



WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS
BOOK FOUR

GARINDO

K.A. MERIKAN

Grind

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“I won’t let anyone hurt him. Even if he can never be mine.”

Ezra. Escort. Cynical. Hunted by a killer. Needs a man capable of anything.

Frank. Client. Protective. Loyal. Wants to forget his violent past.

On his 40th birthday, Frank decides his chance for love has passed.

But when an old friend treats him to a night with a beautiful escort, Frank is not about to say no. In fact, Ezra proves to be so intoxicating, he doesn’t want to let go.

So he’ll pay. An easy solution to loneliness. No strings, no expectations, a clean transaction and a bit of extravagance in his otherwise frugal life.

That is, until one night Ezra arrives on his doorstep, desperate for protection from none other than Frank’s old buddy. A man as dangerous as Frank used to be.

Ezra has a very clear goal in life—make a load of money while he’s young and beautiful, then marry rich. His rules are

just as simple: stay safe and don't fall for clients.

Frank might be Ezra's type: big, rough around the edges, and generous in bed, but Ezra is level-headed enough to know that a guy who works at a junkyard and doesn't exactly own a yacht isn't marriage material.

But Ezra is in danger, and he needs a man with massive fists, not deep pockets, so he will do everything in his power to secure Frank's affection.

Only Frank never planned to get involved with his little treat. Because if Ezra knew his dark secrets, he'd be terrified of what kind of monster he'd let into his bed.



Tropes: size difference, age gap, escort, forced proximity, opposites attract, ice prince, gentle giant, sworn off relationships, dark secret, emotional scars, blue collar

Genre: Scorching hot M/M dark romance

Length: ~120,000 words (Standalone)

WARNING: This story contains scenes of violence, offensive language and morally ambiguous characters as well

as the topics of domestic violence, eating disorders and fatphobia

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Chapter 1

Frank

IN MOMENTS LIKE THIS, Frank regretted he didn't kill people anymore.

He had to take a deep breath as he stared down the cashier's acne-ridden face. "For the last time, it says the coupon is valid until today."

The huff in the line behind him only made him more agitated. He could take on any of these fuckers in a brawl. He was six-five and one punch from his massive fists could shatter a nose with ease, but that would get him thrown out of Costco without his birthday beer.

The teenager frowned at him from behind the register and blew a strand of unruly hair out of his face. "No, according to the terms and conditions, it needs to be used *before* this date. Which means it was valid until yesterday." He then leaned forward and put his finger on a row of words in a cloud of black, barely-readable font on the coupon, as if he thought Frank was either blind or slow.

If Frank had lasers for eyes, he'd cut the kid in half and be done with it. "How is that in any way clear, if it says *until*."

The man behind him huffed again. "Just pay the extra quarter, man. Jesus."

Frank bared his teeth. "That's not the point!" He did not want to pay extra when he had a coupon for this shit.

A middle-aged woman standing right behind his back tossed a bill right next to the cashier's hand and spoke with a voice soaked in annoyance. "Here, now put it through at full price."

Frank blinked and turned around to glare at her scrunched features. “I have money! This is about principles.”

“Well, my principle is to pick up my kid from school on time.”

Frank squinted at her in frustration, but the cashier butted in.

“Or would you like to leave it?”

All Frank wanted today was a nice beer for his birthday on top of all the other stuff he had to get for the small party he was throwing for friends in two days. He was turning forty today, but it was more convenient for everyone to come over on Saturday. So the beer was the one thing just for him. Why would he waste more money than he should when his coupon was valid? Furthermore, why should the greedy corporation get an extra quarter they didn’t deserve, even if it wasn’t him paying?

Until a few months ago, Frank would have sent his nephew, Dex to do shopping like this, but he’d moved out, leaving Frank alone with all the chores. Which was fine. Especially since Dex was wasteful and would have probably forgotten about the coupons altogether. But since Frank needed to get his own groceries now, he’d do things his way.

“Yes, I’d like to leave it,” he said in a stern voice.

The cashier rolled his eyes.

“All this wasted time for nothing,” the woman behind Frank’s back said loudly enough for him to hear.

A part of him wanted to glare at her, but what was the point? His mood had already been spoiled. Not that it mattered, if he wasn't to see any of his friends later. Shane and Ros were away for a dog training event, and since the birthday party was postponed, Jag and Dane had the latter's family over for the evening.

Tonight, it would be just Frank, beer he'd get someplace that didn't violate his customer rights, and *Predator*. The old one, not the shitty new ones.

He'd watched the movie so many times he could recite the dialogue by heart, and it never failed to provide comfort at the end of a difficult day.

Frank paid for the rest of his shopping without a word and grabbed the bags, his lips set in a thin line. This was exactly why he liked that his house sat in the middle of a massive junkyard, far away from people he didn't want to deal with.

It was his sanctuary, a place he'd made his own, and where *his* rules were law.

The standoff attracted the attention of customers waiting in lines for the other registers, so he walked off keeping his gaze on the exit, determined not to make any unnecessary eye contact. He wanted to be back home, in comfortable sweats, and without anyone spoiling his mood with their bullshit.

But as he headed for his truck—beat-up and in a dark red shade Dex laughed off as *old*—his eyes ended up straying to a pair of long legs clad in bootcut jeans. Frank's breath caught when he noticed the way denim hugged the man's buttocks

before making way for a fitted long-sleeve that showcased a toned back.

Had it really been so long that seeing a random dude in a parking lot was enough to make his mouth water? The thought of dating apps made Frank break out in hives, and even hookups often proved too much hassle to arrange when he had so much work every day. Especially that a man couldn't get his cock sucked nowadays without downloading something from the app store. He spent his free time either tinkering in his workshop or preparing for the next strongman competition, and there was no time left for taking good selfies.

But when the stranger bent over, putting his groceries into the trunk of his car, Frank couldn't help but stare. It was his birthday after all. Could this possibly be some sign from the heavens that he should live a little?

A quick glance in the side mirror of his truck confirmed that his long black braid looked neat. Maybe he was no model, but Frank knew he was a catch for any guy who liked his men very masculine and wasn't afraid of the extra muscle he carried. But life was about being realistic, not living in la la land, and Frank couldn't date anyone long-term. Because how would he explain his frequent absences, the occasional bloodstains on his clothing, or the fact that he kept gold bars in walls and under the floor? The right guy for Frank would need to be okay with the illegal shit happening at the junkyard, and if Frank had learned something in the past forty years, it was that the vast majority of men couldn't be trusted. Those in his line of work—even less so.

But while he did not want to form commitments based on lies, a one-night stand wouldn't care if he lied about his profession, so he double-checked whether his T-shirt was clean and stood a bit straighter as excitement simmered beneath his skin.

But just as he was about to leave his groceries by the vehicle and strike up a conversation with the handsome man, a young woman in a flowy dress ran up to him and slid her hand down his back pocket.

So that settled it then.

Frank tried not to take the non-rejection personally, but the flicker of hope that had burned in his chest for the briefest moment left behind scalding ash, so he threw the produce into the truck bed a bit too roughly. He cursed when one of the yogurts squirted out through the plastic top and splashed a pack of bananas.

What else would go wrong today?

He gave the hottie one more glance in the rearview mirror, to make sure he remembered that face when he was alone come evening. This was for the better. He didn't have the whole day off to entertain a man, just because said man had pretty eyes and a tight ass. His life was about responsibilities, and that was why he'd given up on dating a few years ago. To be fair, it did coincide with him needing more cash to help his sister with medical bills, but liquor was punishingly expensive in bars, and any time spent chasing men was time not spent earning money.

It was what it was.

His throat tightened when he thought of all his efforts not paying off, but he gave it his all, and he counted each additional day his sister got on earth as a win.

They might have been estranged for most of their lives, but he still missed her bright laugh on a day like this one.

He tried not to overthink having to celebrate his big four-zero on his own and hopped into the truck, heading straight for the vast junkyard he called home.

It took twenty minutes to reach it from the nearest town, which, on paper, wasn't always good for customers. Fortunately, most of Frank's business was conducted off the books, and the remote location was not a hindrance to those who valued discretion above all else.

Frank liked the quiet of the woods around his tall fence. He liked that every single person who shared this place with him was a friend. And that it was *his*. It gave him a sense of security about the future but also allowed him to be generous to those who mattered. He'd given bits of the land to friends, who then built houses of their own, and knowing he had the means to help them out was a source of pride. Dex's departure left a hole in Frank's home, but Shane and Jag worked with him daily, providing all the companionship he needed.

He passed the gate and drove between familiar piles of metal, wood, and unsorted items. He was dog-sitting for Ros and Shane, so he wouldn't even spend the night at his own

home. The brief idea of bringing a guy here had just been a pipe dream.

He missed sex. That was all. Maybe he could hook up with someone after the upcoming Strongman competition, because it drew the right crowd. Or maybe he'd go to a bar in Pittsburgh once he was done sorting the new pile of old cars on the western side of the junkyard. Shouldn't take more than a few months.

Shane and Ros's home looked like an unexpected transplant from the suburbs with its neatly painted walls and a garden featuring fruit trees and fantastical sculptures Ros had created out of junk.

Frank had an ex who'd wanted to transform Frank's place into something of that nature, but all that was left of that attempt now was a no-longer-white picket fence Frank had no heart to tear down.

The interior of Shane and Ros's place was just as creative, and while filled with patterned furniture and Ros's experimental sculptures, it didn't feel cluttered the way Frank's house had become. He was grateful Shane had offered to host the party at his place, because Frank's was a bit of a pigsty right now. Dex used to handle a lot of daily chores as part of his job, and even though he was disorganized and needed stuff repeated to him, he got shit done, which freed up Frank to deal with other things. Now, it was all on his shoulders, and when faced with the choice between tidying up and resting after a hard day, Frank always chose the latter.

As Frank put the groceries into the fridge, its pristine state reminded him how much he needed to clean his own. Doing the dishes or scrubbing the bathroom felt so irrelevant when he lived on his own. Who cared anyway?

Ros and Shane had taken their herd of trained Rottweilers to the event but left the two older dogs they'd adopted from a shelter a few months back. A white Pittie named Hera was an absolute sweetheart, but her friend, Eros, was an unholy Husky mix that looked like a Welsh Corgi dressing up as a wolf for Halloween. *And* he humped any leg in sight. They both greeted him with the level of enthusiasm only dogs could have for a man who largely ignored them, worried he might start wanting a pet of his own if he wasn't careful. Still, when they'd joined him on the sofa last night, he didn't have the heart to chase them off, and he absolutely did wake up with Eros at the feet of the bed this morning. But it was too early to let himself rest, so he let out both dogs into the garden and got to work. He usually kept the thick ledger in a hidey-hole close to his own place, but knowing he'd have some time, he'd brought it here.

Best to keep creative accounting a hundred percent analog.

Frank was about to start the tedious task when he was disturbed by a rhythmic knocking on the door. Jag's secret code.

This was going to be a long evening. "Come in!" he yelled from the sofa.

Jag dashed in with a wide smile on his tanned face. It didn't escape Frank's attention that there was a plastic Captain America shield attached to the front of his wasteland survivor outfit. It would have been a lie if he claimed that Jag had *really changed* since coupling up, but he definitely smelled nicer than he used to, and his hair was combed every day, since his boyfriend had way better means of convincing him that it was important. It only made sense that elements related to Dane's comic book hobby had started finding their way into Jag's self-made wardrobe too.

Frank stared at the grinning face. "What?" he asked when it became clear that Jag was waiting for this question with excitement. Some days, he was far too similar to Shane's pups.

When he opened his mouth, words came out like bullets from a machine gun. "I set up traps on one side of the shipping containers. Today, a fox fell in, proving they work!"

Frank rubbed his forehead. Shame for the animal, but in truth they did have too many foxes roaming the junkyard. Going by the lack of carcass in Jag's hands, Frank would be getting some kind of taxidermy surprise for his birthday.

"How big are the traps, Jag? We don't want the dogs getting hurt."

Jag's mouth twisted. "Well, I made them to catch trespassers, not foxes, so—"

Oh, Goddamn.

Frank got up and put away the ledger. He couldn't express too much anger, or Jag might want to hide that he made traps at all next time. "Okay. Let's go. Show me where they are."

Jag's eyes lit up, and he marched right outside, barking at Eros when the dog attempted to latch on to his leg and give it some uh—*loving* attention. The unruly pooch yelped and rolled over, showing Jag his underbelly, which Jag accepted with a proud huff.

If Frank hadn't found him injured all those years ago, he'd surely be leading his own wolf pack by this point. Or lying dead in a ditch.

"When did you set them up?" Frank inquired, following the junkyard Tarzan past the gate and toward the truck. They could easily reach the containers on foot, particularly when traversing the junk piles instead of following roads, but the property was huge, and he didn't want to get his one good pair of shoes wrecked.

"Last week," Jag said, rolling into the truck bed like a stuntman in his prime.

Getting behind the wheel and opening the little window at the back of the cab gave Frank just enough time to count to ten. "Someone could have gotten hurt. You should have informed me right away!"

Jag's pout reflected in the rearview mirror. "You would have said no."

Frank started the vehicle and headed between the nearby hills of crushed cars, into the labyrinth that would lead them to the rotten places where dead bodies disappeared without a trace and people's secrets were kept for a fair price. "I'm not saying it's a bad idea in general, but someone could get hurt. You know Ros walks around everywhere, scavenging junk for the sculptures. When you said the fox fell in, did you mean that literally? You dug out hidden trenches or something?"

Jag grunted. "Yes, we should tell Ros to stay away from there. I was thinking about putting in spikes or glass at the bottom, but for now I left the traps empty, so if someone fell in, it would just break their leg, or something."

Only break a leg. No problem at all.

Frank rubbed his face before taking a sharp turn onto a narrow track with piles of used tires on either side. But as worried as Jag's secrecy made him, an additional layer of security around this most important spot within the junkyard wasn't a bad idea. If Jag was willing to set things up on his own, why not let him? Anyone who ended up hurt would have been an *unwelcome* visitor.

Frank must have stayed quiet for a bit too long, because now Jag was grinning like that time they all went on a trip and he caught a fish with his teeth. "Maybe you could use the trap to catch yourself a mate of your own?"

This again? And coming from a man whose *love story* started with abducting a half-dead stranger?

Ridiculous.

Frank slowed as they approached the empty shipping containers. At times, for a fee, they'd keep someone here for the local motorcycle club. Dex was prospecting for them now, and he offered the club a discount as if it were his to give. He didn't even work at the junkyard full-time anymore, and only came over on the odd day to lend a hand.

“Jag, I don't need to trap myself a man.”

“Worked just fine for me.”

Frank sighed, following him away from the containers, toward a sandy area with a gaping hole in one place. The dirt must have fallen into the trap when the tarp used to hide the ditch dipped under the weight of the fox.

“Jag, I have other things to do.”

“You say that, but deep down your heart is yearning for a mate to curl up with at night,” Jag insisted without any sense of embarrassment over his phrasing.

Frank scowled and shook his head. “Not everyone wants to live like a rabbit in a den. I'm a grown man, and I'm perfectly fine on my own.” He spread his arms. “Do I miss getting my dick sucked on the regular? Sure, but I'll get to arranging that when I have time. *This* is not helping. I still need to move a lot of the cars from around the western gate until I can even dream of days off.”

Jag's eyes lit up. “Oh. Can I have some of the rusted ones for my trap? I'll get Dex to drive the truck, and Dane will help

move them. He's very strong." Any opportunity to boast about his man was good for Jag.

Frank sighed. "Fine. But keep me posted on the progress," he said, because in his experience, it was better to allow it and know what Jag was up to instead of one day finding out he'd gone forward with a far worse plan.

When Frank returned to Ros and Shane's home, the two dogs greeted him as if he'd been gone for a whole day, not twenty minutes. By the time he opened the ledger and looked at the rows of items and numbers, it was clear neither his heart nor head were in it, so he walked past the fence, to help himself to one of the massive tractor tires resting nearby. If he couldn't think, he might as well burn excess energy doing some light training for the competition.

But just as he dragged the heavy thing away from its three sisters and was about to warm up, his phone buzzed with an insistent call.

"Fuuuck!" he screamed into the darkening sky. The dogs started barking in reply.

He took a deep breath, but that wasn't enough when he saw the name on the screen.

Paul.

And that meant one thing: instead of enjoying a peaceful night in, he'd get to dispose of a body.

"What's up?" Frank asked when he picked up the call, because business was business.

“Hey Frankie! It’s been a while,” Paul said in a voice that increasingly betrayed how much he smoked. “How have you been?”

“Busy, so let’s cut the small talk. You have junk for me?”

“Busy? On your birthday? And here I was thinking I could surprise you with some fun!”

Well, at least the old bastard didn’t have the not-so-bright idea to arrive at the gates of the junkyard uninvited. If that had happened, Frank would have sicced Jag on him, regardless of their shared past.

He sat on the tire because he had a feeling this might be a longer chat. Possibly one of those in which Paul tried to entice Frank back into jobs that involved producing cadavers rather than just disposing of them.

“Oh? It’s my birthday? I forgot.” In case Paul was hoping for an invitation.

The raspy laugh echoing in the receiver brought back memories of a time which, while violent, had been much more carefree. But Frank shook off the temptation to go back to his old ways. He had changed and didn’t want to go back to the man he used to be.

“Well, Frank, It’s your fortieth. The big one. You need to celebrate.”

Frank smiled to himself despite his feelings for Paul being ambivalent at best. “Fine. What should I do? Go out and

party? I'm too old for the clubs now. I feel like I'm in kindergarten when I sometimes take the plunge."

"Oh, I got you, Frank. Do you trust me?"

Trick question. "I trust you enough to hide your shit." Which was an incriminating kind of trust that went both ways. They both had dirt on each other, which created a perfect balance.

"Well good. I'll send you an address. Come at eight."

Frank groaned. "Listen, Paul, I appreciate it, but I don't have time—"

"Trust me, Frank. You'll like my surprise. Live a little. Christ! Can't even give my old friend a gift anymore?"

"Okay. Fine. Send the address."

Fuck it. Paul was right for once in his life. Frank did deserve to live a little. Especially on his birthday.

Chapter 2

Frank

THE TWO HOURS REMAINING until eight provided Frank with just enough time to clean up, change, and drive to the address Paul had sent him. The navigation led him to an area with modern apartment buildings, which meant that maybe the two of them would end up drinking and reminiscing about the good old days while carefully omitting the bad ones. Frank had made the effort of dressing in his best jeans, a leather jacket, and a T-shirt with the logo of Shane's dog training business.

He accessorized with heavy boots, rings big enough to break teeth, and several necklaces he'd made himself out of scrap. As much as he loved a bit of bling, wearing jewelry wasn't always practical in Frank's line of work, so he'd seized the opportunity and gone all out.

He felt a bit uneasy walking the clean, cream-colored corridor that wouldn't be out of place in a nice hotel. His world was all about hauling junk into a truck and filling holes in the ground with cement, not fancy places where people drank martinis, but he wasn't intimidated by wealth either.

At forty, Frank had been through enough shit to know a man's worth didn't depend on the kind of car he drove or—in his case—how many gold bars he had stashed under the floor. He was who he was and didn't give a fuck what someone residing here might think of him.

Once he found the right door, he rang the doorbell, ready for whatever surprise Paul had in store.

But when the door opened, his confidence evaporated like dew in the scorching sun. He *did not* feel ready.

The man standing beyond the threshold didn't belong in a place as mundane as this apartment building. His eyes were twin copper plates, and his full lips stood out on his smooth face that was masculine yet had a soft edge to its pronounced jawline. And his hair? Thick and dark, it framed his face with soft waves, as if it had been styled by angels.

Frank knew nothing about art, but as he took in the muscular yet slim form of the stranger, he knew that Leonardo da Vinci himself couldn't have conjured a man more beautiful. He was harmony. Perfection. So beautiful Frank forgot how to speak, and instead stared at the smooth chest exposed by a silk shirt fastened with a single button.

Of course. Paul had invited him to show off his new conquest, and instead of pulling himself together, Frank took the bait and imagined his fingers capturing one of the two golden necklaces dangling over the flesh on show.

"Evening," the stranger said in a surprisingly low, smooth voice. He was still young, but no longer a boy, as evidenced by the strength of his features.

Frank smiled, trying not to stare at the nipple peeking out from under the shirt. He wanted to see this beauty naked and strapped down on the bed, trembling at his touch, but no matter how attracted he was to this guy, this had better not be some weird threesome situation Paul wanted to *treat* Frank to, because he did not share. Especially not with Paul. The two of

them had enjoyed a few tumbles in the sheets in their twenties, but they weren't each other's types. Not then, and even less so now.

“Is Paul in?” He'd better be, because if he was leaving Frank with this gorgeous piece of ass, he might have overestimated Frank's morals.

The rosy lips curved, and the young man brushed his thumb against a belt buckle that might be worth more money than Frank's truck.

Everything about him was *expensive*. Even the peppery note of perfume caressing Frank's nose felt refined. A closer look at the stranger's jewelry made Frank feel a bit underdressed and self-conscious. He'd learned a fair bit about pricey watches and the like from his fun, but ultimately misguided, relationship with a pawn shop owner many years ago, and the trinkets this man wore were almost as *fine* as him.

“Paul told me to expect you at eight. Would you like to come in?” the angel said and stepped aside to make space for Frank's massive frame.

Frank glanced at his watch. He was on time. “Yeah, he told me he had a gift for me. You his boyfriend?” If he was, Frank would honor it, but nothing would stop him from stealing a glance at that pert ass in front of him. The sandy chinos were quite figure-hugging and exposed shapely ankles that would look amazing in a leather cuff.

Frank never got to *see* guys like this in real life. How did people this flawless even exist? And why would Paul torture

Frank by parading this guy under his nose?

The stranger chuckled and put his hand on Frank's arm, wordlessly inviting him to the bright hallway. This time, Frank did step inside, taking in the large living room/kitchen area with a paneled statement wall behind the flatscreen TV and a large bottle-green sofa across from it. With golden accents and an overall bright palette, the place looked luxurious yet not too opulent.

"I'm not Paul's boyfriend," the man said and gently pulled on Frank's jacket.

Frank turned around to meet the amber gaze of this sex personified. "Well, in that case, name's Frank." He smiled and extended his hand in greeting, because why the fuck not? Why shouldn't he shoot his shot? He was too old and too experienced to believe in anyone being out of reach. The spark was either there, or it wasn't. You could always try to pour some fuel over it. And if he got shot down? Not a big deal.

The man hid the jacket in a closet and took Frank's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. Even his fingers were impeccable—soft, smooth, without a single callus to spoil them.

"Ezra. What exactly did Paul tell you?" he asked and showed Frank the sofa, taking away his fingers. Frank had to stop himself from following them with his own.

Then it dawned on him. This man could be some kind of thief or shady jewel dealer. That might be someone Paul knew and who could provide a nice gift. And here was Frank, hitting

on him. Not that he could be blamed when faced with so much beauty.

He sat on the sofa where he now expected to be presented with a selection of jewelry to choose from. “Oh, just that there’s a gift waiting for me here.”

Ezra shook his head and approached a glass table stacked with several liquor bottles and glasses. “Typical Paul. Would you like a drink?” he asked, and Frank found himself staring at Ezra’s behind when it shifted under the fabric.

He shouldn’t drink if he was to drive, but in the worst-case scenario, he could grab an Uber to a motel. Or take a nap in the truck. Maybe it was needy, but yeah, he wanted to have a drink with this gorgeous guy who smelled as if he slept in silk sheets and bathed in cream.

“Whichever one’s your favorite.”

A small smile spread the shapely lips as Ezra pulled out two stemmed glasses with wide bottoms and narrow tops before pouring some amber-hued liquid into each.

It was almost the color of his eyes.

“Hope you like cognac,” Ezra said, settling down next to Frank, with his knees directed toward him.

Were the jewels hidden in a compartment in the coffee table?

Or was he in luck and the pretty boy liked slumming it with big, tattooed guys who could break him in half? Frank smirked at the thought and clinked his glass to Ezra’s.

“How do you know Paul?” he asked, because if Ezra wasn’t trying to do his job and rush him out, Frank would take his time. He enjoyed being around this gem far too much. In his mind, his dick slowly sank between those plump lips but in real life, they opened to speak.

“He’s my sugar daddy.”

Frank’s thoughts came to a halt as his gaze settled on the shorter of the necklaces on Ezra’s neck. Its gold links supported an elongated pendant engraved with the word *SUGAR*.

“Oh,” Frank uttered in a casual manner but his mind was instantly engulfed in flames of lust he hadn’t felt for a long time. He didn’t want to jump the gun, but if Paul had invited him to spend time with Ezra on his own, was the suggestion that he was *available*? He had to spread his thighs a bit to ease the growing pressure between them when he thought about all the things he’d do to this man given half the chance. He cleared his throat, but then had a sip of cognac for good measure.

“So...?” He let the question hang in the air so Ezra could take it however he liked, because asking a guy whether he and Paul were exclusive didn’t seem like the best etiquette.

Ezra sniffed his drink and had a little sip, glancing at Frank from above the glass. Never in his life had Frank seen anything as seductive as those dark eyelashes lowering over amber eyes.

“He asked me to take good care of you tonight. Happy birthday,” Ezra said and clinked their glasses.

Reason told Frank that he shouldn't accept such a gift from Paul. That this was mockery. That Paul thought Frank couldn't get laid without help.

But...

He was already here. Ezra's time was paid for, and Frank dreaded to think how much it cost Paul. Then again, Paul had always liked to throw money around.

“Thanks. Paul... he didn't warn me.” Though it wasn't like Frank had better clothes to wear. There was the suit, but he wouldn't have worn it here. More importantly, he had showered.

But knowing that Ezra was *available* to him made focusing on rational thoughts near impossible. He'd never paid for sex before, so he wasn't sure how things would go down, but the threads holding him back finally snapped and he put his hand on Ezra's thigh. The shiver of excitement went straight to his dick.

No strings, no drama, just pure pleasure.

Ezra's teeth pulled over his bottom lip when he restrained himself from smiling more widely. “I take it you do want to stay the night,” he said and moved the back of his hand down Frank's shoulder. His touch set off every single nerve ending in the bare forearm.

“We have the whole night?” Frank would text Dane to feed the dogs in the morning, because he was *not* missing out on this. He squeezed Ezra’s thigh, breathing slowly even as intrusive thoughts showed him those toned legs parting for him, the graceful throat exposed as Ezra moaned in pleasure.

Oh, tonight Frank would let himself feast and lick every inch of this guy’s skin.

“I will even make you breakfast. Unless you’re very particular about your macros,” Ezra said and squeezed Frank’s bicep. He was being paid for his time, but there was a flicker of excitement in those beautiful eyes, which made Frank hope that maybe, just maybe, this pretty thing was very much into men almost twice his size.

“I’m happy with whatever as long as there’s a lot of it.” Frank chuckled and drank more cognac so he could put the glass down and be free to use his other hand. Paul was an asshole, but they sure had the same taste in men. “I’ve worked up quite the appetite, you see.” He slid his hand up Ezra’s inner thigh, and the scorching heat that sparked where they touched confirmed that yes, he did miss fucking. A lot. But this was a new frontier, and he wondered if there were rules to this he didn’t know about.

Ezra must have been thinking the same thing, because he leaned closer and captured one of the screws attached to Frank’s heavy necklace. “Is there anything in particular you’re interested in? Anything I should know about?”

Just the proximity of this heavenly creature was scrambling Frank's brain. "Can I tie you up?" he asked, instantly regretting that he didn't inquire about something normal first. But he was far too eager, since the last time he had a partner who enjoyed bondage had been years ago.

Ezra shook his head right away. "No. But I can hold my hands still, if you'd like," he said, tugging at the heavy necklace as he played with its parts, hypnotizing Frank and making him lean closer. "As for my rules, we use condoms, and you can't leave any marks on my skin."

"I'm not into anything crazy," Frank said quickly, because he didn't want to spook this guy, whether he was an escort or not. "May I kiss you?"

His dick was rock-hard already, and he couldn't wait to make Ezra's just as stiff. If they were to spend the night together, he wouldn't let uncertainty stop him. He slid his hand up Ezra's thigh, teasing his package with his knuckles.

Was that a soft sigh that escaped those perfect lips?

Frank still had it.

"You may," Ezra whispered and leaned in so close their noses almost touched. He did leave the final step to Frank, perfectly submissive despite the obvious confidence he carried himself with. His breath smelled of mint, beckoning Frank to seal the deal.

Nothing outside this room existed when Frank crossed that last inch and pressed his lips to those soft, warm pillows. Ezra

seemed to instinctively allow Frank to lead the way, but as Frank leaned in, he didn't shy away from wrapping his arms around Frank's neck. The embrace sent bubbles of pleasure to Frank's head, making him buzz with excitement. He didn't even care that Paul was in any way involved in this. What mattered was that he was allowed to slide his hand into Ezra's open shirt. The silk might be fine and smooth, but nothing compared to the warmth of the flesh it covered.

Frank let out a raspy growl and pushed Ezra back until they hit the back of the sofa. Ezra spread his legs in invitation, as if he already wanted to close Frank between them but before the excitement could have become unbearable, Ezra turned his face away, breaking the kiss. He had the most gorgeous flush on his cheeks.

"Take a shower, and I'll get everything ready," he said before pressing his lips to Frank's jaw, as if apologizing for spoiling his fun.

Frank could still taste that delicious tongue as he stood, adjusting his stiff dick. All he could think of was Ezra's legs spreading for him. "And do I then... dress, or...?"

Ezra took both the glasses and rose, leading the way past the entrance and toward two more doors, one of which already had the lights on, revealing itself to be Frank's destination. "There's a robe on the hanger, but you may come to the bedroom however you like. I'll see you soon, Frank, okay?" he asked and pressed his lips to Frank's shoulder, since he couldn't reach his face despite not being a short man himself.

A giddy feeling simmered in Frank's chest at the gesture, even though he knew the kiss was part of Ezra's service. So maybe it was nice to feel appreciated. Couldn't he enjoy the fantasy on his birthday? The sex might be paid for, but it would be *real*. He'd get his hands on Ezra, caress him, and give him so much pleasure it would overshadow all his past lovers.

He frowned when a sharp thought lodged itself in his brain, refusing to disappear. "You're not straight, are you? You'd be paid for the evening either way, but I don't want—"

"I'm not straight, Frank," Ezra said, toeing off one loafer without taking his eyes off Frank. "And I rather like what I'm seeing, so hurry up with that shower. Should *I* be naked when you come out?" he asked and twirled to show off his clothed form.

Frank was forty. His heart shouldn't be skipping a beat at a compliment, but it did, and no one needed to know. Maybe deep down this was the real reason he stayed away from hooking up? He was afraid he'd lose his head for some pretty boy and have to face the inevitable rejection once his hypothetical lover got a whiff of the shady business happening at the junkyard. But here? There was no judgment here, because *this* would be clean fun, with no possibility of emotional attachment.

He smiled at Ezra with his hair bristling in arousal. "Stay like that. I want to undress you."

It got him a wink that somehow made the long-dead butterflies in Frank's stomach come to life, so he quickly hid in the bathroom, staring at his reflection in the big mirror shaped like dripping liquid.

The man he saw there might be strong, athletic, and handsome enough, but he didn't have the looks to match Ezra's. Then again, neither did Paul. Or... anyone Frank knew, maybe with the exception of Shane's boyfriend, Ros. He wasn't used to feeling self-conscious, but faced with such beauty, he couldn't help but compare himself to this man who seemed way out of any regular human's league. Still, even if Ezra was not entirely honest about his attraction to Frank, he was happy to have him here, and whatever Frank didn't get from Mother Nature he could make up for with his actions.

Shedding his doubts, he stepped under the hot rain shower and gave his hard dick a gentle squeeze, wondering if he'd get to have sex with Ezra more than once tonight. Would Ezra want to?

But such thoughts were pointless, so he shut off the water, dried himself and stared at his reflection again. The glass fogged up, but seeing himself bare, with thick arms and chest on show, with the dark body hair glinting with moisture did boost Frank's confidence. Especially since he was both long and thick *everywhere*.

He left the bathroom without further ado, entering through the other door. The bedroom was almost as large as the living room, tastefully decorated in the same luxurious yet not overly

opulent style. At its center was a superking bed with a plush headboard, illuminated with small lamps providing just enough light for Frank to see every detail.

Ezra pulled the curtains shut, watching him from the other side of the room, and Frank did not miss the way his gaze strayed to the cock standing proudly between Frank's legs.

“You're a *very* impressive man.”

Frank spread his arms with a smirk. “You sure you can handle it?” he said and approached his pretty butterfly, excited to pin him down. He wouldn't have described Ezra as small. Ros was definitely skinnier, and Dex was shorter, but the elegant way in which Ezra carried himself, the manicured fingers, the pampered face made him seem more breakable. And therefore more precious.

“I can always die trying,” Ezra said with a pretty grin, taking a cautious step closer to Frank, as if he wanted to feel out what was expected of him.

Frank snorted, not bothered that he was naked next to a dressed Ezra. “Handsome *and* witty! I'm getting my money's worth. Or rather, Paul's.” He leaned forward, grabbed Ezra by the thighs, and lifted him over one shoulder. Yep. Still had it. Lugging dead bodies did wonders to a man's physique. He playfully slapped Ezra's ass as he carried him to bed.

Ezra laughed and put his arms around Frank's midsection, burying his face in the skin of his back. “What do you do for a living that you can lift me *this* easily?”

“Ah, some building jobs,” *close enough*, “dirty, tiring, but they keep me fit at forty. Not to boast, but I have won a Strongman competition or two.” Frank had to bite back a smile as he set Ezra down on the edge of the mattress.

He’d hooked up with a guy a few months ago, but that had been just a quick blowjob that took the edge off. Ezra might have been paid for his time, but the air between them was alight with lusty sparks. It wasn’t some magical connection of hearts, but Frank was at peace knowing this night would be only about pleasure. A clear-cut situation he didn’t need to overthink.

As much as he wanted to make his partner feel good, there were no expectations he needed to fulfill. This was a night for him to enjoy, so he pushed his nose into Ezra’s soft hair, smelling his shampoo.

“Strongman competitions? That explains why you’re built like you’re about to play a giant in the next big fantasy show,” Ezra whispered, squeezing Frank’s pec as if he couldn’t believe its size. “I bet you dress up as the Minotaur for Halloween, rounding up all the prettiest boys.”

Frank chuckled, relaxing into the compliments. He got them sometimes, but they were never this creative. “Only one making me *horny* at the moment. Hm? Too cheesy?” he asked when Ezra snort-laughed. The sound he made was so cute Frank didn’t even rush to undress him and instead tickled him under the ribs, successfully eliciting it again.

“Never too early for the dad jokes, Mr. Forty,” Ezra chuckled, opening his thighs in invitation. His plump lips were right there, like two pieces of a plum Frank could suck on forever without them ever losing their sweet flavor.

“I don’t have kids, dumbass. I’m super gay.” He dove in for a kiss as he let his hands open the only button of Ezra’s shirt. He would gorge on this boy all night, and the stupid jokes only put him more at ease, as they made Ezra more human, and less of an untouchable beauty.

“*Super* gay, really?” Ezra asked, opening his eyes wide, as if he were surprised. “What does that entail?” He was getting bolder with his touch and petted Frank’s hair before massaging his scalp with his fingertips.

“Never been with a woman. Never even been curious. These are the only titties I’m interested in,” Frank said and lowered his lips to one of Ezra’s nipples, which had already perked up and was sweet as a piece of pink candy. “I also love giving head,” he murmured against the fragrant skin.

Ezra arched under him, gasping as he squeezed Frank’s arms. “Ooh... and you top or—”

It sounded as if his professional mask slipped for a moment, and it made Frank smile. He could sense Ezra relaxing in his presence, and their flirting was sparking fires under his skin.

“Oh, I *top*. I just like to give pleasure. If you let me, I’ll make you squirm. Turns me on so much to see a guy lose control. So don’t be shy in telling me what works for you, ‘cause that’s what *I* want, that’s what makes my dick hard.”

Frank pressed his cheek between the pecs just to enjoy the sound of Ezra's heart beating faster. They were definitely getting somewhere.

“I like the sound of that. And that you're so big and can move me around so easily,” Ezra whispered, letting his hands roam over Frank's back. It felt as if he wanted to learn its texture by heart as Frank smelled the peppery fragrance on his body.

Frank took his time running his hands up and down Ezra's sides. He was mostly smooth, but there was a treasure trail going down from his navel that Frank couldn't wait to explore all that awaited him where it ended. There was always an element of discovery with a new dick. Would it be big? Small? Curved? He couldn't wait to suck it and feel Ezra stiffen with pleasure.

In sex, he took his time and expressed a side of himself he usually kept hidden, because in real life, he needed to get shit done, and being soft about it got a man nowhere. But in bed, especially with a man like Ezra, in a place as safe as this room, he could let the walls come down. Even if in some fucked up scenario Paul planted cameras somewhere, what would the point of those be? Frank was out and had no shame about fucking.

He dismissed the intrusive thought as his brain playing mind games with him when he had all this beauty in front of him to cherish and enjoy.

“I’m more than happy to manhandle you a little,” he said with a smile as he opened Ezra’s belt. “But I don’t like force.” Bondage was about something else for him. About his partner giving up control and leaving the choice of pleasure up to Frank.

But not every kind of sex had to happen with every partner.

His new lover gave the sweetest sigh as his hard cock rubbed Frank’s hand through the fabric. Amber eyes captured Frank’s brown ones, and in a moment of excitement so high everything beyond their immediate surroundings ceased to exist, Ezra’s voice sounded loud as thunder. “I can be your plaything. Pleasure me.”

He tuned into Frank’s needs and understood them. It filled Frank with both excitement and relief. Tonight, he’d have his birthday cake and eat it, no fucking coupons required. He pulled Ezra’s pants down along with his underwear without teasing him much longer. They’d be coming more than once tonight anyway.

As Frank dragged Ezra’s pants to his ankles, his eyes went straight for his prize, and he was thrilled to find Ezra’s cock hard and arching up to meet his lips.

Rising from a bed of trimmed hair, it was symmetrical, like the rest of him, and perfectly in proportion to his body. Frank was starting to wonder if this wasn’t all a dream, but when Ezra leaned in and captured Frank’s lips, teasing them with his minty tongue, it became clear that even the best of dreams couldn’t possibly be this hot, this touchable. Now that they

were close, he could sense the gentlest scrape of stubble where Ezra seemed perfectly smooth, and there was a scar on the right side of his abdomen. So he wasn't a marble sculpture after all.

Frank had to give it to Paul that it would be hard to top a birthday gift like this.

“No condoms for head?” he whispered, teasing Ezra with his tongue hovering above the cockhead. Ah, the flush on those angular cheeks couldn't be faked.

The dark lashes fluttered, revealing the eyes Frank itched to make ever less focused as this evening progressed. “Um... I'm on PrEP. Everything was clear when I got tested last week, so it's up to you,” he rasped, but the drop of pre-cum rolling from the slit on his cock told Frank what his lover wanted. He was fully hard now, and the cherry-red tip of his dick looked like the tastiest of lollipops.

Frank let out a soft grunt and licked the salty droplet all the way to the slit. He forced Ezra's thighs wider apart and almost chuckled in glee at the shiver he felt under his fingers. “Oh, I'll be taking everything you're willing to give, Ezra,” he said and wrapped his lips over the smooth cockhead.

Fuck, it felt good to taste a dick again. But sensing the way Ezra's thighs stiffened, how he twisted on the bed, rubbing Frank's shoulders, was even better. Frank might have waited a long time for this, but it was well worth it. The stiff shaft pulsed on his tongue, demanding more attention, and Frank was its humble servant.

He loved the peppery cologne radiating from Ezra's skin and how it accentuated his fresh, natural scent, but he wanted to smell less perfume and more Ezra, so he followed the trail to where his aroma was strongest. Grabbing Ezra's dick, Frank teased his balls with his tongue. He took his sweet time exploring the soft skin, kissing and caressing as he pumped Ezra's cock, unbothered that his own stiff dick was neglected. He'd be fucking this prime piece of ass later, so he might as well be patient and enjoy the journey.

And since he was thinking of ass...

He slipped his other hand under Ezra and squeezed his buttock, pressing his face against Ezra's cock and balls. He could only hope the boy didn't mind the scratch of stubble, but the moan falling from Ezra's mouth didn't sound like a complaint.

"I'm going to make you beg for dick," Frank whispered against his skin and licked along the shaft, exploring its smooth underside. Even if Ezra ended up pretend-begging, this was *his* fantasy, so why not ask for it?

Ezra hid his eyes as his breathing quickened, and he opened his legs, lifting his feet off the bed, as if he wasn't sure what he wanted anymore. "Can I start begging now?" he uttered and rolled his hands down, revealing his face. His cheeks and chest were covered with a blot of dark color, and as Frank rolled his palm up his stomach, just past that stiff cock, Ezra's eyes rolled back.

“You can beg, but it will be a while. I’m still unsure if I want to swallow or see cum splash your chest.” Frank let out a low chuckle and flattened his tongue against the cockhead, pressing it to Ezra’s stomach. He slipped his fingers into Ezra’s crack and hummed when its heat beckoned him deeper. He could hardly believe this absolute stunner was putty in his hands. And if they never saw each other again, this night would leave him with a memory to cherish.

A voice in his head spun the fantasy of Ezra ending up so smitten he couldn’t forget Frank, but it was best to squash it before it got out of control. Ezra was allowed to enjoy his work, but it was still work.

“Frank... please,” Ezra whispered, shivering when Frank rubbed one of his nipples while playing with the hard cock. “I need *something*. And your fingers are so thick.”

Those were *some* puppy dog eyes Ezra was giving him.

Pure porn. *His personal* porn.

Oh, Frank loved a needy bottom.

“These?” he teased and found the puckered hole as Ezra pushed his ass forward, trying to get some friction. Taking a deep breath, Frank downed Ezra’s dick, instantly relaxed by the way it warmed him from the inside. Yeah, he’d swallow. Let Ezra come on his tongue so he could taste him.

He looked up the hard, toned stomach that wouldn’t be out of place on a classical sculpture and hollowed his cheeks to watch his partner’s body go rigid. Time stopped being linear,

and for what could have been minutes *or* seconds, Frank gorged on Ezra's clean yet alluring flavor. On smooth tan skin stretched over toned muscles. On the needy sounds coming from the beautiful creature shivering in his arms.

Ezra's lips parted in a shameless moan and he wiggled his ass against Frank's hand, trembling and twisting until cum filled Frank's mouth in several spurts. His hole tightened and dipped under Frank's fingers as he came, and seeing this Mr. Perfect come undone like this, until he was stripped of all elegant layers and turned into a whimpering, sweaty mess was the satisfaction Frank had craved all along.

He let cum flood his mouth before he swallowed, greedy to enjoy every bit of this handsome man. He never blinked, watching Ezra go from hurried trembling to climax. At one point, Ezra even pressed his foot against Frank's side, toes curled, as Frank slipped the very tip of his finger into Ezra's needy hole. It was relaxed and ready but tightened around the digit, making promises Frank could not wait to see fulfilled. It would be a privilege to be inside someone as beautiful and sweet as Ezra, but it wasn't time yet.

This was everything Frank dreamed of, but he backed away after swallowing the last of Ezra's cum and gasped for air after forgetting to breathe for a bit too long. "You're so beautiful. And even your spunk is delicious," he whispered and rubbed Ezra's sensitive opening.

Taut muscles rippled when Ezra arched on the bed. He rolled his head over the sheets and curled his toes, as if he didn't

know what to do with the sensations coursing through his body. But his hips knew what they wanted, insistently rocking back on Frank's fingers, as if he hadn't gotten the memo that being penetrated right after coming might not be too pleasant.

“Yeah? Was it everything you wanted?”

Frank glanced down to the softening dick and gave it one more taste. “Not just yet. Turn around. Ass up.”

If this feast was paid for, he'd have everything on offer at the buffet.

Chapter 3

Ezra

EZRA WANTED HIS SHEETS to soak up Frank's scent so he could enjoy it while catching up on sleep tomorrow. This man was pure testosterone. With biceps the size of a normal person's head and so tall Ezra, who was not a short man, had to rest his head on his nape to meet Frank's eyes at the door. He was also nothing like Ezra's typical client, and he'd been through enough gym bunnies in his free time to have a valid control sample as comparison.

This wasn't the first time Paul had asked him to spend the night with someone. Ezra liked to have very clear boundaries with new clients and vet them first, but since Paul paid for his car, and apartment, and was Ezra's most stable source of income, he wasn't really in a position to say no. But while Paul assured him Frank was a handsome man, the request still left him somewhat uncomfortable until that gentle giant with screws and nails for pendants knocked on his door.

He didn't regret a thing.

Barely catching his breath, he didn't get to respond before Frank flipped him over as if he were a puppet of flesh and bone. Being on his hands and knees, with his face buried in the pillow was like an injection of arousal, even though he'd come a minute ago and was still on a high from that experience. It would be uncomfortable if Frank fucked him now, but the temptation of that thick cock was so great that he might just get worked up again once that thick rod made him burn.

"Oh, aren't you the beauty..." Frank murmured, and when he rubbed two fingers over Ezra's pucker, Ezra wasn't sure if

the complement was for him, or his hole. He'd take it either way.

Ezra wanted to say something, but only a moan left his mouth, because his overheated brain wouldn't cooperate. Frank's hands were so coarse to the touch, betraying that he did physical labor, and something about it set Ezra on fire. Guys like Frank—rough around the edges, firm, with nonglamorous jobs—were not his target audience. But they were his indulgence. He wasn't even embarrassed about being an absolute mess, because Frank wouldn't see him again anyway.

It was relaxing.

He expected the tip of Frank's dick, a request for lube and rubbers, but instead Ezra felt the soft touch of a hot, wet tongue.

Oh, Frank hadn't been lying when he described himself as a pleaser. Ezra mewled into the pillow he pulled close from the top of the bed when Frank pushed the tip of his tongue into his opening, exploring him with the greed of a man who didn't get to do this as frequently as he wished to.

Ezra was good at reading people—he couldn't have been in this line of work otherwise—and Frank's giddiness, the way he acted as if they were lovers rather than an escort and his client told him he didn't usually hire sex workers.

Frank's massive hands squeezed Ezra's buttocks and pulled them apart, burying whatever analytical thoughts might have passed through Ezra's head next.

Flames traveled up his legs and down his spine, creating a highway of sensation leading to his opening, so he pushed back into Frank's face, curling his toes and arching his spine in response to the wonderfully soft touch. His body and mind were still slow, yet Frank wouldn't let him settle and rest, dragging him back toward arousal with hands the size of bread loaves and a tongue that was now swirling on his pucker.

"That... feels good," Ezra voiced, rubbing his chest and squeezing the flesh on his ribs as the soft, wet muscle opened him up. He'd prepared for anal, but the tongue made him feel soft like butter on a hot day. He'd always had an ease when it came to pleasure and arousal—something that made his job way simpler than it might be for other people—but being with someone who was not only his type but also focused on giving him pleasure? It felt like hitting the jackpot.

"This part of you is beautiful too." Frank chuckled in that dark tone that sounded as if he'd been drinking burnt honey, and as his tongue slid to Ezra's taint, his hands traveled down Ezra's legs until they tickled him behind the knees. This man liked to take his time, and Ezra wasn't complaining.

Well, maybe a little, just because his insides felt tense with the need to be filled. But he could wait and let Frank... well, not exactly edge him, since he did make him come, but definitely enjoyed to keep a man waiting.

Ezra grunted when the tongue played with his balls while the saliva on his hole cooled. "I bet you can't wait to feel me tighten around you," he babbled, rolling his hips against

Frank's touch. "Will I get to see your cock up close before that happens?"

Frank gave his buttock a long lick with his flattened tongue and nudged Ezra's legs farther apart. "Look between your thighs," he said, walking two fingers along Ezra's spine.

When Ezra did as told, he was treated to a sight that made his insides ever needier. Frank was stroking his thick tool, only his thighs and groin visible in the frame of Ezra's legs. Hairy, big as a rhino, and covered with old school tattoos of tigers and cars, he ticked all of Ezra's boxes.

The cock was long, and thick, and being stretched by it would feel so damn good. Ezra's own dick was already getting the memo, and seeing it harden again, so close to Frank's own, made him moan with excitement. "That's so damn hot. All of you is... you're like a massive steak I want to eat all night."

So maybe it was a stupid thing to say, but it wasn't like they'd see each other again.

"I'm guessing you really appreciate man meat then?" Frank said with a hint of humor, but Ezra's breath caught when the bed dipped under Frank's knee and the stiff prick disappeared from view. Seconds later the cockhead nudged Ezra's hole.

His entire body felt weak, and his face fell into the pillow as he struggled not to let his knees slide farther apart. It felt like anticipating a big cup of warm cocoa after a tough day in the cold, and he braced himself while remaining sober enough to speak, "Condoms and lube are on the bedside table."

To reach them, Frank draped his whole body on top of Ezra, and his weight, the tickle of chest hair, had Ezra salivating with thirst. Fuck. Such a massive guy. Of course he took part in Strongman competitions. Ezra imagined him pulling a monster truck, and then himself rewarding Frank with a hot, messy blowjob. He could practically sense gravel hurting his knees, but the need to show his appreciation would have been too great to give up on it because of something as unimportant as a bit of discomfort.

He moaned when Frank pulled back and squirted some lube straight on Ezra's hole.

“Reach between your legs and finger yourself for me. I want to watch.” His voice was as raspy as his stubble and so delicious Ezra would have hooked up with him for fun, had they met in different circumstances. Oh, why couldn't he be into sleek guys in suits? It would have made his life so much easier. But no, his preference lay in big, strong men like Frank, and this gem oozed raw masculinity without even a sliver of a violent streak.

With a soft gasp, he pushed the middle of his back up while trailing his hand down his stomach, past his cock and balls, to reach the slickened hole. Tension grew in the air when Frank said nothing, breathing loudly in the silence, but then Ezra rubbed his middle finger up and down the opening, and just knowing that Frank watched it happen made his dick twitch against his own forearm.

“How do you want me to do it?” he whispered, eager for guidance. He wanted Frank to go crazy for him, even if only for this one night.

Frank grabbed his wrist, ever so gently, and made Ezra press his fingers to the slippery hole. “Tease it first, rub it nicely, get it ready for me. That’s it, sweetie. Now dip them in, stretch yourself like you do when you’re horny and there’s no one around to scratch that itch for you. You like getting fucked, don’t you?”

Understatement of the century.

Ezra’s let slip an ungodly, choked sound as he pushed in his middle finger, eager for Frank’s approval like he hadn’t been for anything in a long time. His brain clouded, and when that big hand drew circles all over his back, he couldn’t help the tremor passing through his body. He wasn’t a fan of nicknames, but in this moment, all he wanted was to be Frank’s *sweetie*. “Yes. I like a big man like you inside me and holding me. I want it so much,” he whispered, pushing in a second finger to stretch his hole, but it was already relaxed, slick with lube, and he wanted *more*.

“You want this?” Frank asked and rubbed his stiff dick over Ezra’s buttock. “Fuck yourself with your fingers. Move them faster.”

He had to be set on driving Ezra mad, because his thick thumb joined Ezra’s fingers. The bastard even scratched Ezra’s buttock with the other four fingers of his hand.

They were in the desert, and this cruel man was denying him a sip of water!

Frustrated, Ezra pulled on his sphincter, opening himself up. The stretch already felt good, but when Frank didn't immediately react, he started moving both fingers in and out, creating delicious friction.

He stifled a happy laugh when Frank grabbed his wrist and pulled Ezra's hand away. In his line of work, having shame would have been a hindrance, so he only felt excitement at the thought of Frank watching his pucker and barely able to contain his own need.

“You think you did a good enough job? Got yourself ready for my dick?” Frank asked, but pushed right in, before Ezra could have come up with a witty answer. The thick girth stretched Ezra's hole, and kept going in a slow, never-ending slide that had Ezra gasping for air. Frank grabbed Ezra's hips and kneeled between his spread legs, his dick rock-solid yet so hot and alive.

Ezra squeezed the sheet, high on the sex hormones flooding his brain. Frank had a big dick, thick enough to cause a bit of discomfort even for someone as experienced as him, but there was a satisfaction in letting go in and feeling his insides mold to its shape. It turned him on that his body could do this—that it could open up to something as wide and long as that beautiful monster between Frank's legs—and as the pain subsided, replaced by a satisfying tension, he glanced over his shoulder, eager to watch his lover.

He expected to see Frank focused on his dick driving into the warm body in front of him, but as soon as Ezra looked back, Frank caught his gaze. He smirked, face shiny with fresh sweat, and he didn't even blink as he made the final thrust that had Ezra's buttocks slapping against Frank's pelvis. That last push had Ezra losing his breath as a cramp passed through his insides, but a moment of stillness made it pass and left him with the amazing sensation of fullness he craved so much.

"I wasn't sure if you'd take it all," Frank teased, squeezing Ezra above the hip bones. "You really are a treasure."

A purr left Ezra's mouth as he arched his back, still adjusting to the huge presence inside. It had been a while since he'd been with someone this big. "Please, I'm a professional," he said and tightened all the muscles in his lower body.

This time it was Frank's turn to lose a bit of control. He let out a surprised moan and moved both of his warm hands up and down Ezra's back, as if he needed to unload the sudden tension by moving. "Fuck. That's got to be the sweetest little hole my dick's ever been in. Go on, fuck yourself on it." He bit his lip, appearing dreamy when his eyelids drooped.

Ezra grinned, feeling playful, yet right now, he was too horny to tease Frank and stall. Their goals were aligned, and he slowly leaned forward, gasping when the thick girth passed through his sphincter on its way out. By the time he pushed back, taking it all the way in again, he could taste salt on his upper lip, but it wasn't the end of his workout. Moving back and forth, he focused on the urgency developing deep inside

him, on the burn in his opening, on the heat of Frank's touch, but as he eased into it, the rocking motion quickened, until his body throbbed with pleasure that only kept growing.

He hadn't noticed when he'd gotten erect again, but his dick ached between his legs, begging for touch. He didn't hold in any moans and whimpers either, uttering them freely, because if Frank wanted a show, that was what he'd get.

"Oh yeah... It's so thick," he whined, rocking his hips ever faster, until the molten hot sensation inside became unbearable. "You ready to come yet?"

"Jesus Christ..." Frank muttered and stopped Ezra from moving by gripping his hips. The onslaught of thrusts that came next had Ezra grabbing the sheets, and his knees slid farther apart.

Frank had the stamina of an ox, and just as much strength.

"So good. I could just... fuck you like this... all night," Frank huffed between one thrust and the next.

Ezra's brain whispered that he'd be very sore tomorrow, if Frank got his wish, but every other bit of him screamed *yes*. "Why don't you?" he teased, breathless as his hard cock brushed against the sheets to the rhythm of Frank's thrusts. He licked his lips, tipping his head back to see Frank's thick fingers digging into his hips, the flushed, hairy chest, the focused expression on his wide, masculine face. Naked and in his element, Frank looked like an ancient warrior enjoying the spoils of this lusty war. The long black braid hanging down his shoulder only reinforced the fantasy. As if he were a barbarian

king claiming a lover with the full understanding that he had the right to their body.

“Because you’re gonna make me come too fast with that tight ass. I see what you’re doing. You think you can just play with me by clenching that hole and milking me as if you’re the one in charge...”

As if this really was a game of control, Frank pulled out, leaving Ezra panting and shocked. Before he could protest, Frank grabbed his knee and flipped him to his back.

“Fuck, yes,” Ezra rasped when Frank towered over him, already folding his legs up. “Will you show me who’s in charge now?” he asked, rubbing the big, sweat-slickened chest. There was something so raw about this man, as if he’d been thirsting for this for a long time and finally got his hands on the perfect piece of ass.

To be fair, Ezra didn’t spend so much time doing squats for nothing.

“Sure will,” Frank said but lowered himself for a gentle peck on Ezra’s lips. His brown eyes spoke volumes about the sense of wonder he felt in Ezra’s presence, and while Ezra knew his worth, the open admiration was still flattering and made him warm inside in ways very different than physical touch could.

Frank didn’t waste any more time. His eyes darkened with determination as he placed Ezra’s legs on his shoulders, and then he was back in.

Ezra trembled, overcome by the intense sensation when in this new position Frank penetrated him even deeper. His arms and chest were tense as he held himself up, but one hard thrust later, Frank was riding Ezra as if he'd never stopped.

His long braid fell down his shoulder and tickled Ezra's skin as they moved, wiggling like a snake with every thrust that brought Ezra closer to bliss. He loved getting blowjobs, but nothing beat a good fucking, and that was precisely what he was currently getting.

It was a *really* good fucking.

Gasping as Frank's bulk folded him in two, Ezra rubbed his cockhead, unsure whether he wanted to stare at Frank's abs flexing as he slammed his cock home, or at the stern, focused expression on the face above. A drop of sweat fell down Frank's big nose and dropped to Ezra's lips, making him shiver with anticipation. Most of the sex Ezra had was mediocre, average, even when he wasn't on the clock, but with chemistry as fiery as the sparks exploding whenever their eyes met, he was unable to control himself. But maybe it didn't matter if tonight he'd be a bit too sweaty, a bit too lewd, a bit too much. Tomorrow, Frank would be gone from his life, and he wanted to enjoy every minute of this ride.

"Yes. Like that. Hard," he whimpered as his insides throbbed around the hard cock.

Frank's intense gaze roamed all over Ezra alongside his hand as he pistoned into him at a frantic pace that made the wild cats tattooed on his chest come alive and roar. It was so damn

good. So exciting. And real. And oh—Ezra shivered when Frank turned his head and kissed the side of Ezra’s knee.

“I want you to come first. I’m not resting until I feel your cum on my chin, and your needy ass clenching around my cock,” he growled like a tiger about to dig into his prey. But Ezra wanted to be consumed. Ripped apart and put back together.

He grinned, briefly hiding behind his forearm when the friction became almost too overwhelming. “Maybe I should edge you, huh?”

Frank snorted and leaned down to press his face under Ezra’s chin. “You can try, but I think your dick knows what it wants.” With those words, he slid his hand between their overheating bodies and grabbed Ezra’s cock in that massive paw of a hand. Its size didn’t make Ezra self-conscious. In a hand that big, any dick would seem smaller.

There was no room to ponder things so trivial though when Frank once more quickened his thrusts and pumped Ezra’s dick at the same pace. He licked Ezra’s sweaty neck and then scraped his teeth over the sensitive skin, as if he were about to bite. Ezra knew he’d told him not to, but in that moment he wanted to be covered with love bites.

But like the gentleman he clearly was under all the ink, Frank kissed him instead. “Go on, moan for me.”

Hadn’t Ezra been doing this the whole time? He wasn’t sure anymore, but at this point his mouth was parched, his chest tight, and his insides throbbing with pleasure. There was no

point in holding back, so he relaxed, focusing on Frank's rhythm. His hands moved up the firm torso, climbed the thick, stubbly neck, finally settling on the sides of Frank's face. There was something magnetic in the meeting of their eyes, and as Frank rolled his thumb over Ezra's cockhead, his entire body spasmed, releasing the built-up tension.

Ezra didn't moan as much as yelp in pleasure, and that only amplified when Frank closed his teeth on his neck as if he was a wolf holding down his catch without wanting to pierce the skin. Cum splashed between them just like Frank had wanted, and Ezra's ass clenched on the thick cock inside him.

"Fuck! Fuck!" he kept saying as Frank stabbed into him in a rapid sequence.

"Yeah... that's it..." Frank grunted in pleasure against Ezra's skin, and the heat of his breath was too much. Ezra couldn't remember being this overwhelmed by a fuck. It was probably because he'd already come earlier, but damn, he was *shaking*.

As Frank's thrusts became shallower, he wrapped his massive arms around Ezra, scooping him into a close hug so they could both enjoy resting in a cocoon of limbs. He was heavy, but his size never felt unpleasant or oppressive, and Ezra shut his eyes, pulling his lover close as that gorgeous dick kept pumping into him. "Come inside me," he whispered softly, straight into Frank's ear. "It'll feel so good."

He didn't need to say it again, because Frank finished after one more thrust. He only had to turn his head a couple of inches to reach Ezra's lips. Shivers were still coursing through

Frank's body as he deepened the kiss, letting his tongue do some exploring.

Maybe the cognac had gone to Ezra's head, but he could have sworn he could feel Frank's cum flood him in a hot wave. A part of him worried that the condom broke, but he was on PrEP and got regularly tested. This embrace was too delicious to untangle from so soon.

He hoped they'd get to do this again before Frank had to leave. A fucking this epic did not happen every day.

He sucked on Frank's tongue with a deep groan and stroked the side of his face to express his appreciation. Making out with him took Ezra right back to the cusp of adulthood, when he was starting to explore his sexuality and touching a guy still felt new and exciting. He complained when Frank pulled away, but it was only to remove the intact condom. A moment later, the god of thick muscle returned on top of Ezra and wrapped himself around him, letting his hands roam as if he couldn't get enough. How could such a beast of a man be so docile and sweet?

Ezra clearly had something that tamed him.

"Do you need anything to drink? Or food?" he eventually asked between kisses, enjoying the steady diet of stroking and caresses. This too was new. The men he slept with—both hookups and sugar daddies—were usually not quite this touchy-feely, but he found it so delicious he'd never point it out.

Maybe he *could* hook up with this guy from time to time? Nothing was stopping them from exchanging numbers.

Frank looked a bit dazed as he pondered the question, but then gave Ezra the most genuine smile. “Yeah. Let’s do it. Let’s get some food. I’m gonna need it if we’re to repeat it by morning in any capacity.” He gave Ezra one more kiss before sitting up.

He was a massive teddy bear Ezra followed with his arms, resting his chin on the thick shoulder. “Sounds good to me. I only have plans at noon,” he teased, because why would he deny himself this one time?

“You wanna shower together or on your own? Or do you like to stay a bit filthy?” Frank teased and rubbed the cum over Ezra’s chest.

“We can always get filthy again,” Ezra said, satisfied with the afterburn of sex. “Shower with me? And then we can pick something to eat.”

Would they order something in? Clients usually treated Ezra to a restaurant, but he rather liked the idea of eating together on the sofa while watching some dumb movie neither of them would be sorry to miss if things got heated again. That was the vibe he was getting from Frank at least. This the kind of guy who wanted the boyfriend experience.

At first, Frank moved as if he had rust in his joints, but once he rolled off the bed and stretched, Ezra’s mouth went dry with thirst. Now that the earlier fire simmered down, Ezra noticed that many of Frank’s tattoos weren’t quite the works of

art they'd seemed from afar, but the fact that the inkwork was unpolished gave him a rough edge that Ezra rather liked. He was still admiring every muscle under Frank's dusky skin when Frank lifted him off the bed.

"Come on," Frank said with more vigor, carrying Ezra across the room. "I'm not wasting a minute of this night."

Ezra held on to him, overwhelmed by this display of strength. It was so damn hot that Frank could sweep him off his feet. "You shouldn't. I'm all yours tonight," he said as they entered the walk-in shower and Frank reluctantly put him down.

He gave Ezra one more kiss and turned on the water. "Is this how you get new guys? They spend one night, get hooked for life?"

Ezra laughed, surprised by the question. He stepped under the warm rain and let the temperature relax his muscles. "Sometimes. I've been told I'm a drug." It had clearly been just a compliment, but he rather liked how it sounded. Addictive and expensive. That was him.

Frank leaned against the wall, letting the water drip down his impressive body, but Ezra could almost see the cogs turning in his head. Could Frank afford him? Doubtful if he was a regular construction worker.

"I'm not surprised. That was... wow," he said and smiled, assessing Ezra from head to toe. There was more he wanted to say, and something about this hesitant silence made Ezra's heart speed up like a horse struck with a whip.

Ezra did not do freebies for people who knew him as a sex worker. Too much money and effort went into making him the man he was, and being with him did not come cheap. So he took some shower gel and started rubbing it into his skin while waiting for Frank's move.

“Would it be rude to ask how much you charge? You know, I'm a very busy guy, I don't have time for dating, but if I had something solid like this, say, once a week, I could make the time.”

Something floated up in Ezra's stomach, tickling him on the inside, and he had to lean against the tiled wall when his legs felt a bit unstable. It was likely that Frank had no idea what a night with a high-end escort might cost, but he did ask instead of trying to woo Ezra into another kind of arrangement. That ought to be appreciated.

“No, it's a fair question to ask,” he said as his thoughts raced. He looked good enough to use the law of scarcity to his advantage and normally charged two thousand for a whole night, despite living in a place where few people could afford that. It only took a couple of men willing to sprinkle some sugar. But he did like Frank. And the sex they'd had left his thighs trembling, so he cleared his throat and spoke. “A thousand.”

Frank remained silent but his eyes did widen a little. Maybe he didn't expect Paul's gift to be this expensive. Ezra didn't know any details about their connection. He *would* be researching the logo from Frank's T-shirt to find out more

about him. Unless, of course, it was a random choice, and a lead that took him nowhere. He liked to know as much as he could about his patrons though, and he usually managed to dig up enough to feel secure, in case things went south.

Frank met his gaze. “Maybe twice a month then,” he said with an awkward chuckle. But he didn’t haggle. Like a real gentleman. Good. Ezra was already giving him a discount, whether Frank knew it or not.

He should probably feel bad over taking all that cash off a man who had to scrape the funds together, but he needed the money too, so why should he have scruples about it? At the end of the day, Frank would eventually move on to greener pastures, like everyone else. Money provided the only kind of security that counted.

Ezra smiled and stepped closer, resting his chin on the wet chest. “Sounds like a plan.”

Chapter 4

Frank

ONE YEAR LATER

[*Steak or chicken?*] Ezra's message came with a photo of meat at a butcher's counter and was followed by a selfie that made Frank's heart skip a beat. The pretty, smiling face was slightly blurred against the background of a mural featuring a field, and Frank could see just enough tongue to remember the sloppy blowjob Ezra had given him two weeks back, at the very end of their last meeting. He was wearing a thin turtleneck Frank had gotten for him when they went shopping around Christmas time too. They'd see each other soon, but it was nice that Ezra got on board with the boyfriend experience Frank had requested over a year ago, after their first night together.

Frank didn't question whether all the messages, brief calls between visits, and the smiles Ezra always had for him were genuine, just like he didn't ask how many people Ezra was seeing and when. A part of him hoped Ezra genuinely liked him on some level, even if their relationship was a business transaction, but at the end of the day, as long as he enjoyed himself and was a gentleman about it, everything was fair. Ezra got money, gifts, and, hopefully, a bit of fun, and Frank got to enjoy his company without jeopardizing his work or lifestyle.

Everybody won.

Frank didn't need to think twice about his answer to the message, since he knew Ezra didn't enjoy red meat. [*Chicken. Can you make some of those spicy potatoes for later too?*]

Because while Ezra was a pampered kitten, who liked the finer things in life, he actually cooked well and liked to do it. His meals were much better than Frank's usual fare of microwave dinners, so as silly as it was, Frank looked forward to them just like he did to seeing Ezra and feasting in a different way.

So maybe he was enjoying the fantasy of dating Ezra a bit too much, but he deserved to spend his savings how he wished. Ezra was his one weakness. Since his sister's passing a few years ago, Frank had never gotten out of the habit of being frugal, and it was now a blessing, seeing Ezra wasn't cheap.

"This is all just old crap, Frank," Shane said, climbing the mountain of newly delivered electronics and appliances. "Broken microwaves, TVs, general shit."

Frank nodded, too busy checking Ezra's new message. He was tempted to send back a shirtless selfie, because it always earned him a flurry of compliments, but with Shane right there, he couldn't—

[I'm trying out a new recipe. It'll be something extra special.]

Frank swallowed, letting himself fantasize about Ezra favoring him among all the other sugar daddies and customers and—he didn't really want to know. And he certainly did not discuss Ezra with Paul after thanking him for the *gift* after that first time. It still felt weird to know they were both sleeping with the same man.

A work glove-clad hand waved in front of his face, forcing him to focus on Shane, who'd approached him unnoticed. "Are you listening? Kids these days. Always on their phones."

Frank put away the phone to Shane's mocking tut-tutting. "I heard you, but you're wrong. We need to look through this. I'm sure we'll find lots of useful parts. This is literally the point of this junkyard."

Shane's handsome features twisted with displeasure, but they've been friends half their lives, so Frank had no doubt Shane would get on with the job at hand. Frank had been there for Shane when Shane had gotten out of prison, and had kept in touch while Shane was behind bars and had no one.

"You got really into texting in the past few months," Shane said, piercing Frank with his bright green eyes. It would have been much easier to avoid his gaze if he wasn't nearly as tall as Frank.

The day was warm, so Shane stood there in his work boots, jeans, and black tank top, looking like an ad for hot builders everywhere. He even rubbed his glove over the short crew cut and squinted against the setting sun.

But this was work, not a photoshoot.

Then again... could they make a 'Wreck & Repair' calendar for some extra cash? Frank's expenses had skyrocketed since his little indulgence started last year.

"So? I've got shit to deal with all the time. Nothing new there. Even arranging this delivery took a few weeks," he said,

playing it cool, because the last thing he needed was Shane finding out he was seeing an escort. Frank would never hear the end of it.

Shane rolled his eyes and stuffed a cigarette into his mouth before lighting it. “Come on, Frankie. It’s been a while. Didn’t want to say anything, since you haven’t really had a life outside of this place for a while, but isn’t it time to tell us what you’re doing every two weeks, when you disappear for the night?”

Frank rolled his eyes and picked up a discarded toaster just to have something to do with his hands. “I obviously go do porn, and then moonlight as a rodeo clown.”

Shane snorted and let out a series of smoke rings. “Come on, Frankie, we’re all adults. Are you getting freaky at some sex club? Maybe I should check which place has events that coincide with your nights off, hm?”

“Sex club? So I accidentally bump into my *nephew* and his guy? No thanks. Some things are best left alone, Shane. Promise it’s nothing that will backfire at you guys.”

“A fuckbuddy then? Are you finally getting some?” Shane winked but didn’t stop staring at Frank with his intense eyes. “Is that who you disappeared with that weekend in the summer?”

Frank smirked and grabbed a cigarette out of Shane’s packet... then put it back. Ezra didn’t like him smoking, so he refrained from it on days they were seeing each other.

“It’s nothing serious, and it’s not exactly a secret that I like to fuck from time to time. I’m not a monk.”

Though that weekend together had been about so much more than fucking. To take Ezra away for two days, Frank only saw him once that month, but it had been a blissful three days. He’d rented a cabin by a lake, they had a hot tub, rented a boat and Frank taught Ezra how to fish. When Ezra caught one, the look of absolute joy on his face was worth every cent Frank had spent on the trip. Later that evening Ezra had been so proud to grill the fish for them, and yeah, they were delicious. Despite Ezra’s love of luxury, that weekend he’d been happy in jeans, sneakers, and a hoodie. Not that he needed any clothes when they went skinny dipping.

After the dip in the lake, Ezra had gotten a rash that made him panic so much, Frank had to take him to the pharmacy, but it was fine, all part of the experience. Any time with him was time well spent, and it wasn’t as though Frank could fuck him round the clock, even if he wanted to.

“No? You won’t be knocking on my door to ask for Ros’s help with an engagement ring design?” Shane sniggered, and when Frank opened his mouth, stunned, he waved his hand, adding. “I bet he could also do fancy handcuffs.”

“Ha. Ha. Very funny. I knew I shouldn’t tell you shit. It’s just a thing. Gets me out of this crazy place every now and then.” There was no future for him and Ezra, so Frank took each month as it came and only planned ahead when necessary. It was better to manage your expectations if you didn’t want to

get disappointed. Ezra would have ran for the hills if he knew what kind of job Frank did to afford his time.

Shane showed him his palms before resting one on Frank's shoulder. "Fine, leave me in the dark. But glad you're not letting that thing dry out," he said and stared at Frank's zipper before walking off to climb the scrap pile again.

Frank rolled his eyes and threw a punctured football at Shane's ass. "You're such a dick!"

"Frank! Frank!" Jag yelled from afar, and by the sound of it, he was running.

Frank wasn't alarmed though, because in case of serious danger, Jag had a special set of whistles. And a grandpa phone for communicating at a distance. It only contained a few contacts but did the job.

"What is it?" Frank asked, leaning against the truck as Jag emerged from behind an old, wrecked school bus and dashed forward in a set of clothes made of thin fabric, which flowed around him as if he were some kind of desert warrior.

"I got treasure! Good treasure!"

Frank swallowed. That meant gold or precious stones. Jag's job, other than guarding the perimeter and looking out for intruders, was scavenging for precious items around the junkyard. It had been a learning curve for him to understand what it meant, but he'd gotten there in the end, and Jag no longer brought Frank glitter-covered toys or broken sunglasses.

He faced Jag, immediately focused on the perspective of cash he might get from... whatever was coming his way.

Shane was all too eager to find out and craned his neck from the top of the electronics pile. “What is it, Frankie?”

Jag presented Frank with a chunky watch. “It’s got that name you told me to look out for. R-O-L-E-X,” he spelled it out with pride. His boyfriend had been teaching him to read for a while now, and while progress was slow, it was definitely there.

Frank’s blood ran faster when he held the piece. It was in surprisingly good condition, and if he gave it a good polish, it would look as if it were straight from the shop. At the back of his mind, he was already calculating how much this piece could earn, but then his phone buzzed, reminding him what day it was. His thoughts strayed to imagining the elegant yet chunky piece on Ezra’s tanned wrist. Something he’d wear every day and think of Frank whenever he checked the time.

He’d never asked Ezra about it, but was pretty sure the necklace with the word *Sugar* was a gift from another man. It shouldn’t bother Frank. He knew where they stood, their arrangement was clear... but it still irked him a little to know that Ezra wasn’t *his*.

“Good job!” Frank said and patted Jag’s shoulder. “I’ll check if it works, but if it does, it’ll fetch a good price.”

Jag smiled. “If it does, get the good cheese. The one Dane likes so much.”

Frank had to admit Jag's dedication to his *'mate* was pretty adorable. "Yep, the one from the deli in town."

He did also give Dane a fair amount of cash for the items Jag found all over the junkyard, but if he chose not to sell the Rolex, he'd need to calculate the percentage in a different way than usual.

Jag beamed at him and rubbed his hands. "Dane loves cheese. Make sure to get a lot." He didn't wait around after that and ran off as if he couldn't contain his excitement.

"Dane loves cheese," Shane mocked good-naturedly when Jag was out of earshot, and Frank couldn't fight the laughter.

"Give him a break, he's in love, okay?"

Frank hated that when he looked down at the Rolex all he could think of was, *Ezra loves luxurious shit*. So yeah, he'd keep the watch for Ezra.

In the past months, Paul had been trying to tempt him back for a job or two, but as much as Frank needed the money, he didn't want to get back into that risky line of business filled with grudges, revenge, and bloodshed. He could see that for Paul, a lack of partner was a disadvantage. He often claimed to be doing well as a lone wolf, and laughed that Frank had been unnecessary ballast, but they both knew that Paul could use the kind of muscle Frank was packing. Paul might be a skilled killer and a good shot, but having someone to trust on the job was invaluable.

But after the way they parted years ago, Frank wasn't joining Paul ever again. They both had shit on each other to keep one another's mouths shut, and that was that. Paul should be glad Frank dealt with the occasional body for him, and if he really thought he could tempt Frank back for 'one last job', he was deluded.

Frank had watched enough action movies to know that *one last job* was always the one where the hero's life unraveled.

Chapter 5

Frank

EZRA'S HEART KNOCKED AGAINST the hand Frank splayed on his chest. Its rhythm was fast, hard, triumphant, but as Frank lowered his sweaty body to his lover's smaller form and buried his nose in fragrant dark hair, it slowed.

The bedroom smelled of arousal and the peppery cologne Frank was now addicted to, but they were both at peace, gradually descending from the high of sex.

Ezra hummed, stroking Frank's hand as they rested. He was beautiful, intelligent, and possessed qualities that sometimes made Frank feel almost unworthy of his presence, but when he was like this—tired out after an intense fuck session, the walls of professional charm became translucent, proving that Ezra was a man of flesh and blood.

Frank liked him both ways, but in moments like this one, when Ezra was unguarded, he had a glimpse of what it would be to have him for real.

But it wasn't a thought Frank wanted to entertain.

Ezra rolled his cheek against the pillow and peeked at him over the shoulder. "Give me a moment," he said with a raspy laugh.

"Take all the time you need," Frank said with a smile and gently pulled on Ezra's ear with his teeth. He liked this moment after sex as much as their wild times between the sheets. So maybe it was sappy, but cuddling a sweaty, spent Ezra made him feel all mushy inside. This was the most intimate he could allow himself to get without compromising

his safety and that of his friends. Relationships were not for him, but when Frank was with Ezra, he allowed himself to pretend that he was in fact just a guy who owned a legitimate business and had nothing to hide.

A purr came from Ezra's mouth, and he reached back, gliding his hand across Frank's hip, all the way to his ribs. "Where did that bruise come from? Does it hurt?" he whispered.

It wasn't as though his friends didn't care about him, but when Ezra noticed things like that, it made Frank feel seen on a whole different level. So maybe he did want to be coddled a little from time to time and feel like he didn't need to carry the weight of the world on his own.

"Ah, it's nothing," he downplayed the nasty bruise that did in fact hurt. "I was moving a big pipe the other day with my nephew, and it fell on me when he got distracted by a fox."

Ezra's long fingers made little circles over the black-and-blue blots. He was so perceptive, always noticing small things no one else Frank knew would be aware of. "You need to be more careful. At this rate, you're going to have more injuries than tattoos. But I have something that could help them disappear faster, if you'd like. And I'm not just gonna kiss them better, even though I'll definitely do that too," he added with a raspy laugh.

"Sure. As long as it involves your hands on me, I'll be happy." He smiled and stroked Ezra's hair. It was always so shiny and smelled like a garden deep in the jungle.

The idea of showing him off as a prize on his arm once more popped into his head. He'd been meaning to ask Ezra last time but ended up too wrapped up in his own thoughts. Frank paid for these meetings. He shouldn't be afraid of rejection. If Ezra turned him down, he would surely be graceful and charming enough to soften the blow, but Frank's tongue remained tied into knots when it came to his new request.

He wanted to invite Ezra to a Strongman event he was taking part in next month. It was in another state, his friends weren't coming, so there would be no need for his two worlds to collide. Selfishly, he also dreamed of Ezra watching him at the competition, cheering him on, maybe even congratulating him on a win. Just seeing Ezra's eyes go all wide and shiny as he witnessed Frank doing tire flips or lifting Atlas Stones would be a boost to Frank's ego, and he'd get a blowjob afterwards whether he won or lost.

Ezra gave amazing head and was utterly shameless in the way he always kept staring into Frank's eyes, an artist of pleasure who always guessed Frank's wishes.

Ezra stirred, and when his shoulder pushed at Frank's chest, it was a signal to let him out of the tight cocoon of flesh and sheets. But as Frank lifted himself, the fine, muscular body below flipped over instead of sliding out of the embrace.

He looked so beautiful when the layers that turned him into a statuesque prize were stripped away. There was no perfection in hair sticking to a damp forehead, or to the uneven melange of reds and pinks blooming on his face and torso, but those

things made him more real. More tangible. Less of a concept and more of a man. When he was like this, the precious golden necklace he must have received from one of his sugar daddies seemed almost out of place under his throat.

Frank swallowed when Ezra's tempting lips stretched into a smile, but he still couldn't bring himself to say the words he wanted. No matter how gentle, Ezra's rejection would have spoiled the rest of this night, and he wasn't planning to go anytime soon.

"So, how was your week?" Ezra asked, because they'd barely talked once Frank had stepped into his apartment, too busy tearing each other's clothes off. His beautiful, pampered hands drew patterns over Frank's skin as they moved up, past his throat, all the way to his face. It was such a strikingly intimate gesture Frank took it as confirmation that he wasn't the only one sensing the amazing chemistry sparking between them whenever they met. Tonight though, Ezra's beautiful amber eyes shone with something new, something Frank couldn't name.

He was under no illusion about the nature of their relationship. He hoped Ezra enjoyed himself during sex, and they had some fun times watching movies or talking, but Frank was well aware that he wasn't the kind of guy Ezra would choose in real life. He'd want a guy who drove a Ferrari, not a beat-up truck. A classy guy who could take him to upscale restaurants and give him an unlimited spending allowance so he could get all the Prada he wanted. Definitely

not someone who knew how to make a dead body disappear in a hundred different ways.

“Mixed bag really. On one hand, we had a new shipment I needed to look through, and I’m pretty sure there’s good stuff in there, but then I was so busy I didn’t even have the time to use my workshop.” Though he did find enough time to make sure the Rolex he wanted to gift Ezra was functional.

Ezra’s hands were so smooth and soft Frank found himself leaning into them as his lover stroked his face and neck, but while he’d normally make a little comment on Frank’s words, or offer a fun anecdote, tonight he remained quiet for so long Frank sensed a tension in the air.

There was a darkness to Ezra’s gaze tonight, hidden behind the usual layer of charm and smiles, and it took him way too much time to notice. Unease settled in Frank’s chest as he tuned in to Ezra, noticing that his breath seemed heavier than usual, that his touch lingered longer, that his smile was a fraction wider than normal.

Was it an act? Why? Had something bad happened, yet like the professional he was, Ezra kept up a facade for Frank’s benefit?

But he said nothing, unsure if Ezra would appreciate being questioned about his private life when at the core their whole relationship was nothing more than a transaction.

But before he could have made up his mind, Ezra rubbed his mouth with his thumb and grinned. “What are you working on now, big guy?”

Frank ran his hands up Ezra's side, indulging in the touch. As expensive as these meetings were, they were worth every penny. "I've been working on my own rig to train for the frame carry. I'm ready to try a heavier one now." He'd also made a ring for Ezra out of scrap copper and silver, but then realized how that might be perceived and put it in a drawer for it to never see the light of day.

"You sure you won't break your back or something? A friend of mine ended up with issues from carrying heavy weights. And you are definitely way up there. Then again, maybe you're superhuman," Ezra added, rubbing Frank's cheekbone with his thumb. This time, he did move from under him.

Frank picked him up without trouble. "What do you think? Am I?" Was it needy? Maybe, but he didn't feel bad about that when he was paying for Ezra's time.

After all, this was *his* fun.

Wide eyes looked back at him as Ezra grinned, holding on to Frank's neck. "My very own superman," he said and pressed their lips together, drowning Frank in a wave of tenderness. He *would* ask Ezra to accompany him to the competition.

He'd make his proposition casually at dinner. If it got rejected, then so be it. Ezra was allowed to choose what events he was willing to attend. After all, he had other male friends to entertain, most notably Paul, about whose presence in their life Frank would rather forget.

“Your superman is very sweaty, and we’re both covered in cum. Shower time, and then, we eat so we have the energy for round two.” He kissed that eager mouth, carrying Ezra into the bathroom.

They joked around a bit, but Ezra was done fast and rushed out to prepare their meal. Left in the large stall on his own, Frank took his time, enjoying how the warm water relaxed his muscles. The rain shower at home was too low for him to use comfortably, due to the low ceiling, so he once again found himself wondering if a little remodel of his home wasn’t in order after all.

Eager to get his fill of Ezra’s company, he eventually left the bathroom, dressed in the fluffy black robe that appeared in Ezra’s bathroom after their second night together. It was his size, and he appreciated the gesture too much to not use it.

He found Ezra wearing only light pajama pants that hung low on his hips and showcased the round shape of his buttocks. The air smelled of fragrant meat, and there were already two plates with potatoes and salad waiting on the counter.

“This smells so good,” he murmured and stroked Ezra’s ass in passing. This was the best gift Frank could have gotten himself. Even if their conversations rarely went beyond casual topics, for obvious reasons, being around this man was pure comfort. In his presence, the fatigue and tensions of real life melted away, letting Frank recharge away from worries and responsibilities.

Ezra had also offered him a birthday gift earlier, a thick brown leather belt, embossed with tiger silhouettes similar to the ones on Frank's skin. It wasn't flashy but of good quality, and while the present had been purchased with money Frank had paid Ezra for the time spent together, it was a nice gesture, which showed that Ezra really did pay attention to what Frank was saying, and to his taste.

Ezra looked away from the pan of sizzling chicken breast and grinned at him. "What exactly?"

Frank stood behind him and smelled Ezra's wet hair. "I especially like *this* succulent piece of meat," he murmured, stroking Ezra's side.

"Not this one?" Ezra asked, fitting his pert ass against Frank's groin with an elfin smile. He might have the beauty of an ice sculpture, but over time, he'd melted in Frank's presence and sometimes let that perfect mask slip.

Frank went to his knees and pressed his teeth to Ezra's ribs in a mock-bite. "Oh no, definitely this piece," he mumbled, rubbing his lips over the smooth skin.

He could sense the warm body react to his touch as Ezra rose to his toes, gasping. His fingers dove into Frank's wet hair and held him in place, as if he wanted something more intense, like a love bite, which Frank knew very well were not allowed. After all, it would have spoiled someone else's fantasy.

"Prime rib?"

“Better than any I’ve had.” He sighed and pressed his forehead against Ezra’s spine to not disturb his cooking too much. They were joking around, but after a year, he could confidently say that Ezra was the most beautiful man Frank had ever been with, and the best fuck too.

“Oh I bet it is. I’m a rare breed,” Ezra whispered, switching off the cooker and placing the meat on both plates. His eyes flickered with amusement as he shook his hips, bumping them against Frank.

Frank groaned and got up. “Do you know it’s been a year since we met?” he asked, wanting to lead into his gift. He’d been planning to give the Rolex to Ezra over dinner, so he could fuck him again while he wore the expensive piece.

Ezra turned and tidied his damp hair. It was dark as night, a strong contrast with those bottomless eyes that still hid a secret Frank itched to ask about. “Feels like it’s been only a moment, doesn’t it?” whispered the smooth lips.

“It does. I know you’ve got other... things,” *men* “going on in your life, but you’ve really changed mine for the better. Seeing you is like a breath of fresh air every time.” He gave Ezra one more kiss before sitting at the table.

Ezra didn’t answer right away and placed the plates on both sides of the dining table by the balcony. His hand slid to Frank’s nape and lingered there for a moment. “You know, maybe I shouldn’t be saying this, but in the past year, your visits have been somewhat of a highlight of the month for me.”

Frank snorted in disbelief, but something warm still curled in his chest. “Flattery. But I appreciate it. Do tell me what you like about my visits.” He reached over to the duffel bag he’d come with and pulled out the small box he’d wrapped and finished with a ribbon, because Ezra appreciated such things.

His partner settled on the other side of the table, but his foot met Frank’s on the floor, like it did each week. He picked up the bottle of white wine and poured some into glasses, taking his time to think over his answer. The flame of the candle he’d already lit earlier made his eyes flicker as if they too held real fire when he looked up. “Nothing was ever an act with you. I was wary when I was asked to meet up with someone I haven’t vetted myself, but it just worked from the start.”

Frank swallowed, frozen to the seat. He wanted to believe it. Ezra never talked much about his private life, not beyond things that were amusing or pleasant, but there likely was a good reason for why he’d chosen this profession. It was fair that he took the money they’d agreed on, but it wasn’t impossible that he actually enjoyed his time with Frank.

His hand curled over the box as he struggled to find the right words. He’d never been good with those. “That’s really sweet. It’s one of my biggest pleasures to see you lose control and just feel, but I also love to see you happy. Like when you caught that fish. I wish I’d taken a photo, because your smile was so big. And since it’s been a year... I got you a little something.” He slid the watch over the table, unbothered that his food was waiting.

Ezra froze, staring at the box, then at Frank, before returning his gaze to the gift. “It was a great weekend. I liked doing something different,” he said, putting down his cutlery to accept Frank’s present.

His tongue briefly parted his lips, as if he was nervous, but when the golden surface of the watch glinted in the flickering glow of the candle, he let out a soft sigh. “It’s... beautiful.”

Frank rubbed his chin nervously, but then grabbed the fork to do something with his hands. “I hope it goes with your style. You’re always so elegant.”

Long fingers fished the watch out of the box, and Ezra rubbed it with both thumbs, as if he were caressing the segmented bracelet. But there was something dim in his smile, and Frank’s heart sank when he realized that maybe this gesture spoiled the relationship they’d built so far. His breath burned when Ezra leaned back in his chair and looked up.

“I need to tell you something.”

Frank froze with a potato half-way to his mouth. “What’s up?” He didn’t like the tone of Ezra’s voice one bit.

He’d assumed Ezra had been nervous when they first met, even though he hid it well, and back at the lake he’d been unsure about being in a boat after dark, but this was the first time Frank saw him in true discomfort. A maddening tension squeezed Frank’s back muscles when Ezra gently put the Rolex back into the box and had a sip of wine. His perfect lips opened wider than usual to take a long, ungentlemanly gulp from the glass.

“I wanted to tell you in the morning, but I think... given the circumstances, I should do so now. This is... difficult,” he admitted, biting his lip.

Oh, God. He hates the watch.

Fuck.

“Did I do something wrong?” Frank stuffed his mouth with food, but he could barely sense the flavor, even though the chicken was tender, and the salad dressing—tasty as ever.

“No, of course not,” Ezra said, but his foot left its usual place alongside Frank’s. “It’s just that—”

The room seemed to darken as Frank berated himself for every dumb choice he’d made. He knew other men offered Ezra gifts, even very expensive ones, so he assumed it wasn’t anything rule-breaking, especially that he’d previously brought him modest, more normal presents that had been eagerly accepted. Was this about the confession from moments ago?

His head overheated at the thought that maybe, just maybe, Ezra had wanted to express some deeper affection to him but couldn’t do it because of the nature of their relationship, and the expensive gift ruined it all by reminding him that they were in fact a client and an escort.

Then again, if Ezra had real feelings for Frank, it would change everything. Frank had become his regular because their meetings offered him a bit of clean fun that wasn’t in any way connected to his job or real life, but he couldn’t deny the fact that the man sitting across from him had crawled way too deep

under his skin than he should have. But if they both wanted to change the nature of their connection many issues stood in the way. It wasn't as if Ezra could live in the dump Frank called home, and Frank wasn't sure how he felt about investing his feelings in someone who slept with other people, even if it was for work. But if dating Ezra for real was an option, Frank could make some arrangements. Though they'd need to first have a conversations about Ezra's future without the boundaries of privacy an escort had the right to expect. They'd need to know each other out of this bubble.

“I'm moving to California.”

Frank's thoughts came to a halt, crashing into a massive pile of broken sentences and emotions. He looked up at Ezra, who'd rested both his hands in his lap and watched him with an expression that was almost unnaturally blank.

The chicken tasted so bitter Frank put down the fork.

Happy. Fucking. Birthday to me.

Of course Ezra had other plans. Plans that didn't involve Frank. And in that new place, he'd probably find much wealthier clients, with great connections.

Frank grunted a “hm” and glanced at the food to get his bearings. The seconds ticking away on the Rolex weren't helping him gather his thoughts.

“Fuck. Sucks for me, but... I guess you've got something waiting for you there?” Or someone. It's probably someone. Someone with real money.

Ezra's inhale sounded strained. "Yes. For a while now, I've been wanting to... raise my profile. It was a decision between New York, Las Vegas, and LA, and I like the beach so..." Drifting off, he picked up the watch again. "I wanted to tell you in the morning but this gift—you needed to know now."

"It's okay. You need to do what you need to do. Consider it a bonus for a great year." Frank gave Ezra a fake smile, but he doubted he was as good of an actor as Ezra. He drank half his wine in one go, but that wasn't enough to soothe the burn inside. "You'll fit right in there with your handsome face."

"Thank you," Ezra said, staring at his barely touched plate. "You are incredibly generous."

"Just as you were with your time. Never kicked me out when I stalled in the morning." He kicked Ezra's foot gently, because he did seem down about this, and despite the hole opening up in Frank's chest, all he could think of was cheering up the handsome man who'd given him so many joyful moments.

"I meant what I said earlier. Every two weeks, I looked forward to your visits," Ezra said, playing with the watch before closing it on his wrist. The gold enhanced the olive shade of his skin, making a part of Frank long for touch. He wished to be the one grabbing Ezra's hand and not letting go.

But affection wasn't, and couldn't be, about force. And what they shared had always been about good, clean fun anyway.

He'd be going back to problems that were much easier to deal with, like finding a good spot for hiding bodies until they

dissolved in acid.

He drank the rest of his wine and extended his hand over the table. When he enclosed Ezra's elegant fingers in his, his heart did some kind of melty shit he didn't want to analyze. "I never thought I'd have the chance to spend time with a guy like you." Let alone fuck him. "You made the first year of my forties fantastic. Just look at yourself. You'll have the best time in California. And if you're ever back in the area and feel like slumming it, you've got my number." He winked for good measure, even though he felt anything but joyful.

Ezra's eyes seemed to have lost some of their shine, but he rubbed the inside of Frank's wrist. "I will," he said in a tone that did not sound like an empty promise. Rising from his seat, he squeezed Frank's hand harder and moved around the table until he stood right next to him. "And if you are ever in California, let me know too. I mean that."

Frank lost his breath when Ezra leaned against him, draping his free arm on his shoulders. He sighed and nodded even though that wasn't likely to happen. He could leave the running of things to Shane if Wreck & Repair was just about rusty cars and disused fridges, but since it was not, he couldn't afford a lengthy vacation.

After a second of hesitation he kissed Ezra's hand, then pulled him into his lap. He had to push the chair away from the table, and the food was getting cold, but as much as he loved Ezra's cooking, it couldn't hold a candle to his lips.

They opened without hesitation, and as Ezra went limp in Frank's arms, uttering the softest of gasps, the need to have him close became an itch that had to be scratched.

Their tongues clashed, and while Ezra was coaxing Frank into a deeper kiss rather than fighting for dominance, it fueled a primal need that sent adrenaline rushing into every cell in Frank's body. The cool fabric covering Ezra's legs was so thin one could sense the body hair underneath, and as he cupped the back of Frank's head and changed position to straddle his lap, cupping his ass felt like the answer to the hollow feeling inside Frank.

He could never truly *have* him, but he could be *inside* him at least one more time, to feel him in that raw form.

Could Ezra sense that need? Just tonight, he wanted to believe that he already missed Frank the way Frank missed him.

This desire was like a wave rolling over Frank and leaving him breathless. He grabbed Ezra's ass and lifted him with ease, and his lover had to understand him without words because he blew out the candle, then reached back and pushed away the dishes, making space in the middle of the table right before Frank set him down. As soon as he had the support of wood under him, he leaned forward and rubbed his face against the crook of Frank's neck, kissing it so softly it felt like being brushed by the wings of a butterfly.

Frank had never been a poetic guy, always grounded in the bleak reality of life, catching glimpses of pleasure where he

could, but around Ezra... yeah, he thought of butterflies, of his lover's skin being like rose petals, and compared his eyes to amber, which might hold his reflection forever. Because Ezra would be taking a piece of Frank to California even if he didn't know it yet.

He wanted to say that, express it somehow, but only some useless grunt came out of his mouth, and he settled on pulling Ezra's pants down as Ezra's hands were already on the soft fabric belt tying Frank's robe.

Neither of them said anything, but every gasp, every whisper of fabric, and creak of wood seemed loud like a gunshot. Ezra's gaze was on fire, as if he were already burning on the inside and about to set Frank alight. But Frank didn't care. The moment the pants landed on the floor, Ezra opened his toned legs, grabbed the folds of Frank's robe, and pulled him between his thighs.

Maybe he was genuinely sorry about leaving Frank behind. Maybe he just liked getting fucked this much. It no longer mattered.

His lips were a drug, and Frank wasn't looking forward to the detox, so he'd gorge on them one last time.

And yes, he did nip on Ezra's neck, because fuck it. They'd never see each other again.

He rolled his hips between Ezra's spread legs, already missing the fucks as much as he would miss anticipating them. But what he'd also miss was the relaxing TV marathons, the

dinners, the cuddles, the sweet text messages, and sizzling selfies.

He had the saddest boner, but he was rock-hard nevertheless, and nothing but Ezra's sweet, tight body would do.

The elegant hand with nails polished to perfection reached down and brought their dicks together, squeezing them to Ezra's hard stomach. The jolt it sent all the way to Frank's feet could have electrified the floor, but he was utterly focused on the man sprawled before him, so very needy and submissive.

For a moment Frank indulged in the fantasy of abducting Ezra back to his lair, cuffing him to the bed blindfolded so he could never leave, but he wasn't that kind of man. And it would have given him no satisfaction to trap a bird of paradise in a cage.

Ezra caught his gaze and tilted his hips, his free hand roaming Frank's hairy chest as if he couldn't decide where to touch next. "I need—"

"Yes. Let me just..." But when Frank tried to pull away to get lube and condoms, Ezra clamped his legs around him and wouldn't let go.

"Don't. I—" He shivered, once again squeezing their cocks. The flush on his cheeks was hypnotic, but he seemed just as irrational as Frank felt. "You know I'm on PrEP. Unless you want the rubbers, I'm okay without," he uttered.

The words awoke such a fire in Frank's brain it was hard for him to think straight. This was exactly what he always lectured

his nephew about not doing.

Fuck it.

He'd get to leave a piece of him inside Ezra.

"I don't. I want you to say my name when I fill you with my cum," he rasped into Ezra's ear and pulled his legs up for better access to that sweet ass.

This was no pity fuck.

He was wanted. Truly *wanted*. Ezra wouldn't have suggested going bare otherwise.

Ezra gave a frantic nod, smiling, and forced Frank down for a kiss so hard it made Frank's head spin. Very little blood was left to keep his brain functioning at this point, but it didn't matter, because his body knew what it needed when Ezra passed him some bottle. He didn't check if it was oil or something else, just poured it in his hand and slicked his dick, dripping some of the improvised lube onto his lover's balls.

"You're so damn good at it," Ezra rasped, squeezing Frank's pecs with liquid desire pooling in his eyes.

Frank didn't want to think about missing this in the future and focused on the here and now.

Here and now, Ezra kept kissing him.

Here and now, his dick throbbed with need.

Here and now, Ezra pushed the dishes to the floor, not caring if they broke.

The rattle and clatter of cutlery infused Frank with a sense of urgency. Which was madness because they'd fucked an hour ago. He just couldn't get enough.

When Ezra laid back on the table in all his glory, wet hair spread around his head, his lean, muscular body arching in expectation, Frank thrust his bare dick in. and even his gums pulsed with pleasure as he held Ezra's thighs open and drilled into him without mercy.

Ezra didn't want mercy. He wanted a thick cock inside of him.

His lover arched on the table, his mouth opening wide, fighting for air as he clutched one hand on the edge of the tabletop and pulled the other down Frank's chest, biting him with his nails. A hiss left his wonderful lips, then a hoarse gasp, and finally a low moan when his heels dug into the small of Frank's back.

The world pulsed with blurry colors, and Frank could swear he heard Ezra's heartbeat as that tight body opened for his cock.

He leaned down, grabbing Ezra's hip with one hand, and keeping himself up with the other. "You're a vision when I'm inside you," Frank muttered, riding the tight hole with an urgency he'd never felt before. He both didn't want this to end and *needed* to come inside Ezra.

But as much as he craved this connection, he watched Ezra for reactions, admired every twitch of his muscles, and then moved his hand to Ezra's cock, because his biggest turn-on

was giving pleasure. Seeing a man come, warm seed dripping from his dick, face flushed, mouth open in a moan was the hottest thing for Frank.

Seeing Ezra in that state? That was what got him addicted and spending so much money he didn't even want to account for it.

“And you're a beast when you're fucking me,” Ezra whispered through his teeth, moving with the table as Frank slammed into him over and over, transforming his composed beauty into the lusty demon he existed as now. “You feel good every single time.”

His words went straight to Frank's head, and he hammered into him faster, prompting his lover to squeeze his eyes shut and roll his head over the tabletop, as if he couldn't contain the sensations passing through his body.

“Every. Single. Time?” Frank teased, slamming in hard to punctuate those words, as he rubbed Ezra's gorgeous dick without rhythm to prolong his pleasure.

He leaned lower to lick the delicious sweat forming between Ezra's pecs. He needed to remember every second of this night.

Ezra nodded, again holding Frank's face and meeting his gaze. “Every single time. You are *so* good,” he rasped as his hot insides milked Frank's cock, making his head spin.

Those words made Frank's arousal skyrocket, and just the thought that his pre-cum was now lubricating Ezra had him

move faster. He tightened his grip on Ezra's cock and stroked it at the same frantic pace. They fit together so well, and the smooth inner muscles seemed to caress Frank's dick every time it pushed in.

His mouth couldn't get enough, either and he rubbed his cheek against the pec, then nipped at the stiff nipple. With Ezra, he could be his most primal self, and when his lover pulled him close, arching his torso toward him, Frank let the monster overcome him and bit down on the hot flesh before sucking the smooth skin.

Ezra whimpered, but instead of pushing him away, he dug his fingers into Frank's shoulders, keeping him there for a moment longer. "Oh God. Yes. Frank..."

"That's it. Come for me, baby. Fuck my hand like it's yours. Ride my cock while you're at it, needy boy."

Ezra's eyes rolled back and he rocked his hips, making his abs stiffen as he did what Frank asked, not even trying to contain his pleasure. His voice was the most beautiful melody Frank ever heard, reaching a crescendo when cum jetted from his dick, slicking Frank's fist and painting Ezra's flushed chest.

He'd take this fucking image to the grave with him, and no one needed to know. This was his only. Ezra had never agreed to bondage, but when Frank moved his hands to trap Ezra's wrists above his head, there wasn't a single complaint, just desperate panting to accompany the last bit of cum jutting out of Ezra's cock.

If Ezra liked a beast, Frank wouldn't hold back.

He squeezed Ezra's wrists and unleashed an onslaught of thrusts, focused on coming inside that angelic body throbbing with heat around his dick.

"Keep your legs wrapped around me," he rasped when Ezra's grip on him seemed to weaken.

The lovely thighs immediately pressed to his sides, and Ezra opened his eyes wide, flinching slightly yet not telling Frank off for fucking him so hard. "Yes...I just... it's so much."

"You can take it, pretty thing," Frank whispered, but he could already taste the orgasm on his lips. Or was it Ezra's cum he'd licked off his skin? He wasn't sure, but it didn't matter because it was over moments later

He pressed himself tightly against that pert ass, fantasizing about the way his spunk flooded Ezra's insides. His mind was so hazy he couldn't even remember the last time he'd had sex without rubbers. It wouldn't have mattered anyway because the way Ezra's ass squeezed him was everything he needed to know.

Ezra cried out and pulled Frank's hips against him as his chest rose and fell. He opened and closed his hands, which were still trapped by Frank's wrists, sighing softly, as if he wasn't yet back to reality.

"I can take it, Frank."

A little lazy smile made its way to Frank's lips when he rocked against Ezra's ass, as if it was his instinct to rub his

cum into Ezra.

“You’ve taken it so beautifully,” Frank murmured, kissing Ezra’s chest as his dick softened. “I might just need to see,” he said with a spark of wickedness in his chest.

He let go of Ezra’s hands and pushed his legs apart as he sank to his knees to get a good look at Ezra’s dripping hole.

Ezra exhaled and shifted closer to the edge of the table. “See something you like?” he whispered in a raspy voice as Frank took in the sheen of oil in Ezra’s crack. A trail of cum dampened the skin above a little pool that must have followed Frank’s cock as he withdrew. Most of it was still deep inside the spent body.

“You know I do...” He leaned in and spread Ezra’s cheeks to run his flattened tongue over the sensitive flesh. He didn’t care for the taste of his own cum, but he loved everything about this well-fucked pucker. When Ezra whimpered, Frank teased the tip of his tongue inside, trembling from lust as he held Ezra’s thighs. “Such a delicious, responsive creature.”

“I am,” Ezra said breathlessly and massaged Frank’s head with his fingertips, encouraging him to go on. His smooth flesh was pliable and relaxed now, so when Frank pushed one finger inside him, to coax out more cum, it went in without an issue. Ezra’s toes curled. He even wiggled his ass a little in encouragement.

Frank pushed his finger in and out without rush as he kissed Ezra’s smooth balls.

There would be no way for him to move on. Ezra had set the bar far too high.

All Frank could do now was gorge on this beauty a bit longer before going back to his loveless life interjected by mediocre blowjobs.

He gave Ezra's hole one last kiss, but the moment he rose, his lover grabbed him and pulled himself into a sitting position, greedily inviting Frank into his arms.

It was impossible to deny him, but saying goodbyes might prove too testing for both of them, so Frank didn't stay for breakfast and left Ezra's bed deep in the night, after a final glance at his sleeping form. In the light sneaking in through the blinds, his beautiful face looked younger and so innocent Frank wouldn't have believed it belonged to such a horny man if he hadn't been there to witness it.

But he didn't stall and left, silently wishing Ezra a life worthy of him.

Chapter 6

Ezra

WARM SEPTEMBER AIR SWEPT Ezra's hair back as he drove out of town, cutting through woodlands and fields no longer bearing any crops. He tried not to let annoyance get the best of him, since that wouldn't change his situation anyway, but he had better things to do than dealing with a client who did not show up to his appointment and didn't even bother to pick up the phone.

Were it anyone else, Ezra would have let it go and got on with his life, but Paul had been the largest source of his income over the past two years and demanded to be treated accordingly. Which was fine. He was good-looking enough, didn't want any weird shit, was an okay lay, and never failed to be generous with gifts, but also sometimes wanted to meet up last minute or asked Ezra to sleep with someone as a favor. There was always compensation, of course, but while at times it clashed with his other plans, it wasn't as though Ezra could afford to say no to his cash cow. Only so many men around here were willing and able to pay his premium rates.

That would not be the case in LA, where he was heading in a matter of days.

He wasn't surprised when Paul did not show up at his doorstep at noon, as they'd agreed, since lateness wasn't that uncommon for him. But when an hour passed while Ezra waited, ready to see him for the last time and get on with closing this chapter of his life by packing and running errands, he lost his patience. Paul already knew Ezra was leaving town in just a couple of days—which he did not appreciate—yet

conveniently forgot to take the keys of the expensive car he'd lent Ezra the last time they'd seen one another.

In an ideal world, Ezra would have accepted the vehicle as a parting gift, but since they'd already established his now *ex* sugar daddy wanted it back, he could pick it up himself from the underground garage. Ezra didn't know whether Paul's absence was a way to punish him for leaving, but he had lots of stuff to deal with and couldn't have this guy showing up unannounced at a later time, to make up for the missed appointment. It wasn't as if he needed to cater to Paul anymore.

Which was why he made the decision to drive over to Paul's and hand him the keys, or even leave them on his porch, so he could pick up the Jaguar at a later date. He could even give Paul a consolation freebie while he was at it, to leave all bridges unburnt. One never knew when old acquaintances might prove handy.

Ezra's thoughts once again drifted to Frank, and he rolled his eyes, annoyed with himself. He wasn't the sentimental type, and in his line of work, the last thing one needed was to get attached to a client. But the two of them did have a good run, and while Frank paid least out of the men on Ezra's roster, due to Ezra's lust-filled brain giving him a discount rate that first night, Frank was fun to be around. And the sex? They had mad chemistry, and in another world, where Ezra was the one with loaded pockets, he would have procured Frank's services.

He was genuinely bummed over likely never seeing him again, but if Ezra was to get ahead in life, he needed to focus on his game plan, not silly fantasies of meeting up with that gentle giant in the future. After all, youth and beauty only lasted so long, and while he assumed his expiration date would come at a later time than the average female escort's, at some point he'd stop being the top shelf commodity. Sure, he took care of himself at the gym, and at an aesthetician's, he ate well, and there were always options involving surgery, which he could look at in the future. But if he was to avoid becoming one of those people who chased youth until they transformed into disfigured caricatures of themselves, he needed to make the most of being in his prime.

Los Angeles was full of other beautiful men with big dreams and empty bank accounts, which was why he'd stalled for so long with the move in the first place. He did not want to end up needing to sell his time cheaply, in order to maintain the lifestyle that would allow him to keep up with the kind of clientele he aimed for. Therefore the connection he'd made with a man from the film industry was the answer he'd been looking for.

The dude was a blockbuster movie producer, had more than enough cash to burn on Ezra's time, and an apartment for him, as long as Ezra signed an NDA and became his exclusive boyfriend for a year. Their relationship might end after that, but being in this man's circles would allow Ezra to meet other potential clients and, in an ideal world, follow in his mother's footsteps and get himself a rich husband.

Hurray for marriage equality.

Ezra briefly wondered if Frank was the marrying type. He made it his business to know things about the men he was seeing, so he knew Frank owned a junkyard, but how much cash could this kind of enterprise bring? A part of Ezra found it endearing that Frank saved his earnings just to see him every now and then, so he made sure that their evenings were extra special.

He'd been somehow both relieved and disappointed when he'd woken up yesterday, to find his bed empty and the cash left on the nightstand. Frank hadn't even messaged him since. So maybe this would have been inappropriate, but he'd still enjoy hearing from him for the last time.

Ezra slammed his hands against the steering wheel to shut down the useless train of thought. Frank was out, and so were Paul, Abraham, Alexander, and his other clients. *In* was Robert, the film producer whose surname shall never be mentioned if Ezra didn't want to be sued.

Ezra had a few expensive accessories to sell online and shit to do, so he'd deal with Paul and close this chapter. Maybe a little distraction was in order?

His gaze drifted to the phone attached to the grip in front of him, and moments later, he was calling his friend. Carmen didn't always pick up, since she had more clients than Ezra, but her iPhone was like an extra limb, and he wasn't surprised when her sculpted features appeared on the screen.

“Hey, babe! What’s up? Inviting me to your new sugar daddy’s yacht any time soon?” She flashed her bright white teeth at him and lifted the phone to show herself drowning in bubbles. This did not look like the tub in her home.

“Are *you* inviting me to *your* new daddy’s luxurious bathroom?” Ezra quipped back, kind of wanting to meet up with her after this was over. Otherwise, he was at risk of overthinking his conflicted feelings all evening.

“If you ever come back from California to grace us with your presence and the glow of your new tan.” She rolled her eyes.

Carmen was joking, but Ezra could sense a little bit of jealousy under the nonchalant comment. He’d lie if he claimed it didn’t give him some satisfaction. After all, he’d secured himself a rich guy in LA while she was stuck in the very city she started out in several years ago.

He ignored the little voice at the back of his head, which told him Frank was here as well, and that once he arrived in the promised land of sunshine and heavy traffic, he’d likely never see either of them again.

“I’ll keep that in mind. I just hope I haven’t forgotten anything. I worry what will happen if things don’t work out with my new guy. I only really met him once,” he said, rolling his shoulders to relieve the painful tension keeping them stiff.

Carmen pouted and grabbed herself a chocolate-covered strawberry from the bowl on the side of the bathtub. She didn’t

usually eat sweets, so Ezra was pretty sure she was doing this just to show off what she had.

“If he’s a psycho, I’ve got his address. Other than that, what do you have to lose? I mean, you’ll be missing out on the pleasure of my company of course, but with a face like yours, you’ll find another guy, or several, if push comes to shove.”

Ezra tightened his grip on the wheel and sucked in air. Shades of green surrounded him from all sides, but they didn’t bring him peace. Not when he had so much on his mind. “I saw Frank last night. Said my goodbyes,” he said, and despite hoping that spitting it out would offer some relief, conflicted emotions only gained weight in his heart.

Carmen groaned, holding that damn strawberry instead of biting into it. She likely wouldn’t, instead using the dessert as a prop for an Insta photoshoot. “Not Frank again. Get a grip Ezra. You can’t live on good dick.”

She didn’t need to be so crass. “He isn’t the only guy who’s good in bed, okay? I like him as a friend, and it’s... weird to leave him behind like this.”

Carmen gave him a skeptical glance. “You’re not in love with him or something? From what you told me about him, he can’t provide you with the living standards you deserve.”

Ezra exhaled as his thoughts returned to the moment he woke to discover Frank had already left. The money resting on the bedside table had been agreed upon beforehand, but for once they felt like confirmation that the friendship they shared had always been only a business agreement.

It shouldn't upset him, but it did.

"You know I don't fall in love."

Carmen rolled her eyes. "I've heard that before from girls who caught feelings for a client. I thought it doesn't work like that for you boys."

"That's not the point. He's a good guy, never haggled, and while he did pay for my time, he never made me feel like it."

"He probably just doesn't want to feel like he's a John."

Annoyance buzzed at the base of Ezra's throat. "You never even met him."

Carmen shook her head and put away the strawberry to rearrange a dark curl that fell on her wet shoulder. "Then go live with him if you like him so much. He can be your junkyard daddy, you can go dumpster diving together, and in the afternoons, hang out in front of his trailer on second-hand sun chairs as you drink lukewarm beers because his fridge broke. Is that really the life you want?"

It did not sound appealing, especially that changing course now would have been reckless. Ezra only knew Frank from their encounters every two weeks, and the occasional (okay, maybe not occasional) conversations on the phone, and couldn't predict what kind of partner he'd be. Or how long it would take him to get bored of Ezra and kick him out with nothing.

Literally nothing, since there would be no way to accumulate any wealth in the situation Carmen had just described.

“Oh, baby, no, you are actually thinking about it,” she said, raising her voice and bringing the phone closer to her perfect face. “Look, if you want stability, you can’t be with a client. He’ll always remember how you met. Once the honeymoon period’s over, it will start bothering him. Ask me how I know.”

“Frank is nothing like Brian,” Ezra protested, because he’d smelled that man’s rotten attitude from the moment he’d met him at Carmen’s birthday party three years back.

“They’re all like Brian deep down. They get jealous, suspicious, and eventually dump you, or even hurt you on the way out. The only safety is in creating your own wealth and depending on yourself. Those guys? They’re walking ATMs, honey. It’s a bonus if they’re handsome and fun to be around.”

Ezra didn’t believe for a second that Frank would have actually done anything to hurt his feelings on purpose, he was too gentle for that, but she was right about one thing—he could not help Ezra achieve his goals. And that was that. He could feel like safety between the sheets, when he wrapped those massive arms around Ezra, but he couldn’t provide it in the real world.

Still, the way she kept suggesting Frank wasn’t a man of high value irked Ezra each time they talked about him. But maybe it didn’t matter, since that friendship was over. He exhaled, realizing he was almost at Paul’s home.

“I gotta run.”

“Bye, babe! Don’t be a stranger, tell me all about Cali when you get there!” She looked like she was about to bite into her

strawberry, but disconnected before that could happen.

Ezra pulled into the road that would take him to his destination, still annoyed by this food edging. Paul would usually come over during the week but see him at his own place on the weekend, so Ezra knew where to head, and after cleansing his mind with a silent recitation of the latest earworm, Ezra followed the driveway leading to the farmhouse hidden between the trees.

After coming here for the first time, Ezra had perused property listings to find out that it had been last on the market a few years prior and sold for almost three million. Despite that price tag, it had a rustic feel to it due to the simple, familiar form of the main building and barn doors on each of the four garages. The facade covered in black wooden siding hid minimalist yet luxurious interiors that proved Paul indulged himself also outside the bedroom, but a part of Ezra wished that he wouldn't be invited inside. He was not in the right mind space for sex. Not that it ever stopped him—after all, he was a professional—but a man could dream.

A black BMW was parked outside, polished to perfection yet unfamiliar, which suggested Paul had guests. He should have still answered Ezra's messages, but since it would have been impolite to bother him in this situation, Ezra decided to let himself into the yard and leave the keys in the cabinet on the back porch.

Ignoring the main entrance, Ezra passed the firepit and outdoor bed where Paul had fucked him more than once. He

walked behind the main house, stepping onto the graveled area leading onto the porch. He was surprised to see the back door open but didn't think twice about it and climbed the two steps. He pulled out his phone, ready to message Paul as soon as the keys were tucked behind the glass doors of the cabinet when a pungent smell stabbed his nose.

Bleach?

“Hello?” Ezra asked without thinking and turned toward the door as the hair on his nape bristled. Maybe he should check on Paul after all. What if he hadn't bailed earlier? Even a strong, healthy man could suffer some kind of accident or heart attack, and who could possibly help him all the way out here?

Sweat beaded on Ezra's upper lip as his stomach sank in sudden worry, because that made perfect sense. If Paul had gone out, the back door would have surely remained locked, and that car? Maybe it wasn't a guest's but a new purchase he couldn't fit into the garage.

Ezra stepped into the dining room decorated with dark beams and a long table made out of a tree that had been cut lengthwise. Inside, the sharp odor was even more pungent, but he headed through an open doorway and entered the huge living room, surprised by a tapping sound. Stopping in his tracks, Ezra focused on the noise, only to hear a muted melody coming from somewhere inside the house. He recognized Paul's voice, and that was when it hit him that the tapping was just falling water, and the inconsiderate fucker who'd stood

him up earlier was taking a shower in the first floor guestroom's ensuite.

Ezra rolled his eyes, angry that he'd gotten all worried for Paul, who'd clearly ignored him on purpose, just to fuck with him in retaliation for being abandoned by his favorite fuck toy. But since he was fine, Ezra headed for the kitchen, intent on leaving the car keys on the counter to let the bastard know what he'd missed out on with his petty behavior.

He approached the kitchen island, slammed both his phone and the Jaguar keys onto the marble counter, and approached the refrigerator to grab a piece of paper from the magnetic notepad when his foot slipped.

Cursing softly, he saved himself by grabbing the counter, but then his gaze landed on the wide space between the sink and the kitchen island. His body turned into wood, refusing to move or breathe. Only his heartbeat sped up so rapidly it felt like it was about to shatter his ribcage.

Kitchen towels lay on the floor, red and brown, but a lot of the liquid they were meant to soak up remained on the tiles, including the thick streak that had almost made Ezra fall over. He wasn't sure what he was looking for at first, but then recognized the coppery scent, which in this room was not masked by bleach.

It was blood, and Ezra found himself wondering why Paul would mess up this beautiful kitchen when he had a large property on hand to butcher whatever animal he'd hunted down.

Only it wasn't an animal.

Fingers peeked out from a large black bag, and as Ezra stepped closer, feeling removed from reality altogether, it almost seemed like the severed hand was reaching for a bloodstained saw resting next to a large stewing pot containing —

Ezra bent in half as his stomach convulsed, releasing his latest meal onto the floor at his feet, but he was already backing away, while the dead eyes of an unfamiliar man watched him from the pot in accusation.

When the shower a little bit farther down the hallway stopped running, the silence was as loud as a gunshot, and Ezra *ran*.

The predator was no longer distracted, and the moment it sensed his presence, his head would join the stranger's, his body no longer an object of pleasure but a slab of meat.

The world around him moved in slow motion, blurring as he dashed around the house and then into the car he'd left with keys still in the ignition. The skin at the back of his neck burned, suggesting that Paul had already spotted him, that he was already heading to the front of the building, and that he'd keep Ezra alive for hours of torture.

But nobody shouted or shot his way as he started the car and sped up the driveway and then away from the property with fire in his veins and a heavy weight in his chest. Surely, he was violating all road laws and speed limits on his way from the

isolated property, but he'd welcome a police car at this point, and the safety of an armed man at his side.

But as he pulled into a larger road and joined the sparse afternoon traffic, the tension turned into relief, because Paul would have followed him if he knew his secret had been discovered. And he wasn't chasing Ezra down like a maniac or calling him, then—

Ezra's hands shook so suddenly he swerved to the other side of the road, prompting the upcoming truck to honk, but immediate danger released him from the unexpected stupor, and he squeezed the wheel, going back into the right lane.

Shit.

He'd left his phone on the fucking kitchen counter.

And if Paul didn't notice its presence right away, he surely had by now.

Paul, the killer who sang 'Purple Rain' in the shower after cutting up some dude into bite-size chunks, knew Ezra found out what he'd done.

He was dead.

Dead.

A sob tore from Ezra's throat as he headed toward the setting sun, but this was not the time for crying. His first thought was to contact the police, but Paul had suggested numerous times that he had some bigwig cops in his pocket. Whatever deal he'd struck might apply to shady business dealings, not

murder, but could Ezra afford that risk? No, he needed to get the fuck out of town.

People like him were often disposable casualties for cops.

Every organ inside him cramped when he realized that while some of his stuff was already packed, it wasn't as if he could just pop into his apartment, grab some suitcases and go, because Paul could chase him down there too.

He had no friends who'd let him stay overnight, but even if that kept him safe today, what then? He was so fucking screwed.

But as he agonized over being in this terrible situation that seemingly offered no ways out, his frantic thoughts settled when he thought of the one person who might offer him a helping hand. He lived in a remote location Ezra only knew approximately, but finding him would be the best bet, if Ezra wanted to stay alive.

He took a turn toward the Wreck & Repair junkyard.

Chapter 7

Frank

FRANK FLIPPED THE TRACTOR tire again with a frustrated grunt. Nothing was going right for him today, and getting exhausted to the point of passing out on his sofa after this workout seemed to be the best course of action. Every time the black rubber behemoth hit the ground, a cloud of dust hit him in the face like extra punishment. Not that he deserved it.

He'd stuck to the rules and gone to see Ezra every two weeks or so, which, while expensive, was manageable thanks to his savings. He hadn't gotten his hopes up, understood that the arrangement was based on money and would end at one point or another. Deep down, he knew that Ezra would at some point move on to greener pastures. But it had still hit Frank like that dust from under the tire. Expected, yet somehow just as unpleasant as if it had come out of nowhere. It left Frank wondering if there was something he could have done to keep Ezra that bit longer. Paid more? Eviscerated his bank account to see him more frequently? Pulled out the big guns and used the gold bars he had stashed for emergencies?

"Fuck!" he screamed when the tire wouldn't budge.

Or should he have been more affectionate, so that Ezra would grow attached to him? That would have been an embarrassing failure, since Ezra wasn't interested in him that way though their chemistry was great. It was Frank who'd lost his mind and swallowed the hook of the fantasy Ezra had created for him. Despite acknowledging the reality of their situation, he'd still gotten addicted to the sweet lips, open legs,

and shameless compliments, like some lovesick kid, not a man of forty-one.

All that despite knowing their relationship could never turn into anything beyond sex and friendship, because he couldn't have indefinitely lived a double life.

Frank grabbed a towel from the rickety bench nearby. It was getting dark, but there were four outdoor lamps around the training area he'd set up close to his home. He'd created this space as his sanctuary, and twice even held local competitions here, yet tonight it didn't bring respite.

Since the night when he'd left Ezra's apartment early, he couldn't get his head on straight, instead sulking like some rejected teenager. On one hand, maybe this was a sign that he should in the future rely on one-night stands, on the other, how could *anyone* in the real world hold a candle to the absolute perfection that Ezra had been?

Frank rubbed his face with the towel and sat on the bench, doubting that he'd actually gotten all the grime off. He lit a cigarette anyway, because who the fuck cared if he was filthy or stank? Dex might have told him to shower, but his nephew didn't live here anymore.

He looked up into the darkening sky, thinking back to the night he'd spent with Ezra in that cabin in the woods. They had stayed up until late, and Frank had taken Ezra for a spontaneous night outing on the boat, because the full moon had been so bright. They'd watched the stars reflected in the lake, and ended up getting so amorous they made out in the

boat like two horny teenagers. They'd had to stop the hand jobs at one point, because the rocking made Ezra paranoid about falling into the water, which gave Frank the opportunity to boast about the lifeguard training he'd done back in the day.

Around Ezra he'd felt needed.

Important.

He'd been a wolf coaxed by a prince into showing his soft underbelly for petting.

But maybe this was for the better? The annoyance he was feeling now was the sign that he'd let his control slip when he knew perfectly well that he could not have Ezra in any other way without the risk of him running to the cops. Or worse yet, despising Frank for the scum he was.

He took a long drag of smoke, soothed by its bitter aroma.

At least he never asked Ezra to accompany him to the competition. That would have revealed how needy he was for approval. Not just Ezra's but also the acquaintances he'd itched to show Ezra off to. And for what? For the ego boost? Maybe it would have made some sense if Ezra actually wanted to be his boyfriend, but in reality, he would have been showing off a lie, and proving himself incapable of holding down a partner unless he paid them.

So fucking pathetic. Shane would have eaten him alive with jokes if he knew.

But what should a guy like him expect from life? He lived on the fringe of society, had a shady job, and even the part of it

that didn't involve corpses was filled with rust, mold, and cockroaches scattering from under disused fridges.

If Ezra saw where Frank lived, he would have ran for the hills even before he found out about human remains hidden around the junkyard.

What made this whole thing yet more frustrating was that Frank was so confident when it came to all other aspects of his life. He had no fear about confronting people, he could wield a weapon if necessary, and was proud of the business he'd built. Hell, he had no trouble finding hookups either, once he put his mind to it. Only when it came to romance did he feel painfully inadequate.

"Frank?" Jag yelled from afar and it made Frank want to throttle him even though it wasn't Jag's fault that he was in a mood for murder.

"Fuck off!" he yelled back, putting the cigarette out on the bench.

"No, Frank, this is important!" Jag said, emerging from the other side of the small clearing Frank used for training. In the yellow light, Jag looked like a caveman who'd found the artefacts of an advanced civilization and decided to wear them.

Frank put his face in his hands. "Is this about the dogs? I don't wanna hear it! You and Dane can deal with them just fine."

He usually had far more patience for Jag. On good days, he found the guy kinda adorable in his simple ways, honesty, and

the love he had for his boyfriend. Right now though, he wanted to be left alone, and this was exactly why he didn't agree to housesit four puppies.

“No, Dane is safe with the pups in Shane's home. There's—”

Frank put his hands up. “Is this really not something you can deal with on your own?”

Jag shook the spear he'd made out of pipe and adorned with feathers. “There's an intruder!”

That did rip Frank out of his sulking. “Where? Cops?”

Police coming over to investigate his junkyard was, and would always be, a little background worry, even if he had good connections with enough corrupt badges to sleep soundly.

Jag shifted his weight from side to side. “No... well... maybe not an intruder. A visitor. At the gate.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “It's eight o'clock. Just tell them to go to hell.”

Jag huffed. “I informed him about the operating hours of the junkyard, but he insists he needs to speak to you. I don't recognize this individual.”

Something cold curled in the pit of Frank's stomach. “Did he give you a name?”

“Ezra.”

A cold sensation spread into Frank's chest like an oil spill, paralyzing all logic. While Frank had never explicitly named

his place of work, it would have been easy enough to figure out for anyone with some basic internet sleuthing skills. But why would Ezra come here unannounced? If he wanted to say his goodbyes in person for some misguided reason, he should have called. He'd been nothing but discreet and careful about respecting Frank's boundaries, so his sudden presence made very little sense.

Frank huffed, but his instinct told him to move even though he was filthy and sweaty in a way Ezra wouldn't appreciate.

"You know this person?" Jag asked, tailing Frank as soon as he started walking.

"Yeah."

Jag shook his head. "Frank, how am I supposed to efficiently guard the perimeter if I don't—"

"Just go to Dane," Frank snarled at him in frustration. Something was wrong, and he didn't have the energy for Jag's complaints.

"I'm not leaving you. There could be danger."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes."

Frank sped up. "Then there is no danger!"

At least he hoped so.

A spark of hope lit in Frank's dark heart. Maybe Ezra breaking the professional boundaries meant he didn't want a professional relationship anymore. That he couldn't part from

Frank after all and his arrival was a grand gesture, which, while inappropriate, would have been very sweet.

Frank hated that his mind was playing such dirty tricks with him.

Unwilling to make Ezra wait any longer than necessary, he jogged toward the gate despite his muscles complaining after the earlier training. It took him five minutes to reach the main entrance into the scrapyard, but as he left behind the last bend on the way and moved toward the fence, he recognized that a vehicle was indeed waiting on the other side of the gate.

Maybe he should have dipped into the house and hosed himself down in the shower after all? He was sticky with grime and sweat and wouldn't normally want to be seen like this. But if Ezra really was here because he'd changed his mind, maybe seeing Frank's true form would have been the complete disillusionment he needed to move on? They would have never worked out.

Frank shook off all the doubts and approached, squinting in an effort to see the driver. But as he got close enough, the door of the black vehicle opened, releasing a figure so familiar Frank forgot to breathe for a moment too long. Ezra wore a sandy trench coat from some big-name fashion brand he'd once excitedly told Frank about, and was elegant as ever, but instead of playing it cool, he approached the gate and held on to the steel mesh, as if he was a prisoner hoping for freedom.

“Frank?”

Jag's nearby presence was barbed wire preventing Frank from touching Ezra right away.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" he asked, already typing in the code that made the gate open. Between Jag and Ezra, he couldn't have felt more self-conscious, but as soon as the steel door moved aside, Ezra slid past it to approach Frank.

But instead of leaping into Frank's arms, he pushed his hands into his hair and tugged, uttering a breathless, "Fuck."

Frank glanced back at Jag, his senses on high alert. The pallor of Ezra's features was so stark in the lamplight. "Is this something you need to talk about in private?" he asked, nodding toward Jag.

Ezra swallowed, peeking Jag's way before nodding. "It's just... the car... it shouldn't stay here," he said stiffly as his gaze darted toward the dark woods beyond the fence.

Frank didn't like the sound of this at all. "Okay," he said and headed out to retrieve the vehicle, because whatever spooked Ezra so much was worth paying attention to.

Once he drove in, he opened the door for Ezra, while glancing to Jag. "Close the fence and stay alert. Don't come over to mine unless absolutely necessary."

Ezra hesitated before addressing Jag too. "Tell no one I came here, okay?" he asked before turning Frank's way as he sank into the passenger seat. "Is that okay?"

"We'll find out," Frank said grimly and drove off, leaving Jag to it. As soon as they were in the privacy of the car,

driving toward Frank's home, he spoke again. "What's going on? I didn't expect you here."

Not tonight, not ever, not when I look like shit, smell like a hog, and my house is a pigsty.

Ezra stretched his legs and grabbed the lapels of his coat as he stared at the mounds of junk revealed by the glow of the headlights. But as ashamed as Frank was for him to see it all, something distressing must have happened, and out of all people, Ezra had decided to come to Frank.

"I'm sorry. I'm a mess. This is difficult," he said and hid his face in his hands.

"I'm a mess too. It's okay," Frank said, forcing a smile and pointing to his dirty sweatpants, but Ezra didn't laugh.

He finally looked up again. "How well do you know Paul?"

Fuck.

"We go way back, but don't see each other often," Frank said dryly with the meat on his bones already cooking with rage. "What did he do?" If Paul put his hands on Ezra in ways that they hadn't agreed on, then Ezra came to the right person to deal with it. At least it would give Frank somewhere to exert all the violent energy he'd been struggling with all day.

The shivery breath Ezra took next tugged on all of Frank's heartstrings. "You're not gonna believe me. I can't believe it myself, and I was there," he said, rubbing his hands on woolen pants in a pale tartan pattern.

This didn't sound promising at all. For a moment, Frank considered turning toward Shane's house, which was nice and clean, but then he'd have to explain the puppies, and sooner or later, the truth about his place would have come out anyway.

"Try me."

"He killed someone," Ezra said in a voice coming from deep inside his chest. He shifted in the seat, bending one of his legs and resting it on the seat as he faced Frank.

What would a normal person do? Frank had to ask himself in moments like this. "What the fuck? Did you witness it?" he asked with a scowl as they reached the used-to-be white picket fence around his bungalow.

Ezra shook his head, which gave Frank the tiniest bit of solace. "No. I came to his place to return something. The back door was open, so I went in and—" He put both his feet down and faced away as his body convulsed as if he were about to puke.

This was the confirmation Frank dreaded. Ezra would never accept Frank for what he was, but he needed help now and would accept it from a monster like Frank as long as he didn't know the truth.

Frank parked the car and hovered his hand over Ezra's back, unsure what the protocol was now that he no longer had an arrangement with Ezra.

"It's okay," he said. "You can tell me."

Ezra took a deep breath, and then leaned in, tucking himself into Frank's arm. His aloe-scented hair tickled Frank's neck, a painful reminder that Frank himself smelled like a skunk. "There was... a saw, and rags, and... a guy just butchered like an animal. His head was in a stew pot!"

Goddamn it, Paul! The bastard was getting sloppy.

"Jesus Christ..." Frank said for Ezra's benefit and hugged him, since that was what he seemed to need. What a fucking shitshow. "I knew he could be a dangerous man." *Because we both used to be killers for hire.*

"You did?" Ezra asked, grabbing Frank's wrist as if he needed a lifeline, and Frank was honored to be the steady presence he chose. "He suggested he has contacts in the police force. I didn't know what to do."

Frank's mind worked at full speed on how to get Ezra out of this mess. "He does. Ezra... more importantly, did he see you?" He hoped the answer was no, because the chances of Paul spotting Ezra and letting him go were close to zero, but the pregnant silence that followed his question made his throat dry.

"I left my phone at his. I panicked, and then it was too late to go back for it," Ezra whispered, and his soft voice was like an alarm in Frank's head. That was why he didn't call before coming here.

Which was a fucking mess because that body at Paul's was more than likely ending up here tonight. Ezra should have never been touched by any of the dirt Frank couldn't wash his

hands of. He was too beautiful and pure for this world of blood and violence.

“Fuck,” he said just as his phone rang. The display read, *Paul*.

Chapter 8

Ezra

EZRA SHOOK AT THE sight of Paul's name, and his gaze darted to Frank's face, which formed a frown that made him simultaneously appear contemplative and like a man ready to take on anything. His severe features twisted, and Ezra's hand dashed for his wrist. The darkness around them seemed to crawl closer, and if he didn't hold on, it might drag him away.

"Don't tell him I'm here," he whispered, hoping that the touch would remind Frank how Ezra made him feel. He didn't believe this man would just throw him under the bus, but there was a part of him that wanted to dangle a promise of more in front of Frank's nose.

He couldn't read Frank's expression, but his thick thumb petted Ezra's hand.

"Hey, what's up?" Frank asked when answering the phone in the most neutral way. As if he hadn't just heard that Paul murdered and dismembered someone. He was almost as good of an actor as Ezra was with clients he didn't find attractive.

He didn't freak out, didn't blow up over Ezra appearing here unannounced despite Frank never offering him his address. Solid as a rock, Frank gave a little laugh at something Paul said. Perhaps this kind of thing came with life experience, or maybe the real-life Frank was just as steady as he was in bed, but seeing him in the driver's seat of Ezra's car felt reassuring already.

He was in danger, and his plans were uncertain—but from the moment he'd stepped through the gate and touched Frank, he felt safe.

He tried to eavesdrop on the conversation, but only heard Paul saying something about a car.

“Does it have to be tonight?” Frank sighed, his thumb still caressing Ezra’s hand in a comforting fashion.

So maybe he wasn’t the most refined kind of man and definitely needed a shower, but right now, Ezra didn’t need a guy in an Armani shirt. He needed a guy who could wield a baseball bat if need be.

“Okay, fine, just be on time,” Frank said, leaving Ezra bewildered.

Did he understand correctly? Paul was coming *here*?

His hand squeezed Frank’s as the other man’s eyes narrowed. “You’re already on your way? What if I was away?” he asked, and while his voice remained steady, there was a twitch to his brow.

Shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Jag might have not been here— Okay, he’s always here, but he can be hard to find! I gotta get ready.” Frank turned off the phone, but while he hit the steering wheel with one hand, the other remained on Ezra’s. “Paul’s coming with a car for me. I couldn’t say no, it would have been suspicious. Here’s what we’ll do. I’ll call Jag, and he’ll take you to a safe spot for the time being. His boyfriend will hide your vehicle.”

Ezra gave a shuddery breath. “A car? What? At night? What might be possibly—” His voice died when he met Frank’s

gaze with a terrible realization drilling at the back of his mind. “There was an unfamiliar vehicle at his home. It must have been the dead guy’s! Frank, he might send suspicions your way!”

As soon as he said that, he felt like the biggest idiot. Frank was bound to know there was something shady about the car. After all, he was receiving it at night. From a murderer.

“I’ll deal with it,” Frank said in the voice of someone who’d handled far worse shit in his life. His hand slipped out of Ezra’s grip, and he was already calling Jag as he left the car.

Every bit of Ezra’s body weighed a ton, and he hugged himself, staring at the single-storey home in front of him. The motion-activated lamp, which switched on as soon as Frank’s firm, bulky form moved toward it, only showed so much, but it looked like a place where one might find used needles in the sofa.

Was *this* where Frank spent the majority of his week? How could he afford Ezra’s services when he lived in this dump? His mouth dried when he lifted his hand to take in the Rolex. The grimy pieces of Frank’s life were falling into place, shedding light on things previously unexplained. The junkyard was only a front. For a fence.

Oh, this was bad.

Ezra’s teeth clattered as he hid his face in his hands, feeling trapped between a lesser evil and death. His mother warned him that he’d have to deal with shady people in this line of

work, but he'd assumed he wouldn't need to touch any of it, and dirty money was worth just as much as clean cash.

What next? Would he be kidnapped and moved to some illegal brothel, where he'd get hooked on drugs due to the bleakness of his life?

Movement in the corner of his eye distracted him from that terrible future, and even Frank flinched as a man dressed like a sci-fi warrior emerged from the darkness.

"Why didn't you answer your phone?" Frank barked.

"I figured it would be faster to speak in person," the freak said in that weird, gravelly voice.

Frank frowned and approached his... friend (?), but then gave his shoulder a shove. "Why were you close enough when I specifically told you to stay away?"

Jag shook his bush of hair. "Safety reasons."

Frank threw his arms in the air. "I don't have time for this, but we *will* have a chat later."

Ezra had met this stranger at the gate. He'd appeared out of nowhere, asking for passwords, as if this was Fort Knox, but back then he'd stayed in the shadows. Now that he and Frank stood under the lamp, Ezra saw an outfit composed of mismatched junk and pieces of ripped fabric. It was as if a relatively talented child was attempting to dress as a character from some post-apocalyptic fantasy game, but this guy, Jag, surely wasn't a cosplayer. One way or another, he was involved in Frank's illicit business.

“I need you to take him to one of your dens east of here. Make sure he’s safe, don’t leave him behind or test him, understood?”

Jag frowned and his gaze landed on Ezra. Half of his face was sharply illuminated, while the other drowned in darkness. “Why?”

“I don’t have time to explain this. He’s important, and Paul is coming here any minute, so he can’t be found.”

Jag approached the car like an apprehensive cat.

Was Frank for real? This Jag person looked exactly like someone Ezra would cross the street to avoid. But then again, if the choice was between his company and certain death, was it really a choice?

Also, why the fuck would Jag *test* Ezra?

Choked up, he waved at Jag, who approached him with a pinched face, as if he was never taught that one ought to hide emotions among strangers. He opened the door on Ezra’s side.

“Let’s go,” he said, but then frowned, and leaned in to... smell Ezra.

Ezra had never recoiled faster. “What the hell?” he asked, meeting the guy’s pale gaze. He was handsome from up close, with a symmetrical face and long hair hanging down his shoulders in a mess of strands and loose braids, but Paul didn’t look half bad either, and he murdered people.

“Jag!” Frank yelled as if he were disciplining a dog. “Move.”

Jag huffed and Ezra had nowhere to run when this stranger grabbed him by the arm and pulled.

Frank approached them with an expression carved in stone. “In case you get lost—you won’t, Jag will keep you safe—but just in case,” he said and handed Ezra a flashlight. “It will be easier to find you.”

Ezra itched to grab Frank, or hug him again to reinforce how much he needed help, but he didn’t know if he’d want to be touched in company even if the freak in armor had a boyfriend, who was to drive Ezra’s car. Was *he* as dusty as this guy?

“Where is he taking me?” he uttered, because if the Rolex was stolen, then who knew what other *goods* were moved through this lot? He’d rather not know where Frank got the money to buy his time.

If he could only go back a few hours and never go to Paul’s...

Frank sighed, already texting someone. “Just to one of the areas at the junkyard that are hard to access unless you know where they are. I’ll come for you once Paul’s gone.” He looked up from his phone and into Ezra’s eyes. “It’s going to be okay.”

He seemed so confident about it, Ezra calmed down a little, and he gave Frank’s thick forearm a final squeeze, making sure he remembered the warmth of his touch. “Thank you. I’ll be waiting,” he said, stepping back just as Frank’s pupils dilated.

Frank stalled, looking after him as Jag tugged on Ezra's arm, taking him away from the light and toward the huge mounds of twisted metal. It was only now that Ezra realized how vast the landscape of old cars and disused appliances seemed, even in the dark. A man could get lost here forever, so maybe there was a method to this madness?

Away from Frank's home, darkness became so thick it felt choking, but just as Ezra was about to seek a switch on the flashlight, Jag's face lit up from a bright lamp attached to his head. "Follow me, Ezra," he said and jogged toward a mound of rust-chewed cars.

It felt strange to hear his name on this weirdo's lips, but there was no time to dwell on such things, so he complied until Jag reached the wall of metal and rubber and... slid into a crevice that surely wasn't meant to be a passage.

Ezra lit his own flashlight and cast its glow on the vehicles making up the walls on either side of the path. Dirt and rot consumed each and every one, and he nervously glanced at his clothes. "Hey, is there no other way? Someplace less tight?"

Jag blew hair out of his handsome face. He appeared deceptively normal under the odd mish-mash of metal, plastic, and torn fabric, so maybe the two of them were more similar than it seemed at first glance. What if Jag also ended up here in a crisis and never left? Was *this* fuckery in his future? Would Ezra live out his days as some junkyard hobo?

"Why? You're not that big," Jag asked, barely sticking out from behind the junk.

Ezra's blood ran hotter. "What do you mean why? I'm gonna tear my clothes. This is—a Burberry coat," he said, pulling on the lapel of his best outerwear. He'd worn it to Paul's to look more professional, and this was what he'd gotten!

Jag offered him an empty glance. "What does it do?"

"What?"

"What does a *Burberry* coat do?"

Oh, for fuck's sake, of course this loony didn't know what it meant to get somewhere in life through blood, sweat, and tears. Or rather, cum and sweat.

Ezra counted to ten. "I just don't want to rip it, okay?"

Jag hummed. "Is it an heirloom? I can keep it safe for you," he said and extended his dirty hand through the passage.

"So, is there no—" He jumped when a vehicle started behind him, because he was still out in the open, and if Paul arrived now and saw him... could Frank even protect him? Would he have risked confrontation with a murderer?

"Fine," he said, but when he removed the coat, his gaze fell on the cashmere sweater, and the plaid pants, so he ended up turning the coat inside out and wearing it that way. "I'm coming. Are you sure this is safe?" Ezra asked, looking up at the pile of at least five separate cars, which might collapse on them any second.

"Yes, there are no traps here," Jag said, leaving Ezra even more bewildered.

What fucking *traps*? What was this place?

But there was no time to lose, so he followed Jag into this metal maze, snagging his coat on a rusty pipe sticking out of a car right off the bat.

Nothing to do about that now. Ezra tried not to think what state his new boots might be in by the end of this obstacle course and focused on the future. He was neck-deep in shit, and if he failed to play his cards right, he might just drown. It was difficult to think straight when his brain fogged up with anxiety, but as Jag moved ahead through a labyrinth of narrow passages made out of everything from bottles to old boats, he came to the inevitable conclusion that information might be the key to survival.

He'd come here thinking he had Frank under his heel, but the man whom Ezra had known for the past year had clearly been a facade to a stranger who might still feel affection for Ezra, but who was an enigma.

And Ezra hated being ignorant about what made men tick. "You seem to know your way around here, Jag," he said, making sure to be personal, despite the stranger freaking him out.

Jag looked back at him with a serious expression and pointed out a sharp piece of glass so Ezra would look out for it. "Of course. This is my territory. Nothing happens here without me knowing."

"How big is this place?"

“Several acres, but it’s not as dense everywhere. You will be safe where I take you, don’t worry. Do you know Frank from outside?”

Ezra bit the inside of his cheek. He was the one asking questions, but Jag didn’t know that, and if this was to work, then his impromptu protector needed to get something in return. But what was Ezra to tell him? Even if this guy was gay and knew about Frank’s sexuality, most people didn’t want others to know that they paid for sex. He needed to lie. “Yes. I’m a... massage therapist.”

Jag stalled, but then kept walking, glancing back again and again as if to get a better look at Ezra. “I know massaging, but how do you do it as therapy? My mate sometimes likes retail therapy, but I don’t think those two are similar.”

Ezra knew everything there was to know about retail therapy, but Jag himself didn’t make any sense. He sounded like someone disconnected from the world. “Were you... born here?” he asked, suddenly terrified this was some kind of unlawful imprisonment situation, involving people being born in basements and let out to live in this modern wasteland.

Jag led him out into a clearing, but they walked at its edge, past several massive tractor tires. “Oh, no, I was born in a forest, far, far away from here, but I needed to run, and eventually got here. Frank saved my life, so I owe him a debt that goes beyond loyalty. We’re brothers even if we share no blood.”

Ezra froze on the inside. “Is that what Frank demands of the people he saves?” he asked as his mouth dried.

“What? No. Frank is a good man, I stayed because the junkyard is a safe place. Also very entertaining, but you’ll find that out for yourself. Come. Come here,” Jag pointed his spear at a ladder on the side of a shipping container and was the first to climb it.

Ezra swallowed. So far out of the city, the sky above was dark and full of stars, and the crevices of the labyrinth surrounding him from all sides might just hide monsters that had crept behind them all the way here. He chose not to overthink it and followed Jag farther on, into a big truck. The old leather seat was sticky under Ezra’s touch, but he pushed away the sense of revulsion and followed Jag into the compartment behind the cab.

He stalled when fairy lights went on, revealing what used to be the driver’s sleeping quarters, with a single bunk and a folding table, which now housed a small pile of potato chips and coke cans. The place smelled musty and had old, dirty blankets covering the floor in an uneven layer, but on the upside, it did not contain Paul.

“Yeah? Frank is good?” Ezra asked, desperate to keep the conversation going, because whatever he could find out about this new Frank might be the difference between death and survival.

Jag invited Ezra to the blanket with a grand gesture as if it was a throne. “Oh yes, Frank is very fair. I have a home with a

fridge of my own now, but he used to store my meat and I never noticed any disappear.”

What did that even mean? Ezra arranged his mouth into a smile and stood in the doorway, not sure if he wanted to touch anything without it being necessary. Was this a dream? If it was, and he'd fallen into a twisted version of Wonderland, Jag would be the Cheshire Cat.

“Oh, so he's fair as the king of this little kingdom?” Ezra tried, hoping his joke would land. What he really needed to know was whether his kind, rule-following client was prone to violence in his real life.

Jag's serious expression spread into a wide smile at the comparison, and he sat down, which had to mean they were at their destination. “Yes! That! Now you understand. He makes the decisions. He will help you. You never said what massage therapy is. Do you massage him? That's...” Jag licked his lips. “An intimate thing to allow someone. But you are very pretty, so I can see why he'd like that. He is unattached after all.”

Some of the tension in Ezra dissipated. This was exactly the kind of information he needed. “Well, he is a handsome man. I would be interested if he'd have me,” he said, hoping Jag might repeat it to Frank like the blabbermouth he clearly was.

He'd given Frank a lot of massages. Everywhere.

Jag's eyes opened wider and he moved like an animal about to attack. Ezra took a step back and bumped his head on something but was relieved to see Jag smile. “You would? I knew it. I *knew* there was something about you! I think you

could be Frank's type. Unlike me, he doesn't need his mate to be sturdy. But he lives alone now, and he claims that he doesn't care, but he could use company. I used to be like that. On my own, convinced that I didn't need a mate, or even a home. It wasn't true. A man isn't whole until he has someone to protect, to provide for, and to mate with."

Ezra exhaled, nodding, because this guy was way too intense to go into any kind of discussion with him. Especially since he might not understand concepts that were mundane to Ezra. But everything he'd found out so far led to the conclusion that Frank, who very obviously had a soft spot for Ezra already, could be his shield, and maybe even his permanent way out of this terrible situation. Ezra just needed to give him the right incentive.

He could do that.

After all, he'd been learning that skill all his life.

And since Frank was a beefcake, there would be no loser in Ezra's game.

Chapter 9

Frank

FRANK COULDN'T BELIEVE THE fuckery this night had proven to be. And a rollercoaster ride of emotions at that. He thought he'd never see Ezra again, and now the boy was *here*, at his junkyard, desperate for help.

Which told Frank Ezra trusted him to a certain degree, but also that he had nowhere else to go. It was an unspoken rule that Frank didn't ask Ezra about his personal life, but now he was left with a severe lack of information. It had worked perfectly when they saw each other now and then and had inconsequential fun, but also meant Frank was in the dark about Ezra's real life.

Worse still, since Shane was away at some dog thing, Dex was busy with his motorcycle club, and Jag had to take care of Ezra, Paul had him alone. And so he started casually asking about Ezra, which turned Frank's back into a sweaty swamp. At least Paul had the courtesy to bring his bodies disposal-ready, unlike some people who thought they could dump a guy in a blood soaked trunk and wiggle out of paying extra for the cleanup.

Paul had definitely found the phone and knew Frank had been seeing Ezra, so Frank didn't deny it, but he told Paul that they'd ended their arrangement because Ezra was going to LA. That didn't mean Paul would stop his search, but it gave Frank a bit more time to work out how to deal with this fucked-up situation. Because Frank had known Paul long enough to be sure that the vengeful bastard wouldn't let an accidental witness live long enough to become a liability in the future.

During the digging, Frank got to find out that the dismembered fucker was a mafia member stealing from his own family, but that fact wouldn't help Ezra sleep better at night. Ezra would need years of therapy after this, because he was in no way used to the shit that was Frank's bread and butter. He should have never seen what he had, and he should have never had a reason to come here.

Once Paul was gone, Frank washed off the dirt and grime in the shower but was well aware he'd never be clean enough for a guy like Ezra. He'd never be able to be honest with him, so the delusional fantasies of Ezra wanting to be with him were just that. Delusions.

He could never have someone this radiant and perfect, and even leaving crime behind altogether wouldn't have atoned for all the blood on Frank's hands. It chilled him that had Ezra not known Frank, he might have made the mistake of running home straight from Paul's. He wouldn't have survived the night.

Frank cursed when his head hit the showerhead, and he stepped out of the stall, grabbing his towel. He wiped the wetness off his body, gave his long hair a firm squeeze, and left the bathroom, feeling his stomach drop at the sight of his living room.

He'd made a lot of the furniture himself and was proud of that, but every bit of his house was practical rather than elegant. In comparison to the cozy minimalism of Ezra's apartment, Frank's bungalow was a shack full of mismatched

items with a disassembled radio taking up most of the table, Strongman tournament cups on the kitchen counter, and trash bags piled around the trashcan, because he'd recently been too busy to think about cleaning.

He grabbed the empty tray of a TV dinner and got rid of it, but the longer he stared at the mess, the clearer it was that unless he made Ezra sleep in Jag's den tonight, he didn't have enough time to tidy up.

He just made sure there was no lube by the sofa, and that his guns were locked away, but after that, he braided his hair, put on a clean pair of jeans and a T-shirt, and headed out with a heavy heart.

Ezra's presence here would lead to nothing good. Paul had asked Frank to keep an eye out for Ezra, because he *still had Paul's car keys*. Which was a lie. But if he asked Frank, he'd be contacting other acquaintances as well. No immediate solution was foolproof, so they'd have to play it by ear until it was safe for Ezra to leave, but his dreams of LA would be shattered, because he couldn't go the place he'd said he would.

Ezra could not continue advertising his services and being a presence in his usual circles, period. And that meant, he could no longer work as an escort, because sooner or later, Paul would track him down.

He didn't yet know how to break the news, so he focused on getting to the den as fast as possible. It was past two a.m. and he needed to sleep off this fucked-up day before having serious conversations. He whistled as soon as the truck where

Jag would have taken Ezra came into view, and sure enough, the junkyard warrior peeked out of the cab before sending Frank a signal with his flashlight.

Good. No trouble then.

Frank climbed into the cab to find Ezra in front of a set of cards on the floor. As soon as he spotted Frank, his eyes went wide.

“I was worried,” he said, rising to his feet. His hand rested on Frank’s arm, and the touch triggered an eruption of goosebumps. This guy was doing things to Frank. Things he hadn’t felt in a long time, if ever, but they were not a good match, and it would be better for Ezra to remain ignorant as to why.

“I see Jag kept you occupied. You’ll spend the night at mine, and we’ll figure out details tomorrow. All went smooth with Paul, but he took his damn time, and was asking about you.”

Jag leaned against the wall of the cab with a packet of chips in his hand. “Why didn’t you tell us you were getting massage therapy?”

Frank stilled, blindsided by this idiocy. Massage therapy. By inserting dick into Frank’s throat more like. Or giving the most amazing hand jobs.

At least this meant Ezra hadn’t told Jag the truth. “Jag, it’s been a long night, okay?”

“Maybe he should give massage therapy to Dane too. He’s been having pain in his shoulder,” Jag said with the kind of

sincerity no one else was capable of.

“Sure, Frank’s friends are my friends,” Ezra said, smiling at him, and leaned toward Frank to obscure the fact that he was now holding onto Frank’s T-shirt, as if he needed the safety of his closeness.

“Maybe. Keep his presence here secret, Jag.”

“But—”

Frank knew exactly what he wanted to say, so he raised his hand. “Yes, you can tell Dane, but make sure he understands Ezra needs to stay hidden.”

Jag nodded. “I’ll do that.”

Frank didn’t wait any longer and pulled on Ezra’s elbow, urging him outside into the crisp night air.

Shame crept up Frank’s back when he noticed Ezra had turned his coat inside out, as if he feared the dirt of Frank’s junkyard would rub off on him, but he didn’t argue and just went down the ladder, straight onto the ground littered with empty cans.

“Dane hid your car, and everything went smoothly on that end. How... how are you feeling?” Frank asked, leading the way with his hands in his pockets to not make Ezra feel like anything was expected of him. Their new situation was a minefield, and neither of them needed more disruptions than this night had already provided.

He could practically sense Ezra’s minty breath on his back as Frank headed down an alley broad enough for his stocky form.

He kept the flashlight low, to focus on obstacles under their feet, but his thoughts were spiralling out of control. Once again, he considered leading Ezra to Shane's home, since it would stay unoccupied for the next few days, but his thoughts stalled when a warm hand closed on his wrist, as if Ezra were attempting to get Frank's hand out of the pocket.

Frank couldn't deny Ezra, so he entwined his sausage fingers with Ezra's elegant digits.

"I'm alive. Thanks to you."

They remained quiet for the length of their trek through the mounds of junk. It was only once they stepped into the clearing around Frank's home that he relaxed.

"I'm so sorry you're in this mess. It's not your fault, but you will have to deal with it. We'll work out some kind of plan for you, but Paul has lots of connections. We'll have to be careful."

Ezra squeezed his hand, and while Frank couldn't see his face in the dark, he felt what it expressed in the desperate fear oozing from Ezra.

"I'm sorry to bring this on you. But you were the only one I could trust."

"You made the right choice. My place is very remote." But as exhilarating as Ezra's declaration was, they needed some real talk. "For obvious reasons, I never asked you about your family, but to help you, I need to know more about you, Ezra. The real you. Is that your name?"

Ezra exhaled, looking up at Frank as they stood in the middle of the junkyard deep in the night. The flashlight sharpened his features, but they remained sweet and innocent, as if nothing could have stained him. “It’s my second name. But I use it, since the first is Burton. It’s a bit too *old* for me.” He said nothing about his surname, which made Frank exhale in frustration. Clearly, despite trusting him enough to come here, Ezra still wasn’t sure if he could reveal his true identity. Maybe Frank shouldn’t be surprised when he too had secrets to keep, but if he was the one having to deal with this whole situation, then he should gain full access.

He let go of Ezra’s hand to open the tiny gate in the low fence around his house. He wasn’t sure why he’d kept it, since it didn’t protect from anything, but maybe he was more sentimental than he’d like to admit. His ex had been the one to put it together.

“Where are you from? What’s your family situation? I need to know this shit, and our... arrangement has ended so I think it’s fair to ask under these circumstances.” He hated being so harsh, but he was getting the feeling that Ezra wasn’t fully aware his life was changing tonight, and not in a good way.

The faint glow of the stars illuminated Ezra, who crossed his hands on his chest, shielding himself from the cold. His soft hair was messy, as if he’d just been rolling his head against a silk pillow. Even now, he was so damn sexy Frank would need to keep himself in check at all times.

But he was a big boy. He could do it.

“My family is local. We just don’t keep in touch. I changed my surname, so I don’t think anything could be traced to them.” The sad smile he offered Frank was heartbreaking, because it meant one thing—he’d been rejected by them, either due to his profession or sexuality. Or was it their rejection that had pushed him to become an escort in the first place? Life cost money, and beauty was a pricey commodity.

Frank had indulged in that beauty for a whole year.

Frank let Ezra through the gate, but then led him into the house, trying not to consider what Ezra would think of its state. “I’m in the middle of renovating,” he mumbled, locking the door behind them, but one glance at Ezra’s face reflecting in the mirror Dex had hung on the opposite wall told him that his place was a disappointment. He looked around, wide-eyed like a deer in the headlights, but by the time Frank turned to face him, his features were again neutral, the distaste carefully hidden.

“Um, that’s okay. I arrived without letting you know, so—” Ezra swallowed and again reached for Frank’s hand.

Frank swallowed with growing discomfort in his throat. “Ezra, what do you think is going to happen now?” he asked and went to the kitchen area to grab two glasses.

Ezra cleared his throat. His presence was lighting up the room even when Frank faced away from him, but it also burned, and Frank didn’t know what to do about it. None of this should be happening. They used to have this clear relationship in the elegant rooms of Ezra’s apartment, and

what he could offer here was just... not enough. Even his TV had some dead pixels, because he never had time to go look for a new one.

“I—I was thinking that maybe I could stay here for a bit, if you’d let me. And then, once the dust settles, go to LA?”

Frank pushed away some of the radio parts and poured them a glass of bourbon each. “It might be a very long time until the ‘dust settles’ enough for you to be able to go there.” He picked up a pile of dirty laundry from a chair to make room for Ezra, and dumped it onto the sofa. “At least for a few days, you can stay here, and we’ll see how things go. Do you have any relatives in Canada or Mexico? Europe?”

Ezra sank into the seat, as if the weight of the suggestion behind Frank’s questions was too much to bear. He squeezed his fingers together and exhaled. “Not that I know. I’ve been on my own for a while,” he said in a soft voice.

He was so painfully out of place by the table with permanent cup marks, and with the dirt covering the wall behind him where it was most often touched.

“You’ve been seeing Paul longer than you’ve been seeing me, so he must know a lot about you. He will look for you. He has contacts within the police. He travels, so his reach is wide. You have to—Ezra?” Frank’s heart sank when he saw tears in the pretty amber eyes. “Don’t be scared, okay? It’s gonna be... something. Even if not what you hoped for. This might be a door to a future you never even imagined. We’ll work it out.” He approached Ezra and kneeled on the floor in front of him.

Even Ezra's scent was overwhelming, it reminded Frank of all the intense times they'd spent together, of burying his face in the dark hair after sex when their hearts still pounded like mad. But that had been Ezra's business and place of expertise. Right now, he was a young man out of his depth.

Ezra took a shuddery breath and met Frank's gaze. "I am scared."

Frank stroked his... shin with his knuckles, because touching the thigh would have felt far too intimate. Which was such a strange balancing act when he'd been *inside* Ezra last night. But back then, the rules had been clear, just like their roles.

"I understand. We both learned something terrible about Paul tonight, but we'll survive it, and in a year's time, this will all be just a bad memory." Frank had now become part of that nightmare, no longer a nice fuck to reminisce about years on but a cog in the ugly world that crashed down on Ezra out of nowhere.

"In a *year*?" Ezra asked with barely withheld terror. "But I... all of my things are still at home. Lots of valuables too. Do you think he can track card transactions... somehow, like in some spy movie?"

Frank nodded. "It's possible. Better safe than sorry. In a while, I might be able to get my friend Shane and go to your apartment to retrieve your stuff. But there's nothing more valuable than your life. If you have savings in your accounts, just let them sit there for now."

Ezra pressed both heels of his hands to his eyes, breathing hard. But as tension left his body, he let his wrists rest on Frank's shoulders and leaned toward him. "Frank, I... I don't know what I'd do without you. You're so kind."

Oh God... He'd be kind to Ezra all night long if it wasn't so wrong.

Frank shrugged. "I'm just... I've had a helping hand in life. At a time when I thought things were going downhill, my grandfather reached out and I ended up inheriting this place from him even though at that point I was nothing but a menace to society. I feel I have a duty to repay that kindness. I'd probably be dead by now if he hadn't helped me." He briefly wondered what Grandpa would think of his illegal side business, but he wasn't there to see it anyway.

Frank's heart stopped when Ezra cupped his face and rubbed his cheeks with his thumbs, like he'd always do when they were in bed together. It was a gesture of tenderness that had no place in their current situation, no matter how badly Frank longed to lean into it and forget that Ezra was now trapped here, at the mercy of his good will.

He cleared his throat and got up. "Listen. Sweetie. I—No, I'm going about it the wrong way." One more deep breath. "I'm no ethics professor, but even I know it wouldn't be okay to continue what we... had in the current situation. I don't expect that of you, okay?" Even if he *craved* it. "You're stuck here, so it just wouldn't be right."

Ezra stared back, no longer breathing, but he kept his hand on Frank, letting it slide lower as Frank rose. “But... it’s okay. I want us to continue,” he added, steadying himself. “You know I’m attracted to you.”

He couldn’t have twisted that knife any harder.

Frank sighed and decided to lay his cards on the table. “Only that I *don’t* know. I know I can get you hard and make you come but not how you actually feel about all this, because I paid for the pleasure of your company. I won’t be fucking you in exchange for protection. My conscience might not be as clear as your skin, but that ain’t right. If you want to repay my kindness, which you don’t have to, because it’s freely given, then... as you can see, my house is a mess. Clean up, cook me those meals I love so much, and that’s that.”

In moments like this Frank wished his moral compass was a bit more skewed, because in his daydreams he was pinning Ezra to the table, his lovely moans and whimpers resonating in the room. In that fantasy, he had his hands cuffed above his head and told Frank how safe he felt here. Under him.

Ezra swallowed over and over as he rubbed his hands on his thighs, more vulnerable than he probably considered himself to be. “You don’t believe me?”

Frank wanted to, he really did. But he wasn’t a dick-struck kid like his nephew. He was old enough to know better. “I don’t know what to believe, so I’d rather play it safe for both our sakes. So what? You gonna make me that breakfast?” A

little consolation for this clusterfuck. He extended his hand to Ezra, who took it after a moment of hesitation.

“I’ll make you breakfast, lunch, and dinner, if that’s what you want,” he said, holding Frank’s gaze so intensely a jolt of electricity trailed over his cock.

No. Was he getting hard from this?

Maybe this was his kink. Saving dudes in distress.

Frank squeezed Ezra’s hand, shook it as if they’d just struck a business deal, then pulled away.

He had no idea how they were supposed to live together and *not* end up fucking.

Chapter 10

Ezra

SEPARATE ROOMS.

Separate beds.

Four days after first arriving at Frank's, Ezra was climbing the walls out of frustration. No, he hadn't spontaneously turned into Spiderman, but now that every single surface in the house—including the damn stains on the walls—has been cleaned, how was he to distract himself from his libido? It buzzed at the back of his mind like a mosquito that *wouldn't* suck him dry.

He'd put on the clothes he came here in while they were still damp, because he refused to wear some old stained tracksuit or torn T-shirt when Frank was around. The bastard embodied a Greek God while he... pulled a car behind him right outside, teasing Ezra with his shirtless body.

How many times a day was Ezra to jerk off with the temptation he couldn't have dangled with in front of his face? Masturbation barely took the edge off at this point.

And for what? Some misguided code of ethics held by a guy who (Ezra was now sure of it) handled stolen goods? Sure, it had been a nice surprise to find out Frank didn't jump at the opportunity to abuse his position, but without sex, Ezra was a glorified housekeeper and a charity case. If they were fucking, he'd feel like he had more leverage, and more influence over Frank. But with things as they were now, every step he took might end up with the ground crumbling beneath him.

He didn't have the faintest idea when he'd get to leave this hellscape, and couldn't explore much either, because he'd been told to never go off the main road through the junkyard and was explicitly forbidden from taking certain paths. That was likely where the stolen goods were stashed. It was ridiculous to play this game where he pretended he didn't know what Frank was up to, because his situation left the realm of normality when he'd found a severed head in a pot.

Just thinking about it made his stomach clench, so he put away the broom he'd swept the living room with and approached the cooker, where a large portion of stew was slowly heating. When Ezra had first opened the package and dumped its contents into the pot, there were whole bits of fat attached to the jelly-like mush of juices, meat(?), with a couple of root vegetable scraps added in to pretend the meal was nutritionally complete. Now that the temperature transformed the stew into something more reminiscent of food, it didn't look or smell half bad, but Ezra had seen the lengthy list of ingredients and knew that the thing they were about to eat might as well have been created out of produce from the Chernobyl exclusion zone.

How many weird additives did a damn lunch need? It should be just meat, preferably organic, fresh vegetables, and some spices. And one could thicken the sauce with a bit of flour or even an egg yolk, so what the hell was a 'thickening *agent*' and how much would it spoil Ezra's carefully curated bacterial flora? He hadn't been taking care of himself for years to spoil everything within a few short weeks. This food was not

designed for nutrition, and it was shocking that Frank managed to look as good as he did while having this trash for sustenance, but there was nothing fresh in the house, just frozen stuff, cans, and TV dinners. The wet clothes made Ezra's teeth clatter, but he shook off the discomfort and lifted his top in front of the mirror, which was now spotless and revealed every imperfection. Frank did not own a bathroom scale, so Ezra couldn't be sure, but he could swear his stomach was slightly less protruding just a week ago. At this rate, he'd lose his shape, get a double chin, then his teenage acne would return, and no man would ever want to touch him again.

He glanced out through the blinds for another look at Frank who was shirtless, panting, and paused his training to... douse himself with water straight from a bottle.

Ezra might have salivated a little, wishing he could be those droplets trailing down Frank's big body, tracing every ridge of muscle, licking every hair, all the way under the belt where he got to—

Fuck.

He pressed his forehead and palms to the door, fighting his arousal. Because while Frank had been a client, he was also an amazing lay. The way he teased Ezra's skin, how he had the stamina of an ox, how he focused on Ezra's pleasure even though he'd been paying for a service and could ask for it to be the other way around, like most people... All of that melted into nights he always looked forward to.

So why the separate beds?

Did his vulnerable position affect Frank's desire for him? Maybe what the man wanted was the charming escort, not a scared boy who ran to him for help? What if Ezra's presence here shattered the fantasy and made him into someone to care for rather than lust after? He'd tried to make sure Frank always saw him at his best and took care of the house so that their surroundings could be more conducive to fucking, but it wasn't working. And the little games Ezra used to play by delaying responses to Frank's messages or teasing him with double meanings, would not work in their current situation. How was Ezra to keep up the illusion of scarcity and a wall when *he* was literally at Frank's mercy?

In fact, the place wasn't even all that bad in the light of day and after a deep clean. All the scrubbing and disinfecting had been somewhat therapeutic. It had given Ezra something to do to take his mind off the dire situation he was in, and if Frank let him, he'd gladly refresh the coat of paint on the walls too.

Frank's house was a mish-mash of styles. It had good bones and a very spacious refurbished bathroom with modern tiles, a large walk-in shower, and underfloor heating. Frank's bedroom was mostly a massive bed, a wardrobe and drying rack with a few T-shirts. Which made no sense, since Frank had a perfectly good yard and the DIY skills to set up a line outside to keep them from getting musty.

And then there was the kitchen area with wooden cabinets from twenty years ago, which, from the look of it, could have been scavenged from the junkyard. In the middle of the open plan living room stood an impressive table which Frank had

mentioned making himself, but it had been covered in all sort of trash and electronic parts for god-knows-what. The sofa in front of the shitty TV swallowed Ezra whenever he sat down, and should have been taken to one of the endless mountains of junk around the house before it broke someone's back.

The stew was starting to simmer, so Ezra switched off the heat, covered the pot with a lid, and swallowed, taking in the refreshed interior. If this was his place, he'd have added some personal touches, since even Frank's trophies, which Ezra had put on a shelf previously taken up by old magazines and trash, didn't add enough soul. Had Frank not heard about posters or artificial plants? There were a few limp bushes and wild flowers out in the space pretending to be a garden, but with the bleak hills of metal, rubber, and plastic surrounding the house on all sides, Ezra needed something to transform his prison into a *home*, or he'd go crazy.

No. He was already going crazy from this forced isolation and horny out of his mind yet without an outlet, his position here was as secure and steady as a chair on pencil-thin legs. And the future? What could possibly be out there for him if a killer was after him?

He hated it all.

It was time to serve lunch, but it needed to cool a bit, so for now he poured some iced tea he'd made out of cheap tea bags, lemon slices, salt, and honey into a glass.

He stepped out into the September sun and put on a casual smile for Frank's benefit.

The mountain of a man turned to him and smiled back as he rubbed the towel over his nape. “I’m pumped out. You up to anything good?”

Ezra tried to keep it cool, but his gaze was immediately drawn to the sweat making Frank’s chest shine in the sun and his scruffy cheeks glimmer as if they’d been smothered in baby oil. “I was thinking you might need a massage after all that working out,” Ezra offered, hoping one thing would lead to another and Frank would finally break the chains of principles that held him back.

Or had he lost interest now that Ezra was no longer a prince in an ivory tower whose time needed to be bought?

Frank hummed as Ezra passed him the glass of tea. He was considering it. “Maybe after I shower. I’ve got this ache in my shoulder. Right now, you don’t want to put your hands on any of *this*.” He pointed to his sweaty body, and yes, Ezra would very much want to put his hands on all of that.

There was something about the scent of fresh sweat on a man that had his brain glitching until all he could think of was cleaning all that salt and moisture off with his own tongue. No wonder that when Ezra spontaneously hooked up, it usually happened at the gym.

But he couldn’t say that now. He’d never been *the pursuer*. No, he hunted by making himself a prize every man in existence would follow into oblivion, whether they knew that yet or not. Those who he chose to grace with his attention needed to prove themselves in one way or another, but being

here at Frank's mercy turned Ezra into a pathetic, needy worm who itched for another man's attention. This was not who he was.

“What if I revoke my offer later?”

Frank chuckled and sipped some of the tea. “You've got something better to do, or is this a sweat fetish I'm just learning about?”

Yes.

“Wouldn't you like to know...”

The spark between them shot straight to Ezra's cock when their eyes met. “Wow, this is a really good tea. Did you make this drink?”

A clear evasion of the topic at hand, but since it was graceful, Ezra would take it.

“That's about the only thing I can make from scratch with the food in your fridge and pantry. It will serve you much better than commercial isotonic drinks or that sugary crap that pretends to contain tea.”

“Ooh! Someone's opinionated,” Frank said with a laugh, as if he didn't already know that about Ezra. He drank more of the tea and now even the sight of his Adam's apple bobbing was making Ezra horny. They were here alone, with acres of junkyard between them and civilization, and oh, how he'd ride Frank's fat dick right here, in the clearing in front of the house.

Why, oh why couldn't they just fuck? It was just sex anyway.

“I can’t believe you manage to lift those massive tires surviving on fake food. That shit’s radioactive,” Ezra said, trying hard to keep his gaze north when the breeze carried Frank’s musky, salty scent in his face. For a moment, his tongue felt too thick for his mouth, but when Frank met his gaze with eyes like two coals, he willed himself to produce more words. “This is not good enough. If you treat your training seriously, you need to improve your physique with proper food.”

There, plant the idea that he’s not all that perfect. Make him fight for your approval again.

Frank glanced at his thighs with an empty expression. “You don’t like my food? I told you, you can cook whatever you want...”

Ezra cocked his head. “For someone who’s clearly into being a big, strong man, you don’t really dedicate a lot of attention to nutrition, do you? And I’d gladly cook for you, but with what? All you have is ready to plop onto the plate.”

Frank frowned and downed the tea, then... threw the glass at the nearby pile of crap. It broke against an old car engine with a sharp sound. “I eat lots of protein.” He huffed and crossed his arms on his chest as if what he’d done was in any way normal. Sadly, the new position only made his massive pecs and biceps more imposing. The change in atmosphere turned him from hot-big to scary-big, and Ezra feared that the glass needed to shatter so that his nose could remain intact.

The damp fabric covering his body seemed to tighten around him as his breath quickened. Still, he managed to keep up his smile. It was always best to go with things, to not ruffle feathers or confront men stronger than him, but tension was running high and frustration got the best of him.

“I didn’t mean to criticize you. I just want to help you with your goals, and eating a lot of protein shakes and bars won’t get you into top form. You need healthy food. I can make it for you, but for that I need the right products.”

A part of him wanted to be under Frank even more now, because even the deadliest predator wouldn’t attack the object of his desire.

Frank rubbed his forehead with a sigh. “Okay, but I can’t take you into town. Make me a list and I’ll see what I can do. Dex is coming over in the evening, I should be able to send him shopping.”

Dex, Frank’s elusive nephew, who had already failed to arrive for two days in a row. Just great.

Ezra opened his mouth, but then a stronger gust of wind made him shiver, and tickled his nose until he sneezed. “Sure.”

Frank’s eyebrows rose when he assessed Ezra from head to toe. “Are you wearing wet clothes?”

Ezra sighed. “Yes.”

Frank shook his head and pointed to the door as if Ezra was a dog. “Why? I told you, you can wear mine while yours are

drying. I know they're too big, but what's it matter for a few hours? And didn't I give you one of Dex's old hoodies?"

Oh yes, the red and purple monstrosity with a cartoon poop pattern. No, thank you. Ezra might be in a dreadful situation, but he hadn't yet lost his dignity.

"I wear your clothes when I'm cleaning, but they don't *fit* me. These make me feel good," Ezra said, peeling the damp sweater away from his stomach.

Frank urged him inside with a gentle gesture that was nothing like the barely held-back fury with which he'd thrown the glass. "Okay, well, there's a pile of used clothes someone brought the other day. They're in a shipping container, so they wouldn't have gotten wet. I'll ask Jag if it's safe to go there."

Used clothes? From a junkyard? Was this Ezra's life now? Could Frank not see that Ezra was withering from the inside?

He wanted to protest, but Frank frowned and raised his hand to shut him up as he looked toward the wide road leading here from the gate. And then Ezra saw it too—a van heading their way. Tension passed through his body, but it dissipated when Frank's face relaxed.

"Should I hide?" Ezra asked to be on the safe side.

"Nah, my buddy Shane is finally back from a dog training course he organized. He's the one with the house by the North gate."

Over the few days here, Ezra got some basic information on the setup of the massive junkyard, including a very stern

request on where he shouldn't go. Most places really. Frank claimed it was for safety but Ezra had no doubt the rules had more to do with hiding illegal activities from him than anything else.

Shane was a man Frank had known half his life, and he lived at the junkyard with his boyfriend Ros, who was a sculptor, though Ezra had his suspicions that anyone who lived here, including Jag and his man, Dane, was knee-deep in crime.

Ezra was happy to see a new face nevertheless, and as the van decorated with cartoonish dog figures stopped in front of them, he stood alongside Frank despite the breeze turning him into an icicle.

A tall, handsome man with dark hair and the face of a hot scoundrel slid out of the vehicle first, approaching them in fast strides. Green eyes settled on Ezra from above a crooked nose that somehow added yet more charm to the stranger's magnetic presence.

"Is that him?" the man asked before squeezing Frank's hand, which confirmed that he was who Ezra thought.

"Yeah, Ezra, Shane," Frank said, leaving Ezra to wonder just how much Frank's friend knew about him. "And that's Ros and Cerberus."

On the other side of the van, a man in his twenties got out alongside an American pit bull. While the dog wagged his tail and followed Ros, Ezra still stood that bit closer to Frank, because the animal wasn't on a leash, and the last thing he

needed on top of the mess he was already in was scars from a dog bite.

Ros smiled at them as he approached. He was... very pretty. A large, shapely nose made him look refined, and his skin was clearly getting some hydration. His very long dark hair was arranged into two dutch braids, and a T-shirt with a cartoon pit bull positioned like the Mona Lisa added to his playful charm.

“Hey! I heard Frank had a guest.”

From up close he looked even more beautiful, with clear skin and shiny eyes. His presence made Ezra relax, glad there was someone around who he could relate to. “Nice to meet you. My name’s Ezra.”

Ros shook his hand, and while his fingers were dotted by a few cuts and scars, which could be expected of someone making sculptures out of junk, his nails were trimmed and polished.

“How long are you staying?”

Frank cleared his throat. “That’s... to be arranged.”

Shane grinned at Ezra and wiggled his eyebrows. “You keeping Frank on his toes? Good! Maybe he’ll even clean his house.”

A playful dig but well-deserved, so Ezra offered Shane his most charming smile. “He won’t have to anymore. I know how to take care of everything.”

Ezra let that hang in the air, and Ros cleared his throat, gesturing for the dog to stay at his heel when he noticed the

tension in Ezra's body. He was perceptive.

Frank huffed. "If I had time to arrange things—"

Ros waved it off. "We all know you're busy. That's why we came over. That's a great belt, by the way. Where did you get it?" he asked, pointing at the accessory Ezra had gotten Frank for his birthday.

They both froze, lost in what they should do, until Frank mumbled, "Ah, it was from Ezra."

Shane's brows lifted. "Someone has expensive taste."

Frank's gaze darted to Ezra, who cleared his throat. The belt was actually custom-made, but nobody needed to know how much attention he put into this final gift meant to remind Frank of their brief and unusual relationship. And now? He didn't know where he stood with Frank anymore. And he hated it. "I chose it because it reminds me of his tattoos," he said, not wanting to discuss money.

"It's the best one I have," Frank said, offering Ezra a smile that had his chest going hot. But before he did something he might later regret, Ros cut in.

"We got some takeout for everyone. Wanna come to ours?"

Real food! Even if it was some shitty chain restaurant pizza, at least it had been made fresh, not reheated.

"That's so nice of you. I'd love to get to know you two better," Ezra said, ignoring the fact that Shane watched him with a half-smirk. Maybe he knew of Frank's visits after all?

“Yeah, but you made the stew... I don’t want your work to go to waste,” Frank said, glancing toward the house with an unreadable expression, but Ezra was intent on chatting to Ros and seeing if they’d get along. Maybe he could even give him some gym pointers, because his calves were slightly too slim in proportion to the rest of his body.

“Come on, it’s just pre-prepared stew. It would be a crime to forgo fresh food to eat something that probably has enough preservatives to not get moldy for a week on the counter.”

Shane started laughing and pushed at Frank’s bicep. “He’s got you there! Come on, we’ve got rotisserie chicken and roast potatoes from that new French place Ros likes.”

Ros’s smile widened and he paced in place to his dog’s happy bark. “Oh, and the sourdough baguettes with wild mushrooms and gruyère cheese? Di-vine!”

Ezra’s mouth watered. It looked like Ros was a man of much finer tastes than his surroundings would suggest.

“Of course we’ll come,” Ezra said and sent Frank a bright smile. “I *love* a bit of Gruyère as a treat!”

Ros grinned and whistled at his dog, turning to the van. “Well, today, you can have as much as you want.”

Not really, but Ezra wouldn’t argue when there was real food on the line. So maybe it was on the fattier side, and the baguettes were carb-bombs, but they’d be likely healthier than the processed junk he’d been eating since arriving here.

“Cheese is cheese. Just feels wasteful,” Frank grumbled as if he hadn’t brought Ezra a Rolex less than a week ago. The same Rolex that still sat on Ezra’s left wrist, reminding him that if push came to shove, he wouldn’t starve.

“Quality food is *never* a waste,” Ezra told Frank, meeting his gaze. “And Gruyère offers a completely different experience than Brie, or Port Salut, or Gouda, to name a few. There’s a reason people came up with so many varieties.”

Frank raised his hands in defeat and grabbed his T-shirt off the fence. “As long as you guys don’t mind I’m sweaty after training. Oh, and Ros?” Ros turned back, already opening the door to his van. “Ezra can’t really access his clothes right now. Can you lend him some of yours? You seem to be of similar size.”

It was... actually pretty sweet of him to inquire, even if Ezra had way more muscle on him than Ros. Still, Shane’s partner was just a bit shorter than him, so maybe some of his more oversized clothes *would* fit? Joggers or a T-shirt that hadn’t been given away as free merchandise?

A smile stretched Ezra’s lips as he looked at Ros, and relief filled his heart when the guy nodded.

Maybe life was taking a turn for the better?

Chapter 11

Frank

EZRA WAS BEAUTIFUL LIKE a prince made of ice. His skin might not be pale, but its olive coloring was cool, and the dark brown hair fell onto his nape as if it were light as snow. Only his eyes shone like two candles, torturing Frank with their judgment.

Nothing Frank did was good enough. His food was subpar. His home—a ruin. And yet, despite all the snide comments Frank couldn't help but desire Ezra so fervently he didn't feel at ease spending too much time in the same room. He couldn't let himself accept the offer Ezra had extended to him that first night, not when it meant using Ezra's terrible situation against him, and especially not after he'd learned how far below him everything in Frank's life was.

It was obvious Ezra hated being here and despite trying to hide it, every now and then his distaste showed in one way or another. Hiding him here was like stabling an award-winning Arabian stallion in a dirty old pigsty with holes in the roof, but what was Frank to do when that was all he had to offer?

He'd worried the prolonged stay at the junkyard would transform Ezra's distaste into loathing, but when the careful smile frozen on the handsome features melted at the sight of puppies, Frank's chest filled with warmth too. He'd seen the smile Ezra had for them before—during their trip at the lake and on the rare occasions Ezra truly relaxed around him—so seeing it now felt like a glimmer of hope for a future where the two of them learned to coexist in peace.

“I’m being ripped apart!” Ezra shrieked, rolling to the floor as the litter of Rottweilers climbed all over him while their parents watched with the remaining three dogs.

For once he didn’t care about his shirt getting wrinkled or his pants becoming a new home for dog hair. Frank never wanted a puppy more than right now. Maybe then he’d see more of those lovely smiles around his home.

At least for as long as Ezra stayed, which was only as long as was absolutely necessary.

And as much as Frank’s frugal nature fought against it, he had to admit that the rotisserie chicken was fresh and juicy, unlike the ones he bought frozen in bulk, and Gruyere cheese did add another dimension to the taste of mushrooms. Just like the meals Ezra used to make for him at his apartment, the dishes Shane and Ros offered them was delicious, nourishing, and prepared with care. Maybe it really was time to change something about the food Frank was eating? Because of course this was better than the ready-made stew, but he was usually far too busy to cook or arrange groceries on a regular basis. But if the current situation made Ezra so unhappy, then Frank had to do something about it, even if the boy wasn’t to become a permanent fixture in his life.

Ros sat on the carpet next to Ezra, dangling a plushie above one of the puppies. “Oh, they’re little monsters. I’m not getting any work done lately.”

“I can help,” Ezra said right away, flicking the ear of a puppy triumphantly standing on his stomach.

Of course he would. He surely would do anything to free himself from Frank and the obligation to keep him company.

Ros beamed at him. “You can? I’m pretty sure Frank has an old bicycle you could use if Frank’s other car is still broken.”

Of course. Why not point out another failure in Frank’s life? He never got around to fixing the damn Dodge because he used the truck most of the time anyway, so the other vehicle wasn’t a priority.

“I’ll check on that car,” Frank said, picking apart the chicken. Because what else was he to say? ‘No, Ezra, you can’t come here because I like looking at you too much’? It would be for the better if Ezra had something else to do during their forced cohabitation, because the tension inside Frank accumulated each day, and it could not be eased by breaking more glass.

“You would? That would be amazing. You spend most of the day away, and maybe Ros could use some assistance?” Ezra asked, gently helping the puppy off as he sat up.

“Oh, definitely. They’re a handful, and the other dogs need daily exercise too.” Ros nodded, petting one of the puppies with a wide smile.

Frank didn’t miss the way Shane’s eyes became softer when he watched his boyfriend, and he tried to not be jealous, he really did, but his own ship had sailed, and the little bit of joy he’d shared with Ezra got snatched away from him too.

Everyone around him coupled up, and he was happy for them, but it was always a reminder that his own lifestyle was not conducive to having a partner, especially since he'd always fallen for men he could not have.

“All right, seeing you in those wet clothes is making me shiver. Let's get you something dry,” Ros decided, rising from the floor.

“They've already dried. I'm warm-blooded,” Ezra said with a quick peek Frank's way, “but I need more than one pair of pants and a single T-shirt.”

Frank was on the verge of apologizing, as if it were in any way his fault that Ezra didn't have all the best clothes he could dream of. So he bit into the chicken instead, because this was ridiculous. He didn't owe Ezra anything. He was helping the guy because he wanted to. Because it was the right thing to do for someone he'd spent so much lovely time with.

As soon as Ros and Ezra disappeared upstairs, Shane kicked Frank's foot under the table. “Did you hear that, Frank? He needs more. Are you only giving him half your dick at a time?”

Frank grunted with his mouth full. “We're not fucking.”

Shane rose and approached the kitchen to grab two beers. “Bullshit. I've known you far too long to eat up this kind of lie,” he said and put both bottles on the table.

“Well, I'm not. The only reason he's here is because he's in trouble. I couldn't tell you over the phone. It's some deep shit

I still haven't worked out how to get him out of. In the meanwhile, is he eye candy? Sure. But I'm not getting to suck it."

And oh how much he'd love to suck Ezra. Preferably with those pretty eyes blindfolded, wrists cuffed together, legs wide open. Bondage was something they'd never gotten to, and while Frank accepted that people liked what they liked, it bothered him that he had a feeling Ezra rejected that kind of play for safety reasons, not because it simply wasn't his thing. Otherwise, why would he be so into being overpowered and held down?

Which was something Frank needed to stop thinking about if he was to not get hard in the middle of Shane's living room.

Shane opened his bottle and took a swig of the cool beer, petting Hera's head when she settled next to him, interested in the food left on the table. This moment felt achingly familiar. The home Shane now shared with Ros was way nicer than the shack Frank had lived in when Shane first joined him at the junkyard, way before his prison sentence, but sitting like this and sipping beer together was a callback to that peaceful time. How many years had it been? Fifteen? Shane had been a presence in Frank's life for so long he couldn't count it anymore.

"Since when do you know a guy pretty enough to be a model? And where did you meet him?"

"He's a massage therapist. I've got this thing with my shoulder," Frank said, not believing it himself, but that was the

lie Jag had gotten fed, so sooner or later, Shane would have heard it. To avoid looking into Shane's lie-detector eyes, he focused on opening his beer.

“Really? What kind of massage does he specialize in?”

Hah, of course the cover story sounded shady but they couldn't change it anymore.

“Sports massage,” Frank said without missing a beat, because he'd anticipated this question.

“Yeah? Are his hand jobs record-breaking?”

Frank snort-laughed and then had to cover his face with his hand. He had to give Shane that one. “So maybe I have a schoolboy crush on him, okay? He's here because he's fucked, and not by me.”

Shane sighed, tapping the bottle with his nail. “The man who's after him, is he another one of his ‘massage’ clients?” he asked, doing the finger quotes.

Shane saw straight through him, so what was the point of trying to keep up this charade? Frank took a swig of beer. “Yeah, and it's Paul Burke of all people. Ezra ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he's seen shit he shouldn't have. I need to work out how to get him somewhere safe, because you know how Paul is. Like a dog with a bone. He won't let this go, and I'm not burying Ezra in a barrel in a month's time.” Just the thought of it had Frank clenching his empty fist.

Shane exhaled, and the roguish smile dropped from his face as he watched Frank in silence. They both knew Paul all too well to have a positive outlook on Ezra's situation.

“Shit,” he said with a shake of his head. “What are you gonna do?”

Frank shrugged. “For now, I'm keeping him safe, giving it a few days. I might reach out to Paul in a bit, ask him if he's heard from Ezra to throw him off his scent. I've texted Ezra's phone in case he's checking the messages on it. Future? I contacted my fake IDs guy, and when I feel it's safe, I'll ask Ezra if he prefers Canada or Mexico. He should cross the border on foot, without needing to book a plane ticket.”

Shane tapped his fist on the table, watching the puppies feed from their patient mom in the corner. His face looked like carved in stone when he frowned, deep in thought. “He's the guy you've been seeing for the past year, isn't he?”

What would be the point in pretending now? Frank nodded and had more beer. “It was just a bit of fun.” Shane would probably judge him for it, but Frank was too old to care.

“Must have been more than that if he's here. Why would he run to you out of all people?”

Frank shrugged. “Cause I'm big and dangerous but also have a soft spot for him? And he was right. I guess I do. But when I—you know, when I paid to see him, we both knew where we stood. This? This is a mess. I can't expect anything from him in this situation. I don't want to abuse the power I have.”

Shane cocked his head. “Okay? So the two of you are just stewing together in one house, knowing you could bang? What did *he* say about it?”

“Shane, look at him. He was happy enough in our arrangement, but it’s not like he’d look at me twice if we met in the street. That’s okay. I know who I am. It doesn’t matter. It was fun while it lasted.”

Shane scowled. “You’re acting like some sad old man who thinks there’s nothing out there for him. He’s pretty as a picture, yes, but why do you sell yourself so short? I’m assuming most of the guys who hired him were not *this*.” He pointed to Frank’s body.

Shane’s words ignited a spark of hope Frank couldn’t put out no matter how much his pessimism was trying to. Because what if he *was* Ezra’s type? Frank hadn’t been born yesterday and was well aware that some guys like them big and mean just like Frank liked them refined, with the bone structure of angels.

“I can’t really keep him here forever without Paul finding out eventually.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “So all of a sudden it’s about Paul?”

Frank spread his arms so abruptly some beer spilled out of his bottle. “I don’t know! All of this is throwing me in a loop. Do I even have time for a relationship? And then there’s the *business* he can’t really know about. He’d want nothing to do with me if he knew. He’s very... delicate,” he ended flatly.

Shane's eyes opened wide and he pretended to shut his jaw with one hand. "Ohhh, Frankie. I said nothing about a relationship, but if that's where your thoughts go, then you need to fucking pursue this. And if you won't do it, I'll make sure he knows that you might need some *lovin'*."

Frank got up and grabbed Shane by the collar, because a man had limits. "Don't you fucking dare—"

"Um... all okay down here?" Ros asked, making his way down the stairs.

Frank let go of Shane, but still gave his friend a glare as he sat down. "Fine."

Chapter 12

Ezra

THE MOST STUNNING FEATURE of Rosen and Shane's bedroom was the fresco painted on the ceiling in the alcove containing their bed. Featuring fantastical creatures and men in shiny armor, it should have looked over-the-top. New money. But instead it was the expression of Ros's artistic talent, and Ezra couldn't help but keep glancing toward it as he tried on clothes. He was surprised that most weren't from any well-known brands and often had an unusual design, which, he supposed, went with Ros's personality. One of the sweaters he'd tried on was even handmade.

As he'd suspected, Ros wore a different size, since he had less muscle tone and was shorter, but many of the garments he'd been offered worked quite well. And the gray pants Ros had gotten online and intended to return not only fit Ezra but also showcased his legs. He'd paired them with a simple T-shirt, which he tucked in, and *voilà*, he immediately felt more like himself. Not to mention that the gold-plated band of the Rolex elevated the outfit to new heights.

"You have no idea how happy this makes me. I can't access any of my belongings right now," Ezra said as his shoulders dropped a bit.

Ros, who sat on the floor alongside a Husky/Welsh corgi mix named Eros, offered him a smile. "Don't worry. You can borrow all the clothes you like. I could also order some necessities for you, like underwear. If Frank bought something that's your size, it could stand out to someone looking for clues."

And there it was. Despite his sunny personality, love of quality food and art, Ros was well aware that whoever was behind Ezra's temporary banishment to the junkyard wasn't a regular citizen. No details have been shared, but as Ezra suspected, even this pretty boy knew Frank's business wasn't entirely legitimate.

He cleared his throat. "Thank you. Really."

"That's a nice watch," Ros said in an innocent tone, but his big eyes revealed a curiosity that came with context. He recognized that the piece of jewelry on Ezra's wrist wasn't just a trinket.

"It was a gift," Ezra told him, approaching the bed to fold all the items he intended to take with him. He smiled when his nape tingled with the sense of being watched.

It didn't matter whether Ros was his type, or if he wanted to do anything with him, but being noticed made him feel like he still had *it*. That kind of leverage that only came with beauty.

"Generous. But I can't complain since I've been blessed with six new fur babies last month. Do you know how long you'll be staying?"

"Frank won't tell me. But he's protective," Ezra added, sprinkling a pinch of suspicion in the thoughts no doubt swirling in Ros's head. People like him rarely lived in junkyards in the middle of nowhere.

Ros cocked his head, walking up to the fur-covered bed and sitting against the headboard. "Did *he* give you that watch?"

He grinned and winked at Ezra, in no rush to go downstairs.

Bingo. This was exactly where Ezra wanted this conversation to go, and Ros followed his thread like a good boy.

He was so different than the semi-friends Ezra had back in town. While he was asking questions, he didn't try to show off, and he didn't seem jealous either. It was just a feeling, but Ezra was good at sensing these things. Could it be that he was trying to work out if Ezra and Frank were a thing to understand if he could get Ezra as a third in his and Shane's bed? It wouldn't have been the first time.

“Well... yeah, but now I'm a bit surprised,” Ezra said. “This place must bring more money than it might seem. But then again, I don't know anything about this type of business.”

Ros's smile could have competed with the Mona Lisa's. “There's a lot going on here. Shane does some work with Frank, so I know. But it varies. Depends whether Frank has a buyer for the items, or if someone brings a collectible treasure with all the other crap. Jag helps sort through it, but it's a lot of work. But I'm also pretty sure Frank has savings.”

It was a very enigmatic answer that didn't confirm nor deny Ezra's suspicions about Frank moving stolen goods, but he didn't want to seem nosy and offered Ros his smile number five. “Yeah... I'm insanely grateful for what he's doing for me. It's just...” Ezra cleared his throat to appear sufficiently uncertain, but in reality, he was trying to coax out more information while he had Ros to himself. “I thought we had

good chemistry going. And now he's just... he's just not making any moves."

Ros sat up straighter, hugging a pillow. "Oooh! So you like him. Does he know? That's weird. Why would he not make a move?"

Ezra definitely liked Frank.

He was also very horny after a dry spell of several days. He was not used to going through such a long time without sex, especially not with a stud like Frank always looming close by.

"He said it would be inappropriate. Can you imagine?"

Ros snorted. "What? Why? Because of the age gap? There's ten years between me and Shane, and we're doing just fine."

"You two make a hot couple. Don't ever split up," Ezra said absent-mindedly and pushed back his hair, watching Ros. "With Frank...well, we did have a few *moments* before I came here. But he seems to think that if I did sleep with him, it would be out of obligation, which is ridiculous. Does he not have a mirror?"

Ros's shoulders sagged. "I see... He looks like a tattooed tank, but he's got a very soft heart. He helped out Shane after he got out of prison, he basically keeps Jag as a pet, and he *gave* us the land on which we built our house, because he wanted us to feel secure. But once he decides that something is the right thing to do, he can be really stubborn about it."

That was a lot to take in. Shane used to be in prison, which didn't seem to bother Ros one bit, since he talked about it as if

it was just a phase one's boyfriend occasionally went through, but most importantly, it offered a lot of insight into Frank's character.

Maybe he really was how he'd seemed during their meetings? Someone very giving. Someone *good*.

"What should I do? You've known him longer."

Ros laughed. "Make your move, man! Look at yourself! How long do you think he'll be able to resist? I give it twenty-four hours."

Ezra wasn't sure if he should be flattered or offended, but Ros's smile was genuine and didn't hint that he was waiting for a reaction to the shots he'd fired. "Well, I may have some tricks up my sleeve."

"There you go." Ros said with a shrug and got up to pet Eros who was scratching at the bed. "Though he did once confess in Truth or Dare, after quite a few shots, that one of his favorite things is toys. Make of that what you will." Ros wiggled his eyebrows.

Ezra pointed his finger at Ros as images of Frank diving between his legs with a dildo filled his mind beyond its capacity, ever expanding. "Oh... okay... He didn't reveal if he has any?" Ezra asked, annoyed by the high pitch of his voice. Frank hadn't even done anything yet and was already making Ezra all horny again.

Ros smirked. "I mean... he must, right?" But then Eros started humping his leg, and he groaned. "I have to let him out.

He gets like this when he has too much energy to burn. Don't we all?" he laughed out loud and urged the dog to the door.

"I think I might take Frank home now," Ezra said, tossing the clothes into a large canvas bag with the logo of an art shop.

His back was crawling with fire ants, and only one thing—one dick—could put an end to his misery.

He hated unresolved sexual tension.

Ezra followed Ros downstairs, and going by the number of bottles on the table, Frank must have had at least three beers. Oh well, he'd be easier.

"You got everything?" Frank asked, straightening up in the chair.

Ezra grinned at him and did a little twirl, to make sure Frank saw how good his ass looked in those pants. Shane was watching too, but it wasn't him Ezra wanted to charm. "Let's go."

Ros ran over to the kitchen. "And here's the organic pancake mix, and the eggs we talked about," he said and packed the products for Ezra into another bag.

"Thanks for the food, guys." Frank nodded at Shane. "I'll be in touch if something comes up."

Vague crime-talk if Ezra ever heard any. But considering that he was now on the run from a literal murderer, whatever it was Frank and Shane did seemed harmless. He waved at their hosts, sent the puppies a goodbye kiss, and opened the driver's

seat of Frank's truck, climbing in while his thoughts pulsed with possible things to say.

Frank shook his head. "Oh, yeah? You afraid I'm gonna crash us?"

Ezra sat but couldn't take his eyes off the stern features that sent a shiver to his ass. The strong profile with a wide nose, thick brows and full lips reminded Ezra of a male lion, and he couldn't wait to become his willing victim again.

It was impossible to stop thinking about what Ros had told him. How did Ezra not know this? Why would have Frank not brought up the topic of sex toys? Unless Ros was fucking with him and this was all an elaborate ploy to spoil Ezra's chances with Frank. He didn't know Ros well enough to trust that he wasn't secretly a two-faced meddler. "Maybe. Would you?"

Frank sat in the passenger seat with a frown. "What? Why would I do that? So you lose your precious organic eggs? I'm not that cruel."

Ezra laughed and shut the driver's door, itching to lean closer and smell this hunk. What would Frank have done if Ezra put his hand on Frank's thigh and then leaned in, opening his fly to release the delicious monster hiding under the denim? "Aw, thank you Frank, that's really romantic of you."

Frank stalled. "Um. I guess next I'll be bringing you flowers and breakfast to bed." He laughed a bit stiffly, and while Ezra had just started the truck, he did need to follow up on that right away.

“Yes?” he asked in a soft voice as the vehicle rolled away from Shane and Rosen’s home.

Frank swallowed, his Adam’s apple trailing under swarthy skin. “So, I was thinking ...”

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t know the food bothered you so much. Since we’re not sure how long you’ll need to stay here, maybe make a grocery list, and I can get everything you need first thing tomorrow.”

How was this guy so sweet?

Ezra found himself staring as his stomach did a rapid backflip. He’d been with many guys, many of them intelligent, polite, cultured, but none paid him as much attention as Frank. Sure, sugar daddies wanted the illusion of having a boyfriend without the emotional commitment, but at the end of the day the people who exchanged money and gifts for Ezra’s company expected to have *their* needs met. Ezra was to remain interested in whatever bullshit they complained about, always smiling and happy about their presence, whether his day was all right or not.

And that was fair. After all, he was providing a service, but the dynamic between him and Frank had felt genuine from the start. Which was why had Ezra forgotten professionalism one time during their lakeside trip, somewhat freaked out by the lack of appropriate food options. It shouldn’t have happened, but Frank didn’t get annoyed, or petty, or passive-aggressive, and had done his best to calm him. Almost like a... boyfriend.

And while Ezra could not get attached to anyone if he was to achieve his future goals and be financially secure, it had felt damn good.

Ezra smirked and moved his open hand down his body, drawing Frank's attention to his chest and stomach. "All this has been curated by me for years. I would never look like this if I ate TV dinners and fast food."

Frank was a big guy, so he probably didn't get drunk easily, but his warm dark gaze was still a little softer when he looked at Ezra. "I bet you'd be just as cute with chubby cheeks."

It sounded almost like a threat, because Ezra already felt that his face appeared a bit rounder than normal, bloated by all the extra sodium he'd been consuming. But Frank wasn't laughing or rolling his eyes. It wasn't a joke, not even a kind-spirited one, which made Ezra feel weird about the way he'd blown up earlier. "I should have told you instead of stewing in it. I guess I already feel like I'm using your kindness too much. And the threat of Paul finding me here is keeping me on edge."

Frank shook his head and pointed from himself to Ezra. "This is a one-way kindness street. If I do something for you, it's because I chose to, so don't question it."

Ezra had lived in the world of transactions so long, he wasn't sure what to do with such a declaration. It was hard to believe someone would give him all this protection in exchange for nothing.

But if Frank had been so benevolent and caring to his friends, why would he treat Ezra with any less generosity?

It was both a relief *and* a problem, since Ezra genuinely liked Frank, both as a lover and a person. Maybe he wasn't the kind of guy he'd target as his future husband, since he did not own private jets or yachts, but for the duration of Ezra's stay here, there was no reason to keep things chaste.

He swallowed. "About those groceries, what's the budget?"

Frank shrugged. "Whatever. As long as it's not cake covered in edible gold, it's fine."

Ezra wondered whether Frank realized how expensive some things were if he never bought them, but then his gaze settled on the Rolex on his hand, and he exhaled, trying to keep his voice level as he spoke. "So you'd be fine spending four or five hundred?"

He could see the calculations all over Frank's face. "I guess. If that's what you need. I usually get stuff frozen, so I'm not sure."

Unbelievable. And considering that he no longer needed to pay for Ezra's time either, he clearly had some cash to burn.

"Frank. If you can afford that, then why do you live like this? Why did you not consult a nutritionist to help you plan meals that would help you meet your exercise goals? Why do the walls of your home look like they haven't been painted in a decade? Why is your car broken? I don't get it. You give so much to your friends, but you should take care of yourself too."

Frank tapped his fingers on the glove box with a thoughtful expression. “I guess I’m too busy...”

Ezra shook his head with an exasperated sigh. “It can’t be just that.”

“I... Maybe I just got into the habit of saving every penny. A few years ago, my sister was diagnosed with cancer. We hadn’t been on speaking terms for years, but she had no one else to reach out to, so she asked me for help. Her treatment was very expensive, and it all had to come out of pocket. I took in her nephew as well, and he needed shit. At that point, spending on any frivolities just wasn’t as important. It didn’t save her in the end, but it did give her more time. And once I got the business running at full speed, I didn’t see a reason to slow down, just in case. So yeah, the house is what it is, I don’t have time to cook, and prefer to get stuff that won’t easily spoil.”

Ezra was speechless. How was this guy single? With a body like his and a gentle personality, he should have plenty of takers for what he was offering, even for free.

He put his hand on Frank’s forearm, his gaze on the uneven road as the truck waddled through potholes. There was a strange weight in his chest now, and he wasn’t sure how to get rid of it. “I’m sorry. About your sister. You did all you could.”

Frank had told him bits from his life, but Ezra was realizing he’d barely scratched the surface. There was so much he still didn’t know about Frank, and right now, all the things left unsaid were a void in need of filling.

“You were my first indulgence since her illness. Something just for me.” He smiled in a way that made Ezra regret they’d arrived at Frank’s house and he had to park. He stopped the vehicle to its usual spot without thinking, and his skin broke out in gooseflesh as he moved his fingers down to Frank’s hand, playing with the hair growing on the back of it.

“I might like luxurious things, but I don’t need to *be* a luxury.”

Frank chuckled and shook his head, then pulled Ezra’s hand up to his lips and kissed his knuckles. “You deserved everything, because the time with you was priceless.”

Ezra’s heart made a funny little twitch, and he might have gasped when Frank’s scruff scraped his fingers in such contrast to the gentle way his lips caressed the skin. He still remembered the rush of being fucked by Frank when they both believed it to be the last time. Now the insistent emotions he’d felt that night rushed right back, making him lean closer until —

Unaware of the turmoil in Ezra’s heart, Frank opened the car door and jumped out.

Ezra wanted to scream in frustration.

“I’ll get your stuff,” Frank said, as if they hadn’t just spoken about stuff that should have shaken things up. He took the bags off the truck bed and waltzed right into the house, leaving Ezra on his own.

Fuck.

Ezra's hands smacked the sides of the steering wheel so hard pain traveled up his arms. He hated the way Frank acted as if he was no longer interested. It made Ezra feel as though he was the chaser, and that was *not* his job!

He got out of the truck and followed Frank inside, braced for a fight. He could not let this insanity continue. It wasn't like they hadn't fucked an innumerable amount of times before, so why the stalling?

"Thanks," he said, his gaze stuck to Frank's broad back and tanned nape. Oh, it looked hot enough to fry eggs on. "I should return the favor. How about that massage I offered earlier? Clearly, someone needs to take care of *you* when you take care of so many people."

Frank turned to him and squinted. He was considering it. Good. Maybe they could finally—

"Maybe tomorrow. I've got some stuff to do with the... thing. It's too convoluted to explain. But make sure to make that list."

What *thing*? Ezra was the only thing Frank should care about and *do*!

"It doesn't have to take long," Ezra said, knowing that his hands were magic no man could resist, but Frank shook his head.

"No, I gotta go now. Maybe watch a show you missed," he said, pointing at the TV.

Fury simmered under Ezras's skin, but he took a deep breath to keep his composure. "Are you seriously walking out now?"

He was offering himself on a platter. He'd gone bare with the man, for fuck's sake, without being pestered for it or tricked. How *dare* he resist?

Frank shook his head, already on his way to the door. "I don't have time for this now. Just chill and enjoy the evening."

Ezra sucked in air, but Frank disappeared before he could have spoken. A scream rose inside him, but Frank was close enough to hear it, so Ezra grabbed a cushion from the sofa and shouted his rage into it, because this man did not deserve to find out how much he'd gotten under Ezra's skin. If he did, he'd have the upper hand, and that would have been *unacceptable*.

Chapter 13

Frank

FRANK DIDN'T HAVE ANY *thing*. The only *thing* he had was avoiding Ezra, because if he didn't, they'd end up in some kind of messy situation, and the last thing Frank wanted was drama.

On a scale of one to ten, his levels of pain due to blue balls were a solid eight. After all, he wasn't being flayed, and his dick wasn't getting dipped in dry ice.

He did get some energy out of his system by smashing a sledgehammer through the walls of an old shed.

After hours of work and victimless violence, the job was done. He could go home with a sense of accomplishment, and the hope that Ezra was asleep by now. He hadn't meant to throw up his life story on the boy back in the car, but he rarely had people ask him about the kind of things Ezra did, so it had just come out.

He'd been thinking a lot about it while turning the shed into sawdust and splinters.

Was he cheap or frugal? Ezra probably thought it was the former, and Frank could see how for a guy like him that would be a major turn-off. But on a deeper level, the conversation forced him to confront the reality that Sally had passed four years ago, and there was no reason for him to forgo the damn avocado toast if he wished to have one.

He usually didn't, but maybe he could allow himself a few new items of clothing, or to get the beer he liked most regardless of whether it was on sale. But old habits died hard,

and as he stopped in front of the house and saw the faint flickering of the television screen through the window, his shoulders dropped. The last thing he needed was a confrontation with Ezra.

Maybe he was just lonely? Maybe he should start going on dates with other criminals and find someone who wouldn't mind that he disposed of bodies for a living? Too bad the idea of dipping body parts in acid together didn't feel all that romantic.

What he wanted was a handsome man to pamper and please. But he was afraid to even dare dip his *toe* into the Ezra waters again, because they weren't clear anymore. They were whitewater. Rapid, dangerous, and oh so beautiful, and if Frank wasn't careful, he could break his neck traversing them. Or his heart.

Ezra's offer was tempting, but he knew himself enough to know that without the boundaries of their former situation, he might fall for Ezra the moment he let his guard down. If they spent lots of time together, borders between sex and intimacy might end up too blurry for him to discern.

The light was off, but the faint glow of the screen showing a silent movie featuring a group of witches revealed Ezra lying on the sofa under Frank's old woolen blanket. At peace, without the fear of Paul going after him, he looked serene like a little kitten stretched out by the fire.

At times, he would talk in his sleep, something the thin walls couldn't hide from Frank. Each night Frank worried Ezra

might be trapped in a nightmare, so he waited out any babbling, just to make sure Ezra didn't need to be comforted. It had been a blessing that he didn't, because Ezra's bed might suck Frank in like quicksand.

He left the TV on and went to the bathroom on tiptoes, eager to wash off the grime of the day. He'd only had a protein bar while out and about, but since he didn't want to wake Ezra, the plan was to make a dash for the master bedroom and hide there in hopes that Ezra's insistent need to prod at him would pass.

It would be better that way, and hopefully, with time, their relationship could stop causing all this tension.

The warm water trickling down his body felt almost like caressing fingers, and he hated himself for imagining Ezra with him. This needed to stop.

So he tortured himself with icy water, and once that got his erection down, he wiped himself off, wrapped the towel around his hips, and stepped out into the hallway.

He knew this wasn't the end of his day when he spotted Ezra standing in the middle of the living room, his stare as level as his stance.

"We need to talk," he said, still in the pants that so deliciously showcased his ass.

Frank sighed, trapped in the towel barely concealing his nudity. "Do we though? You shouldn't have gotten up. We can chat tomorrow."

But Ezra's eyes glistened with a murderous edge, so Frank stepped into the living room despite knowing he might end up hurt.

Ezra invaded his personal space and dug his index finger into Frank's chest, his face twisted in a scowl reminiscent of the witches performing devil-worship on the TV screen that should have been replaced long ago.

"You left for hours, without letting me know what was up. I was worried! And that despite the fact that you're clearly just avoiding me," Ezra roared in a voice Frank hadn't heard him use before. There was crackling fire in his gaze now, and not just the glowing embers of lust.

Frank needed to hold the towel in place, so he only spread one arm to the side. Maybe it was time to put his cards on the table. "Because your presence is difficult for me! You're sending mixed messages. Smiling at me, touching my arm, offering massages... How am I supposed to keep our situation clean when you keep doing that? I'm only a man!"

Ezra covered his face with both hands. "'Mixed messages'? How much clearer do you want me to be? I want you to *fuck* me. There. Have it your way, if you want me to humiliate myself by throwing myself at you like some drunk slut. I've had enough of this! And don't you shove your *rules* in my face, okay?" he challenged Frank, showing him air quotes.

Frank stared at him in complete confusion. Was he hearing this right? A flush wormed its way up his body, and his brain begged to be turned off so that his dick could do the talking.

“Is this... are you saying you need money? For the trip in the future?” he asked carefully.

Ezra took a raspy breath, meeting Frank’s gaze after shaking his sleep-ruffled hair. “I’m going to kill you. It’s like you don’t want to listen. You walk around like Hercules in his prime, making me horny all day long, and now I *want* your dick hard for me, okay? Or did something change and you don’t want me anymore?” he asked, placing both hands on his chest as vulnerability replaced some of the anger in his eyes, creating an intoxicating mixture that drew Frank in as if he were a moth following Ezra’s light.

Frank gave up. He let go of the towel, letting it drop to the floor. “Of course I want you. I’m literally getting a boner while you yell at me. Being around you and not being able to fuck you is *unbearable!*”

Ezra’s gaze dropped to Frank’s half-hard dick, and he inhaled, his mouth dropping open in an oddly innocent expression. “For me too. I need you so damn much,” he said and stepped close, pulling on Frank’s head so their lips could meet in the middle.

It was like jumping into the fire, but the flames didn’t hurt Frank. They consumed him. He closed his arms around the slender yet toned body occupying all of his wet dreams.

His hands made their way to Ezra’s waist, then to his back, and lower, until he got to squeeze that perfect ass. At the same time Ezra kissed him so intensely Frank was getting dizzy. His

tongue couldn't stroke Ezra's fast enough, and he tugged Ezra closer, until he could press his groin against Ezra's stomach.

The absolute bliss of that feeling made his dick twitch against that pristine skin. Desire ran wild in his blood, and he was about to pick Ezra up and carry him to the bedroom when Ezra stepped back, tugging on Frank's arms. His cheeks were red. His eyes glowed, and even his white teeth shone as if the boy were thirsting for Frank's blood.

He would be a willing victim to more.

"Here. Sit," Ezra said, out of breath as he shoved Frank toward the sofa.

Breathless as he landed, Frank watched Ezra remove his pants. "I don't know what we are..." he muttered even though all he could focus on was Ezra's naked body, perfect like the pictures of hot men in an underwear ad.

But he was here, with Frank.

"Do I look like I care?" Ezra barked and grabbed a tube of lube, squeezing a huge dollop onto his hand.

This was different from the submissive way he'd acted during their arrangement, when all he did was respond to Frank's wishes. Tonight, he was his own man, taking what he needed while his eyes glistened with something so wild Frank let himself roll down in the seat, choking on the dense atmosphere of sex.

Frank swallowed. "No. You look like you want a plowing."

This time, Ezra smiled, and it was the kind of full, bright smile that lit up his eyes. “Uh-huh. We’re finally on the same page.”

A moan left Frank’s lips when Ezra grabbed his cock with the slippery hand. His toes curled as he responded to the touch by punching his hips up, and their mouths clashed again in a breath-stealing kiss that was all teeth and tongue. And there was no end to their hunger. Right now, Frank didn’t care what they were either, or that he’d get his heart broken, because this beautiful creature, this man who charged thousands for his time, wanted *him*.

He stroked Ezra’s sides in amazement, melting into the kiss and fucking Ezra’s fist with no shame. Not everyone gave good hand jobs, but Ezra? He was a master. His fingers were so smooth and pampered, his gestures so in tune with Frank’s needs. But then his hand was gone, and Ezra climbed Frank like a monkey, his gaze intense as he reached back to keep the hard dick at the correct angle.

“You missed this, big man, didn’t you?” he rasped when Frank shivered, overwhelmed by the sensation of Ezra’s buttocks rubbing against his cockhead.

“Fuck yes.”

The room shrank to just the bubble around them, and everything but the *need* within Frank ceased to matter. The need to pleasure Ezra. To possess him, to connect with him, to be inside him.

To *fuck* him.

He'd devour him whole and not leave a single crumb if he could.

Frank grabbed his ass and spread his buttocks for better access when he slid lower on the sofa and arched his hips up so his cockhead pressed against the hot pucker.

Ezra's hold on his dick tightened, and then he sank down, closing his eyes when his scorching body let Frank inside. It felt like entering heaven through the main gate. No one ever made Frank feel this intensely, so he kept his gaze on Ezra as his features tightened, as he clenched his teeth and gasped in response to the intrusion.

Just days ago, Frank thought he'd never have this again, and now here he was—not only holding Ezra, but also so clearly desired by him. Bliss swirled in his head as he pulled Ezra in for another kiss, rocking his hips until his cock was balls-deep in the tight channel of muscles.

There was something so primal in his dick being accepted inside another person's body. The connection went beyond words and expressed itself in moans and gasps. In the way he could feel Ezra's shiver all the way to his cock, or in how Ezra's nails penetrated the skin of Frank's back deeper than ever before.

This time, Ezra reached for what he wanted, no longer bound by an agreement specifying their roles. He no longer needed to hold back and for once, showed Frank his true self. It was exhilarating.

Beautiful.

Frank let go of everything that held him back too, and this gorgeous young man, of whom Frank often felt so unworthy, accepted him with a growing smile.

“Frank... oh yes,” Ezra mumbled, rocking back and forth while he got used to the thick presence inside him. His cheeks were so smooth, so lovely Frank dove in to kiss one, and the sweet body on top of him leaned in with a soft moan. “This is so good. *So good.*”

“I love being inside you,” Frank whispered into Ezra’s lips, no longer holding back either.

His hands couldn’t get enough of the hot, pliant body, and he thrust his hips faster, pushing deeper into that slick, tight hole. He trailed his kisses down to Ezra’s neck, and yes, bit in. Sucked. Then bit again. Because marking Ezra was what *he* needed. There would be no other man to find offense in hickeys on Ezra’s neck.

There would be no other man, period.

Ezra shook in his arms, holding on while they moved together, his legs working hard to carry him up and down Frank’s shaft. His hands trembled as they traveled over the planes of Frank’s back, over his shoulders, the back of his head, gently caressing flesh that was so rarely appreciated before they’d met. His breath turned shallow, its sound washing over Frank like warm waves on a tropical beach until the edges of his mind blurred, and he let go, listening to Ezra’s heartbeat.

They moved like rapid waves during a storm, clutching at each other as Ezra impaled himself on him while Frank thrust up, wanting to mark him everywhere, even *under* the skin. They were in perfect harmony, and Frank stopped overthinking things, allowing his body to do what felt natural. He squeezed, stroked, licked, bit, kissed until Ezra's moans turned into howls, and he rocked his hard dick against Frank's stomach.

Frank came, holding Ezra's hips to stuff his dick in a few more times, and make sure his seed was planted deep. He could barely breathe by the time his balls emptied, his brain a hazy mess of arousal.

Ezra whimpered, and his lips soon found Frank's forehead, rubbing against it before he trailed soft, teasing kisses all over heated skin. Each touch was like a promise, and Frank longed to see where they might lead, regardless of the danger to his heart.

"Frankie," Ezra whispered and pulled Frank's face to his fragrant chest. The heartbeat echoing from beyond the breastbone was firm, hurried, still very urgent, and as Ezra's hard dick leaked pre-cum onto his own stomach, it fired up Frank's brain.

"How do you want it, needy boy?" Frank whispered, glancing down at the stiff shaft tucked against his hairy underbelly. It was so much easier to tease him now that his own need was satisfied. He was still panting as he rubbed Ezra's cockhead with his thumb.

Would he get to suck it? Would he jerk Ezra off like this, with his own dick still inside him? He wouldn't stay hard for much longer.

But Ezra had an answer to every question and reached back to the coffee table, returning with a fire truck-red dildo from Frank's own collection. His lips were wet from their kisses, his gaze dark with arousal, but what got Frank most was the shameless smile that told him Ezra wasn't at all sorry about going through Frank's things. He was so mischievous. So sexy.

Right now, Frank couldn't care less. Maybe tomorrow he'd fucking spank him.

"I want more."

"Oh, fuck yes," Frank muttered and pulled his dick out. It was only then that he realized they'd forgotten to discuss whether that one time they'd fucked bare set a new standard or if he should have put on a condom this time, but what was done was done. They could talk it through later. "Do you know this thing vibrates?" he whispered against Ezra's plump lips.

He couldn't believe they'd be doing this. Toys gave him all the control over his partner's pleasure. He wouldn't call himself a pleaser in the sense of a person who did not care much about their own needs, but he'd always been turned on watching his lovers squirm with lust.

Ezra's eyes widened, but the wicked smile tugging at his lips revealed that he wasn't surprised. "Does it really? Show me, hot stuff," he rasped, biting his lip and squeezing Frank's pecs

with shocking strength. The time he spent at the gym wasn't just for show then.

Frank grabbed the dildo and moved it behind Ezra, never breaking eye contact. "Where did you get it?" he asked, teasingly brushing the tip of the toy over Ezra's hole, loving that this needy man still wanted more.

"The bottom drawer of your nightstand," Ezra spoke in a voice that dripped with honey. "I sucked on it earlier, but it's not as thick as that natural wonder between your legs, and not nearly as tasty."

Oh. God.

This demon knew exactly what to say to rile Frank up. But Frank was not defenseless, and when he moved his hand, the dildo dove into the relaxed hole. Ezra's eyes flickered and rolled back as his thigh muscles gave up, and he dropped to his knees, straddling Frank's lap.

He was a fucking *vision* with those beautiful lips parted, dick twitching and leaking pre-cum down the shaft.

"Fuck..."

Maybe Frank wouldn't have to wait with that spanking until later?

"And when did I say you could snoop through my shit?" he asked, slowly regaining his composure as he drilled the toy farther into Ezra.

Just as Ezra opened his mouth to speak, he slapped his buttock hard. This was one more thing he'd not been allowed

to do because of the bruising potential. Well, now he *hoped* Ezra would be sporting one more mark tomorrow.

Ezra moaned, his stomach flexing when he pressed his forehead to Frank's, his lips twisting as he lost himself to sensation. "We wouldn't have lube if I hadn't."

Frank chuckled and stroked the rapidly heating buttock. "Fair."

Soon, he'd move his hand to Ezra's cock, but not just yet... With a rocking motion of his wrist, he pushed the fake cock into Ezra again and again, taking time to admire the flush on his cheeks, and his quivering lips.

Ezra's smile teased him, coaxed him closer until he leaned in and claimed those perfect lips with his tongue. Tonight, he was seeing a new side of Ezra, and as much as he enjoyed the company of the seemingly flawless escort, this infuriating, demanding man was even more beautiful.

Frank's toes curled when Ezra moved, riding the dildo as they kissed. He was insatiable, and yet Frank wished he could spend the rest of his life trying to satisfy his cravings. This could have only been better if Ezra's hands were cuffed back, and his knees kept wide apart with a spreader bar while Frank pumped the toy into him, stopping whenever Ezra got too close to the edge.

Soft gasps filled the air when Ezra rubbed his chin against Frank and cupped his face, watching him like no person before had. In that moment, Frank had no doubt that he *mattered*.

Whatever hid in that pretty head, Ezra cared for him in some way, and his body spoke of his attraction to Frank in very honest terms.

So Frank answered in the same language.

He slid his tongue between Ezra's lip and gums, and turned on the vibrations with a button at the base of the toy. He wouldn't dare blink, to not miss a heartbeat of Ezra's reaction.

Oh, how he squirmed. Breath caught in that long, beautiful throat, thighs stiffened on either side of Frank's.

"Oh... oh yeah. It definitely v-vibrates," Ezra rasped, pulling Frank close, as if he wanted to intoxicate him with the peppery scent of his cologne and the fresh sweetness of skin. His spine arched, and he uttered a broken moan, rocking back and forth.

Within just a few days, this young man—almost stranger—had left his mark on everything he touched, even on Frank's deepest, most secretive needs. But when he reached for his neglected cock, the need to keep in control flared up in Frank.

He slapped Ezra's hand away, but before Ezra finished his disappointment-filled whimper, Frank wrapped his fingers around Ezra's shaft.

"Fuck my hand," Frank said, staring at the man in front of him and loving every second of their connection. The amber eyes rolled back and Ezra followed his request without question. Frank held the dildo in place, imagining how the vibrations he could sense in his hand rubbed Ezra from the inside. He hoped they gave Ezra the high of his life.

“Watch me. See me come,” Ezra whispered, his gaze intense as he rocked on top of Frank. He was like a wild cat, tamed yet not domesticated, and Frank didn’t think he could ever be.

The scent of his arousal intensified, he breathed faster, and when his entire body stiffened, about to climax, Frank pushed the dildo in hard, shattering whatever was left of Ezra’s composure.

Cum splashed Frank’s skin as Ezra trembled, throwing his arms around Frank and hissing out a few unintelligible words.

And then he went limp and sank into Frank’s embrace, spent.

Frank turned off the vibrations and was gentle as he pulled out the dildo. He dropped it to the floor without care, hugging Ezra with one arm, as he slid his spunk-stained hand to Ezra’s ass. The tips of his fingers dipped into the warm hole, teasing the sensitive flesh as they both basked in the afterglow of sex.

He hummed against Ezra’s skin and left kisses along his shoulder. “So pretty, but so filthy…” he murmured lovingly.

Ezra swallowed, hiding his face in Frank’s neck. “In a good way?”

“In the best way.”

Frank made sure he was ready, to not fuck up his signature move, and rose from the sofa while holding Ezra against his chest. His knees wobbled for half a second, but yep, he still had it.

The stars shining at him from Ezra’s eyes were the only reward he cared for, but he pushed down the intense need

blooming inside him and carried Ezra to the bedroom Ezra had recently cleaned. Even the sheets were fresh, and as Frank put him down onto the mattress, he could barely believe this was happening.

Ezra stretched, smiling at him while Frank ran to the bathroom to get one of the hand towels wet, and proceeded to wipe Ezra's skin as their breaths calmed.

"You think you got your fill of dick?" he asked and kissed Ezra's ear as he joined him for a cuddle.

Already close to drifting off into the land of dreams, Ezra smiled and rolled his face into Frank's chest, tickling it with his breath. "Yeah. For tonight. Tomorrow, you're gonna have to do it all over again."

"Can't wait." Frank chuckled, closing his eyes, but when Ezra's breath steadied after a while, he opened them again to take in the treasure in his arms. Ezra didn't know it yet, but after tonight, all bets were off.

Frank would fight to keep him.

Chapter 14

Ezra

EZRA BARELY REMEMBERED SLEEPING as well as he had last night. Usually, he'd wake up and then doze off again many times to get ten hours of sleep. This morning, he came to with Frank's firm, warm body pressed to his back, and while he'd only rested for seven hours, his body buzzed with energy. Having sex with Frank last night put an end to the tension he'd lived with since his escape from Paul's.

He liked getting up with a soreness in his thighs and a man's scent clinging to his skin. It was a familiar ritual, which reassured Ezra that despite the upheaval in his life, some things stayed the same. He was still beautiful, charming, and desirable—lots of capital that he could use to his advantage. In this case, to make sure Frank stood by him when push came to shove.

It wasn't the classic tit-for-tat, since Frank was a great guy, who seemed genuinely concerned about his wellbeing, and being with him had always been a pleasure, but he was still just a man, ruled by whatever was most comfortable and convenient at the time. It was Ezra's job to make himself indispensable, but he sure as hell intended to enjoy the process.

He managed to slide out of Frank's embrace without waking up the giant, and he ended up in the kitchen, making breakfast.

By the time Frank got out of the shower, he was flipping the first batch of pancakes made with the mix Ros had given him. They were reduced in sugar, but Ezra still intended to build his own breakfast around the eggs and canned tomatoes.

“Coffee’s ready,” he informed as the floor squeaked under Frank’s weight.

Frank wore only his jeans, accessorized with the belt Ezra had given him for his birthday. The cool shade of the brown leather went so well with the expanse of powerful muscle that made up Frank’s chest. Dark hair created a path for Ezra’s gaze, and he found himself grinning, in need of brushing some of it in place close to Frank’s left nipple. Ezra kept himself mostly smooth, but he had a thing for body hair on other men and loved to feel it against his own skin.

Frank met his gaze with a smile. “That smells amazing,” he said, and petted Ezra’s back. Leaning into the touch was the most natural thing to do.

Ezra rubbed the back of his head against Frank’s chest and grinned at him, smelling the fresh shower gel and the clean musk of his body. Frank’s skin was a gorgeous tan shade, his brows pronounced and low over his eyes, giving him an air of nobility. Such a handsome man. How lucky was it that Ezra was stuck with *him* of all people?

He gasped when big hands, which last night held him up with such ease, rested on his hips, claiming him in that protective way that put his heart at ease. This could be what every morning in the unforeseeable future would be like, and while this kind of domesticity felt comfortable, he wasn’t used to it. The only times he’d ever slept with the same man more than one night in a row was because that man had taken Ezra

on a trip. Would this change things? Make time spent in his company seem less valuable to Frank due to its mundanity?

His heartbeat started rushing as Frank kissed his ear.

Hot, strong arms wrapped around his waist, as if to ease his worries. “I hope you don’t mind all the love bites. I might have gotten carried away last night. It’s your fault though. You unleash the beast in me.”

A tingling heat traveled from Ezra’s nape down his body, making him lean some of his weight on Frank as his legs weakened at the touch. Oh, he’d seen all the bruises and marks left on him last night. In any normal situation, he’d have been livid, no matter how good the sucking and biting had felt in the moment, because it would bother his other clients if he charged them for anything but perfection. But there was no one here to police the red marks on Ezra’s flesh, so he shook his head and put the pancakes on the plate before pouring more of the batter into the hot pan.

The oil sizzled like his brain had when he’d gotten his hands on Frank last night. Ezra had gotten used to a degree of power over the men he slept with, and not having it when Frank was his only lifeline left him feeling as if the floor under his feet was made of glass. Last night put him on solid ground again, but deep down he knew that wasn’t the only reason for his excitement. Something about this man made Ezra lose his mind a little bit, like that time he’d decided to skip condoms for no good reason, because it was to be their final meeting and he felt regretful over it. Or when he’d forgotten about

them again last night, and let Frank bite him all over, braving the discomfort of being penetrated almost too fast because he *needed* to have the big cock inside him so badly.

He was usually reasonable, calculated, so finding out that given the right (or wrong) circumstances, he acted as irrational as everyone else left him unsettled. He didn't like being dirty and worrying about the risk of STIs PReP did not protect him from, so when the rules he'd set up did end up being broken, the fault usually lay in the client *forgetting* to rubber up. But those last two times? It had happened because Ezra wanted Frank to come inside him, and that fucking scared him.

Frank nuzzled Ezra's ear. "Why so quiet? Did I make you uncomfortable?" he asked and pulled away to sit at the table.

Ezra hadn't even noticed how wrapped up in his own thoughts he'd gotten. Then again, wasn't he allowed to be a bit frantic and all over the place after seeing a dismembered guy days ago?

He needed to get a grip on something beyond Frank's dick and decide how to proceed. This should involve finding out what exactly was going on in the junkyard.

"No. I'm sorry," he said and grabbed the jug of freshly brewed coffee on the way to the table. He placed his hand on Frank's forearm and rubbed the thick body hair with his thumb as he filled the two mugs prepared for them. "It's just a bit overwhelming. I'm not used to being with someone every morning."

Frank's gaze was inquisitive when it settled on Ezra. Now *this* was new.

Ezra had always thought of Frank as this working class guy with simple needs, and that suited him. They'd had easy-going, fun dates, shared a sense of humor, and had amazing chemistry. But something in the way Frank eyed him now, as if he wanted to strip away all of Ezra's barriers until he uncovered the truth about him, suggested Frank hadn't shown him his real self either.

"I don't know how long this will last, but we can arrange things differently if you need the time for yourself."

And what was "*this*" exactly? Ezra being hunted by a cold-blooded killer? Them being in some kind of relationship with rules he didn't understand? Either way, he needed to reassure Frank.

"It's not like that. I'm always happy with your company, but I need to get my head around the change itself. I never really lived with another man," Ezra said and returned to the cooker, cracking eggs over the second pan.

Frank sat close enough to reach out and pet his ass. "You never lived with a boyfriend?"

What was that question? Was Ezra going crazy, or did it imply Frank considered them a couple after last night? Was it a way to trap him here?

But the angry buzz in his veins died when he remembered how sternly Frank had attempted not to let this precise thing

happen. He was just being overly cautious when Frank's question was likely an attempt at conversation. If they were to spend a longer time together, it was natural to talk about all kinds of stuff.

And since they were no longer an escort and his client but... friends who fucked, it made sense that Frank wanted to speak about topics that had previously been off-limits. Ezra's mouth dried as threads of insecurity wormed their way into his chest, but he was no longer meant to be only a beautiful commodity. It was an unfamiliar reality, but as he studied Frank sitting at the table with a smile curving the mouth that had left delicious marks all over Ezra, he had to admit a part of him liked this change.

It made him feel more human.

Frank wasn't a bad guy. In fact, it was a miracle Ezra had someone like him to rely on.

So he chuckled, wiggling his butt at Frank while flipping the bacon, almost ready to serve the food. "I never had a boyfriend, period."

Frank laughed and had a sip of coffee. "Now you're just making shit up. Why would you have not had a boyfriend?"

Ezra frowned and got two large plates, which he started filling with the food, making sure that Frank's contained more pancakes and more of... everything. "I just didn't. I suppose I wanted one all the way back in high school, but I was *really* ugly before my glow-up, so the closest to that was hooking up with this other boy for a while."

Frank snorted, looking him up and down. “I don’t believe that. You’ve got those beautiful eyes like two flames, and such a stunning face. Was it a style choice? Were you emo or something?”

Two flames? Ezra didn’t think Frank had enough grasp of metaphors to come up with *that* description, but it flattered him nevertheless. He could be like the beautiful concubines of yore, praised in song for their beauty and charm. Why not?

“No, but I had the *worst* acne, and I was pudgy. A guy like you wouldn’t have touched me with a stick.”

Frank smirked and grabbed a fork as soon as Ezra put the plate in front of him. “A guy like me? What kind of taste in men do you think I have? Because I can assure you I’ve never been with a solid ten before you.”

Ezra’s chest vibrated, as if Frank had pulled on the string attached to a bell hanging in the place of his heart. He’d normally tease Frank by calling him a solid seven, to prompt him into trying harder and paying more, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it and just sat next to him by his own meal. “And you can have the current me. Why would you waste your time on some pockmarked, awkward dude?”

Frank didn’t laugh. He cocked his head as he ate. “You really believe that?”

Ezra stalled, feeling as if Frank had just pushed him off a cliff, and he was now plummeting down, unsure whether there was something soft to land on underneath. “That’s how the world is, isn’t it? Everyone prefers hot people. I can tell you

from my own experience that my life completely changed when people started finding me attractive.”

“And how did that happen exactly?” Frank asked. Still, he reached over the table and stroked Ezra’s hand. “This is delicious.”

Ezra smiled and had a sip of coffee to start with. “Good dermatologist. A dietician. A personal trainer. A growth spurt. Going through puberty. Suddenly, people paid attention, talked to me more, and I no longer felt like someone giving me his cock to suck was doing me a favor. Mom encouraged me to take care of myself, helped me pick new clothes, and by the time I was a senior in high school, I felt like I existed the way I was always meant to.”

Frank stopped chewing for a second, then swallowed. “And that *was* more than a year ago, right?” He eyed Ezra with a frown.

Sweet.

“Don’t you worry, I have not stained your moral compass. I’m twenty-three,” Ezra said, starting his meal with the tomatoes. Fiber first. Then protein, and he’d wrap up with carbs to keep the sugar spike to a minimum. He felt guilty about gorging on so much bread and cheese at Ros and Shane’s, so today’s menu needed to be perfect.

Frank’s relief was so obvious his expression made Ezra chuckle.

“Okay. Good. I might like guys younger than me, but I’m no cradle-snatcher. So you were close with your mom, but... aren’t anymore? Why did you lose touch?”

Ezra chewed a bit slower to think through his answer. He wouldn’t have called his relationship with Mom *close*. They just had a lot in common, and she saw him for what he was.

“Because of the job I chose to do. She thinks it’s dirty, and told me that I’m on my way to sucking dick for crack,” he said, laughing. “She’s a hypocrite, so I don’t feel the need to reach out either.”

Then again, he had ended up in an arrangement with a murderer, and now had to hide out at a junkyard with a different kind of criminal, so maybe she hadn’t been so wrong after all. Not that her choice of staying with a shitty husband was any better.

“How so?” Frank asked between one bite and another. He’d never been this inquisitive before, and Ezra was torn between feeling flattered by the attention and wary that he was giving away too much. Another thing Mom had taught him. Keep your cards close. They might be used against you.

He filled his mouth, once again buying himself time while Frank watched him, his eyes so open, so interested in what Ezra had to say. Most of the people he’d spent time with were more interested in talking about themselves, and he wasn’t sure what this meant.

But his family wasn’t some big secret, so he shrugged. “She married for money. But I suppose she thinks it’s fine to sell

yourself if it's just one person. Or maybe she just got jealous when I grew out of my teen pudge and started getting more attention from guys than her.”

“So how did you get into escorting if your mom was against it?”

Ezra laughed. “Mom couldn't tell me what to do once I turned eighteen. She should blame herself for telling me to go into a profession that would give me access to high quality men, since I was gay and all that. I did a few modeling gigs, and I started going out to get my bearings as an adult. I think it started the way it did for a lot of people. This one guy offered me cash for spending time with him while his wife was away.”

It had felt good to be desired. And he soon found out the money that could be made in the profession would offer him a chance to live independently and reach whatever goal he chose.

“What about your father? You cut contact with both your parents?”

Ezra sipped more of the coffee even though his stomach twisted with ice, as if an eel had passed through it. “There isn't really much to say about him. He was never very family focused. Unlike you. How come you lost touch with your sister?” he asked, eager to shift the attention to Frank because the less they talked about Ezra's dad the better.

Frank gave his pancakes a thoughtful nudge with his fork. “I got mixed in with a bad crowd at a young age. I didn't grow up with money, so I don't know if I was compensating or just

greedy, but from one violent outburst to another, I ended up in a gang. A lot of my tattoos are from back then. Weirdly enough, unlike my family, those guys were fine with me being gay, even if they made the occasional joke. But I was already big as a teen, so no one fucked with me. Looking back, the older guys must have just understood I'd be useful, so what did they care who I fucked?"

Ezra didn't expect to get so much information without any prodding. Most guys he knew would have offered him a story that painted them as victims of circumstance or prejudice. He wasn't used to so much honesty, and his heart beat faster, warning him that this might be a trap.

He chose to fall into it.

"Is that how you know Paul?"

Frank nodded. "Yeah, he's two years older than me, and he's gay, so we naturally drifted close."

Ezra exhaled and put his hand on Frank's knee, because while Frank was a big, tough guy, he did have a soft heart and reminiscing might be unpleasant. "I'm sorry. Must have been a shock to find out he's—"

The words got stuck in Ezra's throat, and as his brain reminded him of the head staring at him with dead eyes, the smell of pancakes became the sickening odor of rot.

Frank sighed and squeezed his fingers. "It's... I don't know. Seems like a natural progression for him. For a few years, Paul and I, we were really a force to be reckoned with. Two young

shitheads looking for trouble, stealing cars, selling drugs. My relationship with my sister was already strained because of that lifestyle, and my father was trash not worth the sofa he farted into for twenty years. But it all came to a head when my sister got pregnant at nineteen. With a guy ten years older than her.” He glanced at Ezra. “The irony isn’t lost on me. I beat up the guy real bad, thinking I was taking some noble revenge. He left the picture, and my sister refused to speak to me for years after that.”

Ezra rubbed Frank’s thigh and shifted closer, suddenly feeling that the questioning had been a mistake. People didn’t like those who made them feel bad, regardless of reasons. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pried,” he said, though the honesty pouring out of Frank’s mouth was baffling. It was like discovering this man from the ground up after a whole year of fucking. As if he’d also been keeping a facade even though he was the one paying, so he didn’t have to. And strangely, all this new info didn’t feel like when clients complained about their wives or problems at work, using Ezra as their pliant sounding board who would tell them they were right and the other people were awful.

No, Frank wanted to *connect* and was open to it. He wanted to let Ezra in, and that was somehow scarier than the blood on Paul’s carpet. Though maybe not the severed head.

“Don’t be. I enjoyed the time with you when I paid for it, but this?” Frank stroked Ezra’s hand. “I think I needed this. I want to *know* you, Ezra. Acne, food allergies, and addiction to

avocado included. I like your pretty face, but that's not all I want, understand?"

Shit.

Ezra froze as the reality of this situation crashed into him. Frank had just declared he wanted them to be more than friends. Had Ezra been this successful at leading him on? Their time together was a pleasure, yes, but Ezra had plans—a guy hopefully still waiting for him in LA, a business to start, and a whole world to discover. He did not want to be stuck in this junkyard forever, and while romantic feelings would motivate Frank to protect him, they would also discourage him from dealing with Ezra's actual problem, Paul, and letting him go

On the surface, Frank seemed like a genuine guy, but the fact that he was involved in crime and hadn't been caught proved he knew how to keep secrets. Would he go as far as keeping Ezra here under the pretense of safety? For all Ezra knew, Frank might have already contacted his former friend and told him he'd keep Ezra quiet, away from the world and therefore of no danger to Paul's freedom.

He hated now knowing what Frank really thought. There was no way for Ezra to verify the sincerity of Frank's words, which left him in this terrible limbo.

But if his feelings were so torn and messy, why did Frank's straightforward declaration make his insides flutter?

"I—you never told me that before," Ezra said, keeping his voice steady.

“Because our previous relationship played by rules I didn’t want to break. But then you came here, needing help, and no matter how many times I told you I won’t use your situation to exchange favors, you still wanted to connect with me. I can only assume you feel the same as me.”

What this *feeling* was hung in the air between them but remained unspoken. But Ezra still wanted to know if Frank meant a temporary arrangement or something more permanent. And while words were stuck in his throat, his thoughts galloped to a world where he moved in here for good. Sure, Frank’s place might be a dump, but it was a dump with good bones, and if the quality of the bathroom renovation was anything to go by, Frank’s DIY skills were top-notch.

Most importantly, in that future, he’d get to wake up with his nose buried in Frank’s tattooed chest every single morning.

Ezra’s cheeks burned, and as his head spun a bit, he was grateful for the steadiness of the chair under him. He felt weak in the face of Frank’s declaration, and no matter how hard he tried to poke holes in his words, they seemed sincere.

Ezra was at a crossroads and wondered if he shouldn’t leave the safety of the main road and head into the woods. For now, sun shone through the leaves, dappling the mossy undergrowth, but if he abandoned the route he’d been following for years, all the goals he’d set for his future would be lost. Was this a risk he could afford to take because of one person?

How was he, the man Paul always called his ice prince, even considering this?

Frank had so far proven himself every time. He'd been patient, had taken Ezra in despite the risk to his own safety, and had never once questioned what Ezra had seen at Paul's. His protection felt like a safety net that wouldn't snap under Ezra just because he said the wrong thing.

He'd never before had that, and while Frank couldn't offer him the kind of money or connections Robert the film producer would, his promise had weight. Unlike anyone else's.

"I do like you. I just didn't think we could—" He swallowed, so out of his depth that his usual conversation skills were failing him.

Frank nodded and squeezed Ezra's fingers. "We could. I've been... on my own for quite some time. But if you wanted to give this thing a shot, I'm at a point where I'm ready to try. No rush though. Think about it. What plans did you have in LA ___"

The rumble of motorcycle engines stopped Frank, but Ezra was still stuck processing Frank's words. No man had ever spoken to him so earnestly. And despite knowing that succumbing to his desires would have been a mistake, he let himself imagine a life in which he was Frank's little spoon, cheered him on during competitions, and maybe even made him healthy packed lunches like some good little househusband.

He shouldn't want that.

That wasn't the plan.

But the sudden arrival of a stranger was a convenient excuse to curb this conversation for now. "Who's that?" he asked, rising from his chair. "Should I hide?"

Frank let go of Ezra's hand to peek out of the window, but just shook his head when he returned to the previous position by the table. "Nah, it's just my nephew, Dex. I'll have to go... look at some motorcycle parts when his club arrives."

Frank got up to put on a T-shirt, and Dex walked right in after a short knock.

"Hey! I came earl—ohh *hello*." Dex's brown eyes zeroed in on Ezra, and he smiled in a devilish way that suited his extravagant look and proved that his boy-next-door face, complete with a dusting of freckles, was a lie.

He had to be a bit older than Ezra, but his whole vibe screamed dangerous child, don't give matches. His mane was dyed blond and styled into a floppy mohawk, with buzzed sides that had a lightning bolt design shaved into the short hair. Black plugs filled his earlobes, and his arms and neck were covered in a random assortment of tattoos. He wore a simple black T-shirt under a leather vest and it read *I'm with stupid* above an arrow pointing to his crotch.

Frank had spoken about his nephew a few times, but seeing the guy in person completed the picture.

Frank sighed. "That's okay, I was just having breakfast."

His nephew grinned and strode over to the table, grabbing himself a plate on the way. “Fucking A. I’m hungry. Aren’t you gonna introduce me though? Dex.” He sat down and held his hand out to Ezra.

Ezra shook it, introduced himself, and pointed to the half-empty jug on the counter. “There’s coffee too. Should still be warm.”

Dex grabbed himself three pancakes in one go, then drizzled them in a flood of maple syrup. “Did you make these? My uncle rarely has a feast like this. He’ll usually just do, like, a can of beans, but they make him—”

“Shut the fuck up, Dex!” Frank snarled and sat back down, with his expression going from mildly annoyed to storm cloud.

Dex raised his hands in defeat. “Okay, okay, just sayin’. I didn’t know we were in the presence of a *gentleman*.” He cackled like a hyena, winking at Ezra.

Ezra hid behind his cup, because everything about Frank’s nephew was loud, boisterous, maybe even a bit dangerous, though that last impression could be on account of him flying motorcycle club colors. “Maybe you two have something to discuss?” he asked, meeting Frank’s gaze. Dex’s energy was too much, too fast, and all at once, at that.

Before Frank could answer, Dex spoke with his mouth full. “Heey... No, don’t go, babe.”

Frank bristled and his nostrils flared. “He’s not your ‘babe’.”

“Is he yours?” Dex wiggled his eyebrows. “Or did someone else chew up his neck?”

Frank’s cheeks darkened. “It’s none of your business. Just eat your damn pancake.”

But Dex wouldn’t give it a rest and turned to Ezra. “You must be *real* special. He never brings anyone over. I can see why, though,” he said and his gaze slid to Ezra’s nipples, making him want to cover up.

It earned Dex a slap to the back of the head.

The way things escalated since Dex’s arrival came as a shock to Ezra, but he was certain Frank would not encourage him to flirt back or sleep with his nephew, regardless of what Dex might want. Eccentric-looking and with a mind that was seemingly all over the place, he was far from Ezra’s type and also had the vibe of someone who liked weird shit in bed. No, thanks.

But as Ezra’s confidence grew, he met the brown eyes and spoke. “If you suspect I’m with him, why are you flirting with me under his nose?”

Dex laughed out loud, grabbing another pancake. “The kitten has claws! I like it. I’m just messing with him. And you never know—”

“Oh, your boyfriend *will* know,” Frank said through gritted teeth.

It did make Dex chew much slower. “Anyway, these pancakes are bomb. Can I take some to go?”

Ezra smirked and grabbed Frank's hand to make sure he knew it was okay. Dex wasn't scary, just... a lot. "Depends. Are you still hungry?" Because the breakfast was for Frank, and Dex could have the leftovers.

Frank squeezed his hand, which made all the unwanted butterflies flutter inside Ezra. He knew Frank was happy to show him off because Ezra was young and pretty, but it still felt good to be acknowledged this way. Most of the guys he slept with were very much closeted, so he didn't get to be out with them around people. And then it wouldn't have been *real* anyway. While he wasn't yet sure what he had with Frank, that something was most definitely real.

"I'm done, but could you pack some for me? We'll be away a while."

Dex made an unhappy face when Frank grabbed the plate from under his fingers. "Like, I'm sorry, okay? Force of habit."

Frank squinted at him, then threw a pancake at Dex's face, but his nephew caught it.

"Of course. When can I expect you?" Ezra asked, rising from the table to put together Frank's lunch. "You could also stop by if I knew when to expect you, and have something warm," he added, because the prospect of spending the whole day on his own in this unfamiliar place was creeping up on him with more insistence. There was only so much time he could spend working out, he'd already prepared the shopping list, he had no tools to take care of himself, and he'd used up

the only yogurt in the fridge to soothe his skin, which left him with nothing. Soon enough, his pores would start congesting, and he did not want that to happen around Frank. Could Ros have some quality face mask or scrub? Or was he one of those infuriating people who just happened to have flawless skin?

“Until the afternoon, and the phone connection in the junkyard is patchy at best. Another reason why I told you not to venture out.”

“I could pop in for some food though...” Dex suggested as he munched on his last pancake. He was slim for a person who seemed to fill his mouth with whatever he found appealing at a given moment.

“You can’t. You’ve got work,” Frank said. “But can you get one of your prospects to buy Ezra’s groceries?”

Dex shrugged. “Sure, they’re not allowed to be here today anyway.”

Ezra frowned, because why would junior bikers not be allowed to at bike parts, but seeing that Frank thought about his needs even when he couldn’t deal with them himself shifted his focus immediately. So what if Frank sold stolen motorcycles, or some shit like that, when he took care of his own? Of course, Ezra would have hated to have his own vehicle taken, but there were degrees of criminality, and Frank was a good man at the core.

“Thank you, that would be so helpful! We need face masks and fiber in this house.”

Dex grinned, biting his lips. “I get it. I got a facial just yesterday.”

Ezra looked at him in surprise. “You did?” he asked but scowled when he understood the real meaning behind Dex’s grin. He would do those kinds of facials sometimes because some clients were really into them, and at the end of the day it wasn’t *terrible*, but he didn’t like it, and the cum always somehow got in his eye. The mess also made him feel ugly, and it irked him that some of the people with fat wallets came to him because they wanted to tear off his refined mask. “This is not comfortable. I don’t know you.”

“Dex. You’re on thin ice already,” Frank said in a frosty voice. “Can you not read the room? Stop it.”

There, Ezra’s knight in a T-shirt and jeans, coming to his rescue. Maybe he shouldn’t like it so much, but he did.

Dex sighed and his shoulders sagged. “I was just jokin’... You have to admit that the idea of you getting a face mask is very funny.”

The rumble of more motorcycles outside ended this farce, and Ezra got up to pack the remaining pancakes for Frank’s lunch. He added a small can of peaches, as well as the leftover bacon, some ham, and the sample-sized bottle of maple syrup he’d found in the almost-empty spice drawer.

Frank approached him, and Ezra leaned in, eager to get a taste of the masculine aroma he carried.

“Thanks,” Ezra said softly, packing all the food in a canvas bag. “He’s a handful.”

Frank’s chest rumbled with a hum, and he kissed the side of Ezra’s head, no longer shying away from showing that they were... *something* in Dex’s presence.

“Don’t take it too seriously. He’s harmless at the core.”

“I am *not* harmless,” Dex said, ticked off as if not being a menace to society was a bad thing. “I’m literally—”

Someone banged on the door, which opened as soon as Frank shouted for them to come in. A tall man entered, stopping in his tracks when his gaze settled on Ezra. At first glance, he looked stylish, and handsome enough to be a cover model for the bad boy romance novels one of Ezra’s acquaintances consumed en-masse in his free time. But the simple outfit composed of jeans, a pale T-shirt, and a leather jacket was marked with real MC patches, and the shiny dark hair couldn’t divert Ezra’s attention from the large scar cutting through the stranger’s cheek and lip. He also wore some sort of harness to strap a large item to his back, and Ezra stiffened, worried it might be a machine gun.

“You have a guest,” the man said in a low voice, shutting the door behind him. He let his arms hang at his sides as he stepped toward the table, staring Ezra’s way as if he were considering whether this particular spider was worth squashing.

Frank nodded. “And you might need a shorter leash on Dex, Hammer.”

Dex spread his arms. “What? I was just being friendly!”

Oh. This was interesting.

Also, what kind of name was *Hammer*?

The tall stranger squared his shoulders, sturdy like a human battering ram. “What is he talking about?” he asked, settling his cool gaze on Dex, whose jokes died like fire during a storm.

He rolled his eyes. “I was just sayin’ Ezra’s pretty. Nothing wrong with that. We all have eyes.”

“Last time I checked, eyes can’t flirt,” Hammer said, squinting at him.

Ezra swallowed, because the last thing he wanted was for Dex to blame him for relationship turmoil. “It wasn’t serious.”

Frank seemed happy with this development as he packed tools into a duffel bag.

“I figured,” Hammer said, cocking his head as Ezra finished Frank’s lunch with a water bottle and a thermos with what was left of the coffee. “He knows I’d drop him like a hot potato if he goes behind my back.”

Dex was back to grinning and slid his finger into a belt loop at the front of Hammer’s jeans. “And that’s why I never will. It was the pancakes. They were so good I lost my mind.”

Hammer shook his head and leaned in, kissing Dex’s lips so gently Ezra looked away, feeling like an intruder, even though the two men knew they weren’t alone.

Ezra turned to Frank, who smiled at him, seemingly ready to go, and oh, he was so handsome. Ezra was by no means small, but next to a tank like him, he felt like the frailest twink, and kind of liked it. He'd rather not wait for him all day long, though.

“Can I come with you? I promise I won't be a bother,” he said, handing Frank the food.

Hammer and Dex exchanged glances, then Hammer patted Dex's shoulder. “We'll wait outside.”

Frank sighed as soon as they were out. “It'll be extremely boring to you. Just motorcycle parts and a bunch of bikers spending far too much time ogling them as they drink beer and waste my time.”

Ezra cocked his head, letting his mouth curl. “Come on, Frank, I know exactly what you all are doing out there.”

Frank stalled. “You do?”

Ezra sighed. “Duh. It's obvious those parts are stolen. You're moving cars and other goods, right?”

“Y-yeah. I didn't want you to know.” Frank stroked Ezra's hair with an unreadable expression.

Ezra offered him a smile and reached for the warm hand hanging at Frank's side. “It's okay. And I'm just so bored. I cleaned everything twice already. There's nothing to do!”

Frank leaned in and gave him a quick kiss. “I've got something for you.”

Ezra's heart beat faster when Frank opened a cabinet by the sink and pulled out a massive box. He put it on the table.

“I've got these receipts I haven't sorted through. You could arrange them by date and type. Groceries, services, home stuff and so on.”

That obviously meant Ezra wasn't invited to join Frank during business hours, but the massive box offered a challenge Ezra could easily take on while listening to music. He picked up a few of the papers, which Frank must have been squashing for a while, to fit more in, and frowned. “This is from two years ago. Why is it at the top, and... when's the last time you've done this? Please, tell me it's not work expenses mixed with personal ones too?”

Frank kissed him on the lips once more, then put his lunch in the duffel bag and zipped it up. “And that's for you to work out. I'll be back later.”

Ezra hummed, putting the box down. “Okay, I'll be waiting here like Cinderella while you guys go to the ball. Make sure that prospect guy from the motorcycle club comes over, so I have more receipts to file,” he told Frank, a bit more at ease. He supposed the bikers might not want an outsider poking around in their business.

“Don't lose any shoes!” Frank yelled on his way out, and Ezra couldn't help but smile.

He felt so much more relaxed now that he was Frank's... something.

But he'd find out exactly what Frank did for a living in due course anyway.

Chapter 15

Ezra

EZRA WONDERED IF THE kimchi he'd made from scratch wouldn't be too spicy for Frank, but he could always make another batch for him in a few days. For now though, he was busy assembling lunch boxes Frank could reach for at any time. Healthy and delicious, they were filled with all the microelements and vitamins a man should need when not only doing lots of physical labor but also training with the goal of gaining muscle mass. And fucking. A lot. One of them might just fulfill all of Ezra's daily caloric intake, but someone as active as Frank didn't need to worry about going overboard.

The kitchen smelled of grilled fish, steamed vegetables, and several spice mixtures that would make each meal fresh, but Ezra wasn't done yet and approached the stove to check on the turkey stew. He liked cooking. He wouldn't call it his passion, but something about controlling what exactly went into his body put him at ease and calmed him down. And since Frank didn't care for himself enough, helping him feel better with the right kind of food became Ezra's mission. Two weeks into it, he could already see progress.

Frank tried not to let it show, but he'd been skeptical at first, and seeing him grow increasingly fond of the new meal plan motivated Ezra to engage all his creativity into putting that pleased smile on that handsome face. It felt good to be in charge and organize all the things Frank didn't have the time for.

Frank appreciated him. There was no money involved, even though Frank did house him, protect him, bought all the

groceries etc. Ezra couldn't put his finger on it, but it wasn't like an exchange or barter either. His anxious brain would sometimes suggest that Frank was only doing all this for the sake of getting sex, but reality proved the opposite.

Frank had slipped into the role of his boyfriend, and Ezra didn't hate it at all, even if Carmen would have called him a sucker, who'd fallen into a trap of permanent freebies, on the way to lose his most precious commodity—youth.

The L-word floated up in Ezra's chest from time to time, and he pushed it right back to the bottom of his mind, where it should stay along with the broken wrecks from Ezra's past, but he couldn't deny that Frank had become his whole world. He was a cuddly bear, with claws for anyone who dared reach for Ezra. Stable. Safe. Kind.

The protector Ezra never had.

So yeah, Ezra gladly did the laundry for them both, took charge of Frank's meals, and scrubbed the place clean, not just because he wanted those things, but because he knew that Frank needed them too.

The Strongman competition Frank was preparing for was approaching fast, and there hadn't been a day when Ezra didn't imagine himself in the audience, cheering for his champion. Too bad Paul was still out there, and Frank might decide to leave him in the safety of Shane and Jag's care.

A head appeared in the open kitchen window so abruptly Ezra yelped and dropped his spatula.

“Mmm... smells nice,” Jag said.

Ezra should be used to this dude spooking him by now.

“You want some?” he asked, because all the boxes were already full, and he’d intended to distribute the remaining food among Frank’s friends anyway. It would have also been an opportunity to visit them all, something Ezra increasingly craved.

“Oooh!” Jag’s eyes widened, and he smiled, attempting to climb in through the window, but Ezra laughed and pushed him back.

“Use the door!”

Jag huffed and landed back on the ground. “Fine. Would have been quicker,” he mumbled, disappearing from sight.

It would have also meant mud on the kitchen counter. Ezra knew, because it had happened before. Dealing with Jag was like training a half-feral dog, but as far as dogs went, he was loyal and could, for the most part, clean up after himself.

Joy flickered in Ezra’s chest, and he tossed a little piece of grilled chicken toward the door as soon as it opened. “Catch!”

When Jag snapped his teeth, grabbing the morsel like an animal, Ezra broke into laughter and couldn’t stop for a while. Jag was the weirdest person Ezra had ever met, and yet was also completely unself-conscious about it. Unlike any of Ezra’s friends, Jag didn’t give a shit when the people around him made gentle digs at his outfits, or that he didn’t do some things the way everyone else did. He said what he thought in

the most straightforward ways, and it was as refreshing, as it was scary.

Around him, Ezra let his guard down a little, because what on earth would he have to prove to someone who thought wearing three belts and a necklace made out of old keys was the height of fashion?

So yeah, Ezra didn't care that Jag would see him in a loose hoodie and sweatpants. They were clean and of decent quality after all.

"I'll give you some later to take home," Ezra said, switching off the burner under the pot of turkey stew, and wiped his hands on the apron. "Do you have time for a game?" he asked, because he'd been trying to teach Jag the basics of playing cards, and fantasized about starting a weekly game night for the whole junkyard crew. Maybe soon he could bring that idea to Frank?

Jag glanced at the kitchen table with a serious frown, but eventually shook his head. "No. Frank asked me to do a few important things." He patted the leather sack at his hip, which Ezra thought of as the medieval belly bag.

Ezra hummed. "He said he'll be back late. What is this about?" he asked and stacked the lunch boxes before storing them in the massive fridge.

Jag pulled out several items from his pouch and placed them on the table.

A calculator.

A vintage wooden box.

A plastic cup with a glitter handle.

Three different watches. A plastic kids' one, one with a leather strap, and one—a golden women's watch that looked surprisingly expensive.

Its presence made Ezra glance at the Rolex on his wrist, but Jag kept going and set several pieces of jewelry on the table, finishing off his collection with a small glass (crystal?) ball that had a skull-shaped stand.

“I bring him interesting things I find. I'm not always sure which ones people value, but he knows.”

“Find where? At the junkyard?” Ezra asked and picked up a bracelet that appeared antique. He wasn't an expert but the damn thing seemed to be made of gold. A lot of gold at that! Heat sizzled in his cheeks as he examined the finds one after another. The golden watch was a Tissot.

Jag wrapped his muscular arms on his chest and smiled with pride. “Yep. It's filled with treasure. Frank doesn't have time to deal with all of my findings, but he does say which to put away for safe keeping. I could show you.”

Ezra looked up as the house shrunk around him. “You mean there's more of this?”

Jag frowned. “Of course. I've been keeping it safe, dry, and it's ready to be looked at when he finds the time.”

The cogs in Ezra's brain turned as he put the remaining food into the fridge before facing Jag with renewed energy. If Frank

didn't have the time to process items that might be worth a pretty penny, maybe Ezra could help him with that too?

“And you're allowed to show me?” he asked.

Jag shrugged. “Of course. You're his mate. What's his, is yours.”

Ezra choked on words as his brain filled with cotton candy that definitely shouldn't taste so sweet. “He said that?”

Jag cocked his head. “He doesn't need to. It's obvious. So which things do we take, and which do we leave?” He pointed to the table, as Ezra's head pulsed with one word.

Mate.

Mate.

Mate.

Was he? Frank's mate? It sounded so primal, not at all like boyfriend, or life partner, or even husband. And he liked it.

Shaking his head, he ditched the insistent thoughts and wrote Frank a note, just in case he popped in during the day and got worried about Ezra's absence. “Why do you say that?” he asked, picking up the things he thought could be valuable, and that included the glass ball, since it could be vintage. He'd have to check online.

“You live with him, you mate with him, you make him food. He protects you, provides for you, and claimed you as his own.” Jag was now looking at Ezra as if he was the one who needed things explained to him slowly.

Ezra's heart felt tight, as if someone held it in a fist.

“Life isn't always this straightforward. I wish it was, but it's not,” he mumbled and took his new jacket off the hanger to protect himself from the cool air.

Jag put the items chosen by Ezra back into his leather pouch. “People make things unnecessarily complicated themselves. Wear boots, it could get muddy.”

“It gets complicated when you need more than just shelter and a bit of food,” Ezra said, following his suggestion.

Jag flashed him a smile and winked. “Of course. You need sex as well.”

That wasn't what Ezra meant, but he let it go and led the way outside. “I know Dane has more things. A TV, three gaming consoles, two different computers.”

Jag straightened with pride and started walking at a quick pace. “Yes, I provide anything he needs.”

To be fair, it was Dane who had a real job in IT, but if Jag got paid for the “*treasures*” he brought Frank, then he indeed contributed. Who was Ezra to enlighten him about the realities of capitalism when Jag lived in the world of barter?

When Jag turned onto a small path where Ezra had been specifically told not to go, Ezra stopped in his tracks.

“Are we allowed...? I mean, Frank told me it's not safe to go there.”

Jag waved his hand. “It’s safe if you’re with me. I’ll show you what to look out for. Frank is overcautious. The junkyard is filled with adventures if you know how to navigate it.”

Ezra hadn’t looked at the surrounding mountains of trash that way before, but Jag was like a kid about to show him his den. And that was kind of exciting. Ezra hadn’t played this way for ages, always afraid of what someone would think of him, of getting dirty, or having an unflattering picture taken.

None of those things mattered here, so after a moment of hesitation, he followed Jag into the unknown. At one point, Jag lifted an old mattress laying on its side, revealing a passage leading to a parallel path. It made Ezra feel like a kid again.

They chatted about Jag’s favorite spots to source the treasures for Frank, but while hidden away behind an old truck with rust eating up its entire side, the container that turned out to be their destination was only a short walk from Frank’s home.

The doors were locked with a padlock, but Jag climbed to the top of the container and, moments later, leapt off with a key in hand. The storage unit was open in less than a minute, and when Jag switched on the flashlight left inside, lighting up three rows of metal shelves filled with boxes and loose items alike, Ezra felt as if the ground was about to crumble under his feet. Because What. The. Fuck?

“Is that...?”

“Dane calls it Aladdin’s Cave.” Jag opened the other side of the door from the inside, letting in more light, and Ezra was sure he spotted glimmers of silver and gold all around. There were also whole sets of dishes that looked antique, and even a crystal chandelier tucked into the very back of the compartment.

“Oh my god—” Ezra’s breath caught when he picked up an elongated art deco sculpture. He knew this style, because one of his former clients was a vintage car fanatic, and hood ornaments like this one could fetch quite high prices, if one knew where to sell them.

It was Aladdin’s Cave indeed.

He was so stunned by the wealth of items around him that his voice came out high in pitch. “Why didn’t Frank sell any of this?” *Is he a hoarder?* Came to Ezra’s mind, but he doubted Jag would understand that concept.

“He does sell things when he has the time, but usually only those he already knows the value of. Things he needs to ponder or research or fix end up here. Though sometimes he just doesn’t have the time for them at all. Which is a shame,” Jag said with a sigh, picking up a porcelain Siamese cat.

Insanity.

Yet when Ezra thought he now had a chance to help Frank out with a task that likely overwhelmed him, determination burned deep inside him like a hot coal. “Maybe if we could sell some of this, Frank would get a bit of a break? Take some time off?” Ezra mused, trying not to get overly excited about

the items. He didn't yet know their value after all. But that wasn't something the internet and a friendly pawn shop couldn't fix.

He'd start by cataloguing things, starting with those items he recognized as easy sells—

Ezra gasped, approaching one of the shelves so fast he almost tripped over a vintage travel chest. “That’s a Birkin. That’s a fucking Birkin bag!” he said, grabbing the elegant, nearly pristine leather bag. He needed to verify all the details, but he could swear it was a Birkin. From the golden lock to the precise stitching, everything about it screamed *luxury*.

Jag approached him with a smile. “And it was filled with cash when I found it sewn into an old coat, which was stuffed with a bunch of other clothes in a wardrobe someone brought here.”

Ezra stared at Jag's satisfied smile, but he wanted to scream, because this was fucking ridiculous. Why was Frank spending his time moving rusted cars from one place to another when he could be focusing on all this? Instead of complaining though, he muttered, “You’re a great tracker. I think we need a camera.”

He'd been wrong to judge this place. *He'd* been the shortsighted one. Sure, it was filled with trash, dangerous, and dirty, but it hid all these treasures. He looked out through the door, at the piles obscuring the horizon, and instead of a trap, he saw endless possibility.

Chapter 16

Ezra

JAG HAD LONG GOTTEN bored of painstakingly going through item after item. Last time Ezra checked, he'd fallen asleep in the doorway, his mouth wide open as he snored and panted between episodes of growls and mumbling, but that did not interrupt Ezra's focus. Many of the items would need to be double-checked—some online, some by experts he could help Frank find, but there was thousands of dollars' worth of stuff rotting away in the container, money that might help Frank renovate his home, or get a new truck.

And while he wanted to make Frank's life easier by helping him with this, he couldn't deny the excitement of discovering brand stamps and features the Internet promised distinguished copies from genuine articles. He could get all those things in top shape, put them up on eBay or at pawn shops. Some he might even contact physical auction houses for. He was on the cusp of something new, and the excitement it filled him with resonated in his skull, until the perusing turned almost meditative.

A yelp at the door pulled him out of his hyperfocus, and when he looked up, he saw Jag half-asleep, but already scrambling up with his pipe-spear in hand.

"Who... goes?" he muttered groggily.

"It's just me," Frank said, lifting his palms, but glancing over Jag's weapon, and to Ezra.

He was kind of... elegant tonight. Sure, he had jeans on, but they were clean, not the torn ones he wore for work, and instead of a hoodie, he wore a black shirt under his favorite

leather jacket. Seeing him like this made the slouch of Ezra's sweatpants feel more prominent. He only then realized that the air had a tart tinge of his sweat, and the T-shirt surely stuck to him in places that felt damp.

“Oh, you're... early,” Ezra said, grabbing the rain jacket and covering himself with it. He tried to always look his best around Frank, and this outfit was not it.

“Yeah, I have a surprise for you. I just wasn't expecting to find you here.” Frank threw a glare at Jag, who just shrugged.

Ezra blinked when his eyes readjusted to facing the open door rather than well-lit items. When had it gotten dark? How long had he been here? “Frank. Sit down. This here is a real Birkin bag,” Ezra said, picking it up. “I'm ninety percent sure of it. You have so much valuable stuff in here!”

Frank approached him with a curious smile. “A what bag?” he asked and, to Ezra's absolute mortification... pulled on the cat ear of the pink hairband Ezra forgot he'd put on to keep hair out of his eyes as he slouched over items.

He froze, then pulled the thing off. “I look so silly. I'm sorry, but I just got so excited. I know you don't have time for any of this, but I could do it for you. If you let me,” he added more flatly when it occurred to him that Frank might not be happy about this development. What if he worried Ezra might steal from him? Just because Jag considered Ezra Frank's “*mate*” didn't mean Frank did.

Frank chuckled and stroked his hair, but Ezra was still nervous about the potential fallout. “You're excited about

what? What have you been doing? Show me.”

Jag butted in. “He knows all the names of these things.

Ezra cleared his throat and zipped up the jacket. “Maybe not all of them, but I have a fairly good idea about some, and I could look up others, if you consent. I started cataloging them, measuring, and taking photos. I’m sorry I had Jag lead me here without asking you first, but I thought I could help you out,” he added, meeting Frank’s gaze, which focused on him with the warmth of hot chocolate. The kind Ezra no longer allowed himself but still remembered from childhood.

“I wasn’t expecting this, but it would be a huge help. I know there’s valuables here, but I don’t always have the time to deal with them. I hate having to describe items for eBay. Then people ask me endless stupid questions about the items, complain I’m not answering in a ‘timely manner’ and shit like that. It’s such a hassle. I don’t want you to feel obligated...”

The way he stroked Ezra was so tender he wanted to lean into it as if he were a cat, and then lick Frank’s thumb, crawl into his lap—

“No, no, I’ll gladly do it. I like researching things, and if it could free up some of your time, then that’s my gain,” Ezra said, pushing back his hair to make it a bit tidier.

Frank smiled at him and leaned down to whisper into his ear. “You are such a good boy.”

That whisper. The scent of soap and musk. It was all Frank, and Ezra felt a delicious jolt in his groin, even though Frank

hadn't touched him. "Of course I am. A real prize," he said, winking at Frank despite currently feeling like a subpar version of himself.

"Let me treat you then, and if you want, you can come back here tomorrow. Jag will make sure you know the safest passage."

Which also meant Frank trusted him with all of these valuables, because if they weren't cataloged, he'd have no way of knowing what disappeared. And weirdly enough, Ezra didn't consider it naive. Frank trusted him. That was all.

It was a powerful thing to know, and Ezra couldn't stop himself from grabbing Frank's hand. "Treat me? Are we going out?" he said as hope lit in his chest.

Frank swallowed, leading him out of Aladdin's Cave. "Kind of. A change of scenery. I'm sorry I can't exactly take you to a fancy restaurant."

Right.

Paul.

Ezra had gotten so absorbed by his new reality he'd almost forgotten why he was here in the first place instead of on a yacht off the Californian coast. While the threat to his life and the discomfort of having to stay in one place at times made him feel hopeless about his future, he had no regrets about being around Frank, or even Jag, Ros, and all the others. For the most part, he felt useful, appreciated for his contributions, and while Frank was away so often, he always showered Ezra

with attention whenever he was present. It was a mundane life, but also one of peace and devoid of the constant stress of having to be enough.

“Oh, at home?”

Frank kissed his lips as they walked out. “Better.” He looked back at Jag. “Lock everything up, okay?”

Jag nodded with a serious expression. “Dane told me there’s a blood moon tonight. Be careful.”

Frank smirked. “We will, thanks for the warning.”

“Blood m—” Ezra stumbled over a can when his gaze settled on the massive orange-ish circle in the sky. “Oh, wow!”

Frank led him through a different passage, one that eventually took them to the truck parked in the middle of a narrow road between discarded furniture piles. He opened the door to the vehicle for Ezra as if it were a limo, not a beat-up piece of junk.

“Jag has some superstitions about it, I just think it’s pretty. And we have a warm cloudless night, so why not enjoy it?”

Ezra licked his lips when his body smoldered under the weight of Frank’s gaze. “I feel underdressed. Should we make a quick shower stop at the house?” he tried. “I didn’t know it was date night.”

Frank snorted and started the engine. “Sure. I wanted to surprise you, so it’s my fault. But you know I think you’re cute like this?”

They weren't far from the house either, so Ezra leaned in and rubbed his nose against Frank's cheek, smelling him again. "I'm sorry. It'll only take five minutes, and you won't have to endure my sweaty smell all evening."

Frank's smile widened. "I sure hope I can get you sweaty later."

Ezra grinned, light at heart. "It'll be a different kind of sweaty," he said, resting his head on Frank's shoulder as the truck moved.

He might have taken more than five minutes to shower and change into fresh clothes, but while still casual, the new outfit was a much better fit on Ezra and didn't optically shorten his legs. And since he knew they'd be spending a few hours at a yet undisclosed location, he packed some snacks before joining Frank in the car.

As Frank started driving, he pointed to the sky. "Looks so eerie. Dane told me we had a chance of seeing it tonight."

The ruddy moon appeared so much larger than usual and cast a yellowish glow on the junkyard as they drove farther and farther away from Frank's house.

"And you can see it so well out here. Just us and the sky, right?" Ezra asked, placing his hand on Frank's thigh.

"Reminds me of that weekend away we had. The sky was also clear, and the stars so bright. I know you're a city boy, but I hope you really did enjoy yourself."

Being paid to enjoy himself was a part of every single encounter Ezra had with Frank over their first year, and the weekend getaway had been amazing too. Not a single moment of those two days had felt like being at work.

No wonder Ezra had gotten so attached to Frank he sometimes forgot that he was in fact imprisoned by the beast prowling beyond the junkyard.

“I loved it being just the two of us,” he confessed. “And I hope you forget my meltdown.”

Frank chuckled. “Never. It was so cute. I felt like a hero by the time I got you to a drugstore.”

“And even there they didn’t have wheatgrass,” Ezra mumbled before poking Frank with his elbow. “God, this is gonna haunt us forever, won’t it?”

“It will, but it’s okay. You’re allowed to want all the weird-ass health things you want as long as you don’t make me use charcoal toothpaste. Aaaand, here we are.”

When Frank stopped the truck, for a moment Ezra wasn’t sure what he was looking at, but the outline of a boat was clear against the glowing sky. Longer than three sedans standing in a row, it sat atop a pile of other junk, but when Frank clicked something on his phone, colorful fairy lights attached all around the railing lit up the night, transforming the disused vessel into a fairground ride.

“Ta-dah!” Frank said, pointing to it and already opening his door. “I know you wanted to be on a yacht in California, so I

figured you might enjoy a tiny piece of the experience here.”

Ezra sank into the seat under the weight of all the joyful thoughts popping up in his head, and he squeezed Frank’s thigh harder as his mind transformed the boat into an expensive vessel floating somewhere off the coast of Italy.

Robert, the film producer, claimed to have one in the Mediterranean. While handsome enough, even his brief time with Ezra had made it clear how much the man loved to talk, mostly about himself. Which was fair enough. Paid for his time, Ezra might fuck *or* nod to whatever nonsense was being said—it was all the same to him—but neither of those was relaxing.

But Frank *listened* to what Ezra had to say and instead of planning a date according to his own taste, he made the effort to give Ezra a bit of magic.

Frank laughed and pushed at Ezra’s chin to close his mouth. “Come on, let’s see how it fares in the open waters.”

“You did all this? By yourself?” Ezra asked, sliding out of the truck and approaching the boat lit up with several strings of small LEDs. A part of him wanted to head straight for the surprise, but his legs carried him to Frank first, so he pushed into his warm arms.

“Yeah. I’m good at DIY stuff, it was easy. You’ve been through a lot and I wanted you to forget it all for one night.” Frank hugged him and kissed the top of his head.

Even on this autumnal night, his presence kept Ezra warm, and he smiled, rubbing his face against Frank's pec as he breathed in the scent of security.

It was so much easier to throw money at someone, to have an exquisite experience prepared by someone else, than get one's hands dirty. But Frank's were lovely, despite the calluses, the roughness, and scars. Ezra pressed one of them to his lips. When he looked up, Frank's eyes were bright like the moon above.

When Frank gently urged him forward, Ezra pulled back.

"Wait, I'll get the snacks."

With the bag of food in hand, he followed Frank up the slope.

"People dump the weirdest shit, you know. This boat has several holes in its hull, but it's actually fine otherwise. After you." Frank smiled and pointed to the ladder attached to the side of the boat.

"Oh, thank you, Captain," Ezra said in an overly polite voice and offered Frank his hand. Electricity sparked when their skin met, and he climbed the rungs at a languid pace, as was appropriate for an elegant gentleman from a bygone era. The breeze combed his hair, bringing with it the scent of the woods around the junkyard. There was something about this moment that connected him to the sky above, reaching way beyond where his eyes could see, but then Frank joined him on the deck, and his arms brought Ezra right back to reality.

Frank must have also taken into account Ezra's need for cleanliness, because the railings had been polished, and the wood of the deck, while worn, wasn't covered in dirt.

Frank hugged him with one arm as he fiddled with something on his phone, and moments later, the sound of waves crashing against a beach came from someplace close.

"Ooh, we better get inside. It's high tide." Frank laughed and led the way down the stairs to a small cabin.

Ezra was so stunned he barely said a thing as he took in the interior with a sofa next to where there surely used to be a table, and a small bed at the very back. The flashlight couldn't reveal everything, but the floor also looked dusted, and blankets that had mysteriously disappeared two days ago provided padding for the seating along with a whole bunch of cushions.

Frank lowered his head to avoid hitting it on the ceiling. He grabbed a lighter and lit several candles, illuminating the space with a warm glow. Each one revealed more of the cozy cabin, including two bottles of wine and Ezra's favorite gluten free crackers, and a platter of cheese and grapes.

There was no other word for it. This was *magical*.

Frank smelled like heaven, Ezra could just about imagine that the sound of waves was real, and Frank must have used an air freshener in the cabin because the scent of pine hid any mustiness the old boat could hold.

Ezra wouldn't have swapped this experience for cold hard cash. This was something you couldn't buy.

This was care.

Tenderness.

Maybe even the L-word.

Enchanted, he placed the food bag on the floor and spun to face Frank, who stood right behind him, hunched forward to fit under the low ceiling and watching Ezra with anticipation, as if he worried there could be anything but enthusiasm coming his way.

Ezra wanted to kiss him. Hug him. Do unspeakable things on this floor. Celebrate this night. Just because.

"I don't know what to say. This is... like something from a movie," he said, spinning around to point at the interior.

"Just enjoy it," Frank said and stroked his side. "I know I work a lot, so this is a moment for the two of us."

Tall and built like a breeding bull, Frank did not look like someone with romantic tendencies, but of all the men Ezra had been with for a bit longer, he was the one who was most thoughtful and caring. His hands might be the size of bread loaves, but they felt like velvet when they touched Ezra, as if Frank infused every stroke with all the tenderness in his heart.

Grinning, Ezra slid his arms around Frank's neck, getting to his toes as their bodies clashed. "This is so amazing, Frank! Who needs a yacht when you can have the magical *MS Junkyard*?"

“And the captain doesn’t even need to be at the steering wheel, so his hands are free to do other things.” Frank grinned and kissed him, sliding his hands down Ezra’s body, all the way to his ass.

Ezra loved being desired. And nobody had ever desired him the way Frank did—ready to put a lot of dedication and effort into making Ezra’s world a bit more colorful. And while the tokens of appreciation Ezra usually received were golden or green, in this moment, he longed for the whole array of shades on the blanket, and the warm brown of Frank’s eyes.

Inhaling their lust, Ezra grabbed the folds of Frank’s jacket and used the weight of his own body to spin them around before nudging Frank at the sofa, ready to climb him like a tree.

Frank chuckled, squeezing Ezra’s ass in a promise of the things he’d do to him. “No wine first? You sure?” he teased but was more than happy to reach for Ezra’s belt as soon as his ass landed on the sofa.

Ezra grinned, drunk on pure joy as he spread his arms in a dramatic swing. “You really want wine when you can have all thi—” He cut himself off when his arm knocked against something warm. He didn’t initially think anything of it, but then Frank’s face went rigid.

By the time he followed the dark gaze, one of the blankets was burning.

Ezra froze, but Frank grabbed his waist and picked him up as if he weighed nothing. “Out! Get out!” he yelled as he put him

down by the stairs, already running toward the growing fire.

Ezra's instinct was to help, but the space was tiny, smoke billowed toward him, and if anything, he might end up getting in Frank's way. He needed to believe Frank knew what he was doing. On his way out, he looked back to see Frank open a bottle of soda. He poured it on the blanket, already coughing, and used the wet fabric to pat the flames.

Ezra stayed back, ready to drag Frank out if the fire ended up spreading, but moments later, the flames died, and Frank looked up at him, kneeling in the glow of the remaining candles.

A cold sensation tightened around Ezra's chest, because this was the moment of truth, where things could go one of two ways, but he didn't want to see Frank snap at him for ruining everything, not after sharing such beautiful moments, and spoke first. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Don't be mad."

He wasn't sure if it was the smoke choking him, or the stress of what just happened, but it reminded him of that time when he was still a teen and made toast in the kitchen. He'd burned the bread, and the fire alarm went off during his dad's conference call. Dad had come over with his phone, relieved there was no fire. He turned off the alarm and laughed about it to his colleagues. But as soon as the call was over, Dad smacked Ezra so hard, he hit his head on the counter and ended up needing stitches. It was fortunate that he could cover that scar with his hair.

Frank looked up at him as he put out all the candles, and his silence clawed into Ezra, keeping him still. They were here on their own, and if something happened, no one would help Ezra, no matter how loudly he screamed.

“It’s okay. You didn’t get burned, did you?” Frank asked.

Ezra made a quiet sound in the back of his throat and toast on the top step, trying to even out his breathing. “No,” he whispered, lost in this unexpected moment. He hadn’t seen his father for years, so why was he coming back to haunt him? “I’m really sorry. I messed up your surprise.”

Frank took a few steps up the stairs to grab his hand. “It’s fine, baby. The cheese didn’t even melt,” he said and laughed, easing the tension in Ezra’s chest. “But it’s smoky down there now. You stay up there, I’ll grab some untoasted blankets, and we can stay on the deck. We wanted to look at the moon anyway.”

Holding his hand felt like handling the most precious thing in existence, even though it was so big, and covered by skin that wasn’t as soft as Ezra’s. So he kissed it again. “Yes. Let’s stay out. I’m sure we can keep each other warm.”

Frank smiled at him and let go as Ezra’s heartbeat returned to its normal pace. “And we have booze to help with that too,” he said and disappeared under the deck to gather everything.

They worked together, with Frank passing him things from downstairs and in no time Ezra created a nest with a view of the moon over the forest beyond the junkyard’s fence. They even got the comforter from the bed for extra warmth.

Once they settled together, the burning desire from earlier lay dormant, but Ezra rested his head in the crook of Frank's arm and watched him in the glow of the magical moon. On a night like this, the impossible seemed more within his grasp, and when their eyes met again, Ezra's heart did a little dance.

Frank hadn't snapped.

He'd stayed calm and made sure Ezra was okay despite him having spoiled this evening's plans.

"This is the best date night in the history of date nights. Minus the fire, of course."

"Aw, Ezra... You're too kind. I bet you've been treated to many five-star experiences." Frank said and kissed the side of his head as he held Ezra close.

There it was, Frank undervaluing his efforts again. He was such a confident man in some matters, yet somehow infuriatingly self-deprecating in others.

"You didn't pay someone to do this. You took the time from your day to do something that would make me happy," Ezra said, raising himself on one arm to pin Frank down and make sure he understood. "No one ever did that for me before."

Frank stroked his face, meeting Ezra's eyes. "I don't believe that. No boyfriend desperately trying to get your attention with a hand-knit scarf?"

Ezra chuckled and rubbed stubble on Frank's cheek, floating in his arms on this imaginary, yet very real, boat. "I already told you I never had a boyfriend. And... well, for many of the

men I was meeting up with, treating me was more about the way they felt about themselves than it was about me. They took me to a five-star hotel because *they* wanted to be in a five-star hotel.”

But Frank was different. Even when he'd been actively paying to meet Ezra, he always acted as if he were the one who needed to earn Ezra's attention, not the other way around.

“Is this what you always do for the boys you date?” Ezra went on with a small smile.

Frank shook his head and pulled away just enough to open the bottle of wine. “You overestimate my dating life. I've been too busy for a boyfriend. Especially when I was saving to pay for my sister's treatments. Before that, I had several long-term partners. One cheated on me. One was very submissive and wanted me to dom him, which isn't really my thing. One got sick of living here and wanted to move, but I didn't. We tried to compromise for a while. He put up the picket fence, made a vegetable garden in the backyard, but we clashed about the way he spoke of the place I call home. At some point the resentment just became too much.”

Guilt sank deep into Ezra's flesh as he remembered the angry comments he'd made about this place in that first nerve-racking week, but he no longer hated it here. In fact, he felt quite at ease around people who didn't care about his exterior nearly as much as those he knew in his former life. The junkyard hid exciting possibilities, and while a part of Ezra still dreamed of California, and a lifestyle that would

eventually lead him to the security and agency he craved, there was comfort in knowing that the man he slept next to cared for him and didn't see him as a commodity.

“I'm sorry. They were clearly very stupid. You need to pick better.”

Frank stalled with the wine in his hand. “I forgot the glasses.”

Ezra shrugged and grabbed the bottle to drink straight from it. Because, fuck it. He wasn't too dainty to enjoy some booze like this. All that mattered was that he could enjoy this moment with Frank.

“Do you like it? I chose a Californian wine.” Frank smiled and took the bottle once Ezra was done with a few gulps.

Ezra chuckled, loving the tartness on his tongue. “I'll let you in on a secret. I know nothing about wine. I pretty much only distinguish between those I like and those I don't, so when I buy, I just go for fancy-looking labels,” he said, pushing his nose against Frank's arm.

Frank whistled. “Oooh! Not as classy as he pretends to be. Naughty, naughty. What next? Are you going to tell me you don't know which cheese is which? Should I have put those little name cards on the plate?” he teased.

Ezra laughed and kissed Frank's cheek, eager to melt into his body. “I am much better with cheese, actually,” he said and took the bottle from Frank to warm up with a few more sips. “And with watches,” he said, showing Frank the Rolex he'd

given Ezra on what they'd thought would have been their last night together.

"I'm happy you kept it," Frank said and leaned away for a piece of cheese.

Ezra snorted. "Are you kidding? This is my life insurance. If worse comes to worst, you'll save me just to retrieve the watch."

Frank laughed and squeezed him closer. "Dumbass. Better tell me what cheese this is, because if you can't, this date is over."

Ezra made a show of a loud inhale. "Outrageous!" But he did take the morsel straight from Frank's thick fingers, making sure to give them a teasing lick. "Mm, Manchego."

It was most definitely Brie.

Frank eyed him in silence. "Good, you can stay."

Ezra wiggled his brows, wordlessly calling him out, but this game didn't matter as they sat together under a canopy of stars, floating toward some distant shore where reality did not have bearing on dreams.

Ezra leaned in, pushing his hand under Frank's shirt. It was cold against his scorching hot stomach, and the shocking difference made Frank stir against Ezra as they slotted together like the only puzzle pieces needed to make a full picture.

"Jag! No, look. Why didn't you say they were on a date?" Dane asked in a hushed tone, pulling Ezra out of this little magic cocoon of tenderness.

Jag had no such qualms as he circled the boat to show himself at the bottom of the scrap mountain. “No, it’s fine, there’s more people coming.”

So typical. Jag had no sense of privacy whatsoever. It was a miracle he never started pissing in the corner of the room, but maybe Frank had already trained him not to. But while this spoiled their romantic plans, there was no point crying over spilled milk. Maybe it was about time Ezra embraced a little spontaneity. At least they had a lot of food to share thanks to him bringing a whole bag.

Frank stiffened, looking over the railing like a guard dog alarmed by intruders. “What the hell? What *people*? What are you doing here?”

Jag waved him off, dragging over a large piece of wood. “I told Shane and Ros to come.”

“I’m sorry, Frank. He’s obsessed with this blood moon situation. Says no one should sleep tonight.” Dane spread his arms wide, the blond side of his head appearing on fire in the reddish glow of the moon. He had the most unusual appearance, with one side of him being blond and blue-eyed while the other was a brunet with a dark, smoldering gaze. It was as if identical twins with different coloring had been merged into a tall guy with thick thighs and a smiley face. And while Dane had covered his body with tattoos featuring superheroes and currently wore an anime hoodie, he was capable of discussing things beyond popular culture, and Ezra had shared several interesting, if brief conversations with him.

“I’m gonna make a bonfire,” Jag said, ignorant of Frank’s agitation, *or* ignoring it willfully. “There’s some wood inside,” he said, climbing onto the deck despite his man’s protests.

“Jag, please, stop it!” Dane shouted.

Frank had more wine, then glanced at Ezra. “Okay with you? It’s hard to stop him when he gets something in his head like this. And... it might be fun?”

His gaze was searching, as if he worried the smallest imperfection might cause resentment, but Ezra kissed him, already resigned to an evening for more than two. “This yacht isn’t sailing away, right? We could come here alone tomorrow.”

The rumble of an approaching car signaled Shane and Ros’s arrival, which meant that the wheels Jag put in motion could no longer be stopped, so Ezra stretched alongside Frank and unpacked the boxes of food that would have been too much for the two of them anyway.

Jag emerged from the cabin with a whole bundle of broken planks Frank must have stored away somewhere, and coughed, shaking smoke out of his hair. “I see you already tried making a fire, but you can’t do that inside. Not without a hole above.”

Frank dragged his hand down his face. “Thanks for the insight, I’ll take it into account next time.”

Jag nodded with a smile. Illuminated by the reddish moon, he leaned over the railing, looking down at Dane. “There’s lots of cheese here!”

“Did someone say cheese?” Ros yelled from afar, approaching the boat mound in a long, flowing coat that made him look like the cutest wizard. “Good thing I brought focaccia and wine!”

He was the only one here with more discerning taste in food, and it made Ezra feel a weird connection with him. As if he also used to live a finer life yet had happily traded it for one in the junkyard with Shane and a bunch of dogs.

Eros and Hera followed Shane, wagging their tails and completing the absolute chaos that had erupted since Jag’s arrival.

“Ahoy, strangers!” Ezra shouted, rubbing Frank’s tense back, because he’d done everything right, and even the failure of his plans for tonight already tasted of laughter and good company.

“Ahoy! Will there be a place for two travelers on your deck, captain? Arr,” Shane tried, but Ros poked him in the ribs, laughing.

“You make a terrible pirate!”

Shane laughed and pulled Ros in for a kiss. “Dex should have invited that one-eyed guy from his club then. What’s his name? Cyclops? He’s gay, isn’t he?”

Frank rubbed his forehead. “Dex is coming too?”

Shane smiled. “He can’t miss the blood moon party after all.”

“Yeah, but unless he’d told Hammer, they’ll probably be here in two hours,” Dane commented, heading for the ladder,

but when Jag reached for him, he gravitated to his arm and let himself be tugged up.

“We’ll have the fire going by then. As long as they don’t sleep, they’ll be okay,” Jag reassured everyone, gathering Dane into his arms as soon as he had him up on the deck. They looked funny together, like a couple who’d met at Comic Con, or some other event of that nature. The fact that Jag was *not* cosplaying a character from the Mad Max franchise was just a tiny detail.

“And all those people who do, what happens to them?” Ezra asked, curious about the way Jag’s mind worked.

“Blood nightmares,” Jag said without missing a beat.

Ros laughed, joining them on the deck. “What’s that even mean? Nightmares about getting nosebleeds? Vampires?”

Ezra pushed under Frank’s arm and looked up into the moon’s ghostly face, which looked unusually flushed tonight. As if it were anticipating Frank’s plan and had come closer to Earth just to watch.

He grinned at the thought of the moon being a pervert and picked up a morsel of Manchego while Jag assembled the fire below with Shane’s help.

Dane cleared his throat, arranging himself on an empty fragment of the deck nearby. “Sorry we spoiled your night. But he feels so strongly about the most unusual things that I just have to indulge him.”

Ezra snorted and reached out with a box of stuffed peppers he'd brought with him. "That's really sweet. I get it, he looks cute with that cape attached at the back."

Dane's face lit up like a new star, and he rested his bearded chin on the heel of his hand, taking one of the peppers. "I turned my life upside down for him, and it was all worth it."

Frank glanced over the railing and watched Jag instruct Shane how to arrange the wood.

"I know what I'm doing!" Shane scoffed.

Frank slid out of the cocoon and threw Dane another pillow. "I'm gonna help them before they start fighting."

Ezra hummed in protest, but when Frank stalled, he gave him a kiss and gently nudged him forward. "Take your time, I'll handle the hosting duties, Captain, but I await your presence most eagerly."

Frank grinned before sliding off the deck and hurrying toward the not-yet-lit fire when Ros whispered in the shivery voice of a maiden in distress, "But be back quick. I'm so cold, Captain."

Ezra tossed a cushion his way and shook his head. "I don't sound like that!"

Ros chuckled with his mouth full of bread. "Come on, we all want them back here. I should have brought a sweater, but when Jag said we'll be on a boat, I kind of assumed *inside*, since it's all about the moon being scary?"

“It’s my fault that the cabin is uninhabitable,” Ezra said and handed Ros one of the rescued comforters.

“You mean you didn’t *try* to make a bonfire in the cabin?” Dane asked, barely withholding laughter.

“Oh, I did. So hard I almost lit myself on fire,” Ezra said as they all shared the opened bottle between them.

“Did you do it to let Frank play the hero?” Ros asked before finishing the wine. At this rate, maybe someone should text Dex with a request for more booze, but Ezra didn’t feel the need for artificial relaxation. There was an ease to this moment under the starry sky. Just him and Frank’s friends, who were maybe-kinda becoming *his* friends too? None of them was in any way uptight or judgmental, a stark contrast to Carmen and Ezra’s other acquaintances.

Did it make him a bad person that he didn’t miss a single one of them yet always felt so happy to see someone from the junkyard crew? That it felt good to not always look his best or anticipate comments about the slightest change in appearance? There would be no discussion of the macros of the foods on offer, or if it was safe to eat all that gluten in the focaccia.

The last time he’d seen Carmen in person, she’d told him to choose a Bloody Mary instead of the cocktail he wanted, to cut down calories before heading off to the beaches of California, and while he’d been annoyed with her, he had in fact chosen the Bloody Mary. And now that he was spending time around people who didn’t put nearly as much value on things that were paramount in Ezra’s normal life, he was starting to feel

ashamed of the way he'd let that lifestyle dictate everything he did. It should have been the other way around.

"He'll always be a hero to me," Ezra whispered with a smile.

Ros leaned over to pinch Ezra's cheek. "Aww! That's adorable."

Dane glanced over the railing with a soft smile. "Jag saved my life. That kind of bond can't be broken."

Ezra opened the next bottle of wine and passed it to Dane first. "Is it okay to ask what happened?"

Dane drank but then nodded, grabbing another pepper. "Sure. I've always had a bit of a thing for bad boys, but my ex? He was just *evil*, man. Literally tried to murder me."

As Dane went on, telling the story of how he met Jag, what they went through and his feelings about it, Ezra was struck by the realization that he'd never *bonded* with anyone this way. His parents were cold. The people he'd considered friends—always ready to deliver biting comments in lieu of jokes and they never opened up the way Dane just had, unwilling to show their vulnerable underbellies. It was... new. And while the relaxed attitude of the guys he now hung out with made him uncomfortable at times, it was refreshing to see them say what they thought and quarrel without the aim of hurting each other.

It made him want to open up too, even if he wasn't yet ready.

Ezra had no idea what his future would be like in the aftermath of Paul, but that was the rational part of him. The

emotional side already felt at home with these guys, with Frank, just hanging out, being himself, and not having to either posture or look over his shoulder at all times.

Chapter 17

Ezra

EZRA WAS RUNNING OUT of his PrEP. There was another bottle in his apartment, but he couldn't take his car out of the shed and drive home as if that whole thing with Paul being a murderous psycho had never happened.

It was kind of important, because he and Frank skipped rubbers altogether, and it wasn't like he could ask for Frank to get tested while not doing so himself. It would have been rude. Not to mention that with Frank already doing so much for him, Ezra didn't want to be ungrateful, which left him worried each time he checked the number of pills in his bottle. He was down to three.

Frank didn't seem like the type to get angry over being asked about his health status, and he never seemed to have an issue with condoms either, but one never knew. Ezra wanted to believe Frank when he claimed to have only been with him in the past year, but people lied about these things, as Ezra had found out early in his career, when an STI took him out of commission.

And it wasn't like Frank was around all the time. His mysterious job demanded attention at odd hours of day and night, and for all Ezra knew, he might be hooking up with someone rather than working. Then again, what right did Ezra have to demand any form of fidelity? He'd been an escort for almost all of his adult life, and many of his clients were cheating on their partners, whom they apparently loved and had good relationships with. Humans were a selfish species,

and even the kindest man might distort reality for his own gain.

A voice from deep in his chest reassured him that Frank had proved himself as reliable, responsible, and kind even in circumstances when he had to let go of his own wants for Ezra's sake. But life was a harsh teacher, and it had punished Ezra for having faith in people too many times to count.

He was afraid that the man who made him feel so very safe, so wanted, might not be the real Frank.

And what then?

Ezra's throat tightened, and he put down the cover of the old scanner he was using to transfer all the neglected papers onto a hard drive. He tried to return to the spreadsheet he created, but his thoughts kept drifting off to the man who'd offered him help when he'd needed it most.

Maybe Ezra was fooling himself, because he'd grown so fond of Frank, but he liked to think that the relationship they'd developed over the past year was real, even if forged in controlled conditions, and that Frank really was the person he seemed to be.

Ezra was blindsided when Frank first told him he wanted their relationship to be more than an arrangement, or friends fucking. But while it might have been a ploy to take advantage of a man in an impossible situation, Frank had always showed his affection for Ezra with actions rather than words and money. And even to a cynic like Ezra, that felt good.

The night at the boat had morphed into an evening with friends, but Frank had prepared everything with his pleasure in mind, down to Ezra's favorite brand of crackers, and since they were already fucking whenever Frank wanted, what other reason for all that effort was there if not legitimate affection?

It delighted Ezra as much as it scared him.

Too antsy to sit still, he stood up from the desk and returned to the bedroom they now shared. He'd already changed the sheets after last night's sex fest, but he needed to *move*, and maybe also see Frank, who was still working on Ros's old bicycle. He'd started repairing it after Ezra complained about the walk to Ros's place taking too long. He didn't need to be asked or given a promise of Ezra doing something for him in return and did it because he thought it would make Ezra's life here a bit easier, like a nice, normal person who wouldn't turn into a dragon in the third act of a movie, in a twist everyone expected.

Ezra peeked out through the curtains and licked his lips when muscles shifted under Frank's T-shirt as he tightened a bolt by the bike's front wheel.

It had been three weeks since Frank had gotten over his weird inhibitions and fucked Ezra, and they'd been on a sensual high since. It wasn't unusual for a client to touch Ezra in passing, or act in a tender way outside bedroom activities, but he'd never been around one man this much, and Frank's continuous attention recalibrated something deep inside him.

It got to a point where Ezra was at the door as soon as Frank arrived home, like a puppy eager for petting, and that wasn't like him at all. He'd always seen himself as a prize to be won, because scarce things were worth more money and effort, but in this new reality where Ezra needed Frank to survive, his value didn't seem so straightforward.

A part of him worried Frank would lose interest, or start taking him for granted, which made every glance at the mirror nerve-wracking. There were things Ezra did every day to remain the best version of himself. He was still working out with the limited equipment around Frank's place, and eating well, courtesy of fresh groceries, but without clothes that fit him right, and without regular cosmetic treatments, he might soon stop looking so appealing. The change would not be perceptible to Frank right away, but he would start noticing that something was different about Ezra and eventually no longer see him as worthy of all his efforts. And while Ezra did not want to think about it, he knew that being rejected by Frank would crush his heart, which he'd so recklessly been giving away bit by bit.

The happier he was here, the greater the stakes. And the more painful the potential fall.

Ezra couldn't help but feel that the small scar on his chin, which he'd so carefully treated over the past two years, was becoming more visible without the daily application of cream, and just earlier today, he'd discovered a pimple on his temple. It wasn't immediately apparent from behind his dark hair, but a clear sign that the cosmetics the clueless Prospect had

chosen at the supermarket were of even lower quality than the ingredient lists suggested. Not to mention that the cheap hydrating cream was doing a shitty job at hydrating, and the scrub contained crushed walnut shells, which Ezra refused to put anywhere near his precious skin.

Soon enough, he'd have dry skin flaking off his nose like some unkempt wretch, and Frank would see that everything about him was a carefully maintained illusion. What would happen then? Would he need to make concessions where he didn't want to make them, to make up for being a sub-par product?

His gaze drifted to the bottom drawer of Frank's bedside table, where he'd found all the sex toys during the frantic search through his host's things. Apart from their first night together, Frank never voiced a desire to tie Ezra down, but there was a lot of bondage gear in that damn drawer, and there was no way Frank wasn't fantasizing about using it on Ezra every time they fucked.

Ezra, the beautiful escort, could easily say no, but could Ezra the man in need of protection do the same without suffering the consequences? The truth he was unwilling to consider was that if a man as big and strong as Frank wanted to tie him down, or break both his legs to keep him from running, Ezra wouldn't be able to stop him, but refusing ropes and cuffs offered him an illusion of control he wasn't willing to give up on.

But that didn't mean he wasn't thinking about it. In the safety of his imagination, Frank could strap him to the bed, use a blindfold, and tease Ezra until he shook, desperate to come. Causing pain wasn't Frank's thing. He liked to give pleasure, to watch Ezra lose control, and most likely, he'd use the bondage to edge him until he begged, unable to touch himself —

No.

No bondage.

Bondage was an unnecessary risk, and while he wanted to make Frank happy and keep his attention for longer, he'd allowed it once in the past, and paid for it. Nothing *terrible* had happened, but his client wouldn't release him when asked, and the imprisonment went on for so long that Ezra ended up peeing himself. He never saw the guy again, but the humiliation stuck with him like a brand on the forehead.

And now that he thought back to *that*, his bladder felt unnaturally full, so he left the bedroom and went to the small space next door. Frank kept it clean and had refurbished it to a high standard—that couldn't be denied—but it was utilitarian to the point where it looked as basic as the showers at Ezra's gym. Every single surface was white, with the exception of a mirror Frank must have gotten somewhere on sale, since it had a frame with cartoony fish. Ezra had attempted to decorate the bathroom with a rug, and hung up a framed Ferrari poster gathering dust in the corner of the guest room, but this place

needed more than that—at the very least matching towels, and a fresh coat of paint in a color that wasn't white.

He was in the middle of relieving himself when the rumble of a car engine outside startled him so badly, he flinched and ended up peeing on the seat and floor.

Fuck.

He was losing it.

Despite the safety Frank provided, the revelation about Paul left him skittish like a bunny about to get a heart attack over a branch breaking behind it.

“Hey, Frankie!” Shane said outside. “Slaving away for your pretty cabin boy?” he asked, referencing the night of the blood moon.

Ezra exhaled and glanced toward the small window. It was cracked open but opaque, so he finished relieving his bladder and moved straight to the much-needed clean up. Shane might be all smiles, but he was a shark. Ezra could feel it in his bones and didn't want to let him smell blood in the water.

“This bike is in good condition. Ezra and Ros like each other, and this will make moving between our homes easier until I fix the Dodge,” Frank said as Ezra sprayed the seat and floor with bleach before wiping everything with toilet paper.

“You think that will make him stay? What if he uses that thing to ride away into the sunset?”

Ezra dropped the disinfectant-soaked paper into the toilet bowl and stared at the window as his stomach sank in

anticipation of Frank's answer.

Frank groaned. "You're such an asshole, you know that? I'm not keeping him here by force, but he's also not going anywhere far on a bicycle. I told him which routes he's allowed to take, and which to avoid."

Ezra cleared his throat and started a trickle of water to wash his hands, but all his attention was on the voices outside, because if Ezra could influence Frank, so could Shane, and if that was his attitude toward Ezra, then he needed to be watched carefully.

Had Ros repeated something Ezra had said without thinking? Was this why Shane was here, trying to sow seeds of doubt in Frank?

"And you think he'll listen?" Shane asked, unaware they might be overheard. "You don't want to mix pleasure with work, Frankie... though I suppose he already does."

"He's not *working* now, is he?"

Ezra sensed the edge of agitation in Frank, and he wished to see his face, because he was quite good at reading expressions.

Shane answered after a long pause. "I don't know. Is he? And if he's not... is he going back to it?"

Ezra switched off the tap and swallowed, gravitating closer to the window. In his current situation, he couldn't plan for the future. The man he'd been meant to move in with in LA had probably forgotten his existence already and moved on to some other pretty face, but he still liked to dream big.

And big dreams didn't have a place in the middle of nowhere.

“What is it to you?” Frank asked.

“I'm just looking out for you. Are you falling for this kid?”

“He's about Ros's age, so don't call him a kid!”

“Touchy subject, I see, I see.” Shane laughed without much humor. “I know he's pretty, but... with his profession, he's been around and knows what to tell a guy to make him dance to his tune. Don't let him use you—”

“Do I look like I can't take care of myself? What are you implying, huh?”

Shane sighed, staying quiet for a breathless second that had Ezra's heart beating faster. “Look, I'm not good at this emotional shit, so I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but serious talk, Frank—you were a bit lonely these past few years. It's understandable that you got attached to someone who makes you feel good. But let's face it, he met you as a client, and he wouldn't have come here if he wasn't in danger. I'm just saying, don't lose your head just because it *feels* right.”

“I don't yet know if he'll stay, okay? The whole thing with Paul needs to cool off for us to know if he can safely leave. But why is it so hard for you to believe that he might actually want me, huh? ‘Cause he's young and hot?”

“‘Cause he's probably seen more dick than I did in prison, and knows exactly how to exchange that pretty face for favors.

He's using you like that guy I knew who'd suck a dick for cigs. He doesn't care—”

A heavy thump was followed by Shane swearing. Ezra leaned against the tiled wall, breathing slowly as the vicious words cut deep into his brain, hurting as if they were shards of glass. He was *not* some desperate guy who'd sleep with just anyone. He was a prize whose time people were willing to pay premium for. He valued every client and chose them based on certain standards. So maybe he did utilize certain... techniques to hook people, but that did not mean he intended to lie to Frank in any way.

He liked Frank.

He really fucking liked Frank so much it scared and confused him.

And Shane was one to talk when he so clearly had the charm of a player! Ezra could smell it on him from miles away. Did he think that not getting paid for it made him better?

“What was that for? I was just being honest because you're like family to me!” Shane complained.

“Fuck your honesty! I bet Dex slept with more guys than Ezra, and that's for free. So what? What's it matter? He's a person, you shithead. He has feelings. Can his feelings for me grow? I don't know, but I'm gonna fucking give it a shot. Not because he's handsome, but because, yeah, I feel good when I'm with him. I like seeing him smile. There's a reason you chased after Ros when he didn't want to see your face, and you built him a goddamn house. It's not because he gives good

head. It's much more than that, and you know it, no matter how cynical you try to act.”

Warmth settled on Ezra's shoulders, and he rubbed his chest when it felt almost too tight around his heart. It had been a very long time since Ezra felt he had someone in his corner, supporting him unconditionally.

The people he met on a daily basis—store clerks, beauticians—were nice and polite because they provided a service. The acquaintances he was closest with were gossip mills good only for passing the time, but he would not trust them with his real self.

Could he reveal it to Frank?

“Fine,” Shane muttered in a voice so low Ezra could barely hear him. “I just came to tell you his new IDs are getting made, but the Elephant upped his prices, so that's an extra two hundred.”

“And you came to me for money? How many times did I bail you—”

“I paid him, okay? I'm just letting you know!”

Frank went quiet for a few seconds, prompting Ezra to get to his toes and peek through the crack letting in fresh air. Outside, the two men were facing each other, but the tension must have fizzled out, because both of them slouched like balloons that lost some air. Ezra held his breath when Frank spoke.

“Thanks for dealing with it. And as for the other thing... I love you, Shane, and I know you’re just trying to look out for me, but do not speak about him like this. I mean it.”

Emotions Ezra had been trying so hard to avoid now flooded his chest. It had been easy to dismiss Frank’s kind words and promises as flattery when he said them to Ezra’s face. But it was now clear Frank’s affection wasn’t just for show, and the bruise forming on Shane’s cheek proved that Frank considered Ezra worthy of fighting his best friend over. And while Ezra was not a weak damsel, even if his muscles were built for show rather than function, he felt grateful to his butch prince charming.

Gay men were as capable of prejudice as any other group. There was always someone who tried to make themselves feel better by punching down another person, and as a bottom *and* escort he’d heard his share of slut shaming. It did hurt more to hear someone actively trying to use those stereotypes to instill doubt in Frank, regardless of their intentions.

He fought the urge to give Frank a hug but stayed put until Shane changed the topic, inquiring about something to do with the pressure in the bicycle wheel.

Ezra put himself in motion.

It was only when he grabbed a drink for Frank on the way out that he registered the two men were discussing IDs. Specifically, *his* new ID. Frank hadn’t told him he’d started the process of acquiring a new ID for Ezra, yet he’d been working

on ensuring his safety all along instead of looking for sneaky ways to keep Ezra tied down.

With the smoothie he'd made earlier in hand, Ezra walked out of the house and along its wall, toward the two voices that had his blood thudding, for different reasons.

"Hey, Frank," he announced himself before turning the corner.

"I'm almost done here," Frank said as Shane muttered a "hey", lighting himself a cigarette. Right now, Ezra didn't want to see him, so he focused on Frank and offered him a wide smile that somehow reached all the way to his chest, warming him from the inside.

"Snack time, big guy," he said, handing Frank the tall glass.

Frank's smile widened, and he turned to Shane. "He's made me a meal plan, you see. Apparently I've been undereating on protein."

Shane snorted. "You? Undereating?"

"Well, he was *eating*. A lot of crappy food that wasn't good for him," Ezra said and leaned close to Frank, rubbing his back in broad circles. "I make everything from scratch, and it's all organic, without weird additives. And the macros are on point, so he can get even stronger."

"You want me bigger?" Frank asked, and looked into Ezra's eyes with so much emotion Ezra didn't know how to handle it.

Shane laughed. "I've seen that monster, and it doesn't need to be any bigger."

Ezra rubbed his face against Frank's chest. He smelled like coffee, and warm evening air, and nothing bad would ever happen as long as Ezra stayed close to him.

"I will ignore you, Shane. Frank is exactly how he should be. I'm just trying to optimize his diet so the training is easier and more productive."

Frank took a gulp of the smoothie, then ruffled Ezra's hair. "See? I got myself a smart one."

Ezra snorted and turned before resting his chin on Frank's peck. Was it a weakness that hugging him gave Ezra a sense of peace? "You've seen nothing yet. I'm almost done with all your invoices and receipts."

"You might actually have to keep him," Shane said as if he hadn't tried to talk Frank out of dating Ezra five minutes ago.

Frank drank with a happy expression as he hugged Ezra close with his free arm. Ezra once tried a weighted blanket and hated how trapped it made him feel, but the weight of Frank's arm, or even his body, always felt calming, so he shut his eyes, enjoying the steady presence next to him.

"You said the bike's ready?"

Frank handed him the empty glass. "Sure is. Just remember not to go off the paths I showed you. This place is easy to get lost in, and not all the piles are secured."

It was obvious to Ezra that all the roads with asphalt would be safe to drive on, but Frank didn't want him to approach places where he could see something he shouldn't. He was

fine with that. The bike offered him an opportunity to exercise and move around faster, and the last thing he wanted was to get mixed up with the wrong people.

Well, technically he already had, but as long as he remained unaware of who Frank's customers were, that fact could be ignored.

"I will, don't worry. I rather enjoy not being buried alive under an avalanche of junk."

Shane took a drag of smoke. "You'd hate to get that watch scratched."

Ezra sensed Frank tensing next to him but was quick to stroke his back. There was no need to get agitated again. "Well, it is one of the very few things of my own I still have."

"I feel you. I had to let go of all of my stuff when I went to prison," Shane said and patted Frank on the shoulder. "But Frankie kept the important shit for me."

Frank took a deep breath. "*This* isn't prison. He'll get to retrieve his stuff."

Ezra's blood ran faster, but he stayed calm, not wanting to have this opportunity turn into a trap if he said the wrong thing. "Yeah, the lease on my apartment runs out soon, and I'm getting a bit worried about what happens to my belongings."

Frank glanced at his friend. "Shane's got nothing to do today. He can come with me, and we can grab some of your stuff. Just tell me what's most valuable or important."

A sense of relief flooded Ezra so fast he barely noticed the drooping of Shane's shoulders. But, to the judgmental bastard's credit, he didn't protest. "You'd do that for me?" he asked as if he hadn't voiced his worries for that very reason.

"Sure, baby, just make a list," Frank said and kissed the side of his head. "I'd take you with us, but I don't feel it's safe."

Ezra stalled, because he wasn't anyone's baby. Or was he? His mind said no, but when he met Frank's dark, intense eyes, his body said that *yes*, he definitely was.

Chapter 18

Frank

THE DOOR UNLOCKED WITH a dull click, and when no sound came from behind it, Frank pushed it open, facing the dark interior of Ezra's apartment. The glow of the lamp above his and Shane's heads illuminated the paneled floor inside and offered enough light to reveal the rough shapes of the furniture in the living room, but if someone was waiting for Ezra's arrival in the bedroom, there was only one way to find out.

"Check the living room. I'll go right," Frank whispered and pulled the safety off his gun, but as Shane slapped the light switch, they both stalled at the sight of the open plan room.

It looked as if a hurricane named Paul had stormed through it twice.

Shane whistled. "That looks promising."

The dark humor in his voice prompted Frank into action, and they both went to their respective sides, checking the apartment for intruders. They found none, but the whole place was *wrecked*. Even the mattress where Frank had slept only weeks ago hadn't been spared and now featured long tears showcasing its gutted insides.

The sole idea that it could have been Ezra cut from groin to throat made Frank shudder. Not much moved him these days, but Ezra wasn't some sack of disposable meat. Frank had chosen to protect him, to make him his if only Ezra allowed it.

Walking around the place he knew so well and seeing it in ruin made him want to go back and stay at Ezra's side, like his personal guard dog, but that was an unreasonable thought.

Ezra was safe at the junkyard, with Jag keeping an eye on him. And Paul should thank the heavens that he hadn't caught up with Ezra that first night, because if Frank had seen the amber eyes looking back at him from the second body bag that night, he—he probably would have broken his vow to never kill again.

Frank put away his gun. “Looks safe. Let's get his stuff,” he said and went back to the corridor to grab the duffel bags they'd brought with them.

Shane sighed and pulled up tonight's shopping list on his phone before stepping into the kitchen. “This place looks like a statement. You really think you can hide him from Paul forever?”

Frank approached one of the cupboards with grim thoughts swirling in his mind. He wanted to bark something back at Shane, but the question was reasonable, even if agitating.

“Probably not, but I don't even know if he'll stay. With the new ID, if he travels far enough, he'll be safe.”

“Only that you don't want him to go anywhere...” Shane glanced his way as he opened a large drawer.

Ezra had given them instructions about a shitload of supplements. Collagen powder, vitamins, and all sort of stuff Frank didn't question, but he didn't like how desperate Ezra seemed to be for these pseudo miracle drugs.

“I don't. But I'm not Jag. I won't be putting a collar around his neck and chaining him to the wall. He either wants to stay

or he doesn't."

Shane shoved bottle after bottle into the bag, his expression rigid as if he were weighing his options after leaving his fingerprints all over a crime scene. Frank was about to grab the two pairs of shoes Ezra asked for when his friend's dark voice made him stall.

"Look, Frank, I'm sorry about earlier," Shane said, dumping the bag onto the kitchen counter as he faced him with a tense set to his mouth. "I'm just worried because you're like a br—no, you're *more* than a brother, because I don't even know where I'd be if you never took me under your wing. But you have your own mind, and I overstepped. If you want me to protect that boy as if he were my own, I will do it."

Frank had no idea how much he'd needed to hear that. A weight dropped off his shoulders at Shane's words.

"Thanks, man. It's been a long time since I was so set on someone. It's only been a few weeks, and he slotted into my life with such ease. I wasn't sure how he'd fare in my less than luxurious house, but he made it a home already. I thought I didn't need much more in life than my friends, TV dinners, and the odd blowjob, but being around him is showing me what I've been missing out on. I don't know what I'd do if he left, but I don't know if he will want to stay in the long run either. I trust he genuinely likes me, but I'm not sure if being confined to a scrapyard won't eventually erode all that."

Shane exhaled and slapped Frank's arm in a gesture of support. "You gotta maximize your chances. Make him

comfortable. Coming here tonight is a good step forward.”

Frank approached the collapsing mound of shoes erected in front of the cupboard where Ezra normally stored them. He fished out the first pair Ezra requested by the time Shane went on.

“But now real talk. The comfort and luxury is the least of your problems, because we can update your place, hell, even build an extension for him to store all his clothes. But would he be okay with our secret side gig? He was horrified when he found out what Paul was up to.”

And that was at the core of Frank’s worries. Ezra already knew about Frank being up to no good, but if he found out the extent of it, could they even have a future? Moving stolen goods hardly fell into the same category as moving dead bodies. Ezra wasn’t the kind of guy who washed his man’s bloodied T-shirt and then made him dinner.

“I know. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. Maybe there’s a nice way to frame it that doesn’t freak him out?”

Shane raised his eyebrows. “Like ‘we dispose of organic matter for people out of options’? Like a charity?”

“It’s not funny,” Frank said but chuckled at the absurdity of it all.

“That’s actually a good slogan. We should put that on a mug and gift it to our best customers,” Shane said and elbowed Frank on his way to a travel case that had been disemboweled in the middle of the living room. Its contents were scattered all

over the floor like body parts after the explosion that had turned Frank's life around. And, oh God, the same could have happened to Ezra.

Frank shook off the intrusive memory filled with streams of blood.

“Dex was lucky to find Hammer. They can be up to messed up shit together. What normal guy would accept the kind of stuff we do? Even Ros is only okay with it because it saved his ass when he needed it.”

Shane snorted. “I don't even wanna know what those two talk about in private. Ros though... He could have walked away, but he still chose me. Junkyard, dirty hands, and all. So maybe there is a chance for you two. You just need to really consider if you can trust him with this. Do you trust him, Frankie?”

Frank sighed, opening a hidden compartment in the media center below the TV. The goons who'd ripped the place apart must have not been too diligent, because Ezra's stash of valuables was right where he'd said it would be. Which meant Ezra trusted Frank with his gold jewelry. He'd also trusted Frank enough to seek him out after coming across Paul's mess. But would he feel the same way if he knew the whole truth about Frank's past? And, frankly, also his present.

Shane tut-tutted. “You're hesitating.”

“Because it's complicated. I trust him... to a degree. I trust that he wouldn't rat me out to the cops. I trust that he won't poison my food and disappear. I trust that he means it when he

says he likes it when I fuck him. But do I trust that he'll stay when he finds out there's bodies decomposing in our backyard? I don't know."

Shane sighed and picked out articles of clothing matching the ones on the list. A grin stretched his face as he showed Frank black Versace underwear, but his words couldn't be more somber. "I'd say it needs more time, but can you afford that with Paul on Ezra's tail? How far would you go to protect him? If he stays, Paul will know sooner or later."

The need to smash something was growing inside of Frank, and since the place was a mess already, he kicked a vase to the other side of the living room. The one time he was growing feelings for someone, and it just had to be difficult.

"Far enough. I'll handle Paul when the time comes. He can be reasoned with, and I don't think he'd be jealous of Ezra."

Shane stretched and pulled on Frank's arm on the way to the bedroom. That space featured on their to-collect list even more extensively than the living area. "Doesn't it... bother you?"

Frank had to take a deep breath to not dent the wall with his fist, because being here and seeing the ruins of Ezra's formerly lavish life was making all the emotions he'd suppressed come close to the surface. "Of course it bothers me. When I..." One more inhale. "When I was paying him, I just blocked it out. Him having other clients wasn't something we discussed. It helped that I didn't know who they were. Other than Paul, which... yeah, is fucking annoying, but what can you do? It's different now."

“Does he know it? Say, things with Paul cool off, you make some deal. Then what? He goes back to—”

“No, he doesn’t.”

Shane raised his eyebrows, loading his bag full of cosmetics scattered on the floor. “What if he wants to?”

Even trying to think about it made Frank’s blood so thick with jealousy his head spun, making him seek the support of the wall.

Shane scowled at the ripped mattress resting against the bedroom wall and approached the open closet. Ezra treated every garment he owned like something precious and always looked immaculate, but the bastards who smashed their way through his apartment in search of hints on Ezra’s whereabouts had dumped all of the expensive clothes to the floor. The beige T-shirt Ezra wore during his and Frank’s trip to the lake was even marked with the imprint of a sports shoe, as if it were a worthless rag.

“Sloppy work, even if it is a popular brand,” Shane pointed out, indicating the logo in the middle of the imprint. He then walked over to the half-empty closet and got himself a stool to reach the back of the top shelf.

Frank found the brain power to answer Shane. “He wouldn’t need to do it. I’d take care of him.”

Shane glanced back with a smirk as he pulled out a shoe box. “You’d be his new sugar daddy?”

“No, I’d be his partner, who supports him in life.”

Shane glanced at the list in his hand, then started rummaging through the box. “What if he likes it?”

“What?” Frank scowled, unable to focus on finding the next stash of jewelry.

“You know, some guys like the thrill of fucking around, he might also want to have his own money. Could just be a job to him. You need to talk to him about that.”

The idea of Ezra meeting up with other guys while being his life partner was so repulsive Frank couldn't find the words to answer Shane. What used to be fine when Frank had accepted his lot in life as client to the beautiful escort would not fly now that feelings were involved for real.

Shane looked up at Frank from an open notebook with a wicked grin. “Oooh, Frankie... I've got the motherload. Listen. ‘Frank doesn't like being fingered.’ Not even a little backdoor action?”

Frank moved before he could even comprehend what happened. “Put that away! That's his private shit!”

“A lot of private shit about lots of different people, neatly cataloged, so he could study his notes before work,” Shane said, stepping back to keep reading. “Ooh, Frank! He gave you a discount!”

Frank tore the notebook out of his hand, and Shane dropped into a chair in Ezra's reading nook, which currently featured a battered copy of a book on perfume-making on the side table.

“He must like you,” he commented.

Heat trailed from the very middle of Frank's body and spread to his limbs and face, but despite the notebook feeling like burning coals in his hands, he couldn't bring himself to discard it when it opened on the page marked with a purple ribbon. The one about him.

He licked fresh sweat off his top lip, taking in the neat script following a number of bullet points, but while he knew he should not break Ezra's trust by reading any of it, his eyes latched on to the words as if they were dirty water in the middle of a desert. A lot of it was practical information about Frank's likes and dislikes, but as he pushed the boundaries he should have never crossed, he found a hurriedly-scribed note that read *sweet and thick as a pancake*.

Warmth spread in his chest as if he were still being cooked in that pan. Instead of butter, he was sizzling in Ezra's affection. He was liked. Truly.

And while he knew this shouldn't go any further, he lifted his thumb from the middle, fully intending to turn the page when his eyes settled on a small drawing in blue ballpoint pen. It didn't reveal any artistic talent, but the crude illustration of a face opening its mouth wide for a big, thick dick with dark hair and heavy-looking balls had the vapor inside his skull creating even more pressure.

Best fuck ever, said the note next to it.

Frank closed the notebook before his eyes could steal any more private information. He wasn't just ashamed of reading it

in front of Shane. He shouldn't have done that at all. But he was only human.

Shane was playing with a golden chain and smirked when their eyes met. "Anything of interest? You're looking pretty red."

Frank stuffed the notebook into the side pocket of the duffle bag before adding several photographs, and a couple of items resting at the bottom of the box. He didn't look at them, not wanting it to end up like it had with the notebook, because despite it only having good things to say about him, it reminded him that his relationship with Ezra was built on a foundation of money and lies. Was there really hope for them when he'd once again proved that Ezra couldn't trust him by reading his diary?

Shane threw the necklace at him, and Frank caught it without thinking. "Maybe you should give him this if you wanna be his sugar daddy?"

Frank opened his palm to reveal the piece of jewelry Ezra had so often worn around his neck. The word *Sugar* in solid gold seemed playful when they'd first met. Now it opened a black hole deep in Frank's heart. The information he'd stolen from the notebook proved Ezra liked him, but Shane was right. Maybe Ezra really did enjoy his lifestyle as an escort and would eagerly return to it if given half the chance?

It was an intolerable thought. Even more so than the perspective of losing him because of Frank's secret job, or Ezra choosing to leave him behind like a bad memory he'd

never go back to once he started a new life in LA But were Frank faced with the choice between dating a man who slept with others for a living, or losing him altogether, would he be able to stand his ground?

He'd been avoiding tough conversations like this, opting instead to live with Ezra day by day. He didn't even know what Ezra wanted to do in LA, because he'd been afraid of the answer. If there had been a man he wanted to meet there, would that have changed, given the circumstances? California was far away from Pennsylvania. With a fake ID, he might have peace there, unless he wanted to become a model or actor.

His thumb traced a rough surface at the back of the pendant, so he turned it to see neat letters that turned his worries into pure rage. It read *To my favorite dessert - Paul*.

Fucking Paul.

Always had to have *everything* and would rather destroy it than let it go!

Frank turned and, with the necklace digging into his palm as he clenched his fist, he punched the ruined mattress again and again.

“Fuck!” he yelled out to relieve some of his fury.

When he finally stepped back, panting, Shane remained silent. At least he had no smartass comments to agitate Frank further.

“You got everything?” Frank mumbled.

“What is it?” Shane asked quietly.

“Paul. Fucking Paul. Always somewhere at the periphery. Won’t fuck off. It’s not enough that I deal with his trash. He keeps pushing me to work with him again, and if I open that floodgate, it won’t end. I know he’ll ask for that in exchange for leaving Ezra alone.”

Shane pursed his lips. “You do what you need to do, Frank. I’ll have your back.”

Frank nodded and threw the necklace into the duffel bag. Ezra had the right to decide what he wanted to do with it.

Chapter 19

Ezra

EZRA ONLY TURNED FOR a moment, but by the time he faced Jag again, the idiot's big, pink tongue was out and folding the bottom half of the sheet mask resting on his face. "No! That gel's not edible! You'll puke," he warned, watching as Jag leaned forward, resting his weight on the knuckles, and spat on the floor Ezra had mopped earlier.

"It smells like strawberries! But it's bitter! You said it's *not* like soap." Jag gave Ezra a suspicious frown through the thin, damp sheet, but sat back down.

While Ezra's first encounters with Jag had been tense, he was beginning to understand him better, and with that, became more at ease with the guy. It seemed he was a bit like a domesticated wolf, so as long as he got treats, and no one hurt his pack, he was perfectly harmless.

And, frankly, Ezra wouldn't mind becoming a temporary member of that exclusive club. At least while the issue with Paul remained a concern. "It's also a cosmetic, but it won't wash your face. It'll make your skin nicer. See?" Ezra asked, leaning close, so Jag could see his complexion in more detail.

Before he could flinch, Jag put his rough fingers against his cheek with raised eyebrows. "It's so smooth. I once found this bag, and it was so soft, just like that."

Ezra let out an awkward laugh and pulled away, sitting on the floor across from Jag. "What kind of bag was *that*?"

Without all his armor, mask, or goggles, Jag didn't look half as dangerous. Especially with a sheet mask that kept shifting

because he couldn't keep his face from moving. "It had to be some kind of leather. I thought it was really nice, so I gave it to Dane, but he said it was a ladies' bag."

Dane would have been here if he wasn't working at his important remote IT job, so Ezra smiled and had a sip of magnesium water. "I'm sure he'll like touching your soft skin."

"You think? He does say he likes my scruff." Jag held his hands up to his face but stopped himself from touching the mask in the last second. "I guess there's the places on my face where it doesn't grow. Should I use a mask on my fingers?"

Ezra's gaze fell to the big, rough hands with thick nails that were a tiny bit too long. "Um... well, you could start using a paste with sugar to remove dead skin cells and regularly hydrate with a special cream. I'm sure Dane could get both those things for you."

Jag watched his hands in amazement as if he saw them for the first time. "I have dead skin? Can you write down the names of the creams? He can read very well."

Dane was the kind of person Ezra would expect to get together with another nerd so they could go on comic convention dates every year, but Jag, who had a trim body and a face cameras would have loved, had nothing but adoration for him. It was cute. In an unexpected way.

"Everyone has dead skin. It just usually falls off in tiny bits so you don't notice. And yeah, your boyfriend—"

“My mate,” Jag corrected with the enthusiasm of a puppy.

“—your mate is very smart. I will write it down for him.”

Jag startled and jumped to his feet seconds before Ezra heard a truck engine, but then he calmed down without even looking out of the window. “It’s just Frank.”

Ezra peeled the mask off his own face. “How do you know?”

Jag shook his head. “His truck has this little sputter every now and then.”

This guy was so bizarre, and Ezra couldn’t help but love it about him. Now that Jag guarded *him*, Ezra rather liked that he could be such a scary presence when he wanted. But more importantly, Frank was back with Ezra’s stuff, and he couldn’t wait to get his hands on both.

“I think your guard shift is over,” he told Jag and rose, heading for the kitchen. He picked up a box containing half the little egg wraps he’d made earlier and offered it to Jag. “For you and Dane.”

The brilliant smile on Jag’s face warmed Ezra’s heart. He’d never cooked for his acquaintances, too worried they’d snub his work for their favorite luxury restaurants instead, but Jag couldn’t be happier when he got the box and held it with reverence.

“Oooh! Dane will love this! Thank you.”

Just as Ezra leaned over to peel the mask off Jag’s face, Frank came in with Shane, each holding two large duffel bags.

“You ladies were having a little spa session?” Shane asked, dumping his luggage on the floor while Frank walked all the way to the sofa before placing the bags he was carrying there.

Ezra wanted to give him a hug right away, but there was a tension in the way he carried himself, and his face was like a mask of steel.

Jag shrugged. “I don’t know what that is, but we did face masks, and now my skin is softer than a ladies’ leather bag.”

Shane laughed and patted Jag’s face. “It is!”

“Ezra says Dane will like it,” Jag boasted, tossing his shaggy mane.

“You want to see him quick? I could give you a lift,” Shane said, but despite him and Jag being so loud, Ezra’s attention wouldn’t stray from the tall, broad-shouldered figure standing still only a few paces away. There was something off about Frank tonight, and it made Ezra’s heart thump louder, as if it was pumping too much blood at once.

Jag considered Shane’s offer for a long time, as if there were better options than going by car. “Yes,” he said in the end. “The egg wraps are still warm. Dane will like them better fresh.”

“Come on then,” Shane said and waved Frank’s way before settling his gaze on Ezra for a bit too long. Hot shivers trailed down Ezra’s back, prompting his insides to cramp, because something must have happened since Shane and Frank had left

for his apartment, and he hated knowing that once the door closed behind their guests, the unknown would come for him.

Carmen's words of warning about dating clients were always somewhere at the back of his mind whether he liked it or not.

"See you tomorrow," he said, managing to keep his voice steady.

"Thanks guys, see ya," Frank said, raising his hand goodbye. "I'm pretty sure we brought everything you listed, but the bad news is, the house was trashed. Paul's guys must have been there. It's a good thing you hid the valuables well."

Ezra exhaled, focusing on the air leaving his lungs as he approached Frank, relieved that his strange behavior was caused by worry rather than anger. "Thank you so much."

Frank pulled him in for a tight hug that was as enigmatic as it was pleasant. He didn't say anything though, just kissed the top of his head.

Ezra hummed and kissed Frank's pec, listening to the steady heartbeat thumping so close to his ear it felt like a wordless message. "Maybe it was reckless. What if they were there when you arrived?" he mumbled.

"Well, they weren't. It's okay," Frank said, warming Ezra's hair with his breath, but something was off about his aura. Unsaid questions brewed under the surface, but just as Ezra stiffened in apprehension, Frank squeezed the back of Ezra's T-shirt and sniffed him. "You smell nice. Strawberries?"

Ezra grinned and pulled on Frank's belt loops, bringing him closer to the front of the sofa. The tension he'd felt moments ago turned into anticipation, and he pushed at Frank, making him drop into the seat. "I wanted to look nice for you."

Finally. A smile. But the danger wasn't over, because while Frank hadn't voiced whatever doubts he had yet, it was coming, and Ezra needed to reel Frank back into his corner.

"You always look nice for me. Even when you got that rash," Frank teased, because at the time it happened, he'd claimed to barely see it.

"Flattery. I must be really good in bed," Ezra whispered, stepping between Frank's spread legs and resting his hands on the back rest, on each side of Frank's head.

Frank was still rigid, but clouds gradually lifted from his features as he regarded Ezra in silence. Maybe he needed a distraction from the danger he'd put himself and Shane in by visiting Ezra's old apartment?

His answer came when Frank ran his hands down the sides of Ezra's body, his dark gaze warm yet penetrating, as if he were assessing whether Ezra was worth all this trouble. If he was still uncertain, Ezra could give him all the reasons, and chase away whatever questions were floating in Frank's head.

"In bed. On the sofa. On the floor. In a boat..." Frank whispered as the corners of his mouth lifted, making his face less severe.

Ezra grinned, remembering the hand job he'd given Frank in the middle of the lake at midnight. "Oh, you liked that one, hm?" he teased, leaning in to press his lips to Frank's ear. His dusky skin and black hair smelled of safety, overwhelming in their sweet muskiness as he rolled his tongue against the warm flesh.

Frank's hands slid down to Ezra's ass and squeezed. "I'd like to take you out there again once all of this blows over."

Speaking about the future felt pointless, but whatever choices Ezra would make once the danger was over, right now his world was limited to Frank's home. His approval was everything, and the fear of rejection was like a throbbing blade that might fall on Ezra's neck at the most unexpected time.

"I'd rather focus on the now," he murmured, flexing his buttocks in Frank's grip while trailing kisses down his man's scruffy neck.

"Me too," Frank whispered so tenderly something inside of Ezra twisted. He pushed his hands up Ezra's T-shirt, tracing his spine as he turned his head for their lips to meet.

It was electrifying, and Ezra found himself leaning closer, until his knee slid between Frank's spread thighs and nudged his soft cock through denim. They both gasped, and the unspoken tension in Frank fueled his touch. When their eyes met and Frank's lips almost opened, no doubt to drop a bomb that would back Ezra against a wall, it became clear Ezra needed to distract him.

Frank licked his lips and met Ezra's eyes. "How about we ___"

"Fuck?" Ezra blurted out because the red light flashed in his mind like mad. There was a fire in Frank's head, and he needed to extinguish it. And only one way came to his mind as naturally as breathing.

There it was. That hesitation on Frank's face. Whatever he'd been considering was getting wiped out by lust.

"Christ... what are you doing to me?" Frank whispered, arching his hips up to the touch, while sliding his hand over Ezra's buttock and all the way to his thigh.

Hook. Line. Sinker.

But who was the fish? Because Ezra loved being between Frank's muscular thighs and seeing him lose control. Any time he thought back to Frank's earlier declaration about wanting to give them a shot, to be something more, his whole body tingled with the need to show Frank he was worth it. So maybe there were other options on the horizon, which had seemed tempting before the truth about Paul crushed Ezra's plans, but they were all flimsy like houses made of cards when compared to the steady reassurance of Frank's presence. When everything else in his life was a blur, Frank remained razor-sharp.

Maybe he was naive. Maybe he was feeble-minded and giving up on a glamorous future he deserved, but if his LA man knocked on the door and offered him the same kind of protection as Frank, Ezra would have stayed.

His mother would have mocked him without mercy if she saw what a dump he ended up at, but Frank was here, and in this moment it was the only thing that mattered. The realization hit him with the power and speed of a bullet train, and he chuckled softly, shifting to settle with his buttock on Frank's firm thigh.

There wouldn't be much talking tonight. They could communicate skin to skin.

It was as if his brain was catching up with what his heart had realized when he was eavesdropping on Frank's conversation with Shane. No matter how hard he'd worked on building a wall between himself and any feelings he might develop for the men in his life, this time they'd snuck up on him. He wanted Frank to care about him, and not just because he was looking for safety like some rat trying to jump into the first lifeboat when the ship was sinking.

For the first time in his life, he had something solid.

The men he'd been sleeping with were either hot and disposable, or paying clients. But with Frank, he'd built a different kind of relationship, something that was intangible, invisible, and yet felt unbreakable. He'd never been around anyone whose affection wasn't conditional, and that included his parents.

Frank wore his heart on his sleeve, and it had been clear from the start that he'd not only respect Ezra's boundaries but also treat him like a person, not just a pretty thing to entertain him. Whatever happened, Frank would be there for him when

it mattered, and the sense of belonging it created made Ezra's heart beat faster. Was he really a sucker for wanting to stay here?

For once, Ezra didn't want to abuse another man's dedication for his gain. He just wanted to... be. With him.

"You smell so good," Ezra whispered to Frank, already sliding his hand between them, where Frank's hard cock awaited him like a prize.

"You smell of strawberries and cotton washing powder. I love that. Smells like home," Frank muttered into Ezra's lips, holding him close as they shared air, sitting together in such bliss Ezra was starting to feel weightless in those strong arms.

You smell like home too, Ezra wanted to say, but words got stuck in his throat when he realized that would be a lie. Frank smelled like the kind of home Ezra never had. One not filled with screams, broken dishes, and bruises hidden with makeup.

He'd had his doubts before, but now he knew on some most primal level that Frank would *never* abuse him in any way. That he was dedicated, safe, loyal to a fault. Like one of Shane's Dobermans, he'd maul any threat to Ezra, but not hurt him.

His mother would have said he was stupid and weak-willed to trust a man with his heart. But then again, she'd married for money, and where did that get her?

"I'll show you how you make me feel," Ezra promised, sliding to his knees in front of Frank.

“I sure hope it’s horny,” Frank said, meeting his gaze as he unzipped his jeans.

A chuckle came from deep in Ezra’s chest as he kneaded the muscular legs. “For your dick? Always,” he murmured and leaned forward, beckoned by the musky scent of lust and the fresh zing of Frank’s shower gel.

Logical thinking left his head when Frank pulled his pants just low enough for Ezra to see his stiff cock. This was where he could lose himself. No talking about serious issues. Just Frank’s moans and his cum.

Ezra looked up while he rolled his tongue up the hot dick. Frank shivered, and his eyes briefly shut, as if he couldn’t handle the arousal pumping through his veins and throbbing against Ezra’s lips.

His hand was warm in Ezra’s hair, and its weight so encouraging Ezra went for it and downed that gorgeous monster while squeezing Frank’s thick thighs.

Lost in dick heaven, Ezra wrapped his fingers around the base of Frank’s cock. The intense scent of his arousal had his toes curling, and he arched his body so the fabric of his pants could put pressure on his own cock

“Your mouth is so damn warm and soft.” There was a flush on Frank’s face, and it brightened up a smug smile that made Ezra consider stopping just so he could climb his man and ride him.

Just thinking about it made him roll his ass and slide his free hand down to his own zipper.

“Don’t jerk off. I’ll take care of you off when you’re done,” Frank whispered, moving his hands along Ezra’s head to stroke his ears. “I love seeing that twitchy little face you make.”

Ezra shivered. He couldn’t wait to taste Frank’s cum. He wanted to make him lose his mind, but who was he lying to? By now, he was so addicted to Frank everything he did was very much self-serving.

“Oh, fuck. You’re *such* a good boy,” Frank rasped, enjoying the royal treatment Ezra was eager to give him with every lick.

Ezra’s blood was on fire, but he needed more and sucked on the hard shaft, teasing its lower half and Frank’s balls with his eager hands. The salt on his tongue made his mouth water, and he hummed, peeking at his lover.

Frank was magnificent. Reminiscent of a lion who knew he belonged at the top of the food chain. The sheer size of his pulsing dick made Ezra lightheaded, and as he pleased him, trembling with desire, Frank’s grunts filled the living room.

Ezra was the one who did that to him. *He* was the source of Frank’s arousal and was so excited to make him come, he’d do it even if reciprocation wasn’t on the table.

He’d worked hard in the past to provide a good service, to be memorable, or see someone burn for him with a fervent lust, but he’d never before experienced this intense need to make

another man *happy*. Maybe it was pathetic, but he no longer cared about dignity.

Deep shivers ran all over his body when Frank's thighs tensed, when his feet slid over the floor, and his hands became less gentle, prompting Ezra to work his shaft faster. Oh, how Ezra needed Frank's cum rolling down his tongue.

He wanted every drop.

"Fuck, fuck... so good," Frank moaned, shifting a bit lower on the couch as his grip on Ezra's hair tightened. "Almost there, I'm gonna fill your mouth just the way you like." He moved his hips up, and Ezra met him halfway, creating an inferno of heat that could end in only one way.

He knew he'd done it when Frank's thighs pushed at his shoulders and his hand tightened in Ezra's hair, keeping him down in a dominant gesture that had his own dick throbbing.

Then the hard dick pulsed between his tongue and palate, and he was reduced to a horny, cum-hungry mess while Frank voiced his pleasure in a series of stifled grunts.

"That's it... All for you to swallow," Frank muttered as Ezra caressed his throbbing dick with his lips, feeling it pulse inside him.

Frank loosened his grip on Ezra's hair when he was done and just stroked it gently.

But Ezra wanted, no, *needed* more than gentleness. His skin was on fire, and he rose as soon as he swallowed everything

Frank had for him. He didn't care how he came, but he needed it now.

“Please, Frank...”

Frank's gaze was hazy as he pulled Ezra up to the sofa, where he had Ezra kneel with his legs spread over Frank's lap. Ezra's head spun when Frank slid lower in the seat and grabbed Ezra's ass to pull him closer. Then his mouth took in Ezra's cock, sucking him with so much fervor, Ezra had to grab the back of the sofa to steady himself.

His skin felt too tight for his body, and he moaned, staring down at the dark flush blooming on his lover's tan features. Frank's hair, always so tidily pleated into a braid, now looked frizzy from rubbing against the cushions. His wide lips stretched around Ezra's cock, moving up and down the saliva-slickened shaft in a hypnotizing rhythm that was quickly bringing Ezra to a new high.

He wouldn't last long.

Frank didn't take him all the way, but that was hardly needed when his tongue was so skilled and his mouth provided all the friction Ezra could dream of. Frank rubbed his forehead against Ezra's stomach, the gesture so hot it sent sparks down Ezra's spine, but it was fingers pulling his buttocks apart then teasing his hole that sent him over the edge.

He threw his head back, gasping for air as pleasure coursed through him with the force of wild rapids. His buttocks tightened on the teasing fingers as he came down Frank's tongue.

For once, his brain was empty of any intrusive thoughts about the past or future.

Pumped out, he limply hung off the backrest, still wrapped in the strong arms as Frank pulled himself back up.

Frank chuckled. “My pleasure. I love when you lose control.” He tightened his grip on Ezra, locking him in a sweaty embrace.

“*You* make me do that.” Ezra nuzzled the side of Frank’s face and put his arms around the thick neck. He was ready for a little nap.

Frank’s heart beat against him fast, and Ezra put his hand over his man’s chest, imagining that it thudded like that *for him*. That he was special, not just a pretty thing who gave good head.

They hugged for a long time, and neither of them said anything. A strange sense of calm washed over Ezra when he removed his T-shirt and rested on Frank half-naked. He was at peace, as if this man and his home in the scrapyards were truly *enough* to ensure Ezra’s happiness.

But at some point, Frank extended his arm to the duffel bag on the floor and pulled out Ezra’s client notebook.

“Can we talk?” he asked, making Ezra’s blood freeze.

Chapter 20

Ezra

THE NOTEBOOK IN FRANK'S hand had been a friend of Ezra's since he'd first started working as an escort. Its corners were worn from frequent use, and the spine had wrinkles, which somehow always reminded Ezra of the fact that he too would eventually age, and that his fortune needed to be made in the present.

But right now, the bundle of paper was like a grenade that might explode at any second.

Frank hugged him though, as warm as he'd been before he pulled out the notebook. "We found it when retrieving your photos, and I never really asked about the other guys you were seeing—"

A ball of lead weighed down Ezra's insides, but he couldn't keep in the question knocking on the inside of his skull. "You read it?"

The prolonged silence made him want to hide under a blanket and never leave.

"It... it opened on the ribbon-marked page, so yeah, I took a peek but didn't read anything else. I don't mind being a sweet, thick pancake, as long as you're the one eating it." Frank was trying to lighten the mood, which had to be a good sign.

Still, Ezra's mind remained clouded, and the insecurities unlocked by Shane's opinion about his lifestyle kept him on edge. Frank had never been violent, mean, nor insincere, but most men would rather not hear about their partner's conquests, especially not in clinical detail. That notebook held

many secrets, and seeing it now made Ezra feel shame over the possibility of Frank knowing them all.

Maybe he shouldn't. He chose his life path knowing all—well, most—pros and cons. A part of him had done it to spite his parents and to no longer be dependent on them, but he had been at peace with it, even when the client was a bore or not at all Ezra's type. But the feelings he'd developed for Frank made him doubt himself.

For so many years, he'd managed to keep focused on long-term goals and steer clear of romance. Now the walls he'd firmly kept in place had cracked, and he felt as if he'd been dropped at swimming distance between two islands but would drown out of sheer indecisiveness.

Words felt like wood chips in his dry mouth, but he spoke nevertheless. "It's just... private notes."

Frank slid his hand up Ezra's spine, then all the way to his hair. "That's okay, but it did force me to think that maybe we both are avoiding some topics that need to be discussed." His voice was soft as velvet, as if to cushion the blows to come, yet it only succeeded at making Ezra feel like he was being smothered instead of stabbed.

He looked away, suddenly aware of his nakedness. Was this a conversation they ought to have without their pants on? What if one of them wanted to run?

But Frank kept stroking him, as if Ezra were a wild animal caught in snares and needed to be calmed.

Ezra's mind was overcrowded with all the words he could say, but instead he smiled at Frank, hoping to distract him. "I haven't been avoiding anything. We're good the way it is."

"Are we though? I need to know where your head is at, sweetie." Frank made his point kissing his temple. "Do you want to add more pages to this notebook when Paul is no longer a concern? Would that be in LA, or here?"

Ezra's mouth fell open. With Paul hunting him somewhere beyond the bounds of the junkyard, he couldn't envision *any* future that didn't involve Frank. But now that doubts hit him in the face, he was questioning his own sanity. Had he forgotten all about the goals and plans he'd worked for? For a guy who didn't fit into them in the slightest? The answer lay in the way he still clung to Frank's sturdy form, but what if the intense emotions he'd been feeling were only some freaky defense mechanism akin to Stockholm Syndrome? What if everything changed once he was free again?

"I—What do *you* think?" he asked to avoid the question.

Frank hummed so loudly Ezra felt it in his chest. "I think it depends on what you planned to do in California. But I'll put my cards on the table, Ezra. I want you. You're everything I never knew I needed. You're fun to be around, smarter than you let on, and a damn catch. I know my place isn't a big, luxurious mansion, but we could work something out, if you wanted to. That being said... if you choose to stay with me, you can't hook up with other guys. It was one thing when I was your client, but if I'm to go all-in, I couldn't bear knowing

that you're with someone else. I guess this is me trying to figure out if it's non-negotiable for you. If you want to continue doing that kind of work more than you want me."

Ezra stared at him, his brain starved of oxygen and unable to come up with an explanation for this that made sense. But there was only one—Frank was exactly the way he'd presented himself all along. Honest. Straightforward. Dependable.

Ezra made a stupid little noise and lowered his gaze, wrestling with his distrustful nature. Frank wasn't like all the people who'd proven to be frauds in the past, and deep down he'd known it all along. That was why he'd trusted him. That was why he'd caught feelings.

He met Frank's gaze, calmed by the warmth it radiated, but that didn't make answering him any easier, so he chose to prod. "I overheard you and Shane talking behind the house."

Frank groaned and covered his face, as if he were ashamed. "I'm sorry, I know he's just looking out for me, but he did say some really shitty things. But I meant everything I said. I want to trust you, and I want to give us a shot. Ball's in your court, sweetheart." His chest sank in a deep exhale when he met Ezra's gaze and played with his hair.

How was he so calm about all this while Ezra had deteriorated into a self-doubting mess? Would Frank always be a rock he could rely on or was this just an illusion hiding a pile of pebbles that might crumble at any second?

“You know who I am. You read that notebook,” Ezra insisted despite feeling his heart all the way in his throat. “Won’t you change your mind about this once you get used to my presence?”

Frank cradled his face with warm hands and gave him a kiss so intense it charmed the fear away. “I don’t care how many guys you’ve slept with as long as you’re mine now. It doesn’t change anything. The only things I do care about is why you chose to do that in the first place, how you feel about it now, or if you ever got hurt in the process. And those things matter to me because I want to understand you better. I wanted to before, but it wasn’t my place.”

Ezra hummed in agreement and rested his chin on Frank’s pec. He didn’t know how to handle this much sincerity, but faced with it, he could only lie his way out of the uncomfortable conversation or offer the same in return. And he didn’t want to play any more games with Frank.

This man was something else. And while he didn’t have the qualities of the enigmatic rich husband Ezra had imagined himself with in the future, the heart he’d long ago chosen to ignore wanted only Frank.

He sucked in a shivery breath, overcome by an onslaught of emotions he wasn’t yet ready to share. “You can ask them now.”

“Why did you choose to be an escort? I’m guessing it’s about the money, but it’s not a career many people would pick.” Frank brushed back a strand of hair that fell on Ezra’s

forehead. His touch, so very gentle, sent heat down Ezra's back, all the way to his toes.

They'd lain together many times, chatting after sex, but this felt different. As if every word said out loud might unlock a secret. For once, Ezra did not want to withdraw.

He trusted Frank.

Wanted him.

Wanted to be his.

Realization made his throat tighten but didn't keep him from speaking. "I wanted to leave my family home, and this seemed like the fastest way to get me where I wanted to be in the future. I told you about a guy who offered to pay me for my time. I did my research after that, and because I was still living at home and didn't need lots of cash right away, it was easy to start slow, picking clients willing to pay what I demanded. I got more of them through word of mouth and planned to never leave any trace online, but then Mom found out what I was up to, and my parents gave me an ultimatum. That's when I posted my first ad and moved out."

Frank hesitated, and in that moment it was obvious to Ezra it had never crossed his mind to look up Ezra's profile online. Good. "Do you... like it? As a job, I mean. Is this something you wanted to keep doing in LA? Or was there... someone you wanted to join there?"

Another tricky question, but one that was easier to answer. "Depends. Sometimes, it felt like having the best time, and

getting paid on top of that. Other times... well, it was just a job. I guess the worst part of it was having to pander to people I found insufferable, the best thing was learning what made people tick and—”

Being adored.

Knowing that to those men his worth was equal to expensive jewelry and thick wads of cash. “I like fucking,” Ezra said, biting his lip.

Frank’s warm eyes strayed to Ezra’s collarbones as he took a deep breath. “I hope getting paid for it didn’t change the way you feel about sex when it’s freely given?”

Before meeting Frank, Ezra wouldn’t have imagined a guy like him to be this perceptive. Between his size, the gruff exterior, and the tattoos, Ezra would have clocked him as a hot meathead, but he had a heart big enough to keep his strange junkyard family together, and more emotional intelligence than the therapist Ezra saw on occasion. Frank’s questions made Ezra feel seen, as if he didn’t just ask them to know how to trap Ezra more effectively.

“I was also hooking up with people out of work,” he said with a shrug, unsure what Frank wanted to gauge with that question. “I never had a boyfriend because it would complicate everything. But also, if—” He took a deep breath, looking away from Frank’s face. “Because of drama potential, and because that kind of person might just want to have me and not give much back.”

“What do you expect to receive then? From this boyfriend candidate?” Frank smirked and pulled on Ezra’s ear.

The squeeze inside Ezra’s chest felt almost painful. He didn’t know how he’d gotten entangled with Frank so fast, but it happened, and the only way was forward.

He wanted to give them a shot, no matter how foolish that was.

“To be honest, I feel as if it’s me who’s not doing enough. You’re always out, working hard, and I just rot away at home, cleaning the same floor for the second time that day.”

Frank gave him a gentle slap on the ass. “That’s dumb. *You* are the value, not what you do for me. Though I definitely love my new meal plan and having you take care of me. If anything, I worry you’re out of my league now that money isn’t on the table anymore.”

Ezra’s face fell. “I mean... we do need money, but that is a crazy thing to say. You are the only guy I ever wanted to skip condoms with.”

The STI risk aside, he’d always felt self-conscious about the potential for mess that came with going bare, but in Frank’s presence he felt more at ease about such things. Most of all, though, at this point the desire to give Frank everything, to have his bare dick inside, and then accept his warm cum was as insistent as thirst.

Frank chuckled and ran his fingers from Ezra’s chin to his Adam’s apple. “I see that’s the highest compliment you could

offer me. Not gonna lie, it feels so damn good to be inside you without anything to keep us apart. I just want to make sure you feel you're getting what you need too. Even if things aren't clear cut anymore."

"What are you offering?" Ezra asked, rubbing his fingers over the side of Frank's face.

"Me. All of me. I know you ended up here for all the wrong reasons, but maybe this is some fucked up chance for us. Whatever plans you had, I could help make them happen. You're so young, so smart, you could do anything you put your mind to."

It was the sweetest thing anyone ever offered Ezra, and while it was unlikely Frank could help him secure the kind of funding he needed for his future plans to succeed, maybe there were other ways to get there? "I actually... planned to move in with this guy in Hollywood. We had drafted a contract, an NDA, and everything. The goal was to get married rich or somehow get enough cash to find connections and launch a business. You know I'm interested in skincare, and it's such a huge industry. I wanted a piece of that pie." He rubbed his face, hoping Frank wouldn't be put off by the truth, but if they were to give this crazy thing a chance, then Ezra needed to show himself for what he was.

Frank's eyebrows rose as he stroked Ezra's side. "You wanted to be a trophy husband with a cosmetics empire?"

Ezra grunted, hiding his face in Frank's chest. "Now you're making it sound silly!"

Was it silly? A similar plan had worked out for his mom... to a degree.

Frank chuckled, hugging him tightly. “No! It was... a plan.” He snorted anyway. “If you’re willing to give me a shot at making your dreams come true, I’ll sure as fuck try. Once we settle things with Paul, we can assess what you’d need. I don’t know much about those creams you love so much, but they matter to you, and that’s all I care about.”

It was ridiculously sweet. Frank clearly had no idea what kind of investment this type of venture might entail, but maybe if Ezra decided to scale down his plans and instead of fucking his way to success took out a loan or tried another alternative route, he might still succeed. Then again—

“It’s not really about *the creams*, as you call them,” Ezra said and gave Frank’s nose a gentle pinch. “I like skincare, but that’s something I can do for fun. What I really wanted was... something stable for the future, so that I didn’t end up tied to someone the way my mom is to Dad. They signed a prenup, and she doesn’t really have anything of her own, *and* she won’t divorce him, because that would mean... well, leaving behind not only the lifestyle she got used to but also financial security.”

Frank nodded with a growing smile. “Okay, so when *we* get married so you can live out your trophy husband dreams, there will be no prenup.”

Was Frank being serious or joking? Ezra couldn’t tell and got flustered the moment Frank nudged his jaw up, helping

him shut his mouth. “Um... that ring better be something special,” Ezra quipped back despite already envisioning Frank all dolled-up for their imaginary future wedding. Did he even own a suit?

Was it naive of him? Probably. But for once he wanted to stop worrying about the possibility of pretty words obscuring lies. “You’ll regret that decision once I’m wrinkled and no longer as religious about working out.”

Frank pinched Ezra’s cheek. “Mutually exclusive. You won’t have wrinkles if your cheeks get chubby.”

Ezra snorted. “Nothing a juice cleanse can’t fix.”

Frank cleared his throat. “Sweetie... um... I can’t think of a good way to ask about this, but... you know you don’t need to be so focused on being fit, right? I mean, exercise as much as you want, eat a quarter of an avocado if that’s all you have appetite for, but sometimes you seem very... anxious about this, and I was wondering if I can help you somehow?”

Ezra frowned. “Help me? I give my body exactly what it needs,” he said and raised his torso off Frank to show off toned muscle he worked hard for every day. “A body like this doesn’t come from starving myself, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

Frank put his hands on Ezra’s waist. “I know, and you look amazing. I’ve just been around bodybuilders, so I know things can get out of hand with all the counting, and the regime. People sometimes forget they’re allowed to enjoy things.”

Ezra swallowed hard as discomfort thrummed under his skin. “I don’t know, it gives me peace to know I’m on board with the plan, you know?”

There was so much understanding in Frank’s dark eyes when he nodded. His calming presence could be an anchor keeping Ezra steady even in the fiercest storm.

“I just think it would be good for you if you gave yourself more leeway for when life gets in the way.”

Ezra swallowed, lowering his face back to Frank’s chest, which was warm as a comforting cup of coffee. “Like that time we went to the lake and the store didn’t have the right products?”

Frank hugged him with a soft sigh. “Yeah. Like that. You seemed a bit... panicked, and all that because you forgot to pack wheatgrass and couldn’t find it in the local store. There has to be some wiggle room in your meal plans, so you don’t go crazy when things don’t work out.”

“Well, they only had snow-white bread and no fresh produce at that store. Chips are not a substitute for boiled potatoes either,” Ezra mumbled, even though in hindsight, he could see that Wheatgrassgate had been an insane situation Frank should have probably dropped him over. But while the single store close to the lakeside cabin only carried convenience foods and offered nothing Ezra would normally buy, their trip had lasted two days, and it wasn’t like his perfect bloodwork would permanently take a dive if he once ate a snack cake for breakfast.

Frank cleared his throat. “I guess I want you to know that you can relax a little. The food you cook tastes much better than my microwave meals did, but if you worry about how what I’ll think about you if your abs are slightly less toned, don’t. You’re perfect to me.”

Perfect.

That was all Ezra ever wanted to be for Frank.

He wanted to point out that it was easy to say those things, but there were imperfections to Frank too, and Ezra never cared. Unlike Ezra, he didn’t always apply sunscreen, so he had a bit of sunburn on his forehead, and despite his skin being generally firm, there were wrinkles on the tan forehead and at the sides of his eyes. He had scars. And that mouse tattoo on his side was not only faded but also plain ugly, like someone’s first try. But none of this mattered to Ezra, because when he looked at Frank, he saw the whole of him rather than such unimportant details.

Granted, Frank wasn’t the type of man anyone needed to have perfect skin and nice clothes. His appeal lay in the roughness of his exterior and the warmth of his smile, but if Ezra didn’t need to appeal to the average man with money to spend on him anymore, then maybe he could... not care *less*, but be slightly more relaxed about his routines?

“You worry about me.”

Frank kissed his lips. “Of course I do. Can I tell you something? Promise you won’t be angry.”

Ezra already felt tense after that preamble, but shrugged, saying, “Go ahead.”

“Dex forgot about my birthday, so he got me some cupcakes the other day, and I *love* your meal plan, but yeah, I ate them. I kinda wanted to bring them home so you could have one, but then I worried you’d be upset with me for cheating on the plan.” Frank took a deep breath. “I’d rather we could be more flexible about this. If possible.”

Ezra let his head drop and laughed into Frank’s chest. “Oh God, Frank! Eighty-twenty rule! If you follow the plan eighty percent of the time, you’re golden,” he said before stalling with air deep in his chest. *He* never followed that rule. It was either a hundred percent success or failure, always, and seeing that his perfectionism had already affected Frank was... disturbing. As air left his lungs, he slid his arms around his lover. “I’m sorry. You felt you needed to hide food from me, and that’s all my fault.”

Frank kissed the side of Ezra’s head, and the intimacy of the gesture, the vulnerability of the conversation, made Ezra realize he’d never had this. He could be his most real self with Frank, without the need to perform in order to keep him interested.

“I like the sound of that rule. Especially that the food you planned for me makes me feel great, and you cook it all on top of it. It’s just that I sometimes need to relax. And sure, maybe that means I won’t win the state Strongman competition, but

I'm perfectly happy being second or third, if that means my life every day is more comfortable.”

Not a concept Ezra was familiar with. His mother used to do beauty pageants, and she'd been the one to always tell Ezra only the first place counted. That if you couldn't be the best, you might as well stop trying, because nobody remembered *losers*. He might have become successful because of her advice, but had it made him happy?

“You've already won. With me,” he whispered, cupping Frank's jaw. He felt silly saying such things out loud, but they weren't lies, and his embarrassment disappeared when Frank's smile lit up the room.

“You're too adorable. I...” He swallowed and tightened his grip on Ezra's waist. “I love you. You don't need to say it back! I just want you to know.”

Ezra's head was so light he thought he might float up to the ceiling and stay there, looking at the man who made him feel things he'd never before experienced. Fear for the future was taking root somewhere at the back of his mind, but while this moment felt like standing on the edge of the cliff, the warm, dark waters of Frank's eyes promised safety if he jumped.

His breath quickened, but just as he was about to open his mouth, Frank's phone screamed at them from the floor.

“Saved by the bell,” Frank said with humor in his voice as he kissed Ezra's temple before reaching for the device.

Ezra chuckled, but there was a rush inside him. And it felt so good. Frank gave Ezra a gentle pat on the ass for him to get up. Shane's voice was vaguely recognizable in the receiver, but Frank's expression turned serious, and he got up, as if he wanted to avoid Ezra eavesdropping on whatever was being said.

Silly. Frank needed to understand that he didn't have to hide who he was either. So he sold stolen car parts and trinkets. It wasn't that big of a deal. It wasn't as though he killed people.

Chapter 21

Ezra

EZRA MISSED FRANK FROM the moment the two red lights at the back of his truck disappeared from sight, but he'd gotten used to Frank running off to deal with *business*. Maybe it was for the better, because he needed time to digest what had happened in the past hour.

Frank said the L-world, and Ezra didn't feel like running for the hills.

When he'd first started escorting, a so-called friend had warned him to squash any feelings he might develop in the bud. Ezra had managed to do that until the truth about Paul had come out. He had been ready to leave Frank behind for a lucrative opportunity only three weeks ago. But right now, after less than a month of living with this man without clear boundaries in place, the thought of never seeing him again was like a spike driving ever deeper into Ezra's chest.

He'd never felt like this before, and it was fucking terrifying.

Pacing around the sofa, like an animal in a cage way too small for its size, he took deep breaths in an attempt to clear his head from doubts that arose whenever he allowed himself to feel elated over Frank's confession.

His father also claimed to have loved Mom once, but they'd resented one another since Ezra could remember. If he allowed himself to trust Frank the way Mom had trusted her husband, he might end up with nothing once the honeymoon period was over, the money he'd been saving over the years consumed by life and whatever business venture he might attempt.

Could he afford that risk for one man, regardless of how *right* his touch felt?

Ezra's gaze swept over the duffel bags Frank had fetched at his request, reassured by their sight. Frank wasn't just about words and showering him with gifts. He belonged to a rare breed of clients who hadn't attempted to test Ezra's boundaries even once and seemed to care about who he was on the inside.

Mom had once told him she stopped being desirable enough for Father around the age of thirty, but the signs of discontent in his parents' marriage had been obvious even in Ezra's early childhood. Like that time Dad refused to take her on a trip with friends because she'd gotten a haircut he didn't approve of, and he didn't want to be seen with her. Or that time she'd purposefully embarrassed him in front of someone from work, to get back at him for some past offense. There were bruises and withheld money. Shouting and the constant threat of their anger turning against him.

But surely, not all relationships were like this. Unlike Dad, Frank had genuine friends, who clearly trusted him a great deal. It couldn't have come from nowhere.

Ezra plopped to the couch with a deflated sigh and grabbed the journal filled with notes on the men he'd been seeing for work. Like a good service provider, he needed to remember details about them to make sure they always had a good time, but Frank had still crawled under his skin early on. He'd never been just another customer.

Ezra enjoyed every moment in his company, even small ones like watching TV together, or chats about nothing. Maybe he was boring, but the calm energy Frank exuded was soothing to his soul. Thinking about him made Ezra's chest burn like a bonfire. For once, he let the flames develop rather than trying to contain them, and the glow they produced exposed the dark thoughts that accompanied Ezra all his life for what they were—chains keeping him back from something he'd been starving for.

The distant roar of a car engine made him rise and approach the front window. He wasn't yet ready to name his feelings for Frank, but Ezra wanted to let him know they were there before he lost his courage.

Seeing three sets of headlights rather than one dampened his enthusiasm, but then he realized they weren't coming from the right direction and stalled with a weight slowly dropping in his stomach, because something was off about this.

There was a prepaid phone Frank left with him for emergencies, and while cell coverage was sometimes patchy around here, texts usually went through. If someone was to arrive at the house, Frank would have let Ezra know. It wouldn't be Shane nor Dex, since they were away with Frank, and none of the other inhabitants of the scrapyards would have arrived in a cavalcade of three vehicles.

The weight in Ezra's stomach turned cold when he stepped away from the window and saw the duffel bags Frank had retrieved from his old apartment a few hours back.

It could be a coincidence, but what if it was not? Ezra had been sleeping with Paul for three years and missed the fact of him being a killer, so why wouldn't he have someone watching Ezra's place?

It wasn't impossible.

In fact, despite the strong sense that he *was* overreacting, Ezra *needed* to be out of the house, or he'd asphyxiate due to lung paralysis.

He turned on his heel and ran toward the smaller bedroom, grabbing the cell phone off the table on the way. Slamming the door behind him, he climbed onto the bed and went straight for the open window.

It was ridiculous.

This probably was just some customers arriving in the wrong place, but he'd rather be a pathetic coward than risk than take the tiniest risk that the new arrivals were *not* friends.

The cool air unlocked his airways as something sharp cut into his palm, but his skin went numb right away, and he shut the window behind him, running toward the shed on the other side of Frank's outdoor gym as the bright glow of headlights filtered through the night, creating enough illumination beyond the main house for Ezra to avoid the random pieces of equipment scattered around the place.

As soon as he spotted the bicycle leaning against the side of the shed, he knew it would be his way out. Fear was sinking into his joints, urging him to crouch in the darkness and cover

his head to avoid being found, to avoid violence. Behind him, the place he'd felt so safe in, turned into a stark black shape, still protecting him from whoever came after him yet not impenetrable.

He couldn't stop moving. Grabbing the handles of the bicycle, he led it farther from the mysterious guests. If this was a false alarm, then he'd lose nothing, but niggling thoughts at the back of his head kept suggesting Paul could have left hidden cameras in Ezra's old apartment. After seeing Frank and Shane there, he would have known exactly where to find Ezra.

So maybe he would find Frank around some stolen cars. Big deal. This might be a good moment to confront him about the whole fence thing and have the secrecy over with.

Wary of attracting attention, ran toward the narrow road starting behind a wrecked double-deck bus advertising a movie from the early 2000s. The car engines were still on, as if the guests were keen to move on immediately after obtaining what they'd come for.

Fear trailed down his back like an icy trickle at a loud banging on the door, because it did not sound like someone asking for entry. The stranger was *demanding* to be let in, and when an unfamiliar voice shouted Frank's name, Ezra dashed forward, led by the faint glow of the moon above.

He ran for his life.

Ezra mounted the bike as soon as he was behind the bus and no longer risked being spotted from the house. By the time he

chose one of the two phone numbers he had on speed dial, he was shaking with anxiety. Between two tall heaps of large home appliances, shadows obscured the way ahead, leaving him to speed up blindly, but after a few turns of the pedals, the light mounted at the front of the bicycle turned on, illuminating the narrow path covered with gravel.

Fighting for breath, Ezra moved his legs faster, narrowing his eyes in an effort to see more clearly as he waited for the call to connect, but the receiver sandwiched between his shoulder and head offered silence.

And then, “The person you are trying to reach is currently not available,” a voice devoid of personality and emotion told him so loudly he almost dropped the phone as pain shot through his ear.

Which meant Frank had to be somewhere deep in the labyrinth of junk, precisely where he’d told Ezra not to go.

Ezra understood Frank’s reluctance to reveal some facts about his life, but in these circumstances, there was no place for secrecy.

Ezra’s legs spun faster than ever as he took one of the forbidden paths, and while a part of him worried he’d slip on the uneven ground and get thrown off the bike, straight on his face, he was too afraid to slow down.

The thudding in his ears might block out the noise of an encroaching car, but he chose to focus on the way ahead, and even if he ended up not finding Frank, he could at least hide

and wait out the danger somewhere in the endless landscape of concrete, plastic, and metal.

It would be fine.

He was about to follow the road when it broadened, but the light mounted at the front of the bike revealed big, curved grooves in the gravel, as if a vehicle had recently made a rapid turn. He slowed down and looked back, in time to see a road cleverly hidden from sight by being nearly parallel to the one Ezra had followed here.

Frank was a deceptively clever man, so of course he'd use visual cues to his advantage. There was also an old, windowless truck parked right next to the passage, and Ezra would bet his finger that it blocked the way when the passage was not in active use. On his bicycle though, he could slip through with ease.

His heart beat ever faster, elated that he was getting closer to the safety of Frank's arms. Nothing bad would happen to him there, even if Frank initially got pissed off about Ezra not doing as told.

He could swear he spotted some faint light in the distance and was already feeling lightheaded with relief. The scent of dirt in the air was soothing in its familiarity. The moon slipped out from behind clouds in its yellow glory, illuminating the way ahead as if to help him find Frank.

He was almost there.

He could feel it in his bones even before the path between stacked cars spat him into an empty area similar to the one surrounding Frank's home. Several shipping containers stood in the middle of the square, meeting around a wood-fired outdoor heater and fanning out like rays a child might draw around a circle to depict the sun.

Several motorcycles were parked close by, but the only thing Ezra noticed was Frank's truck standing alongside them, so he stopped his bicycle and dropped it, breaking into a run toward the glowing flames. Frank's name burned his throat, but the fear and shock kept his voice in, so he dashed forward, knowing he'd find it once he was safe.

Amused laughter lightened the gloom in his chest further, because it sounded like Dex. Even if Frank wasn't here at the moment, his nephew would know how to deal with the intruders. Ezra dashed toward the open container where the voice originated. The roar of a power tool sent a shudder down his back, but for all he knew, Dex was disassembling car parts. Which, while illegal, was the last thing Ezra cared about.

He was out of breath when he stepped inside, blinking when bright white light assaulted his eyes.

“Fra—”

His voice died in his throat.

Raw meat was stacked on the edge of a steel table, and another carcass hung from a hook in the back, bleeding out into a massive bucket. But no matter how hard Ezra's mind tried to make sense of what he was seeing, the very human

hands held up by Dex like small flags revealed that this wasn't, in fact, the aftermath of a hunt in the woods around the junkyard.

He stumbled, wheezing as his lungs demanded air.

This couldn't be happening.

Only then did he spot Hammer on a small stool next to Dex, hidden in the darkness like a menacing shadow. Smiles slipped from their faces the moment they spotted Ezra, replaced by blank masks.

Ezra couldn't back out fast enough, and the overwhelming stench of blood got him so panicked he wiggled sideways and hit a bucket. It rattled when it tipped to the floor and spilled blood-drenched intestines all over his shoes.

He couldn't hold in the scream.

In rubber gloves and a red-stained apron, Dex looked like a friendly butcher, but all the human parts took Ezra right back to the scene at Paul's, which got him here in the first place.

Ezra's scream put Dex in motion, and he hid the severed hands behind his back.

"I don't think you should be here, sweetcheeks," Dex said, but Hammer was already moving.

He got up from the stool and grabbed a massive sledgehammer, which had been resting against the wall. The screech its head made against the floor sent Ezra bolting toward the darkness outside, away from the blood, the guts,

and people who had eaten at his table yet were no better than the monster hunting Ezra.

His mind wrestled with what that meant, but right now the need to flee overcame all else, and he all but flew toward the edge of the square, where piles of cars and tires might protect him from the predators.

He might have evaded the wolves who'd tracked him here, but what if the hunters he'd stumbled upon instead proved even more dangerous?

Dex had been laughing, *laughing* as he chopped some poor soul's hands off.

What. The. Fuck?

Frank's truck was right there. Dex couldn't possibly be doing this without him knowing. Was *this* the "*business*" he'd needed to deal with tonight?

As this new reality slotted into place, Paul's visit on Ezra's first night at the junkyard made perfect sense. Paul hadn't come to get rid of the victim's car. He'd come to get rid of the body.

And Frank had assisted him, all while assuring Ezra he knew nothing about the terrible things Paul was up to.

What had Ezra been thinking? Those two men were *friends*.

Friends tight enough to fuck the same escort, and for Paul to not only introduce Frank to Ezra but also pay for his first visit.

Of course Frank knew Paul was a cold-blooded killer.

Breath was stuck in Ezra's throat, but he ran ahead nevertheless. He couldn't follow the road, because Dex and Hammer would catch up to him in seconds and spread Ezra out on Dex's butcher table. But if he found a good enough hiding place and waited things out, maybe he stood a chance?

Would Frank even apologize for what was about to happen, or would he choose to avoid confrontation and leave Ezra to the wolves in sheep's clothing?

Mom had been right. Trust was a mistake. Always.

A gunshot roared behind Ezra, making him stumble, but whether he didn't feel pain due to adrenaline, or because the shooter missed didn't matter. A voice sounding deceptively like Frank's found its way into Ezra's ears, but safety was his only focus, and he headed for the crack between two columns of truck tyres, in hope they'd lead him to shelter.

Ezra reached toward them, ready to change position and move sideways when the ground opened under him as if it was made of cardboard. Frantic, he attempted to grab something, but moments later, he slammed into a bed of rocks and the world rumbled in warning. Numbness spread in his arm as he looked up toward the dimming moon just in time to see a massive shape follow him past the edge of the hole.

When metal hit his head, making it explode with pain, he didn't have the self-control left to bite his tongue, and screamed. Pure terror sank into his bones when blood filled his mouth.

Chapter 22

Frank

THIS WAS OUTRAGEOUS.

“For the last time, I did not authorize Dex to give you guys a discount,” Frank said, eyeing Lion from the crate he’d settled on. The president of the Demon Brethren MC lifted his chin, and a bit of the ash at the tip of his cigarette crumbled, settling in his thick beard. Frank didn’t bother telling him.

“He is a member, though. You could say he’s doing his thing *pro bono*,” Lion said.

Frank exhaled but wasn’t about to back down despite the other bikers gathered around them like seagulls around a child eating French fries. “But he also works for me, and this is my property, my business, and when he does *his thing* here, it’s on my clock.”

“Hammer is helping out too, and you don’t have him on staff.”

Frank laughed. “The last time I saw *him*, he was sitting on his ass and reading Dex one of his fucked-up short stories.”

A tall, dark silhouette emerged from the shadows behind Lion’s back, and the man’s red glass eye shone in the glow coming from the wood heater nearby, as if he were the next Terminator. “I propose a compromise. We are frequent fliers. Maybe every tenth time should be free?”

Frank threw his hands in the air. “You guys are ridiculous. This is not Costco. I’m not giving out coupons! Do you know how much risk I’m taking doing this? Pennsylvania has the death penalty!”

The one-eyed fucker pursed his lips and crossed his arms on his chest. “There is the moratorium...”

Frank growled, feeling like he was losing his mind. “I don’t care.”

Lion sighed, as if it was him losing out on this deal. “Cyclops is right though, and there’s bigger risk to you than cops. Could we not settle on—”

A scream tore through the air, clear in the silent night, even if distant.

Frank’s blood went cold, because it sounded like Ezra, and Dex’s stupidity, or body disposal coupons no longer mattered.

He spun around and dashed toward the voice in time to see Hammer emerge from the container with his favorite weapon in hand. Dex was close behind, shouting, “Hey, stop!”

With his blood turning into mercury, Frank joined them in time to see Ezra stumble and speed away from the light as if he’d seen a ghost. Or two dead bodies.

Fuck.

A gun fired so close the discharge made Frank’s ears ring, and he looked back to see one of the bikers pointing his firearm into the sky. Lion pushed past Cyclops, his fangs revealed by a scowl. “A witness?”

“Ezra! Stop! Don’t go there!” Frank yelled, because Ezra’s safety came first, but then he turned to Lion. “Anyone puts a finger on him, and they’re fucking dead, understand me?” He ran after Ezra as soon as the warning left his mouth, because

the area around the containers was filled with Jag's fucking *traps*, and he was heading straight for that invisible perimeter.

He had no idea why Ezra had chosen to break the rules and follow him here, but that was a matter they could discuss later, because right now, Frank was racing Ezra to the hidden trenches. "Stop! Traps! Ezra!" he roared, but his voice broke when his lover disappeared from sight, sinking underground. A split second later, the large old Jeep perched close by fell forward as if pushed by an invisible hand.

Every bit of Frank felt the impact of it rolling into the trap after Ezra.

It could have as well smashed into his heart. Frank had just confessed his feelings to this most precious person in his life, and now he could lose him in the most horrific way. Would he have to handle Ezra's cold, dead body as if it were some degenerate criminal's disposable sack of flesh?

Frank was no sprinter, but when Ezra cried out like an injured animal, his feet barely touched the ground.

He had no time to wallow in self-pity over Ezra finding out his secret, or worrying what would happen now that he knew. Saving him was the only thing that mattered.

Thinking would have been a waste of time, so Frank *acted* as soon as he reached the vehicle. He squatted, grabbed the chassis, and lifted the damn thing with a roar.

His thighs were on fire, his arms screamed in pain, and every tendon in his body warned him against continuing with this

feat, but Frank stretched his back and pulled the Jeep higher. He didn't feel as though he inhabited his body anymore, forcing it to work like a puppeteer steering the muscles from somewhere beyond his body.

Lifting the car wasn't optional. It had to be done, so he did it.

He huffed, his body one buzzing ball of agony, but wouldn't let go if it killed him.

Ezra's cries spurred him on, but then dark silhouettes appeared at his side, and men joined him, relieving some of the strain on his back and joints.

"Someone grab him!" he uttered, breathless from the effort.

Dex's pale hair flashed at the edge of his vision as his nephew descended into the trap, and moments later, Hammer's voice cut through the night like an axe.

"Higher, come on!"

Frank didn't hesitate. He felt as if his lungs were about to be squashed from the pressure on all sides, but then someone slapped his shoulder, giving him permission to rest.

"He's out!"

Frank let go, and the abrupt change made his muscles tremble so badly he dropped to his knees. But when he saw Ezra surrounded by others, and the blood staining the ground where he'd been dragged out, he crawled over on hands and knees, manic in his need to act.

Someone turned on a flashlight, but what it revealed was worse than Frank could have imagined. Ezra's face was covered in so much blood it was hard to tell where it all originated, his T-shirt was ripped open, revealing bruises, and one of his fingers twisted at an unnatural angle.

"We have to... get him... to the hospital," Frank rasped, shocked at how exhausted he was. He could barely speak and couldn't afford to break down like a used car.

When Ezra gurgled blood, Cyclops pushed his way forward with a first aid kit he got from fuck knew where. "Turn his head, or he'll choke," he commanded.

"We need to go... to the ER," Frank mumbled, but when Ezra whimpered, looking at the sky as if he were seeing something other than the moon and stars, Frank placed his hand on his arm and gave it a squeeze. "Can you hear me? It's Frank. We'll get you out of this."

Ezra shuddered when Cyclops ripped his T-shirt all the way open. Frank was ready to growl, but Dex's presence held him back from the edge of sanity.

"I'll drive, Frank."

Frank wanted to rip Cyclops's hand away when it roamed over Ezra's chest but stopped himself for long enough for the biker to say, "I think his ribs are broken."

No, fucking, shit.

Frank watched as another pair of hands put bandages over Ezra's face while he stared, still shocked by what just

happened.

Frank was usually the one to keep it together for everyone's sake, but now he couldn't even help Ezra, because his hands were shaky and so weak he couldn't have picked up a plastic cup. He was useless, and his brain didn't seem to be working right, as if he were half-asleep.

"Get a blanket from my truck, so we can carry him safely," he choked out, desperate to take control of the situation, because who else would ensure Ezra's survival? Only he cared.

Amber eyes turned to him in the stark glow of the flashlight, and Frank squeezed Ezra's arm. "I've got you. It's gonna be okay."

Ezra blinked but didn't make a sound, staring at him from behind the white strips of fabric that were already changing color.

A part of him feared his boy might not make it, but every cell in his body knew it would be okay. It had to. He would not accept any other outcome.

Moments later, four people moved Ezra's limp form to the improvised stretcher, and he didn't even make a peep, breathing fast as Frank rose with Hammer's aid and followed him to the truck.

Shane appeared out of nowhere, and helped Frank into the bed, following right behind him.

“What the fuck happened?” he asked as Dex started the engine, and Hammer jumped in from the passenger’s side.

Frank huffed, gently stroking Ezra’s blood-soaked hair with his limp fingers. “He fell into... Jag’s trap.”

“What was he doing here?” Shane asked, wide-eyed, but he still leaned over Ezra to keep him secure in case the trip got bumpy.

“We’ll clear the way!” Lion yelled from the side and was off on his motorcycle.

Frank shook his head. “I don’t know. It happened too fast.”

Ezra mumbled something and lifted his hand as the vehicle moved, sending tremors all over the truck bed.

“Fuck,” growled Shane. “I came as soon as I heard the shot, but I don’t know what’s going on. Jag caught me on the way and said the gate was ‘breached’ whatever the fuck that means. I’ll check the cameras when he’s safe in the hospital.”

Frank’s scrambled brain latched on to the new information as he tried to put the puzzle pieces together. Ezra wouldn’t have come searching where he was told not to go unless he had a good reason.

Frank looked up at Shane, chilled to the bone. “Cameras. Paul could have left cameras in Ezra’s apartment.”

Shane scowled. “Fuck.”

Chapter 23

Ezra

EZRA WAS TOO EXHAUSTED to move, speak, or open his eyes.

So he just let himself *be*, floating on the surface between sleep and reality. He had no care in the world, and even if he did, he wouldn't have had the strength to do anything about it. A part of him was content in this perfect limbo, but eventually he started noticing things like the constant beep close by, the pain that sometimes pulled him out of peaceful slumber, and the dryness in his mouth. Once he couldn't stand it anymore, he opened his eyes and saw a bouquet of flowers on a table across from his bed.

He turned his aching head to the side, only to spot Frank sitting up straight in the chair next to him. He waved his massive hand, which was wrapped with a bandage. What was *that* about? Ezra couldn't remember.

“Hey, sweetie. Are you in pain? Do you need anything?”

A deep sense of *wrongness* settled in Ezra's stomach. Something was taped to his face, and when he focused, he realized there was a gauze dressing attached to his nose. He tried to speak, but his tongue felt like a piece of wood when he asked for water. The word came out as a low mumble, but Frank seemed to understand and poured some water into a plastic cup.

“It's okay if you need to rest. I can ask the nurse for more painkillers too,” Frank said in a soft voice as he offered Ezra the cup.

The cool liquid filled Ezra's mouth, and he soaked it up like a sponge. Every swallow cleared his thoughts, and by the time the cup was empty, he blinked, staring down at the wires attached to his chest.

"Why am I here?" he asked, unsure why his mind refused to work at its normal speed. He might be awake, but his brain seemed half-asleep. His voice sounded dull and hollow.

Frank nodded and took hold of his hand, gently weighing it between his warm palms. "You had an accident. At the junkyard. What's the last thing you remember?" Frank pulled up Ezra's hand up to his lips and kissed it.

One of Ezra's fingers was numb and in a splint, but the rest of his arm was also covered by a stiff cast, which started making him itch the moment he spotted it.

His head throbbed, and he pushed deeper into the pillow when something big and heavy sped toward him in a flash of recollection. But then, Frank had lifted that thing and gotten him out of a hole in the ground.

"You saved me."

Frank's lips spread in a tender smile. "I did what I could. You ran deep into the junkyard at night. Do you remember why?"

Ezra blinked, wrestling with the fatigue fogging up his mind. He did remember running, feeling frantic and desperate to reach Frank, and when the image of three approaching vehicles, and a white glow turning the house into a shadow

flashed through his brain, he squeezed his undamaged fingers on his lover's thick, warm palm.

“Someone came. And you didn't pick up your phone. So I ran. I think I took the bicycle.”

Frank nodded. “I'm sorry. I didn't have any reception. We're worried that Paul could have had cameras in your apartment, because someone did break into the junkyard that night, and they came straight to my house. I shouldn't have left you on your own.”

Ezra shook his head, choking up as the fear that had driven him to flee came right back, as if the danger was still present. “Don't go now?”

“I won't. I've been here all along. Only swapping with someone if I needed to go to the bathroom, but for you, I'll pee in a bucket.” His eyes were soft and full of emotion as he once again kissed Ezra's broken hand.

But something was off. There were missing pieces to this puzzle, and his body could feel it like rising nausea, even if his brain wasn't catching up. “I didn't see the people, but I knew they came for me, so I fled through the window. They were banging on the door,” Ezra whispered, desperate to retrace his steps and make sense of what had happened.

Why was breathing so very hard?

“So you didn't recognize them?” Frank pulled his chair closer to sit right by the bed.

Ezra exhaled, flinching when a dull ache rippled through his chest. “No. You would have told me someone was coming. Then I figured I’d find you where you told me not to go. I saw the containers and—”

His thoughts sped, only to crash into blood and gore. He flinched, ripping his hand out of Frank’s grip as bits of reality clumsily fell into place, forming a string of events that ended with him falling into a void.

The room went cold.

“You kill people.”

Frank swallowed, and the smile disappeared from his face just like Dex’s had when he’d spotted Ezra in that container of horrors.

“It’s not that simple,” Frank said in a dull voice but didn’t try to touch Ezra again and watched him with yet more attention. It felt like being pinned to the ground by a hunter, and he was already injured.

If Frank wanted to, he could snap his neck right now, and there was nothing Ezra could do about it. “Just like Paul... and I didn’t see it,” he mumbled as the machine sped up its high-pitched complaints.

Frank entwined his thick fingers in his lap. “I’m not like Paul,” he said, but stared down at the floor like he was in fact guilty of everything Ezra accused him of. “I do some... bad things, but I wanted to shield you from it.”

“Shield me? You *lied* to me. And... they were bleeding someone out like a pig at your place. You were there and let it happen,” Ezra said, raising his voice as his entire body throbbed.

He couldn't believe it had happened *again*.

He was so damn naive.

“Please. Sweetie. Don't yell,” Frank said softly, so why did it sound like a threat? “It's true. I deal with some bad people and help dispose of the mess they leave behind. But... They're all criminals. They're worth each other. I'm not helping any serial killers.”

“Dex was laughing as he played around with body parts,” Ezra said, flinching when pain jolted on the edge of his mouth. He lifted his good hand to touch it and felt... something there.

Medical tape?

Was his face okay?

Frank swallowed. “Dex is... He's a little different. The people you saw were already dead though. And yes, I know how that must sound to you.”

It sounded psychotic. “What the hell is wrong with you all?” Ezra uttered, trying to shift farther away but discomfort made him fall right back into the sheets. He was trapped. By his own body. “And with me? You have a death factory in your backyard, and I didn't notice...”

Frank kneaded his hand, never looking up. “I didn't want you to see any of that. We've barely started talking about any

future, and the issue with Paul isn't sorted out yet." Frank took a deep breath. "I'm not a threat to you, baby."

Baby? Seriously?

Ezra's chest tightened, and even though Frank was such a dangerous man, he could not hold his thoughts in as they came to him in giant, hot waves. "Why would I believe that? You lied about your job, why wouldn't you lie about anything else?"

He couldn't believe he'd felt so safe with Frank. Was that what it felt like to be in the eye of the storm?

"You wouldn't have wanted me if you knew," Frank said through gritted teeth, as if it was Ezra's fault that people disappeared in Frank's backyard.

"So you wanted to hack the system by lying to me?" Ezra asked, increasingly tense as Frank's body language turned more defensive.

He'd slept in the same bed with this *murderer* for so many nights.

Frank reached for his hand. "Ezra... It's still *me*, okay?"

He didn't think before he jerked away so rapidly his body fought for balance above the floor. Frank pulled him back, but Ezra pushed his hand away as soon as he could. "Don't!"

"I'm sorry you had to see that." Frank sat back in the chair, wrapping his arms across his chest, and reminding Ezra how massive they were when his muscles bulged.

Had Frank really lifted a *car* to save him or was that some fucked-up dream?

“I bet you are. Now you can’t play Mr. Nice Guy anymore,” Ezra whispered, imagining a reality where he’d never gone to Paul’s place that day. If it hadn’t been for that fatal mistake, he’d be in LA already, enjoying the sunshine and the attention of his new sugar daddy.

He would have thought of Frank with fondness and never found out what he really was.

“I hope... um... you understand that you can’t tell anyone about what you saw?” Frank asked, and his expression settled into a mask of indifference. Or was it resignation? Ezra wasn’t sure.

Was that a threat? A chill spread through Ezra, and no matter how hard he tried to stop it, his hands began to shake as he remembered intestines falling onto his shoes.

He’d never wear those again. Were they even here? He doubted it.

“I told you not to go there,” Frank mumbled as if that was any excuse for what hid in the underbelly of his junkyard.

“To trick me into—” Ezra choked up, not wanting to finish that sentence, because it ended with *falling for you*.

He’d already fallen for Frank, like the sucker that he so clearly was. He’d made Frank fucking pancakes and sorted his receipts, happily simmering in Frank’s attention like a slow-

boiled frog while that monster chopped up all its siblings into little pieces.

“It wasn’t my intention to trick you into anything. I meant everything I said to you. But... I understand how you must feel. I’ve covered your treatment, and I’m keeping watch so you’re safe here. We’ll go home when you’re ready, and once you’re healed, and Paul is dealt with, you’ll be free to do what you need to do.”

Home. As if Ezra could call Frank’s house that.

It was a prison he might never leave. And what guarantee did he have that Frank would keep his promise and deal with Paul? He might as well keep him as the boogey man and trap Ezra indefinitely. Until loneliness and fear melted whatever resolve Ezra had right now.

“My treatment?”

Frank sighed. “You have two broken ribs, a broken finger and arm. And you needed stitches. But you were lucky to have no internal organ injury,” he added as if any of this could be considered lucky.

Ezra’s mind buzzed, and his good hand rose, touching the thick layer of gauze and bandage on his face. “Stitches?”

“The car that fell on you... It was old, had lots of sharp metal bits, it cut you real bad, but didn’t break your jaw, and your teeth are fine, just... the nose,” Frank’s voice became quieter as if he knew damn well how much load his words carried.

Even the memories from the container were becoming blurry when Ezra's mind melted under the weight of these revelations. His face had to be stitched up? And his nose? The fuck had happened to his nose?

The beeping sped up, and Frank rose, trying to hold his hand again, but Ezra pulled away, looking around as his weakened muscles gained strength. "Mirror... I need to see."

"Sweetie, there's nothing to see just yet, you need to keep the bandages on."

That meant it was bad.

"Don't fucking call me 'sweetie'!" Ezra snapped.

Frank wrapped his hands on his nape and paced away. "I've had my nose broken, and everything healed well. You just need the time to recover."

"It's over. My life is over," Ezra muttered and fell back as if someone had dropped a lead ball straight onto his injured chest. What was he supposed to do now? And with a fucked-up face? Who'd want his expertise regarding skincare when he had scars everywhere and a crooked nose? Who would now want him as arm candy?

Frank scooted next to the bed, as if making himself smaller was supposed to help somehow. "Hardly. This is just a bump in your road. You'll use your creams and everything will heal nicely."

"I want to see," Ezra said through clenched teeth.

“What’s the point, Ezra? There’s stitches, everything is bruised and tender. You’ll only get yourself nervous. Let it heal a little.”

Ezra shut his eyes, sucking in warm air that somehow smelled of Frank, and despite all the revelations about him, that musky yet fresh scent still put him at ease.

He was fucked up.

“Fine. There’s always plastic surgery, right?”

“I’m sure you won’t need it. You’ve got your natural beauty.” Frank smiled at him with affection, as if he wasn’t staring at a mummy. “The doctors did a real good job on your cheek. In a few months, no one will be able to tell it was cut open, I’m sure of it.”

He might have as well shoved Ezra out of bed, onto the hard floor. Or straight to hell.

“Cut. Open. Like I’m some fucking Joker? But only one cheek, so a *joke*. That’s what I am now.”

But nothing could be done at the moment. Ezra couldn’t even get out of bed, let alone run, and he was still in danger because of a lunatic who wanted him dead. And in love with a man who *only got rid of bodies*.

What else could go fucking wrong?

Frank got up. “Do you... want alone time? I could go.”

This.

Exactly this could go wrong.

Ezra stared at him, going stiff. “You’re going to leave me? After all of this?” he rasped, his insides twisting with shame, because after giving Frank a lecture, here he was, begging for his protection.

It was pathetic.

He was pathetic.

Maybe he should be glad Frank had even bothered bringing him here instead of doing what any rational killer would and getting rid of the witness straight away.

Frank hesitated but then once more reached out to Ezra, leaving the ball in his court. “I’ll keep watch. You can rest. Ezra... I’m really sorry. I wanted you to have more options.”

He should take Frank’s hand in exchange for the safety he offered in a world where Ezra was marked prey, but he was too hurt, too angry, and on too many drugs to be rational.

So he just glared at the hand and grabbed the blanket he was covered with instead.

“‘Options’?”

“If you never found out about what I do, it would have been easier for you to just leave. I still want you to feel that you can, but you’ll need to stay with me until the dust settles. But... my feelings for you are honest. You’ll have time to think about it. About us,” he mumbled the last bit as if it was something to be ashamed of.

“There is no *us*,” Ezra muttered, meeting Frank’s gaze. “You’re someone I don’t know.”

And yet he'd still go back to the junkyard with Frank. He was terrified of what he'd seen back at the container, but not stupid. Frank at least had a reason to keep him alive, unlike Paul and his goons. And that reason was, well, his feelings. While flimsy and intangible, if it was a branch that might save him from doom, Ezra would grab it.

The cynical part of Ezra, the same that had made him start his escorting career, knew that Frank was more likely to protect him if they were still an item, but the naive boy who had fallen for a client lived in Ezra too, and he believed Frank would keep him safe regardless. After all, bringing him to the hospital had been a gamble, yet Frank had chosen to take that risk for Ezra's sake.

He cares about you, whispered his pathetic heart as Frank sat back down in the armchair with his bandaged hands curled into fists. Frank had hurt himself lifting a car to save him.

Did it make Ezra a bad man that he enjoyed knowing this despite the truth about Frank?

He chose to go with his gut and met Frank's gaze. He might still not know the whole truth about him, but last night had made one thing clear: he could trust Frank with his safety. Especially since Frank risked being exposed to the cops by bringing him here, yet he'd still done it, prioritizing Ezra's health over his freedom.

“Don't make that face. You'll get over me when the stitches come out and I'm no longer a prize.”

“I’m sure you’ll be as adorable as ever,” Frank said softly, his voice warm like a scented bath with rose petals floating on the surface. In this moment, Ezra wanted to be in its embrace, even if it contained blood.

“Yeah, like those puppies born without hind legs.”

Frank smirked. “Exactly. Very cute.”

But Ezra wasn’t laughing. He had no idea what his life would look like now.

And he fucking hated it.

Chapter 24

Frank

FRANK WANTED TO BE a gentleman, give Ezra space and time to think things through, but the way Ezra withdrew his affection hurt like being stabbed with a blunt knife over and over. Frank had known this would eventually happen—there was only so long a secret like his could be kept from a life partner—but had managed to talk himself into believing the opposite.

He was such a hopeless fool.

This was Ezra's last day at the hospital. While he'd need time to fully recover, he'd calmed down about being left on his own when Frank needed to use the restroom, which meant that Frank no longer swapped shifts with friends and pretty much moved into the hospital, sleeping in an armchair a few paces away from Ezra's bed.

They watched television almost constantly, which diffused the choking silence stretching between them like a wall, but it couldn't snap Frank out of the sense of regret and failure. He should have known loving someone normal, without any connections to the criminal underworld was a near-guaranteed failure, yet he'd pursued Ezra. Because he'd wanted to.

As if to showcase what kind of life Ezra was missing out on, his TV shows of choice were *The Real Housewives of Wherever*, and *The Kardashians*. He didn't comment on it though, just watched with his eyes glazed over as if only half of his mind was focused on the show. He did sometimes smirk when the characters did something particularly outrageous, so that was progress, but once he'd found out more about the

extent of injuries to his face, he'd shut down almost completely.

Frank was lucky to have such dependable friends, because Shane took over his work at the junkyard, and while he'd once called Frank to discuss a particular client, the business hadn't collapsed yet. Dex, on the other hand, provided a steady stream of food, delivered fresh every day. The meals were a bit hit-and-miss but, more often than not, better than the hospital fare or snacks from the vending machine. He'd promised to bring his famous ramen today, so Frank waited in a lounge area on the second floor, using the food pickup as an excuse to leave the scorch of Ezra's accusatory gaze for a couple of minutes.

It was better this way, since the last time Ezra had seen Dex, the hands that prepared the homemade meals had been covered in human blood. The last thing Ezra needed in his current state was to confront the person who still came back to him in violent nightmares.

Frank was always there to calm him, but a brief shake of Ezra's shoulder was the only thing he could do, because Ezra did not want hugs, stroking, or any physical contact that wasn't strictly necessary. The perspective of taking him home later today filled Frank with dread, but his own feelings and sense of duty were not dependent on whether Ezra loved him back, so he'd protect him and help him recover for however long it took.

He owed Ezra that much for all the lies he'd fed him.

“Hey! Sorry I’m late,” Dex yelled from afar, earning himself a glare from a janitor. “This douchebag parked in the spot for disabled people, and I had to park all the way at the back. And there was a bunch of pigeons there, and one had no leg, so I felt bad for it, and ended up giving it some bread.”

Frank took a second to process the jumble of words as Dex approached with a large cooler bag. “What? You’re not disabled.”

Dex rolled his eyes. “I’d just be in and out, no biggie. And that car was a silver McLaren 720S with custom matte bodywork. So this person is for sure not disabled, because where would you even fit a wheelchair in that kind of vehicle?” He looked so certain of his logic, Frank hated to burst his bubble.

“There’s disabilities that have nothing to do with being in a wheelchair.”

Dex shrugged. “Oh, yeah? So why does the sign have a wheelchair on it? It’s for people in—”

“Dex, just give me the food while it’s still hot.”

Dex rolled his eyes and handed over the bag. “Easy, you must be really hungry. I packed an extra portion, because I went a bit overboard with the broth. Hammer really loves authentic ramen, so I learned how to make it on YouTube, from this Japanese lady’s channel. There’s subtitles, and everything, but I still messed it up the first two times. It’s a lot more work than making ramen from a packet. You have to cook the meat and bones for a long time, and add special

ingredients I had to go all the way to Pittsburgh for, but it's all worth it. You know people dry fish and then grate it, like it's cheese?"

That gave Frank pause. "What? Like... flakes out of fish?"

Dex instantly picked up on that. "Well... not like normal fish meat flakes. It's those paper-thin strips. And it's so good. Hammer loves my ramen. Now that I learned so much about making it from scratch, I experiment with it anyway. I'll put in some chicken nuggets, or add hot sauce."

"I hope these don't have nuggets? When Ezra still spoke to me, he used to say nuggets are fifty percent meat, fifty percent poison." He'd once made his own version, using fresh chicken from a deli, and then baked them in the oven in a coating made of cornflakes. They were so delicious Frank still fondly thought back to that meal. Everything Ezra had cooked for him had been a delight. Partially because it was homemade from fresh ingredients, partially because it was made out of care for Frank.

Being rejected by him was like physical pain, but Frank had been through a lot, so what was another blow?

Dex snorted. "Nah, I know your boy is fancy, so I put some pork in there, and egg, and sesame oil. Oh, and spring onion, of course. Don't you think it's a weird name, by the way? Spring onion? If it only grows in spring, how come we can easily get it all year round? And is it even an onion, or do we call it that because the root looks a bit like an onion, so they were lazy naming it?"

Frank shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Dex cocked his head. “You okay, Frank? Are you exhausted over being in the hospital all the time? Or are you upset he won’t be able to give you head for a while?”

Frank growled like a bear woken early from hibernation. “It’s not all about sex!”

Dex raised his hands. “Okay, okay, though you gotta admit it’s kinda about sex if you paid him for it? You could have said you were this horny. I have friends I could have hooked you up with.”

Frank counted to ten, but the anger wouldn’t dissipate. “Friends who can handle the kind of work we do? I don’t want to date some biker psycho. I want *him*.”

Dex’s brows lowered, and he sighed, shaking his head. “It got you good, Frank, didn’t it?” He stepped forward and pulled Frank into a hug. “Don’t worry, he’ll be better soon. The doctor said it’ll all heal with time, right?”

Frank went tense, but then relaxed into the hug and patted Dex’s back. While not always socially aware enough to say the right thing, Dex tried, and did have a big heart for those he cared about.

“He’ll heal. But it pains me that he suffers so much. He won’t speak to me, but I’ve heard him cry after he saw all the stitching on his face. I don’t know how to help him. All I know is that he saw what I do and wants no part in it.”

Dex pulled away, rolling his eyes with a silly expression. “Oh, come on! If Ros and Dane can be okay with it, so can he. It’s not such a big deal. All this could have been avoided if he just announced himself instead of walking straight into the butchery. And as for his face, how does he expect it to look like? It’s all swollen now. People look terrible after plastic surgery, but a few months on, they have a better face.”

“He’s coming back with me because he’s still afraid of Paul, but I don’t see much future for us. He hates me.”

“Oh, my God! You’re so grim. Just give him some good D, and he’ll find his own excuses to stop caring about your job. He’ll be like ‘ooh, I’m so afraid of Paul, babe, I need your dick inside me to stop the nightmares’.” Dex wiped an invisible tear, and while Frank shoved at his chest for the disrespect, he still chuckled.

“Get the fuck out, and make sure my fridge is stocked with all the stuff he likes by the time we go back today.”

Dex saluted Frank and turned on his heel.

“And don’t park in disabled parking spots, asshole!” Frank yelled after him, but a weird feeling he couldn’t pinpoint settled in his chest.

Didn’t he know someone who drove a McLaren? An uncommon car.

He sped up on the stairs and headed down the hallway, nodding at the nice nurse who periodically checked on Ezra, but the sense of apprehension agitated his insides like tiny

needles that couldn't do any damage yet caused never-ending discomfort. Squeezing the handle of the bag, he walked a bit faster, heading to the very last room on the left.

He didn't even knock, too agitated by the time he reached the door. His palms were sweaty, his heart beat faster, because it just hit him who owned such a car.

Paul sat in Frank's armchair, and looked up with a blank expression.

"You've got something of mine," he said in a cool voice, pointing a small handgun straight at Ezra.

Chapter 25

Frank

FRANK'S HEART STOPPED BEFORE dashing so fast he barely restrained himself from moving. Ezra did not seem hurt, but his hands were locked together with zip ties, and his eyes appeared bloodshot where they emerged from the bandages. Frank could only see some of it behind the big dressing protecting the healing nose, but even with the swelling, the change was stark enough to be noticed. Ezra's fingertips trembled as he met Frank's gaze, silently begging for help.

Don't let him take me.

And Frank wouldn't.

He would never. Even if Ezra chose to leave him behind like a bad dream. He wouldn't be the first person to turn their back on Frank upon realizing that his heart was tar-black. But Frank loved him for real. Had for longer than he'd be willing to admit.

"Paul," he said in a steady voice and shut the door behind him, placing the bag with food on the floor.

The reptile in human skin adjusted his position in the chair Frank had been sleeping in the last few nights, his pale eyes reminding Frank of water. It was as if there was no soul behind them. When the smooth-shaven head moved, it was like facing a Komodo dragon. And while time had marked Paul's face with wrinkles and puffiness under the eyes, his hands were steady as if he were still the twenty-year-old stone-cold killer Frank met all those years ago.

“I could have taken him already but chose to wait for you to return, on account of the old days, but now that he lost his pretty face—”

“What the fuck do you want?” Frank asked, stepping closer, but his gaze kept drifting between all of Paul’s limbs, wary of what the bastard might do next. This man had the empathy of a crocodile, and he was just as efficient as a hunter. Frank knew better than to underestimate him.

Paul sighed and tapped the little gun against his thigh, making Ezra whine when the muzzle of the thing pointed at his head. “I had cameras in his apartment, Frank. I figured that maybe you wanted to keep him for a while, but enough’s enough. You’ve had your fun. He’s seen things he shouldn’t and needs to come with me. Remember who introduced you to him in the first place, old friend. I’m calling dibs,” he said with a smirk that showed all his teeth.

Frank couldn’t think straight anymore. The mere idea of this monster taking Ezra anywhere, let alone hurting him, of his cold eyes being the last thing Ezra saw before his life was extinguished, made Frank’s mind cloud with so much fury, he went straight for Paul’s throat.

Cold eyes widened, gaining focus a bit too late. For a horrible moment before Frank’s hands found Paul’s throat, the smell of gunpowder seemed almost inevitable, but Paul hesitated, and as Frank slammed his forehead against the reptile skull, the pistol clattered to the floor.

With his now free hands, Paul attempted to remove Frank's fingers from his throat, but when he tried to shove them aside, Frank put all his weight on that damn neck. So maybe he'd end up tried for murder, but if they put him away, at least he'd rot behind bars knowing that Ezra was safe and free.

"He's mine," Frank gritted through his teeth, meeting Paul's eyes without ever blinking. A surge of adrenaline hit him along with the electrifying power of making a man lose his breath.

Paul couldn't speak, but he understood. His red and purple face told Frank so.

Frank thought he was winning this deadly clash when Paul stopped wrestling his hands, but then the steel grip was on his balls, and when Paul put his force into the painful squeeze, dark spots blurred Frank's vision.

"Motherfucker!" Frank yelled and stumbled back, fighting the nausea taking over his body. He didn't have the time to focus on pain, but when he raised his head, ready for a counterattack, a plastic tray hit him square in the face, filling his vision with bright dots. Blood tasted bitter on his tongue as his nose and lips grew numb, but when Paul swung the tray his way again, Frank dove under it. The floor passed under them on fast forward, and just as the edge of the tray smashed into Frank's back, Paul collided with the wall so hard the television set attached above gave a warning creak.

But the fucker was like a viper in attack mode now, and while older and smaller, Paul had experience in martial arts.

Frank depended on his size and strength, so he squeezed Paul, trying to choke the breath out of his lungs, but Paul lashed out and stuck his fingers into a sensitive spot under Frank's ribs.

Frank groaned and shoved at Paul's hand, but that gave him enough wiggle room to slip out of Frank's grasp like an eel. Frank reached for him right away, but only managed to rip the jacket off the bastard as he rolled to the bed, to Ezra's pained squeal.

Seeing Ezra drop to the floor like a sack of potatoes made Frank's protective instincts ring in alarm, but this way he was out of Paul's reach at least, so Frank hauled himself at the beast scrambling off the mattress with a low huff. If he could get both his hands on the bastard's head and trap his body against something, it would just take a bit of strength to break his neck.

What then?

He didn't know, but Ezra would be safe.

Zeroing in on the spots he needed to target, Frank didn't notice Paul snapping his hand as if it were a scorpion's tail before pain seared his thigh.

Paul stuck a syringe in his leg.

"You cunt!" Frank growled, slipping over the floor as he ripped the thing out.

His hand passed over the small side table with Ezra's food, and he grabbed a small lemon-shaped bottle of the tart juice Ezra put in his salads.

Frank didn't think. The moment Paul darted toward him, he turned the bottle at the fucker and squirted lemon juice into his eyes.

A dull grunt escaped Paul's lips as he covered his face, but the adrenaline-fueled moment came to a rapid halt at the loud knock on the door.

Reality was coming for them, and Frank was too stunned to react before the sound was joined by a female voice.

"Is everything all right? I'm coming in."

He spun around as the door opened, and a tiny woman entered in pink scrubs. She adjusted her thick glasses and stared at them. "Where is the patient?"

"Bathroom," Frank and Paul said in unison.

"And... what is going on here?" She lowered her glasses and frowned at the food and dishes scattered all over the floor.

"I... slipped," Paul muttered, still rubbing his eyes.

Frank did everything in his power to avoid acknowledging Ezra who lay on the floor on the other side of the bed, out of the nurse's sight. But in the corner of his eye, Frank did see him crawl under the bed.

"You can ask the janitor for a mop and bucket," she said sternly and slammed the door behind her, as if to make sure they understood she wouldn't be dealing with the mess.

Frank sucked in a lungful of lemon-scented air and faced Paul again just in time to hear Ezra speak.

“Don’t come any closer!”

Frank turned into ice when he looked down and spotted Ezra on the floor, gripping Paul’s gun and aiming it in their general direction.

Paul was still squinting and rubbing his eyes as he scowled, blindly patting the nearby table until he found a jug of water. “Your hands are trembling. What do you think you’re going to do with that, Sugar?” he asked and then poured the clear liquid straight into his face to wash away the acidic juice.

Frank growled, filled with so much hate for Paul he wanted to rip him apart and hear his blood squelch, but didn’t want to be caught by a stray bullet if he scared Ezra by making a sudden movement. “Don’t underestimate him. I taught him how to shoot.” A bluff, but it would make Paul think twice before his next move.

Water splashed onto the floor and dampened the front of Paul’s shirt by the time he shook his head like an animal. He pinned Frank with his reddened eyes. “What is up with you? There’s hundreds of boys like him.”

“There isn’t. He’s special to me,” Frank said plainly. There was no point in hiding these cards now.

Paul glanced at Ezra who gripped the gun so hard his knuckles were white. “He’s seen too much, Frank. You know it.”

He did. If Ezra chose to talk to the police, slipped a note to the nurse or something along those lines, Frank’s junkyard

operation could be compromised. And while he could take the blame for whatever was found there, all the men who depended on him, his chosen family, might not get end up unscathed either. But he could not give up Ezra's life for anything, even all the other people Frank cared about.

“He won't talk. My business is on the line too, and I vouch for him.”

Paul wiped his eyes again, his chest working at a slow pace as he took that in. “You've gone soft. I should have kept you on a diet of pretty boys all along. Then none of this would have happened.”

“I make my own choices,” Frank said sternly, knowing Paul meant all the other choices he'd made in the past too, including the ones that led to them parting ways.

Paul raised his hands. “I know, I know. Let's call a truce. I didn't think you were so serious about my sloppy seconds.”

“You're pushing your luck, Paul. I'm real close to ripping you apart even if it means the cops get involved.”

Frank hated the smirk emerging on Paul's face. It was sly, and always preceded some bullshit falling out of that lying mouth.

“So you do still have your instincts. And our little scuffle showed me you're definitely in your prime. There is a job I'd appreciate your help with—”

“No.”

Paul had the audacity to roll his eyes. “It was worth a try. Fine. Take him if you want. But if he talks, I know where you and all your friends live,” he said as the pleasant tone of his voice gained a razor-sharp edge.

And Frank knew where Paul’s bloodied knife from a murder years ago was hidden. They’d existed in this limbo for a very long time, and could continue for as long as the bastard stayed civil.

Frank nodded. “You do. So get the fuck out.”

Paul shook his head and grabbed his jacket off the floor. “Don’t forget to ask the janitor for a mop and—”

“Get out!” Frank pointed to the door, and this time, Paul didn’t argue, disappearing without a word.

The room was a mess and looked exactly as if two men had been having a fight here moments ago, but all Frank could see was Ezra sitting on the floor behind the bed with his knees pulled up high to keep the small gun steady.

Frank scooted in front of him, as if he were calming a kitten left out in the rain all night. “It’s okay. You can put the gun down,” he said and extended his hand. Soothing Ezra came before dealing with any aches and pains, but when wide eyes flashed at him from above the dressing, he knew it would not be a straightforward process.

“He just came in here,” Ezra uttered in a shaky voice, still clutching the gun in his pale fingers.

“I know. I’m sorry. I should have had someone here at all times. I thought we were out of the woods. But you’re safe now. He understands the situation.” Frank ended up kneeling on the floor, and stroked Ezra’s shin. Seeing him stiffen at the touch felt like a stab, but Frank didn’t have the right to tell Ezra how he was supposed to feel and sat next to him instead, hoping his presence would be enough to offer Ezra a sense of safety.

Ezra’s pale lips moved. “If he took me... would he do the same thing to me that he did to the man I saw?”

There was no point in lying. “That’s... possible. But he didn’t. And he won’t. I’ll make sure of that. I know that after what you saw at my place, your trust for me is... patchy, but I promise you this. I will make sure you’re safe.”

The gorgeous Adam’s apple Frank loved to trail kisses along bobbed. “Trapped. Because the moment I’m out from under your protection, he’ll strike again. Is that what you’re saying?”

That hurt. Frank hung his head and rested his arms on his knees. *Trapped*. That was how Ezra saw being around him now. “No. I’ll work it out. If Paul believes me, and he knows not to fuck with me, he will leave you alone. But I would rather you stayed with me as you’re healing. How are your ribs? That was a nasty fall.”

Ezra kept silent, as if the shock of what happened only hit him now, but he finally spoke. “I fell on my other side. I’m not that fragile. It’s better for me to get used to a new kind of life

sooner rather than later,” he said grimly and offered Frank the gun.

Only then did Frank notice that the damn zip ties still sat on his wrists. “Nothing wrong with being fragile and sweet. You don’t deserve to be crushed just because you don’t know how to fight.” He scrambled to his feet to get a knife. The hospital offered plastic ones, but Frank had gotten Ezra a nice set of cutlery that included a steak knife, because he knew Ezra appreciated such things.

“It doesn’t matter what I deserve,” Ezra mumbled, watching Frank with eyes still surrounded by bruises that made their bright shade stand out even more. “I have no future anymore. My life is ruined, and I’ll always have to watch my back. That’s the reality.”

It broke Frank’s heart to hear that. He held Ezra’s hand to steady it as he cut through the ties. “Difficulties pass. You’re very young, and your life is ahead of you, even if it doesn’t feel that way right now. This is just a bump in the road, and I’ll be there along the way as you heal. I know it must be frustrating to you, and that you’d rather not be around me, but you need the help right now. It doesn’t come with any strings, and once you feel safe and able, you’ll make your decisions.”

And they’ll surely cut my heart in half.

Ezra’s face was blank in a way Frank had never seen it before the accident. It was as if that damn trap had crushed not just his body but his spirit as well.

“I don’t understand you. You’re a killer. You clearly can take Paul on. Why do you let him live?”

So this was how Ezra now saw him. No wonder his heart was locked to Frank. “Because I’m out of the killing business,” he said more harshly than he would have liked, but just thinking about the past triggered an amount of anger he didn’t expect. He rubbed Ezra’s wrists where the zip ties had dug in. “Do you *want* me to kill him?” he whispered without looking up.

The *yes* hung in the air unsaid, because if it passed Ezra’s mouth, he’d be complicit in someone’s death, and his heart was too warm, too soft under that icy exterior to accept that. “But you used to be? In that kind of business?”

Frank nodded and let go of Ezra’s wrists when he no longer had an excuse for touching them. “With Paul. But as I said, difficulties pass, and life moves forward, dulling the pain.”

“What happened?”

Frank shook his head. “Ugly shit, Ezra. Nothing you’d like to hear about if you want to sleep at night.” He took a deep breath and got up. “I’ll get that mop.”

When Ezra didn’t respond, Frank offered him his hand, but it was rejected with a shake of the head as Ezra pulled himself up on his own.

With nothing left to say, Frank left the room, but the moment the door shut behind him, he leaned against the wall in the corridor and hid his face in his hands.

He could have lost Ezra. Paul could have taken him. And while Ezra would never let Frank close again, Frank still wanted only the best for him. He needed Ezra to be back on his feet and smiling. That need was as visceral as Frank's hate for Paul.

Chapter 26

Ezra

EZRA WAS GRATEFUL HIS nose was healing so well. It remained somewhat swollen and bruised, but its shape hadn't changed much, and while it might not look exactly as it did before the accident, it was attractive enough, even if a bit numb.

The scars were another matter.

The one on the left brow cut into the upper part of the nose, but it was shallow, as was the cut on his chin. He might just be able to laser them out of existence, but the massive scar running horizontally across the side of his face? A piece of metal had pierced his cheek straight through. Over five weeks on, the scar remained protruding, big, and haunted him even at night, when he agonized about a future in which the beauty of his features wouldn't be the first thing people noticed about him.

His heart started pounding hard as he looked away from the mirror and paced around the dinner table to walk off the heat simmering under his skull. The skin of his left arm was too hot, and while he'd gotten used to the cast, he still wanted to get it off as soon as possible.

Frank had told him that he didn't need to do any housework while he recovered, but while everything was more difficult and took longer, he couldn't stand being so useless. So Ezra cooked, washed dishes, and cleaned, all with one hand. He also finished dealing with the junkyard's backlog of paperwork and had recently taken to putting some valuables Jag had found up for sale, because what else was he to do all

day? There was only so much time he could dedicate to researching scar recovery before fear of the future tossed him down a well of wallowing and self-pity.

As the pressure in Ezra's chest increased, he went down to the floor, braced his toes and good arm, and started doing push up after push up. After forty reps, the ache in his right shoulder felt almost as if his muscles were about to tear, and he ended up collapsing on his side, breathless yet a bit calmer.

Rolling onto his back, Ezra took in the chairs, the table, the sofa, all towering above him like high-rise buildings under the skyline of the ceiling. There used to be two stains on it—squashed bugs, most likely—but by the time Ezra had from the hospital, they were both gone.

In fact, the whole house had been pristine to a point where it appeared newly inhabited, with a fresh coat of paint on the walls, and scent diffusers in all rooms. The fridge had been filled with all of Ezra's favorites, and a fresh bag of wheatgrass powder had waited next to the blender. Frank had even offered Ezra his own bedroom to use while in while in recovery and moved into the small bedroom with a bed that was way too short for him.

He was trying.

Things changed after Paul's attack. Before it happened, Ezra didn't talk to Frank, scared of the feelings he still had for him despite the terrible things he'd seen. But the traumatic experience broke a dam inside him, and while he and Frank would only chat about the most mundane of things, there was

some communication at least, with both of them pretending the elephant was not in the room. But Frank worked *a lot*, so Ezra was left to his own devices most days. He wasn't sure if Frank was avoiding him, or had this much to do, but when he'd casually tried getting that information out of Jag, he learned that Frank didn't know the word *rest*.

Each day, it seemed that Ezra's world shrunk further, but whenever he stepped beyond the immediate surroundings of the house, a sense of dread crawled up his back and tightened its hold on his throat, warning him that Paul might be watching him from behind heaps of junk. Or that one step in the wrong direction might end with him falling into another trap, one set up to keep him here.

Paranoia turned his world so small.

When someone walked into the house without knocking, Ezra got up so abruptly he hit his forehead against the underside of the table and fell back down. Because Frank always knocked, despite this being his own house.

"Fuck," he mumbled and rubbed his head. Just what he needed. A big fat bruise on top of the ones he already sported. Oh well, it wasn't like he could get any uglier.

"Oh! Sorry. Didn't see you there," Ros said. "Dex told me you'd be out."

The sense of panic turned into relief, and Ezra scrambled to his feet, using the table to pull himself up on wobbly legs. "Why would he think that?" he uttered, remembering that time he woke up to find Jag staring at him through the window like

some creep, because he wanted to “*check up on him*”. More like find out how badly scarred Ezra was.

Ros put several jute bags on the table.

“I’m not sure. I think he said Frank told him he was taking you shopping.” Ros pushed back some of his luscious long waves. At this point, seeing him be so casually gorgeous felt like a personal dig.

Compared with him, Ezra was a shadow, and he was ashamed of ever mentally insulting the proportions of Ros’s legs. Because what did it matter when Ros seemed so happy with himself and had the complete adoration of the man he loved? He had it all while Ezra’s one stumble—betting on the wrong sugar daddy—had razed his hopes for the future to the ground.

Because what was he to do now? Use all the money he’d saved to seek out a more conventional career and risk that it won’t pay off?

His days as a high-end escort were over.

“He... did not tell me that we’re going somewhere,” Ezra said, unable to keep bitterness out of his voice, though he felt it deep in his throat, before words left his mouth. Frank clearly was not ready to be seen with him in the town closest to his home. “Uh, would you like something to drink?”

Ros glanced outside, no doubt eager to go back to his fun life instead of lingering with the wretch Ezra had become, but then

he nodded and closed the door. “Something warm would be nice. Do you have hot chocolate? It’s getting chilly out there.”

“Yes,” Ezra said right away and ran for the area containing all of the shake ingredients, including raw cocoa powder. “Oat milk okay? Do you sweeten it? I have sugar and stevia.”

He felt pathetic as soon as he finished talking. If he continued being so needy, Ros would soon find an excuse to leave, and he’d spend the rest of the day on his own, like almost every day since returning from the hospital.

Ros smiled at him and started unpacking the food. “Surprise me. I was in town and picked up some groceries for you guys.”

Ezra stalled, but he swallowed his bitterness without a word. He wished he could be this chill about what went into his food, but right now, all he thought about was the contents of the bags Ros placed on the table.

Maybe Frank was right? Maybe it was ridiculous that he stopped trying new foods out of worry that he might enjoy them and start craving them too much?

Okay, even *he* knew it was ridiculous.

“Thanks. That’s so nice of you. I’m... sorry about not reaching out. I’m still in recovery,” he muttered and poured some oat milk into a pan before putting it on the heat.

Ros glanced at Ezra’s face with... pity? Compassion? Ezra couldn’t tell. “I understand. You’re going through something very hard, take all the time you need. And let me know if I can

help in any way. I can't imagine how annoying it must be to do things with only one hand."

"No, it's fine. I actually don't have much to do here, so I can take my time," Ezra said and added cocoa to the milk before stirring it in with a whisk. Ros's gaze heated his back like a brand, but he had no idea what to do about it, so he pretended everything was fine.

"I heard Frank lifted a car to get you out. Looks like all that training paid off. Shane would sometimes tease him about there being no point to the kind of strength training he does, but the other day, when Shane thought I was still asleep, I saw him through the window, struggling to flip one of those crazy massive tires."

Ezra looked over his shoulder, startled by Ros's confession but also touched. He barely remembered what had happened to him after the shock of seeing Dex playing with human remains, but he would have been dead if it wasn't for Frank.

"Fortunately for him, you're not dumb like me and won't fall into a trap."

Ros sighed as he unpacked a whole plastic tray of donuts. "It's not dumb. You couldn't have known. I scavenge a lot at the junkyard, and even I will often ask Jag to come with me when I want to go to an area I'm not familiar with. He knows this place best."

Ezra froze and looked away from the donuts. "How do you deal with everything that happens here?" he asked, whisking the heating cocoa faster, because the very presence of pastries

he couldn't ignore out of politeness made his blood pressure rise.

Ros could have easily made a joke out of the question to avoid its baggage, but his face became serious. "I... I don't like the danger of what they do, but it became this weird thing where I no longer fear the people involved. You'll think it's weird, but I've seen Shane do some violent things to protect me, and it made me feel safe. The bikers don't freak me out either. It's like with my Rottweilers, they're *mine*, you know?"

The pressure in Ezra's throat grew until he felt as if there was a rock with sharp edges stuck in there. "Have you actually *seen* the things they do?"

This time Ros wouldn't meet his gaze, keenly interested in the small print at the back of a bag of oat flakes. "Some of it, and it's not pretty, I know. But I still stand by Shane. Maybe it's stupid of me, but I trust him."

The whisk dropped from Ezra's hand, and he rested his fingers on the edge of the countertop, watching the light brown liquid spin inside the pot. Its movement affected his own sense of balance, so he shut his eyes, trying to chase off the intrusive images. "I can't wrap my head around this and the way Frank has always acted toward me. It's like he's two different people."

Ros pondered it a while and sat by the table. "Well... are you always the same with everyone?"

"It's not that extreme. I just don't understand how he can be so tender and then go and watch Dex cut people up like

they're pork," Ezra said and picked up two mugs before pouring the cocoa into both. He made sure to add stevia to Ros's but left his own bitter. The milk was sweet enough anyway.

"Maybe it's because he knows they're bad people. Or because he's seen enough to become numb to violence?"

Despite Ezra's mind initially rebelling against that concept, he could relate to it. As much as he liked sex and flirting, many clients were not his type, not at all good in bed, uninteresting, or held views that made him burn with rage. He'd learned to lock parts of himself away when that happened. To laugh at crude jokes and not expect anything but money in return for all his efforts.

Maybe it was the same for Frank?

"I think he never wanted me to know."

Ros nodded and took a sip of the hot chocolate as soon as Ezra placed the cup in front of him. "Everyone wants to show the person they care about only the best parts of themselves. But without knowing the ugly, there can be no real connection."

He wasn't wrong. It wasn't like Ezra uncovered all his cards in front of... well, anybody. Was it right to expect Frank to do so?

He settled in one of the other chairs and blew air into the warm beverage to cool it. "It's been weird since I found out. Frank is barely here. Do you know if he still wants me around,

or would he rather I went home?” he asked, hiding behind the mug as his facial muscles twitched against his will.

There was no *home* for him to go to.

Ros became more animated again as if the dark cloud over him had dispersed. “He’s always worked this much since I met him, so don’t think it’s you causing him to stay away. I’m pretty sure he very much wants you around. He actually asked me the other day if I could come and help remodel your room so that it’s more to your taste. He cares about you, Ezra.”

Then why wasn’t he here, trying to convince Ezra that nothing changed?

So maybe it was in contradiction to everything he’d told Frank at the hospital, but wasn’t he allowed a bit of chaos in his mind after all he’d been through?

And despite the constant melancholia and self-pity, he did wait for Frank each day, always hoping that there would be a breakthrough. That maybe they’d talk like they used to, so he no longer felt so out of control. Because right now, he felt like he provided no value to anyone.

“I feel that I should be revolted by what I’ve seen, and I am, but I also miss Frank.”

Ros nodded as he sipped from his cup. “I don’t want to try to sway you. It’s for you to decide what kind of life you’re ready for, because the one here isn’t just a bed of roses.”

Ezra nodded, letting the waves of heat and cold wash through him as he thought back to all the times he and Frank

had laughed together, of him protecting Ezra at the hospital as if his own life was on the line, not someone else's. How despite the rejection, Frank had declared to Paul that Ezra was *his*. But Ros was right, only he could make decisions about the future.

“Thanks. I have a lot to think about.”

The door burst open, startling them both, but instead of entering, Dex stood there like a deer in the headlights, staring at Ezra.

“Oh. My bad. I thought Frank took you shopping.”

He looked just like he had that night, minus the apron, gloves, and blood. But even though tension held Ezra's muscles rigid, he knew there would be no better opportunity than this to find out more.

“We have donuts,” he said without thinking.

Dex glanced to the threshold like a vampire who needed an explicit invitation to enter, but one look at the full box lured him in. “Frank told me not to come when you're here, but I know that if only I got to explain what happened, you'd understand.”

Ezra wasn't so sure about that, but he appreciated Frank thinking about his comfort. “Sure. Come in,” he heard himself say, even though his imagination conjured the unpleasant odor of blood.

If he was to make decisions and regain some control over his life, he needed more information.

Ros slurped his chocolate in silence, but Dex filled it without issue.

He grabbed himself a donut and sat on the table, next to Ezra. “I know what you saw looked *bad*, but those guys I was cutting up were, like, total scum, and I was only laughing because Hammer was reading me his story, and there was something there about one guy getting *handsy* with the other. Like, ‘ooh, don’t get handsy with me’, and I was holding the *hands*, so it was just really funny when I imagined getting handsy. With hands in my hands.”

Ezra would have laughed if Dex was a character in an action movie—an over-the-top comic relief vigilante—but this was real life, and the light-hearted way he spoke about murder was horrendous.

Still, Ezra kept his cool and nodded, swallowing big gulps of the cocoa to give himself more courage. “How were they scum?”

Dex stuffed the whole donut in his mouth and only then chewed, holding up his finger to signal that he was getting to it. The pause gave Ezra a moment to notice the T-shirt Dex wore under his open hoodie. It was black but had a neon-colored print at the front, featuring a Stop sign, a hammer, and a watch. Did the charade stand for... ‘Stop, hammer time’?

How was this guy a member of a motorcycle club? The skills he’d showcased in that container must have been his ticket in.

Dex swallowed. “So. Those two guys stole drugs, which is bad enough, right? Like, a lot of money was involved, but

then, when I tracked them down with Hammer, we found out that they wanted to smuggle them inside of puppies.”

Ros started choking so hard Dex leaned toward him and patted his back but went on as if nothing happened.

“Exactly. Sweet little innocent puppies with bellies full of pills. And it’s true, because they had already done it to one of them. We arrived in time to save the others, but this one needed to be taken to the vet and everything.” He rubbed Ros’s shoulder. “That’s the one I brought you guys that night. Is he doing okay?”

“Yeah, a friend of mine is adopting him,” Ros said, grabbing a donut.

Dex spread his arms. “So, like, what you saw, was kind of a misunderstanding, because I get it, it looked bad, but ultimately, it was about saving puppies, and you can’t say that’s such a terrible thing.”

Ezra very much doubted that whoever had the drugs stolen from them cared about saving puppies, but Dex sounded so honest in his disgust, it was easy to lean into his version of events. And while there was no point in questioning the moral side of the drug trade as a whole or why Dex was in any way involved, Ezra nodded, wanting him to feel heard. “Do you ever do this with just random people? Like... are you hitmen?”

To Ezra’s shock, Dex leaned forward and slid his fingers along his jaw. “Noo! Sweetie, we’re like... we get shit done, but we’re not psychos. I mean, technically, Hammer might be

on that spectrum, but, like, he's got me as his moral compass, you know?"

Excuse me?

Ezra recoiled, escaping the touch. "I did not need to know that. What about Frank?"

Because that was the whole point of this conversation.

"Frank is... I mean, he's like a landlord. At the cemetery." Dex glanced at Ros. "Do cemeteries have rent, or do you buy a spot?"

Ros shrugged, indicating he had no idea, so Dex continued.

"He deals with whatever comes his way, but also generally chooses who he works with. But it's not like there's a truck of corpses coming here every day. It's an occasional kind of thing. He's mostly out there working through the crap people bring him, or doing all the regular junkyard stuff. The plot is massive, so there's always something for him to do. I've been telling him he needs to employ someone to help him out, but he says he doesn't have time. But how is he supposed to make time if he doesn't get help? Logic, man." Dex poked his temple.

"I know, he's never home," Ezra muttered, suddenly annoyed. About being kept in the dark. About being left on his own all day. But most of all, he was angry with himself for not taking action earlier. "Can you get me cognac? Or red wine?" he asked, snapping his eyes at Dex.

Dex squinted at him. “Are you twenty-one—Ah, what the hell do I care? Sure.” He laughed and jumped off the table, grabbing one more donut.

Ros got up as well. “I’ll be going.”

Ezra’s hand shot to his wrist, because the last thing he wanted was to leave Ros with a bad impression. His life would never be what it used to, and he needed to change things. Maybe even have friends who didn’t want to just gossip. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Sure, you should come over to see the sculpture I’m working on.” Ros’s face lit up with a genuine smile. Something Ezra’s old friends never displayed.

Dex bit into his second donut. “I’ve seen it, and I still think it needs two dicks.”

Ros rolled his eyes and pushed Dex toward the door. Which was nice, because despite him technically being a safe person, Ezra still felt uneasy about being alone with Dex. “It doesn’t even need one dick.”

He watched them leave and sank deeper into the chair as his shoulders relaxed. It was time to break the impasse between him and Frank, whatever it took. He should have a few hours left to prepare, but he would take action.

When his gaze settled on the donuts, his blood sang with a new energy, and he grabbed one with black frosting and cream filling. It was enormous, and fatty, and carby, and represented everything one should avoid to stay fit and healthy, but nobody

died from eating one. Ros had them and he looked like Legolas's handsomer brother. If Ezra was to take on Frank's demons, as well as his own, he could not be afraid of something as mundane as baked goods.

When he bit in and sugar melted on his tongue, he felt full of life.

Chapter 27

Frank

GETTING HOT AND SWEATY while chopping up rotting furniture wasn't Frank's idea of fun, but it did help ease some of the tension he now lived with every day.

The sun was setting already, but he wouldn't be going home until he couldn't delay his return anymore, because his presence made Ezra nervous. While it hadn't been Frank's fault that Paul started hunting Ezra, all the other calamities in Ezra's life were. The injuries to his beautiful face, the emotional scars of being lied to, and the nightmares about people being dismembered, were all the result of fate putting him in Frank's path.

If they'd never met, maybe Ezra would be in sunny California right now, lounging by the pool and basking in the attention of someone who could make all his dreams come true. That was where he belonged, not in Frank's well of death and dirty business. Not even on his arm during the Strongman competition that passed by while Ezra was still in hospital. Frank had forgotten about it until a fellow athlete called him to ask about his absence, but it didn't matter.

Nothing mattered until he managed to help Ezra back on his feet.

He didn't think much of the hum of an approaching engine, since he was right next to the main road leading across the junkyard, but when the vehicle stopped behind his back, he lowered the axe and glanced over the shoulder. Dane's old Ford opened, spitting out Jag, who was soon followed by his boyfriend.

“Frank, Frank!”

Frank straightened up and dropped the axe, frozen to his bones. If Jag had gotten Dane to drive him, this had to be serious. “What is it? Is Ezra okay?”

“What? Yeah, he’s fine,” Dane said, approaching too.

Jag stood behind his boyfriend and got to his toes in an obvious attempt to be slightly taller as he hugged him from behind. “Ezra wants you home.”

Frank stilled and cocked his head at the two of them. “Why? What’s going on?”

Dane pointed to Jag. “Jag says it’s urgent.”

“Urgent how? I need one of you to be much more specific. I have lots of work to do here.”

Dane frowned in an expression of disapproval he rarely allowed himself, polite as he was. “Come on, Frank. He wants you to come home. Since when do you not want to see him?”

Jag smelled his hair and met Frank’s gaze. “I thought you wanted him to be your mate. Did that change?”

“What’s it matter what I want if he doesn’t think about me the same way? Sometimes you need to be a man and suck up the rejection. I’ve been very clear about what I feel for him in the past. The ship has sailed.” He shook his head and picked up the axe, ready to get back to work. His love life, or lack of it, wasn’t an emergency.

Dane stepped closer, clearly set on not giving this a rest. “Why would he insist on getting you to come home if he didn’t want to see you?”

Jag nodded. “Exactly! And I’ve seen Dex deliver him alcohol, and Ros brought groceries—”

“What’s with the spying?” Frank snapped, though the idea of Dex bringing Ezra alcohol was... concerning.

Dane cleared his throat, standing straight as if he thought he were Captain America about to give good advice to the youth. “Jag likes to check up on him, because you leave him on his own all day.”

Frank let go of the axe. Again. Because he could already see there was no way out. The two love birds would pester him until he went home. Fine. He’d just prove to them and himself just how much Ezra *didn’t* want him around.

“He’s not a dog, he can spend time on his own. He’s recovering from injuries, watching TV, and selling stuff on eBay, hardly torture.”

Jag growled. “If Dane asked me to come over, I would drop everything and go. If you neglect your mate like this, he’ll find someone else!”

Dane blinked and looked back at him. “I wouldn’t...”

Jag kissed him with a smile. “I know, but Frank needs to understand the seriousness of the situation.”

Frank took a deep breath and counted to ten. “Fine, I’m going home. Happy?”

Jag's face lit up. "Yes!"

Dane nodded, most likely realizing the question was rhetorical. "He'll tell me if you disappear midway," he said, as if Frank could be swayed by the pressure from a man almost fifteen years younger.

But whatever. He could always see what Ezra wanted and then go back to work.

Frank shook his head and didn't even wave at them before heading for his truck.

Living with Ezra for the past four weeks hadn't been easy. It pained Frank to see the person he loved struggling, but not being able to express his feelings made everything even more difficult. So the place he called home was hardly a refuge anymore.

Once Ezra decided to leave, it would probably feel even worse, like a shell of a building.

Maybe then Frank would simply torch the place in an attempt to bury the past and build something new altogether.

He drove straight home, and while it was already getting dark outside, the glow coming from inside didn't feel inviting. It was a warning, chasing him off as if he were a wild animal stalking around a bonfire in the woods. But it was better to rip off the Band-Aid sooner rather than later, so he leapt out of the truck and walked straight to the door.

He was about to knock, since Ezra was easily spooked these days, but when the door opened before he had the chance to,

Frank's heart stopped before leaping into a gallop.

The silk shirt Ezra wore exposed the upper part of his chest. Despite the cast and sling, Ezra looked elegant and refined in the very same top he had on the night they met. Frank's mouth went dry when he got the tiniest peek at Ezra's nipple.

Was this some kind of consolation prize for him on a night of Ezra announcing his departure? Frank had thought Ezra would at least wait for the cast to come off.

"Um... hey. Jag told me there was something urgent?" he asked, stepping closer, unable to help himself. Like a moth to the flame.

Ezra exhaled, and while his body language still showed a desire for keeping distance, he offered Frank a smile. "It's late. I thought we could eat together," he said, stepping back to let Frank in.

Frank licked his lips. "You cooked for me?"

This was *definitely* a goodbye dinner. The alcohol would be there to soften the blow, just like when Ezra had told him he was leaving for LA. Only that this time there would be no goodbye fuck, because Frank wouldn't accept pity sex.

Maybe this would be for the better, but Frank already missed having Ezra around. His wish to have him here for a bit longer was selfish, but deep down he also worried that without any people to check up on him, Ezra might be consumed by mourning a future he could no longer have.

"I'm making pasta," Ezra said, biting his lip.

Frank wouldn't be going back to work, would he? There was no other way. He had to accept his fate, whatever it might be.

"I'm all sweaty, let me just take a quick shower," he said, choosing to cross the threshold and step into the warmth of tomato-scented air.

"Just don't take long," Ezra said, walking past a table set for two, with an artificial plant in the middle. "It's almost done."

"Okay. It... smells nice." Frank dared to smile before heading for the shower, but it felt like delaying the inevitable fall of the guillotine. Then again, if he was to receive bad news, he might at least not stink while it happened.

Ezra might not remember him with fondness, but maybe at least he would not feel any disgust when thinking back to their time together.

The heavy weight in Frank's chest did not drop throughout the brief shower, but when he returned to the living room in a fresh set of clothes, he felt more human at least. It was the first time they'd sit at the same table since Ezra's return from the hospital, and he tried not to get emotional about it. Maybe someone like him really didn't deserve love, and it was time to face that fact rather than hide his head in the sand and pretend he just didn't have the time to date.

"Sit," Ezra told him, using tongs to place long strands of spaghetti with tomato sauce on two plates. Frank itched to help him, since only having one hand made such simple tasks unnecessarily tough, but he didn't want to suggest Ezra was incapable of taking care of himself and ended up doing as told.

“Thank you. I’m actually really hungry. What’s the occasion?” he asked to get that out of the way.

He stared into Ezra’s face when the elegant hand he itched to cover with kisses placed the plate in front of him. The biggest scar on Ezra’s face was prominent because of its redness, but it didn’t affect his facial structure which was as stunning as ever. If anything, the imperfection made him appear more real in Frank’s eyes, more tangible. He wasn’t an angel, or a magazine cover model, but someone Frank could touch, kiss, and do all sort of unspeakable things to.

Not that Ezra would ever want any of that again.

“I told you, we don’t really talk much anymore,” Ezra said, sitting close to Frank with a large bottle of vodka. He seemed confused for a moment, as if he’d only now remembered he didn’t have another hand to unscrew it with. His gaze settled on Frank.

Oh. So that had been the point of alcohol provisions. So that they could loosen up a bit. Frank sure as fuck needed it, so he opened the bottle without wasting time.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think it was something you needed from me,” he said as guilt crushed him over yet another of his failings. He’d even argued that point with Jag and Dane like some old grump when Ezra had been wasting away all alone and waiting for a word from him.

“I don’t think I’ve been much fun to be around lately, so I get it. It’s not what you’re used to from me,” Ezra said in a soft voice, watching the clear liquor being poured into a glass.

“You’ve been through a lot. You have the right to be angry or upset. I just wish I could help.” Frank downed a shot, enjoying the burn, but then grabbed his fork to dig into the food.

Ezra exhaled and spun some of the wholegrain pasta with chicken and sauce onto his fork. “Maybe I do, but what about you?”

“Hm? What about me? I’m... fine. My hands are fully healed, and that was the only thing *I* had to deal with.” Frank shrugged and dug into the food, painfully aware how close to Ezra he was. Just enough to sense the teasing whiff of Ezra’s peppery cologne, or get a glimpse of a nipple whenever Ezra leaned forward. Was it torture or heaven? He wasn’t sure.

“That’s not true, is it?” Ezra asked, meeting his gaze. “You have to deal with me, and my moods, and... all the issues I caused,” he added, shaking his head as his eyes dimmed a bit.

Frank’s first instinct was to deny it, to claim he wasn’t bothered by anything, so Ezra could feel more at ease, but he got the sense that Ezra didn’t want niceties for their own sake. He wanted a *conversation*, and Frank could only lie for so long.

“You’re not a burden, Ezra. It’s just... a little tough to be around you sometimes, because of our history. Just like seeing Paul reminds me of stuff I don’t want to remember, seeing you reminds me of things I don’t want to forget. But being exposed to that can hurt.”

Ezra inhaled and emptied his vodka glass. His face was beautiful even when the sharp bitterness of the liquid made him grimace. “I talked to Ros earlier, and it made me regret that I haven’t asked more questions when we talked about Paul and you.”

An alarm bell rang in Frank’s head, but at least he had the delicious food to soothe himself with. “Why? It’s all history.”

“History that’s still affecting us both. And I want to know what happened. Why did you work with him? Why did you stop? Why is he still coming back like a nasty rash?” Ezra asked and poured them more booze.

If Ezra wanted to know everything, Frank definitely needed another drink. “You can leave stuff behind, learn from it, but it still stays with you, makes you the person you are now. My past is ugly, Ezra. And I guess you think badly enough of me for what I do in the present. I didn’t want you to also see all the shit I left behind.”

Ezra shifted closer, his amber eyes like two candles illuminating Frank for questioning. “Will you tell me if I ask?”

A raw wound opened inside of Frank as if Ezra was prying it open with his bare fingers, so he took another shot of vodka to disinfect the tender flesh. “If that’s what you want, I will. I don’t need to keep secrets from you.” Because if Ezra wanted to incriminate him, he already had all the necessary ammo, and Frank wasn’t going to trap him here forever.

Exhaling, he met Ezra’s gaze, and placed his fate in those delicate, beautiful hands. The still-swollen nose flared when

Ezra nodded, chewing on his food without paying any attention to it, as if he only cared about the things Frank might tell him.

Frank took a deep breath. “When the dinosaurs still roamed the earth, and I was ten,” Ezra shook his head with a little smile and kicked his foot under the table, “my mom left me and my sister with my dad, and went back to New Zealand. This might not seem like it has much to do with Paul, but we’ll get there.”

Ezra swallowed and sucked in more of the spaghetti, but his attention seemed absorbed by Frank’s words. After four weeks of avoiding each other, it was as if a switch flipped, and while this was nothing like the sense of familiarity from before the accident, dopamine raced through Frank’s veins.

“The thing is, my father was not a good man, and I don’t blame my mother for going across the ocean to escape him, but it did leave me, as the older child, to be his new target. I had to grow up fast, and I did. Not only mentally, but physically as well. By the time I was a teenager, I was big, angry, poor, and gay. Not a great mix, but the more violent I got, the more I could see my father back off.”

Frank opened his mouth to continue, but he lost his breath when Ezra placed his hand on his forearm, filling the thin layer of air separating them with fireworks.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Frank swallowed and slowly entwined their fingers when Ezra didn’t back off. So maybe it was greedy of him to steal

touch this way, but he'd enjoy it anyway.

“To amend the being poor part, I got drawn into a gang. Most of the tiger tats on me are from that time. And it wasn't even a problem for those guys that I was gay. In hindsight, I can see that all they cared about was that I was fearless and had the muscle to back it up. But I felt accepted, I got myself the coolest car I could afford and fucked any pretty boy who wasn't too afraid of me.”

Ezra shook his head and rubbed Frank's hand with his thumb, swallowing hard. “You do have the aura of someone dangerous. When I first saw you, I was... worried. It's one of the hard parts of being an escort. You see many people behind closed doors.”

Frank squeezed his hand tighter. “I'm sorry you felt that way. Is that why you were against bondage? I get it. Why would you trust a big tattooed bastard who didn't even pay his way.”

Ezra shrugged, shifting closer again, until his knee met Frank's under the table. “Even the nicest-looking people can do something unpredictable. People who never had to live under one roof with my father would always think he was so polite, and kind. And he can be, when he is in a good mood. I never knew when it would change, and that stuck with me.”

Frank wanted to hug him, close him in a cocoon of safety, because he understood the meaning behind Ezra's words. Painfully so. “Is that why you're not in touch with your family?”

Ezra licked his lips. “My parents are both... they’re difficult in their own ways. My dad would come home angry and unload all that on us. Most of the time, he’d just be unpleasant, but it would sometimes get physical. Not in this kind of stereotypically violent way, but he’d slap me if he thought I did something wrong, or push me. Sometimes, I would really not see it coming.

“He did the same thing with Mom, but she doesn’t want to leave him, so I can’t help her. Especially now, after I became an escort. She literally pretended to puke when she found out.” Ezra rolled his shoulders, as if he could no longer stand the tension keeping them rigid. “Even though I feel she set me up for this. She encouraged me to look pretty and find a guy who’d take care of me.”

Frank would take care of Ezra in a heartbeat, but saying so would have made Ezra uncomfortable, so he stayed quiet, itching to kiss away the sadness overshadowing Ezra’s lovely face face.

Ezra licked his lips. “So, I guess what I’m trying to say is that I understand how wanting to leave your home so badly can lead to choices that carry their own weight. And I also loved the money that came without my dad’s strings. Getting to fuck any guy I wanted when I was off the clock, and feeling like no one could tell me what to do. I felt powerful.”

Frank nodded, surprised how similar their situations were in their essence. “I thought I was untouchable. Someone others turned to with problems. Then Paul joined the gang during

some trouble we had with the cops, and all hell broke loose. We fooled around a few times but quickly worked out there were better ways for us to connect. He was older than me, vicious, and he impressed me. I wasn't even twenty when I went on my first job with him, and didn't really know what it was about until shit hit the fan. We went to retrieve some guns from a guy who stole them, and ended up killing him. It happened so fast it took me hours to truly comprehend that we took someone's life."

Ezra let go of Frank to pour them both more booze, but his fingers were right back, squeezing Frank's like they would before things got complicated. He paled but wouldn't look away.

"How was that?"

Frank downed his drink, not in the mood to finish his pasta anymore. "Terrible. Exhilarating. The worst day of my life. And an absolute power trip. And the respect I got from people when word got out? Out of this world. Paul spurred me on, and we became this two-man team for the toughest jobs. We dealt with shit together, trained, rented an apartment for the two of us, and even double-teamed a few guys. At the same time, I was in a place where I only lived day by day. I felt I could die at any point, so nothing really mattered, and I didn't plan for a future."

Ezra swallowed and picked at the hair at the back of Frank's hand. "What changed?"

“My granddad came back into the picture. I wasn’t in touch with him, but my father died in a car accident, and I think he wanted to reconnect. He was the owner of this whole place before me. Talking to him was so different than the shallow conversations with all my buddies. He wasn’t blind, he could see I was a bad seed. I even took him up on his first invitation just because I hoped to get some money from him. But he asked questions about the future, something I ignored until then, and we started meeting up every week or so. With him I could be, let’s say... softer. I forgot how to be that around Paul.

“At the same time, Paul became pushy about an upcoming job which I felt was too risky. The gang wanted to get rid of a guy who ratted on us to the cops. Paul was adamant we needed to send a message, so he wanted it to be out in the open. He wanted to plant an explosive in the guy’s car, but I was worried about innocent bystanders. Even then, I tried to have some kind of moral code. I know this might not matter to you, but I never wanted to hurt anyone who didn’t deserve it.

“I don’t remember how exactly, but I expressed some of my worries to my granddad. I think I might have been complaining about money, and he told me I could come work for him, build a future for myself, learn about his business, and take over the junkyard in the future. It was as if he lit a spark at the end of a pitch-black tunnel. All of a sudden, the respect I got from my gang didn’t feel like sitting on a throne, but being shackled to it.”

Ezra made Frank feel the same way Granddad had. He made Frank want to be better. To be dependable, honest, someone Ezra would never have to fear. He'd spent so much time toiling away in solitude, with no one to call his own, but the brassy irises of Ezra's eyes promised possibilities he rarely let himself dream of.

"I'm happy you had him in your life. I think you must have taken after him rather than after your father," Ezra said.

Frank smiled, stroking Ezra's hand even though what he was about to say was nothing to smile about. "Maybe what I have in common with him is that I also acted too late. I believed Paul when he said that the job was set up right and didn't back out even though I wanted to. I only went with Paul because he said he needed me in case the guy somehow ran away.

"What followed was an absolute mess. A bloodbath—" Frank's voice shook so he got himself another shot and downed it. "Our mark didn't come out alone. He was going on some vacation with his whole family. I didn't act fast enough, I hesitated, and seconds later, all five of them were either dead or dying. Him, his wife, and three kids. Blood covered the pavement, I vividly remember someone's guts sliding into a gutter like a snake. There was an ungodly scream, like a wailing for all those already dead, and then it just stopped. I thought I was used to gore, but that day broke something in me."

Ezra's expression was tense, but he didn't let go of Frank's hand, and it didn't matter much whether it was for Frank's

sake or his own. They both needed support tonight. “That’s when you left?”

Frank nodded. “I could never fix what happened, but I told Paul I wouldn’t kill again. We both had shit on each other, and I think he understood that what he did was my last straw. It wasn’t straightforward, but I untangled myself from the gang under the pretense of needing to care for my granddad. Weirdly enough, they were understanding. But with those connections still in the rearview mirror, when I inherited the place, I ended up being the person to go to when shit needed to be hidden or disappeared, because this place is so vast and remote. I didn’t love it, but I was barely making ends meet with legitimate business, and the occasional dirty work kept the junkyard afloat. And then my sister got sick, and I did what I had to.”

Emotions passed over Ezra’s features like freight trains speeding in opposite directions. “Are they all bad people?”

“Yeah, that’s the deal with the motorcycle club and the few other people that know. I’m not perfect, Ezra. I’ll never make up for what I did, but I try to continue my granddad’s legacy in my own way. It’s not easy when you’re gay and on the fringe of society, so I helped Jag when he needed it, gave Shane a hand, made a place in my home for Dex. In the process, I got their hands dirty too, but life isn’t black and white. We support each other like family, not like in the gang, where it was all about being useful. Not like with Paul.”

Ezra nodded, and his lips stretched into the softest of smiles. Frank would have swallowed a live eel to be graced with it more often. “They all love you like an older brother,” he said and squeezed Frank’s hand with so much tenderness, hope lit up all of Frank’s body.

He took a deep breath, spurred on by the alcohol coursing through his veins. “And I’m happy to give people a place they can call home. That um... includes you, Ezra.”

When Ezra’s eyes brightened, Frank continued, “I know you have grand plans, and you’ll achieve them for yourself sooner or later, but until then, you could stay here on a more permanent basis if you don’t despise me. I’ve seen you putting stuff on eBay, sorting out my accounting. You’re really good at these things. If you stayed longer, I could build an extension to this house, give you your own entrance and all that.”

Just as quickly as Ezra had offered Frank the dream of maybe mending things between them in the future, all that was taken away when Ezra let go of him and rose, taking a few steps away from the table. Frank’s chest tightened when he watched the beautiful shoulders rise and fall at an agonizingly slow pace while his heart counted split seconds preceding the inevitable.

He’d fucked up. Ezra had only wanted to clear the air before leaving him behind, and he’d crossed invisible boundaries.

Ezra spoke before he managed to apologize. “That’s okay. I get it. I’ll be out of your hair. Tomorrow.”

Frank wasn't sure how to understand that. "What? Ezra, I just said, you could stay. Do you not like the work? You could do something else. Or nothing," he added, not wanting Ezra to feel like he had to work for his keep.

Still facing away from him, Ezra crossed his arms on his chest and took a long, laborious breath. "I don't need pity, Frank. I get it that you don't want this kind of burden when I'm no longer the way I was," he said in a voice made of shattered glass and needles.

Frank swallowed and got up so abruptly his chair fell over. "What 'burden'? You're not a burden. You... brighten my life. What are you even talking about?"

"Then why don't you want to see me anymore? I thought we could... go back to the way things were."

When his voice broke into a sob, Frank dashed up to him in panic and hugged him from behind, desperate to not see him shed another tear. "No, sweetie, of course I want to see you. All the time. Every day. When I wake up and before I go to sleep," he choked out, unwilling to hide that anymore. "But I can't expect you to accept my dirty hands. I thought this would have been what you wanted."

Frank was still processing what Ezra had said, because he couldn't comprehend that after all he'd heard tonight, Ezra might want him.

Ezra's breathing sounded laborious when he turned and pressed close, hiding his face from Frank's view. "I'm such a mess. I already cost you so much time, and money, and I might

just always have ugly scars. But I never felt like this, Frank. Only about you.”

Frank’s mouth went dry and his heartbeat sped up. He now regretted arguing with Jag over coming home early. This was what Ezra wanted him back for, and he’d been too stuck in his own head to see it.

He stroked the perfect black waves of hair, elated and lightheaded as if he’d drunk a whole bottle of vodka, not a couple of shots. “Baby... I’ve got you. And scars aren’t ugly. They’re just scars. Just today I was thinking about how beautiful you are, how much I miss touching you, how happy it makes me to take care of you.”

Ezra took a deep breath and wiped his eyes, before leaning back to look at Frank. His eyes were red and damp, and his face still swollen from injuries sustained almost a month ago, but his battered soul was tender and sweet. Frank wanted to make him his.

“Maybe it’s for the better that all this happened, because if it didn’t, I’d be far away. I’d never see you again and miss out on you, on... this.”

“You don’t think you would have been happier there?” Frank asked. So maybe it was a little needy, but he was so overwhelmed by the possibilities opening up in front of him. This man was the most precious person he’d ever met, and he’d bend over backwards to make him happy.

Ezra squeezed his eyelids to stop himself from tearing up. “Frank, I was never happy before. Never. Proud?”

Comfortable? Yes, but not happy. I felt different around you. I felt good. I trusted you. You and I? We make sense,” he whispered, placing his hand on Frank’s chest.

Frank squeezed it with his own, choked up. The wall that had kept them apart for weeks crumbled, and instead of using hammers to reach one another, they’d tentatively opened doors to each other’s hearts at the same time.

“I still love you. I never stopped. If you let me take care of you, I promise to make you happy.” Frank leaned down to steal a kiss from Ezra’s trembling lips.

The spark between their mouths dashed all the way to the tips of Frank’s toes when Ezra fell into him with a soft moan, as if his head were spinning. “Please. Make me happy.” But when Frank wanted to kiss him again, Ezra pulled away with a little smile and dashed to the bedroom, leaving him with hummingbirds in his stomach.

Frank’s face heated up when Ezra emerged with a large box that Frank had stuck under the bed while cleaning. It contained all the bondage gear he hadn’t used in ages, and the fact that Ezra presented it to him had Frank’s gums tingle with arousal.

Ezra looked up at him with those beautiful golden eyes, making Frank’s heart skip a beat.

“I trust you,” Ezra whispered.

Chapter 28

Ezra

THE PEOPLE WHO HAD shaped Ezra's life offered him no reason to trust anyone. But the man standing before him, with golden flecks in his eyes and arms like steel, felt like a home that could brave any storm, keeping him safe and dry.

Ezra's heart pumped equal proportions of fear and elation, but he put the box of sex toys on the table and nudged it toward Frank, because he was done running from his own demons. He didn't need precautions when it came to Frank.

"Have I mentioned you're the best thing in my life?" Frank murmured, leaning in for a gentle kiss as he pulled Ezra in with massive hands that always felt tender rather than threatening. "I want to kiss every inch of you."

His touch was like a gulp of cool water after hours in the desert, and Ezra found himself shivering as his skin erupted in goosebumps. "I missed this," he whispered, rising to his toes to be that bit closer to Frank.

Hands sliding around his waist and all the way to his ass made his legs weak. He'd had no idea how horny he'd been before Frank touched him.

"My tongue?" Frank teased and licked the corner of Ezra's mouth.

Oh, God.

"Everything. You. All of you," Ezra told him, placing his hands on arms that could overpower him with such ease. Frank was a dangerous beast but not to him. Never to him. It was anyone who wanted to harm him who needed to be afraid.

“I thought I lost you,” Frank said and squeezed his ass. His kisses trailed to Ezra’s jaw, with the reverence of a pilgrim who’d reached the gates of a temple and was about to bask in the glory of holy relics. He didn’t care about the scars, and while that made so much sense, considering the kind of person he was, it still felt like a revelation.

The beauty he loved Ezra for went way beyond his looks, and knowing this made Ezra want to become the person Frank saw in him. “I thought so too. Maybe it’s selfish of me, but I want to trust you in everything. When you say those people deserved what they got, I believe you,” Ezra said, locking his eyes with Frank as the firm hands settled on his waist, holding him close.

Frank’s fingers delved under Ezra’s shirt as he nipped on Ezra’s jaw. He’d wanted this for a long time. It was as obvious as the fact that he loved *Ezra*, not just what Ezra could do for him.

“You’re such a treasure, sweetie. Oh, but the things I will do to you tonight... You’ll forget you have a past or future.”

Blood drained out of Ezra’s brain, rushing between his legs when Frank spun him around as if he were a puppet, and covered his whole pec with one hand. It burned, but in a way that made him lean into the touch when stubble scraped against his jaw before a hot tongue drew a line up his neck.

“I’d tell you to strip for me, but you’re getting a pass for that arm. Tell me if anything hurts,” Frank whispered, and

unbuttoned Ezra's shirt. "I want you naked before I choose how to strap you down."

Every letter of those three last words had Ezra's body vibrating with a mixture of anxiety and joyful anticipation. He knew for a fact that Frank would let him go the moment he asked, but he was still not used to giving away so much agency during sex. In bed, he was on the submissive side, and liked big, strong guys, but while whatever control he had around them might be an illusion, it was there, keeping him sane. This would be a step into a forest that had previously proven dangerous, but he trusted Frank to keep him safe.

"Please. I keep forgetting how annoying this cast is," he said with a small smile, prompting Frank to unbutton his top and then peel the smooth, cooling fabric off him while carefully handling the arm and sling.

"Healing well, I hope?" Frank asked and kissed Ezra's nape, but he wasn't about to waste time and unbuttoned Ezra's pants at the same time. The way fabric pressed against Ezra's cock had his head spinning, and he leaned into Frank, ready to whet his appetite by pressing their mouths together.

"Can't wait to be fully healed so I can kiss you. And then put my lips around your cock, teasing you all evening."

Frank exhaled as he pulled down Ezra's pants and underwear at an agonizing pace. "But only once it's no longer tender. Though it pains *me* to say that. You give the most amazing head."

Ezra grinned as his chest lit up with giddiness. “Oh, I know. You just wait, and I’ll reward you,” he said and winked at Frank above his shoulder before reaching back, between Frank’s legs.

“No, baby. I want this evening to be all about you.” Frank chuckled and nudged the hand away. “That’s my pleasure, though. Taking care of you, making you come, feeling you trust me.”

Frank grabbed Ezra by the waist and sat his naked ass on the wooden table. He gave Ezra’s lips one more kiss before scooting down to remove Ezra’s shoes.

It made Ezra feel both like a prince being undressed by his servant, and a celebratory meal being prepared for devouring. Once Frank took off every last item of Ezra’s clothing, he pulled off his own T-shirt right in front of Ezra.

And what a sight it was. Every hair on Frank’s chest, every ridge of muscle called out for his hands. He wanted to smash that damn cast on his arm just so he could use both of his palms.

Without thinking, Ezra reached out for Frank, his gaze descending his strong form until it stopped on the bulge at the front of his pants. “That looks uncomfortable,” he said in a breathy voice.

“I’ll live,” Frank said, but did pop one of the buttons of his jeans open. “I need to get you ready.”

A shiver went down Ezra's spine when Frank opened the box filled with toys and bondage gear. Arousal made his face bloom with heat, and the excitement of not knowing what was to come gave Ezra an unexpected thrill. He hadn't been very thorough in inspecting the box all those weeks ago, but now he wanted to try out everything it contained and see Frank's eyes shine with lust.

Ezra's thoughts floated to the last time Frank's thick fingers had teased him open, and he spread his thighs, trying to calm down as his cock demanded attention, hard as steel. "Yes, please."

Frank's gaze scraped over Ezra, from his face to his dick. "I know exactly how I want you."

He pulled out a set of leather straps and guided Ezra through the process of putting on what turned out to be a chest harness with several D-rings. Ezra's breath sped up at not knowing where this would go, but when Frank wrapped his arms around Ezra's waist to close the straps at the back, he was overcome by a sense of calm, as if he'd been dropped into a dark pool filled with water as warm as his own body. He could lose himself in Frank's fresh, soapy scent, and he took the opportunity to kiss Frank's shoulder.

There he was, happily allowing a man to restrain him without a single worry.

When did that happen?

When did one man take such complete ownership of him?
And since when did he not mind?

The straps locking the harness around him were somewhat loose, to avoid compressing his chest, but when Frank tugged on the leather, the odd sense of weightlessness made Ezra's mind fly.

“What do you like about this?” he asked when Frank put a cuff on his cast and used it to strap his healing arm to the harness.

Frank smirked as he moved on to closing leather straps on Ezra's thighs, right above the knees. “I like knowing you trust me enough to let me do this. That you believe me when I say that I'll give you the pleasure you need and won't fight me about it. That I get access to your beautiful body in whatever way I like. That you trust I'll let you go if you ask, but also that you won't ask, because you know I'm not gonna hurt you.”

Frank spoke with confidence as he splayed his hand on Ezra's chest and pushed him down to the table without using much force. Something about the steadiness behind that movement made the butterflies in Ezra's stomach spin rapidly, but he didn't fight gravity and rested on the table, taking in Frank almost as if he were seeing him for the first time.

He'd always considered Frank handsome, with his strong, masculine features, thick dark hair, and eyes deep like secret passages leading to mysteries Ezra was desperate to uncover. “There was this boy, a bully, who'd always hold me down, and while I was always afraid it might spin out of control, a part of me liked it. The way he was hot against me. The way he

touched me more than anyone else in my life. That's when I started having fantasies of it turning into more," Ezra said breathlessly, as he recalled discovering his first sexual feelings and immediately knowing he was not like most boys. "Do you remember when you knew you wanted this?" he asked, making the metal rings clink.

Frank hummed, circling the table with a little smirk. He grabbed Ezra's wrist and pulled it all the way to the corner. There was a certain finality to the way he attached the cuff on Ezra's wrist to one Frank wrapped around the table's leg.

He then proceeded to pick up the glasses and dishes, as if Ezra wasn't there, naked, hard, and desperate for more.

"I had a lover who was into being overpowered. He was a tiny thing, but needy and horny. One night he was scratching my back so much, and I just wanted to fuck him in peace." Frank chuckled as he set a plate on the kitchen counter. "So I grabbed his wrists and held them above his head. The way he looked at me when I did that and instantly calmed down. Mmm... It was as if I lit a fire in his eyes. He completely lost it, came like never before, and I knew I wanted more. I wanted to give it to him, but be in charge of his pleasure. He'd come on *my* terms. But it was only fun because he liked it." Frank came back to the cleared table and met Ezra's gaze from above. "I want *you* to like it. Tell me if at some point you don't. I want to see you horny, red-faced, and your dick rock hard with arousal."

At this rate, Frank might not even need to touch Ezra, because just hearing him say such dirty things had his heart beating faster and his skin burning. The fears that had kept him from letting Frank do this to him earlier were gone like a drawing in the sand blown away by the breeze. “Then come here.”

“And you know what else I like?” Frank teased as he walked his fingers down Ezra’s arm, all the way to his chest, until he pinched his nipple. “That you don’t get to decide. You get to experience.”

And what an *experience* it was to view Frank from his perspective. His size made Ezra feel so small in comparison. Frank was such an impressive man, like a noble warrior who’d always stand guard at Ezra’s side. It only made sense to give him whatever he needed.

“That’s so cruel,” Ezra complained, tensing his thighs to slowly fuck the air with his rigid dick. But he wasn’t sorry, or worried, or truly impatient. There was excitement in being at Frank’s mercy and provoking him.

They had time. They understood each other. Frank wanted him.

“Just a little. But pain isn’t my thing, so I won’t spank you,” Frank said as he circled the table, sliding his fingers over Ezra’s tense stomach and taking them away just when it seemed he was about to touch his shaft.

He stood between Ezra’s legs and spread them in one decisive move.

Fire sparked from under his rough palms and trailed up the inner sides of Ezra's thighs before twisting around his groin. His insides felt empty, his hole—sensitive, and as he looked down at Frank's unbuttoned jeans, all he wanted was to feel his hard dick against skin. To smell it. Taste it. Have it inside him.

“Yes...”

Though right now, he would have let Frank spank him. Maybe not *too* hard, but he would if Frank told him it was part of the experience.

Instead of pulling his pants down and showing off that monster of a dick, Frank took his time again. He lifted Ezra's leg and clipped a carabiner hook above Ezra's knee to a ring at the bottom of the chest harness.

Air was stuck in Ezra's lungs when Frank teased the slit on his dick with the tip of his finger, but then proceeded to lock Ezra's other leg in the same position, which left Ezra so open, so available, ready for the taking.

Frank slid his hands under Ezra's hips to lift them a little, then spat at the exposed hole.

“I'm about to have so much fun with you...” Frank murmured and used two fingers to spread the saliva over Ezra's needy pucker. The touch was so intense the rest of Ezra's body felt numb, which left his mind focused solely on the ticklish sensation while the need inside grew, overpowering everything else.

“I want to be your plaything,” Ezra whispered, jerking his hips to ask for more, but Frank wouldn’t give him anything beyond what he’d already planned.

“Mine to touch, knead, pinch, and... suck on.” Frank squeezed his ass with one hand, while the other made its way to Ezra’s dick. He bent forward and licked the cockhead with a flattened tongue. “Mine to fuck when I feel like it?” he teased with a devilish smile.

Even Ezra’s feet shook when Frank’s thumb rubbed the underside of his cockhead. The sensation it produced was almost too intense, but when the leather straps prevented him from reaching down, there was a strange comfort in not being able to. In trusting Frank with his body and not having to worry about a thing. “Jesus, yes,” he whimpered, trying to get the tip of Frank’s digit inside him, to no avail. “I missed you so damn much. I want you to fuck me until we break this table.”

Even the air felt like a physical presence, making his nipples pucker while Frank teased him with touch that was way too gentle to push things forward yet tormented him to a point where he shamelessly arched his exposed body, seeking more.

“Oh, I missed you too. You’ve got no idea how much I needed to taste you again,” Frank said and wrapped his lips around Ezra’s throbbing cockhead.

Only now was Ezra beginning to appreciate the wickedness of being disempowered like this. He couldn’t push on Frank’s head, or press his foot into Frank’s back to make him take his

cock deeper. And yet instead of frustrating him, this new reality allowed him to just enjoy Frank's touch without doubting himself.

Frank must have gotten the lube as he was putting away the dishes, because as he sucked Ezra's dick, a slippery finger rolled against Ezra's hole. The sudden contact had Ezra going rigid with anticipation, and he twisted his body, melting into the touch.

“Fuck. Yes. Push it in me. Please. Frank.”

Frank hummed, his tongue and lips vibrating around Ezra's cock.

It felt so fucking good to have sex again. He'd been so hungry for it that the wait bordered on too much, but he could get Frank to fuck him hard and fast another time. If Frank needed to play with him slowly, Ezra was ready to let him.

The thick finger drilled into him without warning, and Ezra arched on the table, shivering when his hot, burly prince sucked him harder. This was *their* home, and with no neighbors to overhear his moans, he let out a choked howl, spreading his thighs wider.

It's been so long since Ezra felt anything close to this that his body trembled under Frank's caresses, greedy to come again and again. “I... uh—needed you so much I used one of your toys while thinking of you,” he muttered, glancing to the flushed face between his legs.

Frank's fingers dug into his thigh, holding it in place while he looked up, hollowing his cheeks around the saliva-slickened cock.

"You did what?" He straightened up, leaving Ezra's stiff dick to helplessly twitch on his stomach, in need of attention. "Tell me about it."

He pulled his finger away, and Ezra wiggled on the table, desperate to be filled again. It was like being lit up from the inside, and the only way to survive the growing heat was to... well, be fucked. Ezra's brain was a mess of short-circuiting cables, so he could no longer think in metaphors. He needed Frank's thick, rigid tool inside him. Right. The fuck. Now.

"I used the red dildo. Rubbed it against my hole, inserting just the tip at first, and I did it under that stupid weighted blanket, because I wanted you on top of me, and now I want you so damn much."

"You will have to show me some time," Frank said with a chuckle, but instead of pushing his cock inside Ezra, he circled the table again and picked up something from the box.

He had to be just as desperate to fuck, considering he'd opened two more buttons of his jeans. But instead of going for it and leaving Ezra dripping and sated, he approached with a... sleeping mask?

No.

A blindfold.

He put the simple black mask over Ezra's eyes and tied it at the side of his head, humming a giddy tune.

Ezra went frantic at first, and he must have seemed uncertain, because Frank stalled, holding his warm hand on Ezra's chest, as if he wanted to steady him. How were his palms so dry when Ezra was so all over the place with arousal?

“Is that okay?”

The tension, which for a moment made Ezra's body too rigid passed, and he took a deep breath, as if that question unwound all the knots in his muscles. “Yes.”

“I want you to only *feel* things, to get lost in what I have to give.”

Which sounded kinda romantic if it wasn't for the context of what Frank wanted to give.

Frank pulled away, but Ezra knew he wouldn't leave him hanging. He wouldn't go out for a smoke, or take a photo of him in secret. Ezra was safe with Frank.

When Frank's lips returned to their place on Ezra's cock, he moaned and arched off the table. Frank stroked him wherever he could reach, his touch like warm waves crashing over Ezra while he remained in his own head, focused on pleasure.

The sucking became more intense, and Ezra started to enjoy not knowing where the next pinch or caress would come from. He smiled to himself when Frank's fingers found their way to

his nipple, but at the same time, something hard but flexible pushed at his hole without mercy.

Ezra's brain froze for half a second, because he half-expected Frank's cock, but that couldn't be the case in this position.

A toy then. Slippery, smaller than a dick, it lodged itself inside Ezra's overheating body with ease.

And then Frank switched on the vibrations, sending him flying off the table, desperate to fuck Frank's mouth, especially when his lover moved the plug, making it press against Ezra's prostate. It was delightful torture, but he didn't protest, twisting on the tabletop in search of the hot lips. But Frank had no mercy for him and left his cock cooling in the air while he played, pulling on the small toy just enough to stretch the muscles of Ezra's opening before pushing it all the way in again.

"Are you... do you not want to—" Ezra didn't know what he was trying to ask anymore, overwhelmed by the constant stream of sensations that were simultaneously too gentle and too hard to make him come.

And to make matters yet more desperate, just as he could feel the orgasm approaching, Frank let go of the toy, leaving him on the verge of orgasm.

"You make the prettiest picture right now. Spread open, rocking your hips like you'll be in agony unless I fuck you, drooling over the table like an animal in heat."

Drooling? Had he drooled?

He hadn't even noticed, but there had been a moment when he turned his head, panting and moaning as saliva pooled on his cheek.

"I don't like being ugly," Ezra complained, closing his legs, which hung in the air, strapped to his harness, yet weren't in any way forced apart. Oh, the delicious pressure on his rigid cock made him feel like humping something. What was dignity anyway?

Frank let out a raspy laugh. "You're not ugly. You're the sexiest man I've ever seen, and when you let go, it's even more of a turn-on. But you do look overheated. Let's deal with that."

Yes. Let's.

But as Ezra braced himself for Frank's hot dick, his lover walked away. The soft pad of his footsteps was followed by the sound of... the fridge being opened?

Before Ezra could have questioned or guessed what this was about, his nipple was stabbed by a jolt of cold that had him trying to twist away. Frank licking his shoulder a second later made him melt into the table. "Is that... an ice cube?" he uttered as the little frosty object moved across his chest, leaving behind a wet trail.

"Yes. I want you to cool off a little, so you don't come the moment I enter you."

How was that supposed to help when the toy buzzed inside of him insistently, sending jolts of pleasure to his cock? He was overwhelmed by contradicting sensations, and when Frank moved the cube lower, kissing off the water it left behind, Ezra started feeling so confused he barely knew up from down anymore. Teeth found his nipple, scruff stabbed his skin like tiny needles while the bit of ice circled his navel and continued its journey, followed by Frank's lips.

"Please. Please," Ezra begged, locked in the dark and no longer fully coherent. He hated and loved this at the same time.

But all he got was Frank turning off the toy, then pulling it out. "Is this what you wanted?" he asked and left the ice cube to melt on Ezra's stomach as he got another one and, like some absolute madman, wrapped his fingers around Ezra's cock with the smooth bit of ice in his palm.

It was like being burned, but by freezing cold, and he cried out, twisting so rapidly Frank had to catch him when he found himself too close to the edge of the table. His mind was a tumble of shapes and colors keeping him at Frank's mercy like misshapen guard dogs.

"No... no... please."

"No? You can tell me to stop and untie you, you know?" he reminded Ezra, with a whole new level of cruelty.

Ezra didn't want it to stop. He wanted everything Frank wanted to give and to satisfy all his cravings. Yet in the

moment, his body was in sensation overload. He turned into a moaning mess, melting at his man's touch.

Frank pulled the wet, cold ice away from Ezra's softening cock, but then trailed the cube down his balls, over the taint, and all the way to Ezra's stretched and overheated pucker.

Every muscle and tendon in his body went rigid, and while he hated the idea of it slipping inside him, a part of him was curious, and if that was what Frank wanted to see then why not let him? Would he feel numb once it turned into cool water?

He whimpered Frank's name and stilled in anticipation, existing only to *feel*.

Frank twisted the ice against Ezra's pucker but didn't push it in.

Thank God.

Ezra wouldn't have chosen this, he wouldn't have played with himself this way. And yet there was something liberating about allowing Frank to use his body in whatever way he pleased.

A rattle suggested that the ice ball landed on the floor.

Frank hummed and Ezra thought he'd be getting fingered again, but the thick girth of the hot flesh pressing against his opening awoke him to the realization that it was Frank's dick.

"It is cooled down..." Frank whispered and kissed Ezra's thigh. "Can't have that for too long."

“No... I mean yes. Yes. Yes, Frank,” Ezra mumbled as his senses went crazy from the onslaught of stimulation. There was just one thing he wanted right now, and it seemed he was on the verge of getting it.

Frank’s lube-slicked fingers felt so big around Ezra’s half-hard prick, waking it up to arousal as the wide cockhead insistently pressed against his hole.

“Is that hot enough?” Frank asked, leaving Ezra confused by the unexpected question.

But then... yes. It *was* getting hot.

Frank must have used heating lube, because sparks erupted wherever it got spread.

“No,” Ezra whispered in an embarrassingly broken voice, “it’s not enough. I’m still cold inside. So cold.”

The blunt head of Frank’s cock was already pressing on his opening but not hard enough to breach it. Frank had no business having this much self-control around a beauty like Ezra, no matter how unexpectedly delicious it was to be teased.

“Guess I gotta warm you from the inside too,” Frank said, but there was a rasp to his voice this time. He was losing it at least a little, and that gave Ezra all the satisfaction he needed.

Just as a silly smile bloomed on his lips, Frank grabbed Ezra’s hips and pulled him to the edge of the table, stabbing all the way into Ezra in the process.

“So fucking good!” Frank uttered, squeezing Ezra’s stiff cock.

It all happened so fast Ezra initially gasped for air, but when his mind caught up with reality and understood that Frank was inside him, a howl erupted from deep in his chest. He could sense every square inch of the shaft and the cushion of pubes against his buttocks as he yielded, trembling in response to this utterly satisfying moment.

“Oh yes. Yes. Yes.”

“How are... you... this... perfect?” Frank asked, accentuating each word with a thrust of his hips.

Ezra’s cock throbbed with heat in Frank’s grip, leaking pre-cum all over his stomach, but Frank’s dick was the main event. Each forceful thrust reminded Ezra how much he’d missed this, and after all the foreplay, he felt as if his hole was primed for cock and ready to feel the intense pleasure of Frank’s dick prodding at his prostate over and over.

It was indescribable. Sex with Frank had always been amazing, but something about the restraints, the darkness, and the inevitability of whatever was happening to Ezra turned every single sensation to the maximum setting, leaving him scrambling for sanity as Frank started riding him in deep jabs. He didn’t seem in a hurry, pushing in fast yet retreating at an agonizing pace, but Ezra was one with the experience, listening to his man’s soft grunts and the slap of flesh. He was burning, yet when Frank took hold of the harness to keep his

body from slipping away, Ezra truly felt his. He belonged to Frank all the way to the bone.

Frank leaned over him, parting Ezra's thighs and capturing his lips for the softest of kisses, mindful of the healing wound on his face. But the movement of his hand on Ezra's cock, and the speed at which he rode Ezra's ass had none of that gentleness. His breath was fast, his thrusts jerky, and he'd be coming soon.

Ezra squeezed his hole tightly, eager to give him *everything*. He couldn't wait to be filled with Frank's cum again. He craved it. Dreamed about it.

He didn't want just any hot dick.

He wanted Frank.

He choked up, and his eyes welled up under the blindfold as ecstasy rushed through every cell in his body, chasing away all the fear and sadness he'd felt in the past weeks. He'd finally met someone who he could trust not only with his body but also with his soul, and it made the noise in his head fall silent.

This was all he ever wanted.

Pleasure passed through him in a rapid buzz. Frank had been insistently thrusting into him insistently, kissing him, touching him, and then Ezra was coming.

"Oh, fuck... so good," Frank muttered against Ezra's jaw, riding his hole with the urgency of a man an inch away from breaking a record.

Ezra's muscles spasmed in pleasure around Frank's rigid cock, and he floated on the wave of his orgasm, moaning and curling his toes.

The way Frank stilled for a moment, leaning more of his weight on Ezra, told him that Frank had gotten there too. He bit down on Ezra's neck, his heart beating so loudly Ezra sensed it even without their chests touching. He didn't need to. Frank was inside him after all, and Ezra could feel his pulse as if it were his own.

Now that they'd both finished, his muscles felt limp, and he let himself rest under Frank as cool air scented by cum and sweat filled his lungs. But at the same time, the blindfold suddenly felt oppressive, and so did the cuffs.

"Frank? I want to see."

Frank chuckled and it only took one move of his hand to push the blindfold up Ezra's head and off his eyes.

Oh what a magnificent picture Frank made from up close. Flushed a dark shade of red and sated, he watched Ezra with absolute dedication. "Do you like what you see?" Frank asked and gave him a tender kiss.

Ezra nodded, too choked up to speak. He'd missed Frank so much despite living in the same house, but now that the haze of pleasure no longer had a grip on his mind, every emotion he'd carried deep down now simmered just beneath the surface. "I want to hug you."

Frank's gaze softened. "Oh, sweetie..." He reached for the cuff binding Ezra's wrist to the table leg in the corner and released the carabiner, setting Ezra's arm free.

Just as Ezra wrapped his arm around his man's thick neck, Frank scooped him into a tight hug. It felt so good. So perfect.

He wanted this feeling to last forever.

"I love you, Frank," Ezra whispered straight into his ear.

Frank squeezed him so hard it felt as though the cast on Ezra's arm might break any second. "I love you too. I love you so much. You're my treasure."

That was what Ezra wanted to be. Frank's cherished treasure. Someone he'd never want to let go, no matter what happened.

He wished he could melt into those strong arms and drown in Frank's scent.

He had a future here, with Frank. One he'd never envisioned, and yet it was so obvious now that no other made sense.

Ezra didn't need LA, a loaded sugar daddy, or some bullshit gold necklace.

He needed a man who would stand by him when shit got hard, when his arm was broken, or when his face looked like it had gotten dragged over gravel. With Frank, he could relax, be himself, and maybe skip a gym day if he was ill, or have a donut without a mental breakdown.

Frank was comfort. Safety. And love. So much love.

Chapter 29

Frank

FRANK STILL COULDN'T BELIEVE Ezra was his, even though he'd been waking up with him in his arms for weeks now. Despite everything Frank had told him about his past, Ezra chose to trust him. He'd chosen Frank over LA, over making sugar baby money, and over any other hot guy who would gladly make Ezra his by giving him an expensive car and a palatial home.

Instead, Ezra picked a life in the junkyard, a place that meant so much to Frank, and made it his home. In the process, he became passionate about the finds he came across. The treasure trove gathering dust over the years was his new project, and he got so excited about the auctions on eBay Frank made sure to celebrate the biggest bidding wars.

Ezra was also meticulous about money, and since Frank had always loathed dealing with accounting, he entrusted his lover with all of it. Every now and then Ezra would report to him about the state of their finances and lately had suggested splurging on a luxurious vacation in the winter. Frank got a little nervous every time he thought about leaving the junkyard for a whole week, let alone two, but Ezra was right. He barely took any time off, and everyone deserved a break sometimes.

Since Ezra had moved in for good, Frank had been forced to face the fact that not every job at Wreck & Repair was an emergency. He needed to prioritize his relationship if it was to succeed, even if it meant letting go and going back to a task the next day instead of working late into the night.

Ezra deserved that.

Frank deserved that.

But since Ezra was also keen to spend time with their friends, they ended up at Costco, shopping for their big Thanksgiving dinner, which Ezra wanted to cook for everyone. He'd even suggested visiting a discount store, suggesting they shouldn't overspend on food if they wanted that dream vacation.

Frank would have given him every gold bar he owned and then bent over backwards to make more money, but despite chasing high-earning men in the past, Ezra insisted he'd rather spend more time with Frank, even if it meant less cash in their budget. And while Frank vaguely understood that Ezra had chosen to stay because he loved *him*, this was the proof of how much he cared.

Ezra had even jumped into the world of couponing, so they could save up for that dream trip with more ease. It was as impressive as it was concerning, considering Ezra's obsessive personality, but at the end of the day the practical nature of this new passion benefitted them both. In the end, Frank decided to let him do his thing and strategize the shopping however he liked. He made sure to bring Ezra any magazines that had coupons, and sometimes they'd sit at the table and cut them out together, chatting or watching the news.

Frank did insist on getting their turkey from a farmer friend. It would be the best quality, *and* free, since the guy owed him a favor, but all the other choices regarding food were up to Ezra. He took them very seriously, and Frank smiled, watching

him check his extensive list as they turned into another aisle. The cast was gone, and while Ezra worried the scars on his face weren't healing fast enough, Frank definitely saw progress. Talking about them at all was a minefield though, so he didn't mention them unless Ezra did it first. The same went for Ezra's eating habits.

Frank fell behind to have a look at the protein powders, but when he caught up with Ezra, his man lingered close to a table with samples.

Ezra stared at a tiny chunk of chocolate-covered marzipan as if it were one of those weird spiders that buried themselves in the dirt and caught their unsuspecting prey by pulling it underground. In this case, the little paper muffin cup holding the candy played the role of the trap, and Ezra was clearly trying to convince himself that digging in wouldn't be a big mistake.

He had already looked up marzipan online, explained (more to himself than to Frank) that it did contain some minerals and vitamins, so it wasn't completely nutritionally useless, but at the end of the day it was almond paste with lots of sugar. Ezra's life would be so much easier if he accepted that not every single meal needed to be balanced, but that was something he ought to work out himself.

Frank could only support him, which was difficult at times, because, having no inhibitions related to food, he didn't understand the process going on in Ezra's mind. In fact, he never thought about it much at all and assessed his meals

based exclusively on flavor. Being on Ezra's meal plan convinced him that his previous attitude had been a mistake, since he could already see the results of eating more mindfully, but balance was always best, and it pained him to see how much distress Ezra went through every time he couldn't be perfectly on plan.

But patience was in Frank's nature, so he petted Ezra's toned back in encouragement. This needed to happen at Ezra's own pace, but he started seeing a therapist about his food issues and was making progress by not measuring the weight of every single meal. Trying new foods was part of the process, so when Ezra shoved the bit of marzipan into his mouth and chewed it like a child trying broccoli for the first time, Frank's chest lit up with joy.

"How is it?"

Ezra hummed, sucking on the food with an uncertain expression. "Very sweet."

"Too sweet?"

"Yeah. I mostly taste the sweet cocoa glaze."

Frank nodded and gave Ezra's hand a gentle squeeze. "I never liked it much either. At least now you know."

Ezra shook his head. "I had this one friend, who ate tiny marzipan balls in dark chocolate as a treat once or twice a week. She said she allowed herself that because it wasn't just pure sugar like gummy bears, but at the end of the day, a sweet is a sweet, right?"

“You may as well have the one you really enjoy,” Frank told him and pushed the cart along the area with clothes, which never had anything in his size anyway.

“Oh, look at that,” Ezra said, jogging up to a stand with sunglasses. He picked up a pair with forest green frames and smoky lenses before striking a pose for Frank. The shades not only went well with Ezra’s toned down yet elegant outfit featuring his favorite Burberry coat but also complimented his tan skin and dark hair.

“You like them? Would be great for the winter,” he teased, fighting the smirk.

“Perfect for a winter vacation in the sun,” Ezra quipped back and grabbed a pair of thick tortoiseshell frames before putting them on Frank’s nose. “You look like you’re a character on *Mad Men*.”

“Is that like *Mad Max* but gay?” Frank asked but glanced in the mirror, unsure if Ezra’s comment was a compliment or a joke.

Ezra snorted and placed his hand on Frank’s, where it still rested on the cart handle. It was discreet enough to remain unnoticed by the other customers, but the warm touch of perfectly smooth hands smoldered against Frank’s skin.

“No, it’s a show set in the fifties, and it’s full of well-dressed guys in suits,” Ezra said and pulled out his phone. “You could be an executive, I could be your secret beatnik lover. It all checks out,” he said before leaning against Frank to snap a quick picture of them.

Frank made a serious face to go with his role, but he looked more like an 80s mobster than anyone who might work in an office. “Should I get a suit? Would come in handy when I take apart the next rusted car.”

Ezra chuckled, his face relaxing with pure joy. Nothing was better than seeing him like this—truly at ease. It fueled a part of Frank that previously hadn’t been satisfied, and he was only now starting to realize just how much he needed to take care of somebody this way. It made his heart full.

“If you want to roleplay that scenario I just mentioned, let’s thrift for one. Otherwise, no need. You look so good the way you are,” Ezra said, watching him with sparkling eyes.

Frank grinned. “Look at you, first couponing, and now thrifting. Who have you become?”

Ezra sighed, and his face stilled behind the glasses as he contemplated the question. When he responded, his voice sounded even and earnest. “I think being at your place made me realize that all that fancy stuff never made me happy. You do.”

Frank gave him a brief hug. He’d kiss him too but didn’t want to risk someone causing a scene. “You’re so sweet. So what else do we have on the list?”

Ezra pulled the shades off Frank’s face. “Other than those two pairs of sunglasses? I think we’re done.”

Frank chuckled and pushed the shopping cart in the other direction, but he’d been too hasty and it bumped into someone

else's.

The young woman looked up at him with a scowl. "Watch where you're—"

Ezra stared at her as she blinked, adjusting the silk scarf she had tied around her neck in a fancy manner.

"Carmen? I thought I wouldn't see you again! We should catch up."

She gave Ezra a flustered look that lingered on the scarred face for a bit longer than was polite, then glanced at Frank. "Oh yeah, we should. I'm just so busy, you know. I don't even usually shop here, it's just that my mom wanted *this* specific cake."

Frank's gaze swept over the pile of stuff in her cart. She definitely hadn't come here just for a cake, but there was no reason to point out her lie.

Ezra rubbed his shoulder and smiled at her. "This is Frank. Remember? I told you about him." He then introduced the woman as his *old friend*, but the energy Frank was getting from her suggested she'd rather not have met them at all.

Carmen gave Frank the fakest smile he'd ever seen. "Oh yeah! Of course, the prince charming. I've only heard good things. I'm sorry I can't chat too long. I've got to go, but call me, Ezra, let's catch up!" she said and rushed off, blowing Ezra a kiss in the air.

He watched her go but didn't bother replying to the goodbye, contemplating the sudden silence that didn't get any less loud

because of the white noise of other customers. Frank swallowed, worried if Ezra's feelings hadn't been hurt, but he rolled his eyes, facing Frank.

“She's running like a cat caught with its face in the butter dish. You think we'll find her cart abandoned, so she doesn't have to endure standing in line now that she'd been caught shopping for bargains?”

Frank chuckled, leaning against the shopping cart. “She had much more than cake in there, I'll tell you that. What's up with her?”

Ezra put his hands on his cheeks, for a moment staring into space, as if he were searching for the truths about the universe. “She is such a snob. I knew it before, but wow. This was... enlightening. She's probably scared I'll tell everyone we know I saw her buying toilet paper for cheap. She'd probably faint if I told her I have coupons.” His expression relaxed, and he gave Frank's arm a gentle squeeze. “You know, she told me I shouldn't get attached to you. I clearly didn't listen, did I?”

Frank frowned. “Now I'm invested. What was that about? Did you not tell her I'm boyfriend material?”

Ezra grinned, leaning close with a smile so wicked it started a fire in the pit of Frank's stomach. “She predicted you'll waste my best years and then leave me with nothing. So how is it gonna be, Frankie? Will you be a good boyfriend and buy me those shades?” he asked, tapping the green frames.

Frank cocked his head, but then looked around and grabbed a pillow from one of the shelves. “I'll even throw in this silk

pillow for good measure. Just for your perfect head.”

Ezra chuckled, handsome like a model pretending to enjoy life in a high-budget music video, and while the scars were still very prominent, they didn't take away any of his charm or beauty. Not in Frank's eyes. “You don't have to pay for good head from me. It'll be my pleasure,” he whispered and lowered the glasses as he winked.

Frank snorted “I'm in my prime, you know? Maybe you're the one wasting *my* best years? Using up my life juices, and all that.”

Ezra bumped his hip against Frank's and whispered, “no one needs to know I like to suck you dry.” He then led the way to the registers, and his gaze teasingly stroked the front of Frank's body, reminding him of the innuendo-filled conversation they'd just had. Unfortunately, they were in a public place, which forced Frank to think about unsexy things to keep his dick from making other customers uncomfortable. He knew exactly what he wanted to do with his naughty tease of a boyfriend as soon as they got home.

They did find Carmen's cart abandoned, as Ezra predicted, and helped themselves to a pack of nut bars she'd left in it. Her loss. Their gain.

Paying for groceries didn't go without a hiccup either, since it turned out one of Ezra's coupons had just run out. Having learned his lesson in the past, Frank wanted to discourage him from arguing, but... Ezra did not argue. Did not get annoyed. Instead, he was like a dog submissively showing its underbelly

to the alpha behind the register. His face was sweet as when he'd asked Frank for a foot massage last night, his voice—soft and borderline apologetic as he told the cashier about a non-existent grandma who'd given him the coupon for her Thanksgiving groceries.

By the end of the performance, the couple waiting in line, the cashier, *and* her manager were melting for his model grandson persona, and while the coupon was out of date, they got an equivalent discount.

Frank shook his head as they exited the store. “Remind me to never get in a fight with you. That was both terrifying and impressive.”

Ezra grinned, pulling on Frank's belt as they reached the truck. “I know I have great power, but I promise to handle it responsibly. You'll be under my special protection,” he said, starting to load the back of the vehicle alongside Frank.

“Maybe you can use it when we go on vacation and a sunchair breaks under me.” He winked at Ezra.

He was so... happy. Sure, his life wasn't devoid of struggle and stress, but they seemed more bearable with Ezra around. As if his presence softened every blow.

Ezra pouted. “Aww, I'd take such good care of you if you hurt yourself in the process! Your vacation would turn into an all-inclusive train of cocktails, massages, and blowjobs. That being said, don't break yourself on purpose,” Ezra said and winked before leaning toward the truck far more deeply than

was needed, which made Frank's mind cook up images of how that perfect ass looked under the plaid coat.

There were people around, going about their business, driving off or coming in, but it was getting dark and Frank didn't want to wait any longer. He pulled on Ezra's wrist and spun him around, then kissed his soft lips, eagerly parting them with his tongue. He'd have fucked him in the back of the truck if they weren't in a busy parking lot.

Ezra must have been waiting for this, because he molded himself to Frank as if he were clay, and while their kiss was brief, instead of satisfying the growing desire, it fueled all its fires.

But it didn't matter. Home was thirty minutes away, and they'd reach it eventually. Once they got there, Frank would be free to remind Ezra what teasing him might result in.

He was sure they'd both very much enjoy that outcome.

Ezra grinned as they parted, and while Frank did look around, to make sure no one was about to get nasty about two men in love, people were too busy with their Thanksgiving shopping to pay attention to strangers. Especially now that the sky had darkened.

"Yes, Frank, we will," Ezra responded to the question Frank hadn't voiced, and pushed away the cart away from the vehicle.

"Oh, the things I will do to you..." Frank laughed and gave Ezra's ass a pat before walking off to the driver's side.

He'd been in relationships before, but none were like this. Ezra was the perfect answer to all his needs—capable yet in need of Frank's help and protection. Gentle yet with a sharp tongue. There was a balance to their love, and each passing day reassured him that this wasn't just a prolonged dream. This beautiful man who could have anyone chose him, and Frank was determined to prove himself worthy of Ezra's love. Always.

They had their meal times, daily rituals, and there was even a constant in the way Ezra always held his hand on Frank's thigh when they drove. It almost felt as though they'd been together for years, not months.

And unlike all of Frank's previous partners, Ezra knew all of him. The good, the bad, the ugly, Frank had laid it out, and Ezra chose him anyway.

"Paul called me yesterday," Frank said, because while he didn't want to upset Ezra, it was essential that he knew what was going on.

The hand on his leg twitched, but Ezra's face showed no emotion when Frank peeked at it. "Why?"

"He does this now and then. Ever since I pulled away years ago. He claimed he desperately needed me for just 'this one last job', but that's how things always escalate. It's never one more job. So I turned him down. Pissed me off too, because he asked about you, and I'm not telling him shit." Frank groaned and rubbed Ezra's hand. "Sorry for dragging down the mood, I just needed to vent."

Ezra sighed. “No, that’s okay. What does he want to know? If he cared about me in any way, he wouldn’t have tried to kill me.”

Frank shook his head. “He just likes to have strings to pull. Did you... Your arrangement with him. Was it a shallow connection, or something deeper?” He felt uncomfortable asking that question, but he’d rather have more cards up his sleeve.

Ezra remained silent for so long Frank regretted his decision to speak up, but when he opened his mouth, his voice was clear and calm. “I didn’t particularly like him as a person. I now think the reason why he chose to be with me rather than a real boyfriend is because he didn’t want to risk being exposed for what he is. But at the time I just saw him as one of those guys who like having all the power and everything catered to them. So no, no feelings involved. Just money.”

Frank took a deep breath. “Okay. Just to be clear, it would have been fine either way, I’ve got no issue with what you used to do. I wanted to know about him specifically to work out if he’s just being a menace or actually jealous. He’s a dangerous man, so I don’t want to underestimate him.”

Ezra’s eyes lost some of their sharpness, letting Frank know he’d said the right thing. “Not that I know of. I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t have asked me to sleep with his friends if he was jealous of me.”

“That’s true. Though I took into account that he might have just wanted to show off. But then he wouldn’t have been fine

with me continuing to see you. Are you...” He licked his lips. “You’re okay with not doing it anymore, right? You don’t... miss it?”

It was dark, and the glow of the headlights reflecting off asphalt was the only light reaching Ezra’s features as they drove through the woods, heading for their home. He swallowed, once again taking his time. In many people this silence would have been a sign of anger or hurt, but Frank was gradually learning that Ezra liked to think things through before he spoke.

“I’m actually relieved. There was a lot of stress tied into my work. I’m not saying people who hire escorts are bad, but there are certain expectations that come with paying for sex and companionship. Always having to be *on* and never really letting go. The need to always be perfect, because that’s what is expected at that price point. I once looked up a discussion group about escorts. Someone was reviewing my teeth, which, apparently, aren’t white enough. I was very self-conscious about it for a while.”

Frank squeezed the wheel in helpless rage. “Jesus fucking Christ. You are a *person*. People are fucked in their heads. I’m glad it’s not something you have to deal with anymore.”

Ezra shrugged, stroking Frank’s thigh, as if he were trying to calm an agitated animal. “It does help if you can separate who you are from what you’re doing, otherwise it would be a very difficult experience. Because while some clients are perfectly normal, others will be assholes. I did enjoy the money, but

there's a reason I kept having sex for myself while escorting. The work wasn't there to satisfy *my* needs. But I don't regret any of it. It did give me freedom from my parents. And it gave me you," he added in a voice so sweet Frank's throat suddenly felt thick.

Frank raised his hand to his lips and kissed Ezra's knuckles. "I love you."

Ezra's eyes were like bright stars, lighting up the dark cab when he smiled. "I'll make sure you never stop. But it's good to not have this constant pressure for perfection. I like working with you, because what I do now isn't just about my charm, or the way I look. I really only need to care what you think, *lover*."

"And you're great at it. I know a thing or two about jewelry, but the way you research all the items for potential value... I wouldn't have the patience."

They were approaching the junkyard gate, and a giddy feeling once again spread in Frank's chest. Because now this wasn't just his home. It was *theirs*. And while he hated Paul for the trauma he'd caused Ezra, the bastard had ultimately brought them together.

Shane would be home soon, so Frank left the gate open for him and headed straight for the house, but as soon as he got back in the vehicle, Ezra's hand slid from his thigh and cupped his crotch, drawing a swirl over it with one finger.

"How long will it take us to put everything away when we arrive?" he asked in an innocent tone.

“I love you, but I’m not letting the ice cream melt. We’re gonna have to make a race of it.” Still, Frank slid his hand over Ezra’s, growing more excited by the second. This was the kind of thing that made him feel like he was twenty again. That buzz of arousal always remained in the air, even when neither of them felt like doing anything beyond hugging.

He’d found his Holy Grail in Ezra, and he’d make sure to always remind them both how much that meant.

“Freezer stuff goes into the freezer,” Ezra agreed as his long fingers played the piano on Frank’s growing cock. “But I have little patience today. I might just have to help myself to you.”

Frank wiggled his eyebrows. “Looks like I need to cuff you as I take my time putting things away into the fridge correctly. Should I do that naked?”

Ezra’s teeth shone like pearls when he smiled. “You wouldn’t do that to me!”

Which in Ezra speak meant, *hell yes*.

There was a good reason Frank had installed ceiling hooks both in the bedroom *and* in the kitchen.

“You’ll just have to find out,” Frank said and parked in front of their house.

He needed to get rid of that dirty old picket fence. It was time to change things and not dwell on the past, but right now he had more important plans. Plans that involved steel on bare skin.

He grinned when Ezra headed straight for the back of the vehicle and caught him before Ezra managed to pick up any of the bags. “Enough of this. You’re being a tease,” he said, hauling Ezra onto his shoulder and slapping his ass.

Ezra laughed, twitching at the smack, but instead of following up on his act, he wrapped his arms around Frank and hugged him on the way inside.

Fire was already scorching Frank’s brain, so he needed to act fast, before he reached his boiling point and forgot all about the full freezer bags.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Ezra asked, pretend-pulling away as soon as Frank put him down in the kitchen/dining room.

Frank chuckled and grabbed his jaw for a kiss. “Whatever the fuck I want. Now strip while I get the freezer shit. You have thirty seconds,” he said and turned on his heel.

“What will you do if I can’t make it?” Ezra called back, but Frank could already hear the rustle of clothes. At the end of the day, he *was* a good boy.

By the time Frank got back with the bags that mattered, Ezra was already pushing off his pants and shoes. Fuck, was he gorgeous... Absolutely stunning, regardless of the scar on his face. If anything, it only made his beauty stand out more.

Frank might have salivated a little at the sight of Ezra’s cock stiffening.

“I love seeing your nipples so perky from the cold,” Frank chuckled and dumped the bags into the freezer without bothering to unpack them in a more organized fashion. There would be time for that. Right now, he was *thirsty*.

Ezra leaned against the wall, his smooth, toned body a feast for the eyes as he met Frank’s gaze in a clear challenge. Someone wanted to be manhandled tonight.

Frank opened their fun drawer and pulled out a pair of cuffs, eyeing his naked prey. When he moved to the right of the table, Ezra moved to the left. They did this dance a few times, but when Ezra circled the table and got close to the corridor, he sprinted toward the bedroom.

That was Frank’s cue. He caught up and grabbed Ezra by the waist before he could have reached his destination.

Laughter tore out of Ezra’s chest as he mock-beat Frank’s back, but by the time Frank pushed his face and chest flat against the table and pressed his growing cock to the bare ass, the sound died on the pretty lips.

Frank’s brain fogged as he leaned down, pushing his nose through the fragrant hair at the back of Ezra’s head, but he wanted to be ready before they started playing, so instead of following his immediate instinct to knead his lover’s beautiful back, Frank pulled him toward the hook, cuffed his hands, and then attached the long chain to the ceiling.

Only then, with Ezra secured, did he take off his jacket, then his T-shirt, just to get a kick out of Ezra’s needy little moan. His amber eyes were on fire, and his half-hard cock drew

Frank's gaze as they studied one another in this moment of delicious agony.

What would happen tonight? Should Frank keep him like this? Naked in the middle of the room, shifting his weight impatiently while he was touched and teased? It was pure delight to edge him in this position, when he had nothing to rub against and nowhere to run.

Ezra shivered, rising to his toes when Frank touched his balls, but the moment those angular hips shifted forward, seeking more, Frank made himself pull away, to Ezra's pleading whine.

They both stilled at the buzz of an approaching vehicle, but Shane's shortest way home featured the cleared land next to their place, so Frank gave Ezra's lips a kiss and pulled the curtains shut before heading to the bedroom, to pick the tools he'd like to use tonight. The collection had recently gained a new item—a long, very soft feather, and he picked it up, imagining the needy glow in Ezra's eyes once the delicate barbs were pulled over his skin with cruel gentleness.

The car stopping in front of his house abruptly made the hairs on Frank's arms bristle, and he rushed to the kitchen, in case Shane had the stupid idea to pop in. But just as he walked out of the bedroom, quick footsteps outside suggested there was no time left. Frank swore under his breath and stood in front of Ezra to hide him as the door opened.

“Kindly get the fuck out—” he started, but Shane wasn't the one who dashed in, and Frank spread his arms to shield Ezra,

dropping the box of toys.

A small vibrator rolled over the floor and hit Paul's shoe.

Chapter 30

Frank

FRANK'S FIRST INSTINCT WAS to grab a blanket and cover Ezra, but his feet wouldn't move as he turned into a wall between his lover and a former friend who'd turned out to be such a pain in the ass. His breath got stuck in his throat, because he was not prepared for this. He didn't have a knife, a gun, or even a piece of string to wrestle a potential weapon out of Paul's hand, but he would protect Ezra with his own life regardless.

The hurried breathing behind him made the fine hair on his nape stand to attention, as if danger was looming everywhere around him, but with Paul pinning him with wide eyes, there was only one thing he could focus on.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Frank asked in a voice that seemed to come from somewhere deep within him.

Paul locked the door just as the grunt of engines thrummed under Frank's feet.

“S-someone's coming,” Ezra whispered when Frank's gaze shot to the gun in Paul's hand.

The bald reptile cocked his head in a way that made a bone pop somewhere in his neck and pleaded, “Frank, you gotta help me.”

“I don't have to do shit,” Frank spat, worried out of his mind that Paul might lash out and do something unpredictable.

“If you'd gone on the job with me, it wouldn't have happened, so just do me this one fucking favor?” Paul asked, his face sweaty.

Frank scowled. “You fucked up. And *I’m* supposed to pick up the pieces?”

“For old times’ sake, Frank. There’s maybe six of them. Casino bodyguards. Goons. Easy.”

Frank’s blood turned into ice. “You led them here? To my home? What the actual fuck? Leave. Now!”

A drop of sweat rolled along Paul’s brow and slid down the side of his nose as he stared back at Frank, panting while the vehicles roared ever closer. “They’re gonna off me. I had no choice.”

Frank’s chest felt tight. Heavy. And a part of him hated seeing his ex-comrade in this situation, but he had been told no so many times and had still come here, endangering everything and everyone Frank wanted to protect. Jag could have been injured in some reckless attempt to stop the intruders, or Shane, surprised to see strangers at the junkyard. And finally, Ezra, who was naked, vulnerable, and unable to flee.

“You made your bed. Lay in it.”

The corners of Paul’s mouth twitched as the vehicles stopped. Voices erupted outside, but Frank would not budge. Not this time.

“You’d rather see me bleed out on your doorstep than help? After all we’ve been through?” Paul said, not flinching when someone honked their horn outside before shouting his full name.

“You should have forgotten I exist when I told you to.”

A bullet shattered a window without warning, and as Paul ducked, Frank stepped closer to Ezra.

“Don’t fucking shoot! He’s in here!” He yelled, itching to grab a gun.

“Then hand him over! We’re surrounding the house! That was your warning shot,” roared a deep voice.

Some fucking warning when the shot came out of nowhere and could have killed either of them.

“Stay down,” Frank hissed to Paul, and as much as he hated leaving Ezra’s side, he took three steps to the side to reach the drawer with his piece—

“Sorry, Frank. You’re leaving me no choice,” Paul rasped, sending the alarm bells in Frank’s head into a cacophony.

Deep down, he knew what he was gonna see. But when he turned around and saw a gun resting against Ezra’s now pale skin, the barrel pressed into his cheek while Paul stood behind him, embracing him from behind, the world stood still.

Ezra’s chest moved at a rapid pace, pumping the shallowest breaths as he stared back at Frank with shiny eyes while that reptile of a man stood a bit straighter, knowing he’d won.

“I tried being nice, Frank. You know I did,” Paul said as if to soften the blow.

There was no coming back from this for him.

“What will it be?” the stranger roared outside. “I have my men on all sides. Give him up, and I’ll leave you be.”

“I’m trying!” Frank shouted back, wading through the mess of frantic thoughts that crowded his head, only to hit a dead end each time, because that gun pointed at Ezra’s face? It left him no options.

“Try fucking harder! Bastard tried to kill me, and he has to be put down.”

Someone was dying tonight, and it wouldn’t be Ezra, if Frank had anything to say about it.

“Okay,” Frank whispered and took a step closer. “How do you want to do this? Six of them.”

Paul’s gaze darted around. He was a cornered animal about to lash out. Any advantage he had would be gone the moment he stepped away from Ezra. He might have come here for help, but he didn’t trust Frank anymore, and for good reason.

Frank’s hands balled into fists as Paul’s fingers moved, pulling over Ezra’s collarbones in a motion that seemed absentminded yet looked like a caress. Damp eyes met Frank’s, begging for help, but when the offending hand passed over Ezra’s face, the soft, pretty mouth snapped open, showing teeth.

Paul roared, opening his eyes wide as Ezra bit down on the side of the bastard’s hand. They both twitched when the gun went off, filling the air with the burn of gunpowder.

For a split second, Frank’s heart stopped.

Time stopped.

But it was only his brain that remained in limbo for a bit too long, because Frank's body was already moving.

The bullet hit the ceiling without even grazing Ezra, and when Frank saw that Paul was ducking to pick up his fallen gun, he charged at him like a bulldozer. The bastard rolled back over the floor, sprung to his feet like a much younger man, and grabbed a knife off the kitchen counter. At least he couldn't shoot them anymore.

"Give me a chance to flee, you fucker!" Paul rasped, backing away, because they both knew their chances in this fight have changed drastically.

Too little too late. Their long-standing truce has ended the moment Paul threatened Ezra in Frank's home.

Frank might have been bare-chested, but that knife was no scalpel. As long as he avoided a stab in the guts, he'd survive, so he fell forward, grabbing the wrist of Paul's offending hand and his throat. The wall was too close for the bastard to maneuver out of Frank's hold, and he grunted when the wood creaked at the impact. He would try to kick, but Frank knew Paul's technique by heart and came close to step on his feet. Then, with the firmest flick of his hand, he broke Paul's wrist, and the knife fell.

The moment Paul ceased being a serious threat, Frank wrapped his arm around his neck and turned with this flesh puppet in his arms. Blood buzzed in his veins like angry hornets when he met Ezra's eyes. "Do you want me to...?" he

asked, even though the tears streaking down Ezra's red face made Frank want to make the call on his own.

Maybe he shouldn't put this on Ezra's conscience, but he was here and deserved a say.

Frank kicked Paul's legs, making him sink to his knees, and tightened his stomach muscles, to protect himself from the elbow flying back at him, but Paul must have understood how dire things were, because he grabbed Frank's forearm and tried pulling on it.

"Please—"

Ezra nodded, holding Frank's gaze, and that was that.

Frank twisted Paul's head and dropped him to the floor.

He took a deep breath as his mind emptied. He didn't feel sorry for Paul, but maybe it had happened too fast and hadn't hit him yet. Paul would have never stopped imposing on Frank, and Ezra would have always been his go-to target to threaten Frank into compliance.

Frank took note of Ezra's trembling lips. "I'm sorry," he muttered, lifting the dead body as its head lolled from his to side. "I need to deal with them first. They seem trigger-happy," he said and headed for the door as if this were a bad dream.

"Oh—okay," Ezra muttered as Frank gravitated to the exit, barely feeling any of the tension and fatigue that normally followed a difficult fight. He announced that he was coming out and hoped the bastards waiting outside would keep their

offer of sparing everyone if he gave them Paul. Whether he was to be dead or alive hadn't been specified.

Their headlights shone straight at the house, and Frank lowered his eyes, squinting as he stepped outside, dropping the limp form to the porch. But since it was Paul, and that fucker could never make things easier on people, his carcass rolled all the way down the steps and into the mud.

He could see a gun lowering at the periphery of his vision, then one of the men stepped forward, into the light.

“Is he... dead?”

Frank took a deep breath. “Things got out of hand, but you got what you wanted so take him and get the fuck off my property.”

Now that his eyes were starting to adjust to the bright lights pointed straight at him, he saw the men looking at each other. Clearly, they hadn't heard about Wreck & Repair's other services.

A man in formal clothes stepped forward, placing his gun in a holster under his suit jacket. “Why? You're the one who murdered him.”

“And you wanted him dead, so take the damn corpse.” Frank couldn't believe he had to argue about this. As if this evening hadn't been enough of a shitshow.

“He's on your land.”

“You cornered him here,” Frank said, taking a deep breath.

The stranger took a moment to think, and then struck gold. “You want money, don’t you?”

Frank took a deep breath that got stuck somewhere in his throat. “Yes, I want fucking money if I’m to dispose of him for you,” he said through gritted teeth.

The leader sighed and exchanged a few words with one of his companions, who walked over to the trunk of their vehicle and opened it. “Fine. I suppose I owe you for disturbing your peace tonight. No reason to burn bridges,” he said as his man approached Frank.

Dressed in a gray T-shirt under a short jacket, he seemed deceptively normal, but the way his gaze wandered over Frank, looking for weak points and weapons, suggested he was no ordinary goon. He stepped over Paul’s body and reached Frank, then offered his hand like a polite gentleman should before offering him a wad of cash. There was a hundred dollar bill at the top, and based on this Frank estimated his payment was a couple thousand. This one time, he didn’t care about the exact sum. He just wanted them gone, so he could tend to Ezra.

“KP, give him my card,” the leader stated as the foot soldier was about to leave.

Frank stopped himself from rolling his eyes, because this wasn’t a time to make enemies. So he kept his face neutral as the man passed him a card.

“You’ll find my contact info on the fence. On your way out.”

KP backed off, but the leader snorted, entering his car. “Pleasure doing business with you!”

“Likewise,” Frank lied and watched the intruders retreat the same way they came, in a neat cavalcade. Only when the back lights of the last one disappeared from his sight did he take a deep breath of gasoline-scented air and returned inside.

Ezra was shaking when he met Frank’s gaze, and while Frank’s body erupted with rage at the sight of blood around his mouth, he soon realized it had to be Paul’s.

“Is it safe?” Ezra whispered, as if he were afraid someone might overhear him.

“Yes,” Frank said on autopilot, unable to shake the tension out of his body. But he didn’t wait and unlocked the damn cuffs from the hook in the ceiling.

He enfolded Ezra’s trembling body in his arms with a deep sigh. He was safe. And Paul would never get to him again.

Ezra rolled his wrists, as if his hands had died a little in the upright position, but then his arms were around Frank, pulling him in as if it was Frank who needed sympathy, not him.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

“I’m fine. Are you sure you’re not injured?” Frank stroked Ezra’s warm back, soothing himself by touching his lover’s warm skin, but Ezra kept watching him as if Frank were a frightened animal in need of coaxing.

“I’m all right. You protected me.”

“I promised.” Frank kissed the side of his head, slowly relaxing into their embrace. “I’m sorry you had to see it.”

But his muscles instantly tensed again at the rumble of an approaching car and he peeked through the shattered window where the curtain had fallen off its pole. One glance to the glass-covered floor made him pick Ezra up and sit him on the table.

But when he was about to grab his gun, Shane’s voice made him relax.

“Frank? Ezra?”

Relief ran deep in Frank’s bones as he watched Ezra cover himself with the coat he’d left across the back of the chair. Frank would much rather take care of *him* now, but with Shane here, explaining what happened took priority.

“We’re fine,” Frank said and stood in the doorway, looking out at his friend, who stared at the dead body resting with its face in the dirt.

Shane relaxed too and gestured at Paul. “I passed three fucking Hummers on the way here, and now this? What the fuck?”

Frank rubbed his forehead. “Well... It’s done. You wanna help or what?” he asked, waving the wad of cash in the air.

Shane raised his eyebrows but nodded. “Let me just tell Ros I’ll be home late.”

Chapter 31

Ezra

EZRA FELT NUMB. THE evening had seamlessly turned into night, and now there was a dark red glow at the edge of the horizon, predicting the upcoming dawn. He didn't think about changing into anything suitable and wore the same neat leather shoes and Burberry coat he'd gone shopping in. Now he felt not only overdressed but also comical.

He was a clown. A well-dressed one, but a clown nevertheless.

Frank had suggested Ezra could stay home and not witness any of the aftermath, but he was done hiding from the truth. It was unlikely he would do this kind of work himself, but if this was what his man did, he needed to see it with his own eyes.

“Can't believe he would do something like this after everything you two have been through,” Dex said, once again adjusting Paul's position in the back seat of the car the bastard had come in, as if it mattered now.

“We're not turning him into a mummy. He doesn't need to look pretty. The compactor's gonna rearrange that precious pose anyway,” Shane said, blowing out a cloud of cigarette smoke.

Frank was smoking too. Something he rarely did, and never around Ezra since the one time Ezra had expressed his displeasure about that habit. Tonight though, he wasn't going to say a thing.

Dex gave the corpse one more glance before backing away. “Can you teach me that kind of neck-break power combo?”

Frank took his time inhaling, then exhaling smoke. “No.”

Dex looked borderline offended. “Why not?”

“You’d have to be stronger.”

Dex scowled before wiggling his body like a toddler told it wasn’t tall enough to go on the rollercoaster. “I am strong. We have a gym at the MC, and we work out every day.”

Ezra exhaled, gravitating closer to Frank’s side as Shane eyed the magnet grapple looming over them all like a rusty dragon. “Are we doing this? It’s almost morning, and we still need to bury the fucker once he’s crushed.”

Frank threw the cigarette under his feet and took a step forward when Dex slammed Paul’s door shut and hopped in place. “Can I do it? This way you won’t have to climb all the way into the cab,” he said as if Frank were an elderly man who couldn’t possibly manage such a feat.

Frank groaned. “Sure, knock yourself out. But you have to help with the burial as well. Shane already got the cement machine going.”

It was odd to see him this emotionally flat. The Frank Ezra knew might not be a ray of sunshine or a chatterbox like his nephew, but there had always been a warmth to him, which now seemed absent, as if the mild flame inside him had been extinguished. And while Ezra desperately wanted to once again ask him how he felt about what happened, it was clear he’d get the same dismissive answer as he had earlier.

Ezra had been terrified when Paul entered, and even more so when that cold, heavy piece of metal pushed at his face, yet now he felt nothing but fatigue. The rational part of his mind knew he'd risked everything by biting Paul's hand. That bullet could have shattered his teeth, injured him, maybe even killed him, but in that moment both he and Frank had been in danger, and distracting Paul seemed to be their only chance.

He didn't know how he'd made himself do it.

Maybe deep down he was braver than he realized?

The roar of metal made him stiffen, but then, the massive grapple lifted the car with Paul's corpse as if it were a toy and moved it to an imposing piece of machinery the size of a large shed.

Dex looked focused like a big kid playing with his favorite toys. Ezra would never consider him normal after what he'd seen in that container before his accident, regardless of whether his actions were truly motivated by saving puppies. Still, this was Frank's nephew, and therefore—family.

Shane lit another cigarette and approached them. "You can go, Frank, we can handle the rest."

"You sure?" Frank asked.

Shane pointed to Ezra with his chin. "Yep, I'm pretty sure you two need to talk."

Ezra exhaled and grabbed Frank's hand, squeezing it firmly as he met Shane's gaze. Shane hadn't been certain of his intentions at first, but maybe tonight's events would finally

convince him that Ezra was in it for the long haul, and that he intended to stand by Frank.

“Thanks. Yes,” he said before Frank could get a word in.

Frank just nodded at Shane as if they could have a complex conversation without words, and squeezed Ezra’s hand. “Are you okay with walking?”

Ezra nodded. “I might just need that,” he said, already leading Frank away from the others and toward their home. Frank put on a flashlight to reveal the way, and Ezra focused on it rather than on the sharp cries of breaking metal erupting behind them.

For a while, they walked in silence, cooled by the night air, but then Frank spoke. “If anything like this ever happens again, and it’s me who ends up dead, I need you to think of your safety first, okay? No one but Shane knows this, but I have small gold bars stored under the floor in our house. Under the bed, under the shower, and under the sofa. You’d need to grab an axe and break the floor there. They’re small, so they’re easier to cash in, and the price of gold doesn’t fluctuate as much—”

“Frank. It’s gonna be fine. But... I do appreciate you telling me this,” Ezra said, even though the thought of Frank dead made Ezra’s insides twist and bile rise up his throat. At the end of the day, Paul was dead, and they were safe.

For a moment, he did wonder why Frank lived the way he did if he had gold bars stashed away, but as that first thought settled, he understood the reasons without having to ask. It

would be fun to have more spending money, but in Frank's line of work, he needed a backup. One slip up could lead to medical expenses that insurance couldn't cover, or a bribe that needed to be paid on the spot.

The gold bars were safety and security.

Ezra rather liked that, so he squeezed Frank's hand in reassurance. They were more alike than Frank could imagine.

Frank took a deep breath. "I'm sorry you had to see it happen, but I think there was no other way. Paul would have never let go."

Ezra, who up to this point chewed through all the things he should say, stepped in front of Frank and held on to his arms. "I'm sorry I told you to do it. I know it meant a lot to you that you're not a killer anymore," he said in one breath before lowering his gaze to the downturned flashlight in Frank's hand.

In the silence, he could clearly hear Frank swallowing.

"It's just... It's something I tried to stick to, but when he threatened you, my rules no longer mattered."

Ezra's exhale sounded shaky as he took half a step closer. "I worried they might shoot you through the window while we were in an impasse. Everything happened so fast, and when you held him in place, his death seemed like such a straightforward solution. But it shouldn't have been my decision. It's my fault that you broke your rules, and now you're hurting. I can feel it."

Frank might not know it, or even want it, but his former life hadn't dulled his emotions. They were still very much alive under this stoic exterior, and Ezra desperately needed to bring them to the surface, to know that their relationship wouldn't change because of this night.

Frank pulled him in for a hug and stroked his back in a soothing motion that was as much for Ezra as it was for him. "It's not your fault. I gave you the choice, because I wanted you to have the final say. It's a big burden I put on your shoulders, but I didn't see it that way in the moment."

Air left Ezra's chest as he sunk against Frank, soaking up his scent. Earthy yet fresh, it would always be his comfort. He could only hope Frank felt the same way about him.

"I want you to know that nothing changed between us. I know you did it to protect me."

Frank kissed the top of his head. "I just... He got that one more kill out of me, you know? And now you'll never see me in the same way again."

Ezra looked up, swallowing air as if he were about to drown in Frank's sadness. This was a man who'd do anything for him. Even at the risk of estranging the man he loved.

He might have seen way more death than Ezra, but it affected him all the same. "I would never. Frank, you are mine," Ezra said, stroking the scruffy cheeks with his fingers.

Frank's eyes were like two wells of withheld pain, but Ezra wasn't afraid to sample their waters anymore.

“Are you sure? I would understand,” he whispered, but the way he squeezed his hand on Ezra’s nape spoke of his desire to go back to the way things were hours ago, before Paul had brought violence into their home.

Ezra took a deep breath, leaning in, and when this tower of a man mirrored his gesture, their foreheads touched. His skin was on fire, but he’d rather burn to cinders than let go of the one person who truly wanted to protect him. Care for him. Love him.

“I am sure. Don’t you shut me out now.”

Finally. His heart leapt at the hint of smile on Frank’s lips.

“You’re my everything,” Frank said and dropped the flashlight to the ground to hold Ezra with both arms. “I want you to feel safe in our home, and with me.”

Being so close to him, sensing his heartbeat, and feeling the touch of smiling lips drained the fumes Ezra had been running on for the past few hours, and he let himself go limp in Frank’s arms, breathing in his essence.

“I’ve spent my life worrying for my future, but I’ve finally found it. I’m no longer afraid.”

“I’ll make it my life’s goal that you never have to be,” Frank said and even the bitter aftertaste of tobacco on his tongue tasted sweet when he kissed Ezra.

They were both home at last.

Epilogue

Ezra

THE STATE STRONGEST MAN contest wasn't nearly as flashy as it would have been on a national or international level, but it didn't matter. Frank had literally lifted a car to save Ezra's life, and now he stood at the top of the podium, presenting his trophy while the crowd cheered.

Ezra was *so* proud of his man.

And the event had been such a fun and casual day out too, accompanied by a fair, people showing their horses, and a mudslide. *He* wouldn't go on a mudslide if someone paid him, but it was fun to watch.

Ezra was still a bit self-conscious about the scars left behind by the terrible accident at the junkyard, but they were fading each day, and with time and the right care they might just become undetectable within a year or two.

He wished not to care, he really did, but while he'd be forever grateful that all his injuries had healed fine, he couldn't shed the sense that he ought to mourn his no-longer perfect face. The old Ezra would have feared it might affect his *market value*, but that was no longer a concern, not with a man as solid as Frank at his side.

It felt good to be loved.

"I'm cheering on my Bill, but Frank does deserve it. He outdid himself this time," Vicky said, clapping her hands beside him.

They'd only met today but had already taken a liking to each other. Her and Bill were Frank's acquaintances, some of the

people he hung out with at these contests. Vicky was blond, loud, and had rhinestones on her jeans, so Ezra was surprised how quickly they'd become friendly. But that had been the learning curve around Frank from the start. Not to judge a book by its cover. Ezra clearly still had a long way to go.

“Bill was amazing too. Must be that injury he told me about acting up,” Ezra told her, but she shook her head.

“Nah, it's his habits. I kid you not, he says he's *refeeding*, or something of that sort, but I know he just wants pizza and fried chicken way too often. We should hire you to make a nutrition plan for him, like you had for Frank. He told me all about it.”

Ezra stalled. “Oh... I don't have the qualifications yet.”

Vicky rolled her eyes. “Bill needs all the help he can get. He won't be asking for any certificates.”

Ezra gave a low chuckle and shrugged. “Okay then. Just call Frank, and we'll work something out.”

Frank shook hands with the second and third place winners, but then got off the stage to be replaced by a children's dance troupe. The crowds were still cheering for the athletes when Ezra tried to reach the edge of the bleachers, eager to congratulate his man in person rather than through intense stares. But when he reached the wooden steps and made his way to the ground, a man was already standing at Frank's side, congratulating him with massive enthusiasm. Muscular yet not nearly as big as Frank, the stranger didn't seem at all out of place at this kind of tournament, but when Ezra's decision not to interfere and wait for his turn turned into way too much

back-rubbing on the stranger's part, he lost his patience and headed toward *his* strongman.

“Who's your friend?” he asked, holding back the terms of endearment pushing at his mouth, because he didn't quite know how accepting this crowd was, and he didn't want to spoil Frank's victory with a dashing of homophobia.

Frank smiled at the sight of him and pulled Ezra under his arm in the masculine way which could be interpreted as just a friendly gesture.

“Jack, my partner, Ezra. I do my best to show off in front of him, so he's earned half this trophy.” Frank laughed, ruffling Ezra's hair.

Jack smiled, but his eyes pinned Ezra as if he were an annoying fly to squash. Wow. If this guy wanted Frank so much, he should have claimed him when he still had the chance, because Frank was off-limits now. Frank didn't seem to notice the air of confrontation and kept chatting about a new brand of protein bars until Jack excused himself and went on his way.

Ezra exhaled, and as they walked away from the field where the contest had taken place, slaloming through groups of tipsy people, he discreetly petted Frank's back in appreciation.

“First of all, congratulations, you were amazing, and I love that some people know who I am to you. Secondly, who was that guy and why did he look at me like he wanted me to rot in the ditch?”

Frank laughed out loud and shook his head. “These contests... attract the kind of guys who are into men my size. You might not realize, but in some circles, I am a huge turn-on.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “And since most of the other guys competing are straight, I might have enjoyed a groupie or two.”

A laugh tore out of Ezra as they left the competition area and moved to the fairground featuring a couple of carnival rides, some games, as well as food trucks.

“I would have never thought people could find you attractive. I’m just here by accident,” he mocked, now lowkey interested in playing the role of Frank’s groupie. Maybe once they weren’t so close to other people, they could park in a discreet location and—

“I know, you had to really lower your standards to be with me, but maybe you could just give me away to Jack? Problem solved,” Frank teased. It’s been a while since Ezra had seen him *this* carefree, and it felt damn good.

Ezra’s chest burned with need. He’d put golden laurels on Frank’s head if he could, and then run him a bath, so he’d feel really appreciated. “I want to kiss you so fucking much.”

Frank stroked the back of his head. “I know, sweetie. Just wait a sec. I know a spot. I could take on any guy trying to bitch at us, but I don’t wanna end up arrested.”

He pointed farther down the row of trucks with food. At the very end, behind a booth with cotton candy, stood a picnic

table with two long benches, hidden from the sun by a large blue parasol.

The majority of the audience was watching the performing children, so this spot was still discreet enough for Ezra's purposes. He hopped up and gave Frank a peck the moment he decided no one would spot them outright. "You were so great out there! I still can't believe you can do those things with your body," he mumbled and playfully squeezed both of Frank's pecs.

Frank laughed and flexed his muscles under the touch. "I'll just have to remind you at the hotel."

Because yes, they were treating themselves to a whole weekend away. In a room with a hot tub.

Ezra licked his lips as naughty thoughts passed through his head. But no, they couldn't just have a quickie in the truck bed, hoping for the best, so he needed to endure this torture for a while longer. "My memory is perfect when it comes to your body."

Frank gently led him to the bench and sat next to him. "Are you sure? Can you map every inch of me?" He put the shining cup-shaped trophy between them, playing with its handle.

He smelled of the woody aftershave Ezra had bought him for Christmas, and fresh sweat evaporating in the sun. Even the tacky number attached to the front of his tank top looked good on a man as beautiful as him.

Ezra leaned in for another kiss and touched Frank's knee. "You actually doubt me? I can't believe the disrespect!"

"Well, you didn't even ask to check out my trophy, how's *that* for disrespect?" Frank chuckled and pushed it closer to Ezra, who picked it up but didn't let his gaze stray from Frank's strong features.

"I could serve you smoothies in this thing, so you remember what's at stake."

Frank grinned and rubbed his nape as he grabbed Ezra's hand. "I'd love that. But you better check if it's not dusty inside first."

Ezra snorted, confused. "Um, you just go—" His voice died when he noticed a band of silver and copper resting inside the cup. The ring radiated heat that smoldered his face, scorched his brain, and kept starting fires all over his skin as he looked up into Frank's lovely, lovely face.

"What...?"

Maybe the flush on Frank's cheeks hadn't been caused by sun exposure, or the earlier effort. Maybe he was nervous? He slid that bit closer to Ezra, squeezing his hand as Ezra picked up the ring, discovering that a small diamond was embedded at its head.

It was a unique piece, very much like the jewelry Frank sometimes created in his workshop. Could it be the work of his own hands?

“If you allow me, I’d like to make it official. It’s only been a year since you moved in with me. But I know you’re the one. You just are.”

Ezra stared at the simple band with decorative grooves on both sides of the head. He now remembered his rant about the uselessness of fancy jewelry. Frank must have noted what he said about important pieces needing to be versatile.

His chest was so tight he almost wished to massage the tension out but in the glow of Frank’s love, he didn’t dare move and ruin the perfection of this moment. “You’re serious. I... I didn’t think this was something you wanted.”

Frank stroked his hand with his thumb. “I do. I want you to feel secure. What’s mine is yours, but it needs to be on paper. I joked about that once, remember? When you told me your mom was trapped because of a prenup.”

Ezra did remember that, but at the time he’d dismissed it as Frank trying to put him at ease. Had he been serious back then already? “I—love you. Of course I want this too.”

Frank exhaled. So he *had* been nervous! How adorable. “Oh, thank fuck. For a moment there I worried I shot myself in the foot.”

Unbelievable.

“Frank. You did know I planned to bag myself a high-value husband. I just didn’t think I’d succeed so fast,” Ezra muttered, running out of breath halfway and whispering the rest as he placed the ring in Frank’s big, warm palm.

Frank's smile was gentle when his thick fingers grabbed Ezra's elegant ones, and he slid the ring on his finger. "I'm like my junkyard. Rough around the edges, but full of surprises and hidden gems."

Ezra trembled a bit when the cool band slotted in place, already looking at home on his finger, as if Frank had taken a cast of his hand to the jewelry store. "You are the gem, Frank. A gem no one in their right mind could overlook," he said, entwining their fingers as the breeze combed his hair.

Frank laughed and gave him a kiss. "Because I'm so big?"

"No, Frankie, because your heart is even bigger than your biceps," Ezra said, swallowing to make his eyes stop tearing up. He was such a giant cheese, but he didn't care.

He'd marry this man. He'd already found his happiness with Frank, and now he had a diamond to go with it, because Frank cared about the things that made Ezra happy.

The sweet smell of cotton candy only made him more joyful.

"I can't wait to show you something even bigger later." Frank grinned and kissed him again.

Ezra laughed and pushed into his arms after checking if they were still alone. But when the familiar arms closed around him, all he wanted was to celebrate. "You're always just as eager as you were the first time," he said and sniffed the sweetness in the air.

Frank hugged him tightly. "Oh, I remember losing half my brain cells when I realized I'd get to sleep with you."

Ezra chuckled, elated by all the compliments. “We should celebrate. Do you know I’ve never had cotton candy?” He pointed to the nearby stall.

Frank backed away with a comically shocked expression. “What? Why?”

“My mom used to say it was pure sugar, so there was no point in eating it.”

Frank shook his head and got up. “We’re fixing that right now. It’s okay if you hate it, but you have to try.”

Still overwhelmed yet drunk on joy, Ezra took his hand and rose too. The old him would have come up with an excuse not to have nutritionally worthless food, especially one he hadn’t tried. But he wasn’t that person anymore, and if he’d learnt anything by almost missing out on a relationship with Frank, it was that he’d never again let old inhibitions and prejudice hold him back. Despite moving into a remote location, his world seemed broader now, and more exciting, and that ring on his finger? It might not change much, but it meant more than all the tokens of adoration he’d ever received.

Would he like the cotton candy? He didn’t know. But he was excited to try it with Frank.



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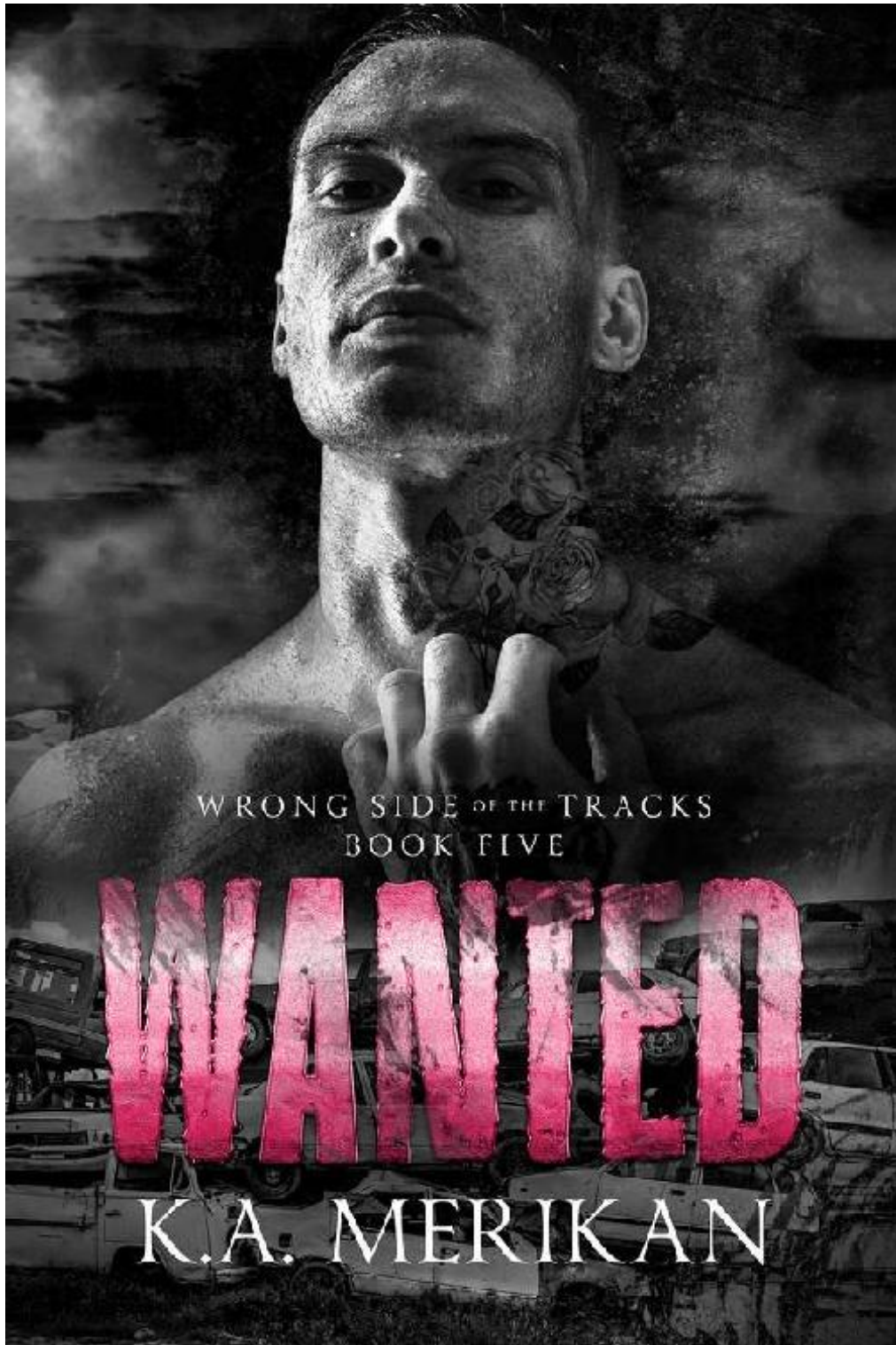
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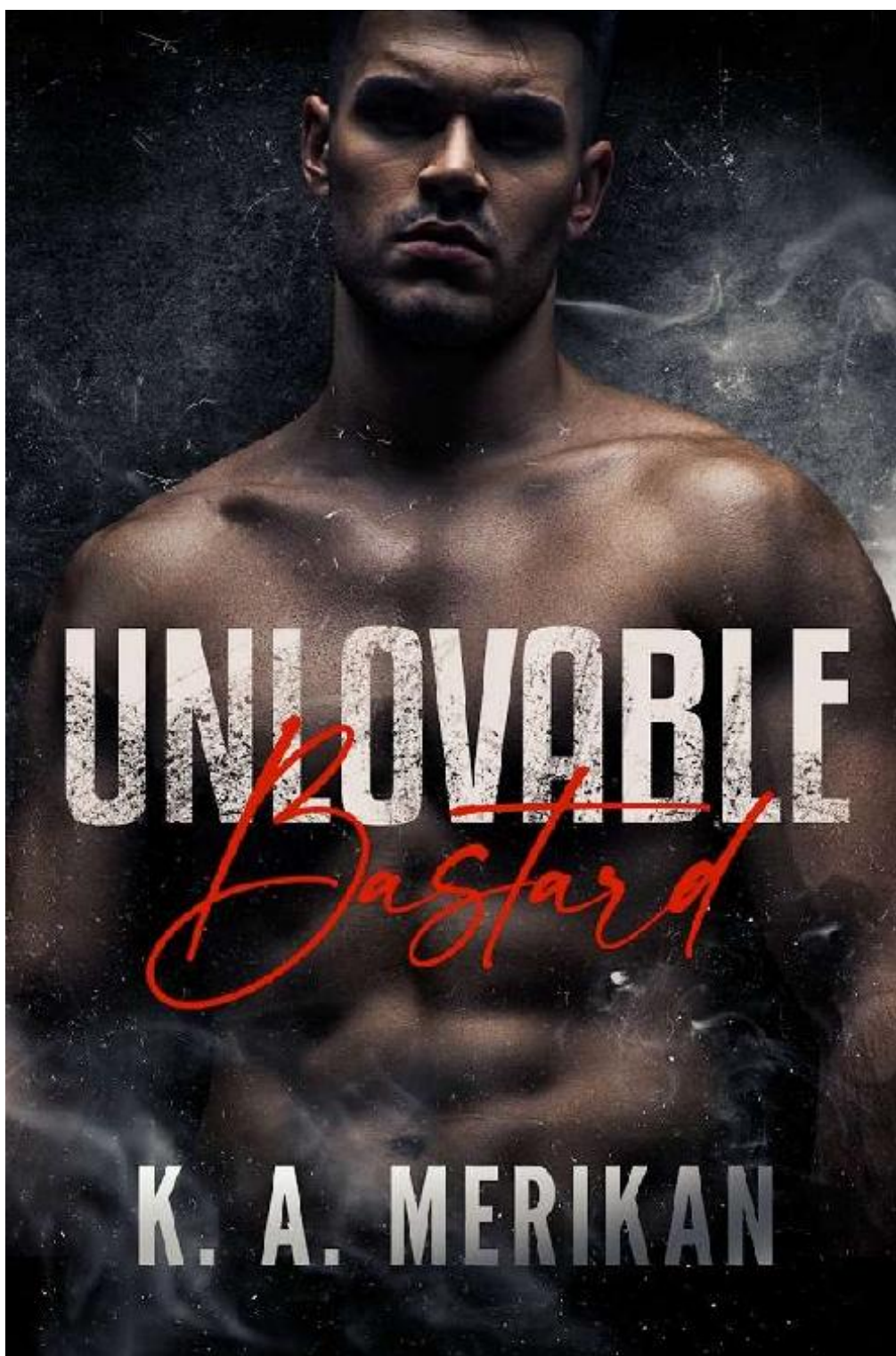
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About the author

K.A. MERIKAN IS A duo of queer writers who don't believe in following the well-trodden path. In their books you can dip your toe into dangerous romance with mafiosi, outlaw bikers and bad boys, all from the safety of your sofa. They love the weird and wonderful, stepping out of the box, and bending stereotypes both in life and in fiction. Their stories don't shy away from exploring the darker side of M/M romance, and feature a variety of anti-heroes, rebels, misfits, and underdogs who go against the grain.

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