't know how else to find you without just texting you to ask and then I didn't want to talk over text or the phone and I might have lost my courage to come here."

I press a finger to his lips to stop his nervous ramble. "You can look up my damn blood type for all I care. I'm just glad you're here."

"You are?"

I kiss him lightly. "Yes. I need to know that we can figure this out. Together."

"But... you told me you're in love with someone else," he says, the hurt in his voice clear.

Sighing, I pull him deeper into the house and fall onto the couch with him. I keep Declan close because I need his touch and I know he needs mine. “Look at me.” Sage does, then I frame his face in my hands. “I love Simon with everything in me. I love Declan with everything in me. While I’d like to be able to tell you that my love for Simon is... sibling-like. Or platonic at best. I think you know that’s not the case.”

“I love you with just as much of me, Sage,” I say quietly. “But it’s very different from how I love either of them. It’s no less. Definitely not any less. But this love? It’s all yours. I’m not sharing it with anyone else.”

Sage’s breath catches. “Really?”

“Really?”

I smile. “All yours,” I say again and ignore the way my brother huffs in my head. He knows. He’s a part of everything, including this. But being a part of this love doesn’t make it any less completely for Sage. Because this love comes from me. From us. And it’s for Sage alone.

“Sappy fucking psycho.”

Sage takes a breath. “But... I mean. I like that. Actually, I really love that. I just... I don’t know how to be accepting of what I saw with Simon. I know I need to if we’re going to be together, but the way it made me feel.” He shakes his head, tears coming to his eyes again.

“I won’t pretend I don’t understand because I really do. You have a very real idea of how much I hate seeing Stommer touching Simon. But Najee, this isn’t a love triangle. This is me and you. In this capacity. No one else is a part of it.”

“You say all the right things,” he says.

Pulling his mouth to mine, I quietly laugh. “I love you, Sage Rossi, and I want to keep you forever. All we need to agree on right now is that we’ll work together to find a way to make that happen. If you want the same thing.”

“Yes. I do. It’s what I’ve wanted for so, so long. I was just afraid to tell you.”

I kiss him again. “I know, Sage.”

“You do?” His eyes shoot wide again.

Laughing, I nod and hug him tightly. The way he melts into my arms just does it for me. I want to stay like this forever. To keep this big puppy in my arms. I want my brother by my side with his man. I want...

Fucking hell.

“We’ll take smaller steps with Simon. Okay?”

He swallows. “Okay.”

“You want to be with me enough to try? I think we both know it’s not going to be easy on our relationship.”

“Are you going to be my boyfriend now?” he asks, his voice small and hopeful.

I meet my brother’s eyes. There’s a tiny smile on his face. *“Such a fucking adorable puppy.”*

“Yes,” I tell him. “But you should know that I really don’t like that word. You’re more than that.”

“What am I?” he whispers, fidgeting.

“Mine. In whatever way I want you. Tied up in bows and begging for an orgasm. Or wrapped in my arms so I can hug you. Or sitting in a chair where I can hand feed you. With my brother where I can watch. No matter what we’re doing or where we are, Sage Rossi, you belong to me. Understand?”

His fingers dig into my ribs. “Yes. That’s all I want to be.”

Thirty

SAGE



I FEEL BETTER after the reassurances, but I still have a hard time *not* seeing them dance together when I close my eyes. The sight makes my stomach fall. There's a part of me that screams I'm never going to be enough to keep him happy if he needs Simon that way.

It's not a fair feeling. I don't even think it's accurate. Well, maybe it's not. My life has been a series of 'never enough' so maybe I'm just not. My therapist would tell me that's stupid (not in those words, of course) because that's how my mother made me feel in her quest to manipulate me. I *know* that.

Some lessons are hard to unlearn.

It's Wednesday now and I've spent every evening after work at Damon's condo with him and Declan. Zarek isn't answering Declan with more than vague texts when he bothers to text back. Damon doesn't want to leave his brother alone. I understand that.

I'm sitting in Damon's lap and though I'm definitely bigger than him, somehow I fit there as he holds me like I'm a child. Tucked into his arms. His chin on my head. His hands run soothingly over me, anywhere they can reach.

Declan sits close, and though his eyes are open, he's not seeing anything at all. I wonder if he and Damon are talking in their minds. It's a very strange concept, but I don't doubt what they say. The world is full of stranger things than twins having the ability to communicate mentally.

"Declan?" I ask.

He looks at me, blinking until his eyes focus.

“Want to cuddle?”

I’m not sure he hears me for a minute, but then he gives me a little smile. “Thanks.”

I reach out my arm and he shifts until he’s leaning against us. Damon and I each wrap an arm around him and pull him close. He sighs.

“Do you want me to talk to him?” I ask.

Declan laughs quietly. “No, but thanks for offering.”

The television is on but the volume is so low, it’s just a quiet murmur. We’re not watching it, anyway. It’s just there for background noise. Before I can suggest that he give me Zarek’s number because we’re friends, the front door opens and the three of us turn toward it.

Simon comes in with a box in his hands. As he’s kicking off his shoes, he’s saying, “I know that ice cream is the traditional sweet for these moments, but we prefer cake as our dessert of choice, so I compromised and got an ice cream cake.” He looks up and stops, his eyes landing on me.

I hold my breath and wait, eyes wide. Wondering what’s about to happen.

Simon breaks out in a wide grin, his shoulders releasing some of the tension he was carrying. “Sage,” he says, almost in relief.

“Hi,” I say tentatively.

His eyes flick between the twins before he says he’s going to put the dessert into the freezer. I hear him move around the condo and remind myself that he lives here too. He pays the mortgage. He shares their bed. Their closet and clothes.

I forcefully shove all those thoughts away as he steps back into the living area. His eyes fall to Declan and he frowns. “Dec,” he says, his voice filled with sadness.

Declan sits up. Damon and I let him go as he reaches for Simon, pulling him onto his lap. Simon straddles him and hugs

him fiercely, one hand in Declan's hair where he brings his face into his neck. "I'm sorry," he says quietly.

Declan doesn't answer. I watch as his arms tighten, hugging Simon close. So close there's no space between them. Logically, I know that I'm sitting in Damon's lap. That's not Damon wrapped so intimately around Simon. But the way my heart races, I'm not sure it knows that. Nor does my stomach as it starts to churn.

When I look up, I find Simon watching me.

"I know what you think, but I promise you, that's not what happens between us," Simon says quietly.

"It's not sexual," I say, though my voice sounds like I swallowed sandpaper. Damon hugs me.

Simon gives me half a smile. "And it's never going to be."

"How can you know that? You're so... close."

This time, his smile is amused. "I'm asexual."

I stare. After a second of trying to figure out if he's just telling me that, I sit up to look at him more clearly. "You are?"

He laughs quietly, his fingers still carding through Declan's hair. "Yes. I am. I thought you knew that."

Looking at Damon, he smiles and shrugs. "It's a relatively new discovery, and I wasn't sure how comfortable you were putting it out there, so no, I never repeated it."

"Thanks," Simon says. "I'm..." He laughs again. "That's probably the easiest thing to accept about all the weird hollows inside me."

I stare at Simon again, having no idea what he's thinking. He looks at me again. "Did you know I lost my parents when I was ten?" he asks.

I shrug a little. I knew something about it.

Simon nods absently, his gaze going vague. He rests his head against Declan's and sighs. "I was ten. Barely ten. My mom was diagnosed with cancer after she'd been sick for a couple weeks. She was dead within two weeks of her

diagnosis. It moved rapidly. Watching my mom become so violently sick as quickly as she did and then just... disappear one day completely wrecked me. We were close. I was close with both my parents. They were always hugging me and telling me how much they loved me. That I was their perfect son. They were so proud of how smart I was.” He pauses and I sniff, my vision blurring as he quietly tells me about his pain. “After my mom’s funeral, my dad started drinking. It got... really bad. I don’t honestly know how long I was left in that house while he drank himself into alcohol induced blackouts. I always wish I never saw him like that. Passed out in his own vomit. Reeking of alcohol, vomit, and piss. I think several days went by where I had nothing. I’d already eaten everything in the kitchen. *Everything*. I stopped going to school because I didn’t have any clean clothes. The house was disgusting, so I couldn’t even go out wearing what I had; there was no surface I could touch that was clean. Damon and Declan’s mom came to check on me and she pulled me out of there.”

He didn’t talk for a minute, as if he were seeing everything. Maybe reliving it. My stomach churned for a very different reason this time.

“Depression is bad at any age, but for a ten-year-old, it looks very wrong. I didn’t want to do anything. I didn’t have the strength or will to do it. My mother died, leaving me with a man who didn’t love me enough to take care of me. The way that fucked with my head, even then, while not understanding how it made me feel, left a lasting impression.”

He glances my way and gives me a bemused smile. After a deep breath, he says, “We were always close, but that’s when a lot of our behaviors that the world deems inappropriate started. When I tell you I was lifeless, I really mean that. Declan and Damon kept me clean. They kept me dressed and made sure I ate. Wrapped me between them and hugged me while I cried. They pet me and loved me and made sure I knew I wasn’t alone. That they’d never leave me alone. They’d never let me hurt alone.”

His voice is surprisingly steady, even if sad. I'm filled with enough emotion for him. I was always called a sensitive soul because I feel a great deal for someone who suffers. What Simon is describing would be difficult for an adult; I can't imagine a little kid going through this. And then two more little kids trying to make him feel better.

"Anyway," he says after a pause, "even as I started to... I'm not going to call it healing because I don't think I ever did that. But as I started to move past that crippling depression, we never grew out of that closeness. I needed to feel their affection. I needed to know that they were there, that someone was there, and that they loved me enough not to leave me. Not by using alcohol and not from death. I've recently come to the conclusion that I never actually dealt with anything difficult. Declan and Damon have always protected me. Surrounded me with themselves so I never had to face anything on my own. I was too young to understand what I was doing and while I went to grief counseling at the school, it didn't last long since I wanted no part of it. I wanted my twins because *they* made everything better."

He meets my eyes with an amused smile. "What really happened is that I used their friendship and grew dependent on them to feel for me while I shoved anything hard, anything difficult and challenging, deep inside me and threw away the key. You have no idea the havoc that's created in my life now. But my point in telling you this is that, while I won't lie to you and tell you it's all innocent because they're two horny gay men who love me deeply, I am telling you that the things you're worrying about aren't anything you need to worry about because this *just is* our relationship."

"They're in love with you," I say, my voice hoarse, both from the emotion of his story and because of the truth in those words. "They want a future with you."

Simon grins. "Yeah, I know. And we'll have that." His words sting but he reaches for my hand and I let him take it. "But he wants one with you too, Sage."

My breath catches as I look at Damon. He doesn't say anything but smiles.

Simon sighs. “Do you know how many hookups I’ve met?”

I cringe and shake my head. I’m not sure I want to know.

“None,” he says, surprising me. He grins at the look I give him. “Exactly zero. I’ve been with them to the club nearly every single time they go. I’ve seen, never mind met, no one. Do you know what that means?”

Looking between the twins, I say, “That they lie about their hookups?”

Simon laughs. Declan snorts. Damon pinches me and I laugh too.

“No. It means that he wants to keep you. It’s one thing to introduce you to Declan because they usually hook up together. I don’t think you really grasp the mountain you scaled to have reached the point where Damon brought you home to me.” He squeezes my hand and I think I feel it around my heart. “Damon loves exactly three people. And they’re right here in this room, Sage.”

I pull in a shaky breath and look at Damon.

“There’s no competition for his love. None. He loves me as much as he does Declan. And he loves you as much as he loves us. It’s all a little different, but the twins don’t do anything by halves. Damon loves you and he’s going to keep you. I’m so fucking happy you’re here, Sage. I can’t tell you how much that means.”

I’m still staring at Damon when Simon eventually lets go of my hand. “You want to keep me?” I ask, voice shaking.

He frames my face with his hands. “It’s not a matter of want, Najee. I *am* keeping you. I will never let you go again.”

“And... what kind of future do you see now?”

His eyes don’t leave mine. “One where we’re all together. My husband. The father of my children. We’ll find a way to get there, Najee.”

Simon snickers. “I can’t believe you call him that as a term of endearment.”

“What does it mean?” I ask, looking at him.

Simon smirks. “It means you’re a really cool guy. Awesome.” I grin and start to look at Damon with doe eyes until Simon adds, “It also means you have a really big dick.”

My face heats stupidly fast and I cover it with my hands. “No, it doesn’t. Please tell me it doesn’t.”

Damon laughs and pulls me to him. “It does. You are an amazing guy. The fucking best. Your cock is a masterpiece that I will never get tired of choking on.”

I almost swallow my tongue. “Stop. Ohmygosh, stop.”

“You’re so fucking adorable,” he murmurs, pulling me to him and covering me with his arms.

For a minute, we’re quiet as my cheeks stop burning. The television murmurs. Simon stands and pulls me up. “Come on. Let’s get cake.”

Following him to the kitchen, I glance at the guys, seeing Declan move closer to Damon again, cuddling back into his brother’s arms. It breaks my heart to see him like that. So despondent. Heartbroken.

“You know where the plates are?” Simon asks as he goes to the freezer.

Shrugging, I pull open doors until I find them and pull out four. He’s already cutting the cake into four pieces. It’s not a huge cake, but those are giant pieces.

“No word from Zarek yet?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No. I don’t have his number, so I can’t even call him.”

Simon nods. “I’m going to give it through the weekend. If he doesn’t come back, I’m going to campus to find him.”

There’s a moment where I picture Sammy coming to the gym and almost argue. Instead, I say, “I’ll come with you.”

He smiles at me, licking the frosting from his fingers. “Good. I think that’ll help.”

There's only two pieces out and two spoons as he sticks the other half of the cake back into the freezer. He hands me a plate and a spoon. "Who isn't eating any?"

Simon grins. "Come on. Go climb back in Damon's lap."

I follow him and he settles into Declan's lap as I climb back into Damon's. We situate ourselves and Damon takes the spoon from me, telling me to hold the plate. I do and he scoops a bite, offering it to me. I glance at Declan and Simon to see that Declan has both in his hands, as he's already feeding a bite to Simon before he takes one for himself.

"Honestly, it's probably a good thing I already knew how to feed myself before I met the twins. I'm positive I wouldn't know how otherwise."

Laughing, I let Damon feed me. We share the piece and then we're relaxing on the couch. No more talking. Just being together. I'm actually really glad Simon came over. Not just because of all the things he told me but because I'm glad Declan has someone to hold him, even though he's the one doing the holding.

We stay like that until Declan says, "He's asleep."

I shift to see that Simon is sound asleep, curled into Declan's hold as Declan gently runs his fingers through his hair.

"We still don't know where he lives," Damon says, amused.

"You don't?"

They shake their heads. "No. We know which condo complex, but not even the floor."

Declan reaches into Simon's pocket and hands Damon the phone. I watch as he easily gets in with the passcode and then scrolls through the apps until he finds the messenger.

Simon

This is Damon. Simon fell asleep. You want to come get him or we can bring him home? Or he can stay the night.

Quin

He can stay. Thanks for letting me know.

“I feel like we’re discussing custody arrangements,” Damon mutters.

“With how bitter you are toward him, that’s what it might as well be,” I say.

The twins quickly look at Simon, making sure he’s still asleep. Then meet my eyes and I flinch. “Sorry.”

Declan stands, taking Simon with him. Simon isn’t a small man, but Declan carries him as if he always has. Which I would wager a guess isn’t inaccurate.

Damon closes the phone after sending over a quick ‘you’re welcome,’ then tosses it onto the couch. He meets my eyes, moving my hair from my forehead. “Stay the night?”

I glance at the bedroom, biting my lip. “I don’t know if I should.”

“You should,” he says. “I need you to see. I need you to be here with us.”

There’s a part of me that wants to. Because I feel like maybe if I’m here, I can be a buffer between their physical contact. But there’s also a part of me that really, *really* doesn’t want to see it at all. His hand on my face, gently pulls my attention back to him, pulls me from my warring thoughts.

“I love you,” he says and my heart dances as if it’s still the first time I’ve heard him say it. “Simon’s right. I wouldn’t have brought you home to him if I didn’t love you and plan to keep you forever. We’re just going to have to work on what that forever looks like. But don’t doubt at all that I want you in it, Sage.”

“You really want to marry me?” I ask, because I can’t help myself.

“Yes, absolutely. I told you; forever. You’re mine.”

“Can I have your last name?”

He tilts his head a little. “I’d love that, but you don’t have to.”

“I want to. And I want to move out of my house. Maybe find a different job so my mother can’t find me.”

Damon smiles, nodding. But there’s something hard in his eyes. “Yes. We can do that. Whenever you’re ready.”

That makes it sound like if I want it next week, I can have it. With my stomach doing acrobatics that threaten to make me nauseous, I tell him I’m ready for bed. I try to ignore the way Declan is wrapped around Simon in the bed we’re going to be sharing as Damon leads me to the bathroom where we brush our teeth.

When we get back into the bedroom, we strip down to our underwear and Damon climbs in, pressing into Simon’s back. All those good feelings start to drop. Dissipate in the reawakened pain in my chest.

“Come here, Najee,” he says quietly.

I hesitantly follow him into bed, pressing into his back as he is Simon’s. Declan reaches for my hand right away and I meet his eyes for a brief second. It takes a long time for me to settle, even with their hands on me.

“I didn’t think I’d like being the big spoon again,” I say through a yawn.

Damon chuckles. “It’s nice when it’s where you want to be,” he says.

I nod and bury my face into his hair. He smells so good. He’s mine. I get to call this man mine forever. That’s what he said.

Curling into him further, I decide right here and now that I *will* find a way to accept whatever relationship they have. I

have to. Because Damon is mine and I don't want to live without him.

Thirty-One

DAMON



THE ALARM on my phone goes off right as I finish tying up Sage. Reaching for it, I turn it off as I look at him. Fuck, he's so goddamn hot like this. I mean, he's hot anyway. Absolutely gorgeous. I've never seen a man hotter.

"I'm the hottest man alive."

I snort, but grin. Declan's only feeling marginally better. Zarek came around two days ago, but it feels... weird.

Sage tries to shift so he can see my phone since I'm still scrolling through the apps on it. But he can't move, something I love more than fucking breathing. My wiggly puppy is rendered motionless. Helpless. My cock throbs. It can't possibly be healthy to get so turned on by making your lover completely vulnerable and at your mercy for every single whim you can imagine.

There's something so fucking thrilling about forcing him to be still. This man who is much bigger and stronger than me, is now unable to do anything other than what I want.

"Keep thinking like that and we're both going to be hard all fucking day, psycho."

That's kind of the plan. But it's entirely Sage's fault.

"What's the alarm for?" Sage asks, his sexy deep voice breathless. I reach out and stroke his big, perfect dick. He whines a little.

"Just reminding me that I need to go in fifteen minutes," I say.

His eyes go wide. “What?” The alarm in his voice is equally thrilling as seeing him in ropes.

Smiling, I lean into him and kiss his lips until they’re swollen. “I told you when you begged me to tie you up that I didn’t have time to do what you wanted.”

“You’re going to leave me like this?” he asks. Fear blossoms in his pretty face.

Though it’s slightly awkward since he’s kind of twisted up right now, I bring him into my arms. “I love you, Sage Rossi,” I tell him and he moans quietly as I brush my finger across his cheek. “Here’s what I want to do and you can tell me if you’re on board. Okay?”

He nods.

“I’m going to put a fat plug in your ass that’s wireless and attached to my phone. I also have a neat little cock strangler thing that I forgot the name of, also wirelessly attached to my phone. And I’m going to gag you with the new ball gag we bought at the store that we haven’t used yet. I’m going to set up my tablet and let it face you, also attached to my phone. While I’m having lunch with Declan and Simon, I’m going to be watching you and constantly bringing you to the edge of orgasm while I’m gone.”

His breaths are shallow; his pupils have dilated so the dark brown of his irises are completely drowned out.

“You’re not really going to beg since you’ll not be able to talk, but I’ll have an earbud in so I can listen to you cry and plead and whine. All those sweet, sexy sounds you make—I won’t miss a single one.”

“You’re a fucking torturing sadist.”

I grin and kiss Sage’s lips at my brother’s remark. “What do you think? Want to do this with me?”

He nods absently, but it’s wild just like he is.

“Here’s the thing, Sage. Are you listening?”

“Yes,” he says, blinking as he tries to clear the fog in his head.

“I won’t be able to hear a safe word from you. There’s no way you can motion for it, either. Not in the position you’ll be in—powerless and completely under my control.” He shudders. “I’ll be gone for a couple hours. If there’s any part of this you don’t want, tell me.”

I’m not really going to be gone that long. Twenty minutes at most. Long enough to pick up food, my brother and Simon, then we’ll be back here where I can check on him constantly. I can’t imagine leaving him alone like this. What if something happens?

“I want it,” he says.

“Are you sure? There’s no pressure here, Najee. None at all.”

“I want it,” he repeats. “Yes, all those things.”

I press my raging hard dick against him. “I’ll be like this the entire time, my love,” I murmur, making him moan. “Knowing that you’re here like this. Where I can see and hear you but not touch you. Where I know you’re unable to come until I give you permission. Knowing that your denied pleasure is going to be so severe, it’ll be painful. Do you want to hurt for me, Najee?”

“Yes,” he almost shouts. “Please, Damon.”

Knowing my time is running out, I kiss him again and then move back. I start with the butt plug first and I take my time working it in. It’s extra fat, though relatively short. I wanted to make sure it hit his prostate with pressure. Then I rig up the cock thing. There’s a silicone ring that goes around his balls and one between them, almost like underwear for his sac. The other piece is about an inch wide that I have to stretch to get his fat dick into, and it rests right above the root of his cock.

I can make it vibrate, concentrating around his shaft or around his balls, or both. There’s also a small balloon at the base that can be blown up that will give him the sensation that he’s being squeezed. Which should effectively cut off any orgasm with a bit of pain. Just in case I get him too close.

His eyes are wide as I set up the camera right in front of the scissors; there's always a fail safe plan. I'd never put him in actual danger. I have two minutes before I have to get out of here. When I have it all set up and make sure everything's paired with my phone, I give every feature a trial run, watching Sage as he cries out and tries to jerk his body.

I'm smiling all too widely when I see that he's exactly how I want him—fucking immobilized while his body hums in pleasure before it's taken away.

“Are you sure you want the gag?” I ask.

He nods wildly as he tries to catch his breath.

This isn't actually the gag we bought. This one has a slightly smaller ball. Only because he's going to be like this for awhile; I don't want his jaw to hurt too much. Especially since I plan to fuck him after with this thing still in his mouth.

He opens for me and I set it into place, tying it securely but not too tightly. “Okay?”

He makes a noise as he nods.

“Fuck, I wish you could see this,” I murmur. I squeeze my cock that's already dripping far too much.

Slipping from the bed, I quickly dress fully and then kiss his forehead. “Love you, Najee. Wait for me.”

He whimpers as I walk out. My gaze is already locked on the phone screen where his image fills it in real time. His eyes dart around his room, feral and overwhelmed. His chest heaves. Fuck, he's gorgeous.

“I'm going to be getting off to your fantasy, asshole. I don't even want anyone tied up.”

Too bad. It's so fucking sexy.

His agreement is enough that I grin. I stick the phone into its cradle and force myself not to watch it as I drive. Though, I can hear his breathing in the earbud. He's so fucking gorgeous.

He's all mine.

The thought makes me grin so stupidly sappy that it's still hanging on when I pull up to the cafe just outside the subdivision where Sage lives. Declan's frowning at me, shaking his head as he leans against his car with his arms folded over his chest. "There's something wrong with you."

Leaning into him, I press my lips to his, making him catch his breath. "I'm going to tie you up someday and we'll see if you hate it."

He can't hide his response. His heart thumps loudly.

"Only if you let me spank you, brother," he mutters.

I'm not sure if we share a bit of each other's kink or if I'm responding to his mental image of me leaning over the bed, bare, as he leaves his handprints all over. Marking my body with his hand. Making sure everyone knows that I belong to him.

I shudder and glare at him, throwing him an image of himself fucking tied up and exposed to me. Legs spread, so his hole is always open and available. He's restrained, immobile, and begging for me to fuck him until he comes screaming my name.

"Sick fuck," he mutters, but he also can't hide how hard he is.

I smirk and lean against the hood of his car with him while we wait for Simon. He leans into me as I pull my phone up and tap the button for the vibrating butt plug. I know the second it turns on because Sage starts trying to hump something. His muffled cries fill my ears and I groan.

"You're going to be jerking off under the table, aren't you?" Declan asks, shifting to adjust himself.

Grunting, I think he's probably not far off. I'm pleased to know he will be too.

"You're not really going to leave him like this, are you?"

"No," I say as I watch Sage squirm and whine while I play with the intensity of the vibration in his ass. "Let's go order while we wait for Simon."

Simon pulls in a second after we leave the cafe, having placed our order, and approaches. We pull him into our arms and hug him fiercely. When he steps back, his gaze locks on the earbud and he raises a brow. “What’s with that?”

“He’s torturing his boyfriend,” Declan says.

I nod. “It’s true. And I’m enjoying every moment of it.”

Simon laughs and shakes his head. “Kinky motherfuckers.”

“What did I do?” Declan asks as we head back to the café.

“Right now? Nothing, I suppose, but you did tell me you like to whip *your* boyfriend.”

“Did I actually *say* I use a whip?” Declan asks, sniffing dramatically.

“I looked up impact play.” He levels Declan with a look. “That’s exactly something you’d do.”

Declan huffs, but he doesn’t argue. Which is good because I recall, *specifically*, a moment not long ago where he did just that with Zarek.

It’s not long before we gather our hot subs and then head back to Sage’s house. As soon as we’re inside, I move back to Sage’s bedroom. His face is streaked with tears, eyes shut tightly. He’s so damn beautiful.

Very gently, I touch his shoulder. He doesn’t respond. So I lean down and ask him if he’s okay. He gives me a moan in response, and I kiss his temple. “I love you. I’ll be in the kitchen, Najee. Watching and listening. It’s okay if you need to stop.”

Sage shakes his head, saying something around the gag, though I’m not entirely sure what. He’s not in distress, though I’m regretting the gag right now. I can’t hear his words. But he was excited about that part, so I don’t take it off him. I’ll just have to watch him closely.

I shut the door quietly behind me and I join the others at seats around Sage’s kitchen island, sitting far too close to Simon, squishing him between us. He sighs in contentment.

For a minute, we sit quietly and listen to the dull sounds of kids playing outside and the sounds of cars driving by. I absently press the on and off buttons on the devices via my phone and listen to Sage go wild for several seconds before turning them off.

Pretty sure my dick is leaking enough that I'm going to have a wet spot on my pants by the time we've finished lunch.

"Serves you right."

Yep. And so will you.

He grumbles internally, and I smirk.

"So... how's it going with Zarek?" Simon asks.

The feeling of deflation fills me and my heart stutters a little. Fuck, I hate how my brother hurts.

Zarek approached him two days ago while Declan was shooting hoops on campus. There was a tentative reconciliation. But Zarek still feels distant. They spent the evening together Friday night and then most of Saturday, Simon insisting that he do so and giving up his night with us for now. He'll be heading to Zarek's house after lunch today.

However, it feels as though Zarek isn't willing to let himself get as close as he once was trying to get. There's a lot of hesitation. There's some physical distance. Even though he tries to be open about wanting to be together, everything about him screams that he's really not sure if this is what he wants.

"I don't know," Declan says, his tone low as he stares at the table. He sighs. "I don't know what to do right now."

"Are you sure you won't let me talk to him?" Simon asks.

The half smile that Declan aims at the table isn't really a smile at all. He reaches for Simon's hand and gives it a squeeze. "It's fine. I'm an adult, right? I can figure this out."

"I'm pretty sure you once told me that it's okay to ask for help," he pauses. "Or something like that."

Declan looks up, amused. "That's because we want to take care of you. We would still rather you stay home and just be

our househusband in nothing but your underwear every day.”

I nod in agreement. Yep, I’d definitely like that.

Glancing at the screen, I hit the button for Sage’s butt plug and leave it on until his dick is leaking profusely. When I switch it off, I hit the balloon on his cock thingy—I really ought to look up the name for it again—and squeeze him until he’s sobbing. Jesus, seeing his dick all red and angry, hard as fuck, is one of the sexiest things I’ve ever seen.

When I look up, Simon’s watching me with his usual amused smile. “You really are torturing him, aren’t you?”

Smirking, I shrug. “Don’t worry; I’m torturing myself too. I can’t remember the last time I’ve been this hard.”

He laughs and shakes his head. At Declan’s scowl, Simon laughs again.

“I really think you should let me talk to Zarek,” Simon says after we’ve eaten a couple bites while the distant sounds that Sage makes calm. “Sage is doing better around me. Isn’t he?”

The question is directed at me, and I nod. “I think there’s always going to be a bit of jealousy, but as long as I keep reminding him we have a different relationship than what’s between me and him, I think he’ll be fine. As much as he doesn’t want to see anything intimate between us, it’s important that he does. He feels a lot better since Wednesday when we all slept together. I don’t know that he actually understands, but his empathy for you runs deep.”

Simon sighs. “He’s really sweet.”

I nod, a fond smile on my lips as I absently tap the side of my phone. “He is. I’ll be right back.” I receive twin smirks, which says a lot about how much time Simon spends with us that he can match our expressions.

Ignoring them, I peek in on Sage and make sure he’s okay. Keeping my voice low, I ask him again if he’s alright. He reassures me though I’m not sure he thinks I’m actually here.

Like I could stay away when he’s like this.

I return and take a seat next to Simon again as I stare back at my phone while I pick at my sub. I'm starving and I really need the carbs to fuck him as hard as I plan to in a bit. But being out here is hard when I know he's ready for me. Weak for me. For me! He did this for me!

Well, he clearly likes it, too.

Simon's hand on mine makes me look at him. "I'm really glad you found him, Damon. He's exactly right for you."

"Yeah?"

"Not just your physical preference, but you love someone slightly broken so you can make them whole again. You really love to build someone up."

"I do?" I ask, surprised by this interpretation of my personality.

He laughs. "You do. As twiny as you two are, there's a very distinct difference in your personalities. You're the nurturer. The true caregiver. Declan encourages creativity and boldness. He's ready to support anything wild and unhinged and you're there to make sure there's a cushion to fall on should things get a little rough. Your professions are a direct reflection of that, despite you having the same degree."

"Explain," Declan says.

"You deal with sports teams. The guidelines and expectations are already set, but you're there to encourage the players, push them, and give them what they need to reach whatever lofty goals they have. Damon is usually the one setting expectations for us, so you needed a place to do that for you in his absence. And Damon, as a personal trainer, does exactly what he's best at; setting someone up for success by giving them all the tools, then properly training them how to execute the plans."

"Huh," I say. Now that he's put that shit into words, I can definitely see that's how we fall. When I meet my brother's eyes, it's like we're seeing each other as individuals for the first time.

“I’m not sure I like being separate beings,” Declan huffs with a pouty frown.

Again, Simon laughs. “You’re never going to be true individuals because you have no desire to be. But I’m glad you allowed yourselves and each other to follow your own dreams instead of one of you taking on the other’s as a means to stay together 24/7.”

I’d like to pretend that’s not something we’d do, but we’ve done more drastic things to stay together.

“Why did we do that? Why didn’t we choose to stay together, knowing how much it sucks to be apart?”

Because we’re never really apart. That’s why you’re sharing my erection right now.

“Fucker.”

Thirty-Two

SAGE



I HAVE NEVER BEEN in so much pain in my life. Every single muscle aches from the strain of trying to get some friction on my cock. There's no pattern, no rhyme or reason to when Damon turns on the butt plug or the dick thing. Sometimes it's low, just barely there, but enough to make me whine.

Other times it's so intense that I think I'm about to come. I try desperately to jerk my hips so my dick can find something. Even if it's just air friction. But I can't move. I literally cannot move an inch. I'm so thoroughly tied up that I can't even shift my arms enough to roll.

All I can do is scream into the gag as I beg in my head. Fuck, the entire thing hurts. Especially when he adds the vibration around my balls and dick. I get so close. *So close*. And then it's all taken away.

The frantic need in me leads me to tears every time the orgasm is right there, ready to spill over, and then everything is taken away. I clench my ass around the plug, over and over. But I swear, he knows what I'm doing and then strangles my dick with the thing around it, making me practically sob in frustration.

I'm breathless, made even more so every time the vibration turns on. With the gag in my mouth, I feel like I can never truly take a deep enough breath. For some reason, this just heightens everything. Every feeling. Every denial. Every muscle in my body is distraught at being held so completely still.

I don't know that I've ever been forced to stay this still for this long in my entire life. The pediatricians wanted to diagnose me with hyperactive ADHD, but my mother refused to let them. Even if I was a poster child for it. Never sitting still. My mind is unable to keep a single train of thought.

But having a diagnosis of any kind meant that I wasn't a perfect son. God for-fucking-bid that I was anything other than what she wanted me to be.

Because of that, I was always moving. Always trying to expend the well of pent up energy. Being forced to remain perfectly still, the ability to move being taken away from me, is both a relief and stupidly maddening.

The frustration in it only adds to my current mental and physical fatigue right now.

My face and neck are covered in drool and tears. Although I refuse to think it, probably snot, too. But that's gross, so I'm just going to say saliva and tears.

The butt plug suddenly turns on again and I cry out as I try to wrench my body into thrusting. The ropes, though smooth and gentle on my skin, don't chafe but hold me unforgivingly. I can feel the vibration through my entire body as it presses on my bundle of nerves unrelentingly.

My screams fill my head as I try to beg and plead around the ball in my mouth. Tears stream as my dick throbs. Fuck it hurts. My dick hurts so bad with the need to be touched. There's not even a rope around it. Nothing but the stationary thing at my base.

I'm so close. So very close. My cock tingles. The base of my spine tingles. My balls are so tight. It's right there. I'm a breath away. Another second.

The sudden grip on my dick and balls has me screaming again. I sob and whine and go lax on the bed. No. No, no, no. I need to get off.

It hurts so bad.

I'm so lost in this haze that I've forgotten that Damon is watching and listening to me, even though sometimes I

imagine hearing his voice, asking me if I'm okay. Sometimes, I even feel his phantom touch. I've forgotten that I'm actually conscious. Hell, I think I forgot that I'm alive. Everything in me hurts. Even the pleasure that pulses through my body hurts. Little bursts of *good* that end in thorns.

I'm not even aware when there's movement on the bed. I swear I can hear Damon's voice, but I'm pretty sure I'm delirious. That I just *want* to hear it. If he can hear me through the tablet, then surely it works both ways, right? That would explain why I hear his voice sometimes.

The grip around my dick comes back and I sob, whining and begging with tears coating my face with the refusal to come. Especially since the pressure in my ass has changed. It burns and stretches and feels so fucking good.

I need to come. I need to come. I need to come.

Not that the words can form, but I repeat them over and over until they're the only words I know. The only thought. My chant matches the beat to the hard, rhythmic penetration in my ass, robbing me of my breath as it shoves pleasure so forcefully through me that I can't see straight.

It directly contrasts with the tight grip around my dick, refusing my orgasm.

Then I'm floating, my heart pounding so forcefully that my chest hurts. I can't breathe. I can't think. My skin is so sensitive that if my dick wasn't being choked so fiercely that I think it might fall off, I'd probably come with just a touch.

And then the blissful words ring loudly in my ear. "Come for me, Najee."

There's no more pressure on my dick. Just a soft, calloused hand gently stroking me.

My orgasm has been held at bay for so long that it slams into me with force. I'm caught completely suspended as it crashes over me. As much as it feels good, it hurts like nothing I've ever felt. I cry with relief, with pleasure, but it's so intense that I pass the fuck out before it finishes rocketing through my body.



WHEN I OPEN my eyes again, I'm disoriented. Everything in me aches, even as soft, calloused hands touch me, digging into my sore muscles.

I catch my breath and the movement stops.

"Hey," Damon says, his body suddenly blanketing my back. I can't stop the stupid smile that spreads over me. "Welcome back, my love."

Those words from his lips directed at me! Tears sting my eyes because I can't believe this is real. I'm really with this man. He's mine. He wants me.

"Hi," I say, voice hoarse and scratchy. "When did you get back?"

He chuckles. "Honey, I was gone barely twenty minutes, but I left you alone until we were both ready. Then I fucked you until you passed out. You still have my cum dripping from your pretty, abused hole."

My cheeks redden. "I do?"

"Yes, Najee. Honestly, I keep trumping the last thing I thought was the hottest sight. I thought coming in here with you delirious and ready for me was the best thing I've ever seen. But now I think that having you spread under me and limp while I rub you down and you're still leaking my seed might just be the hottest thing I've ever seen."

"You've only seen me like this, right?" I don't know what makes me ask. Because I know he's never been with anyone more than once, I'm sure I am the only one. But it's my insecurity talking. I wonder if he's ever tied up Simon. I wonder if he's ever seen Simon like this.

I momentarily forgot everything about Simon until that image flashes in my head, making my stomach lurch.

“Yeah, my Najee. Just you.” He presses his lips to my ear. “Only you like this. This is just ours, Sage. We won’t be sharing this with anyone, ever.”

My heart soars and emotion gets lodged in my throat. “What about Declan?” I ask, breathless.

He chuckles, laying his body flat on mine. I groan at the feel of his cock between my ass cheeks. His hands are still rubbing me, now focusing on my arms where they’re stretched above my head. “I’m only going to be allowed to tie him up if I let him spank me.”

My dick gives a sudden lurch and I jerk under him.

“You like that, huh?”

With cheeks bright red, I nod. “Yes. I don’t know that there’s anything I wouldn’t like to see between you two.”

His hands pause for a second, then they’re moving again as he chuckles. “You dirty boys,” he mutters and then bites my ear. I groan and squirm under him. I’m not sure who he’s referring to as ‘dirty boys’ outside of me, but I don’t even care right now.

“Want to try something new?” he asks.

I honestly don’t know how I can possibly be horny again. But the tone in his voice makes my blood run south as I nod. “Yes, but I really don’t think I have it in me to be tortured again, Damon. My balls still hurt.”

He chuckles. “No, sweet Najee,” he murmurs, his voice so soft. “No restraints this time. Let me just hold you. You can come as often as you want to. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Hold me?”

“Mm. While I make love to your perfect ass.”

The air leaves my lungs and I’m a big stupid sap for the way tears sting my eyes. I shift under him so I can try to see his face. He’s too close to see clearly, but he’s smiling. A pretty, perfect smile that I’ve never seen before.

“You want to m-make love to me?” I whisper.

Damon sighs and he slides his hand between us so he can maneuver his hard cock into my weeping hole. I groan as he slides in, moving my entire body to try to make him hurry up. I need him deeper; to feel him everywhere.

“So squirmy,” he murmurs. The hand he used to move his cock in place wraps under my chest; the other moves further up my arm until he can twist our fingers together and hold my hand. His lips press softly to my skin, all over my shoulder and the back of my neck as he gently, so maddeningly slowly, works his way deeper into my ass.

I’m surprised to feel that I’m sore. Is that from the butt plug or did he actually fuck me that hard while I was begging for release? Giving me what he promised he would when he got home?

Burying my face into the comforter, I moan and spread my legs for him. A dull ache moves through my body as he slides home. Damon stills, buried as deep as he can get.

“I will make love to you every single day for the rest of our lives,” he murmurs. “I love you, Sage Rossi. So fucking much there aren’t words enough to tell you. I promise that I’ll make sure you never doubt my love for you. I’ll never give you any reason to question my love, my support. I’ll make sure you know that you’re fucking perfect, just the way you are.”

He moves out of me as tears sting my eyes and then slowly moves in deep. I’m not sure if there’s still enough lube inside me or his cum or what, but there’s little friction. Just the overly slick, slippery feel of him. How he moves so perfectly within me, like he was made for my own specifications to be everything I’ve never dared to dream I wanted.

“You are enough,” he whispers. “You’re always going to be enough. Just as you are.”

That does it. Though I squeeze my eyes shut to try to keep the emotion in, it boils over. I’ve always, always wanted that approval. Needed it. Craved it. I thought I’d wanted it from my mother. But maybe I just needed to be that for someone. By someone who loves me.

Damon kisses me softly as he continues to murmur to me how much he loves me. How perfect I am, just the way I am. He'd never change anything about me.

All the while, he moves within my body in the most intense, intimate way I've ever felt. I don't just hear his love with his words, I feel it in the way he touches me. Holds me. Makes love to me.

This is mine. For the rest of my life.

I think I have loved him since I first saw him. But I just fell in love with him all over again.

Thirty-Three

DAMON



I FINISH WIPING off my feet and stand up, stepping into a jock. When I turn, I find Declan watching me, his eyes intense. There's a whirlwind of shit going on inside him right now; moving so quickly I can barely grasp one thing before he's already overwhelmed with something else.

His hands land on my hips and he's right there. Moving his fingers around the elastic of my jockstrap, tracing around my waist, then dropping his hands to my ass and pulling me close.

Smirking, I let our lips hover. "I feel like it's almost arrogant to tell you that you're hot in nothing but your underwear, since we're identical."

His smile is small, unsure. Our mouths linger close, lips parted. It's like he wants to take that step, but he doesn't want to cross the line.

"It's already crossed."

I take his bottom lip between my teeth and feel his moan throughout my body. "I have no opposition," I say when I let his lip go and instead trace my tongue over it. "But I think we might need to work on what we have right now with Zarek and Sage before we introduce them to something really taboo."

He snorts but nods. When he goes to back away, I pull him close and hug him tightly. "That's not a no," I say quietly. "You understand that, right?"

"Yeah," he says, but I can feel the ache in his chest. So I kiss him. Barely brushing my tongue against his until I can feel his moan race through me again.

“I mean it,” I whisper. “I’m glad you’re done pretending that we’re only going to be together with our guys. Because I am. I don’t want you to think that’s where I’m pushing this to stay.”

“I know,” he says quietly. “You’re right. Whatever future we make, it needs to be the six of us and we need to find a way to make that work or we’re going to lose our damn minds.”

We’re already going to lose our minds having Stommer around more. Only now that I have Sage do I understand how irritating and hurtful it is to try to split my time and attention between Sage and Simon. I don’t want to have to do it apart. I don’t want separate lives.

But that also means I can’t be a fucking hypocrite and ask him to leave Stommer at home.

“For tonight, we’re going to work on the four of us and then get freaky together later.” Declan grins. I kiss him lightly again, chasing his tongue until I barely brush it with mine again. A shudder goes through his body. “But I promise we’ll come back to this.”

“You really think we can make this work? All six of us?” he asks.

“We don’t have a choice. We just have to be on our game. Besides, Simon is rather disarming. I’m pretty sure Sage is half in love with him because he’s a sappy fucker and he sees someone he wants to cuddle all their sadness away. We just need to give Zarek that time, too.”

“So you’re saying that I should let Simon deal with my relationship as he’s been asking to do,” he says, frowning.

I peck his cheek and pull away. “No. I think they’ll find their own time to talk, just as Simon and Sage did when it was the four of us. Let it happen naturally. It will. And yes, I think it’ll help.”

He nods and links our hands together before we step out of the bedroom. “Love you,” he says.

I kiss him again. Just because I can. For whatever reason, he’s feeling very needy tonight. If we didn’t have Sage and

Zarek in the living room, I'd dig through his mind like an archeologist until I uncover exactly what's bothering him so we can get to the bottom of it. Once we fuck our men tonight and they're happily sated and falling asleep, *then* we'll talk.

"Great. Thanks for the warning."

Simon wasn't wrong. I am the caregiver. I meet my brother's eyes. *And I'm going to take care of you, too.*

He might outwardly scowl, but he can't hide the way he fills with warmth. Want. I know that's what he wants from me. I'll always give him what he wants.

Declan rolls his eyes as we leave the bedroom and then we both stop as we stare at the men on our couch. They're very different, those differences emphasized as they sit next to each other, completely naked, on our couch. Because Zarek is a few inches shorter and definitely leaner than we are, that makes him look almost doll-like next to my big guy, Sage.

Sage is filled with defined, hard muscles, where Zarek is soft. He's thin, but there's no definition. Oh, and Zarek's nipples are pierced. Barbells right through them. And his ever present pearl necklace, though this one is a length of chain interspersed with a black, white, and blue pearls.

I can still picture you sucking them.

"Fuck. Shut up, Damon."

One thing they have in common is their long, fat dicks. Angry red heads leaning against their stomachs, straining for attention. Their hands are locked together, grip tight, as they look between us nervously.

I realize that Declan and I are wearing the same jocks. We're truly identical right now. I stare at Sage as he looks between us anxiously until he realizes that I'm staring at him. As if he can read my thoughts, I think, *I'll never let you be confused about who I am, Najee.*

Obviously he can't hear me, but when I smile and bow my head a little, he knows it's me. He smiles, and it's radiant. Shining across his face. Already getting a bit fidgety. My perfect puppy.

Keeping my brother's hand in mine, I move toward them, and we fall to our knees in front of our men. Did we plan to choke on them before dinner? Absolutely. Releasing each other's hands, we concentrate on our men separately for a second.

I kiss up Sage's amazing chest and suck on his neck. He moans as I leave a bruise behind. It's nothing like all the bruises covering Zarek's body. He looks like he's been beaten half the time. I guess that's a sign that their sex life is strong.

"Seriously, shut up."

I chuckle internally and kiss Sage. He clings to me with the hand not holding Zarek's. His fingers tangle tightly in my hair. "Okay?" I whisper.

He nods.

"Gonna let me suck your big dick?"

The heat that covers his cheeks has me licking his face. "Yes. Can I come?"

Declan snorts and I feel him shaking his head.

"Yeah. For tonight, you can come whenever you want to."

He beams at me. "I don't mind not coming. I just like to know what you want."

I kiss him again. Deeply. Until he's moaning and squirming against me. Fuck, I love this man. Simon's right. He's exactly everything I need. Everything I want.

I drop to his cock as Zarek curses. Declan got the memo, too, and swallowed Zarek down, wasting no time in taking him in.

There's just something we love about this. We've never analyzed why we love to suck dick when we strictly like to be in control. Up until Sage, choking on a fat cock was my favorite way to get off. Penetrative sex was nice and all, but finding a guy bigger than me that wants to bottom isn't the easiest feat. It wasn't always possible.

Declan's preference was easier to come by. I've fucked more of his type than mine because they were easier to get what we wanted from them. Pretty boy twink who just want their hole abused.

In the end, my choice was sucking dick. I still don't get tired of it.

Licking the tip of Sage's cock, I drop my hand to my brother's thigh and hear him hum in acknowledgment. I tease Sage until he's basically bouncing in front of me, whining and groaning.

"Kiss," I demand right before I take him into my throat. Looking up, I see that our men are doing just what I said. Kissing. Sloppily but thoroughly. There's a moment where I wonder how Simon will fit into this. He doesn't like sex so... where will he be when we do this?

Declan takes my hand and pulls it up. He licks my fingers, coating them in his spit, before pushing them toward Zarek's ass. He has one of Zarek's legs over his shoulder, leaving his hole wide open.

Wasting no time, I push two of my fingers into him. Given the way my brother likes to brutalize him, I have no doubt he won't be satisfied with one.

I'm rewarded when his hips jerk and he moans loudly. Declan shivers as he pushes Zarek closer to Sage, pressing his leg to mine, and then reaching up to finger fuck my man as I am his. That's how we bring our guys to orgasm. Listening to them kiss and moan, feeling how hard they are and loving the way we're making them feel. Choking on their fat heads and swallowing until they spurt down our throats.

I suck Sage down, swallowing all but the last bit, leaving some of it dribbling down his dick. These moments are when I'm appreciative that me and Declan don't have to speak to communicate or there'd be cum everywhere.

His hand mirrors mine when I reach to swipe the come that's leaking from Zarek's cock with my fingers as Declan does the same to Sage's. We bring our fingers back to our

mouths and suck our twin's lover's release from them while staring into each other's eyes, listening to how much they enjoy seeing it. Zarek is still rocking on my fingers when I look at his face, and Sage is doing the same to Declan's as he faces him, too.

It's now, now that our men have been satisfied while we're still touching them that we let our own orgasms go. Filling our underwear as we lick at our guys' cocks again to make sure we get every last drop.

I shudder and sit up. We blink at each other, the hot pleasure still cooling as it slowly zings through me.

We remove our fingers from the shared partners' holes.

"It's so hot," Sage groans. I chuckle and kiss him deeply, letting him taste himself and Zarek on me. There's a knock then and I get to my feet, handing Sage his own jock. I help him into it, picking up his feet and sliding them through the holes before pulling him up and bringing the jock with me.

I arrange his half hard cock just so and then smile at him. He's swaying a little. Kind of all swoony with his eyes half closed and a dopey smile on his lips.

My jock is filled with cum, nearly transparent because it's soaked. Making sure anyone who looks will see exactly what I'm packing. Since I'm not quite soft yet, it's a bit of a peek.

"You can't think I'm going to wear that," Zarek says, and I pause to see the skimpy thong Dec's holding up for Zarek. There's a trunk pocket in the front, letting me know it's indeed made for a man, but you'd not know that otherwise.

"If you don't, the delivery guy is going to see your junk," Declan says, shrugging.

Another knock, louder this time, and I move to the door. Zarek scrambles up, his cheeks fire engine red, and he quickly slips it on. I get just enough of a glimpse to see that really, he shouldn't have bothered. Not only is he far too big for it, but it's lace. Like, completely transparent. He's frowning severely at Declan, who just beams at him.

I throw open the door and the man stares with wide eyes. Eyes that dart over me on their own before he practically thrusts the paper bag into my arms and runs back down the hall.

“Thanks,” I call after him and shut the door. Turning to the others, I frown. “Guess I’m not as hot as I think I am.”

“You definitely are,” Sage says, nodding emphatically.

I chuckle and bring the food to the table.

“I’m not eating in this,” Zarek says, making a face. “The only thing I like between my ass cheeks is your cock.”

“His tongue?” Sage asks.

Zarek shrugs. “Yep, that too. And your fingers. *Not* a piece of itchy string.”

“You’re so hot in it,” Declan says, pulling him to his chest. “Please?”

I smirk. They’re not quite back to where they were yet. Not to the level of comfort that they shared before the club with Simon. I can almost physically feel the way Zarek pulls away at times. As if he’s reminding himself that he can’t fall for this man who has baggage in the shape of another man.

But I don’t feel like he knows he does so sometimes. Like he *wants* to let himself go, but there’s muscle memory there reminding him unconsciously that this man loves someone else and that he’s going to remember what it feels like to experience that again.

“If you want me to wear this, you wear one too,” Zarek says, scowling.

Declan grins. He kisses Zarek breathless before dropping his mouth to suck on the barbell going through his right nipple. Zarek grunts, tangling his fingers in Declan’s hair and pushing him away. “Go change into a lace thong.”

My brother grins and heads to our room. I can only imagine what he’s going to come out wearing. We have the whole gambit for underwear. It’s the one drawer Simon never

got into. He is strictly a boxer brief guy. No amount of bribing or begging would get him into a jock for us.

What Declan comes out in, he's basically spilling out of. A black strap circles his waist and down through his crack. The little cup? Emphasis on little. The fabric crosses over from under his balls (which basically hang out) and does nothing to hide his dick, which the head is peeking out through the little hole where the two pieces cross, intentionally leaving it open.

Zarek stares. Sage stares, eyes wide.

“Better?” Declan asks.

Zarek doesn't answer as he cups his cock. “You'd never know I just got off,” he mutters and turns his back on Declan.

Smirking, my brother holds out another pair of underwear for me, which I'm grateful for since my cum is drying uncomfortably in these. At first look, they appear to just be skimpy men's underwear. But once I arrange my dick, you see that the front hole is completely wide open. Letting me spill out as if I'm not wearing any underwear at all.

Sage's intent stare is hot enough to make my skin heat all over. But Zarek raises a brow. “Okay, honestly. What's the point of those?”

Declan nods in Sage's direction. “That right there.”

Sage is completely oblivious as he stares. I pull him against me and kiss him. “Like what you see, Najee?”

He shivers and nods.

“Ready to eat?” I ask. He grunts but doesn't answer as we fall to the floor around the table.

We eat in silence for a while. No sounds but our quiet chewing. But Sage isn't one to sit in silence for long. He looks up at Zarek. “You said you're an actuary? What does that mean?”

“In short, I use mathematics to assess the level of risk and uncertainty in any given business scenario. I basically develop solutions for complex financial issues,” he says. “But I haven't been a full-time actuary in a while. I like to teach math, so I

just do that on the side. For the university sometimes, but also for some big businesses that I've established relations with in the past."

Sage stares at him for a long time. "That's impressive. Very important."

I can tell by the tone of his voice how he's feeling. And I know that's a result of the way his mother made him feel about his career choice. Like he's stupid and all he can handle is using his muscles instead of his brain.

But this man has a bachelor's degree in exercise science. Having just received mine, I know what's entailed and I *know* that he's not stupid.

I bring his face to mine by a fistful of his hair. "You're not any less intelligent, Sage."

"I suck at math," he mutters.

"I clearly suck at getting in shape," Zarek says, shrugging. "We each have our strengths."

Sage bites his bottom lip, but I take it from him to chew on. He shivers until I let it go. "I mean it. You're no less intelligent. How many anatomy classes did you take? How many chemistry classes?"

"I really sucked at those too," Zarek mutters.

I appreciate what he's doing.

"Sweet puppy, you use the knowledge you have of the human body—which is riddled with complex chemical reactions— every single day. You change that shit up depending on the body type and their individual needs. You're able to think quickly about how to do that. I've seen you do it on the spot when you're helping one of the other trainers." I force his eyes to mine. "You're fucking smart, Sage. Don't you dare listen to anyone who tells you otherwise."

It's clear that he doesn't quite believe me, but the grateful smile he gives me and the little nod tells me he'll let it go. We finish eating with quiet conversation about our jobs, and Zarek asks Sage a lot of questions. At first, Sage is aware of what

he's doing and tries to brush it off. "You don't have to ask about it." But Zarek persists, always following up with a different, complex question about the human body, energy, and a particular muscle group.

Sage is obviously in his element. By the time we're finished, Sage is grinning and bouncing again, excited to talk about it. He loves what he does. That's incredibly clear.

He gathers our trash as Declan and I arrange our couch section so that it's two cushions deep and resembling a bed. Before Sage gets back from cleaning up, I pull Zarek to me and hug him fiercely. "Thank you."

He looks up at me with a sweet fucking smile. "I really am impressed," he says. "That's not a lie. I don't understand half of what he explained to me."

I kiss him quickly and let him go. "I could tell. But I appreciate that you understood what he needed."

"He's been hurt," Zarek says, nodding. "I get that. What he's been led to believe about himself is obviously a lie. He's a very intelligent man."

"He really is."

Our conversation stops as Sage returns and the four of us gather on the couch with a movie on. Sage's hands wander over me, but he's hesitant. He stalls before he moves down my stomach and looks at me with wide eyes. "Can I touch you?" he whispers.

"This body is yours," I assure him. "You can touch me whenever you want."

"I can?" his eyes are wide, filled with amazement. This fucking man, I swear!

"Yeah, Sage." Kissing him for a long minute and letting him feel how much I mean those words, I let him go. "Touch me wherever you want to."

"I've been dying to touch you," he murmurs, but he doesn't hear anything I say after that as he spends the next few hours while we watch the movie just touching me. Tracing

muscles and the shape of me. Tasting every inch of my skin. Memorizing me as if I'm the only thing in the world that he sees.

I'm not going to lie, being his sole focus is a high. A trip. He has me hard the entire time and while he constantly returns to my dick to learn everything about that, he never spends much time there. Like he might miss somewhere else.

The way he touches me has everything inside me all warm and cozy; the only words that I can think are filled with awe. *This man is mine. How did I make this man mine?*

Thirty-Four

SAGE



THIS MORNING WAS REALLY, really good. We spent the night together, Damon, Declan, Zarek, and I. Then me and Zarek went out for breakfast, just the two of us. I love spending time with him. He's so smart and I love his sass. He's pretty to look at too.

I also like that there's someone else in this with me. Someone who feels the same way I do about Simon and the twins' relationship with him. The fact that they never call it a friendship and refer to it as a relationship says a lot, as far as I'm concerned.

In the last month, Simon's been around more often. Most of the time with Quin, but sometimes not. The twins are definitely more at ease without Quin, but I think Zarek and I feel better when he's there too. Simon isn't oblivious to it, but because Declan and Damon are polite, he doesn't say anything.

Simon doesn't talk about himself a lot. He'll talk about his job and he talks about their friend Vulcan. He talks a lot about Quin's job. It's obvious how proud he is of Quin. They also talk about the new not-for-profit LGBT+ organization that Quin's father began. That's the one and only conversation the twins actually get in on. From what I can tell, they've spent a lot of time at pride parades and got involved in several LGBT groups since they were teenagers. And always dragged Simon along with them.

Zarek is more comfortable around Simon now. I think he actually really likes Simon as a person, which leaves him

warring inside because his jealousy is evident when Declan touches Simon at all.

And really, the twins have a hard time *not* touching Simon. I'm not sure they realize how often they do. It's like they do it subconsciously.

I remind myself that this is exactly how they've always been. Since they were kids. It originated because Simon lost both his parents and the twins wanted to make sure he knew he was still loved and wanted.

That helps. But I'm not sure Zarek knows all that. I want to tell him because I think it'll help him understand better but it's not my story to tell. I'm not sure if I'm allowed to and I don't want to break the new friendship between me and Simon.

Maybe I should encourage Declan to tell him, though.

When we're done with breakfast, we head to the market and do some grocery shopping for the week. It's been fun being in this big relationship. We kind of rotate through our houses now. Sometimes at Declan and Damon's, sometimes mine, and recently we've been visiting Zarek's too. I love that we have several homes.

It means that we buy four times as much of a meal, but we also split those meals between us. Then there are nights where I'm not with them at all. When Simon's home and they do their thing. Honestly, I do everything I can *not* to think about them together. It's me mentally telling myself that Simon is asexual. Simon has a boyfriend who trusts them together. Alone and naked and washing each other.

I spend those nights with Jordan and River to get baby snuggles. It's not newborn snuggles anymore since Sparrow is a few months old now. Fourteen weeks, I think? The more time I spend holding and playing with their baby, I find that I crave one as well. I didn't think I would, but for some reason, I really do. I want a baby with Damon. How do we make that happen?

After moseying along the market and just spending time together, Zarek and I go our separate ways. Because I have fresh produce and meat that needs to be put away, I don't dally on my way home. When it takes me a few trips from my car, I realize maybe I enjoyed shopping a little too much today.

I'm just unloading everything onto the island and folding the last bag when I hear my front door open. I still, my heart racing, as I silently beg whatever might be out there that it's Damon.

Please be Damon. Please be Damon. Please. Please.

“Honey?”

Everything inside me turns cold. I can literally feel my blood draining as dread settles over me. I should have locked my door. If my hands weren't so full, I would have.

She comes around the corner and smiles, but I'm already tense because I know that smile is a lie. She's not actually happy to see me. It's a matter of seconds—not minutes, but seconds—before she finds something that isn't good enough for her.

Behind her is Sammy. She looks small next to my mother and kind of sunk in on herself as she looks at me with big, pleading eyes. I turn away because I really don't want to look at her. I don't want to feel sorry for how much she unwittingly got wrapped up in this mess. She showed up to my work. That's all I need to remind myself that she's no longer an innocent party.

“Honey, you're home!” my mother says, still smiling as she looks over all my groceries laid out. I'm surprised when she has nothing to say. It's all healthy. Even the lean cuts of meat that I have wrapped in paper from the butcher. “You've obviously been super busy since you haven't been taking my calls. Do you have a new girlfriend you're hiding?”

I scowl at her and turn away as my shaking hands fumble with my phone. “I don't have a girlfriend and I never will,” I mutter as I manage to turn on my phone and send a plea to Jordan. He's close. And it's Sunday, so I think they're home.

She sighs in exasperation. “You’re still on this? This... this *gay* thing? Oh, honey, you need to get over that and get back together with Sammy.”

“I haven’t canceled the flowers yet,” Sammy says, her voice quiet. “We can still get married in the summer.”

My stomach churns. “I’m not marrying you,” I bite out and then remind myself that she’s not really to blame for all this. She’s not, despite showing up at my work.

“Look at me, Sage,” my mother says and as if I’m still that eight-year-old desperately seeking his mother’s love and approval, I turn to face her. “It’s time you become a respectable adult. Enough of this disgusting behavior.”

Pressing my lips together, I stare at her without seeing as she continues to tell me how much of a disappointment I am. How she’s done everything to make sure I have the perfect life and I repay her by choosing men over a nice girl like Sammy. I need to stop rebelling. I need to stop punishing her for not buying me the skateboard I wanted when I was twelve by pretending to like boys.

“What could you possibly do with a man, Sage? You can’t have a child with a man! What kind of family do you think you can have? What will your neighbors think?”

On and on until I can barely breathe, and can’t even see her through the darkness in my vision. I’m never good enough for her. I’m never going to be someone she loves. Someone she’s proud of. Tears sting my eyes and I spend the next several breaths trying to drown out her voice and the way it grates on every last bit of strength I have in me.

Digging her claws in and pulling away strands, one at a time. Weakening me. Making me into the nothing she says I am.

But I won’t cry. I refuse to cry. That’s why I focus on breathing through my mouth and forcing my tears away. Even through her hurtful words. Through the way her voice turns colder and nastier.

I don't hear the door open, but suddenly Damon's there, his hands on either side of my face. "Look at me, Najee. Take a breath. There you go. Just breathe."

My mother is still there. Now her voice is a shriek as she's demanding Damon to stop touching her perfect son. He's contaminating me. I'm easily impressionable, confused, and he's only further instilling that being with a man is okay. Men shouldn't touch.

"Just you and me here," Damon says, his soft voice overriding all the gross words my mother doesn't stop saying. His hands go to my hips and he picks me up, placing my ass on the counter. Stepping aside, he opens my fridge and takes out a sports drink. Uncapping it, he hands it to me.

"Drink, Sage," he whispers, moving between my legs and pulling me close, something my mother doesn't miss and her voice turns shrill. When my eyes dart over his shoulder, he pulls my face back around. "Just look at me. Only you and me right now. You're okay. I'm right here."

A tear slips past my resolve and travels down my cheek. He catches it, wiping it away. I drink until it's gone, wishing it was stronger. Do I even have alcohol in the house?

Taking a shuddering breath, the room comes into focus again.

"There you are," he says, smiling. He brushes my lips with his finger. "You okay?"

My mother hasn't stopped yet, but I nod. In the corner of my eye, I see movement and turn my head to find Jordan getting closer. River remains by the entrance with Sparrow in their arms. I smile a little at Jordan.

Damon doesn't say anything to Jordan, though he gives him a once over. I don't have time to introduce them and explain that Jordan is my friend before Damon turns his back on me and stares down my mother.

I've never seen my mother rendered speechless, but her mouth snaps shut as her eyes turn wide. I'm so startled that I look at Jordan with my own wide eyes. He smirks, leans

against the counter until his hip touches my knee so I know he's there and can feel his support, and watches with his arms folded over his chest.

Heavy silence hangs around us. Not even Sparrow makes a sound as he watches us all.

“Get out,” Damon says. Growls. I can feel that tone reverberate throughout the entire room.

My mother sputters. “You cannot kick me out of my own son's home. *You* should leave. You're dirty and—”

“Get out!” Damon barks, making my mother jump and Sammy stumble several steps back. “Get the fuck out right now. Don't pretend you give a shit about your son and how he feels. You've done nothing, *nothing*, his entire life but make him feel like shit. And you continue to do that, despite him being a grown ass adult. Get the fuck out of his house. Now. Or I will have you arrested and charged for harassment, you sorry, pathetic, bigoted ass.”

“You can't—”

“OUT!” Damon shouts, taking several steps toward her. I can feel the storm he is, and I shiver.

My mother backs up without realizing she does so. Her eyes move between him and me. With my breath held, I wait for her next words.

“You will run back to Sammy when you realize he can't satisfy you,” my mother says and I flinch. Ew. Parents should not say that kind of thing.

“I already do satisfy him,” Damon says. “Far more than a woman is capable of. You have thirty seconds to leave before I call the cops.” He takes out his phone and pulls up the number.

My mother looks like he hit her. Like she swallowed a lemon and is going to be sick. But over all that, I see her fury.

She leaves without another word, her head high as if she won whatever battle just happened. I watch her freeze in front of River and stare. They're wearing a snug dress that clings to their small, thin frame and outlines every line of their body.

It's tight enough around their ass that you can even see the elastic around their waist and ass cheek of their jock. I'm not even going to comment on how that looks in the front.

"Careful," Jordan says, his voice low and threatening. "Don't think I'm above smacking you. I have a room full of witnesses that will corroborate any story I come up with to justify punching a bitch for any nasty little thing that comes out of your mouth concerning my spouse or child."

My mother visibly shudders as she hurries for the door. River follows and I hear the lock snap in place. They come back into the room and then silence follows. The seconds tick by. One. Two. Three. We wait to see what my mother will do next.

But she drives away.

Damon turns to me and wraps his arms around me. The noise I make is a sob, but I still refuse to let those tears fall. My mother was full steam today. In the short time she was here, she never stopped stabbing me with anything she could think of. Years of unloading. I feel raw and open as he pulls me into his chest.

I slip off the counter, my body wrapped around his. Somehow, he manages to hold my heavy ass without shaking while I cling to him. "It's alright. Everything's all right. I have you. You're all right," he murmurs until I stop trembling.

When I finally catch my breath, I let my legs fall and stand. "Thanks," I say. "For making her leave."

He brushes my hair from my face; the look of concern he shows me makes my chest feel tight. No one has ever looked at me that way. It reminds me of...

I glance at Jordan. He's still where he was while my mother was here. Now he's watching me with a smile. Smug but happy.

"This is Jordan," I say. "And River holding Sparrow."

Damon examines my face for another minute before giving his attention to the others. When his eyes land on Sparrow, he

raises a brow. “You call him a newborn, but I think he’s solidly out of that age, Sage.”

Jordan chuckles. “Fourteen weeks tomorrow,” he says proudly.

I smile for a second because I was right about his age. Go me!

“Thanks for coming to my rescue,” I tell him.

Jordan shrugs. “Always. But I enjoyed just sitting back and watching your man have the privilege of telling your mother off.”

His words make me remember that woman and I shrink again. “I need to leave here. To sell this house and change my name so she can’t find me. I need to—”

“Woah, woah. Take a breath,” Damon says.

“I don’t want to see her again,” I say.

“We’ve suggested a restraining order,” River says.

Damon nods, glancing at River. He grins. “I really love that dress. The color matches your eyes.”

River grins. “Thanks. It matches Sage’s too.”

That makes Damon’s gaze move back to mine and I see the glint in them, which already has my face heating. “I’m not wearing a dress.”

“Hm,” he answers, but moves away from the dress. “I agree with the restraining order. Why haven’t you done that yet, love?”

He called me love. In front of other people!

“That won’t stop her. I need to disappear from this life. New name. New house. New employer. I just need to leave. I don’t want her to find me again.”

Damon nods. “Come home with me,” he murmurs against my lips. “We’ll talk about it.”

“Yes. Take me away from here.”

“Here,” River says as they cross the room and hand me Sparrow. “Hold him while we pack up your groceries again.” They look at Damon. “Want to pack a bag of clothes for him?”

Damon nods. He kisses my cheek and leaves the room.

When he’s gone, Jordan and River stare at me with wide smiles.

“So... that’s Damon, huh?” Jordan asks.

“He’s hot,” River says, winking at me.

“Especially when he’s telling your mother to go to hell. I know those words never left his mouth, but he fucking said them,” Jordan says.

River stares at him for a minute with a wide grin. “You think he’s hot, baby?”

Jordan rolls his eyes. “Pack the fruit and veggies. Don’t start with me.”

I grin and nuzzle into Sparrow’s hair.

Thirty-Five

SAGE



MY HOUSE HAS BEEN on the market for a week now. The realtor says we're not entertaining offers until the open house next weekend, but there's been almost half a dozen showings each day since I listed it. There's a lot of excitement about it and I'm assured that there will be multiple offers. There might even be a bidding war.

When Damon saw my stress over that, he shook his head. "No bidding war. Tell them all to come with their best offer because there won't be any negotiation."

I sighed in relief.

As for changing my name? Damon says that we will sell my house with my current name. That way, whatever I change it to won't be able to be tied to the sale. At least, not as easily. Although we hadn't talked about it openly until last night, there'd been hinting that I should wait until we get married to change my name. So I don't have to go through all the paperwork with everything all over again.

It made me feel stupidly good to hear that. That he still wants to marry me despite the crazy in my life. Despite me always needing to run from it.

So what changed last night? Well, it seemed that Damon and Declan have been conspiring. I don't know what their end goal is, but last night? We had a sleepover. With all six of us. In their little full-sized bed.

Marriage came up once while he was buried in my ass and holding Simon's hand while his face remained buried in the

comforter as his professor fucked him. I was very concerned, since he was clearly not aroused at all. On their other side, Declan was railing Zarek while also holding Simon's hand.

Damon chose that moment to say something about me being his husband. My head was spinning as he slammed into my prostate for like the millionth time, so I'm not quite sure what he said.

And now, I'm wide awake wondering about it. Trying to recall his words.

"You know," Simon says through a yawn. "This bed is fine for three people, but not six. If we do this again, we should talk about getting a bigger bed."

"I'll agree to a queen," Declan says.

"King," Simon argues. "Six big guys. A queen is not that much bigger than what we already have."

"I agree with Simon," Zarek says. "We'll still be on top of each other in a queen."

"That's why we like small beds; that's the whole point," Declan says. I can hear the frown in his voice.

Simon laughs. A minute later, he extracts himself and slips from the bed. He's a good-looking man with dark, sun-kissed skin and even darker eyes. I have no idea what color they are, even with as close as he was to me last night.

He's not as defined as Damon or Declan, but he's trim, skin taut over muscles that only need a little bit of encouragement.

"I see you checking him out," Damon says in my ear as Simon disappears into the closet. My face heats.

"I was just..."

He chuckles. Quin grins at me as he gets out of bed too. He slips into his underwear and then a pair of sweats before leaving the room entirely.

Simon follows a minute later, and I release a breath.

"He is cute," Zarek says. Begrudgingly?

Damon grins but doesn't say anything. He moves me over, pressing me into Declan's side. Declan shifts to wrap an arm around me and then Zarek's falls across my chest, too. I smile. It feels so good to be like this.

"So, let's talk about selling your house and what comes next," Damon says, pressing his lips to mine.

"Then I find a new one," I say.

"And your name? Your job? How far do you plan to move?" he asks.

I shake my head and close my eyes. "Not sure. I just don't want to be found." Damon blocked her number in my phone. And Sammy's. But we also talked about getting me a new number. Maybe even a new cell phone carrier.

I really just want to disappear.

"Hear me out," he says, pressing his body along mine. I nod as his lips feather kisses over my skin. I feel his hand trail up Zarek's arm before it comes back and tangles in my hair. "Once your house sells, we'll get married. Then you can change your entire name, just once. You move in here with us."

My brows knit together, even as my heart races. "I don't want to take your time with Simon," I say.

He smiles. "Don't worry about that right now. Trust me when I tell you, he doesn't want you anywhere around your mother. And he likes you around. He loves to see you, Sage."

I'm not going to lie. Simon's been incredibly accommodating. I've stayed here ever since Damon took me from my house after my mother's recent visit. He doesn't appear to mind. In fact, when he came home, it was obvious Damon told him a little because he wrapped his arms around me and told me he was happy I was here.

It made me feel good. I expected to feel like a burden, but they've all made sure I haven't.

But what he's suggesting now...? "You want to marry me now?" I ask, the words barely audible.

“It’s sooner than we planned. I get that. But I meant what I said: I’m never letting you go, Sage. You’re mine. A piece of paper saying so doesn’t change that. We’ll have a small ceremony. Just the six of us. And your friends if you want them there. When we’re ready for a bigger one, I’ll give you the wedding of your dreams.”

I’m really not a crier. Seriously, I’m not. But his words filled my eyes with tears and took my breath. “Okay,” I whisper.

“Good. Once your house sells. Once it’s all closed and the check has cleared—all of it—we’ll apply for a marriage license. We’ll get married.”

“We can do it in my backyard if you don’t want to go to the courthouse,” Zarek says. He touches my neck lightly, wrapping his hand around it before letting it fall back to my chest and over my heart. “And we can dress you all pretty, too.”

I laugh, hearing how watery and filled with emotion it is.

“I guess we can even give you a couple nights to fuck without us,” Declan says with a dramatic sigh.

Zarek must have pinched him or something because Declan flinches before laughing. “Don’t be a pain in the ass. We can have our own things, too.”

“I know,” Declan says quietly. “I like our own things. But I really need us to be together more. Is that okay?”

“The four of us or the six of us?” Zarek asks.

I hear the sound of light kisses above my head. “Both, Ehsan. I need my brother. I need Simon. I need both. Please understand how much I fucking love you, Zarek. No matter what I feel for someone else, nothing will ever touch what I feel for you.”

“You love me,” Zarek says and I realize it’s the first time he’s heard the words. I smile and pull Damon’s mouth to mine, trying to give them their moment without it being incredibly obvious that they’re sharing it with us.

“Yes,” Declan says. “Jesus, Zarek. I love everything about you. *I can't live without you* any more than I can without Damon or Simon. You're my person. My life. I'm keeping you, so you better fucking accept that I love the fuck out of you.”

Zarek doesn't answer, though I can hear his shaking breath. His hand on me is tight, though I don't think he realizes it. “I love you too,” he whispers.

“You better,” Declan says. I hear a slap, and then Declan shakes with his laughter.

We lay quietly for a while before Zarek says, “Yeah, okay. We can give them a couple nights to themselves and then we can have a groupie again.”

“Don't pretend you don't like to fuck together,” Declan says. I grin against Damon's mouth.

“Of course, I do. I like this; the four of us. It's a little weird with Simon and Quin because you can't keep your hands to yourself.”

“Like we keep our hands to ourselves when it's the four of us?” Declan counters.

Zarek doesn't answer. “I'm still a little...”

“I know,” Declan says. “Look, let's compromise for a bit. We'll keep the bigger group sleepovers fewer for now as long as you agree to spend time together as a bigger group more often. It's really imperative that you and Simon get along, Zarek. As much as it is that you and Damon get along. *I can't live my life without either. And I can't live without you.*”

I don't hear anything at all. But Zarek sits up, his hand pulling from me. Worried that he might be upset, I pull my lips from Damon and shift to look at him. He's not upset, but he's still frowning slightly. He studies Declan's face before looking at me. “Come on, Sage. Let's go hang out with Simon.”

Declan's face splits into a wide smile as Zarek rolls his eyes and climbs from the bed. Damon kisses me before I follow. We're allowed underwear only. That's apparently the dress code in this house. I grumble about Quin being allowed

to wear sweats, but leave the room on Zarek's heels while we look for Simon.

He's in the kitchen staring at the stove. There's a pan there with pieces of bacon in it. The counter is strewn with all sorts of things. It's a mess, but the only thing on the stove is the pan of bacon. It's not even on.

"You know that cooks better when you turn the burner on, right?" Zarek asks as we join Simon.

Simon smiles demurely and takes a step away from the stove. "I hate cooking," he says, giving the raw bacon a glare.

"Then why are you?" I ask.

He sighs and reaches for the knob to turn it on. I cover his wrist before he can. "I like cooking. If you don't like to cook, then you don't have to."

Simon gives me a smile. He leans into me for a minute, and I remember that his love language is physical touch. Wrapping an arm awkwardly around his shoulders, I give him an even more awkward half a hug.

He grins up at me and takes a step back. "I was going to cook because I wanted to make you all breakfast. Then I thought maybe I should just order breakfast, but I already took the bacon out. That's when you walked in, while I waffled back and forth between cooking the bacon and ordering breakfast for delivery."

"You don't like to cook?" Zarek asks.

"No," Simon says. "I think it's too much a reminder of my mom, actually. I can cook. Damon and Declan's mom made sure I knew how. But I have so many memories of cooking with my mom when I was young. From a really young age. Sitting on the counter and dumping chocolate chips into the bowl of cookie dough. Licking batter from a beater. Stirring pasta water. I think cooking now is just too loud a reminder that she's gone."

I gave him another awkward half hug again, and he laughs quietly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to bring you down," he says.

“No, it’s okay,” I say. “I like to hear about your mom. Or whatever you want to share.”

“Thanks, Sage.”

Zarek attends to the bacon, adding sausage and getting ready for eggs as I prepare batter for pancakes. Simon busies himself with heating the syrup and cutting fruit. Those tasks don’t seem to bother him. Although he’s quick to get through it and then sits on the counter to watch us.

“Are we going to be okay?” Simon asks after a while and I shift to look at him. But he’s watching Zarek.

Zarek frowns at him and shrugs. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

“To start with, you don’t even like to look at me,” Simon says with a slight smile.

Zarek flushes and sighs. “I’m sorry. It’s not personal. It’s just—”

“Jealousy,” Simon says, cutting him off.

Zarek nods and his words are stiff when he speaks. “Yes. His hands on you bother me. I know that’s stupid because it doesn’t bother me when he touches Sage or Damon. But when it’s you, I just remember how hurt and down he was when you weren’t a part of his life. How miserable he was. Lost and just... empty. Because he loves you so much. Seeing him touch you and knowing how much he loves you...”

“Zarek,” Simon says and waits for him to look up. “You know that he was exactly like that when you wouldn’t talk to him for that week too, right?”

By the way Zarek stills, I don’t think he knew that. “I—He was?”

Simon nods, looking at me. I agree readily because it’s definitely the truth. I saw that first-hand. Since I came around sooner, I was here for that.

“Maybe you’ve been told this already, but the twins, they don’t do anything by halves or fractions. If they love someone, it’s with their whole being. Every single cell beats for that person. They live their lives for that person. I’m sure you

know that they're pretty easy to get along with. It wouldn't be hard for them to make friends or date or anything. But they won't let someone in their lives unless they know that person is here to stay. Because they claim a piece of their heart." He rests his hand on Zarek's, where it pauses holding the fork over the sizzling bacon. "That's you, Zarek."

Zarek takes a sharp breath and looks into Simon's face. His lips are pinched together, but his eyes are wide behind his glasses.

"I'm really, really glad you're here. That you love him enough to put yourself in a place you're uncomfortable because you love him and want to be with him. He does that for me too. I know they think they hide what they really feel for Quin behind their monotone voices when they speak to or of him, but they can't hide that shit from me. I know them better than they know themselves."

I laugh at his amused face.

"But the point is, we sacrifice and compromise when we love someone so much that we want to spend our lives with them. You're perfect for him, Zarek. Everything about you is. And you're everything that I'm not. Everything that I'll never be. You will always be able to give him pieces of you that I don't have and can't give him."

Simon's eyes flicker to mine and I know those words are for me, too. Even though he's talking to Zarek.

Zarek pulls the bacon already finished out of the pan and Simon adds more. They work in silence for a while as I finish the next couple pancakes, before Zarek says, "I needed to hear that. From you. Thanks."

Simon nods. "I told Declan to let me talk to you. Damn man doesn't know how to listen."

I laugh, and Zarek does, too. "Don't I know that."

Thirty-Six

DAMON



BREAKFAST IS quiet as Declan and I mentally confer about how we're going to approach this subject. Getting Stommer on board was surprisingly easy. I hate how easy he is when it comes to Simon. I mean, I love it. It makes this custody arrangement easier to have him so supportive and accommodating. But it just shoves in our faces how much our hatred for him is unjustified.

Are we ever going to stop hating him? It's a little exhausting.

"Yes. And I also hate the idea that I'll stop hating him one day."

I know Simon will be on board with our plan too. It's Sage and Zarek I'm not so sure about. Simon and Zarek look like they're getting along a lot better since they cooked breakfast together. I've been staring in wonderment at the way the two are caught up in conversation about some ideas Simon has for his job.

He explains what he has planned, and as if Zarek can't help himself, he goes into actuary mode and starts rattling off random statistics and risk factors for different scenarios. Sage stares in awe at the way Zarek talks numbers and shit. Declan looks like a proud daddy while Stommer continues to eat in silence, watching it all with a very pleased smile.

Their conversation carries us through breakfast and clean up. Our condo isn't small, but I love the closeness that we're kind of forced into when we're all together like this. I really

even kind of appreciate that Stommer is there when we all pile into the living room, so Simon has someone to cuddle with.

I want to touch him. I want him between me and my brother, where he's always supposed to be. But I also feel this new need that's only filled with Sage.

Zarek and Simon continue to talk about it for a while, and the rest of us watch fondly. The way Simon looks at him is so sweet that I know a piece of me loves him a little more for it.

Eventually, the conversation lulls and we're left in comfortable silence. I glance at my brother and he nods.

"So, we want to talk to you about something," I say.

"We as in the hive mind?" Simon asks.

Sage giggles. My big wiggly puppy *giggles!* I kiss him because the sound is so fucking cute.

"Yes," Declan says. He shifts on the couch so Zarek is facing him. If I'm being honest, I think even Sage will be okay with this. Zarek is going to need convincing. Either way, I start because I need Declan to just concentrate on Zarek.

"So we're all on the same page, I'm going to backtrack a little for the group's benefit. While I know I'm in my brother's head, I can't even tell you how hard it is to remember whose conversation belongs to whom. So while I know these words have been said, and the topic discussed, I'm a little unclear on the details of who was on the other end."

"That's weird as fuck," Zarek says, smirking.

"Just try living with it," I say.

"Don't," Declan says. "You'll find you're turned on by kinks you don't even have."

Simon laughs. The sound is so light and free that I grin. Fuck, hearing him laugh again is everything.

"So, since we were kids, we've always had a plan for our future. That plan has always been the three of us. Always. I know you imagine a romantic and sexual role in what I just said, but no matter what age we discussed this, those aspects

were always overlooked,” I say. Sage smiles a little, and I’d really like to be in his head right now. Already I can see the way Zarek is staring at Declan, tension in his shoulders. The way he’s already trying to pull back a little. Declan doesn’t let him.

“We wanted to be together. Because we love being together. Our relationship isn’t as complicated as it looks from the outside. We’re whole together and it’s physically a pain in the fucking chest when we’re apart.” Sage nods. “We’ve never thought about what a future would look like with one of us having a lover. Dec and I always imagined that lover would be Simon’s. Some stupidly perfect girl with a vagina—the one thing we don’t have.”

Simon laughs again. “Because that’s done so well to entice me.”

“Obviously, your sexuality wasn’t part of these thoughts,” I say, flashing him a grin. He’s in my line of sight, so I meet his eyes filled with a smile for just a second. He’s curled in Stommer’s lap while the professor pets Simon in the way he loves. But Simon’s watching the four of us. I cup Sage’s face. “As I’m pretty sure I told you, I knew how we felt toward Simon was unrequited. I knew it would go nowhere. *That’s* the future we were striving for. Three best friends. Living our best lives together.”

“Forever bachelors?” Zarek asks.

I shift my focus to view his face through my brother’s eyes. He’s frowning, but most of his tension has slackened. There’s no disbelief in his tone or expression. He’s... surprised.

“Yeah,” I say. “Honestly, we never put too much stock into falling in love. For the reasons that are obvious. Who would love us knowing what kind of relationship we have with our best friend?”

“Or maybe worse, the relationship we have with each other,” Declan adds quietly. I’m actually pretty proud that he said the words out loud. He gives my pride for him the finger.

“I can see how that might be a hurdle,” Zarek says.

“Yes. Hurdle. I think it’s more like the Great Wall of China,” I say. “But yeah. I know that this has been hard for you.” Although I’m cupping Sage’s cheek, I hope Zarek knows I’m talking to him, too. “I hope you understand why we’re not willing to compromise our relationship.”

“Compromise isn’t the right word,” Simon says.

“It’s absolutely the right word,” Declan argues. “I’ll never give up my brother or you. I refused to let anyone else close because I wasn’t convinced someone could look beyond those bonds and still love me. Love me enough to want a life with me. Especially when I feel it kind of slip through my fingers all the time.”

Zarek’s face scrunches and he pulls Declan close. It’s not often that my brother shows vulnerability; so I’m glad Zarek knows that. “I love you too. I want to be with you.”

“Good,” I say. “Because we have a new future to work towards and while maybe we should take it a little slower than what I’m about to suggest, things happen.”

“You’re making me tense,” Zarek says. “Out with it.”

“One house. Four bedrooms. But we sleep together in one. All six of us,” I say.

Silence follows my declaration. It’s so silent that I hear the ding of the elevator beyond the door. Sage’s eyes are wide, his lips parted. Surprised. Nothing else flutters across his face strong enough to overshadow his surprise.

When no one speaks, I continue. “One house. One family. We live together. Sleep together. Vacation together. Have kids together.” I kiss Sage. “I marry you, Najee. Now. Doing everything to erase your old life and build you a new one. I will only ever let you be surrounded by people who know how fucking amazing you are. No more stress. No more self-loathing. You’re mine to take care of; mine to worship.”

Tears fill his eyes, and he buries his face in my neck. I hug him tightly and watch Zarek as I hold Sage.

Zarek takes a deep breath, but he doesn't look away from Declan.

"I have one thing to add to that," Stommer says and I try like fuck not to stiffen.

"What's that?" Declan asks.

"Whatever relationships happen under our roof are supported. I don't really care what they look like or who they're between. I don't care if it's something that's starting now or developing later. That means we're going to have to be obsessive about communication between couples and as a whole. With this many people living close together, it's necessary."

"You say whatever relationships happen..." Zarek starts, and I can hear his unease loud in my ears.

"Well, the most obvious ones I can point out are the four of you," Stommer says, smirking. "If you'd like to pretend that's a bedroom thing, I'll humor that for now. And you don't have to admit that there's anything more between you and Damon or you and Sage if you don't want to for a while."

I'm almost irritated that he called us on it. Irritated that he says we will need to talk about it as a whole at some point. Because he's not wrong. I just hate that he said it.

I also don't miss that he's left it wide open with that statement that if something happens between us and Simon, or Zarek and/or Sage and Simon, then he's open for it. When I meet his eyes and he just holds my stare with an unwavering smile, I *know* that's exactly what he's doing.

This man is fucking maddening. I hate and love how accommodating he is. It also makes my chest ache that he thinks *something* could happen between us and Simon. I want to ask. I want to demand he tell us what he thinks.

Obviously, I don't do that.

Declan and I don't answer. There's a part of me that wants to put a caveat on it. As long as Sage isn't with him. Stommer already took Simon from us. He sure as fuck doesn't get to have Sage. Or Zarek.

I don't say that, either.

Despite my animosity towards Stommer, I really want this to work. So I wait. I need Sage or Zarek to speak next. We need one of them to lead this part of the conversation.

Sage says, "I really like Zarek."

Declan reaches behind him and pulls the strap to Sage's jockstrap and lets it go. It hits his skin with a loud *snap*. Sage yelps, jumping, and twists to look at him with wide, wounded eyes. "Just Zarek, huh?"

Sage flushes. "You too."

Declan grunts and I try to hide my amusement.

"I agree to that," Sage says quietly, and I know he's looking at Zarek. Zarek, who's really trying to hide a smile at the exchange and declaration. Because he heard the same thing I did. He knows Quin's statement is concerning Simon. Because that's all that Stommer truly cares about: Simon.

"I have questions," Zarek says.

"Ask," Declan says, pulling him closer. Getting right in his face.

Zarek tries not to smile, but he wraps his arms around Declan's neck. "Why four rooms if you're making us share one?"

"We're sharing a bed," Declan says. "We can discuss size if you really need to. I suppose we can compromise on that."

"So generous," Simon says, rolling his eyes.

"The other three rooms are so each couple has their own space. I'm assuming there are some things we'll want privacy for."

Zarek nods. "Like when I slap your ass until it's red?"

Declan rolls his eyes. "Ehsan, we all know that's not what really happens behind closed doors. Especially since we can all see which of us is wearing the evidence of that."

With a huff, Zarek presses his face into Declan's cheek. "Are you going to want to get married right away too?"

My brother shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head. "I'm indifferent as to when. Yes, I want to marry you. I want you to take my last name. I want to own every fucking inch of your body. But like my brother said, I don't need a paper to say that you're mine. I just need you to agree that you're mine and never take that back."

There's that open vulnerability again that makes me want to reach for him.

Zarek picks his head up and looks at Declan. "Dec, I'm yours. Always. I don't want to live without you ever. I'm going to agree to this weirdness because I can't wait to spend every single day with you for the rest of my life. And I *want* kids with you. We can discuss the last name thing later."

"There's no discussion. You're going to be a Whitaker."

Zarek huffs.

"Your initials don't even change. I've seen your signature. I don't think you even have to change that. As long as you're legally Zarek Whitaker, I don't care what you sign."

"You're barbaric," Zarek says, rolling his eyes. Not bothering to hide his smile. "And when we have kids?"

"I'm not sure what you're asking. When we're ready for kids, we can talk about it in more detail. I think right now, we need to concentrate on selling our many properties and finding a house together," Declan says.

"With an enormous shower," Simon muses as he glances at our bedroom. "Ours is big, but we can't fit six bodies in there."

"Might as well make a locker room communal shower," Sage says. The way his fingers bounce on my back, I can feel his excitement.

My man is going to have a big family who will love and take care of him. Just what he's always wanted. What he's

always deserved and been denied. I'm going to give him everything.

“Oh!” Simon says. “Yes. But fancy.” He twists in Stommer’s lap to face him. “Can we do that?”

Stommer smiles, a look that I know all too well. Complete adoration. “Anything you want, sugar baby.”

I glower at the words and turn my attention back to Zarek and Declan since Sage’s face is still in my neck. I don’t think Sage really cares. All he wants is to be loved. The more people who love his affection-starved soul, the better for him.

“What else?” Declan asks, pressing soft kisses all over Zarek’s face. Zarek lets his head tip back, allowing Declan access to more skin, which my brother takes advantage of. “What other questions, my love? Tell me.”

Zarek shivers. “You promise you love me? You really want me forever?”

Declan pulls his face back up and kisses him until he’s breathless and we’re all fucking hard watching that display of filthy tongues. Asshole.

“Until my last breath, Zarek Whitaker. I will never, *ever* let you go.”

Exactly. I couldn’t have said that better.

Thirty-Seven

DAMON



Four months later

I STEP into our house and drop my gym bag in the entry closet. I don't bother to take off my shoes since we've been in and out for the last two days with boxes. The floors are going to need deep cleaning before we stop wearing shoes. It's to be expected when you move; especially considering it's six of us moving in.

There isn't any noise coming from deeper within the house, despite half of us being home to continue unpacking. So I move through the rooms until I find someone and then stop to stare.

Simon stands in the living room, his hands on a picture frame. It's a large square—ten by ten inches. It was always on the dresser in our bedroom, even in our condo. But he sets it atop the mantle, his fingers lingering on it. It's the last professional picture that his family took before he lost his parents. When his mother was still healthy, and his father wasn't an alcoholic. Simon is eight, I think. Almost nine maybe.

Before I can go over to comfort him, Zarek walks in with a handful of throw pillows. He pauses when he sees Simon and then drops the pillows on the couch before approaching.

Declan and I were most concerned about Zarek. Even after the conversation four months ago in the kitchen that we witnessed but couldn't hear, he was easily jealous if Declan

touched Simon for too long. The conversation settled something in him. We no longer feel like he's pulling away. But it didn't change the fact that on some level, he feels threatened.

However, the two get along really well. They are friends. There is no doubt about that.

Zarek rests a hand on Simon's shoulder until Simon looks at him with a smile. Everyone knows that Simon's love language is affection. He needs to feel seen and wanted.

Zarek pulls him in for a hug, and, for a minute, I just watch. Smiling. My brother steps next to me and sighs. "Thank fuck they get along," he mutters, leaning his shoulder into mine. I wrap my arm around him and sigh.

Then, to make it even better, Sage walks in with a box. As soon as he sets it down, he joins them, wrapping his big arms around both and lifting their feet off the ground. Simon laughs, letting his head fall back on Sage's shoulder. Zarek rolls his eyes, but he doesn't try to hide his smile.

"This is nice," Stommer says as he steps up on Declan's other side.

I glance his way and frown. "You look like hell," I say. He does. Stommer's department is expanding again now that summer's here. He's spending a stupid amount of time on campus recently.

"Can't leave contractors there alone while there are other people wandering around that part of campus. I argued that they're used to people around but." He shrugs. "Those damn fuckers like to get there at the crack ass of dawn though their lazy asses never start work until eight."

"You can't put a stop to it?" I ask.

He shrugs again and yawns. "I tried. Hopefully it doesn't last too much longer."

Raising a brow, Declan shakes his head. "You know they get paid hourly, right? The longer they draw that shit out, the more they get paid."

Stommer scowls. It's the first time I've really seen that look on him. There was the time that he stormed into our condo and yelled at us. But this is different. I almost smile.

“Go take a nap. We'll have Simon get you when we're ready to eat,” I say.

He nods, but doesn't move as the three of us continue to watch our three lovers. Actually, two lovers and a husband.

Sage's house sold right away. He received a stupid amount of offers and then handed them to me with wide, anxious eyes. So I went through them with his realtor and we chose one based on some shit that I still don't understand; but it came down to cash versus credit and the amount of profit Sage would get.

Once the check cleared, we got married in Zarek's backyard. The six of us, my parents, and Sage's friends gathered to witness. Then we commandeered the condo, kicking my brother out to stay with Zarek for a couple days while I kept my man tied up or otherwise occupied with something in his ass as he begged me to let him come.

After three days of torturing him—I mean loving him on my own—Zarek and Declan returned, and we fucked together for another two days. If I do say so, it was a fantastic honeymoon. Though I never stopped reaching for Simon.

After we got the newlywed sexcapades out of the way, we went about changing his name. When the paperwork came back, we took on the monumental task of changing *everything* into his new name. Sage Dorian Rossi is now Jonathan Sagen Whitaker, though we still call him Sage. He wanted to keep Sage in his name, but added the 'N' to it. When I asked about it, he just shrugged.

Aside from the necessary and obvious things like credit cards and loans, car registration, and whatever, we took a few steps further. He closed his bank account and changed banks. We canceled his phone, and he joined the family plan with Declan, Simon, and I.

Then we started the bigger tasks. The rest of us selling our homes and searching for a new one. Together. When our condo and Stommer's sold almost immediately, Zarek pulled his from the market so we all had somewhere to live. It was a little tense because he had so many people crashing his space, but I think it actually did the group of us a lot of good.

There's a sense of harmony between us now. We move around each other instead of running into each other. There's a natural flow.

It also solidified some things we were looking for in a house. Definitely four bedrooms. As many bathrooms—although sinks were more important than the actual bathroom itself. It's difficult for six men to get ready in the morning and only have three sinks between them.

We didn't have an actual area we were looking to live in, but we knew we were moving out of Glensdale to get Sage away from his mother. We likely would have left the state entirely, except three of us haven't held our jobs for a year yet, and we didn't want that to reflect negatively on our resumes. Besides, Stommer is a big man on campus. He's probably not going to get the opportunity he has now anywhere else for a while. Not until this project has been up, running, and successful for some time.

When Sage told our boss that he needed to quit and why (my big sappy puppy was teary), our boss did one better. He told Sage he'd been looking to expand, but it always felt too big for him to do on his own. So he asked Sage to take on the project. He'd make sure that when Sage Rossi left our gym, no one would know that the same man under a different name was actually heading up the second gym.

Sage was elated. Though he agreed that he'd definitely help set up the gym, he didn't want to run it. He loved being a physical trainer, and that's what he wanted to be. So he'd help our boss get it built, things set up, everyone hired and trained, and oversee everything until they were both comfortable with him stepping back into his preferred role.

I am so stupidly proud of him. He's been at it for three months now and he comes home loving what he's a part of. His smile never leaves his lips.

The house we found is in the suburbs of Sun Haven, which is a town northwest of Glensdale. It's close-ish to campus where half of us work and only a slightly longer commute for Simon and me. We still get to enjoy the city of Glensdale, though we're careful about being out. Once we get settled, I know we'll explore our new home, so we have less of a chance of running into Sage's mother or Sammy.

Sun Haven isn't as big or populated as Glensdale, but it's not a sleepy, quiet town either. The new gym is on the border of Sun Haven and Marlin Yard so it attracts both populations. The communities' demographics skew slightly older, but since we're settling down now, it's not a big deal.

I muse about that. Settling down. I'm married!

Declan kisses my jaw and leans his head against me, reveling in all the warm, squishy, and sickly sappy feelings inside me. "We're really doing this," he says. "Look at the future we built together."

It's enough that I almost feel choked up. Declan's right. We kept Simon, just as we always wanted. But we also have two more men who we love with every atom in our bodies. Men that are doing their best to keep Simon smiling because they think he's sad after setting his family photo on the mantle.

I pull my brother to me, hugging him tightly, and just relish in the world we created. The life we built. We're still standing like that when I feel Sage press against me, kissing my ear. "Are you okay?"

Smiling, I nod. "Yep. Perfectly good."

His lips brush my skin as he smiles. "Okay. I think we're almost done for the day. Can we cook outside?"

"Anything you want, Najee."

"Husband," he murmurs. Then kisses me again before he bounds back into the living room, joining Simon and Zarek.

They continue arranging pillows between throwing them at each other.

“I love the way you smile when he calls you husband,” Declan says.

Squeezing him to me, I nod. “I can’t help it. I fucking married someone other than Simon. The weirdness of it makes me want to laugh hysterically.”

He chuckles. It’s not like we don’t still want that. Want a verbal promise and maybe something legally binding between the three of us. But we’re realistic. We won’t make Sage or Zarek uncomfortable, and we know that it’s not exactly legal to marry more than one person. Stupid closed-minded legislature. I suppose we have the big win of two men being able to marry. Can’t have it all, I guess.

We remain wrapped in each other for a while longer, watching our guys and enjoying being pressed against each other. The last few months have been fast-paced, so it’s going to be nice to slow down once we’re settled here. Enjoy some quiet time. Establish routines.

That’s really when we’ll see how we manage as a family. Zarek’s house was a peek, but it’s a lot smaller than what we were looking for. There wasn’t much room to spread out. We already wanted a place where we wouldn’t be on top of each other all the time—that was a nighttime activity—and Zarek’s house wasn’t accommodating to that.

He was a single guy when he bought the two-bedroom house. The entirety of his house was only 1100 square feet. That’s really small for six grown ass men. This new house is more than three times as big.

However, the argument we lost after being there and sleeping in Zarek’s king-sized bed was the size of the bed we bought for our new house. Yep, we ended up with a king. Declan and I will never admit it out loud, but we kind of like the extra space. Not that we sleep far enough away where I can’t reach everyone during the night, but it’s not so bad.

The other three bedrooms, one for each couple, all have smaller beds. Declan and I have doubles in our rooms. Simon has a queen. However, we will be maintaining that those beds aren't for all night events. They're for private fucking and that's it. We sleep together. Fuck all that noise. I'll lose my shit if Simon is sleeping somewhere else while under the same roof. And my brother?! No fucking way!

Eventually, we stop unpacking the thousands of boxes from four different households for the day. I'm thankful that it's just four houses and not six. Deciding what furniture we kept was... interesting. Thankfully, we all agreed on our couch because it could be arranged in many ways depending on our needs. We went so far as to buy a few more sections of it to make room for all of us.

Even with the couch obstacle taken care of, I feel like we're going to be unpacking for months. At least we commandeered the big closet in the primary suite for my, Declan, and Simon's clothing. Any other options just didn't make sense since we don't have separate clothes and I really just don't see that happening. I'm still hoping to get Simon in a jockstrap someday.

Declan and I start prepping food for the grill while everyone else but a napping Stommer head out back. Declan cuts up vegetables while I pull out the meat and gather the ingredients to prepare everything over the grill. Pretty sure I can make a pasta salad outside. Probably. There's a burner on the grill, I think.

The house came with a large outdoor cooking area that we've been excited to break in. Since it's Friday and no one has to be anywhere tomorrow, we're going to take our time and enjoy our backyard. Maybe plan how we want to utilize the space and what additions we might want.

When we gather the trays of prep and head outside, I stop just beyond the door. Sage is sitting in one of the lounge chairs with Simon in his lap and Zarek on his side, pulled in close under Sage's arm. Their heads are bent over Simon's phone as they discuss something on the screen.

My heart skips as I look at them.

“No better sight,” Declan murmurs. I shake my head. There really isn’t. Nothing is better than this. Nothing at all.

I finally convince my feet to move. Stommer is at the grill, scraping the grate with a metal brush as he lets the fire cook off any remnants left from previous use. Honestly, the thing is shining like it’s new. I think the grates had been replaced.

“Couldn’t sleep?” I ask.

Stommer gives me a bemused smile. “No. I can only think of what needs to be done here before we can all relax. So, yeah. No sleep.”

Declan chuckles, shaking his head. “We’re taking care of it.”

He sighs and closes the top. “I know that. And I trust you. It doesn’t stop my head from continuously listing everything that we’re still waiting to do. What deliveries we’re waiting on. If we have enough food for six men. If our direct transfers for the house account are working properly. Hell, I was even thinking about the land taxes. That’s when I decided I’d rather be up, tired, and with you guys, than thinking about taxes while I try to go to sleep.”

My brother and I laugh.

I admit. I don’t hate him. Even though I still really want to. There’s an echo inside me that still screams occasionally—especially when he’s touching Simon—that he took our best friend from us. It’s a lie. I know that. My brother knows that. That doesn’t stop the irrational voice inside me that wants to blame him instead of myself.

Turning around, I look at Simon. He glances up and meets my eyes and flashes me a wide grin. ‘Love you,’ he mouths.

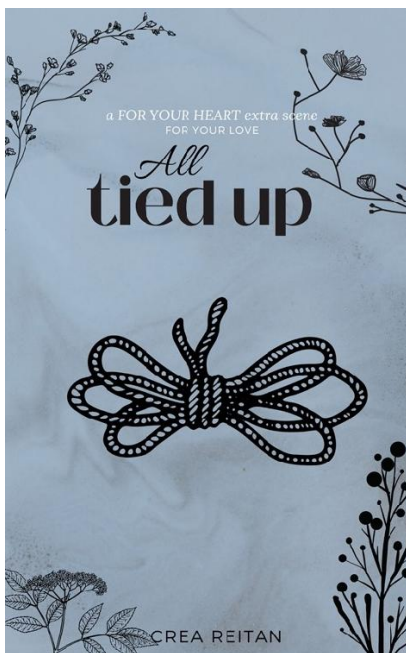
My heart skips. ‘Love you too, Simon,’ I tell him in the same way.

He sighs and snuggles back into Sage’s chest. Sage shifts to wrap an arm around him as if it’s something he’s always been doing. Zarek moves in closer; maybe feeling like

Simon's cuddling means he needs some comfort, and grips Simon's free hand.

Simon's eyes flash to mine again, and he grins. Happy. He's happy. Declan's hand slips into mine and I squeeze his hand. Fuck, we're all happy. Nothing can ruin this moment.

Want More Damon and Sage?



Thank you for reading Damon and Sage's story. I hope you enjoyed their story as much as I loved writing it. If you're not ready to be done with them, you can sign up for my newsletter where you'll have access to another scene in [All Tied Up](#). (Once you sign up for the newsletter, you'll gain access when the next newsletter is sent - every three weeks!) There will also be an extra scene in my [patreon](#) (after the second book releases due to spoilers), where you'll find a whole lot of other

goodies, including N/SFW art from this story!

Within my patreon, you will have access to download a taboo version of this book with a taboo cover! This version is certainly crossing the lines hinted at within these pages and the cover is not Amazon approved! For those who don't want to subscribe to my patreon, an ebook (and paperback) will be available for purchase on my website soon, if not already.

Author's Note

I planned all along to write this story but I have to say, it changed a few times from what I initially thought was going to happen. Damon's character was pretty well fleshed out but Sage had been a blank book. His golden retriever energy just made me smile as did his two besties and how he was just in love with their newborn.

What I hadn't been prepared for was Sage's mother. Sammy was always going to be a delusional obstacle that couldn't accept that Sage is gay and was living a lie. And while I knew his mother had something to do with it, the depths of her nastiness just broke my heart to see how it affected Sage. How broken and worthless he felt. Like he was never going to be good enough no matter what he did or who was around - because that's how he was raised. His best was just never enough.

While I hadn't really meant for Zarek to be introduced in this book, I'd always intended for the second and third book to run concurrently. So why did I end up introducing him? It made sense for Damon to introduce Sage to his brother and vice versa first. They were the first hurdle. Because they're used to sharing *everything*, this was kind of a trail run to see what would happen.

But Simon was always going to be the tell. If the boys made it past the brothers, the true hurdle would be their relationship with Simon, arguably the love of their life. It would be the make or break moment in their relationship. Not surprisingly, it was a little of both.

Again, I will repeat what I stated within the first author note. If these relationships aren't doing it for you, you don't have to read what I write. I'm certainly not forcing you and I don't want you to read my books if all you take away from it is that you hate the relationships within. But I also maintain

what I said. You don't get to determine what a healthy friendship looks like. I'm not claiming that every aspect of their friendship was healthy. The twins acting like dicks when Simon fell in love with someone was certainly NOT healthy. But it was natural and normal, like it or not. As is jealousy. Showing actual affection, sleeping in the same bed, wanting to take care of someone important to you - none of those things are toxic or unnatural. It's only because people with opinions no one asked for and feel the need to spew on about something that doesn't affect them that these relationships aren't as readily seen in public or accepted. It doesn't make them wrong. It's not unhealthy. It's not taking advantage of someone to shower them with affection when they fall into depression. I'm sorry you don't know that kind of friendship.

Co-dependent relationships are real. That doesn't mean they're toxic, though I don't disagree that they're not all that healthy, either. It doesn't mean that any of them need therapy because someone else is bothered by how they're living their lives, NOT AFFECTING YOU AT ALL. Those who vomit their opinions about other people's relationships/friendships/lifestyles is what's toxic. Yes, I took some things to the extreme but again, that doesn't mean someone else gets to declare that what's portrayed within this series is UNNATURAL, NOT NORMAL, and INAPPROPRIATE. Is this a relationship mirror that I am personally in? No. That doesn't mean I haven't witnessed something like it.

As with polyamory, as with sexuality, as with gender - YOU DON'T get to say how someone lives, how they identify, and what their lives look like.

The second and third books are parallels to each other though the scenes that extend from one to the other have been split. So you might see the date night in this book but you won't see the actual sleepover until the next.

Now, it's time to dive into the third book. It's time to meet Zarek for real.

Books by Crea Reitan

MM NOVELS/SERIES

For Puck's Sake

Shiver

Starting Line (2023)

Lucky Shot (2023)

For Your Love

For Your Time

For Your Heart

For Your Mind (2023)



Poly Titles

THE IMMORTAL CODEX

Immortal Stream: Children of the Gods

Mortal Souls

The God of Perfect Radiance

The Hidden God

The God Who Controls Death

Gods of the Dead

Gods of Blood

Gods of Idols

Gods of Fire

Gods of Enoch

INFECTED FAIRY TALES

Wonderland: Chronicles of Blood

Toxic Wonderland

Magical Wonderland

Dying Wonderland

Bloody Wonderland

Wonderland: Chronicles of Madness

The Search for Nonsense

The Queen Trials

Veins of Shade

Finding Time

Neverland: Chronicles of Red

Neverwith

Nevershade

Neverblood

Nevermore

OTHER/STANDALONES

Hellish Ones Novels

Blood of the Devil

House of the Devil

Harem Project Novels

House of Daemon

House of Aves

House of Wyn

House of Igarashi, 1

House of Igarashi, 2

House of Agni (2023)

Brothers of Eschat

Unsolicited

Equipoise

Paranormal Holiday Novel

12 Days

Satan's Touch Academy

A Lick of Magic

Fae Lords

Karou

Sweet Omegaverse

Alpha Hunted

Knot Interested

Omegas of Chaingate

Get Pucking Knotty (2023)

The Princess and Her Alphaholes Anthology (excerpt of Wrecked)

Wrecked

Hell View Manor

Stroking Pride (A Sons of Satan Novel)

A Tale of Steam & Cinders

Terror

Haidee (*A Ladies of the MC Novel*)

For Your Love

NEW SERIES BEGINNING IN 2023

This is a 3-book MM series with content not suitable for those under 18 years of age due to graphic scenes. These stories should be read in order.

For Your Time will be available on [Amazon!](#)

Within the pages of book one, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Sexuality exploration and discovery
- Gay for you
- Professor/student
- Sugar Daddy
- BFF twins crossing lines
- Breath play
- Cock warming
- Pain play
- Hurt/comfort
- Breeding
- Strict top/bottom roles
- Co-dependent BFFs
- Age gap
- Gray asexual
- Subspace
- “Virgin” gay
- “Inappropriate” friendship



For Your Heart available on [Amazon!](#)

Within the pages of book two, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Bondage
- BFF twins crossing lines
- Strict top/bottom roles
- Co-dependent BFFs
- Hurt/comfort
- Twin bonds
- Gags/blindfolds
- Orgasm denial
- Golden Retriever MC
- First times
- Begging
- Hint at twin taboo
- Cock cage/male chastity
- Dirty talk
- “Inappropriate” friendship



For Your Mind will be available on [Amazon!](#)

Within the pages of book two, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Shibari
- BFF twins crossing lines
- Strict top/bottom roles
- Co-dependent BFFs
- Hurt/comfort
- Twin bonds

- Impact play/pain play
- Forced orgasm
- Sleep play/dub con
- Group sex
- Nerd/jock
- Hint at twin taboo
- Cock cage/male chastity
- Possessive/jealous
- “Inappropriate” friendship
- Sex swing
- No condoms/lack of lube

For Puck's Sake

NEW SERIES BEGINNING IN 2023

This is a series of standalone MM(+) hockey stories with content not suitable for those under 18 years of age due to graphic scenes. These stories have character crossover but it is not required to read them in order.

Shiver available on [Amazon!](#)

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- Nerd/jock with a twist
- Cruel games
- Co-dependent hockey player
- Sunshine and lovable
- Bi-awakening
- Hurt/comfort
- Opposites attract
- High emotion
- HEA



Starting Line will be available on [Amazon!](#)

Within these pages, you will find some of these tropes among others:

- MMM
- Obediance
- Caregiver
- Sensation play
- Voyeurism/Exhibitionism
- Cuckold
- Video sex
- High emotion
- HEA

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This is an adult group. No drama. No judgment. No bullying, shaming, or being an ass in general. No one outside the group can see what you like, post, or comment so you're free to do as you please (as long as it's group appropriate - hot, half-naked men are allowed!). Here you will be the first to find teasers, new-release announcements, games, giveaways, and more!

My Instagram

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My TikTok

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About the Author

Crea lives in upstate New York with her dog and husband. She has been writing since grade school, when her second grade teacher had her class keep writing journals. She has a habit of creating secondary, and often time tertiary, characters that take over her stories. When she can't fall asleep at night, she thinks up new scenes for her characters to act out. This, of course, is how most of her meant-to-be-thrown-away characters tend to end up front and center - and utterly swoon-worthy! Don't ask her how many book boyfriends she has...

When not writing, Crea is an avid reader. Her TBR pile is several hundred books high (don't even look at her kindle wish list or the unread books on her tablet). Sometimes, she enjoys crafting; sometimes, exploring nature; sometimes, traveling. Mostly, she enjoys putting her characters on paper and breathing life into them. Oh, and sleeping. Crea *loves* to sleep!

Note - Crea is an Amazon exclusive author. If you're reading this ebook anywhere other than through Amazon, it is a pirated copy and has been stolen! Please don't add to that.

Thank You

I hope you enjoyed Sage and Damon's story. Like everything I write, I know this was a little different but I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. Finally we find the happily ever after. Stay tuned for book three where we see the events of book two from Declan's POV - *[For Your Mind](#)*.

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Thank you!!

Crea Reitan

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