



Just a Bit

CAPTIVATED

ALESSANDRA HAZARD

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Just a Bit Captivated

Straight Guys Book 14

Alessandra Hazard

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This book contains MM content and graphic language.

Chapter One

Elephants.

There was a small herd of elephants stomping all over his head. Or at least it felt like it.

He groaned, rubbing at his pounding temples. Had he had too many drinks last night? He felt nauseated and dizzy. It almost seemed like the ground was moving under him. Speaking of the ground, he was lying on something hard and uncomfortable. Why was he on the floor?

“Hey, you, are you finally awake?”

A female voice. One he didn't recognize. It definitely didn't belong to his sister or mother—and he currently didn't have any other woman in his life. Where was he?

He opened his eyes blearily and turned his pounding head.

A windowless room.

There were eight other people in the room. And the ground definitely *was* rocking.

Also—his hands were handcuffed together.

Handcuffed.

He stared blankly at the handcuffs.

Unless he'd suddenly developed a penchant for kinky, exhibitionist sex overnight, this was more than a little alarming. He couldn't remember how he could have possibly ended up handcuffed.

What *did* he remember?

Aiden. That was his name. He was Aiden Gates, a twenty-year-old, a junior at Northeastern University, the youngest son of Edward and Veronica Gates.

The last thing he remembered was... He'd been... He'd been walking home after hanging out at his friend's house for a little get-together before Christmas. He remembered footsteps behind him—and then nothing.

“Are you mute or something?” the same voice said.

Aiden shifted his gaze to the person addressing him: a young woman around his age. She was very pretty, with shiny golden hair and wide blue eyes.

She was handcuffed too. Actually, all the other people in the room were, as well.

Aiden really didn't like the implications.

Fuck, this was too much, even by his standards. He'd always had a history of getting into scrapes. Trouble simply had a way of finding him. His mom never tired of telling the story of how a three-year-old Aiden had toddled out of the house and somehow ended up at the other end of the city. It had gone downhill from there over the years, and Aiden could only laugh at his misfortunes, but this... this was something else.

“I'm not,” Aiden said belatedly, hauling himself into a sitting position, which was unexpectedly difficult without using his hands. “Sorry—it took me a few moments to get over waking up handcuffed in a room full of handcuffed strangers. It doesn't happen to me every day.”

“Point,” she murmured with a small smile. “I'm Janice.”

“Aiden,” he said, waving his cuffed hands. “I would shake your hand, but...” He took a deep breath and dropped

his light tone. “Do you know what’s going on here?”

Janice’s lips pursed. “I’ve been here for two days, so yeah, I’ve overheard some stuff when they brought you guys in. They’re in the human trafficking business.”

Aiden grimaced. He couldn’t say he was surprised. Just his luck, really.

“We’re on a ship, right?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Do you know where they’re taking us?”

Janice’s expression darkened. “They want to sell us in the Middle East. One of them mentioned the UAE.”

Great. What were the chances of them being found halfway across the world?

Aiden screwed his eyes shut. All right, there was no need to panic yet. The authorities might catch these assholes any moment now, for all he knew. It would take the ship, what, weeks to get to the UAE? There was still plenty of time for their kidnappers to get caught.

His family was probably already freaking out.

Aiden winced at the thought, but pushed it away to focus on the more pressing issues.

He looked at the other people in the room more carefully. There were five women, including Janice, and three other guys besides Aiden. All of them were young and incredibly good-looking. And all of them were blond, which was a weird coincidence.

Or maybe not a coincidence at all.

“Is there a reason we’re all blonds?” Granted, their hair color ranged from dark blond to Aiden’s strawberry blond, but still.

Janice wrinkled her pretty nose. “Apparently perverted sheikhs like exotic pets, and natural blond hair is rare and valuable.” She pursed her lips. “Yes, they actually checked if I

was a natural blonde. They checked all of us. And never mind that some of us don't even have hair down there."

Aiden pulled a face, glad that he'd been unconscious for that.

"Did they say anything else?" he said, trying to ignore the crying girl in the corner. She was the only one crying, but the others didn't look much better. The guy with dirty blond hair seemed on the verge of crying too, his eyes wide and freaked out, his breath coming in loud, ragged gasps.

"No," Janice said. "Most of the assholes don't speak English, so I have no idea what they were saying."

"Does anyone here know their language?" Aiden said, raising his voice a little.

No one replied.

Sighing, Aiden sagged back against the wall and tried hard not to think about what would happen to them if their kidnapers didn't get caught.

Aiden had never been a worrier. There was no point in worrying about things he couldn't change. He was normally good at adapting and flying by the seat of his pants, no matter how uncomfortable the situation was.

But being kidnapped and taken to the Middle East to be sold was... something else entirely. He had no delusions about what kind of future was awaiting him: even if Janice hadn't confirmed their kidnapers' plans, with his looks, it could only be one thing.

Aiden wasn't vain, but he knew he was good-looking. A bit *too* good-looking. It had always attracted people's attention, and not always in a good way. Kids were cruel. High school had been... tough until he had filled out, and even after that his face was a little too *pretty* for his comfort.

Frankly, Aiden used to hate his looks. Growing up, Wolverine had been his favorite superhero, and Aiden had wanted to look like him. Instead, he looked like a blonder, prettier version of boy scout Scott, sans the tragic backstory and laser-shooting eyes. His hazel eyes might not shoot lasers,

but he'd been told they were uncommonly pretty, with ridiculously long eyelashes like something from an anime. His face had annoyed the teenage him so much that he even had a phase when he'd dyed his hair black, but with his pale skin, he'd looked like a lame emo vampire instead of Wolverine, so he'd stopped doing it and learned to live with his face. Some girls *were* into it even if he wasn't. And it wasn't like he was alone in this. It was a family curse. Jordan, his older brother, even had to act like a hard-ass who didn't understand jokes in order to be taken seriously at work.

But now it seemed Aiden's blondie looks were responsible for this mess.

Maybe he should have kept the black hair.

It didn't take their kidnapppers weeks to get to the Middle East. It took them two months.

The ship had taken several detours to avoid the authorities and pick up more *cargo* from cities in South America. Aiden wasn't sure how many more people these assholes had kidnapped—the others were kept separately from them—and they seemed to have been sold faster than them, too.

“Each of you will make us more money than dozens of them,” one of the assholes had told them, his eyes flashing with greed as he scrutinized them. “Premium goods fetch premium prices. We're not in any hurry to sell you.”

Time seemed to drag. Aiden only knew that it was the end of February already—which meant his birthday had come and gone without his noticing—when one of the girls, Amelia, passed away. She'd gotten progressively sicker during the voyage, and even the doctor the dickheads had eventually brought couldn't do anything for her. Apparently it was a heart condition. She passed away in her sleep two days before their arrival in Dubai.

Aiden didn't know what the assholes had done with her body. Had they simply thrown it to the sharks? The thought made him ill, but he couldn't help but wonder if her fate was a mercy compared to what awaited the rest of them. It probably was.

Their kidnappers weren't happy about having fewer *premium goods* to sell. They held a long, heated discussion, only some of it in English, but Aiden thought he got the gist of it. It seemed they were supposed to deliver five beautiful blonde women for a specific high stake auction at the beginning of March, but now they were one woman short and they were panicking.

"They aren't good enough!" their leader snapped when one of his goons suggested that they replace her with one of the pretty girls they had kidnapped in Argentina. "Simply 'pretty' isn't going to cut it! I'm supposed to deliver *exquisite* jewels for that auction, worthy of the sheikhs! That auction is famous across the Middle East! The auction organizer will have my head if I deliver subpar goods!"

Good, Aiden thought vindictively, but then one of the assholes pointed at him and said something in Arabic. His buddies got a speculative look in their eyes and then started nodding.

Aiden got a very bad feeling about it.

Chapter Two

Unfortunately, his bad feeling turned out to be correct. Apparently, the assholes' ingenious solution was to have Aiden replace the poor girl.

“Are you fucking serious?” Aiden growled as three goons manhandled him into a building. “Do I look like a woman to you, you dumbasses?” he said, gesturing to his body. He was taller than average, and he was in great shape.

One of the goons laughed while another punched Aiden in the stomach. “Shut your mouth.”

“Don't damage the goods,” their leader said before looking at Aiden. “You don't need to look like a woman. If they don't like what they see, no buy. Simple. If they like it, they buy. The important thing is, you look expensive. After seeing your pictures, the auction organizer agreed that you'd be a worthy replacement. There are some supposedly straight sheikhs who are rumored to have perverse tastes, so you might tempt them.”

Aiden grimaced. “But why me and not one of the other guys?”

“You're much prettier,” one of the goons said, chuckling. “Almost like a woman. I'd stick my cock into you and I'm a normal man, not a homo. Those other guys will be bought by homos, but you might be bought by a normal man

who's just feeling adventurous. There are more rich normal men than there are rich homos.”

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that you're ‘normal,’” Aiden said, which earned him another punch in the stomach—a light punch, because expensive goods should be in pristine condition.

Fuck his life, seriously.

Aiden wasn't sure what kind of auction he had been expecting, but it wasn't what it ended up being. They hadn't been tied up naked to poles and there were no people shouting in order to outbid each other.

But the reality wasn't much better. In some ways it was worse, because it all seemed so... normal.

By all appearances, it seemed like a fancy party for the rich and glamorous. Granted, it wasn't easy to tell who was rich when pretty much everyone was dressed in those long white things all the Saudi royalty wore when Aiden saw them on the news on TV, but the venue was clearly classy and expensive—as was the quality of food and drinks.

Not that Aiden had an opportunity to taste any of the fancy-looking food. He was the entertainment, not a guest.

He might not be naked and tied up to a pole, but it couldn't be more obvious what he was. He had been put on the podium in the center of the room in a kneeling position. Men milled about the room, socializing, sipping on drinks, munching on snacks, and eyeing him like a piece of meat. While there wasn't anything as vulgar as people bidding loudly, clearly there was some kind of subtle bidding war going on. The bastard in charge of the auction had mentioned that they guaranteed discretion thanks to a totally anonymous bidding process. Bidders could see the other bids made electronically, but everyone's identities would remain safe. Apparently, this gave everyone in attendance plausible

deniability. This way people could even claim being unaware of any human auction happening, since nothing was announced outright.

Aiden had to applaud the bastards' ingenuity.

That was, if he were in a mood to applaud anything.

Staying on his knees for what felt like ages was uncomfortable as hell, but his discomfort wasn't only physical. He was worried for the girls—Janice, Ruth, Melissa, and Annie. During these past few months, they all had become close, and it made him sick to his stomach to think that they would be next on this podium—as soon as Aiden was sold.

If he was sold.

But Aiden's hope that he wouldn't be bought was rapidly dwindling. Despite his lack of soft curves, the guests' gazes lingered on him more than once or twice. Unfortunately, it seemed their kidnapers' strategy was working. The audience here might not be exclusively gay, but he was something exotic and different for these jaded perverts, something even more forbidden than female sex slaves.

It made Aiden's skin crawl, being looked at like a thing, objectified by those creeps. He couldn't imagine becoming a sex toy for one of those revolting men. Unfortunately, it increasingly looked like it was happening, whether he wanted it or not.

Aiden looked around the room, searching for... he wasn't sure what... someone sympathetic? Someone who might help him? Fat chance.

That was when Aiden noticed him.

The man.

He was seated at the table to the far right, nursing a drink. He wasn't drinking it, his dark eyes fixed on Aiden.

Aiden wasn't sure why he took note of it—there were a lot of people staring at him at the moment.

But there was something different about that man.

Although he was surrounded by people clamoring for his attention, he seemed to almost stand apart. He had some intangible quality about him, a peculiar sense of otherness. Aiden couldn't quite put his finger on it. It was probably the man's bearing. He emanated... Aiden tried to think of an appropriate word but couldn't find it. *Power* was the closest thing he could think of, though it wasn't quite right, either. The man held himself like only a very self-assured man would. This was a man who knew—or at least thought—he was better than everyone else in the room. It was really peculiar how he managed to give that impression despite being dressed in clothes identical to most other people's.

Well, maybe his physical appearance played a part.

The man was handsome. His features were a little harsh and rough, but he was undeniably striking. Flawless sun-kissed tawny skin, strong bone structure with chiseled cheekbones and a really good jawline with carefully groomed facial hair that was somewhere between stubble and a beard. His deep brown eyes, framed with long black lashes and dark, prominent eyebrows, were his best feature—and the most unnerving one. There was something about those eyes that unsettled Aiden. The color was that of molten chocolate—soft and inviting—but their flat, hard expression was disquieting. Unlike the other men staring at him, he didn't seem to be looking at Aiden with lust but with cold calculation... and something else. Something that made Aiden's skin prickle with a mix of awareness and unease.

“Who is that?” Aiden asked the goon responsible for guarding him, motioning with his head toward the man.

The goon followed his gaze and frowned, something like surprise flickering over his features. “Huh. We weren't expecting him. He didn't accept the invite initially.”

“Who is he?” Aiden said.

“Sheikh Zain ibn Mustafa Al Rahim. The second son of the emir. Owns half of Dubai. The richest man in the country, though his entire family is rich too. The House of Al Rahim has been ruling this emirate for ages.”

“He’s part of the ruling family?” Aiden said, perking up.

The goon snorted. “Don’t get your hopes up. It doesn’t matter. Even certain emirs have been known to buy our merchandise in the past. Our private auctions are the worst-kept secret the authorities only pretend not to know anything about.”

Aiden deflated. He kept forgetting he wasn’t in America anymore.

“Besides,” the goon said. “He might be part of the ruling family, but it’s well known that Sheikh Zain doesn’t give much of a shit about following or executing the law. All he cares about is his business. He won’t lift a finger to help you. My guess is, he’s not even here to buy anything—he probably has a business meeting here with someone interested in the auction.”

Aiden pursed his lips and looked back at the sheikh, but he wasn’t looking at him anymore. “He’s leaving,” Aiden said, following the man’s tall form with his eyes. A path opened before him as if by magic as people stepped out of his way. That man had a truly magnificent presence; Aiden had always envied people like that a little.

The goon shrugged. “Told you he isn’t interested. That sheikh doesn’t need to wait to see the other merchandise and buy a woman to get laid. He has his pick of them.”

Looking away, Aiden sighed. “My knees are killing me. When is this stupid thing going to end?”

The goon glanced at the tablet in his hands and smirked. “For you, very soon. We just got a very high bid for you. I can’t see it beaten.”

Aiden’s heart skipped a beat. “Who bought me?”

The goon shrugged. “We don’t know and don’t care, as long as they pay. We guarantee full anonymity.” He waited a few moments and nodded. “Congratulations. You’re sold.”

Aiden’s stomach twisted into a painful knot.

Well, fuck.

Chapter Three

After the auction ended, things moved so fast it was a blur.

Aiden felt like it all was happening to someone else, not him. Part of him still expected to wake up at any moment. He'd obviously known that sex trafficking was a real issue in the world, but like most people, he had never thought it could happen to him.

He had been bought. Bought. Like a thing.

Who was the buyer? That was still a mystery.

The man who had handed his kidnappers a briefcase with the money and picked Aiden up on behalf of the auction winner was covered from head to toe. His black eyes were the only visible part of him as he and the goons steered Aiden toward the waiting car. The car didn't have a license plate. It made Aiden extremely uneasy. All this secrecy seemed to indicate that the auction winner was either very deep in the closet or intended to bury Aiden's corpse without witnesses after he was done with him. Or both.

The car ride was long.

The man didn't speak, completely ignoring Aiden's questions and sitting very still in the opposite seat. Maybe he didn't understand English.

At long last, Aiden gave up and closed his eyes, the car ride slowly lulling his tired body into restless sleep.

When he woke up, his handcuffs were gone. The man was gone from the opposite seat, too.

In his place, there was another man.

Aiden stiffened, his heart beating faster as he recognized him. “You!”

Sheikh Zain ibn Mustafa Al Rahim looked at him with his inscrutable dark eyes.

“Why?” Aiden said, feeling more than a little confused. There was *nothing* in Rahim’s eyes as he looked at Aiden: he didn’t stare at Aiden with lust, as many other prospective buyers had. If anything, this man seemed almost reluctant to look at him now, as if even looking at Aiden pained him for some reason.

“How old are you?” the sheikh finally said.

“Twenty-one,” Aiden said. “Why?”

The man ignored his question. “Are you heterosexual?” he said instead.

Aiden narrowed his eyes, studying him. He still noticed no carnal interest in this man’s gaze. It made no sense.

“Yes,” he replied, though strictly speaking, he might not have been entirely truthful. He definitely wasn’t gay—he liked women just fine—but there had been a few guys he’d considered attractive in the past. He’d never done anything about it, so he wasn’t sure if he really was bi or it had been simple aesthetic appreciation.

“Why?” he asked again. The uncertainty ate at him. It didn’t seem as though Zain Rahim was into him, regardless of the enormous amount of money he’d spent on him. So why the hell had he bought him? “Why did you buy me?”

“Keep your voice down,” the man said, looking out the window at the Dubai scenery.

Glancing at the partition separating them from their driver, Aiden scoffed. “What, don’t tell me you’re ashamed of buying a person? I can’t imagine why.”

The sheikh’s jaw clenched.

Aiden studied him curiously. Was it possible that he actually did feel ashamed?

But then the man turned his head and pinned Aiden with an unreadable look. “I’m not proud of it,” he said without much inflection in his voice. “I’ve never thought I’d have to resort to something like this. But I’m not the person who kidnapped you. If I didn’t buy you, someone else would have. And acquiring you was the solution to my problem.”

Acquiring him? The way he’d said the word was infuriating, as if Aiden were a horse or a car.

Aiden laughed. “What, you can’t get laid like all normal people do?” Frankly, it was hard to believe. The asshole might be intimidating, but he emanated a certain magnetism, the way confident, powerful men often did. His chiseled features helped too. Aiden might be—probably—straight, but even he could see that some people would find this man sexually appealing. Some other people.

“I have no interest in you,” the sheikh ground out, his eyes flashing with some intense emotion Aiden couldn’t identify. “I acquired you for my brother. Not me.”

Aiden stared at him. “What?”

The corner of Rahim’s mouth twisted into something hard and uncompromising. “My younger brother is an irresponsible fuck-up who can’t keep it in his pants when he sees an attractive man. I’m tired of cleaning up his messes.”

Aiden frowned, trying to make sense of it. Right—they were in a country in which homosexuality was punishable with imprisonment or perhaps even death, if rumors were to be believed. It seemed Rahim’s brother wasn’t discreet about his affairs with men, and Rahim was forced to intervene—and likely bribe the authorities—in order to protect his brother, and he was fed up with it.

“And you think buying him a personal sex pet will help?” Aiden said, not bothering to keep the snideness out of his voice.

“It will if he knows what’s good for him. I can’t forbid him from having sex entirely—the brat would never agree to it—but if I present him with an attractive, discreet solution, he’ll have no choice but to agree to my conditions. He will agree. And it will be your job to keep him in line.”

Aiden was honestly speechless.

“My job to keep him in line?” he finally managed, his hands balling into fists. “You actually think I’d do anything to help you?” He laughed. “You bought a person like cattle! You’re out of your mind if you think—”

“Stop your hysterics and listen for a moment,” Rahim said, his voice quiet but steely. “Gadiel is leaving for Oxford next summer. You need to keep him in line until then. After that, I’ll let you go. This is the best possible outcome for you, so you should be grateful that it’s me who bought you and not some sick pervert who would have used you for decades and then killed you when you stopped being so young and pretty. Gadiel is a harmless kid. He won’t hurt or mistreat you. Help me protect him from his own stupidity, and I’ll let you go.”

Aiden opened his mouth and closed it without saying anything. A year of being a sex slave really was much better than decades, but it was still a *year of being a sex slave*.

“Grateful,” Aiden repeated. “I’ll be grateful to you when hell freezes over. Why can’t you just ship him to the UK now? That would have solved the problem without fucking buying him a person!”

“If it were possible, I would have done it. Our father will not let him leave the country now. Besides, Gadiel is getting married next year, and he needs to be in the country for that.”

Aiden stared at him. “He’s getting married. And you bought him a sex slave. What a thoughtful brother you are.”

A muscle jumped in Rahim's cheek. "It's an arranged marriage to the daughter of the emir of Abu Dhabi who also happens to be the president of the UAE. Al Sharabi will not hesitate to have Gadiel killed if he ever learns of his proclivities. That's why it's paramount for him to be discreet this year. Al Sharabi is the richest, most powerful man in the country."

"I thought *you* were the richest man in the country," Aiden snarked.

Rahim shrugged. "The Al Sharabi fortune comes from the oil and gas industry. Mine is in real estate. It's hard to compare. And it changes nothing. Emir Al Sharabi is a ruthless man set in his old ways, and so is our father. They both will kill Gadiel if they find out about his inclinations."

Despite his own situation, Aiden couldn't help but feel sorry for this guy he'd never met. If his own father would kill him for something Gadiel couldn't help, it was beyond fucked up. Christ, sometimes it still hit him how much harder gay people had it in some countries. It was the twenty-first century, for god's sake.

"Why can't you just tell him to keep a low profile until Oxford?" Aiden said. "Surely he isn't suicidal?"

Rahim looked out the window again and said nothing. His silence spoke volumes.

Jesus. This was a whole new level of fucked up.

"Then he needs a therapist, not a fuck toy," Aiden said.

"I didn't ask for your opinion."

Aiden scoffed but didn't say anything. It was pointless. This man didn't see him as a person, just a thing to serve as a distraction for his brother.

"How old even is he?" Aiden finally asked, breaking the tense silence.

"Just turned eighteen."

Aiden's eyes widened. "You're forcing someone this young to marry?"

“The marriage isn’t my idea,” Rahim said. “Our families arranged it more than a decade ago.”

Aiden’s gaze dropped to Rahim’s hands. They were good hands, with strong, capable fingers. There weren’t any rings on those fingers, but Aiden knew it didn’t necessarily mean anything. Muslim men didn’t have to wear wedding rings, if he remembered correctly. “Are *you* in an arranged marriage too? You’re older, so you should be married by now, right?”

For a moment, it looked like Rahim wouldn’t reply, but at last he said curtly, “I’m not married.” From the finality in his voice, it was clear that was all he would say on the matter. “And that’s not relevant for you. Only Gadiel is.”

Aiden took a deep breath before letting it out loudly. “I feel sorry for your brother, I really do, but his problems aren’t my problem, and you’re kidding yourself if you think I’ll be fine with being his *sex slave* just because you’ll supposedly let me go next year.”

“Stop using that term.”

Raising his eyebrows, Aiden said, “What term? Sex slave? But that’s what you bought me for, no matter how you dress it up. You might be a good brother who wants to protect his sibling, but you’re still a shitty human being. I have a brother too. I have a family too, and they’re probably freaking out of their minds, because I’ve been missing for months.”

Aiden almost thought he saw a flicker of remorse on the asshole’s face, but it was gone so quickly he was sure he’d just imagined it.

“I’m not the one who kidnapped you.”

“No. You’re just the one who bought me. At least my kidnappers did it for money. You bought me to *use* me, just because you could.”

A weird sort of hush fell after his words.

Aiden’s face felt a little hot as he held the other man’s gaze, an odd, uncomfortable feeling tightening his stomach. The tension already swirling in the air between them turned

thick and ugly with... with... Aiden wasn't sure with what, but he knew he wasn't the only one feeling it. It was an almost tangible thing.

He breathed out only when Rahim looked away. "Thanks to me, you'll get to return home eventually," he said stiffly. "That wouldn't have been the case if I allowed someone else to buy you. This is a glass-half-full situation."

Rationally, Aiden knew it. He knew that dealing with a harmless teenager for a year was far better than being mistreated by some disgusting old pervert for decades. But god, this situation—this infuriating, haughty man—angered him so much.

"And you're not a slave," Rahim said, still not looking at him. His Adam's apple moved. "You were an impulse buy. I knew you could be the solution to my problem, but I'm not interested in ending up in jail. If you cooperate, you'll be rewarded handsomely."

Aiden's brows furrowed. He eyed him suspiciously. "And if I refuse to be your brother's sex toy?"

Rahim shrugged. "You'll enjoy my hospitality for a year. You won't be forced into anything."

"Right," Aiden said, scoffing.

"You'll see."

When they finally arrived at Zain Rahim's house, Aiden understood what he had meant.

The huge, sprawling house was located on an island dozens of miles away from Dubai. They'd arrived here in a helicopter, and the more Aiden looked around, the lower his heart sank. The beauty of the sprawling, white mansion didn't even register, nor did the immaculate landscaping surrounding it. The manicured lawns, sculpted shrubs, and colorful flowerbeds couldn't distract him from the glaring, stomach-wrenching fact: the house was the only one on this island.

Zain Rahim most likely owned the island—possibly had even built it, given the popularity of artificial islands in the

UAE. There wasn't anyone on the island except for Rahim's people. There was no way off of that island.

If he refused to cooperate, there was no escaping it—
or *him*.

Chapter Four

His room was in a goddamn basement.

It was actually a pretty nice room, but it had a big flaw: it didn't have any windows. While Aiden wasn't exactly claustrophobic, he'd never liked staying in a room without windows. He couldn't imagine being locked up here for a year. But then again, that was likely the point.

It was now glaringly obvious how the asshole intended to avoid getting in trouble with law enforcement. If Aiden refused to help him and then tried to report him when Rahim let him go, what would he even accuse him of? The bastard could claim that he'd saved Aiden out of the goodness of his heart and allowed him to enjoy his hospitality without putting a finger on him. The fact that Aiden had to stay in a windowless room for a year was a small detail.

"You're joking, right?" Aiden said, looking around the room.

"As I said, you can improve your situation if you cooperate. Take your shoes off. I've never understood how people in the West live among the filth you bring into your house from outside."

"Fuck you," Aiden said, turning and glowering at Rahim with as much hatred as he could muster—and currently he could muster a lot. He was normally laid back and

easygoing, but right now he felt as far from easygoing as it was possible to be.

His angry look was wasted. The bastard didn't even blink, his expression as unimpressed as ever. "Take your shoes off," he repeated softly.

Aiden glared at him.

Rahim stared him down.

To his shame, Aiden was the one to look away first. Scowling, he took his shoes off. It was a small thing—he didn't really mind taking his shoes off when his hosts requested it—but for some reason, it felt like a much bigger concession this time.

"Gadiel should join us momentarily," Zain said.

Right on cue, there was the sound of footsteps.

A brown-haired guy entered the room—presumably Gadiel Rahim.

The guy was very handsome. Incredibly handsome, actually. He was about Aiden's height—and a few inches shorter than his brother. The family resemblance was definitely there, but his features were much softer than his brother's, and it wasn't just because of the age difference. Rahim—or *Zain*, since they both were Rahims—was ruggedly handsome in a brutal sort of way, while Gadiel's handsomeness was more refined. Gadiel's skin was paler, and something about his features—and his striking bright blue eyes—made it obvious that he was mixed race. Unlike his older brother, he could easily pass for a white guy, and not an ordinary-looking one. His features were exquisite, of perfect symmetry, except for his mouth, which was a little too wide for his face.

Gadiel said something to his brother, the questioning tone clear as he glanced curiously at Aiden.

Zain said something back, and Gadiel's stunning eyes widened as he did a double-take at Aiden.

Aiden scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “What, is he telling you that he bought a sex slave for you?”

For a long moment, there was only silence.

Gadiel was gaping while Aiden glowered at Zain.

“You can’t be serious,” Gadiel said at last, his English as good as his brother’s. His accent was vaguely British. “You *bought* him for me? I can hook up myself!”

Zain’s expression became pinched, irritation coming off him in waves. “I wasted millions on covering up your latest hook-up,” he said flatly. “The money is nothing compared to the favors I now owe to people I’d rather not owe anything. Clearly you can’t be trusted. From now on, you’ll have a discreet option here in my house, since you’re so incapable of grasping that you might end up in prison—or worse—every time you want to suck a cock.”

Gadiel flushed. “Zain,” he muttered, managing to look both like a kicked puppy and a very resentful child.

“Don’t. It won’t work anymore. I’m fed up, Gadiel.” Zain glanced at Aiden, his dark eyes flashing with displeasure. “He’ll stay here until you leave for England next year. He’s the only option you have—”

“No, I’m *not* an option!” Aiden cut him off, crossing his arms over his chest.

Zain shifted his heavy gaze to him, his lips twisting in derision. “I thought Gadiel was the only idiot in the room, but it seems you also lack the intelligence to make the right choice.”

“You—you—”

“Hey!” Gadiel said at the same time. “I’m not—”

“Silence,” Zain said.

They both shut up.

Aiden flushed, resenting his own compliance.

“If you’re both determined to be idiots, go ahead,” Zain said before looking at his brother. “That means you will not

even *look* at men for a year. No flirting, no touching, no hooking up. And you know I'll know if you attempt to lie to me." Ignoring his scowling brother, he looked at Aiden. Something flashed through his eyes. "Enjoy my hospitality. I hope you like the room. I'll see you in a year." And with that, he stalked out of the room, leaving a tangible and rather awkward silence behind him.

Aiden pursed his lips, eyeing the younger guy warily. Gadiel looked harmless enough, but sometimes appearances could be deceiving.

"Let's make something clear," Aiden said. "I don't care what your overbearing asshole of a brother says, but I'm not a sex pet and will never be your sex pet. Come close to me and I'll punch your balls so hard you'll never even think about sex again."

Gadiel backed away, covering his crotch protectively. "Um... Look, this really wasn't my idea, okay? I need to... go and digest all of this. Maybe I'll be able to make Zain change his mind."

Yeah, good luck with that.

Before Aiden could express his skepticism, Gadiel was gone.

At first Aiden thought things weren't all that bad. He had a nice room, he could sleep as long as he wanted, he was left alone, and he was fed well.

But by the end of the week, he was bored. Very bored.

By the end of the month, Aiden felt like screaming. Just to hear his own voice. *Any* voice.

He'd never been claustrophobic like his brother Jordan, but now he was starting to understand what it was like to hate enclosed spaces. His room might be rather big, but it still had the same four walls he had to stare at all day long. The only

people he saw were the silent male servants who brought him food three times a day, and those barely counted as interactions, since the men either didn't speak English or were ordered by their asshole of an employer not to speak to him.

Christ, Aiden felt like he was going insane. He'd never been one of those people who were happy with their own company. He was a sociable, tactile person. He liked talking, he liked touching people. He'd always needed people around him to feel happy. This lack of any human contact and entertainment was making him more than a little anxious, his anxiety rising with every passing day.

By the end of the month, he couldn't do it anymore. "Tell your employer to come here," he said that day when he was brought lunch. "Tell him I won't eat until he does."

The man ignored him, as usual, showing no sign of having heard or understood him, and left.

Aiden plopped down on his bed and waited.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the door's lock clicked and Zain entered the room, looking extremely irritated.

Aiden sprang to his feet, feeling inordinately excited to see him. Talking to that asshole was still better than talking to no one.

"You interrupted an important business meeting. What do you want?"

Aiden crossed his arms over his chest, hating how small he felt in this man's presence. It wasn't even the two or three inches Zain had on him. Something about this man's sheer presence made him seem so much more imposing than he physically was.

"Let me leave," Aiden said. "Your brother clearly has no intention of using me. He won't change his mind. He seems to have some human decency, unlike you."

"He's a horny teenager incapable of keeping it in his pants. I'll give it another week or two before he comes here, his horniness overruling his supposed human decency."

Great. Fucking fantastic.

“About that,” Aiden said. “You do realize that I’m straight, right? I have no experience with men. How am I supposed to keep your brother’s interest for a year when I’m completely inexperienced when it comes to men? You would be much better off hiring male escorts who actually know what they’re doing!”

Finally that seemed to give the bastard pause. His eyebrows drew together.

“He’s a horny teenager,” Zain said at last. “Even bad sex with an attractive person seems good to horny teenagers. And escorts aren’t an option—even using the most discreet agencies is a risk. My father has eyes everywhere.”

Aiden raised his eyebrows. “And buying him a sex pet isn’t a risk?”

“Actually, buying you really was much less risky. As far as our authorities are concerned, you are nothing. Legally you aren’t even in this country. You don’t have a family or friends to spill Gadiel’s secret to. No one knows that you’re here, except for me and my people, and they’re absolutely loyal to me.”

Aiden’s stomach knotted up.

What Zain said was true. This man could do *anything* to him, even kill him and dump him in the ocean, and no one would be the wiser. No one would know or care.

Aiden said quietly, “I don’t know if there’s a concept of hell in Islam, but I hope you know you’re going to burn in it.”

Zain’s expression remained unmoved. “Noted. If that’s all, I’ll return to my work.” He turned toward the door. “Don’t bother me with temper tantrums anymore. I don’t have time for them.”

Temper tantrums?

“You ruined my life!” Aiden snapped, stepping forward, his hands clenching into fists. “You stole my freedom! I’m going crazy in this room! But apparently, not wanting to be

locked up in this room for a year is a temper tantrum—*look* at me when I'm talking to you, you asshole!" He shoved hard at the taller man, forcing him to turn around.

For a long, charged moment, they just stared at each other, Aiden's harsh, unsteady breathing the only sound in the room.

"I hate you," Aiden said, his voice shaking with feeling. He might normally be a laid-back, good-natured person, but he felt nothing like that now. He *hated*. That feeling was burning in his chest, eating his insides like acid, demanding an outlet.

Those dark, emotionless eyes just looked at him for what felt like an eternity before the bastard turned away and walked out of the room, the lock clicking shut after him.

Aiden deflated like a balloon, feeling so defeated he was close to crying.

But the next morning, the lock on the door was gone.

Chapter Five

Over the next few weeks, Aiden tested the limits of his freedom within the house.

It was a huge, T-shaped mansion that was a compelling amalgamation of Western and Arabic cultures. Some of the rooms wouldn't have looked out of place in fancy five-star hotels back home, but some of them looked like something straight out of Aladdin. Aiden found the contrast fascinating. Bizarrely, the mix of cultures didn't seem bizarre at all. It worked, creating a house that felt elegant, tasteful, slightly exotic, but homey, despite its size. Aiden would have loved this house—if he weren't imprisoned in it.

There was a room on the first floor where the staff gathered for prayers five times a day. Aiden loitered outside the room a few times, curious whether Zain took part in the prayers too. He never did, as far as Aiden could tell. Whether it was because he preferred to pray by himself or wasn't religious... who knew. Aiden wouldn't have been surprised if it was the latter. Zain didn't seem the type to pray to anything, too self-important to think there could be a higher judgment for his actions. Aiden honestly couldn't imagine that arrogant dick showing any humility and prostrating himself on the floor.

Anyway, fuck him. Aiden refused to think about the asshole more than he had to. If he thought about Zain too

much, he felt like his blood vessels were going to explode from sheer rage. It was a novel feeling for him. Aiden *didn't* hate people. He wasn't that kind of person. But Zain Rahim made him feel like a different person altogether. That dick was —

Right, not thinking about him. Clearly he still needed to work on it.

Anyway.

There were a few computers around the house, but they were password-protected, to Aiden's disappointment—not that he was surprised. His hope of stealing someone's phone to contact his family had been crushed as well: the staff didn't seem to carry their phones on them. Aiden had gotten up very early yesterday and actually seen the staff hand over their phones to security guards upon entering the estate. Presumably they got their phones back when their work day was over.

Either way, that plan was a bust. The phones were locked up in the security room that was off limits to him. It was one of the few places in the house that was, actually. Aiden had discovered that he could go pretty much anywhere except for the security room and Zain's office on the first floor. So he explored to his heart's content, avoiding only the left wing of the house where Zain's bedroom was apparently located.

The worst part was, he wasn't allowed outside at all. The moment he attempted to step out into the gardens surrounding the house, security guards seemed to materialize out of nowhere, none too gently pushing him inside. It was annoying but not entirely unexpected.

What was a little unexpected was that there weren't any women around. All of the staff were men, and none of them said a single word to Aiden, their eyes downcast and their expressions blank. Despite their unsettling silence, they were incredibly efficient.

The house ran like clockwork, with meals served three times a day in the dining room. If Aiden missed a meal, no one

bothered to feed him—Aiden had learned it the hard way the previous morning.

Despite being allowed out of the room for a few weeks now, he and Zain had rarely crossed paths. It seemed Zain might have been away on some business trip. But apparently he was now back home. Aiden had found out about it when he'd arrived for breakfast yesterday. He'd turned around and walked out. He had gone hungry for the rest of the day, hoping that he'd be brought food to his room if he refused to eat with the asshole.

He hadn't been brought food.

Instead, a silent servant brought him a note from Zain after he missed breakfast again.

Stop being a child and eat. You were the one who wanted to be out of your room so badly, so you won't get room service anymore. You will eat in the dining room or you will starve if you're so afraid of me. Your choice.

Aiden crumpled the note into a ball and threw it at the wall. Afraid? He wasn't afraid of anything.

Screw it, he could stomach the dickhead's presence. It wasn't like they had to talk or anything. He wouldn't even *look* at Zain.

But it was easier said than done.

Aiden's determination to ignore Zain seemed to dissipate the moment he strode into the dining room and saw that asshole seated at the head of the table, drinking coffee and browsing on his phone, looking like the king of the world in his snow-white robe—it was called a thobe, if Aiden wasn't mistaken. His headwear—Aiden wasn't sure what that was called—was off, revealing thick, slightly wavy black hair that didn't soften the man's stony, cold exterior at all. His facial hair was in beard territory today, and Aiden felt a rush of envy—he could barely grow stubble, much less a beard.

Aiden glowered at him as he sat down, but his hateful look was entirely wasted, because Zain didn't even glance at him.

Scowling, Aiden turned to the food and tucked in, telling himself to just ignore the dickhead.

Except once his stomach was appeased with the delicious khuzi, he became terrible at ignoring the other person in the room. In his defense, Zain Rahim wasn't an easy man to ignore. Aiden's eyes seemed to gravitate toward him, no matter how hard he tried to keep them on his food.

The worst part was, the bastard didn't seem to have any issue ignoring *him*. He barely lifted his gaze from his food, eating with such a detached, cold attitude he might as well have been eating alone.

"I want to contact my family," Aiden said, breaking the silence.

Zain didn't even lift his gaze from his food. "No."

Aiden gritted his teeth. "My mom has a weak heart. The grief might kill her."

"And you contacting her to tell her your current situation wouldn't?" Zain said, still not looking at him, as if Aiden wasn't worthy of even a brief glance.

It was fucking infuriating.

Aiden grabbed an apple and threw it at the asshole's head.

The *smack* as it hit Zain's arrogant mouth was incredibly, immensely satisfying.

Aiden grinned, but his grin faded as Zain slowly lifted his gaze, the look in his dark eyes chilling him to his core.

As if in slow motion, Zain took a napkin and pressed it against his split lip. The drop of blood looked obscenely red against the snow-white napkin and Zain's white thobe.

Aiden's stomach clenched. "Look at me when I'm talking to you," he said, trying not to sound too defensive. Violence against the person who had *bought* him like cattle was justified. It was.

For a long, charged moment, Zain didn't say anything, staring him down. "You refused to cooperate, but I still let you out of your room," he said at last, very quietly. "I can just as easily lock you up there again. Don't test my patience, boy."

God, Aiden hated that a part of him wanted to drop his gaze meekly and submit to this man's will. "And you don't test mine. You might have bought me like a thing, but I'm not a thing—I'm a human being. The least you can do is look at me when I'm talking to you."

The tight look Zain gave him was that of irritation mixed with... with something Aiden couldn't put his finger on.

"Fine," Zain said. "I'm looking at you. Now what?"

Pinned under that heavy, intense gaze, Aiden realized what people meant when they said to be careful what you wished for.

Aiden wet his dry lips with his tongue. He felt parched, uneasy in his own skin. "I want to negotiate."

"Negotiate," Zain repeated, as if he didn't understand the word. It seemed almost mocking, and Aiden glowered at him, feeling a rush of pure hatred again. God, he'd never known that hatred could feel like this, all-consuming and overwhelming his every sense, making his hands tremble with it.

"Yes, negotiate. You said if I cooperated with you, my situation would improve. What exactly did you mean? Will you let me contact my family if I do my best to keep your brother in line?" God, he couldn't believe he was even considering it.

Zain looked at him as if he were stupid. "Of course not."

Aiden took a deep breath, fighting the urge to throw another apple at the asshole's face. Or something sharper. Like his fork. Or the knife. He'd never had homicidal urges until he'd met this man.

"Then what did you mean?" he said with forced calm.

“If you cooperate, I’ll pay you a million dollars when I let you go home next year.”

Aiden stared at him before shaking his head, incredulous.

“Ten million,” Zain said.

Aiden just laughed.

“Fifty.”

Aiden laughed again. Jesus, this man was filthy rich. “Wow, I’m so glad that at least I’d be a very expensive whore.”

“You’ll also get more freedom,” Zain said, ignoring his snide remark. “You’ll get a better room, with windows. You’ll be allowed to go outside. If you’re *very* cooperative, I might let you accompany me off the island or even allow you trips to Dubai by yourself—accompanied by bodyguards, of course.”

Aiden chewed on his lip, considering it. It was tempting. Very tempting. Being able to leave the island meant more opportunities to escape or at least to contact his family. He might not be locked up in his room anymore, but Aiden knew he would go crazy if he remained confined in this house for a year. He wanted to go outside. He wanted to go home. A year of this seemed like forever right now.

“Fine,” he said, even though a voice at the back of his mind whispered that he was selling his soul to the devil. He quashed that voice. Being stubborn was stupid. Principles wouldn’t get him home. Gadiel wasn’t repulsive or anything. Maybe he could make it work. Maybe. “I’m willing to cooperate. What do you want me to do?”

Zain took a sip of his tea, his eyes glinting with mild satisfaction—the bastard didn’t look surprised by his acquiescence at all, as if he had expected it. It made Aiden’s fingers itch with the urge to smash his fist against that arrogant face.

But there was also something else in Zain’s eyes, an emotion Aiden couldn’t quite read. If he didn’t know better, he’d think Zain was also displeased. Which made no fucking

sense. How could he be displeased and satisfied at the same time? Why would he be displeased at all?

“Gadiel wants to see you soon. As expected, his supposed human decency stood no chance against his inability to keep it in his pants.”

Aiden’s stomach knotted up.

Leaning back in his chair, Zain heaved a sigh. “But you had a point: your inexperience might be a hindrance. My brother is...” He grimaced. “He’s a horny idiot who thinks with his dick whenever he sees a handsome man. It will be hard for you to keep his interest since you lack the skills. But you will do it.”

Aiden blinked, wondering if it was the language barrier.

“I will?” Aiden said with a laugh. “And how am I supposed to do it?”

Zain’s expression was unmoved. “I don’t care. I just want results. There are... rumors around. About Gadiel’s inclinations. I couldn’t entirely quash them, so he’s going to be under increased scrutiny until his marriage. Gadiel is not to even *look* at other men that way this year. You will have to become the perfect little sex pet of his dreams, so perfect that his attention doesn’t stray.”

Looking down, Aiden realized he was gripping his knife too hard. It was blunt and useless against anything but fruit, but the temptation to throw it at the dickhead’s face was becoming nearly irresistible.

“A perfect little sex pet,” he repeated slowly, trying to keep the rage that was choking him out of his voice. “If you wanted a perfect little sex pet for your brother, you should have bought him one. You can’t buy a poodle and then expect it to guard your house.”

Zain’s bland expression didn’t change. “The poodle will have to learn,” he had the gall to say. “So are you going to cooperate or not?”

Aiden let out a sigh through his gritted teeth. “You might be used to getting your own way every time, but

newsflash, Your Highness: you can't just order someone without any experience with men to suddenly become a pro at keeping another guy's attention solely on him for a year. Even the high and mighty Sheikh Zain ibn Mustafa Al Rahim can't *will* those nonexistent skills into existence."

For a long, charged moment, they stared—glared—at each other, at an impasse.

Aiden almost cheered aloud when Zain was the first to look away.

"Fine. I'll help. You can ask me anything about him." Zain's tone was short, clipped, as if every word pained him. "I'm aware of my brother's tastes." His lips twisted. "More aware than I ever wanted to be."

Aiden scoffed. "How is knowing his sexual preferences going to compensate for the complete lack of practical experience?"

Zain looked at him dispassionately. "Knowledge is power. A well-informed lover is better than an ignorant whore. Every man has a weakness. Luckily for you, I know my brother's." Glancing at his watch, Zain got to his feet and headed toward the door.

Aiden frowned. "Wait, you're going? You didn't—you didn't tell me anything useful!"

"Later. I'm late for my meeting as it is. My helicopter was supposed to leave five minutes ago."

"Right. As if you can't tell your pilot to wait for you."

"Of course I can," Zain said without looking up, typing on his phone. "If I had something important detaining me."

Aiden vividly imagined curling his hand into a fist and smashing it against the asshole's haughty face.

The fantasy gave him a visceral satisfaction, but as soon as the door closed after Zain, Aiden felt a peculiar sort of emptiness, his insides pulsing with hatred that needed an outlet—needed its target. Badly.

Christ, he'd never felt such hatred. He wanted to chase after Zain and make that dick look at him, pay him some real attention, make Zain treat him like a fucking person and not a thing that was at the bottom of his priorities.

Fuck him, fuck him, *fuck* him.

God, Aiden hated him so much. So much.

Chapter Six

The idea came to Aiden a little after two in the morning, when he finally got tired of lying in his bed, fuming uselessly, and started thinking of ways to get back at Zain.

It was obvious that his hostility didn't bother Zain at all. But there could be another way to get under his skin. The asshole wanted him to be cooperative? He could be *very* cooperative. In fact, he could be very cooperative right now.

Grinning, Aiden sat up in his bed and pushed his sheets off.

He glanced at his nearly naked body—his dark blue boxers were the only things he was wearing. He thought for a moment but then decided against getting dressed.

He padded out of his room and headed toward Zain's bedroom. It was a good distance away from his, and the walk gave him a chance to second-guess himself.

Was it really smart? Probably not.

Would it piss Zain off? Without doubt. And that was the only thing Aiden truly cared about. Pissing the asshole off. Inconveniencing him. Getting under his skin. He would do fucking *anything* to be more than a thing not worthy of His Highness's time.

The house was eerily quiet. It was creepy, even though Aiden knew it was nowhere near as abandoned as it seemed: there were at least a dozen security guards patrolling the house's premises and there was some staff that stayed overnight. But it was very quiet and dark at this hour.

Aiden actually got lost before he finally found his way again and came to a halt in front of Zain's room.

He pushed the door open. It wasn't locked. But then again, why would it be? The man was in his own house, on his own private island that was very well guarded.

Aiden tiptoed to the bed and stared at the man in it.

The French windows were open, letting the glow from a security light spill into the room, casting shadows on the wall.

Zain Rahim was asleep.

Apparently even heartless monsters slept. But of course, unlike Aiden, he was a free man and could sleep like a baby. It wasn't like he was burdened with a conscience.

Aiden's gaze roamed over the man's sleeping form with growing resentment. Apparently it wasn't enough that the asshole had pretty much every privilege in the world; he was also ridiculously fit. Aiden wanted to find some flaw, but try as he might, he couldn't. The bastard was built flawlessly, his body the epitome of masculine strength without being ridiculously buff.

Zain was sprawled on his stomach, his muscular arm hugging his pillow, drawing attention to the width of his shoulders and the narrowness of his waist and hips. He was naked from the waist up, the white sheets bunched down around his hips, his back strong and corded with muscle under the smooth skin. His shoulders rose and fell with every breath.

For a moment, Aiden vividly imagined grabbing the white pillow next to Zain, pressing it against that black hair, and *smothering* him in his sleep.

The thought was immensely satisfying.

Alas, considering Zain's physique, he had some doubts about his ability to overpower him. And Aiden didn't really want to become a murderer, no matter how tempting the dick made it.

He could get his revenge in other ways. More creative ways.

Operation Annoy-Zain was a go.

Aiden grinned and flopped down in the free space next to Zain. "Hello!"

The man next to him stiffened, his even breathing coming to a halt. Slowly, he turned his head and stared at Aiden's grinning face with his dark, intense eyes.

Aiden grinned wider, refusing to be unnerved. He was made of sterner stuff.

"What are you doing here?" Zain said, his voice husky from sleep.

Stretching out on his side, Aiden blinked at him innocently. "I'm here to ask questions about Gadiel."

A beat passed.

"Out," Zain said, his voice very, very quiet.

Aiden shivered.

Don't you dare chicken out, he told himself sternly.

"No," Aiden said, making a show of getting comfortable. "I'm keeping my end of our deal, aren't I? You promised to tell me stuff about your brother, so I can become a perfect little sex pet for him. I'm all ears."

A muscle by Zain's left eye twitched.

Aiden gave him another innocent smile.

"Out," Zain repeated, in a tone that made it clear that disobedience was unthinkable.

Aiden despised the part of him that wanted to meekly do as he was told. Fuck that. He wasn't going to let this man's will crush him—that would be the ultimate, final enslavement.

That would mean he had accepted what he had been turned into.

Aiden made a thoughtful sound. “No, thank you,” he said after a moment. “I’m very comfortable where I am.”

The expression on Zain’s face was priceless: cold fury mixed with deep incredulity, as if his mind couldn’t grasp the concept of his commands not being obeyed. Aiden could barely keep himself from laughing.

“Get out of my bed,” Zain said flatly.

Aiden pretended that he couldn’t hear him. “So, here’s the first question: does your brother prefer to top or bottom?”

Zain took a deep, audible breath.

Aiden yelped when he was suddenly thrown over a wide shoulder and carried like a sack of potatoes.

He was dumped on his ass in the corridor, and the door slammed shut an inch away from his nose.

Aiden stared at the closed door.

And then, he grinned.

His butt kind of hurt, but Operation Annoy-Zain was off to a very promising start.

Next night he’d half expected to find Zain’s door locked, but it wasn’t. Then again, installing a lock to keep Aiden out would be the equivalent of admitting that Aiden was significant enough to get under his skin, so of course that arrogant dick wouldn’t do it.

That played right into Aiden’s hands.

He hadn’t seen Zain at all that day—his helicopter had left very early in the morning and returned well after supper—and Aiden was... antsy. He couldn’t wait to see him. He couldn’t put his plan into action if the villain wasn’t there, after all.

Zain was sleeping on his back this time, his long, muscular arm stretched across the empty space beside him.

Aiden scowled once again at his perfect physique—he somehow looked arrogant even in his sleep, the dick—before walking over and climbing into the bed again. But Zain’s arm prevented him from lying down. After a moment’s thought, Aiden crouched beside him and poked him in his smooth chest. Did he wax it? Or was he naturally smooth? Aiden had kind of thought that with such an abundance of facial hair Zain would be hairy all over, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Aiden moved his fingers to Zain’s arm to check if he had hair there. He did.

“Out,” Zain said, without opening his eyes.

“You’re getting repetitive, you know,” Aiden said, turning on the lamp on the nightstand. “So, does your brother prefer to top or bottom?”

Zain sighed. It was the most long-suffering sigh Aiden had ever heard in his life. It made him grin. He knew he’d won.

“Probably the latter,” Zain said, his eyes still closed. “I once walked in on him having his asshole licked.”

Aiden pulled a face. Just imagining Jordan walking in while someone ate his ass made him extremely uncomfortable. “It doesn’t necessarily mean that he’s a bottom though. Some tops like having their asses eaten.”

Zain’s expression became pinched. Clearly it wasn’t a topic he ever wanted to contemplate or talk about. “Gadiel’s never had to lift a finger to get anything in his life. I can bet you anything that he’s the type to lie there and order someone to pleasure him. Topping would be too much effort for such a spoiled brat.”

“It’s kind of weird that you care so much about him when your opinion of him is so low.”

“He’s my brother,” Zain said, as if that explained everything.

Maybe it did.

“Hmm,” Aiden said, drumming his fingers thoughtfully.

“Stop groping me.”

Startled, Aiden looked down. His fingers were on Zain’s—very hard—stomach.

Snatching his hand away, Aiden flushed. “I wasn’t—I wasn’t *groping* you, you conceited dick! I was thinking.”

“Go think in your room.”

“No.”

Aiden grinned when he heard Zain sigh through his gritted teeth. Seriously, annoying Zain was his favorite thing in the world.

“Can I ask you something?” Aiden said. “How are you so okay with your brother being gay? I thought it was taboo in Islam.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m *okay* with it. But I know better than to think it’s something that I can change.”

“But it is taboo in Islam, right?”

Zain finally opened his eyes and regarded him for a moment. “There are many things that are taboo in Islam, including consensual sex between a man and a woman who aren’t married. But realistically, few men remain virgins until marriage—unless they marry very early. I’m certainly not a virgin. I may not be happy about Gadiel’s behavior, but shunning my brother for doing something taboo would be the height of hypocrisy.”

I’m certainly not a virgin.

Wetting his lips, Aiden glanced at Zain’s virile, strong body. He didn’t doubt that for a moment. A man like this wouldn’t be a virgin. Women of every religion, age, and race probably flocked to him.

“That’s surprisingly reasonable of you,” Aiden said.

Zain’s eyes narrowed. “Surprisingly? Just because I’m a Muslim?”

“Because you’re a dick,” Aiden said, huffing. “Don’t bring religion and prejudice into it. I have nothing against Islam. I’m not religious myself, but I’m a firm believer that everyone should believe what they want to believe. I didn’t expect you to be reasonable because normally you act like you know better than everyone else.”

“I’m many things, but I try not to be a hypocrite,” Zain said, closing his eyes again. His lips curled into something unamused. “By Muslim standards, I’m a sinner of the worst kind. I’ve done enough to end up in Jahannam in the afterlife.”

Aiden looked at him curiously. “And it doesn’t bother you?”

Zain gave a sleepy shrug. “Sometimes it does, but I’m not the most devoted Muslim out there. I’m not a firm believer in everything the Quran says. My religious education was... spotty at best. Let’s just say I was disillusioned early about the necessity of following everything the Quran says. Children learn by example.”

Aiden stared at him, now burning with curiosity. “What do you mean?”

“I thought you were here to learn about Gadiel, not me,” Zain said, very dryly. “I’m going back to sleep. If you don’t leave within the next fifteen seconds, you’ll be locked up in your room again.”

Aiden didn’t want to go yet. He wanted to stay. He wanted—needed—to learn more about this man, because... “know thy enemy” and all that. “That wouldn’t be very fair, would it? When I’m just following your orders and trying to learn stuff about your brother in order to become the perfect little sex pet of his dreams?”

“Five seconds now. And stop saying those words.”

“But I’m being *cooperative* here! Hey!”

He was hauled off the bed and unceremoniously dropped on the floor of the corridor again.

“Ouch! My butt hurts,” Aiden complained, rubbing his abused ass and scowling up at Zain.

The bastard gave him an unimpressed look, somehow managing to look impossibly superior despite wearing only a pair of black boxers, his dark hair ruffled from sleep. “Say thank you.”

Tearing his envious gaze from his tall, powerful body, Aiden blinked up at him, utterly confused. “What?”

Dark eyebrows lifted slightly. “I don’t make empty threats. If you were still in my room, I would have been forced to follow through and lock you up again. So say thank you.”

Spluttering indignantly, Aiden choked out, “You insufferable ass—”

“I’m still not hearing a thank you.” Zain’s eyes narrowed in contemplation. He made a mock-thoughtful sound—or at least it seemed mocking to Aiden. “Come to think of it, a mere thank you wouldn’t be enough. We can’t have you showing this attitude with Gadiel. He’s far less thick-skinned than I am. From now on, you will watch your tone. Insults will not be tolerated. You will address me respectfully. Remember your place.”

Rage filled Aiden’s chest.

“And what is my place, Your Highness?” he bit out, glaring at the floor resentfully.

Zain put a finger under Aiden’s chin and tipped it up.

The contact made Aiden shiver violently. Was it revulsion? Maybe it was the rage. Either way, he couldn’t breathe. He wanted to squirm away from the contact, his skin *burning* where the other man was touching him.

“You don’t have one,” Zain said softly, his eyes boring a hole in his face. “You will be whatever I want you to be.”

Aiden shook his head dazedly. He was trembling, his ears were ringing, and his head felt floaty and weird.

“Right,” he croaked out. “Because I’m a lowly slave and you’re my owner.” His tone was supposed to be sardonic, but he missed the mark by a mile.

Silence fell—and it felt a little weird. A little off. A little *something*.

“That’s ridiculous,” Zain said, his voice low and rough. His eyes seemed black. Were they not brown? “I told you you weren’t a slave. Much less mine.”

Aiden moistened his lips with his tongue. They felt dry. Parched.

“Go,” Zain said, letting go of his chin and stepping back. “Return to bed—your own bed. If you disturb my sleep again, you will regret it.”

Aiden stumbled to his feet and strode away, a hot feeling twisting his stomach into a knot.

He told himself it was hatred, but there was a weird edge to it.

Something he couldn’t put his finger on.

Chapter Seven

After that night, something changed. Or maybe it was all in Aiden's head.

That mocking *owner* shouldn't have changed anything, but the word, once said, seemed to be constantly present in the room with them, like a giant pink elephant impossible to ignore.

Owner.

Owner owner owner.

Aiden now felt very self-conscious, acutely aware that Zain owned him. This man really could do anything to him. He'd known that already—rationally—but the *owner* somehow had made it so much more real.

"Gadiel wants to meet up with you," Zain said, breaking the silence that had fallen ever since Aiden came to the dining room.

Aiden looked up—met the chocolate-brown, piercing gaze—and swallowed. "He's coming?" His voice came out more high-pitched than he would have liked.

"No," Zain said. "He wants to meet you on neutral ground." His lips curled slightly, his eyes glimmering with wry amusement. "He said he wants you to feel comfortable in his presence when you talk."

“So he does have some human decency,” Aiden said.

Zain took a sip of his coffee. “Don’t be naive. It basically means that he’s accepting my conditions but wants to assuage his conscience first. To pat himself on the back for being a good person.”

“Have you always been such a cynic?” Aiden said, even though he couldn’t say he disagreed with him this time. If Gadiel truly were a good person, he would refuse to use a person who had been *bought* for him, period.

“I’m not a cynic,” Zain said. “I’m a realist.”

Scoffing, Aiden rolled his eyes. “So, you’re taking me to Dubai?” His heart sped up at the thought. Dubai meant a chance to escape.

“Yes. But don’t get too excited.” Zain looked at him steadily. “I’ll keep an eye on you, always.”

Aiden’s stomach clenched, that weird self-consciousness making itself known again. *Owner.*

“What, you’re going to be the third wheel?” he said, clearing his throat a little and chuckling. “That would be a tad awkward, wouldn’t it?”

Zain heaved a sigh. “Considering the rumors, Gadiel can’t be seen alone with an attractive man. My presence would eliminate any suspicion. Don’t look so excited. I’m hardly excited to waste my time on this, either.”

“Fine,” Aiden said. Frankly, he didn’t mind that Zain would be there. His presence would make Gadiel behave. He had no idea what to expect from Gadiel. At least Zain was familiar. “Where are we going to meet him?” He glanced down at his clothes. “Can I go there in these clothes? I don’t exactly have anything fancy.” Zain’s people had brought him some clothes, but they were simple and didn’t fit all that well.

Zain frowned and looked him over. “We’ll meet Gadiel at a restaurant. You’ll need to change into something decent.” He stood and headed out of the room. “Come.”

A little confused, Aiden followed him. Only halfway to Zain's room did he realize that he hadn't even *questioned* Zain's order. That was more than a little alarming. Surely he hadn't already been brainwashed into thinking that this man could order him around, right? *Right?*

Aiden had still been mulling it over when they finally reached Zain's room.

Zain strode over to the walk-in closet and opened it. "Pick something to wear. My clothes will be a little big for you but should be better than what you have."

Aiden entered the closet, fully expecting to see rows upon rows of traditional Arabic clothes, but while there really were plenty of them, an entire section of the closet was dedicated to regular clothes he was used to. Granted, upon examining them, Aiden had to revise his opinion. There was nothing regular about these clothes. Everything here was designer and ridiculously expensive. But of course it was.

Aiden stared at those sharp suits and suddenly imagined Zain putting them on: buttoning up a shirt, buttoning the cuffs, his long tawny fingers making quick work of the buttons before knotting a tie around his tanned neck.

Biting his lip, Aiden shook the weird thought off—why was he even thinking about such inane things?—and reached for a blue shirt and one of the gray suits.

Aiden quickly changed and examined himself in the mirror.

Zain had been right: while the suit was clearly made for a taller, bigger man, he still looked... good. People would obviously be able to tell that he'd borrowed someone else's clothes if they paid attention, but he wouldn't stand out in a fancy restaurant as much as he would in his T-shirt and sweatpants.

He wasn't sure how he felt about wearing Zain's clothes though. The mere thought made his stomach squirm funnily. It made him... uncomfortable, reminding him of the *owner* and what the word made him feel. Wearing Zain's clothes felt like

another mark of ownership. Zain's ownership. Him being Zain's.

Christ, why was he fixating on it so much?

"Hurry up," came Zain's impatient voice from outside the closet. "I have business in the city before our meeting with my brother. You have half a minute."

"Half a—I'm ready, Jesus!" Aiden said with a scoff, striding out of the closet. "Why are you always so bossy? And what kind of business can you possibly have on a weekend?"

Zain didn't reply, just looking at him strangely.

"What?" Aiden said, glancing down at himself. "I thought I looked pretty good?"

"You look passable," Zain said, already turning away and striding out of the room. "Let's go."

Aiden glowered at the back of his head all the way to the helicopter. Even being allowed to go outside for the first time in what seemed like forever barely registered. *Passable?* No one had ever called his looks passable. Aiden might not have liked his pretty-boy looks growing up, but he knew he looked objectively good. But of course His Highness wasn't impressed.

"Is there a reason you're attempting to bore a hole in me with your eyes?" Zain said a few minutes after the helicopter took off.

"What's your business in the city?" Aiden said, quashing the bizarre urge to demand that Zain admit he looked good. He didn't even know why the *passable* comment bothered him so much. He'd never fished for compliments in his life. Christ, what was going on here?

"I have a date, but I'll have to cut it short to chaperone you and Gadiel."

Aiden stared at him. "You have a *date*?"

Zain raised his eyebrows. "Why are you surprised? You know I'm no virgin. Did you expect me to keep a harem of concubines instead of dating?"

Aiden chewed on his lip. He wasn't even sure what he had expected. But the thought of Zain dating someone was just... bizarre. Unfathomable. Wrong for reasons he couldn't even explain.

"I just can't imagine anyone actually wanting to spend time with you," Aiden said. "The mind positively boggles. She must be a gold digger. Or a doormat. Or most likely, both."

Zain looked at him as though Aiden was a mildly interesting bug under his shoe. "I've been reliably informed that I top all those silly 'most eligible bachelor in the country' lists."

Of course he did, the arrogant dick.

"That proves nothing," Aiden said with a smile. "It just raises the likelihood that your date is a gold digger. I'm not sure who I feel sorry for: you or her. Probably her. Even a gold digger deserves better than you."

"And what do I deserve?" Zain said.

"You deserve to die alone, buried with your precious money. I'm sure no one will even come to your funeral, because they will no longer be paid to tolerate you."

"Is that so," Zain said, and was that amusement in his eyes?

"Yep," Aiden said, nodding earnestly. "You're a horrible person, and your ridiculous wealth doesn't help. I've always thought billionaires shouldn't exist in a world that has so many starving people, and after meeting you I'm even more convinced that so much money can only turn a person into an asshole of epic proportions who thinks he can do anything without any consequences. Like, my parents are far from being poor, but the wealth you were born to is something else entirely. It clearly corrupted you."

The asshole didn't look fazed in the least, regarding Aiden with something like mild curiosity. "I hate to disappoint you, but I earned everything I have through hard work."

Aiden laughed. "Right. You're a fucking prince."

Something shifted in Zain's eyes. "I'm just a second son, and my father cut me off financially when I was seventeen."

Aiden sat up straighter. "What? Why?"

Zain shrugged and reached for the door as the helicopter landed.

He got out, his gaze already on his phone.

Aiden scowled at his back, fighting a feeling of dissatisfaction. He never felt satisfied after his interactions with this man, unable to quash the feeling of utter insignificance. He wanted to run after Zain and yell at him, slap his chiseled, arrogant face, shove at him, and—and punch him, or something. Get his attention for real. Get under his skin. He wanted it so much. So much.

"Stay inside," Zain threw over his shoulder, like a master ordering his dog to stay put.

The urge to *obey* was nearly irresistible.

Annoyed with himself, Aiden forced himself to move. He followed Zain out of the helicopter and looked around curiously. They were on a beach that looked picturesque and vaguely familiar, as if he'd seen it on the Internet. They had landed beside a lovely, fancy bungalow.

It looked like a love nest.

He couldn't deny that he felt a perverse curiosity about what kind of woman Zain dated. In his mind, he imagined a skinny model, a barely legal pretty young thing with perfect fake tits and an equally perfect fake smile.

But the woman walking toward Zain was nothing like that.

She was attractive in a handsome way, her features a little harsh, her dark eyes glinting with obvious intelligence. She was also a lot older than Aiden had expected: she seemed quite a bit older than Zain, more likely in her forties than thirties. She was tall, elegant, and refined in a way that screamed confidence. This was a woman who knew her worth.

Aiden blinked, taken aback by the clothes she was wearing. Her attire was elegant and modest, but it was very much Western, no abaya or hijab in sight.

The woman said something to Zain, her curious gaze flicking to Aiden.

Zain's answer was short, his tone clearly reluctant.

That didn't seem to deter the woman. She turned to Aiden and smiled at him.

"You're staring, darling," she said, stretching her hand out for a handshake.

Aiden shook it, a little embarrassed that he was so easy to read. "Sorry," he said with a sheepish smile. "I didn't mean to stare. You're just not what I expected."

"I'm Salma Abadi," the woman said, her eyes flashing with amusement. "Zain, where did you find this charming young man?"

"There's no need for introductions," Zain said, flicking his eyes to Aiden. "He's not important."

Aiden glowered at him and turned to Salma. "I'm—"

"No one," Zain cut him off, stepping closer and laying a hand on his arm.

Aiden went still, his breath knocked out of his lungs. He stared blankly at the sun-bronzed fingers on his arm. Even though there were two layers of fabric separating them from his skin, the touch seemed searing.

"Get back in the helicopter," Zain said.

His eyes were all Aiden could see, like dark pools of nothing, dragging him down into their abyss.

Clinging to his willpower, Aiden gulped and forced himself to shake his head. Fuck, what was happening to him? Why did he feel like this? Like it was impossible to disobey this man? Like he *needed* to obey him? He was losing his fucking mind.

“Don’t be rude, darling,” Salma said, clicking her tongue. “If you don’t want to introduce him to me, fine—but the poor boy doesn’t need to sit in your helicopter while we have fun.”

Have fun? What the hell did that mean? Surely they weren’t going to... fuck, right?

“Aw, he’s adorable,” Salma said. “I absolutely insist that he come inside. That’s not up to you, Zain. I can invite into my house whoever I want.”

“Not him,” Zain said curtly. “If I say he stays put, he stays put.”

Aiden’s stomach squirmed.

Salma gave Zain a strange look. “You’re acting bizarre, darling.” She added something in Arabic, her tone partly bewildered, partly amused.

All she got in response was a flat look from Zain. She said something again, which prompted a terse answer, irritation coming off Zain in tangible waves. After a moment, he looked at Aiden. “Wait for me in the helicopter. I won’t be long.” He allowed Salma to lead him toward the house.

Aiden followed them with his eyes, an odd feeling settling in his stomach. His gaze shifted to Salma’s slim, manicured fingers on Zain’s bicep. Were they lovers? She certainly acted very familiar with him.

Aiden imagined them in bed together, both of them tall and long limbed, Zain’s muscular form on top of her soft, pliant body, his muscles flexing as he thrust hard into—

Right.

Aiden looked away, his cheeks warm and his borrowed pants suddenly tight. It weirded him out. He wasn’t really the type to fantasize about real people having sex. It had never been his thing. He had no idea why he’d just so vividly imagined Zain and Salma having sex. She was an attractive woman, but she was twice his age, for fuck’s sake. It was a little weird. Scratch that, it was a lot weird.

And why the hell was he doing as Zain said? He might have agreed to cooperate, but he wasn't Zain's slave. Zain didn't fucking own him.

Decision made, Aiden strode toward the house the couple had disappeared into. The bungalow's door wasn't locked. He pushed it open quietly.

There was soft, relaxing music playing in the room. The lights were dimmed, adding to the atmosphere of intimacy and relaxation.

Zain was sprawled in the armchair. Salma was behind him, her hands on his neck. She was massaging Zain's neck and shoulders, speaking softly in Arabic. Her voice was low, kind, and friendly. Her touch was very familiar, like she'd done this hundreds of times.

Aiden watched the scene from the doorway, mesmerized by what he was seeing. He'd never seen Zain look so relaxed. He always seemed to carry a certain tension with him, a tightly coiled energy, as if he was about to spring into action. This time the tension was absent.

Zain's eyes were heavy-lidded and soon enough they closed completely as her fingers moved into his dark hair, massaging his scalp. It looked...

Salma said something, and Zain murmured what sounded like assent. Her slim fingers unbuttoned his thobe and helped Zain shrug out of it, leaving him bare-chested, smooth skin rippling over his muscles as he settled back into the chair.

When Aiden dragged his eyes up, he met Salma's gaze. There was something like curiosity in her eyes. "Your boy is here, darling," she said in English, her fingers still working their magic.

Zain's eyelids lifted. Dark eyes stared at Aiden with an expression he couldn't quite place.

Aiden suddenly felt like he was the one half-naked and vulnerable.

"I'm not his boy," Aiden said belatedly. "Don't call me that."

“Well, pardon me for not choosing a more appropriate word,” Salma said with an amused smile. “I would have, if Zain bothered to introduce you instead of treating you like his possession.”

Aiden’s stomach clenched, and the feeling got worse when he looked back into Zain’s eyes.

“You were ordered to stay put,” Zain said, tension returning to his body. The muscles of his arms flexed slightly, as if he made an aborted move to get up but thought better of it.

“I’m not a thing to be ordered about,” Aiden said. “I’m not going to wait for you like a good little boy while you get massaged and pampered like a king. Let’s go. We have places to be.”

Salma laughed. “Oh, this is priceless! I like him, Zain. You need more people around you who don’t put up with your bossy ways.”

Throwing her an annoyed look, Zain got to his feet, all smooth grace and tightly restrained energy. He quickly got dressed, his eyes fixed on Aiden in a manner that was *slightly* unnerving. Slightly.

Saying something in Arabic over his shoulder, Zain strode forward and settled a heavy hand on Aiden’s back. “Walk.”

Aiden walked.

They walked in silence to the helicopter. Aiden resented the arrogant, proprietary way Zain’s hand felt on his back, and his insides were twisted up into a tight knot that was part-anticipation, part-trepidation, and part-glee. It might be fucked-up, but he was... *pleased* that he’d spoiled Zain’s fun with his woman, and he didn’t even mind all that much that Zain was going to punish him for that—and for his disobedience. It was worth it. Annoying and inconveniencing that dick was worth *anything*.

Zain spoke only once the helicopter took off.

“Massage is one of the few things that help my headaches,” he said. “And thanks to you, I still have one.”

Giving him an innocent look, Aiden smiled. “I’m sorry? I would offer to give you a massage, but I don’t know the first thing about them.”

Zain regarded him for a moment. “You’ll have to make up for it another way, then,” he said in a quiet voice.

Aiden’s mouth went dry. His heart started beating somewhere in his throat. He stared at Zain, painfully aware of him—the distance between their bodies—in a way he’d never been aware of another person in his life.

“What do you mean?” he managed.

Was this going where he thought it was going? He was pretty sure he wasn’t imagining the thick tension in the air, the cruel glint in those dark eyes. Zain wanted to punish him. He wanted to make him regret his insolence. Zain was going to make him do something. Something disgusting and humiliating. Like... Like make him suck his cock.

Suck his cock.

The idea made Aiden’s heart race with—with indignation and disgust. He was already mentally preparing arguments when the other man finally replied.

“Shutting up and being quiet will be a start.”

Aiden blinked at him, flushed and wound up from the confrontation that hadn’t happened.

Right.

Why had his mind immediately jumped to being forced to suck Zain’s cock? It had been stupid of him to expect Zain to behave that way. The guy was probably homophobic, like the majority of people in this country. He wasn’t going to suddenly want head from a man. Which was great. Fantastic. Aiden didn’t have to worry about being molested and forced to suck Zain’s cock.

His own cock twitched in his pants.

Aiden took in a deep breath, trying not to freak out.

Okay. He was a healthy twenty-one-year-old guy. The semi he was sporting didn't have to mean anything. And it *definitely* didn't mean that he found the idea of being forced to suck this asshole's cock in any way arousing. That would be— weird. Aiden had always been open-minded, but he'd never been into rape fantasies. He really didn't judge people who were—whatever floated their boats—but it just wasn't his thing. At all. But it looked like now he was going to have to reevaluate that opinion.

Unless it was a *Zain* thing rather than the forced sex thing.

No way, Aiden told himself vehemently. That would actually be far worse than a questionable kink. He refused to believe that he could be attracted to that asshole. Refused.

Nope.

Just nope.

Chapter Eight

Aiden was still freaking out on the inside by the time they arrived.

It was a fancy restaurant in Dubai Marina. The view was spectacular enough to make Aiden snap out of his confused musings and stare at all the glittering, luxurious buildings.

But Zain didn't give him much time to gawk. The familiar heavy hand returned to his upper back, fingers grazing against his nape.

A small moan threatened to leave Aiden's lips. He swallowed it with some difficulty, looking at his tented crotch. Fuck.

"Walk," Zain said.

Tugging his suit jacket closed, Aiden did as he was told.

Walking with an erection was fucking hard, pun intended. Walking with an erection when the cause of that erection still had a bossy hand on his back was almost impossible. Ugh. Seriously, what the fuck? Aiden had no issue with being into men, but couldn't he have a hard-on for someone—*anyone*—else? Anyone but the impossibly domineering dick who had bought him to be a sex toy for his brother. Clearly he needed to get his head checked.

Gadiel was already waiting for them at the restaurant, seated at a secluded corner table. He got to his feet, looking a little nervous. “Hey,” he said, nodding awkwardly to Aiden.

Aiden just glared at him sullenly. Gadiel might not be as much of a dickhead as Zain, but he was still an ass without an ounce of human decency.

“Sit,” Zain said, pushing Aiden into a seat and finally removing his hand from him.

Not that it helped much. Aiden’s skin was still prickling with terrible awareness, as if Zain’s touch had left a permanent brand on it.

Aiden’s cock twitched again.

Jesus. This was bad.

“So,” Gadiel said. “How are you settling in? Do you like the country?”

Aiden scowled at him. “Seriously?”

Gadiel gave a sheepish smile. “Sorry, I just—I just don’t know how to talk to you. This situation isn’t exactly normal, and you’re very—I’m sure you know how you look. You’re very handsome. The most handsome guy I’ve ever seen.”

Aiden glanced sideways at Zain, wanting to know what he thought of his brother’s words.

Zain’s face was inscrutable as he perused the menu. By all appearances, he wasn’t paying them any attention, and Aiden dragged his gaze away. Something that seemed an awful lot like disappointment nestled in the pit of his belly.

“Thanks,” Aiden said belatedly, remembering that he was supposed to be cooperative.

Silence fell after the waiter took Zain’s order and left. Aiden frowned, looking at the dish in front of Gadiel. “What about me? I didn’t order anything.”

“I ordered for you,” Zain said shortly, his gaze on his phone. He said it so matter-of-factly, as if he was entitled to order for him.

Aiden scowled, his ears turning hot and heat pulling to his crotch.

“You and Gadiel have twenty minutes,” Zain said, without looking up. “So you’d better not waste it.”

“The food probably won’t even get here in twenty minutes,” Aiden said, just to be contrary. And because he kind of wanted Zain to look at him.

“Of course it will,” Gadiel said with a smile. “It’s *Zain*. It’ll be served in a few minutes. I’m sure they had it timed so that all his favorites were prepared right around his arrival, just in case.”

Aiden huffed, glaring at Zain’s arrogant face. But his glare was entirely wasted, because Zain didn’t even glance at him. He hated the part of him that wanted—needed—Zain to look at him.

Look at me, look at me, look at me.

“So,” Gadiel said. “I wanted to get to know you before we... you know.”

Aiden dragged his gaze away from Zain and frowned at his younger brother. “No, I don’t know,” he said coldly.

Gadiel winced, looking sheepish. “Look, the whole thing wasn’t my idea, either, so please don’t take out your anger on me. We can be friends. I get how you feel.”

“Do you?” Aiden said with a nice smile. “Are you locked up in someone’s house with all your rights stolen from you too? Are you being coerced to become a sex pet of a guy you don’t find the least bit attractive?”

“Ouch,” Gadiel said, averting his gaze. To his credit, he did look uncomfortable. “I have little choice, Aiden.” He laughed bitterly. “Zain isn’t wrong that our father will kill me if he finds out. You’re the only safe option I have.”

Aiden bit the inside of his cheek. He did feel sorry for the guy; he really did. At least Aiden had a loving family to return to. “What if I don’t want to be your safe option? Doesn’t it matter?”

“Is that you being cooperative?” Zain murmured. He was finally giving Aiden his full attention, his dark eyes fixed on him with a supremely unimpressed expression.

Aiden felt a rush of adrenaline. God, it was absurd. Why did a simple look from this man make him excited and jittery in his skin?

“If I weren’t so cooperative, I wouldn’t be sitting here but would be halfway across Dubai already.”

Raising his eyebrows, Zain said, “You wouldn’t escape from me that easily. And you wouldn’t like your punishment.”

Aiden pursed his lips tightly, hating the way his stomach was fluttering and the way he felt flushed and out of breath. Fuck, this was bad. How could he be so turned on by a man who was irredeemably horrible? Was he an idiot? He was quite possibly an idiot.

Gadiel cleared his throat. “Eh, there’s no need to punish him for attempting to escape, Zain. I get it, really. It’ll take him some time to—”

“You aren’t the one who gets to decide whether to punish him or not,” Zain cut him off, flicking a cold look at Gadiel before returning it to Aiden. “Only me.”

Aiden licked his dry lips and had a wild, insane thought: *I wanna suck your cock.*

His face warm, he tried to push the thought out of his mind, but it refused to go away.

The humiliating, bewildering, horrifying truth was, if this man said the word, he’d drop to his knees right there and slobber all over his cock, any witnesses be damned. Something about this man pushed buttons he hadn’t even been aware of.

“Yeah,” Aiden said, looking into those dark eyes, his voice hoarser than it normally was. “God forbid you go a few minutes without reminding me who owns me.”

Zain stared at him, transfixed, and the weight of his attention was like a physical touch, pressing onto him, *into* him, robbing him of breath.

Aiden breathed raggedly, his cock so hard in his borrowed pants he could barely think. The mere fact that his cock was pressed to fabric that had once hosted Zain's cock was even more of a turn-on.

The waiter's sudden appearance by their table made Zain remove his gaze from him, and Aiden almost whined in disappointment. He glared at the waiter for taking Zain's attention away, hating him and hating himself for feeling that way. Christ, he needed to get his head checked for real.

"Eat," Zain commanded as a dish was put in front of Aiden.

Aiden ate. He could barely taste the food, no matter how delicious it was. If someone asked him later what he had been eating, he wouldn't be able to reply, he was so distracted.

Zain and Gadiel conversed in Arabic a little, but the conversation seemed rather stilted. Zain looked cold and faintly disapproving; Gadiel sounded defensive and sullen.

At last, Zain glanced at his watch and said, "Well, that was an absolute waste of time." Wiping his lips with a napkin, he got to his feet and looked at Aiden.

Aiden sprang to his feet as well, feeling shaky, uncertain, and more than a little freaked out by his sudden spike of anxiety at the thought of Zain leaving him with Gadiel. Christ, was this what Stockholm syndrome felt like?

"Let's go," Zain said and strode toward the doors without even bothering to check that Aiden was following him. Arrogant dick.

At least his Stockholm syndrome didn't suddenly make him think that Zain was less of an asshole than he was.

Thank god for small mercies.

Chapter Nine

The helicopter ride back to the island was quiet.

Zain seemed in a pensive mood, staring out the window. Aiden was in a self-kicking mood, trying to eliminate his stupid attraction.

Unfortunately, it was easier said than done.

As they walked toward the house, his eyes kept straying to Zain, lingering on his chiseled cheekbones, strong profile, and the mouthwatering Adam's apple on his stubbled throat. Aiden wanted to put his mouth there and *suck*. Fuck, if he had any doubts left about his attraction to men, they were gone now. He definitely was attracted to men. Or at least to this man.

"I hope you realize that I didn't buy you to suck my cock."

Aiden paled, flushed, and stared at Zain. "W-what?" he stammered. But part of him wasn't even surprised that Zain had noticed his stupid attraction to him. This man was too intelligent and observant to have missed anything.

Zain opened the front door and preceded him into the house. Taking his shoes off, he headed toward his office.

Numbly, Aiden took his shoes off as well and followed him, feeling like a man sentenced to death.

“Shut the door,” Zain said once they were inside his office.

His knees trembling, Aiden shut the door.

Leaning his hip against his desk, Zain regarded him with his inscrutable brown eyes.

Silence stretched, thick and suffocating.

“You told me you weren’t homosexual,” Zain said in a conversational voice.

If there was a god, a meteorite would strike the house right this moment, saving him from this humiliation.

Unfortunately, the cosmic bodies didn’t oblige.

“I didn’t lie,” Aiden said stiffly, looking anywhere but at him. “I just wasn’t entirely honest. I did find some men attractive in the past. I just didn’t do anything about it. So I wasn’t lying about my lack of experience.”

Silence.

“Can I go now?” Aiden said, rubbing the back of his neck. His face felt very hot.

“Look at me.” It was a quiet command, but it was a command all the same.

Aiden couldn’t disobey him.

Zain was eyeing him with a strange look on his face. “I’m not homosexual,” he said. “Your attraction is unrequited and unwelcome.”

This was the single most humiliating moment of Aiden’s life. He hadn’t thought it was possible to hate this man more, but he did now.

Laughing harshly, Aiden turned toward the door. “Right. All right. If that’s all—”

“I didn’t say you could go.”

Aiden froze with his hand on the door handle.

“While the situation isn’t ideal, it can be used to our advantage.”

Frowning incredulously, Aiden turned around. “What?”

Zain thrummed his fingers absentmindedly on the desk, his expression calculating. “Your lack of experience *is* a problem. Gadiel is skittish about the whole thing as it is. Saddling him with an unenthusiastic lover who doesn’t know what he’s doing isn’t going to work. You should at least know what you’re doing.”

Aiden’s heart started to pound. Did... Did Zain mean what Aiden thought he meant?

“I will allow you to practice on me,” Zain said, his fingers flexing on the desk. “Come over here.”

He was kidding.

He couldn’t possibly be serious.

It couldn’t possibly be happening.

Aiden swallowed, looking at him wide-eyed.

“It’s not funny,” he rasped out.

Zain’s lips twisted into a sardonic smile. “Trust me, I don’t find this amusing, either.” His shoulders were tense. His entire body was, tension rolling off him in almost tangible waves. “Stop wasting my time. We both know it will happen. You will get on your knees and you will learn how to suck cock. Now, Aiden.”

Aiden’s feet moved before he consciously made the decision. He stopped in front of Zain, feeling nearly dizzy with an awful combination of want, hatred, and confusion.

“Get on with it,” Zain said, his careless tone at odds with the intensity of his eyes. “Do you need to be ordered? I can order you.”

The world seemed to be wavering around him, shaky and out of focus. The only thing that remained firmly in focus was Zain’s haughty face and his dark, dark eyes.

“Now,” Zain said softly.

Aiden’s knees buckled. He all but fell, his knees hitting the plush carpet, as if pushed down by an invisible hand.

Dazedly, he watched Zain's long fingers lift the white thobe out of the way and then unzip his pants.

And there it was.

Zain's cock.

Aiden licked his lips, unable to look away. The cock was more than half-hard already. It was big. Thick. Veiny. Darker than Zain's skin. Zain's hand moved, stroking it lazily, until it completely hardened inches away from Aiden's face, the cockhead fat and glistening.

Christ.

Aiden stared at it, hypnotized. He couldn't seem to look away.

"Get on with it before I change my mind," Zain said tersely. "Stop wasting my time."

Aiden felt a fresh wave of helpless anger—and an equally strong wave of arousal. To his mortification and confusion, Zain's dismissive, bossy attitude was only making him more eager. More desperate. As if Zain really was doing him a favor by letting him suck his cock. As if it were a privilege.

"Fine, then," Zain said, making a move to tuck his cock back into his pants.

No!

Aiden swayed forward and touched the head of Zain's cock with his tongue.

Oh god.

The first lick across the silky, swollen head left him lightheaded with arousal. Fuck, it shouldn't have been so hot. He was licking another man's cock. Why did this turn him on so much?

Aiden dragged his tongue from the base of Zain's cock to the tip, and then he mouthed his way back down, marveling at the silken texture. He could hardly believe he was actually doing this. But god, he wanted this cock in his mouth.

Aiden sucked on the fat tip, and then dipped down further, taking as much of the cock inside him as he could. He moaned, his mind becoming foggy and slow with arousal.

He got a rhythmic bob going, relishing the sensation of the thick, smooth rod sliding over the sensitive skin of his mouth, hitting the back of his throat again, and again, and again. It was making him choke a little, but Aiden kind of didn't care. He wanted more. He couldn't stop.

A heavy hand tangled in his hair and tugged, pulling him off Zain's cock.

Aiden moaned in protest, panting raggedly, and lifted his glazed eyes.

Zain's face was no longer inscrutable, his jaw tense and locked as though he was in pain. Dark eyes glared down at him, Zain's hard cock throbbing against Aiden's parted lips.

Aiden tried to take the cock back into his mouth, but Zain's grip tightened, not allowing him.

A whine left Aiden's throat.

Zain's nostrils flared. "So desperate," he said, his gaze flicking between Aiden's eyes and his panting mouth. "Pathetic."

"Fuck you," Aiden spat out—or rather, tried to. His voice sounded absolutely wrecked.

Zain's thumb stroked Aiden's wet bottom lip, pressing hard. His leaking erection slapped against his cheek. "I'm not surprised. You looked like a cocksucker kneeling on that podium, the way you were constantly licking your fat lips."

Fat lips? He didn't have fat lips!

"Why, thank you, I had no idea you were paying so much attention to my lips—"

Zain shoved his cock back into him, making Aiden choke and glare at him sullenly. His anger probably didn't look very convincing, considering how hard he was, how much this was turning him on—having his mouth used for another man's pleasure. For this man's pleasure.

Aiden wished he had the self-control to pull away, to punch this insufferably arrogant man, but something about the humiliating words—the humiliating treatment—only turned him on more. He moaned around Zain’s cock and humped the air, seeking friction—anything.

Zain pressed his socked foot against his crotch, *hard*, nothing gentle about it, and Aiden groaned, humping it gratefully, harder and faster, oh god, yes, yes—

He came so hard he nearly blacked out. He was barely conscious while Zain grabbed his face, holding him still as he slammed hard into his mouth, over and over and over. Then he groaned and Aiden’s mouth was suddenly filled with hot, salty come. Aiden coughed, but Zain didn’t let him pull back, holding him in place.

“Swallow,” came a quiet command.

Aiden swallowed every drop, shivering as Zain’s thumb stroked his cheek lightly before Zain removed his hands from his face.

Panting, Aiden looked up, despising how much he wanted to have pleased this man. Was it good?

Was *I* good?

Zain tucked his cock back into his pants. His face was inscrutable once again. “Passable. You were more eager than skilled, but some men are into that.”

Flushing, Aiden glowered at him. “Fuck you.”

Straightening his thobe, Zain said, “You’ll need more practice.” He walked out, leaving Aiden gaping.

More practice?

Chapter Ten

Apparently, when Zain had said “more practice,” he had meant it.

Over the next few days, Aiden found himself *practicing* at least twice a day. The asshole didn’t even care what Aiden was doing or if the timing was inconvenient for him.

This morning, Aiden had to forgo breakfast and suck Zain’s cock while the bastard sat at the head of the table, casually sipping his coffee and doing something on his phone.

The infuriating part was, Aiden *liked* it. Part of him got off on being treated like a cockwarmer, a thing for Zain to put his cock into and use. He seethed at Zain’s disrespectful, dismissive attitude, but every time Zain told him to kneel for him, his head quickly became foggy with arousal. He hated it, and he loved it. He hated what this man did to him, the way his mind and body became weak with the pleasure of being used. The pleasure of being *owned*. He actually got off on the thought of Zain owning him. It was deeply humiliating and disgusting—when Aiden thought of it afterward.

He didn’t give a damn while it was actually happening.

Aiden moaned around the cock in his mouth, his hands gripping Zain’s muscular, firm thighs. The fabric of Zain’s thobe partly covered Aiden’s head, making him nearly suffocate from the heat, but he couldn’t bring himself to care,

lost in the sensation of being fucked in the mouth. He was loving even the controlling weight of Zain's hand on his head. Although the fabric didn't let him feel Zain's bare hand, the experience of being confined under Zain's thobe and being forced to suck his cock while anyone might enter the room was deeply arousing.

Aiden shifted, rutting his aching cock against Zain's ankle. *Like a horny dog humping his owner.* But the embarrassment was unable to penetrate the fog of arousal in his mind.

The pressure of Zain's hand on his head increased. Zain's hips flexed, thrusting his cock up into the welcoming heat of Aiden's mouth. Oh god, yes, yes, more—

Aiden's mouth was filled with salty come and Aiden swallowed greedily. So good. He was almost there, too—

“Stop,” Zain commanded, sounding only slightly out of breath.

Aiden froze mid-hump, disoriented and so turned on he was close to crying.

“I didn't say you could use me to get off,” Zain said, pushing his thobe off Aiden's head.

The fresh air didn't cool Aiden's desire in the slightest. He stared dazedly at Zain's face, panting like he'd run a marathon. “Please,” he croaked out before he could stop himself.

Zain's expression was... strange, his eyes roaming over Aiden's overheated face. Aiden pressed his hand to his throbbing erection, needing relief so badly he didn't even feel embarrassed.

Zain's gaze followed the movement. His lips twisted derisively. “You're going to make a mess. Pull it out at least.”

Aiden complied hurriedly, moaning as his hand wrapped around his bare cock. Almost, almost there.

Falling forward, he nuzzled against Zain's half-hard cock and sucked the tip back into his mouth, ignoring the hiss

Zain let out. It pushed his arousal higher—the taste of Zain’s spent cock—and he came like that, moaning around the penis in his mouth and spilling all over the floor.

“Your technique still needs work,” Zain said after a moment, tucking himself back in. “But you’re improving.”

Aiden shivered in pleasure, hating how much even the smallest praise from this man affected him. God, he wished he’d discovered this particular kink before meeting Zain; then the experience might not have been so overwhelming and disorienting.

“I live to please you,” he said with forced sarcasm, trying to shake himself out of that state. *Get a grip, dammit, before you thank him for the privilege of sucking his cock.*

“I know,” Zain said, getting to his feet and looking down at him with faint disapproval. “Fix your clothes before my staff sees you with your cock out.” He glanced at Aiden’s come on the floor. “And clean the mess you made.”

Aiden flushed and glared at him sullenly. “Yes, master,” he snarked. Attempted to. *Master* came out a little bit wrong, a little off-key—or a little too genuine.

They stared at each other.

Aiden felt so damn weird. He wanted...

“I want a cat,” he blurted out, saying the first thing that came to mind. It was completely inane, but it was better than saying something more stupid. Like asking for a kiss.

“A cat,” Zain repeated, as if he’d never heard the word.

“Yes, a cat! We have a cat back home—Mrs. Hudson—and I miss her. I demand a cat for being so cooperative. You promised that you’d make my life better if I’m cooperative. I need a cat to pet.”

The incredulous look Zain gave him almost made Aiden laugh. Instead, he smiled.

Shaking his head, Zain looked away and strode out of the room.

Aiden had completely forgotten about his spontaneous request until he saw the cage Zain was carrying in his hands as he entered his room that evening.

“Oh my god,” Aiden said.

Glaring at him darkly, Zain all but dropped the cage into his hands. “Is this sufficient?”

“This” was a tiny golden-white kitten with the prettiest hazel eyes Aiden had ever seen. It looked absolutely adorable. It also looked ridiculously expensive.

“I would ask why you put a tiny, defenseless kitten into a cage, but that’s actually entirely in character for a monster like you, so I won’t.”

Zain’s lips twitched. “I’m glad to live down to your expectations, but you’re more of a puppy than a kitten. And the ‘poor defenseless kitten’ scratched my hand bloody.”

Aiden grinned. “Good. I already adore it.”

“You’re smiling too much lately.”

Aiden smiled wider, just to annoy him. “I’m sorry, master. Should I ask permission before smiling?”

Zain just looked at him for a long moment, his expression tight. At last he glanced at his watch. “I have a few minutes to spare for your practice.”

Aiden rolled his eyes. A few minutes to spare, right.

Zain lifted his eyebrows expectantly.

“Oh, fine!” Dropping the cage on the bed, Aiden knelt down and reached for Zain’s zipper.

Afterward, Zain patted his head and said sardonically, “Good puppy.”

Aiden scowled at him, licking his come off his lips. “Don’t call me puppy after I just sucked your cock. It’s

weird.”

Zain took Aiden’s chin into his hand and tipped it up. “I’ll call you whatever I want,” he said, leaning down.

Aiden nodded dazedly, looking at Zain’s mouth. His lips parted, and he strained forward—

Zain let go of him abruptly and straightened up. His expression closing off, he strode out of the room.

As always, Aiden immediately felt like the world rearranged itself around him now that there wasn’t a Zain-shaped pillar in it. The sensation was disorienting, as if he were waking up from a bizarre dream.

Aiden got to his feet and blinked blankly at the door, barely curbing the ridiculous urge to go after Zain. Like a fucking puppy following his owner.

A wave of self-disgust washed over him.

Jesus. He needed to put a stop to this.

Before he really started thinking of himself as Zain’s pet.

Chapter Eleven

When Zain sent for him the next evening, Aiden was resolved to put a stop to the whole thing. There was being cooperative, and then there was what Zain was forcing him into. Zain was full of shit. Aiden didn't *need* practice anymore. He was hardly a pro at blowjobs, but he'd gotten pretty good and comfortable with them, despite Zain's rough handling.

"I'm not going to give you blowjobs anymore," Aiden said the moment he entered Zain's room.

Seated in the armchair by the window, Zain lifted his gaze to him. The room was poorly lit, the bedside lamp the only source of light, so Zain's face was half in the shadows and difficult to read. "What blowjobs?"

Aiden blinked at him before laughing. "Is that your idea of a joke? I didn't hallucinate the blowjobs you forced me to give you!"

Leaning back in his seat, Zain folded his long fingers in front of him and regarded Aiden with slightly raised eyebrows. "It was just practice. And if anyone was forced into it, it wasn't you. I distinctly remember you enjoying yourself every time."

His face burning, Aiden huffed. "Are you seriously going to claim that you didn't?"

Zain shrugged. “I won’t deny that, but it’s nothing more than a physiological reaction to stimuli. It’s still unnatural and repulsive.”

“Repulsive?” Aiden repeated, spluttering with indignation. He tried to ignore the other feeling that had his stomach twisted up. It wasn’t hurt. It wasn’t disappointment. Whatever it was, it originated from the same part of him that preened every time this man deigned to praise him. That part of him should shut up.

“Yes,” Zain said. “In case you’ve forgotten, I’m not gay.”

“It was *hard* to take that seriously when you were coming in my mouth several times a day. Pun intended.”

Zain gave him a flat look.

Aiden smiled. “Sorry, but I don’t buy that it was repulsive. No man is that self-sacrificing. And a selfish asshole like you definitely isn’t. I don’t care how you rationalize it in your homophobic mind, but don’t feed me that bullshit. Because I’m not buying it.”

Something shifted in those dark eyes. The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees as Zain scrutinized him. Finally, he said softly, “You don’t get to accuse me of repressed homosexual inclinations just because I don’t return your feelings.”

Aiden choked out, “I don’t have *feelings* for you, you self-centered, conceited, smug ass!” The mere thought was nauseating. Nauseating and ridiculous. The nerve!

Zain raised his eyebrows. “My mistake. It must have been someone else who looks like a kicked puppy every time I leave the room.”

Aiden vividly imagined choking him with his bare hands. Or punching those sneering, perfect lips.

That’s not fucking true, he wanted to yell.

But then he thought better of it. It would be pointless. Zain wouldn’t believe him. Why would he, when Aiden

behaved so embarrassingly eager every time he sucked his cock? No, he had to think of another way to get the upper hand. Everyone had a weakness.

The problem was, this man didn't seem to have any.

Except... except maybe for the chink in his armor that had appeared when Aiden had alluded to Zain's repressed homosexual leanings. Or had he imagined it?

It was worth a try. It might be the only way to get under Zain's skin, to push him off balance.

"You're right," Aiden said, giving him his sweetest smile and batting his eyelashes in an exaggerated manner.

Zain's eyes narrowed. "Am I?" he said, watching him warily.

"Yep," Aiden said, sauntering over. He dropped himself into Zain's lap and smiled wider, pretending he hadn't noticed the way Zain had gone completely rigid. He looped his arms around Zain's neck. "I adore you," Aiden said dramatically, pecking him on the stubbled jaw. His heart thundering, he did it again, trying not to breathe deeply. This man's scent did things to him. Horrible things. "I can't live without you, let's have babies together—Ouch!" Aiden rubbed his sore ass when he was unceremoniously dumped from Zain's lap. "This isn't the way to treat someone in love with you, babe," he said, batting his eyelashes again before blowing him a kiss.

A muscle twitched by Zain's left eye. He stared at him for a long, charged moment with such intensity Aiden started seriously fearing for his life.

But there was no turning back now. Besides, this sure was working as far as annoying Zain went. And it *was* fun.

"Don't be angry with me, sweet cheeks," Aiden said, barely suppressing a laugh. He leaned forward and rested his cheek against Zain's knee, looking up at him through his eyelashes. "I can feel how stressed you are." He slipped his hand under Zain's thobe, letting his fingers run over the fabric of his pants, up his hard thigh, until they finally reached Zain's cock. Which definitely wasn't completely soft.

Aiden smiled. “Do you want my mouth now?” he asked softly, rubbing his cheek against Zain’s knee. His face felt hot, but he forced himself to add, “You can have it. You know I love sucking your cock. Your cock is the only one I want to suck.”

The cock under his hand twitched.

Zain’s face was stony. “Stop this ridiculous behavior at once,” he said coldly, as if the cock hardening against Aiden’s hand didn’t belong to him. “I’m not sure what you’re trying to accomplish, but it won’t work. It was just practice. I’m not into men.”

Well, the hard dick throbbing against Aiden’s palm said otherwise.

“It’s okay,” Aiden murmured, pushing Zain’s thobe out of the way and moving forward until his face pressed against the obscene bulge under Zain’s pants. Aiden breathed in, trying to rein in his excitement. God, he hated that what he’d told Zain wasn’t even a lie: he did love sucking his cock. It was disturbing how much he loved it. He was kind of addicted to it. He would happily spend the rest of his life on his knees, with Zain’s cock in his mouth, used by him whenever Zain wanted to get off. And that was why this had to stop. This was madness. His attraction to Zain was turning into something obsessive, submissive, and unhealthy.

This had to stop.

Aiden couldn’t stop. “I won’t tell anyone,” he whispered, mouthing the head of Zain’s cock through the fabric. “No one will find out. You own me, right? My body is yours to use.”

A hand buried in his hair before roughly jerking his head up.

“It’s cute that you actually think you can manipulate me,” Zain said, his eyes blazing fire. “What are you hoping for? That you’ll be a good little cocksucker and I’ll let you go? Not happening.”

Aiden nearly laughed. It would have been so much better for his pride if he were trying to manipulate Zain. If he were pretending. But he wasn't pretending. And he definitely had no idea what he was hoping to accomplish. He hadn't really had the time to put together a coherent plan. But he trusted his instincts. And his instincts said that the only way to manipulate this man was *not* to outright try to manipulate him. To be honest about the strength of his attraction, no matter how mortifying it was. This man was too smart and cynical to be tricked by a lie.

"I'm not manipulating you," Aiden said with a small, rueful smile. "Except for the part where I said I loved you. I know better than to try. I'm being honest, Zain. I hate you—and I didn't used to hate anyone—but..."

Just say it.

"I want you," he admitted, blushing as he met Zain's gaze. "I hate it, I hate that you've become the focal point of my life, and it keeps getting worse every day—the fixation, the obsession, the hatred. I'm not a hateful person. This is not me. I feel like I'm losing myself the longer I'm stuck here, turning into someone I don't recognize." He laughed bitterly. "You said I look like a kicked puppy when you leave, and it's—it's actually not inaccurate. There's a perverse part of me that's already started thinking of you as my owner, and I hate that I—that I get off on it." He was blushing furiously, barely able to hold Zain's heavy gaze.

Zain's grip on his hair tightened.

"I'm not gay," he said again, his voice rough.

Aiden glanced at the bulge in Zain's pants. It seemed to have become bigger. "Who cares?" he said, looking back into Zain's eyes. "You can use me anyway. No one will know. I'm yours, aren't I? Not Gadiel's. Yours."

Zain's expression became tight, almost pained. It felt like those dark eyes were burning a hole in him. There was distrust in that gaze—this was a cynical man who didn't trust easily—but Aiden could tell that he was affected by his words.

“I know you’re attempting to play me,” Zain said. “It won’t work. I don’t want you.”

Aiden narrowed his eyes and got to his feet. Laying his hand on the back of Zain’s chair, he leaned in and whispered, almost against Zain’s lips, “Bull. Shit. You want me. I can feel it.”

Zain’s jaw was locked so tightly Aiden could actually hear him grind his teeth.

“You’re delusional,” he said, his expression dismissive.

It was infuriating. Maddening. God, Aiden wanted to wrap his hands around that strong tanned neck and strangle him.

“*You* chose me,” Aiden said. “You. You looked at me kneeling on that podium, half-naked, and you wanted to own me.”

“I chose you for Gadiel.”

Aiden laughed. “Right. I don’t know your brother all that well, but even I can tell that I’m not really his type. He’s not the one who looks at me like he wants to wreck me with his cock.”

Zain’s nostrils flared. “You only see what you want to see,” he said. His tone was positively frosty.

Aiden eyed him.

Then, he straightened up and pulled his T-shirt off.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Zain said.

Aiden shoved his pants and boxer briefs down and kicked them away.

“Get dressed,” Zain said. His voice was strained. Terse. A little hoarse.

Aiden met his gaze and smiled. “Why? What’s a little nudity between two straight men?” He tried to keep his voice casual and careless, but being naked in front of this man was fucking nerve-racking. And much too arousing, in a fucked-up sort of way. He was acutely aware that he was nude and

vulnerable in front of a fully dressed man who owned him. Aiden felt too hot, his skin tingling all over, his balls heavy, his cock aching. Even his nipples felt tight and sensitive, itching to be touched and rubbed and sucked. They *ached* as Zain's dark, intense gaze roamed over them.

God, he'd never wanted sex so much. He'd never wanted anyone this badly before. It was pure animal lust, and it was making his mouth dry, his knees weak, and all his blood rush to his crotch. He wanted to fuck.

"Admit it," Aiden whispered hoarsely, meeting Zain's eyes. Melted chocolate. Hot, melted chocolate. "You want me. Deep down, you've always wanted me." Jesus, it was pathetic *how much* he wanted that to be true. How much he wanted this man to want him.

Zain rose to his feet with the grace of a predator, his eyes glinting with something hard and mean. "I don't. But if you're that eager to be a hole for my cock, fine. Bend over."

Aiden sucked in a breath. "W-what?"

Zain gave him a steady look. "You heard me, Aiden. Bend over the bed."

Aiden stared at him. Zain stared back.

Seconds dragged by, and the air in the room seemed to become impossibly thick.

"I'm waiting," Zain said evenly.

Was that triumph in his expression? The asshole was trying to freak him out. Fuck that.

Aiden turned, walked to the bed, and did as he was told, ignoring the voice at the back of his mind that was screaming at him to stop and walk out of this room while he still could.

"Now what?" he said defiantly, his voice shaking only a little. There were mirrors in the headboard. He could see his own wide-eyed face in them. Aiden dropped his gaze and stared at the bedspread. White. It was white.

The silence was starting to make him nervous. When was Zain finally going to admit that he was bluffing? That

repressed, closeted dick would never actually fuck him.

At long last, he felt some movement behind him. He could hear a drawer open and close.

There was the sound of something tearing, and then a slick sound, as if... as if something slick was rubbed into flesh.

Aiden swallowed, his pulse thundering in his ears. Was Zain actually...?

He attempted to look over his shoulder, but a firm hand pressed against his nape and held his head down. The pressure wasn't forceful, but firm and commanding, and Aiden despised the way his body immediately went pliant, as if trained to obey its master. Its owner.

“Stay still,” Zain said from behind him.

“What—what are you doing?” Aiden whispered.

“Doing exactly as you suggested.” Something blunt and slick pushed against Aiden's asshole. “Making use of your hole.” Zain leaned his weight forward, his hand flexing on Aiden's nape as something—Zain's *cock*, holy shit—slowly, very slowly, inched into him.

Aiden gasped, his eyes widening in stunned disbelief. Zain seemed to have used an abundance of lube, so it didn't really hurt, but the stretch was definitely uncomfortable given Zain's size and the lack of prep.

Oh god, he had a cock in him. He had *Zain's* cock in him.

Aiden breathed deeply and did his best to relax until he finally felt Zain's clothed hips press against his ass. He was fully in, holy shit. Zain's cock felt like a giant rod lodged into his ass. Aiden wondered why gay men did this all the time. How was this supposed to feel good? All it felt was uncomfortably full, like he wanted to take a shit.

“This is definitely not gay,” Aiden said with a laugh. “You're the straightest man to ever straight.”

The grip on his nape tightened in warning, and Aiden shivered, hating himself a little for how much he enjoyed the bossy, grounding weight of it.

“You will shut up and take it,” Zain said nicely into his ear, his voice a little raspy as he pressed Aiden harder into the bed with his weight. “Like the good little hole you wanted to be.”

“Fuck you—” Aiden’s words turned into a startled moan when Zain shifted his hips, his cock rubbing right against his prostate.

“You were saying?” Zain ground out, pulling his cock out and slowly thrusting back into him.

“Congrats, you found my prostate—” Aiden moaned again as Zain gave another vicious stab against his sweet spot. “I still hate you. Asshole.”

“Do you ever shut up?” Zain said, biting his earlobe.

Aiden grinned dazedly. “Never, babe.”

Zain bit his earlobe again, his stubble scratching the side of Aiden’s face and sending a shiver over his skin.

Aiden turned his head, mouthing the corner of Zain’s lips desperately, *wanting*.

But Zain didn’t kiss him. He was breathing hard against his cheek, his thrusts becoming faster, his grip on Aiden’s nape unforgiving. Christ, it had no right to feel this good, not with this man. Aiden tried to appear unaffected, but he couldn’t seem to stop his hips from moving to meet Zain’s thrusts, chasing that delicious feeling of fullness. What had seemed uncomfortable a few minutes ago now felt like an itch that needed to be scratched, and he couldn’t get enough. His mind felt fuzzy, all other thoughts wiped clean other than the cock moving in him and the need to have his hole well and truly filled.

Before long, his state deteriorated to the point that Aiden found himself whimpering at every thrust, his overheated body pliant on the bed, unable to do anything but

soak up the sensation of being fucked within an inch of his life.

God, was this how cock-sluts were created? Because he sure felt like one now. He felt like he would fucking cry if Zain stopped. He needed this, he needed this, he needed this—

And then the bastard *pulled out*. “Say it again,” he demanded, his breath hot against Aiden’s neck.

Aiden whined, disoriented and so damn empty it took him a moment to comprehend the words. “Say what?”

“Say that I own you,” Zain rasped out.

“Are you fucking serious? Move.”

Zain bit his neck, shooting a sensation of pain-pleasure straight to Aiden’s crotch. “Say it. Or I won’t give you my cock.”

Aiden shivered. “You own me, you self-centered dick. Now move, damn you. I wanna come.”

“Watch your tone. And you will come only if I let you.”

God. How did this horrible, infuriating man push every button he hadn’t even known he had?

“Please,” Aiden whispered, his voice small, raw, and terrifyingly honest. “Please, Zain.”

The man behind him went very still. He appeared to have stopped breathing altogether.

Then Zain gripped his hip hard and slammed back into him. Moaning, Aiden clutched the bedspread in his hands and held on as Zain’s cock hammered into him at an unrelenting pace, again and again and again.

Christ. So good. He’d never felt such a high. There was something about being *fucked*, about being used, submitting to this man’s strength and dominance, that felt so deliciously wrong and so hot. He was making sounds that didn’t sound manly in the least, broken moans and whines that he hadn’t even known he was capable of.

It took Aiden less than a minute of that to come, spilling his release all over Zain's bed, pleasure making him see white.

He lay there in a pool of his own come, dazed, fucked-out and blissed-out, like a sex doll for Zain to use. And use him he did, for what felt like hours until he finally came, too.

Zain didn't spill into him—he was wearing a condom—but Aiden could *feel* his orgasm almost as acutely as his own. He felt Zain shudder and shake, a low growl leaving his throat, barely audible but raw, before he fell on top of Aiden, breathing hard, still mostly clothed.

Aiden forced his eyes open and breathed, too, trying to regain a semblance of control. His body felt weak like a kitten's, unable—unwilling—to move. He felt at peace exactly where he was: under Zain, with Zain's cock still inside him.

Oh god.

Had he really allowed Zain to do it?

He had.

While Aiden would have liked to deny it, he couldn't even pretend in his mind that Zain had forced him. Aiden had *known* that if he had said no and walked out, Zain would have let him. But he hadn't.

What now?

How was he supposed to act now that he'd willingly—and enthusiastically—had full-on penetrative sex with the man who had bought him? Bought him for his little brother.

Zain pulled out of him, and Aiden hissed, aching in places he never had in his life.

Slowly, he turned onto his back and sat up.

Zain looked up from fixing his fly.

Their eyes met.

Later, Aiden would try to convince himself that it was a deliberate plan he'd come up with to manipulate Zain. But that would be a lie.

The truth was, his body moved before he could stop it. He got to his feet, he stepped forward, his arms wrapped around Zain's neck, and...

And Aiden kissed him.

It was a gentle, chaste kiss, but it made Aiden shiver almost violently with the need to deepen it. He didn't, keeping the contact of their lips barely there. Oh god.

Zain's body was absolutely rigid against him. For a long moment, he didn't move.

Then his hand came up and wrapped around Aiden's throat. "What do you think you're doing?" Zain said, his breath brushing against Aiden's lips.

Aiden lifted his gaze to his eyes and smiled. "It was a kiss. I had fun. Let's do it again sometime."

Zain stared at him.

Aiden's smile widened. God, there was nothing he enjoyed more than befuddling and frustrating this man. "What? No one ever kissed you after sex before?"

"You're unbelievable."

Grinning, Aiden patted him on the cheek. "What, did you seriously expect me to be freaking out over this? I did tell you that I wanted you, remember? I'm an honest guy."

Zain bored his eyes into him. "I distinctly remember you telling me that you hated me."

Aiden nodded. "I do," he said amiably. "I do hate you. But it's just sex. Sex means nothing. I can hate you and happily let you fuck me every day."

Zain's expression became tight. "I have no intention of fucking you again. This was—I did this to teach you a lesson. I'm not gay."

And yet Zain *still* wasn't pushing his very naked body away.

"Sure," Aiden said agreeably, nuzzling the firm line of Zain's jaw. Inhaling his scent greedily, Aiden murmured into

Zain's ear, "You sure taught me one. You taught me that I'm your thing. That you own me. That I'm yours to use."

Zain's spent dick twitched against his hip.

The hand around Aiden's throat squeezed, the pressure almost painful, before Zain all but shoved Aiden away.

"Get out."

Swallowing, Aiden opened his mouth but closed it when he saw Zain's frosty expression.

"Fine," Aiden said with a put-upon sigh. "I'll see you tomorrow, I guess." He darted forward and pecked him on the cheek, smiling sweetly when Zain fixed him with a cold glare. "Good night, babe!"

Grabbing his clothes from the floor, he headed out of the room, whistling cheerfully.

Once the door shut after him, Aiden chuckled before dissolving into helpless laughter, though truth be told, there was nothing remotely amusing about the situation.

He was half-infatuated with a closeted, cold-hearted man who refused to even admit that he wanted him.

"It's just a silly little crush," Aiden muttered under his breath, shaking his head.

Just a silly crush.

It was.

If it wasn't, he was fucked.

Chapter Twelve

After some thought, Aiden decided that there wasn't any point in moping about something he couldn't change. So, he had a bit of a crush. So what?

Aiden wasn't a stranger to crushes. His teenage years weren't so long ago that he'd forgotten all the embarrassing, unsuitable crushes he'd had, starting from his mom's best friend and ending with his brother's very hot ex-wife. In hindsight, there was a clear pattern with his worst crushes: he always seemed to gravitate toward the forbidden. Luckily, his crushes had always been fleeting, and he had no reason to think that it would be any different this time.

His thing for Zain wasn't the end of the world. He just had to wait until it inevitably passed, as all his inappropriate crushes had in the past. Nothing to worry about.

So Aiden was in a pretty good mood when he entered the dining room the next morning.

But his mood took a hit the moment he saw Zain.

He'd thought he was prepared to deal with his silly crush.

He wasn't.

Even looking at Zain was disorienting, Aiden's emotions contradictory and confusing.

Zain was seated at the head of the table, mouthwateringly handsome as usual. His black hair looked soft and gorgeous, a striking contrast to the white thobe that hugged his wide shoulders and fit arms. Zain was sipping his tea, his eyes fixed on the paperwork in front of him, his fingers absently stroking his chin.

Aiden still felt the same burning dislike and resentment when he looked at him. This man was still his captor. He was still the same arrogant dick he'd come to hate. Aiden hadn't suddenly started liking him just because they'd had sex.

He just wanted to kiss him.

The thought—the desire—made him sigh inwardly. For fuck's sake.

“Good morning!” he said, trying to ignore the horrible butterflies that were fluttering all over his stomach.

The asshole ignored him.

Aiden felt the familiar desire to introduce his fist to Zain's mouth. Unfortunately, his desire to put his mouth on that mouth was far stronger.

“Back home it's not very polite not to say anything when people tell you good morning,” Aiden said, walking closer. “Are things different here?”

When Zain finally deigned to look at him, his gaze was unreadable. He looked about as approachable as a stone gargoyle.

Aiden still wanted to kiss him. He wanted to touch him. God, this man was such an unfeeling, problematic mess, but Aiden *itched* to touch him. He wanted to slide his fingers under Zain's impeccable white cuff and trace the veins and muscles of his wrist, feel his pulse beat under his thumb. He wanted to feel him up. Badly.

Aiden closed his eyes for a moment, exasperated with himself.

Maybe indulging this stupid crush would cure him of it. Overexposure was a thing, right?

“Are you going to stand there all morning?” Zain said.
“Sit down.”

Aiden sat down.

In Zain’s lap.

“Hi,” he said, cradling Zain’s face with his hands and giving him a beaming smile. He knew his smiles annoyed Zain for some reason. The dick seemed to like making everyone miserable, so Aiden was determined not to give him the satisfaction of seeing him scared and sad.

A muscle by Zain’s left eye twitched. “Remove your butt from my lap,” he said, in a suspiciously conversational voice.

Aiden might have been more intimidated if he hadn’t known what this man felt like inside of him. That knowledge was surprisingly emboldening.

“No thanks,” Aiden said. “I’m pretty comfy here.”

Zain attempted to dump him off his lap as he had the previous evening, but Aiden was prepared this time around. He twined his arms around Zain’s shoulders and clung to him like a baby koala, burying his face in Zain’s neck, as he resisted the attempts to dislodge him.

“Let go of me,” Zain finally ground out when he seemed to realize the futility of it.

Aiden pressed his cheek against Zain’s stubbled throat, trying not to breathe deeply. Jesus, how did this dick always smell so good?

“Don’t want to,” he said honestly before lifting his head. When Zain pinned him with an icy glare, Aiden gave him his sweetest smile. “It’s your own fault. You smell too good. Is this your aftershave? That would be weird because you look like you haven’t shaved in days. Your stubble is closer to a beard, which definitely didn’t used to be my thing—I always thought it was lazy, but you rearranged my worldview and apparently now I like it and it’s so ridiculous I want to bitch-slap myself—”

Zain kissed him.

Aiden's brain short-circuited.

Zain's mouth. Zain's mouth was on his mouth. Zain was *kissing* him—if that even could be called a kiss. It felt more like an assault, aggressive and bruising, almost hateful. Zain crushed his lips, sucking hard and biting them, and then his tongue was practically in Aiden's throat, as if he was attempting to choke Aiden with it, punish him for making him want him.

It was beyond overwhelming, it shouldn't have felt good—it was objectively a horrible, selfish kiss, with no care for Aiden's pleasure—but perversely, that only turned Aiden on. The force of Zain's lust, the lack of control and finesse he displayed was more arousing than any soft, sensual kisses would have been. He even loved the feeling of helplessness, the punishing grip Zain had on his chin. He wanted to be crushed by this man, wanted to choke on his tongue and on his cock, and swallow every drop of his come, wanted this man to fuck him into unconsciousness, until Aiden was nothing but a vessel for his cock.

Christ, his own thoughts and wants crept him out, but he couldn't stop wanting that. Couldn't stop wanting him. *Wanting* seemed like such an inadequate word for this all-consuming hunger, the desire to swallow, to devour, to consume.

He moaned in protest when Zain wrenched his mouth away. No!

"More," Aiden said, kissing Zain's jaw desperately. "Let's fuck—please, please. I wanna fuck." *Wanna fuck* sounded a lot less embarrassing than saying *I want you inside me*, which was what he really wanted. God, just thinking about the way Zain had felt inside him, huge and overwhelming, made his hole twitch and squeeze around nothing, eager to experience it again.

A strong hand gripped his chin hard and forced him to look at the other man.

Zain's pupils were so blown his eyes seemed black as they roamed over Aiden's face. "You have no shame, do you?"

Aiden kissed him wetly, needily. "What should I be ashamed of?" he said breathlessly. "It's just sex. I'm not a homophobic dick like you. I can admit that I loved being fucked—being fucked by you." Slipping his hand between them, he greedily palmed the massive erection tenting Zain's pants. So thick. "You loved it, too. Your cock doesn't lie."

Zain gave him such a cold look Aiden would never have guessed that he was sporting an erection had he not been groping it.

"My cock likes a hole to fuck," Zain said with deliberate crudeness. "I was horny, and you were easy and there. A convenient wet hole and nothing more."

Aiden shivered, his crotch aching. Shit, he was discovering new—and rather mortifying—kinks he hadn't known he had.

"Am I supposed to be offended?" Aiden said, stroking Zain's erection. "Are you saying you'd stick your cock into just anyone? Should I fetch one of your employees for you?"

Silence was the only response he got.

Aiden smiled, feeling a rush of giddy triumph. Zain wanted him. *Him*. He might deny it all he wanted, but his body didn't lie.

The sound of the door opening made his smile freeze.

Turning his head, Aiden saw one of the servants—Damir, if he remembered correctly—standing in the doorway with his mouth open and his eyes confused and wide.

Zain barked out something in Arabic, his voice like a whip.

The servant stepped out of the room so fast it was almost comical. The door closed firmly.

Aiden didn't move from Zain's lap.

If anything, he moved closer, grinding his cock against Zain's. Being interrupted had done nothing to kill his arousal. Zain being commanding and harsh didn't help, either—it went straight to Aiden's cock. His cock was weird like that.

“You're like a cat in heat,” Zain said, watching him through heavy-lidded eyes, his lips twisted in disapproval. But he wasn't pushing him away. He wasn't dumping him off his lap.

Aiden moaned, grinding harder against the bulge in Zain's pants. The friction felt so good, but their clothes were in the way. Off. He wanted them off. Unfortunately, they were in the dining room, and anyone might enter at any moment. As they'd already seen.

“What if he talks?” he gasped out, pushing Zain's thobe out of the way and fumbling with his trousers' zipper. It seemed Aiden would have to take the matters into his own hands if he wanted to get off. Zain's internalized homophobia and stubbornness wouldn't let him act on his desires, no matter how hard his cock was.

“He won't,” Zain said flatly. “My staff knows better than to talk about anything they see in my house.”

Aiden fished out Zain's erection and stroked it greedily while he pulled his own cock out of his sweatpants with his other hand. He pressed their cocks together and wrapped his hand around them, staring in fascination at the contrast between Zain's darker, bigger cock and his own.

A drop of pre-come appeared at the tip of Zain's cock, and Aiden used his thumb to spread the silky bead of moisture over Zain's thick, veiny cock and then his own. Christ, it looked so filthy. It *was* filthy: both of them fully clothed but for their hard cocks, in the middle of the dining room with the door unlocked, Aiden writhing and rutting against the older man like the aforementioned cat in heat. He wished he *were* a cat in heat: then he would be leaking and wet and wouldn't need any lube to sit on Zain's cock right now, right here, as he wanted to do. God, he wanted to get fucked again. He'd done

it only once, but he already craved it: to feel the impossible, delicious stretch as Zain used his hole to get off.

Moaning, Aiden buried his face in Zain's neck and started jacking them off, wishing they could do more than that, wishing they could fuck for real. If only there was lube here...

Aiden whipped his head to the table and his eyes zeroed in on the bottle of olive oil.

"What do you think you're doing?" Zain said tersely when Aiden grabbed the bottle.

Aiden smiled dazedly, liberally slicking Zain's cock with oil, stroking it greedily and marveling at its silky texture and girth. "Giving you a hole to fuck," he said, pushing his sweatpants and boxers down.

"You can't be serious," Zain ground out, watching Aiden reach back and push an oiled finger into his asshole. "We're in the dining room."

"That didn't bother you when you fucked my mouth here the other day," Aiden said, gasping as he pushed another finger in. Oh, the stretch felt so good.

"I'm not fucking you without a condom."

"I don't have any STDs. You got my test results when you *bought* me, remember? Aren't you clean too?"

Zain glared at him as Aiden lined up his cock against his asshole. "I am. It's still unnatural and unhygienic."

Aiden rolled his eyes with a grin. "You aren't the one who'll have to clean jizz out of your asshole, so shut up and enjoy, Your Highness." And he sank down onto Zain's erection, his breath hitching as his desire to be filled up was finally satisfied.

"Ohh," he sighed, laying his head on Zain's shoulder. He rocked back and forth a little but otherwise remained seated on Zain's cock.

"Aren't you going to move?" Zain said by his ear. He was breathing unsteadily, his hands coming to rest on Aiden's ass.

“It feels good this way too,” Aiden said softly, almost dreamily. “The fullness. It’s delicious. Your cock is thick enough to make me feel good even when it’s not moving. I could sit on your cock all day. Can I sit on your cock all day? You can use me as a cocksleeve. Your personal cockwarmer.” He shivered, the idea going straight to his cock. To just sit there and be a wet hole for Zain to fuck...

“I’ve never seen a bigger slut than you,” Zain said, biting his neck. His hips started moving, fucking up into Aiden’s hole. “You’re a whore for cock.”

“*You* made me into one.” Aiden moaned, gyrating his hips. “Oh god, don’t stop.”

Zain didn’t stop. Aiden was of little help, but Zain made fucking up into him look effortless. Zain fucked like a machine, steady and relentless. Aiden could only hold onto his wide shoulders and whimper helplessly, rocked up with every thrust of Zain’s cock.

“Be quiet,” Zain gritted out, his features contorted as though in pain. “You’re loud.”

“I can’t—aah—ahh—so good... Why does this feel so good with you—you’re a dick—”

Zain crushed his mouth against his, probably to shut him up, but Aiden didn’t mind. He whimpered into Zain’s mouth, sucking on his tongue greedily as Zain’s cock hammered into him, again and again. God—god—he couldn’t get enough—almost, almost there—

Aiden came so hard tears sprang to his eyes, a sob leaving his throat as he clung to Zain’s firm body with all his strength. His hole squeezed around Zain’s cock, and Zain *groaned* and spilled into him, his fingers digging hard into Aiden’s buttocks. Having another man’s come in his asshole should probably have felt more weird. Bizarrely, it didn’t.

Panting, Aiden put his head back onto Zain’s shoulder, his arms relaxing their death-grip on Zain’s back and shifting to a tired embrace. God. He felt so good.

“This was awesome,” he murmured into Zain’s neck. His voice sounded drunk. He felt drunk. “You’re such a good fuck.”

Zain made a sound that was a mix of exasperated and disgusted. “Get off my cock.”

Aiden lifted his head and smiled at him, stretching lazily. “Not until you admit that it was awesome.”

Zain gave him the stink eye.

Aiden blew him a kiss and reluctantly got off him, wincing a little as Zain’s cock slipped out. Tugging his boxers and sweatpants up, he carefully sat down in the chair to Zain’s right.

Grabbing a fork, he reached for a sausage and started eating.

It took him a while to notice the weird stare Zain was giving him.

“What?” Aiden said, after he finished chewing.

“Are you really going to sit there and eat with your ass full of my come?”

Aiden’s dick twitched again. He shrugged. “Why not? I’m hungry, and it’s not like anyone will feed me if I miss breakfast.”

Zain’s expression did something complicated: it almost seemed like he was about to smile but stopped.

Aiden blinked and looked back at his food. He didn’t think he could handle it if Zain suddenly started smiling at him. This ridiculous infatuation was bad enough as it was.

He ate in silence for a while, but eventually he couldn’t resist glancing back at Zain.

But Zain wasn’t looking at him anymore.

Aiden wanted his attention back. He tried to fight the feeling, but it was useless: instead of satisfying him, the sex seemed to have made him *more* desperate for Zain’s attention, not less. God, this was awful.

“I’m full,” Aiden said, pushing his plate away. When that didn’t make Zain look at him, he took a grape and threw it at his face.

“You’re a child,” Zain said without looking at him.

“Not sure what that says about you, then,” Aiden said with a smile, hooking their ankles under the table.

That finally made Zain look at him. There wasn’t a trace of a smile on his face anymore. “Stop this nonsense,” he said.

“What nonsense?” Aiden said, propping his chin on his hand and giving him an innocent look.

“This.” Zain glowered at him, unhooking their ankles. “The touching, the flirting, the—the smiles. It’s irritating. And unwelcome.”

Before Aiden could say anything, the door opened and Gadiel walked in.

Aiden tensed up.

“Hey,” Gadiel said, looking a little uncertain when he met Aiden’s gaze before smiling at him.

Zain said something in Arabic, his tone cold and displeased, even though his face betrayed none of his displeasure. He was irritated. He didn’t like being surprised—at least he didn’t like *this* surprise.

Aiden wondered if he should be worried that he was so attuned to him.

Gadiel shrugged, brushing a hand through his hair. “I figured since the restaurant didn’t end up being a good idea, I’d come here to get to know Aiden better.” He smiled at Aiden again.

Pursing his lips, Aiden looked at Zain.

Their gazes met and held.

And Aiden made the decision right there. This attraction might have been stupid, inconvenient and infuriating, but maybe, just maybe, he could use it. Maybe.

Aiden let his expression become soft and pleading as he gazed at Zain with his best puppy-dog eyes.

Please, he mouthed at him.

Zain just stared at him, his face unreadable.

“Eh, Zain?” Gadiel said. “I think it’d be better if I get to know Aiden without you around. I think you make him nervous. Come on, Aiden.”

Tearing his gaze from Aiden, Zain looked at his brother. “What do you want with him?”

Gadiel shot him a strange look. “What do you mean? Didn’t you buy him for me? I mean, I still feel weird about it, but what’s done is done, and he’s, like, mine now, right?”

Zain said nothing for a moment.

His heart beating somewhere in his throat, Aiden held his breath.

When Zain looked at him, Aiden gave him another pleading look.

Zain’s lips thinned. He said, looking away from Aiden, “Fine. Go for a walk outside.”

Aiden’s stomach plummeted.

Gadiel frowned. “But—but I thought we’d—”

“Outside,” Zain repeated, his voice steely.

Aiden exhaled. He didn’t want to be alone with Gadiel, but at least being outside the house where people could see them should make Gadiel behave. Hopefully.

He still felt disappointed. He knew it was ridiculous. What did he expect—that Zain would suddenly have a change of heart just because he’d fucked him a couple of times? Right. And maybe pigs would fly.

“Fine,” Aiden said, forcing a smile. “Let’s go.”

He and Gadiel left the house through the back door. Zain could probably watch them through the security cameras—if he cared enough to watch.

“So,” Gadiel said as they walked through the immaculate garden. “Look, I get that it’s not something you chose and you’re angry at being here, but I don’t want you to feel like you’re being coerced to—” He screwed his eyes shut and sighed. “Obviously you are, but we can’t change what Zain did—”

“We can. You could tell him that you refuse to use me and he should let me go home.”

Gadiel made a face. “I wish I could do that, but... I can’t.”

“Why the hell not?” Aiden snapped. He didn’t have much patience for this kid’s woe-is-me attitude.

“I can’t go without sex for a year! It’s been more than a month and I’m going crazy!”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “Use your hand. Plenty of people are still virgins at your age. Lack of a sex life doesn’t kill anyone.” When he was Gadiel’s age, he’d gotten laid twice a year, and it was fine.

“No, you don’t get it—I *can’t* go that long without sex!”

The desperation in Gadiel’s voice made Aiden give him a longer look.

“I know I have a problem,” Gadiel said, misery written all over his face. “I want sex all the time. Like, all the time. I’m not exaggerating. I know it’s risky and dangerous—I’m not stupid—but I can’t help myself. It’s the only thing that makes me feel—” He cut himself off, pressing his lips together. His shoulders hunched.

Aiden frowned. There was something wrong with this guy. “Have you talked to your brother about it?”

“Zain thinks I’m an irresponsible, stupid fuck-up,” Gadiel said with a humorless chuckle. “Zain would never understand what it’s like not to be able to control yourself. He has iron self-control. He never lets his dick do the thinking.”

Aiden nearly laughed. He wondered what Gadiel would say if he knew that his ass was full of Zain’s come right now.

But it did shed a new light on Zain's attitude. On top of his internalized homophobia, it probably pissed him off that he had let his cock do the thinking.

"Let me get it straight," Aiden said. "You think you can't survive without sex for a year, and because of your overbearing asshole of a brother I'm your only option. You're so desperate to get your dick wet that you don't even care anymore how morally wrong it is."

Gadiel averted his eyes. "It's not that," he said in a small voice. "I don't trust myself. It's like there's something in me that *wants* to get caught, you know? Sometimes I almost want my father to find out. Maybe death would be better than continuing to live a lie."

Jesus.

Aiden stared at him, his stomach sinking. Gadiel's gorgeous eyes looked lifeless. Weary. Utterly defeated.

Oh, fuck it. Lending a hand wouldn't kill him, right? The guy probably wouldn't even need much to come.

Quashing his distaste, Aiden said, "Fine."

"Really?" Gadiel smiled, relief wiping the tension from his neck and shoulders. He really was gorgeous, with his perfect bone structure, beautiful eyes, and full lips.

The prospect of physical intimacy with him shouldn't have made Aiden's stomach churn uneasily.

"Really," Aiden said, turning back toward the house. "Let's get it over with."

He walked into the house ahead of Gadiel, trying to steady the panicked beat of his heart. *Don't be ridiculous*, he told himself, wiping his sweaty palms against his pants. There was no reason to feel like he was doing something wrong. Absolutely no reason. He would touch Gadiel's dick, stroke it a few times, and that would be it. Considering the guy's age and pent-up frustration, it would likely take less than a minute. Then it would be over.

"Where are you going?"

Aiden came to an abrupt halt, blinking at Zain's tall figure that had seemingly materialized out of nowhere.

"We're, um," Gadiel said from behind Aiden. "Aiden agreed to help me out! Isn't that nice of him?"

Zain didn't even glance at him, his gaze on Aiden, heavy and suffocating.

Aiden could barely breathe, his heart starting to beat faster, but for an entirely different reason than panic.

"Did he," Zain said flatly.

Aiden smiled and nodded. "I'm being very cooperative," he said. "Just as you wanted."

A muscle jumped by Zain's temple.

Aiden smiled wider. "Would you like to watch us, to make sure I'm performing my duties well?" he said innocently.

"Eh," Gadiel said from behind him. "I don't think—"

"Go home, Gadiel," Zain said, his dark eyes boring a hole in Aiden.

"What? Why—"

"I said go home," Zain bit out. "I'll speak to you later."

Muttering in Arabic under his breath, Gadiel strode away sulkily.

As his footsteps faded, Aiden gave Zain a serene smile. "What? Why are you looking at me like I did something wrong when I did exactly what you told me to do? Don't tell me you're jealous?"

Zain strode forward, grabbed his arm, and yanked him close, pulling their bodies flush against each other.

Aiden utterly despised the way his body immediately went boneless.

"Jealous?" Zain said, glaring at his mouth. "No. I just don't like someone else playing with my toys."

“I bet you were a very selfish boy,” Aiden said, wrapping his arms around Zain’s neck and smiling at him. His stomach was full of horrible butterflies again. “Kiss me?”

Zain kissed him.

And everything else faded away.

There was only this horrible man, and this desire thrumming between them, like a living, breathing thing, unstoppable and intoxicating.

Chapter Thirteen

Three months later

“Zainie, no! Don’t go in there!”

Aiden ran after his kitten, but she had gotten much bigger and faster lately, and she was already in Zain’s bedroom before Aiden could catch up.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!”

Aiden entered the room after her and looked around. But she was nowhere to be seen. She was probably hiding under the bed again. Hopefully she’d emerge before Zain returned. He didn’t like Aiden’s kitten. To be fair, it might have something to do with Aiden naming his—very female—kitten after him in order to annoy him. Either way, Zain hated the kitten. Unfortunately, Aiden’s stupid kitten had grown to adore him.

“If Zain bitches at me because of you again, I’m going to drown you in the ocean.”

Zainie ignored him.

“You’re just as bad as Zain,” Aiden said with a sigh, sitting down on the bed.

They really were alike. Zain largely ignored him too, doing everything his own way, and deigned to touch Aiden only when it suited him.

Aiden stretched out on the bed and frowned when he glanced at the clock on the wall again.

Zain was late.

He was usually home no later than eight in the evening on Tuesdays. Not that Aiden kept track of Zain's schedule or anything. Of course not.

Pursing his lips, Aiden turned onto his stomach and sighed.

"Aghh," he growled into his pillow in frustration.

The pillow in question smelled good. Of course it did. It was Zain's, and at this point, he was conditioned to Zain's scent to a ridiculous degree. Conditioned? More like utterly addicted.

The fact that he was waiting for Zain in his room like a good little pet waiting for its owner spoke for itself.

The blame might be partly on his cat, but she wasn't forcing him to remain here.

And yet here he was, even though he wasn't even supposed to be in Zain's room. Zain didn't like having him here. He liked *fucking* him here well enough, but he was allergic to having Aiden around his personal space otherwise.

"I hate him," Aiden said aloud.

The room's silence seemed almost mocking.

"I really, really hate him," Aiden said.

More mocking silence.

God, he was going insane if he was talking to a room. It was one thing that he talked to his cat, which was pretty pathetic in itself; talking to no one was a new low.

He had to get out of here. It wasn't healthy in the least that his existence revolved around an emotionally unavailable

man who owned him so utterly Aiden sometimes couldn't even remember his own name. These past few months had passed in a haze of god-tier sex and pleasure, followed by lonely hours of lucidity as Aiden freaked out over how utterly pathetic this existence was.

He was basically a glorified sex doll kept under lock and key that Zain used only when he felt the urge to scratch the itch. As soon as Zain pulled out of him, he became a hard-eyed, distant stranger.

Aiden knew that this... relationship, if it even could be called that, bothered Zain even more than it bothered him. Every few weeks, Zain seemed to make an attempt to stay away from him and avoided him like the plague. Every time, that distance eventually ended with some hard, angry sex and Zain was back in his bed for a few weeks before the cycle repeated itself.

"I hate you," Aiden whispered into Zain's pillow, burying his face in it and hugging it hard.

He was almost glad that Zain was such a dick. How much worse would this have been if Zain hadn't kept him at arm's length?

Breathing in Zain's scent, Aiden eventually drifted off.

Interlude I

Zain strode into the house, anger and frustration quickening his steps. Seeing his father rarely put him in a good mood, but that family dinner had been more frustrating than usual.

Gadiel had been sulking all evening, refusing to talk to any of them. Omar was of no use, despite being the crown prince—his attitude in life was to be as agreeable and obedient around their father as possible, so he never interfered, even though Zain suspected that he was aware of their youngest brother's inclinations. Zain had had to be the one to deflect their father's attention—and criticism—toward himself before the brat gave himself away and managed to get himself killed.

Unfortunately, Zain wasn't much better at reining his temper in where their father was concerned.

Sheikh Mustafa ibn Mohammed Al Rahim wasn't an easy man, never had been. Some fathers—some other fathers—might have been proud that their son was a highly respected businessman with a fortune that far exceeded their own. Not Mustafa. A control freak like him didn't like how little control he had over Zain's life. If Mustafa had his way, Zain would have already been married to Al Sharabi's daughter.

Zain's lips thinned, a twinge of guilt twisting his stomach as it did every time he was reminded that Gadiel's bride had been supposed to be his. Zain was the one Mustafa

had wanted to offer for Sheikh Al Sharabi's daughter. His father hadn't exactly been happy when Zain had point-blank refused to marry the girl. He had no desire to marry someone chosen by his father, a girl thirteen years his junior.

You have no issue fucking a boy eleven years your junior.

Zain's jaw tightened, his mood taking a turn for the worse as he quickened his steps.

The boy was... He didn't count. He was just a convenient hole to use. Nothing more. Nothing.

Zain came to a sudden halt, realizing where his feet had brought him.

He was standing in front of Aiden's room, not his own.

He stared at the door in frustration, but he couldn't bring himself to turn away. This was where his body wanted to be after that clusterfuck of an evening. This was what his body itched for—to bury itself in Aiden's sweet body and soft, eager mouth and forget all the problems and frustrations of the evening.

It was useless fighting this. He would only end up tossing and turning in his bed if he denied himself this. He *could* walk away. But why should he? Aiden was his.

Zain pushed the door open.

The room was empty.

His heart beating faster, Zain scanned the room with his eyes. Where would he be at this hour?

Quashing the irrational urge to wake up all of his employees and force them to find Aiden for him, Zain turned and headed to his room. He'd probably fallen asleep in another room. Nothing to worry about. Zain didn't *need* to see him tonight. He was in control of himself. His cock didn't control him.

Zain approached his bedroom—the door was already open—and went still.

Aiden was sleeping in his bed.

After a moment, Zain closed the door, slowly walked forward, and stopped by Aiden's side.

The boy was stretched out on his stomach, his arm hugging the pillow. He was only wearing a pair of shorts, which wasn't surprising. He constantly complained about the heat, unused to the local climate. His cheek was slightly pink—he must have been spending too much time outside again. His long eyelashes fluttered against the pale, fragile skin below his eyes. His lips were parted, a little wet and soft-looking.

Zain dragged his eyes away. But his gaze fell to the graceful slope of Aiden's shoulders and back, covered in hickeys—the ones *he'd* given him when he fucked him—and then lingered on the round, firm ass hugged by the thin gray shorts.

Zain grimaced and took a deep breath, trying to will his arousal away. It didn't work. It never did when it came to this—this unnatural, infuriating attraction. It sickened him, how *wrong wrong wrong* this was, and yet he could do nothing to eradicate it.

The low hum of frustration that had buzzed under his skin since dinner didn't help, either. He wanted relief. He wanted to bury himself in Aiden and take out his frustration on him.

You can, a voice said at the back of his mind. *He's yours. Yours to do whatever you want. Yours yours yours.*

Zain gritted his teeth, trying to block it out of his mind. It was useless. Something about Aiden brought out his worst qualities. Greed. Possessiveness. Selfishness. And uncontrollable, animal lust. Lust for another man.

Had he been a more devoted Muslim, he would have been more guilt-ridden and ashamed. The guilt and shame were still there, but they had little to do with his religious beliefs and more to do with his lack of self-control. He did

believe in Allah. He didn't believe that Allah cared that much about where he put his cock.

His abysmal lack of self-control was the bigger issue.

Had he been able to control this unnatural attraction, he'd have let his brother have him—the brat might do something very inadvisable any day now because of his pent-up sexual frustration and immaturity.

But he hadn't been able to control his illogical possessiveness. He hadn't been able to allow another man to touch what his body considered his.

Looking back, Zain even found himself questioning his decision to buy Aiden. It had been too impulsive. He'd gone to that party to meet a business associate. He'd certainly had no intention of buying Gadiel a sex pet—until he saw Aiden kneeling on the podium. The boy had looked so vulnerable and lost—and so unbearably pretty, all golden and light, his skin soft and smooth. Zain could barely look at him, yet he couldn't look away. He knew he had to buy him. For Gadiel. Or so he'd convinced himself.

That had been his first mistake.

Except he didn't regret that mistake. Just the thought of another man buying Aiden made him nauseated and unreasonably angry. Aiden made him unreasonable, period.

He should never have touched Aiden. That had been his second mistake.

Not that Zain was the only one to blame for this mess. Aiden was a manipulative little menace, with all his soft, doe-eyed looks and *I want yous*. Zain wasn't born yesterday. He knew when he was being manipulated, even if Aiden had chosen a bizarre way to do it.

Except knowing that he was being manipulated didn't necessarily mean he wasn't affected by it. Unfortunately.

Sighing, Zain undressed to his boxer briefs and got into the bed.

He considered kicking Aiden out of it—he had no business being in his room—but to Zain’s distaste, he couldn’t deny that a part of him very much liked finding his—*the boy* waiting for him in his bed, all soft and warm and his for the taking.

Frowning at the predictable direction of his thoughts, Zain watched his hand touch Aiden’s lower back. The contrast of his darker hand against the pale skin was fascinating. It was another reminder that Aiden was from a different world. He didn’t belong here.

But he still belonged to *him*.

Zain watched his hand tug Aiden’s shorts off, revealing his ass to his hungry gaze.

Being undressed didn’t wake Aiden. He was a heavy sleeper. He’d once slept through Zain fucking him, waking up only when he came on Zain’s cock.

“Figures you’d be into somnophilia,” he had grumbled afterward, rolling his eyes. “You pervert.”

Zain wasn’t into somnophilia—at least he hadn’t been. But there was something about using Aiden while he was sleeping so peacefully that made his heart speed up and his cock harder than it had ever been. The absolute rush it gave him was disturbing on several levels that had nothing to do with a sexual kink and everything to do with his insane, unhealthy possessiveness. The desire to use this young man like a thing and own him, totally.

Damn it, how he despised it. He despised the way Aiden knew exactly what to say to lead him by his cock. *I’m yours. Your thing. I love it when you use me. You can use me whenever you want.*

Just remembering Aiden’s words made him so hard it was uncomfortable, his body burning with the primitive need to fuck, to *take*.

He stared—glared—at Aiden’s round, bare buttocks for minutes before eventually losing the battle with himself and

groping them greedily, kneading the plump flesh. Aiden made a small sigh-like noise but didn't wake up.

Zain spread Aiden's cheeks and stared at the pink, tiny hole between them, his mouth going dry.

Although this had been going on for months, he'd never touched Aiden more than necessary. The sex was always fast and urgent, just a means to get off and relieve the tension between them.

Aiden's hole was nowhere near as attractive as a pussy. It was just an asshole. Zain didn't want to lick it. That would be disgusting and unnatural.

But he could spit on it.

Spit *inside* Aiden.

The thought made his cock throb, and Zain palmed it absentmindedly before leaning in and spitting on Aiden's hole.

The jolt of arousal he felt from seeing—making—Aiden's hole *wet* was ridiculously strong. Zain leaned in even closer, so close that his jaw pressed against Aiden's smooth cheeks. He rubbed his stubble against the soft skin, wanting to leave marks, something Aiden would feel for days.

He spit on his hole again. He missed, his spit ending up a little lower down from Aiden's hole.

All right, he'd just have to push it toward his hole.

Zain used his tongue to do it, pushing his spit into Aiden's tight little hole. There was a roar in his ears, his body nearly shaking with arousal as he thrust his tongue into the boy's hole, again and again.

Aiden moaned, squirming in his grip. "Zain? What are you—oh god—ah—ah—ah—oh god, don't stop..."

Zain pushed his tongue deeper, so deep his jaw started aching, but he didn't give a fuck. He wanted to leave his mark as deep inside Aiden as possible before doing the same with his cock. The slutty, wanton sounds Aiden was making only spurred him on, making him more greedy, more aggressive as he fucked him with his tongue.

Before long, Aiden was sobbing and pushing back onto his tongue, like the little slut he was. Of course he wanted more. He always did. His eagerness should have been disgusting—they both were men, it was wrong, it should have felt more wrong—but it was like a heady drug.

“Please—cock—your cock—give it to me...”

Zain shoved his boxer briefs down and pulled his cock out. Reaching for the lube in the drawer, he quickly slicked up his aching cock before moving over Aiden’s body. He pushed into him in one smooth, long thrust, groaning in relief. This was exactly what he’d been craving all evening. This.

Aiden sobbed out, arching his back obscenely, his hole squeezing him impossibly tight. Zain swore under his breath and buried his face against Aiden’s nape, his hips already thrusting hard and fast. He despised this, despised how little control he had over his body, becoming a mindless animal every time he put his cock into this boy. It was absolutely maddening. He bit hard on Aiden’s neck, wanting to punish him, punish him for being the way he was, as if he were created perfectly wrong to bring out Zain’s worst qualities and turn him into this. A rutting animal that thought with his cock.

He fucked Aiden so hard the bed started shaking, the headboard slamming against the wall with each thrust. Part of him wondered if his staff could hear them. If they knew who he was fucking in his room. Instead of alarming him, the thought just pushed his arousal higher. Irrationally, he wanted everyone to know. He wanted everyone to know how much Aiden loved taking *his* cock, his—

Zain nearly came and had to stop thrusting, breathing hard.

This was ridiculous. What had happened to his stamina? He felt as if he were an eager, green boy and not a grown man with nearly two decades of experience.

Aiden was whimpering desperately. “Don’t stop—I wanna come...”

“You will get to come only when I let you,” Zain said, mouthing the sweaty skin at Aiden’s nape. “And not a moment sooner.”

Aiden shivered. “I hate you,” he said with feeling.

A fresh wave of arousal washed over Zain’s body, blood rushing to his cock.

There was something very wrong with him.

“How much?” Zain said hoarsely into Aiden’s ear, breathing in his scent deeply. It should have been unpleasant, another man’s sweat. It wasn’t. He couldn’t get enough.

Whining, Aiden turned his head, rubbing their cheeks together. “Don’t be an asshole.”

“How much do you hate me?” Zain said, biting his earlobe.

Aiden moaned, clenching around Zain’s cock. “I could fucking kill you right now. That much.”

There was something heady about it, about how much Aiden must have wanted him if he was that desperate for him, despite hating him. It went straight to his cock.

Zain slipped his hand down and gripped it around the base of Aiden’s erection. “Now tell me who you belong to.”

Aiden whimpered, thrashing beneath him. “Go to hell.”

“I’m waiting,” Zain said, stroking Aiden’s leaking cock with his other hand.

Aiden groaned, “You! I belong to you!”

Zain shuddered, and to his exasperation, he found himself unable to remain still, his hips already moving, thrusting hard into Aiden’s tight hole, his grip still firm around the base of Aiden’s cock. His. He was his.

“Please—Zain—”

“Please what?” Zain said into his ear, licking it. It was probably messed up how much he loved hearing Aiden beg. It

had never been his thing. Until Aiden. He wanted Aiden to beg. He wanted him to be desperate for him. He wanted Aiden to need him like he needed air to breathe.

Fuck, his own thoughts weirded him out. What was happening to him?

Aiden turned his head, kissing Zain's jaw desperately despite the awkward angle. "I want you. Let me come. Come in me—fill me up. Want you to fill me up."

He nearly came on the spot.

Pulling out, Zain flipped Aiden onto his back before slamming into him again.

Aiden cried out, his arms wrapping around Zain's shoulders, fingers digging into his shoulder blades. He looked obscene, his hazel eyes glazed, his pretty lips parted and bitten red. Unable to resist, Zain leaned down and kissed him, his cock pounding hard into Aiden's hole without any rhythm or restraint. He detested this, detested how out of control he felt, the need to fuck, to own, to claim, like a red haze filling his vision. He wanted—he wanted—

They came together, kissing messily and groaning into each other's mouths.

Damn you, Zain thought, their foreheads pressed together as they breathed like they'd run a marathon.

"This was so good," Aiden whispered hoarsely, looking at him with a soft, dreamy expression in his eyes.

Zain wanted to kiss him *everywhere*.

The desire was paralyzing—because it had nothing to do with his cock.

And right then, he knew with absolute certainty that this couldn't continue.

He needed to get rid of Aiden, and soon.

While he still could.

Chapter Fourteen

Aiden was still trying to regain his breath when Zain rolled off him and said, “Go to your room.”

Lifting his eyelids, Aiden turned his head and studied him carefully. Had it been only a minute ago when the entire universe had shrunk to just them, to their bodies and Zain’s dark eyes fixed on him as though Aiden were the only thing in the world? Zain’s face was absolutely inscrutable now.

“I will, as soon as I get my legs working,” Aiden said, adopting a light tone. “They feel like jelly, so you’ll have to put up with me for a little while.”

Stretched out on his back, Zain stared at the ceiling. “I don’t have to put up with anything.”

Aiden smiled. “Someone is extra grumpy tonight,” he said, running his fingers over Zain’s hard chest and watching the muscles tense up at his touch.

Zain caught his fingers, forcing them to be still.

Aiden couldn’t look away from his pale hand covered by Zain’s hand. The sight made him feel funny. Zain had beautiful hands, with long fingers that seemed very elegant despite their size. They always fascinated him. Aiden wondered what it would feel like to kiss them, kiss those strong knuckles and then—

“I’m going to let you go.”

Aiden looked at Zain blankly.

“Wh—what?”

Zain’s face gave nothing away as he repeated, “I’m going to let you go.” His hand let go of Aiden’s and curled into a fist by his thigh.

Aiden blinked, feeling dazed. “I... I don’t understand.”

“What is there to understand?” Zain said, his expression blank. “Isn’t that what you wanted? To leave?”

“I...” Aiden laughed a little. “Of course I want it! But I don’t understand what brought this on!”

“I originally acquired you for my brother. Since you aren’t helping with him, I have no use for you.”

Aiden opened his mouth and then closed it.

That was... true.

Zain had no reason to keep him.

He tried to summon the elation he was supposed to feel, but all he could feel was confusion and something that felt uncomfortably close to panic.

“Okay,” he finally managed. “So you’ll just let me leave? Right now?”

Zain’s jaw tightened. He glowered at the opposite wall and didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Not right now,” he finally said, his voice a little clipped. “I need to arrange your trip home. You can hardly travel officially when you don’t have any ID and aren’t supposed to even be in this country.”

“I can go to the US Embassy and sort it out, I guess,” Aiden said, even though it felt surreal to imagine that he could just walk out of here and go to the embassy.

“No,” Zain said curtly. “There would be questions. I’ll get you out of the country myself. Until then, you’re not to contact your family.”

“Okay.”

Zain gave him a strange look. “Okay?” he repeated. “You’re not going to bitch and sulk over it?”

Smiling crookedly, Aiden shrugged. “At this point it doesn’t matter. It’s been more than seven months since my disappearance. My family probably thinks I’m dead, and another few weeks won’t make a difference.”

Zain looked away. “It might take longer than a few weeks. I’ll need to find someone discreet but reliable. I can’t exactly give you back to the people who brought you here.”

“Please don’t,” Aiden said with a chuckle. “They’d just sell me to someone else.” The thought was chilling and Aiden squirmed closer to the older man, pressing his nose against Zain’s bicep and closing his eyes. It was a little worrying how much he liked just being close to him, but Aiden decided not to dwell on it much. It didn’t matter. He was going home soon.

Once again, the thought failed to cause elation. The most positive emotion that he could feel was relief. Relief that this unhealthy fixation wouldn’t have the time to grow into something else. Into something worse.

“Don’t fall asleep here,” Zain said.

Aiden ignored him, nuzzling his bicep sleepily.

“I’m serious, Aiden. I’m going to dump you in the corridor if you fall asleep here.”

“Don’t be a grump,” Aiden murmured, kissing his arm. “It’s your own fault that I’m so starved for company. You can put up with my touchy-feely ways for a little while longer. Then you’ll be rid of me and we’ll never see each other again.” His stomach knotted up at the thought, and Aiden squirmed even closer, maneuvering them so Zain’s arm was around his shoulders and Aiden’s leg was slung over Zain’s hard thigh.

Zain let out a long-suffering sigh, but Aiden noted with some surprise that he wasn’t pushing him away, his arm a heavy, comforting weight around him.

“Can I ask you something?” Aiden said after a long while of blissful cuddling.

Zain hummed noncommittally.

“Why don’t you get your brother out of the country too? He’s clearly miserable here.”

“I can’t.”

“Bullshit,” Aiden said, running his fingers through the fine dark hair on Zain’s arm. “If you can get me out of the country when I’m legally not even here, getting Gadiel out shouldn’t be a problem at all. Don’t tell me you’re afraid of making your dad angry?”

“It’s complicated,” was the terse reply.

Aiden rolled on top of Zain, folded his arms on Zain’s chest and put his chin on top of them. “Uncomplicate it for me, then,” he said, looking at Zain curiously.

Zain didn’t look amused. “What gave you the impression that you can lie on me?”

Aiden smiled, looking into his brown eyes. “Sorry, but after having your dick in my ass and my mouth hundreds of times, you aren’t that scary anymore. And don’t change the subject. I know a diversion when I see one.”

For a long moment, Zain didn’t say anything, just looked at Aiden’s smiling face.

At last, he averted his gaze and spoke. “My parents were a love match. It’s very rare in our circles—most marriages are arranged—but they were ridiculously in love. At least that’s what everyone says. I barely remember it. My mother was diagnosed with dementia when I was four. She got progressively worse and died when I was twelve—fell down the stairs, running away from me.” His tone was so flat it completely lacked any emotion.

“I’m sorry,” Aiden said quietly, his teasing smile gone. He knew how hard it was caring for someone with dementia: to watch the person you loved fade away before your eyes, replaced by an aggressive, confused stranger who didn’t

recognize you. He'd seen it happen to a friend: she was absolutely burned out by the time her beloved grandfather died. He'd never wish that on his worst enemy.

Zain gave a jerky shrug, his gaze distant. "I'm not telling you this to make you feel sorry. It's relevant to Gadiel's situation." His lips thinned. "My father's mental health deteriorated with my mother's condition. The worse she got, the worse he got, becoming moody and depressed. He started drinking, which is haram—taboo—for a Muslim, but he couldn't seem to stop. The more he drank, the more mistakes he made—political, financial, personal. I don't think I saw him entirely sober a single day for years. It got worse after my mother's death. He drank to excess, he whored and gambled and—" He cut himself off, a shadow passing over his features. His voice didn't have any emotion when he continued. "My older brother, Omar, was studying abroad, so it fell to me to clean up after our father's messes. I even had to forge his signature to keep the emirate running and our people oblivious to how much of a mess their emir was."

Aiden pursed his lips as he imagined a young boy growing up in that kind of atmosphere and having to carry such immense responsibilities on his shoulders on top of dealing with losing his mother to one of the most brutal diseases. Christ, Zain's mother had died in front of him, probably irrationally scared of him if she had been running away from her own adolescent son. Had Zain even been able to properly process her death and grieve if he had to take care of his father? Was that why he was so... emotionally unavailable? Aiden wasn't sure.

But now some things finally made sense. Now he understood what Zain had meant when he'd told him that his religious education had been spotty and that children learned by example. His father had been a very poor example who had forced his son to take care of his shit rather than the other way around. This man had effectively raised himself, without any real moral compass or religious guidance. Whatever code he possessed, he'd fashioned it on his own, for better or for worse.

“You had to grow up very fast.”

Zain gave a clipped nod. “The only good thing that came out of my father’s whoring phase was Gadiel. My father knocked up a British expat, so he had to marry her. That seemed to have shaken him enough to get a grip. But by then, it was too late. Our fortune was mostly gone, and it didn’t help that out of misguided pride, my father had been hiding our financial situation for years by keeping up a luxurious lifestyle that we couldn’t really afford. He told me that we were on the brink of bankruptcy when I was seventeen.”

Aiden was confused. “And? What does that have to do with you not being able to get Gadiel out of the country?”

“My father’s solution to our situation was a business venture that required an insane amount of investment—investment the Emir of Abu Dhabi was willing to make as long as we became a family through marriage.”

Oh. Aiden could see where this was going.

Zain’s lips pursed. “My father and Al Sharabi created a joint business on the assumption that it’d be kept in the family. It was initially funded by Al Sharabi and it brings billions annually.” Zain sighed, his expression becoming tight with frustration. “If the marriage doesn’t happen, things will get very messy. In the years since the deal, Al Sharabi has become even more powerful—he’s now the President of the UAE on top of being the Emir of Abu Dhabi. Not only will Al Sharabi be able to take the company away, he can take all the assets of our family as compensation. And that would be the least of our problems. Al Sharabi isn’t a man who will let go of a public insult easily—and neither is my father, for that matter. They might literally kill Gadiel if he escapes the country to be gay in the West. They certainly have the money to track him down, no matter where he is in the world.”

“Damn,” Aiden said, pulling a face. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Why haven’t you been married off if arranged marriage is still a thing here?”

“That’s none of—”

“My business?” Aiden finished with an eyeroll, giving him a crooked smile. “Come on, tell me. You already told me a lot. So what difference does it make?”

Zain just looked at him for a moment, his expression rather tight. He brought his hand to Aiden’s face. His knuckles pushed against the side of Aiden’s cheek where Aiden knew his dimple was, as if he were attempting to erase it. What a weirdo.

“It’s hard to make me do something I don’t want to do,” Zain said. “My father learned that when he attempted to arrange a marriage between me and Gadiel’s bride.”

Aiden blinked. “You were supposed to be the one to marry her?”

Zain shook his head. “Since Omar was already married at the time, my father wanted to arrange the match for me. When I refused, he arranged it for Gadiel. Al Sharabi never knew that a match with me was a possibility, or he wouldn’t have settled for Gadiel.”

“You said it happened when you were seventeen. And your dad just accepted your refusal? He doesn’t seem like the type.”

Something flickered through Zain’s eyes. “He didn’t at first,” he said. “He had to give up when none of his... methods worked and I threatened to publicly humiliate him with disobedience.”

Seeing his carefully blank face, Aiden had the sudden urge to cradle it with his hands and kiss him gently.

“It doesn’t seem like much of a threat,” Aiden said, quashing the ridiculous urge. It was one thing to want to kiss the man because he was in lust with him, and it was completely another to kiss him because he wanted to—what, *comfort* him? This man wouldn’t want comfort from him anyway.

“You wouldn’t understand,” Zain said with a wry smile. “Our cultures are too different. Disrespecting

one's father in public is much more unthinkable here than it is in the West. Disrespecting him in private was bad enough of an offense for my father to cut me off financially. He would have publicly disowned me too if he could get away with it—it is considered haram for a father to disown his children. Our relationship has been very strained ever since. It pisses him off that I didn't need his support to become successful.”

Aiden hummed, stroking Zain's collarbones with his fingertips absentmindedly. “I do know our cultures are different. That's why I don't even blame you for being homophobic. I understand. I know it's hard to overcome prejudice when it's normalized in your culture.”

Zain narrowed his eyes. “You don't have to butter me up anymore. I already agreed to let you go, so you can drop this soft-eyed, nice and understanding act.”

Aiden blinked before laughing. “You think I'm pretending to be nice?” He laughed again. “I'll tell you a secret: you've seen me at my bitchiest and moodiest in my life. I'm not actually an angry person, Zain. I *am* nice. This fucked-up situation threw me off balance, but anyone who actually knows me would tell you that I'm one of the most easygoing, lighthearted, and nicest people they've met.”

Zain's dark eyebrows drew together. “I've known you for nearly five months.”

“Yes, you have. But for the majority of that time we were either angry with each other or later fucking every time we weren't too angry, and the rest of the time you thought I was trying to manipulate you by being my normal very nice, smiley self. The circumstances of our first meeting gave you a very skewed impression of me.” Aiden smiled. “So nope, I'm not pretending to be something I'm not. If you're really letting me go, I'm not going to bitch and sulk anymore. It's as simple as that.”

The look Zain shot him was almost baffled. “You can't be serious. I still bought you like a thing. I treated you abominably. I tried to coerce you into being my brother's sex pet. And you're not holding a grudge? No one is that nice.”

Aiden shrugged with a laugh. “I am. You’re a high-handed asshole, but being angry at you for being a high-handed asshole is like being angry at the sun for being too bright.”

Zain gave him a look of consternation. “You’re not nice. You’re dumb.”

“Now that’s not a very nice thing to say,” Aiden said, pouting exaggeratedly. “I think I’ll take offense to that.” Aiden made a show of pulling away from Zain, but Zain didn’t let him.

“I didn’t say you could go,” Zain said, holding Aiden tightly.

“I thought I was a free person now,” Aiden said, trying hard not to smile but failing. “Or are you taking that back, Your Highness?”

Zain rolled them and, leaning down, glared at him, as if Aiden’s levity bothered him. “Stop smiling.”

Aiden smiled wider, looking into his dark eyes. “Sorry for not being a grump like you—”

Zain kissed him.

Aiden melted into the kiss, parting his lips eagerly and looping his arms around Zain’s strong neck, trying to tug him closer. God, it shouldn’t have been possible to want this much, when he’d had a spectacular orgasm just a short while ago. But he did. He wanted this man, wanted to crawl into his mouth, between his ribs, wanted to wrap around the heart within and know him from the inside out. Down to the marrow. Every molecule.

When they finally parted for breath, Aiden licked his wet, swollen lips and whispered, holding Zain’s gaze, “Round two?”

Zain nodded, though it seemed absentminded, his eyes not quite focused as they roamed over Aiden’s face. “I can’t wait to get rid of you,” he said.

“No,” Aiden said, pulling him so their foreheads pressed together. Fuck, he wanted to inhale the air Zain exhaled. It was probably weird. “I can’t wait to get rid of *you*.”

And then they were kissing, and nothing else mattered.

Chapter Fifteen

In the following weeks, nothing really changed—and yet, at the same time everything did.

Aiden's days still started and ended with Zain; that hadn't changed. They still didn't seem capable of being in the same room without fucking like animals in mating season—that hadn't changed, either.

But things felt different.

Now that he knew that Zain was working on getting him back home, something in Aiden finally relaxed. It was going to be okay. He was going to see his family soon. He was going to be a free person, not a possession of another man. This... this infatuation was still horrible and unhealthy as fuck, but now it had an expiration date.

So Aiden decided to stop feeling guilty for enjoying himself. He allowed himself to kiss and touch Zain whenever he wanted to—and he wanted it often. Probably too often. Even when they weren't having sex.

"I don't have time to fuck you," Zain said that day, without looking away from the screen of his laptop.

Aiden laid his head on Zain's shoulder and sighed dramatically.

"Get off my lap, Aiden."

“But I’m not doing anything,” Aiden said, playing with the collar of Zain’s white tunic. He wasn’t wearing a thobe that day, and although being so dressed down looked a little unusual on him, he looked good enough to eat. Aiden could barely stop himself from covering his strong, tanned neck and jawline in kisses.

“You’re a distraction,” Zain said, his eyes on the screen. The hand that wasn’t on the touchpad moved to Aiden’s lower back, absently pulling him closer.

Aiden was this close to purring. He *loved* being close to this man. It was somehow both exhilarating and comforting. And yet it still wasn’t enough. “Are you sure you can’t spare a few minutes to fuck me? You won’t even have to prep me. I’m still loose and sloppy with your come and lube.”

Zain’s Adam’s apple bobbed. “That’s disgusting,” he said, his hand sliding lower, under Aiden’s shorts. He pushed two fingers into Aiden’s hole, and Aiden moaned approvingly. He *was* still loose and slick from their morning sex, and his hole took Zain’s fingers with ease. There was still plenty of lube.

“You really are wet,” Zain said, as if commenting on the weather, his eyes on the screen.

His fingers were still in Aiden’s asshole. And the bastard wasn’t doing anything with them.

“You’re a dick,” Aiden said. He didn’t intend for it to come out so fond.

The corner of Zain’s mouth twitched. It was a small smile, but it took Aiden’s breath away.

God, Aiden wanted to swallow him inside himself.

Which... Okay, sometimes his own thoughts crept him out.

He might not be able to swallow Zain into himself, but there was always the next best thing: his cock.

“Let’s fuck,” Aiden murmured, palming the sizable bulge under Zain’s pants. “I’ll be quick, and then you can go

back to your boring Excel. I want to have your cock back inside me.”

Zain let out a sigh, but Aiden wasn't fooled: Zain's cock wasn't exactly uninterested in the proposition.

“I really am busy, Aiden,” he said, but Aiden knew him, knew that Zain would just kick him out if he really wanted to.

Beaming, Aiden pecked him on the cheek. “I'll be quick, I promise!”

He quickly unzipped Zain's trousers and pulled out his cock, humming appreciatively at how hard it already was.

“I love your cock,” Aiden said, stroking it a few times. “I wanna have it in me all the time.”

“You're ridiculous,” Zain said, looking pained. “Who even says stuff like that outside of bad gay porn?”

Aiden grinned. “Are you saying you've watched gay porn? Yeah, you're totally straight!”

Zain glowered at him. He pulled his fingers out and looked back at the screen, as if he didn't give a damn what Aiden was doing and wasn't all that interested in getting off.

“You're so silly with your homophobia, you know,” Aiden said, lining up Zain's erection with his hole. “Sex is just sex. It's about making yourself feel good. It makes you feel good to put your cock in my asshole. Period. Stop being weird about it. Ohh—doesn't this feel as good to you? This feels so damn amazing. Your cock, filling me up.”

“Stop talking,” Zain bit off, staring at the screen of his laptop. “You take cock like a seasoned whore with a sloppy cunt.”

Aiden half-moaned, half-laughed, clutching his wide shoulders for leverage. “You do realize that I love it when you call me offensive things, right? Call me a cockslut, a whore, call my hole a cunt—it only turns me on.”

“Because you're shameless,” Zain said, finally looking—glaring—at him, his gaze intense and utterly fixated. As bewitched as Aiden felt.

Aiden smiled at him dazedly, feeling drunk on the heady want that thrummed in the air between them.

“I’m going to miss this,” he said, pushing down on Zain’s cock.

“Miss what?” Zain said, his eyes roaming over Aiden’s face.

This addicting intensity. You. The way you make me feel.

“Your cock,” Aiden said lightly. “I didn’t know what I was missing out on. It’s a good thing it’s much easier to find cock back home than here—”

Zain threw him onto his desk, yanked his legs wide, and slammed into him.

Aiden cried out, staring at him wide-eyed, as Zain’s mask of indifference *shattered*, revealing something half-crazed and feral. He could only take it as Zain pounded into him like a man possessed, like a beast staking his claim, all cock and animal want.

Aiden barely registered his own orgasm, his eyes fixated on Zain as the older man pulled out and came all over him: his face, his clothes and his softening cock.

Breathing hard, they stared at each other for a long, stunned moment.

Slowly, Zain’s mask of indifference slipped back into place.

“Leave,” he said, returning to his chair. “I have work to do.”

Aiden fixed his clothes with trembling fingers and left.

He barely remembered getting to his room.

He walked to the mirror and touched the smear of come on his cheek. A mark of ownership. He shivered, remembering the crazed look in Zain’s eyes: dark, possessive, and toxic.

He should run. Run very far away. He shouldn’t wait for Zain to get him out of the country. After what he had seen on Zain’s face, he wasn’t at all sure Zain would ever let him go.

He wasn't sure *he'd* have the strength to go.

Because the horrifying truth was, part of him didn't care that this sort of possessiveness was more than a little disturbing.

Part of him felt *thrilled*.

Chapter Sixteen

Aiden felt very cranky the next morning. He hadn't slept well. Zain hadn't come to his room for their usual round of sex in the evening, so he hadn't seen him since the... the incident.

Aiden wasn't sure how he was supposed to act now. Should he just ignore the issue? *Was* it even an issue? Maybe it wasn't. Maybe he was overthinking it. People could say and do weird things during sex. Maybe Zain had just gotten a little carried away, and that dark, intense possessiveness in his eyes wasn't real.

"Hey," Aiden said when he entered the dining room. He could barely hold Zain's gaze when the older man looked at him over the rim of his coffee cup.

He looked normal again. There was no half-crazed, possessive look on his face. His expression was inscrutable, almost cold, and Aiden's stomach dropped.

Christ, what was wrong with him? Did he actually *want* Zain to go all crazy caveman on him?

Aiden stopped by Zain's chair—and hesitated. These days he usually just got into Zain's lap and kissed him good morning; more often than not, they even had quick sex in some form. But this morning, he felt... weird. A little uncertain. Almost shy. Which was ridiculous, considering that

he'd had this man's cock in him several times a day for months.

"Hey," he said again. He grimaced before laughing. "Okay, this is awkward. And ridiculous. Stop making it weird and say something!"

"Someone has to balance it out. You talk too much."

Pouting exaggeratedly, Aiden dropped himself into Zain's lap and put his head on his shoulder. "Let's not make this weird," he said, wrapping an arm around Zain's waist and snuggling up to him. God. He smelled so good. Half a day of not having Zain's attention on him had been... unsettling. And that was very unsettling in itself.

"I wasn't aware there was any weirdness happening," Zain said wryly. "Besides you forcing your clingy self on me."

Aiden huffed. "You should be thanking me. You clearly weren't hugged enough as a child."

When Zain said nothing to that, Aiden lifted his head and looked at him.

"Oh," he said softly, feeling like an idiot. Of course he hadn't been hugged enough. Who would even hug him? His ill mother who probably hadn't even recognized him in the last few years before her death? His neglectful, grief-stricken father? Or the numerous servants that would keep their distance from a sheikh?

Zain's expression became tight. "Stop giving me that look."

"What look?" Aiden said, cradling his face with his hands gently. Zain's facial hair was a little prickly to the touch, but Aiden actually liked the texture of it. Loved it.

He could almost feel the frustration buzzing under Zain's skin before Zain leaned forward and kissed him, hard and greedy, the kiss punishing in its intensity.

Aiden melted into it, his mind quickly turning into needy mush, all the weirdness of the incident forgotten.

Some time later—much later—once Aiden fixed his clothes, and was drowsing dreamily on Zain’s shoulder, he murmured, “So, I’ve been thinking.”

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

Aiden playfully slapped him on the chest. “Oh, shut up. Anyway, since you’re letting me go soon, there’s no reason for me to stay locked up here, right? I’d like to get out, do some sightseeing. Can I go to Dubai?”

He felt Zain’s body tense up. “That’s not... wise.”

“Why not?” Aiden said, laying his hand against Zain’s pec and enjoying his steady heartbeat. Though, it actually wasn’t very steady at the moment. “Are you afraid I’ll run away?”

“I’m not afraid of that,” Zain said in a clipped voice.

“Right—because there’s nothing to be afraid of. Even if I do run off, it’ll be a win for you: you wouldn’t have to find a way to smuggle me out of the country without implicating yourself.”

“Yes,” Zain agreed flatly, but his muscles didn’t relax. His body felt hard and unyielding against Aiden, his arm like an iron band around his waist.

Aiden felt like purring in contentment. The tighter Zain held him, the better it felt. “Are you making some progress on that front, by the way?”

“Some.”

Aiden knew he should push Zain, because what kind of answer was that? But the truth was, he didn’t particularly want to talk about leaving while he was wrapped up in Zain’s arms. The mere idea made his chest a little tight and he squirmed closer to Zain. He didn’t want to think about it until he had to.

But there was something he did want to talk about. Something that had been on his mind for weeks—for months, actually, but Aiden couldn’t do anything about it before. He wasn’t sure he could do anything about it now, but it wouldn’t

hurt to ask, right? His relationship with Zain was better now. A lot better. He felt... *comfortable* with him, god help him.

“There were four girls sold at that auction,” Aiden said, his throat becoming tight as he thought about what might have happened to them. Zain might be a royal ass, but at least he wasn’t cruel. He wasn’t a rapist. He doubted the girls had been as lucky as him. “At least, they were supposed to be sold after me. I never found out what happened to them. Could you find out?”

Zain was silent for a moment.

“That auction was anonymous,” he said at last. But it wasn’t a no.

His heart beating faster, Aiden lifted his head and looked at him pleadingly. “But you could find out?”

Zain hesitated and then nodded.

“I could try,” he said.

Aiden beamed at him. “And you will help them too if you find them, right?”

Zain opened his mouth and closed it.

“What makes you think I’d do that?” he finally said, his voice strained.

Cocking his head to the side, Aiden grinned. “Because you actually aren’t as much of a heartless bastard as you want people to think.”

Zain just looked at him for a moment, his expression vaguely pained and sour.

“Fine.”

Gasping in delight, Aiden hugged him hard, his heart filled to overflowing with joy, relief, and something that uncomfortably felt like adoration—and trust.

God, this was bad. But it felt so wonderful. This feeling. This man.

Snap out of it, Aiden told himself, trying to eradicate the emotion, stomp all over it before it could grow into something dangerous. More dangerous than this already was.

Christ, he needed some distance away from Zain. He needed to find out how bad this was.

“So, can I go with you to Dubai today? You can give me a few bodyguards if you don’t trust me not to get in trouble.”

After a long pause, Zain said, “All right.”

Lifting his head, Aiden smiled at him and pecked him on the cheek. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! You’re the best owner I’ve ever had!”

“Funny,” Zain said, rolling his eyes, but Aiden could see a smile tugging at his lips.

The helicopter ride to Dubai couldn’t have been more different from their previous trip. Aiden spent it all but in Zain’s lap, snuggled up against his chest and chattering about the famous sights he wanted to see. Zain tolerated it, humming noncommittally and mouthing at Aiden’s neck.

“I keep forgetting to ask you... How is Gadiel?”

Zain heaved a sigh against his neck. “As expected—impossible to deal with.”

“That bad, huh?” Aiden murmured, stroking Zain’s fingers absentmindedly. “He’s not just being an irresponsible brat, you know. Some of the things he told me... they made me very uneasy. He needs help. Like, professional help.”

Zain sighed again. “I know. But I don’t trust a therapist to keep Gadiel’s secrets from our father.”

“I think he just needs to be loved,” Aiden muttered, pressing their cheeks together and enjoying the way Zain’s beard felt against his skin. “Love helps.”

Making a derisive noise, Zain kissed his neck.

Aiden shivered, the subject of Gadiel forgotten.

They arrived in Dubai much too soon.

When they left the helicopter, Zain handed him off to his bodyguards before getting into one of the two cars.

Aiden waved him goodbye cheerfully, but his smile slipped as soon as he climbed into the other car with the bodyguards.

His stomach was churning with discomfort and the overwhelming urge to get out of the car and run back to Zain.

Damn it.

This was worse than he'd expected. Although Aiden had genuinely wanted to get out and do some sightseeing, the main purpose of this outing was to find out how well he could handle being away from Zain.

Not very well, it seemed.

But he would have to learn. He had to leave his golden cage—had to want to leave it. He shouldn't want Zain around so much. Wanting him was fine, but needing him definitely wasn't. Because Aiden would be leaving soon. Eventually.

But not yet.

Not yet.

"Where to?" the driver asked in accented English.

Back to Zain.

Quashing the thought, Aiden shrugged with a lost smile. "Where do the tourists go?"

Chapter Seventeen

Aiden was enjoying the stunning view of the city from the observation deck near the top of the Burj Khalifa when one of the bodyguards approached him and handed him a phone.

Aiden stared at it blankly before realizing that there was a call active.

He brought the phone to his ear and walked away from the bodyguards. “Zain?” he said, because there was only one person who would speak to him on the phone in this country.

“Is everything fine?” Zain’s voice sounded kind of tense and abrupt.

Aiden pressed the phone closer to his ear, as if that would magically bring Zain closer. “Sure,” he said belatedly. “Don’t your bodyguards report to you?”

There was a small pause.

“They do.”

Aiden found himself smiling. “Aw, so you just wanted to hear my voice, right?” He knew he was projecting. If he had a phone, he would have called Zain hours ago, not two hours and twenty-odd minutes later. Not that he’d been keeping track of time or anything. Much.

Zain didn’t dignify that with a response, of course. “The bodyguards said you are at the Burj Khalifa. So cliché.”

“Hey, clichés exist for a reason! And being in Dubai and not visiting the tallest building in the world would be a missed opportunity, wouldn’t it? At least I’ll have something to tell my grandchildren!” Aiden imitated an old man’s voice, “When I was young like you, children, I saw the Burj Khalifa when I was a pleasure slave of the local sheikh—”

“You’re ridiculous,” Zain said, but was that a hint of a smile in his voice? “And I’m not *the* sheikh. I’m one of his sons.”

Aiden shrugged with a smile. “It’s my story, so I can exercise some creative freedom! I’m sure my imaginary future grandchildren would be less impressed if their grandpa were a pleasure slave of *a* mere sheikh.”

He fell silent, a feeling of disquiet twisting his gut as he imagined decades passing, having children, then grandchildren, growing old until this misadventure—Zain—would be a distant memory, like something from a dream.

Aiden cleared his throat a few times, trying not to freak out about how much that possible future freaked him out.

“I have to go,” Zain said, his voice rather abrupt. He hung up.

Aiden returned the phone to the bodyguard, feeling a little numb on the inside. A little hollow.

He shook his head, trying to shake the feeling off. “Let’s go to the aquarium, guys,” he said with forced cheer. “It seemed really cool.”

The rest of the day passed in a bit of a haze. Aiden tried to distract himself with cool sights and landmarks, but everything failed to hold his attention, no matter how grand and awe-inspiring the architecture of this city was. The feeling of disquiet in the pit of his stomach grew with every hour until Aiden couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Call your boss, please,” Aiden requested at last. He was tired of sightseeing.

Liar, said the voice at the back of his mind. *All you’re tired of is being away from the man who owns you. You’re*

pathetic.

Shut up. He felt cranky and far too hot. All he wanted was to get home, into his cool, air-conditioned room, and take a long shower. Nothing more.

“I can’t do that,” the bodyguard said, frowning. “We are not allowed to bother the sheikh unless it’s very urgent. He’s a busy man.”

“Don’t worry about it, call him. I’ll take the blame if he’s pissed.”

Looking doubtful, the bodyguard exchanged a few words with his partner. They both looked hesitant, as if it were unthinkable to bother their boss for such an insignificant reason.

“Come on. You can tell him I said it was urgent.”

The men exchanged another look.

At long last, one of them reached for his phone and handed it to Aiden after unblocking it and picking Zain’s contact.

Aiden walked a little away from the bodyguards as he waited for the call to connect.

To his surprise, Zain picked up on the second ring. He said something in Arabic, sounding irritated.

Aiden shivered, enjoying the sound of his low, growly voice probably a little too much.

“It’s me,” Aiden said and smiled when Zain fell silent. “I’m done sightseeing. I wanna go home. Are you done already? Can you pick me up?”

After a moment, Zain said, “Give the phone to the bodyguard.”

Aiden did as he was told and watched the bodyguard as he spoke to Zain. The apprehensive expression on the man’s face shifted to one of surprise. When he hung up, he gave Aiden a suspicious look. “He told us to bring you to his penthouse.”

Frowning, Aiden repeated, “Penthouse?”

“Yes. That’s where the boss lives in the city. It’s in his company’s building.” He exchanged a look with the other bodyguard and said something in Arabic.

The other man shook his head and headed to the car. “Let’s go.”

Zain’s company was located in a skyscraper that was nearly as tall as the Burj Khalifa. But Aiden didn’t have time to admire it before he was rushed into the private elevator by the bodyguards. The security guards gave Aiden some strange looks but didn’t ask any questions—they must have been forewarned.

Once the elevator reached the 134th floor, it stopped. Aiden got out and waved to the bodyguards, who still looked rather perplexed as the elevator doors closed.

Aiden looked around.

For a penthouse, the apartment wasn’t actually gigantic. It was spacious, sure, and the panoramic view it offered was ridiculous, but it had a cozy, lived-in feel to it. The open floor area took most of the penthouse. There was only one bedroom, decorated in white and blue-green, and the floor-to-ceiling windows provided a fantastic view of the Walk and the sea. Aiden was in love.

But he was far too hot.

A quick shower fixed that, and Aiden helped himself to one of the shirts from the closet. He sniffed it, but it didn’t smell of Zain, only of laundry detergent.

Sighing, Aiden went to the fridge. He’d eaten with the bodyguards, but he was a little hungry already.

After carefully examining the fridge’s contents—a lot of the labels were a mystery to him—Aiden found some chocolate ice cream, put it in a bowl, and took it to the terrace.

Evening was falling.

Sprawled on a comfy chaise lounge, Aiden slowly ate his ice cream, gazing at the brilliant lights starting to

illuminate the city.

It was really beautiful here.

A bird in a gilded cage, whispered a voice at the back of his mind.

Aiden stabbed the ice cream with his spoon, brought it to his mouth, and chewed.

He wasn't. He was going home soon.

Are you? Do you really believe that?

Yes, Aiden snapped. *Zain promised.*

Oh, if Zain promised, his inner voice snarked. *Do you even hear yourself? Did he fuck the remaining brain cells out of you?*

"Shut up," Aiden muttered, putting another spoonful of ice cream in his mouth.

Look at you. You're lazing around in this fancy penthouse while your family probably thinks you're dead.

Aiden's stomach twisted. That was true. But he was going home soon. A few weeks wouldn't make a difference to his family. And how could he have contacted them?

You've been handed a phone twice today. You could have easily called Mom instead of flirting with Zain over the phone.

Aiden went still, his breath coming in short, ragged gasps.

It was... It was true. All of it. He hadn't even thought of calling his family. He could have easily done that. It wasn't like his bodyguards had been all that watchful while he talked to Zain. It wasn't like it would have been impossible to slip away from them. But he hadn't even considered it.

This is a textbook case of Stockholm syndrome. You sympathize with your captor, you don't want to leave him, and you feel anxious away from him. Run away, you idiot. This is not good for you. He's not good for you.

Aiden squeezed his eyes shut and tried to bring his chaotic thoughts into a semblance of order. But he couldn't.

All of it was true. He needed to leave.

But he'd never see Zain again.

The thought was paralyzing. He couldn't—he couldn't do it. Not yet. He needed just a little more time. Maybe another week. Yes, another week. And after that, he'd go to the embassy. And then it would be over.

But not yet.

There was the sound of footsteps.

“Aiden?”

He lifted his head and stared at Zain, trying to summon the burning hatred he'd used to feel for him. He used to hate him, right? He used to hate him a lot.

But looking at that hard, chiseled face right now, all Aiden could feel was *want*. And the want wasn't just lust; it was much worse than that. Zain's presence made him feel on edge—and made something in his soul relax. It felt like his skin was too small, crawling with the need to be closer, to feel Zain's arms around him.

God help him, he wanted a hug right now. A *hug*. From the man who owned him. It was official: he was an idiot.

Aiden sighed. “I just realized that you Stockholm syndrome'd me.”

His brows furrowing, Zain walked forward. “I don't know that expression.”

“Google it,” Aiden said with a crooked smile. “I don't really feel like explaining it to you.”

Zain pulled out his phone and started tapping on its screen.

Aiden laughed. “Are you actually Googling it?” he said, nudging Zain's thigh with his bare foot.

“Yes,” Zain said, absently catching his foot with his hand, his gaze on his phone.

Aiden shivered, his toes curling at the touch.

“Hmm,” Zain said. “Stockholm syndrome is a coping mechanism to a captive or abusive situation, when the victim develops positive feelings toward their captors over time.” He lifted his gaze, his dark eyes glinting as he met Aiden’s eyes. “Are you saying you developed ‘positive feelings’ for me?”

There was a great deal of mockery in his tone, but his grip on Aiden’s foot was strong and kind of possessive.

Aiden’s face felt far too warm. “Don’t flatter yourself. The only positive feeling I have is for your cock.” He pressed his toes against Zain’s crotch and licked his lips slowly.

Zain’s expression darkened. Shoving Aiden’s foot aside, he spread Aiden’s legs wide and lay down between them. The chaise lounge creaked under their combined weight as Zain leaned forward, looming over him, their unsteady breaths mixing, their erections pressed snugly against each other.

“Is there a name for *my* predicament?” Zain said, wrapping a hand around Aiden’s throat.

Aiden whined, grinding their cocks together. God, he wanted to come. He wanted to get fucked. He wanted Zain inside him, as deep as possible. “What predicament?” he gasped out, looking at Zain’s firm lips hungrily.

Zain’s jaw worked. He said nothing.

Unable to stand the distance between their mouths, Aiden leaned forward and kissed him. God, it was bliss after half a day apart, Zain’s mouth as hungry and desperate as his own.

The kiss felt more like fucking, as they dry humped through their clothes until Zain finally pushed Aiden’s shirt—his own shirt on Aiden—up, revealing his lack of underwear. Zain growled into the kiss, his hands groping Aiden’s buttocks greedily before retrieving a small bottle from his pocket. He opened it and poured its contents into his hand.

“Is that lube? You came prepared!” Aiden said with a breathless, teasing smile.

Zain scowled at him. “Of course I did,” he said tersely, yanking his zipper down and pulling out his erection. “I’ve been thinking of this all day.” He slicked up his cock with a few fast, impatient strokes before nudging it against Aiden’s hole. “I knew”—Zain gritted it out, pressing carefully into him—“I knew I’d end up with my cock in your cunt within minutes of seeing you.”

Aiden moaned, spreading his legs wider. His hole was well used to taking Zain’s cock several times a day, so the stretch wasn’t even uncomfortable. It felt glorious.

“We probably shouldn’t be—ahh—fucking outside,” Aiden said, looking at the darkening sky. Anyone with a pair of binoculars would be able to see them from another skyscraper taller than this one. Luckily, this one was very tall, but still. The risk was definitely there.

“We shouldn’t be fucking, period,” Zain said, biting Aiden’s neck viciously as his hips snapped forward, driving his cock faster and harder into him.

“But it feels so good,” Aiden whispered, closing his eyes and finally losing himself in the glorious sensation of being taken and having this man inside him.

They came together, kissing desperately.

Then Zain lifted him into his arms and carried him inside.

They were too tired and spent to do anything besides undressing and falling into the bed.

Before long, they were asleep, tangled in each other.

Interlude II

His head was pounding.

It had begun as a dull ache during lunch and had turned into a throbbing pain by four in the afternoon.

Zain hated feeling ill. He hated other people seeing him in that state even more.

Unfortunately, the headaches had been his frequent companion for the past decade. They came and went randomly, each time leaving him snappish, moody, and sometimes nauseated.

There wasn't a medical reason for his headaches; Zain was as healthy as a bull. His doctor insisted that his headaches were just the result of stress and too much work.

Whatever their reason, when a headache set in, Zain's tolerance of other people tended to hit an all-time low—Salma always said he turned into a bit of an ogre. She was one of the precious few people he could tolerate in this state, thanks to their old friendship and her excellent massage skills. Theirs was a steady friendship with benefits—or at least it had been, since he hadn't enjoyed the benefits this year at all.

When Zain had felt the headache become worse that afternoon, he should have gone to her straight from his office. But he had wanted to go home.

To Aiden.

“Like this?” Aiden said softly, massaging his scalp with his fingertips.

Zain hummed in assent, even though the pressure was a little off. Salma would have given him a much better, professional massage, but just the thought of lifting his pounding head from Aiden’s lap, getting into a helicopter, and going to Salma was very unappealing. Aiden might be unskilled, but his touch was comforting. It soothed him, made him feel good in a way that wasn’t physical. Which was a thought Zain didn’t examine too closely.

“You poor thing,” Aiden murmured, leaning down and kissing him on the brow.

Zain gave him a baleful look.

He must have been losing his touch, because Aiden only smiled at him. “Is the light too bright? I can turn off the lamp.”

“No,” Zain said, loathing the thought of Aiden removing his hands from his head and moving away.

“All right,” Aiden said, brushing his thumb between his brows. “I still think you get these headaches because you frown too much. You should smile more. I’ve read somewhere that smiling is very beneficial for your health and stress levels.”

Normally, it irritated Zain to no end when people attempted to engage him in conversation when he had a headache this bad. But to his surprise, he found that he didn’t mind Aiden’s chatter. Aiden had a good voice, soft and smooth, and he didn’t speak too loudly, ever so mindful of Zain’s discomfort.

“Are you too hot? Do you want me to turn up the air conditioning?”

Zain hated being fussed over. He wouldn’t tolerate this nonsense coming from any other person. But Aiden was so ridiculously kind—kinder than he deserved, frankly—that Zain couldn’t bring himself to say anything rude. In fact, to his befuddlement, he found that there was a part of him that...

liked all the fussing. He might not be in any mood for sex right now, but having Aiden's attention on him felt right. He should always be the focus of Aiden's attention.

"I'm not too hot," Zain said. "Just keep doing what you're doing."

The pleased little smile Aiden gave him made something vicious twist in his chest. It left Zain feeling wound up and breathless, so he closed his eyes, unsettled.

Later.

He would think about the issue later.

Zain shut down his computer and was about to leave his office when his secretary told him that there was a man who wanted to talk to him.

"Tell him to make an appointment," Zain said, irritated that he even had to say it. "I'm done for the day." He had actually planned to leave sooner. Aiden had been mopey lately. If Zain had to guess, it had something to do with the approaching Christmas. He probably missed his family.

Zain pressed his lips together, the thought unpleasant for reasons he couldn't explain.

He just detested moping of any kind. That was all.

Presents. He would buy Aiden a few Christmas presents to cheer him up. That should fix the issue.

"I tried," said his secretary over the intercom. "But he refuses to leave."

Zain frowned. "Call security. Why are you bothering me with this?" He switched the intercom off and started quickly gathering up the paperwork that was strewn about on the desk. Some of it needed his immediate attention. He'd have to take it home with him.

The sound of the door opening didn't make him lift his head. But the sound of heavy footsteps that definitely didn't belong to his lanky secretary did.

"*Buono sera,*" said the man.

Zain straightened up, his eyes narrowing. He pressed the button of his intercom. "Salih, I told you to call security."

The man shrugged with a smile, letting his jacket fall open, revealing a holstered gun.

Zain went still.

"Your secretary decided to take a break," the man said in English, but he didn't speak it as a native speaker, his Italian accent very strong.

Zain considered calling security, but they wouldn't be of much use to him floors away. The man was armed. Armed and dangerous. There was something about the way the man carried himself that made it obvious that he wouldn't hesitate to use his gun.

"What do you want?" Zain said.

"My name is Lorenzo," the man said, with a smile that didn't touch his eyes. "I'm just here to ask you a few questions, *Signor* Rahim. You answer them, and I go away."

Zain sat down in his chair and regarded him coldly. "You have three minutes and then I'm calling security."

Lorenzo—if his name really was Lorenzo—sat down in the chair across his desk and studied him with sharp, intelligent eyes. "You attended a party in March."

Zain didn't tense up, but it was a close thing.

Inwardly, he cursed. It had been too much to hope that finding Aiden's friends and helping them get home wouldn't have consequences. He might have taken precautions to not give away his identity, but the girls knew where they had been initially sold.

No good deed went unpunished.

That said, he still didn't regret doing it. Aiden's reaction alone had been worth it.

"I attend a lot of parties," Zain said, holding the Italian's gaze steadily. "You'll have to be more specific."

"That one was special. It had a discreet auction happening, with very exotic, expensive merchandise."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

Lorenzo gave him a long, assessing look.

Zain met his gaze head-on. Let him look his fill. He would find nothing on his face.

"Hmm," Lorenzo said before pulling out a photograph from his pocket. "And you've never seen this man?"

Zain glanced at the picture. Although he'd expected it, seeing Aiden's picture still felt like a blow to his gut.

"I don't think so," Zain said. "Even if I have, I don't remember. I don't have a good memory for faces. Now, are you done wasting my time?"

Slowly, Lorenzo got to his feet, his eyes still boring a hole in Zain's face, no doubt looking for any signs of lying.

"Fine," he finally said gruffly. "But if you're lying, you will regret it, *signor*." The threat was delivered with calm confidence.

"Get out," Zain said, staring him down.

He didn't relax once the man was gone.

He reached for the phone on his desk and contacted his head of security. "A man just left my office. Use CCTV cameras to track him and get me information on him. Who he works for, what he's doing here—and how he was able to incapacitate my secretary and get into my office to threaten me with a gun when I'm paying millions for my security."

There was a sharp intake of breath. "Yes, Sheikh," Abdullah said stiffly.

“Call me when you learn who he is.” Zain hung up and got to his feet, his body thrumming with agitation. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he strode out of his office and called the head of security of his island. “Is Aiden in the house?” he said, keeping his voice low.

There was a moment’s pause. If Hakim was surprised by his question, he didn’t let it show. “Yes,” he said. “He was seen entering the home theater half an hour ago, but we don’t have cameras inside the room.”

Zain’s shoulders relaxed a little. He got out of the elevator, heading toward his helicopter. “Put two men outside the room. All of you are to be on high alert. Security must be tightened. I’ll have Abdullah brief you.”

“Yes, Sheikh.”

Zain hung up and got into the helicopter. “Home,” he said. “As fast as possible.”

Despite his instructions, the ride seemed to last longer than normal, and he felt wound up by the end of it.

The home theater was guarded by two security guards.

“Return to your normal posts,” Zain ordered before pushing the door open.

Aiden was seated on the floor in front of the TV, a pair of headphones covering his ears, gripping a controller in his hands. There was an endearing look of concentration on his face: his brows furrowed, his full lips pursed tightly, eyes glaring at what was happening on the screen.

He didn’t hear Zain enter, of course. Anyone could have entered and stolen him.

Zain grimaced, trying to eradicate the thought. Aiden wouldn’t be *stolen*. He had to be Zain’s first in order to be stolen from him, which was the line of thinking that was... that he had been trying to eradicate for months.

Aiden must have noticed him in his peripheral vision—he turned his head and smiled widely. “Zain! You’re back!”

Zain stared at that smile for a moment before clearing his throat and clasping his hands behind him. “I am.” He wanted to ask Aiden whether he’d seen anything suspicious around the house, but that would give away that there was a problem.

The problem wouldn't exist if you'd gotten rid of him immediately after you decided to do so. It's been months.

His lips thinning, Zain walked closer and sat down on the couch behind Aiden. The younger man immediately leaned back, resting his cheek against Zain’s knee as he resumed playing his game.

Zain stared at him. He didn’t move his leg away.

He utterly despised this—what he’d been turned into. By a *boy*, no less. Zain had never been one to hesitate. Once he made a decision, it was carried out. Until Aiden.

His decision to let Aiden go didn’t seem to matter. He didn’t seem capable of following through. If he were honest, it wasn’t all that hard to get Aiden out of the country. With his connections, he could accomplish it within days. He’d already done it for Aiden’s friends last month, which had earned him a bone-crushing hug from Aiden—and an adoring look that made him beyond uncomfortable. Uncomfortable and greedy for more. The fact that Aiden hadn’t questioned why Zain was able to get his friends out of the country so easily but couldn’t do the same for him was something Zain was grateful for—because he had no satisfactory answer.

He simply didn’t want to do it.

That was the crux of the issue.

He didn’t want to let Aiden go. Just imagining putting Aiden on a plane and never again being on the receiving end of his smiles, touches, and lighthearted, teasing chatter made a vicious feeling twist his stomach into a hard, toxic knot. He’d never experienced this sort of possessiveness before. He felt like a dragon hoarding his treasure jealously, ready to breathe fire at whoever threatened to take it away. It was ridiculous and unacceptable. And a million other things.

“All right, I’m done,” Aiden said, switching the PlayStation off. The mere existence of this stupid console was proof of how bad things had gotten: Aiden had briefly mentioned wanting to play a new Spider-Man game, and Zain had bought him the console—and the collector’s edition of the game.

Aiden crawled into Zain’s lap and looped his arms around his neck. “Hey,” he said with a small, fond smile. “What’s got you brooding now?”

Fond. He had no business looking at him this way. Sometimes Zain wanted to shake him. He might not have kidnapped Aiden himself, but he had treated him horribly at the beginning. Zain didn’t deserve this fondness. He didn’t deserve these soft smiles.

He still craved them like a thirsty man craved water in the desert. He wanted everything—every smile, every millimeter of skin, every molecule.

“You’re weirding me out,” Aiden said with a soft laugh.

“Stop that,” Zain bit out.

Aiden blinked. Cocking his head to the side, he looked at him curiously. “Stop what?”

“Stop being—” He cut himself off. It wasn’t the language barrier. He’d never spoken as much English in his life as he had done this year. The language came naturally to him these days. No, it was... He didn’t want to put his thoughts into words. Make them real. Make it obvious how bad this shit was.

His jaw clenching, Zain said tersely, “Have you already forgotten that I’m your owner, not your—friend?”

Aiden blinked a few more times before smiling. He had the nerve to look *amused*, the little shit. “Translation from Zain-speak: I’m experiencing some soft, icky emotions, so I’m going to overcompensate and act like an asshole. Did I get that right?”

“I don’t act like an asshole. I am an asshole.”

Aiden grinned. “I know. You’re a dick, there’s no denying that. Now kiss me, you grump. I missed you.”

Zain buried his hand in Aiden’s hair and crushed their lips together.

Aiden was still smiling as he kissed back.

Aiden was fast asleep beside him when Zain’s phone buzzed with a notification.

Zain reached for it and tensed up when he saw who the message was from. It was his head of security, Abdullah. Apparently, he had the information he wanted.

Carefully, Zain pushed Aiden’s leg off him and got out of the bed. Aiden made an unhappy little noise but didn’t wake up, hugging Zain’s pillow instead.

Tearing his eyes away, Zain walked onto to the balcony and called Abdullah. “You know who he is?”

“Yes,” Abdullah said. He sounded uncomfortable. “I was able to identify him using my connections in the intelligence agency. The man is an Italian—”

“I gathered,” Zain said, very dryly.

“He’s a member of the Sicilian mafia, Sheikh. Rumor has it, he’s the right hand of the new boss.”

Zain frowned. It made no sense. He’d never had any dealings with the mafia. Why would they even be looking for Aiden? He lived half a world away from Italy.

“I’ve also found out that Lorenzo has approached several high-profile businessmen lately, for reasons unknown.”

Probably the other attendees of the party Aiden was sold at. Lorenzo clearly knew Aiden had been sold at that party but wasn’t sure to whom.

But it could be only a matter of time before he found out. The auction might have been anonymous, but as Zain had proved, that didn't guarantee anything. Granted, it had taken Zain considerable effort to find out who had bought Aiden's friends, and he could only do it because he had access to all CCTV cameras in the city.

"Anything else?" Zain said.

"Not much. But Lorenzo has at least twelve men with him. And they all seemed armed."

Zain hung up and returned to the bedroom.

He stared at Aiden's sleeping form for a moment.

Then, he climbed into the bed and pulled Aiden into his arms, pressing his back flush to Zain's front. Somehow, it wasn't enough. Burying his face in Aiden's neck, Zain held him tighter and carefully slipped his cock back into Aiden's well-used, still-wet hole. There was no urgency to his desire this time. He just wanted—needed—to be inside him.

It had nothing to do with the fear that he could be taken away.

He didn't fear that. He was going to get rid of Aiden. But on *his* terms, when *he* decided to do so.

He wouldn't let anyone interfere with that, Italian mafia be damned.

"Zain?" Aiden mumbled sleepily. "Do you want me to go to my room?"

"No," Zain said, tightening his arm around him. His. He was his. "You will always sleep with me from now on."

So that no one can steal you while I sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

There was a wrapped rectangular box on their bed. Well, it was Zain's bed, technically, but considering that he hadn't slept in his own bed for the past few months, Aiden was a little justified in thinking of this bed as theirs.

Aiden picked up the box and said, "What is this, Zain?"

Zain didn't look up from his phone. "Isn't it your birthday?"

Aiden blinked. His birthday—

Right. It was February already. He had turned twenty-two.

"I had no idea you even knew when my birthday was," Aiden said, starting to tear the wrapper off. "It's sweet of you to remember."

Zain kept his gaze on his phone. "It's nothing. I had my secretary buy it."

Smiling, Aiden rolled his eyes. It was kind of endearing, really, how dismissive Zain was of any nice gesture on his part. He'd done the same back in November when he had casually remarked that he'd gotten Aiden's friends out of the country, as if it wasn't a monumental thing. He'd done the same in December too: pretended that it wasn't a big deal to have the house decorated for Christmas and acted as though it

was normal to give a small mountain of presents to a sex pet on Christmas—a holiday he didn't celebrate himself.

Aiden was actually low-key surprised Zain was giving him only one present this time.

But as he tore the wrapper off, Aiden's smile faded.

He stared at the phone in his hands. "It's a phone," he heard himself say.

"Hmm."

"You're giving me a phone," Aiden said.

"Yes. I'm sure you've seen one before."

Aiden lifted his gaze and stared at Zain. "I..." *I don't understand*, he wanted to say.

Rationally, he knew it wasn't really a big deal: security had stopped taking away the staff's phones months ago. Aiden could have easily borrowed one of their phones if he wanted to.

But it was one thing to *theoretically* be able to contact his family. And it was completely another to be given the means to do so.

If he wanted to.

Aiden stared at the phone in his hands, both hating and loving the gift.

He hated that now it would always be there, a taunting reminder that he was *choosing* not to contact his family. He was voluntarily causing them pain by his silence. But how could he contact them? What would he even say? "Sorry, Mom, I'm alive and totally fine, but I don't want to come back yet"? His parents would never let it be. His dad would have the call traced and then his parents would be here, probably with the FBI, and bring a shitstorm down on Zain. That was why he hated this gift—it was irrefutable proof of his weakness and selfishness. He was a selfish, horrible person unable to let go of a relationship that should never have happened.

But he loved this gift too. It meant Zain trusted him enough to have it. Trusted him not to betray him.

Or maybe he just knows how bad you have it for him. You told him yourself that he successfully Stockholm syndrome'd you. It's been half a year since he promised to get you home, and nothing happened. Stop waiting and leave. Contact your family at least. He literally gave you the means to do it, you idiot!

Gripping his phone in his hand, Aiden walked to Zain and crawled into his lap. "Thank you," he said with a small smile, burying his fingers in Zain's hair.

Zain tolerated being petted for a while, looking at him with an odd sort of intensity. "I put my number in it. I want you to contact me if you see anything strange."

Aiden's brows furrowed. "Strange in what way?"

"If you see strangers," Zain said, putting his hands on Aiden's waist. "Anyone who acts suspiciously—or even looks at you too long."

Aiden laughed. "Are you serious?"

His expression vaguely annoyed, Zain nodded.

"Don't take it the wrong way," Aiden said, threading his fingers through his dark hair. "But you've been acting odd for the past few months."

He had been. He had been *smothering* Aiden with his attention lately. Aiden wasn't sure what was up with him, but Zain had rarely let him out of his sight since December.

Not that Aiden was complaining; far from it. He was just surprised. And a little bit relieved too, if he were honest. He couldn't deny that he'd kind of expected (*scared*) that Zain would get tired of him by that point. They'd been having sex for nine months. He'd been staying in Zain's house for eleven months. He'd kind of thought Zain would tire of him by now.

But Zain was showing no signs of it. If anything, for the past few months, they'd been attached at the hip—to the point

that Zain did most of his work at home and rarely left the house without a good reason.

“You’re imagining it,” Zain said, pulling him closer and then kissing him, hard and greedy, as though he couldn’t get enough. Aiden could relate: it always felt like he had this unquenchable thirst inside him that couldn’t be sated, no matter how much sex they had or how often they kissed. He wanted this man. So much. So, so much.

God, why wasn’t this getting better?

“Bed?” Aiden panted out, rubbing his erection against Zain’s.

Sighing, Zain got to his feet and carried Aiden to the bed.

“It gives me butterflies when you carry me around,” Aiden said, wrapping his legs around him.

“You have no brain-to-mouth filter, do you?” Zain said with a laugh, dropping him into the bed and climbing on top of him.

Aiden grinned. “Nope,” he said, putting his phone aside and pulling Zain down into a kiss.

Tomorrow, he promised himself, losing himself in Zain’s mouth. He would contact his family tomorrow.

And never mind that he promised that every day—and every day he couldn’t make himself do it.

Aiden woke up to the sound of raised voices.

Blinking blearily, he rubbed his eyes before his vision focused on the intruder.

Oh.

Gadiel was yelling something at his older brother, red in the face, his eyes glistening with angry tears.

Zain stood by the bed, his expression blank and entirely unimpressed, as if he hadn't been caught in bed with another man—a man Zain had initially bought for Gadiel.

Aiden winced. “Look, Gadiel—”

“Shut up,” Gadiel snapped at him. “I’m talking to my hypocrite of a brother, not his whore!”

“Out,” Zain said, his eyes cold. “Close the door from the other side and let me get dressed.”

Looking mutinous, Gadiel opened his mouth but shut up when Zain’s expression turned positively frosty. He stalked out of the room, slamming it hard.

“He’s a bit of a drama queen, isn’t he?” Aiden said, trying to lighten up the tense mood.

“He’s a spoiled brat, that’s what he is,” Zain said, slipping into a thobe. “Stay in bed, it’s still early. Seeing you will just piss him off more. Knowing him, he’s probably halfway to his yacht anyway. I have to calm him down before he does something stupid.” Fully dressed, Zain leaned down, kissing him briefly on the lips. “I should be back before lunch.”

Aiden leaned forward, wanting a real kiss, but Zain was already straightening up. “It’ll take that long?”

Zain grimaced. “Gadiel has quite a temper.”

“Don’t be too hard on him,” Aiden said, catching Zain’s hand and squeezing it. “He feels hurt. I don’t think it’s even about me. He probably feels like you’ve been lying to him all his life—that you didn’t tell him that you can relate to his situation. He felt alone, and now he feels betrayed.”

Zain looked at their hands and then looked back at his face. “You’re too nice for your own good. He called you a whore.”

Aiden shrugged. “He was angry. And he does have a reason to be angry.”

Shaking his head exasperatedly, Zain let go of his hand and left.

Aiden sighed, his whole body feeling unsatisfied, as it always did when he didn't get enough of Zain's attention. He rolled his eyes with a laugh, exasperated by his own clinginess. He was going to have all the attention he wanted once Zain came back.

Aiden had no idea how wrong he was.

Chapter Nineteen

Aiden had been getting dressed after his bath when the noise outside the room caught his attention.

It sounded like... footsteps, many of them, and they were approaching rapidly.

Frowning, he slipped into Zain's shirt and opened the door to check what was going on.

He was greeted with a gun aimed at his face.

Aiden froze, and then slowly lifted his hands as his mind worked to process what was happening.

There were seven armed men in the corridor. They looked strange, and it took Aiden a moment to realize why: he'd gotten so used to Arabic facial features that seeing Caucasian features took him aback. Intruders. They were clearly intruders. The house was guarded by at least a dozen security guards—had been. It was highly unlikely that these big, armed men had managed to sneak past them.

One of the men stepped forward and said something in what sounded like Italian to the guy who held the gun to Aiden's face.

The guy nodded and let the hand with the gun drop to his side.

Aiden exhaled. “Who the hell are you?” he said, wishing he hadn’t left his brand-new phone on the nightstand.

The man who had just issued the order to drop the gun said in accented English, “We’re here to rescue you.”

“Rescue me?” Aiden repeated numbly, blinking.

“Yes,” he said, laying a hand on Aiden’s arm and steering him none-too-gently down the corridor. “My name is Lorenzo. We need to leave quickly. We dealt with the guards, but we can’t be sure that one of the staff hadn’t managed to contact someone, asking for reinforcements.”

Nausea churned in Aiden’s gut, rising to his throat. “You k-killed them?”

Lorenzo shrugged. “Some of them might be just knocked out, but yeah, more or less. They won’t be a problem. But there isn’t enough of us if more people arrive soon. That’s why we need to leave quickly— What?”

Aiden stared, wide-eyed, at the body in the main hall, lying in a pool of blood. It was Ibrahim, the young guy who had served them breakfast just yesterday.

Unable to hold back the nausea, he doubled over and puked all over the floor.

Lorenzo sighed, having the nerve to look disgusted, as if Aiden’s puke was more sickening than the dead body a few feet away. “Come on,” he said impatiently, tugging Aiden toward the front door.

“Let go of me!” Aiden snapped, wrenching his arm free and backing away. “I’m not going anywhere with a bunch of killers!”

The men exchanged looks that didn’t need translation: they looked as if Aiden were the crazy and unreasonable one.

Lorenzo sighed again. “I should have expected this. Your brother is a lot more cool-headed, but you’re still just a kid.”

Aiden’s stomach dropped. “My brother? You kidnapped Jordan too? Where is he? What did you do to him?”

After a moment's pause, Lorenzo said, "If you want your brother to live, you will come with us, quietly and quickly. Or he will die."

One of the men laughed meanly but was quickly silenced by Lorenzo's look.

"Let's go," Lorenzo barked out again, grabbing Aiden's arm.

This time Aiden didn't resist. If these assholes had Jordan, he couldn't risk his life. He would have to comply—for now.

But his resolve weakened when he saw more bodies in the grounds around the house. God, why? So many lives taken to "rescue" him? It made no sense. These assholes weren't rescuers. They were cold-blooded killers. What did they want with him and Jordan?

The endless questions buzzed in Aiden's head all the way to the helicopter waiting for them.

He was so confused and distracted by those questions that it took him a while to realize that they had taken off and Zain's private island was quickly disappearing out of sight.

Zain.

They didn't... These bastards hadn't done anything to him, right?

His heartbeat became so fast he felt dizzy, gasping for breath.

"What's wrong now?" Lorenzo said gruffly.

"What did you do to Zain?"

Lorenzo's expression darkened. "Nothing. We didn't have time. We received the confirmation that he was the one who had you only this morning, and we had to prioritize. We decided to get you while he was busy with his brother. We can always deal with him later if the boss gives the order."

Aiden breathed out. Okay. All right. Zain was safe for now; that was the important thing. And after finding all of his

people brutally murdered, he would be on his guard.

It would be all right. Everything was going to be all right. Aiden would escape or Zain would find him, or—any alternative was unthinkable.

It was going to be all right.

This would seem like a distant nightmare once he was back with Zain.

And he would be.

He *would* be.

It didn't take Aiden long to completely lose track of time. He had been moved from the helicopter to a private jet and then to another helicopter. He'd been offered food a few times, but Aiden refused to touch it. He didn't trust these assholes. He wouldn't be surprised if they were lying about having Jordan too.

The more Aiden thought about it, the more likely it seemed. But he still couldn't risk Jordan's life, on the off-chance that he was wrong.

So he waited.

At long last, their helicopter landed.

Wherever they were, it was early evening there.

Aiden frowned, looking around.

One thing was for sure: they weren't in the UAE anymore. The weather was cold here. Well, not *cold* cold—it was pretty mild for February—but it was a world of difference from the Arabian heat Aiden had gotten used to in the past year.

The climate here seemed... Mediterranean. He could see hills covered in cypress trees, and there seemed to be a beach—and sea—some distance away.

“Where are we?” Aiden asked Lorenzo.

The man smiled. “Sicily.”

Frowning, Aiden eyed him warily. “What are we doing in Sicily?”

“I was ordered to find you and bring you to your brother. We didn’t kidnap him, by the way. He lives here.”

Aiden had never felt more lost. “Are you claiming my brother all of a sudden decided to move halfway across the world to Italy? That’s ridiculous. Jordan has no reason to—”

There was a man running toward him from the big white house on top of the hill.

Aiden’s breath caught in his throat when he recognized him.

It was Jordan.

His brother really was here. He didn’t look like he’d been kidnapped or hurt. He looked healthy, and he was wearing his usual high-end clothes. He looked fine.

Except for the fact that his brother was *crying*—his big brother who had never been one to express much emotion in public.

“Aiden!”

Before Aiden even understood what was happening, he was enveloped in Jordan’s arms and squeezed so hard his ribs hurt. “I can’t believe this,” Jordan said hoarsely. “They really found you.”

After a moment, Aiden hugged back, feeling absolutely confused—and suddenly, utterly terrified.

He had been rescued.

He really had been rescued.

Chapter Twenty

For the first few weeks after his rescue, things had been so hectic that Aiden didn't have a moment to himself.

Everything felt surreal, like things were happening too fast.

There was a lot of news to digest. Apparently in the year he was absent Jordan had abandoned his life in Boston and moved to Italy to live with his new boyfriend. The latter was mind-boggling on several levels. Aiden hadn't even known his brother was into men too. The identity of the boyfriend was even more mind-boggling: Jordan was dating the boss of the Italian mafia.

Granted, Damiano Conte was pretty attractive: he was tall, dark, handsome, and confident—which... yeah, okay, Aiden could see the appeal. Aiden still wasn't sure what to think of his brother's boyfriend, but Damiano had been very accommodating. He had sent his private jet to bring Aiden's parents and sister to Sicily, and for the past few weeks, they'd all been staying at Damiano and Jordan's house. It had been... strange, to have so many people around all the time.

The knock on the door snapped Aiden out of his thoughts.

It was his mother. "Can I come in, darling?"

"Sure, Mom," Aiden said with a smile.

His mother walked over and sat down beside him on the bed. “How are you, sweetie?” she said, taking his hand.

Shrugging, Aiden smiled again. “I’m fine.”

His mother’s gaze was searching as it roamed over his face. Her hazel eyes, so much like his own, were unsmiling, troubled. “Have I ever told you about the day you were born?”

Aiden blinked, taken aback a little. “I don’t think so.”

His mother smiled wistfully, looking down at their joined hands. “You were a surprise. I wasn’t all that young, and we weren’t sure if we should have a third child so much younger than Eloise and Jordan. It was a difficult pregnancy and very difficult birth. God, I wanted to die by the time you finally came out—I was so exhausted and in pain. But when they gave you to me for the first time, you looked up into my eyes and...”

She smiled with a faraway look. “You smiled at me. They say newborns don’t see well and their smiles aren’t real, but I know what I saw. You looked at me and gave me the sweetest smile... And I fell in love so hard right there, all my exhaustion and unhappiness gone. And I knew you would be my happy child. And you were. You brought so much joy to our family. You rarely cried, always quick to smile and make people feel better. And you didn’t lose that ability as you grew up. You are so *light*.” She squeezed Aiden’s fingers, her eyes suddenly glistening with tears. “Or rather, you were. You still smile, but your light—it’s not there anymore, sweetheart.”

Aiden laughed a little. “Come on, Mom! I think, given the circumstances, it’s understandable that I feel a little out of sorts—”

“Don’t,” she said, looking pained. “Don’t smile for our sakes. I hate seeing it. And I hate not knowing what happened to you.”

“I told you—nothing happened,” Aiden said, averting his gaze.

There was a long, strained silence before his mother spoke again. “I understand that—that it may not be easy for you to talk to your mom about being r—about being violated —”

“I swear, that didn’t happen,” Aiden said firmly, looking into her eyes. “I *swear* on your life. I wasn’t—I wasn’t raped. I swear, Mom.”

She gazed at him searchingly, looking confused, heartbroken, and very, very old. “Then why are you like this? What happened to you?”

Aiden looked away again, unable to hold her gaze. Unable to answer.

He didn’t want to lie to her, but the honest answer would make him sound crazy. His parents had already suggested therapy as it was. Jordan flat-out insisted on it.

Aiden didn’t want therapy. He already knew what a therapist would diagnose him with. Everything in him rebelled against the idea of some stranger reducing his feelings to those two words and neatly deciding that they weren’t real or healthy.

Maybe they weren’t, but they were his. *Theirs*.

“The truth is,” Aiden said, stroking her fingers. “You’re right: I’m not really okay. This—being back with you guys—it feels weird to me. I’m happy to see you—of course I am, but... I really need to talk to him.”

His mother’s hand stiffened in his. “Him?” she said, her voice ringing with suppressed anger. “You can’t be serious, Aiden! *That man* is—he’s—”

“He didn’t do anything to me,” Aiden said. *Anything I didn’t want him to do.*

His mother scoffed. “Aiden—surely you can’t expect us to believe the man bought you out of the goodness of his heart and didn’t do anything to you in the year you lived with him? You should press charges, have him arrested! Buying people is illegal even in the UAE! He might be a sheikh, but that wouldn’t protect him!”

“Leave it, Mom. I’m not pressing charges. Even if I wanted to do it, how would I even explain how I escaped without implicating Damiano and the fact that his people killed Zain’s staff just because they were in the way!” It still made him furious. His rescue wasn’t worth people’s lives.

And if they didn’t rescue me, I could have been with him right now.

Aiden curled his hands into balls, trying to ignore the gnawing ache in his stomach. God, the yearning was unbearable sometimes. Sometimes he physically felt his body ache with it, as if every cell felt the distance between them, as if there was a string connecting their bodies despite thousands of miles separating them.

Maybe it was just him though.

Maybe Zain was happy to get rid of him—he’d planned to do it, after all.

“Damiano saved you,” his mother said sharply. “It’s unfortunate that his people had to resort to violence, but Lorenzo said there was no other choice. Apparently that man had his island more well-guarded than some prisons. That was actually what made Lorenzo suspicious, and that’s why he had that man’s younger brother bugged. And even then, it took Lorenzo some luck to get proof and retrieve you.” She swallowed and gave him a long, piercing look. “Lorenzo said they heard Gadiel Rahim yell at that man for being a hypocrite and call you his whore.”

He hadn’t known that. So that was why his family didn’t believe him.

“Fine,” Aiden said, looking down at his hands before looking back at his mom. “I did have sex with him.”

She paled and looked like she was about to be sick.

“But it wasn’t like that, Mom,” Aiden said quickly. “It was consensual.”

“Consensual?” she choked out. “You weren’t in a position to give consent! That’s not consent! That man—”

“Stop calling him that,” Aiden snapped. “He has a name!”

She stared at him, something like horror dawning in her hazel eyes. “Oh my god,” she whispered, shaking her head. “This is so much worse than I thought.”

“You don’t understand, Mom.”

She shook her head. “No, I understand now. He brainwashed you into thinking that you’re in love with him.”

Aiden’s stomach knotted up.

Love.

That was one word he hadn’t allowed himself to apply to his feelings for Zain.

But the word didn’t feel wrong.

“I—I don’t know if I love him,” Aiden said. “But I need to talk to him, Mom. If you want to help me feel better, help me contact him.”

“You can’t be serious, Aiden!” She squeezed his hands. “We will go home and find you the best therapist in the city. You’ll get better and forget about that man. Everything is going to be all right. You’ll fall in love with a nice, sweet girl your age—or a nice boy, if that’s more your thing—and you’ll be happy.”

Aiden tried to imagine it. But try as he might, he couldn’t. That nice future only left him feeling cold and hollow.

“I don’t want to forget him,” he whispered. “I don’t think I can be happy without him, Mom.”

His mother was openly crying now. “Don’t be ridiculous, sweetheart,” she said, pulling him into her arms, against her chest, as if he were still her baby in need of protection. “Of course you will be happy without that man. I promise you.” She kissed the top of his head. “Just give it time. We’ll fix you. You’re home now.”

Aiden breathed in her familiar scent, trying and failing to believe that.

Chapter Twenty-One

Aiden left Italy with his family—bar Jordan, of course—a month after being rescued.

He would've liked to say that he was easily able to reclaim his old life in Boston, but that would've been a lie. He had missed two terms and returning to school was out of the question in the middle of the current term, so for the time being, he was pretty much confined to his parents' house.

Considering that the house in question was guarded by a dozen security guards 24/7, Aiden soon started feeling like he really was confined. Locked up. Suffocated by his parents' overprotectiveness.

"The bodyguards aren't here for your sake, darling," his mother had said when Aiden had brought it up. "They were assigned to us by Damiano in December, when Jordan started seeing him. Damiano doesn't want us to be kidnapped and used against him by his enemies."

Aiden wasn't sure whether he believed her or not. Either way, he felt constantly watched even if he went for a walk. It didn't help that the therapist his parents had found for him had strongly advised against giving him a phone.

"It's not that we don't trust you with a phone, Aiden," his mother had said. "But Dr. Richardson said that limiting

access to electronic devices would be beneficial for honest communication between us.”

Aiden had wanted to yell at her. He still did. He felt suffocated in his parents’ house in a way he hadn’t felt even in the first months in Zain’s house: at least he had been left to his own devices back then. Here he was watched *constantly*, and there was something wary in his parents’ eyes, as if he were a feral cat they had brought home and didn’t know what to expect from it. Aiden hated it, and he hated that he hated it.

He didn’t actually want to be resentful and miserable. He didn’t want to mope around and worry his parents. He wasn’t the moping kind. But his ability to feel joy seemed completely gone.

He just... he just...

He felt hollow on the inside, like he had swallowed a huge, cavernous nothing, and at the same time he felt like his insides were shrinking and curling around themselves, hungering for something that wasn’t there. The feeling was ever-present and ever-growing. Dr. Richardson had said that it was normal to feel post-traumatic depression and that it would get better once he reclaimed his old routine, but Aiden didn’t buy that. He didn’t feel traumatized.

“Then how *do* you feel, Aiden?” Dr. Richardson said.

Aiden gave a listless shrug. “Like a bird in a cage.”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “And you didn’t feel that way in the UAE?”

“The irony is,” Aiden said with a crooked smile, “he actually gave me more freedom than my parents do now.”

“He,” she repeated, a contemplative look in her eyes. “Is that how you think of him? He? Mr. Rahim? Or Zain?”

Aiden pursed his lips. “I already told you I don’t want to talk about him.”

“How do you expect to ever get better if you refuse to talk about the cause of your depression?”

“He isn’t the cause of my depression,” Aiden said, acutely aware of how unconvincing he sounded.

Sometimes he almost hated Zain. Hated him for turning him into this miserable, mopey person who craved him like he craved air. Zain had done this to him. It was as though Zain had contaminated him, infected him with a feverish sickness for which he was the only cure. He wanted—needed—Zain close. He wanted his body inside his. He wanted to feel his dark-brown eyes on him. He wanted his arms around him. He wanted to sleep against him, his ear pressed against the steady beat of his heart.

He wanted a lot of things he was never going to have again.

Dr. Richardson gave him a patient look. “Aiden, you can trust me, you know. I’m not going to tell your parents anything you tell me. They might be paying the bills, but I’m here to help you, not them.”

“You want to help me?” Aiden said. “Convince my parents to allow me a fucking phone. That would be a good start.”

Later that evening, Aiden stood outside Dr. Richardson’s office and listened to his parents’ argument with her.

“You were the one who told us not to allow him a phone!” his father said.

“It was my recommendation to limit his access to electronic devices, to make him talk to you. But you pushed him too far. He feels like you’re his jailers, not his parents. Buy him a phone and don’t monitor what he does.”

“But,” his mother said. “He might contact that man if we do it.”

“If he wants to, eventually he’ll find a way to contact him, no matter how many bodyguards you assign to him. By actively forbidding it, you’re only making him resent you instead of making him forget about that man.”

“But what if he does contact him?” his mother said plaintively.

Dr. Richardson sighed. “Frankly, it might actually do Aiden some good. The environment in which he developed his attachment to that man was very unusual. If he talks to him, it might help Aiden realize how far apart their real lives—and their real selves—are. It might give him the closure he needs.”

“But what if contacting that man makes things worse?”

“How?” Dr. Richardson said. “It’s been three months since he was rescued and your son isn’t getting better.” Her voice softened as she added, “I know you feel overprotective after what happened, but Aiden is not a child. The truth is, he lived with the man for nearly a year. While we don’t know what exactly transpired between them, the fact is, at least physically Aiden seems to have been treated well enough. A phone call wouldn’t break him.”

“She’s right,” his father said with a sigh. “I’ll get Aiden a phone.”

True to his word, his dad handed him a brand new iPhone the very next morning.

“Thanks, Dad,” Aiden said before running back upstairs, the box clutched in his hand.

It took him ten minutes to set up his phone, and it still felt like forever.

Once he was done, he stared at it, his body shaking with a terrible mix of excitement, longing, and trepidation.

To make things worse, he wasn’t even sure he would be able to get through to Zain. He hadn’t bothered to memorize his number, and trying to get to Zain through his company’s corporate numbers seemed like an impossible task.

But luckily, Aiden knew a person in the UAE who was easier to get in contact with than Zain was. Salma Abadi owned a prestigious spa and wellness center in Dubai—Aiden recalled Zain mentioning it in passing—and it was easy enough to find it on Google.

It still took Aiden a good twenty minutes before he was finally connected to Salma.

“Hello,” she said. “Who is this?”

Aiden licked his lips. “Hi, you probably don’t remember me—I’m Aiden. We met last year, when Sheikh Zain Rahim visited you—”

The woman chuckled. “Oh, I do remember you. You’re the kid Zain looked at like he couldn’t decide between putting a collar on you and strangling you.”

Aiden flushed. “I—lost Zain’s number. Could you please give it to me?”

“I could,” she said. “But I wouldn’t contact him right now if I were you, in light of recent events.”

“What recent events?” Aiden said, frowning. It wasn’t as though he hadn’t had the opportunity to Google Zain—he *could* have done it, regardless of his limited access to electronic devices. The truth was... he’d been scared to learn that Zain had easily moved on with his life—that Aiden had never mattered to him as much as Zain mattered to Aiden.

“You haven’t heard? His brother ran away just before his wedding. It’s been a shitstorm. Zain has been breathing fire ever since. The sacrifice he had to make to placate the President would infuriate anyone.” She sighed. “But to be fair, he’s been breathing fire for a few months now, ever since that terrorist attack on his house.”

Aiden swallowed. “Yeah, I heard about that. Is he okay?”

“Darling, it’s Zain. Who knows what’s going on in his head?” She snorted. “But I’d really stay away from him if I were you. He’s been scaring even me a little. He’s in a nasty mood these days.”

“Noted,” Aiden said. “But I really need his number.”

“Fine, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. Here it is...” She rattled off the number, and Aiden hastily wrote it down.

“Thank you,” he said.

She chuckled. “Don’t thank me yet. Seriously, don’t call him now. He bit my head off last time I called him.”

That seemed like sound advice.

Sadly, Aiden was too weak to follow it.

He called.

He waited with bated breath, his heart beating in his ears and his stomach attempting to crawl out of his mouth.

Finally, on the fifth ring, Zain answered, barking something into the phone.

“Hi,” Aiden stammered. He hadn’t meant for it to come out so weak and shaky. It barely even sounded like him.

Zain said hoarsely, “Aiden?”

A whine building in his throat, Aiden pressed the phone closer to his ear, as though that would make him closer to him. Hearing Zain’s voice was like allowing a starved man to smell a feast but not allowing him to eat. “Yeah. I’m—how have you been?”

“How have you been,” Zain repeated flatly. “I’ve been busy hiring new people after you had all of my staff killed.”

Aiden lay down on his bed and hugged his pillow, pressing the phone even closer to his ear. He could hear Zain’s every breath that way. If he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend he was right there, behind him.

“I didn’t do it, you dick. It’s not my fault I was rescued.”

“Congratulations,” Zain said and hung up.

Aiden nearly cried—*no, please*, it wasn’t anywhere near enough. But then his phone rang. It was Zain. Aiden had never answered a call so fast.

“I don’t get something,” Zain said testily. “Why the hell are you bothering me after siccing your mafioso of a brother-in-law on me?”

Aiden frowned, utterly confused. “What? I don’t understand.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“You didn’t tell Damiano Conte to threaten me to stay away from you?”

“What? No!” Aiden scowled. “I told Damiano to leave you alone. I told him you didn’t do anything to me.”

Silence fell over the line.

“I definitely did something to you,” Zain said at last, very dryly. But his tone was softer now.

Aiden found himself smiling. “I miss you,” he blurted out before he could stop himself.

Silence.

He could hear Zain inhale deeply.

“I thought they’d cure you of that nonsense by now,” he said in a clipped voice.

Nonsense.

It was nonsense.

Of course it was. Had he actually expected Zain to say that he missed him too? That he wanted him back?

Aiden pressed his trembling lips together.

“They’re definitely trying,” he said, forcing lightness into his voice. “It hasn’t worked yet. But I’m sure it will soon enough.” *I miss you. I wish you were here. I miss your weight on me, your arms around me, even your scent.*

Aiden didn’t say any of that. He wanted to, but *nonsense* still stung.

“Probably,” Zain said tonelessly.

Silence fell again.

“It’s probably for the best that they took you away,” Zain said. His voice sounded rough. Stiff. “I wouldn’t have—” He cut himself off. “It’s a good thing they separated us.”

“Yeah,” Aiden said, closing his eyes. His throat ached. This felt like a goodbye. “Probably.”

Silence reigned again.

“You’ve lost weight,” Zain said.

“What? How do you even—Are you keeping tabs on me?”

“It’s easy enough for a man with my resources,” Zain said, irritation in his voice. Or was it defensiveness?

“I didn’t say it was hard,” Aiden said, smiling involuntarily. “But it’s sweet of you to care.”

“Sweet,” Zain repeated. “Some would call it stalking. You really need to get your head fixed.”

Aiden smiled helplessly. God, he missed him so much. So much. It felt like he was alive for the first time in months. Just hearing Zain’s voice was invigorating. “I probably do,” he said agreeably. “But in the meantime, I’m allowed to say all the *nonsense* a person in their right mind wouldn’t say. So I will. I miss you. I miss you so much.”

Zain inhaled audibly. And then he hung up.

Aiden blinked, his eyes suddenly burning.

But before he could wipe the stupid tears away, his phone rang again.

“I’ll be in the US next week,” Zain said. “I might find time to see you, but it’s a business trip.”

Aiden’s heart soared. “Right,” he said, smiling. “I had no idea you even had business here.”

He could practically see Zain’s dark eyes glowering at him.

“I’ll text you when I’m there.” Zain hung up again.

Grinning, Aiden hugged his pillow to his chest and screamed with joy.

“Aiden?”

Aiden froze.

He turned his head toward the door and found his mother watching him with a troubled frown on her face.

“You called that man, didn’t you?” she said.

“Yes,” Aiden said.

His mother’s lips thinned. “Aiden...”

“I know, Mom,” he said with a long-suffering sigh. “I know what you’re going to say. He’s bad for me, what I feel for him isn’t real, I should stay away from him, and so on and so forth.” He smiled, hugging his pillow. “I don’t care. He’s coming to the US next week, and I’m going to see him, just once. Please. Don’t ruin it for me.”

Looking pained, his mother closed her eyes and ran a hand over her face. “Aiden... That man should be in jail, not —”

“Mom.” Aiden got to his feet and moved to take her hands into his. “I know you’re worried, but I promise seeing him won’t hurt my recovery or whatever. I just need to see him. I need some closure. Please.”

She looked at him searchingly before sighing. “You’re not asking for permission.”

“I’m twenty-two years old, Mom. Of course I’m not asking for permission. But I’d like to have it. I don’t want to worry you.”

She shook her head. “Sweetheart...”

“Please, Mom.”

Her lips pursed tightly.

“All right,” she said at last. “But you will meet him in a public place where he can’t—where he can’t do anything to you. And you will take at least a few bodyguards with you.”

“All right,” Aiden said, beaming at her. Frankly, he would agree to pretty much anything, as long as he got to see Zain.

She shook her head, her eyes suddenly glistening with tears.

“What is it?” Aiden said, frowning again.

“It’s the first time you really smiled since you were returned to us,” she said, her voice strained. “I’m happy that you’re smiling again, but I wish it were for another reason, not him.”

Aiden didn’t know what to say to that.

So he said nothing.

Turning away, he couldn’t help but smile again.

He was going to see Zain soon.

That was the only thing that mattered.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lying was bad.

Aiden had always genuinely thought so. But he couldn't bring himself to feel guilty about telling his mom that seeing Zain for one last time would give him the closure he needed to move on. For all he knew, maybe it really would.

Deep down, he knew it was a lie. He knew seeing Zain wouldn't help him get over him.

But his conscience remained quiet, crushed by the far more persistent feeling in his chest: the bottomless hunger, the yearning he was afraid to give a name to.

Rationally, Aiden knew this meeting wouldn't satisfy the hunger. They would be meeting in public, under the watchful eyes of Aiden's bodyguards. Hell, Aiden wouldn't be surprised if the bodyguards filmed them for his parents.

It still changed nothing. He was as excited as a kid before Christmas. Even his parents' pursed lips and strained smiles couldn't ruin his excitement as he left the house to meet Zain.

His bodyguards followed him at a distance as Aiden quickly made his way to the park nearby. He and Zain had agreed to meet at the entrance of the park at five o'clock. Aiden was twenty minutes early, so he wasn't surprised not to

find Zain when he arrived. He was still disappointed. And more than a little anxious.

Maybe Zain wouldn't show up.

He tried to push the thought away as he waited, but it refused to leave. Zain hadn't exactly sounded all that eager to meet him. He hadn't called Aiden once since their phone conversation the other day. Well, to be fair, Aiden hadn't called him, either, but that was because he didn't want to look pathetic and clingy—look more pathetic than he already did.

There was a black car pulling up.

A tall man emerged out of it. He was wearing a dark suit, and for a moment, Aiden's heart sank before he looked closely at the man's face.

It was Zain.

Their eyes met and the world seemed to come to a screeching halt.

Aiden could no longer hear the children's laughter and shouts. He could barely hear anything besides his heartbeat in his ears.

After a moment, Zain moved toward him. It seemed as though he moved with an excruciating slowness that made the scene feel as if it were playing out underwater or in a dream.

Aiden didn't move. He didn't trust himself not to run to him if he did. His eyes roamed hungrily over Zain's chiseled features, over his tall body hugged by the splendid dark suit, before going back to those chocolate brown eyes that seemed to be trying to burn a hole in Aiden's face.

Zain stopped two feet away from him.

Neither of them spoke for a long, charged moment. Aiden was distantly aware that he was trembling violently, his whole body straining toward the older man, needing to be closer.

The Adam's apple on Zain's stubbled throat moved. He opened his mouth, but seemed to change his mind as his eyes flicked to something behind Aiden.

Zain's lips thinned. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his pants and said stiffly, "Do you really think you need bodyguards to protect you against me?"

"My parents—they insisted." Christ, Aiden had never felt so tongue-tied. He didn't know what to say, acutely aware of his bodyguards listening to their every word. "Let's—let's walk?"

Zain gave a clipped nod.

They walked at an unhurried pace, both of them looking straight ahead, their shoulders six inches apart.

It was fucking torture, to have him so close but not be able to touch.

"How long—how long are you going to be in the US?" Aiden said as they walked deeper into the park.

Zain's hand seemed to twitch toward him. He put it back into his pocket. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

Oh.

His limbs suddenly weak and heavy, Aiden sat down on the nearest bench.

After a moment, Zain took a seat beside him, their knees a few inches apart.

Aiden stared at his own hands, inhaling shakily.

Silence stretched.

In his peripheral vision, his bodyguards shifted slightly.

Lifting his head, Aiden glared at them. "Can you give us a little privacy? You don't need to listen to us to bodyguard me."

The men exchanged a look and retreated about ten steps away. It wasn't much, but at least now they couldn't hear everything Aiden said.

Not that Aiden had any clue what to say. There was so much he wanted to say but couldn't. So much he wanted to say but shouldn't.

“I shouldn’t have come here.”

His shoulders tensing up, Aiden said, “Why not?”

He expected Zain to say that he wasn’t gay. He expected Zain to deny having any attachment to him. He expected the usual “no icky emotions” bullshit Zain tended to pull when the strength of his feelings made him uncomfortable.

But he’d never imagined what Zain said next.

“I’m married.”

Aiden felt like he’d been punched in the solar plexus.

“What?” he croaked out, whipping his head to Zain.

Zain didn’t turn his head, his profile stony. “I had no choice after Gadiel ran away with his bodyguard. Al Sharabi would have had him killed for such a public humiliation.”

Aiden tried to process it, but he couldn’t seem to think beyond the fact that Zain was... He was... “You—you married your brother’s bride?”

“Yes,” Zain said tonelessly. “It was the logical thing to do. I’m a bigger prize than Gadiel. Al Sharabi is happy. My father is happy—he got what he originally wanted. My irresponsible fuck-up of a brother is no doubt happy too. Everyone wins.”

It felt like there was something hard and painful lodged in his throat.

“What about u—you?” Aiden managed. “It’s not like you to be selfless.”

Zain finally turned his head to meet his gaze. “It wasn’t an entirely selfless decision,” he said, something tight about his expression. “It was self-preservation too.”

Aiden looked at him searchingly, not understanding—until he did.

“Oh,” he said in a small voice, his vision going blurry. Zain had agreed to the marriage to escape *him*. It didn’t matter why he’d done it: whether Zain was running from his “unnatural,” inconvenient feelings or whether he didn’t trust

himself to stay away from Aiden despite Damiano's threats. It didn't matter why; the end result was the same.

Zain didn't want him enough.

He didn't want him.

Zain's expression became pinched. "Stop that," he said roughly, claspng his hands together. "Don't. Don't cry, damn you."

"I'm not crying," Aiden said, wiping his eyes. "That would be stupid. What I feel for you isn't real."

Zain's jaw locked. "Exactly. You're young and confused. You'll forget me within a few months."

"Yeah," Aiden said, forcing a shaky smile. "I will. Consider yourself forgotten. Bye." Why was his vision only getting blurrier, damn it? His face felt wet. "Go away!" Aiden croaked out, pulling his knees to his chest and turning his face away. "Go. Please, Zain." God, why did this hurt so much if his feelings weren't real? If it was just stupid Stockholm syndrome?

"Aiden—" Zain said tightly. "*Habibi*—"

And then there were arms around him, tugging him against a firm, familiar chest, and Zain was kissing all over his face, whispering something in Arabic, and Aiden was clinging to him with all his strength, his senses going into overdrive. God, he missed him, he missed him so fucking much—

"Let go of my son!" They were yanked apart forcefully, and it took Aiden a moment to process what was going on through his tear-filled eyes.

There was his father, glaring at Zain, his face red with rage. There was his mother, holding Aiden tightly as if she was afraid that he'd be stolen away. There were the two burly bodyguards holding Zain back. There was Zain, his face stony and his eyes hard as he held Aiden's father's gaze.

"I don't care what my son says," his father spat out. "We all know what you did to him. We all know you brainwashed him and held him against his will. We don't even

need him to testify against you to press charges!” His eyes hardened. “We don’t even need to win in court, Mr. Rahim. Even the accusation of sodomy will be enough to destroy you —”

“Dad!” Aiden snapped, shaking his head frantically. “Don’t do that—you’re better than that!”

His father didn’t even glance at him, glowering at Zain. “Normally, I would never use such barbaric, discriminatory laws to threaten anyone with exposure. But to protect my son from a predator, I will. Don’t think I won’t. Stay away from him.”

His face expressionless, Zain wrenched himself free and walked to Aiden’s father. He said something, very quietly.

Aiden’s father’s lips thinned, something like discomfort flickering in his eyes. But his voice was still firm when he said, “Leave right now and never come back. My son doesn’t need you in his life. Aiden, tell him.”

When Zain turned to Aiden and looked at him searchingly, a lump formed in Aiden’s throat.

God, I love you.

It was the worst possible moment to realize that, but he could no longer remain in denial when above all, he wanted Zain to be all right. He cared more about Zain being safe than he cared about his own happiness.

It was said that when you really loved someone, you wanted that person to be safe, healthy, and happy, even if it was without you. Aiden had always scoffed at that, not believing that anyone would be that selfless.

But now he understood.

Any relationship between them would be extremely dangerous now that Zain was married to the daughter of the President of the UAE. Al Sharabi would have him killed or thrown in jail if Zain left his daughter to be a sodomite with Aiden. Anything between them was impossible now, even without Aiden’s father’s threats.

“Go,” Aiden whispered.

A muscle jumped in Zain’s jaw. He didn’t move.

“Go,” Aiden croaked out louder. “This isn’t real. It’ll pass. I don’t need you. Stop ruining my life.” He wasn’t sure who he was trying to convince, but it seemed he sounded far more convincing than he felt.

Zain’s expression closed off.

He gave Aiden a long look before giving a clipped nod and turning away.

A horrible, gurgling noise tore from Aiden’s throat as he watched Zain go. His throat hurt, his heart hurt, his very soul hurt. He felt like an old man who had taken a beating. He wanted to run after Zain and beg him to stay, and damn the entire world.

His mother’s arms tightened around him. “Shh, darling,” she said, kissing his head. “You did the right thing, sweetie. You have closure now. You can forget him and move on.”

As Zain disappeared out of his sight, Aiden clung to his mom and wept.

Interlude III

This isn't real. It'll pass. I don't need you.

Zain took a swig from his bottle of Scotch, staring unseeingly at the brightly illuminated city. It was nearly dawn already.

He felt bone-tired, but he knew that going to bed would be useless. He couldn't sleep, and the demon of a cat wasn't even the reason.

The hour was too early to be drinking. To be fair, there was no hour appropriate for drinking for any decent Muslim.

But then again, he wasn't a decent Muslim, hadn't been for years. In decades. There was already a place reserved for him in hell; Zain had made peace with it a long time ago. A decent Muslim wouldn't spend a year in a sordid relationship with another man—or at least would feel guiltier about it. A decent Muslim would touch his own wife. A decent Muslim would be performing a dawn prayer right now instead of getting drunk.

A plaintive meow snapped him out of his grim thoughts. He glared at the cat rubbing against his ankle.

“Go away,” Zain bit off in English. He shouldn't even be still using English for its sake. He should have thrown the cat out instead of bringing it with him when he had relocated to the city.

The cat didn't obey, of course. It was Aiden's fault. He'd spoiled it rotten, conditioning it to his constant touch and warmth. Of course it was now miserable.

Zain glared at the cat's hazel eyes. "Go. Away. Or I'll kick you."

The cat rubbed against his ankle again, meowing.

"Stop being pathetic," he told it harshly. "If he wanted you, he would have taken you with him when he left."

He still remembered finding the blasted cat by a puddle of blood when he'd entered the house. His heart had about stopped before he registered that the blood—and the body—wasn't Aiden's. He remembered feeling profound *relief*, as if it was totally fine that all of his staff had been murdered as long as Aiden wasn't one of the victims. It had been hard to care about his employees' deaths compared to Aiden missing. The latter should have been trivial compared to the former, but it was the other way around for him.

Did that make him a monster? Probably.

Zain had no delusions about his morals. He'd done some things that didn't skirt the boundaries of ethical conduct so much as trample all over them. But he'd never considered himself a bad man, either. Just a regular flawed human being. A regular kind of asshole, as Aiden would say, smiling at him fondly.

The toxic longing that twisted up his insides at the mere memory of Aiden's warm smile made Zain grimace and bring the bottle back to his lips.

Damn it. It seemed he wasn't drunk enough yet for the alcohol to dull this bullshit, this idiotic yearning he didn't seem able to eradicate, no matter how many months it had been.

This isn't real. It'll pass. I don't need you.

Zain threw the bottle away in disgust.

He watched dispassionately as the bottle fell until he could no longer see it from the penthouse. Hopefully he hadn't

killed someone with it. It would be funny—and somewhat ironic—if he ended up in jail for that, after behaving like a sodomite for a year.

Running a hand over his unshaven jaw, Zain stared blankly at the Dubai skyline.

This was useless.

Utterly useless.

This pathetic behavior wasn't him. In fact, it was everything he despised. He was behaving little better than his father had around his mother's death: he drank too much, he neglected his business, he obsessed over the loss of one person and neglected all the others in his life. Had he paid any attention to his family, Gadiel wouldn't have run off with the fucking bodyguard Zain had hired to keep him in line. The only sins Zain hadn't committed compared to his father were beating his sons and sleeping around. The former was impossible for lack of any sons. As for the latter, he couldn't summon a flicker of interest in fucking someone who wasn't Aiden, his own wife included. He didn't want anyone other than Aiden.

Zain pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

Enough.

He'd tried waiting it out. But it had been four months since Aiden had been stolen—taken away from him. A month since he'd last seen him.

If this thing was ever going to pass, it would have passed by now. He shouldn't have still been avoiding his own house, hating it for the Aiden-shaped hole in every room, hating it for seeming empty and dark without Aiden's light and laughter, hating it for not even feeling like home anymore. He shouldn't have forbidden his lawful wife from entering the house he considered *theirs*—his and Aiden's. Farah didn't take issue with it—she was a quiet girl who seemed scared shitless of him. She seemed content to live by herself in one of Zain's numerous apartments, ignored by her husband.

He had no idea what she even looked like. He hadn't even seen her without her niqāb. He had no desire to. The only person he wanted was the one he wasn't allowed to want.

This isn't real. It'll pass. I don't need you. Stop ruining my life.

Zain closed his eyes. He'd tried to be the better man. He had. He'd given Aiden space when Aiden's mafioso of a brother-in-law had sent his people to tell him that Aiden was with his family and never wanted to be bothered again. It helped that at the time Zain had still had some hope that this was a passing fancy and he'd forget the boy and eradicate his unwelcome feelings. He'd even married Al Sharabi's daughter to give himself an extra incentive to stay away from Aiden. Back then, he had still thought he could go back to his old life pre-Aiden.

His self-delusion had lasted until Aiden's call. Just hearing his sweet, familiar voice had shattered his self-control. Seeing Aiden again, seeing his tears, had destroyed what was left of it. Had they not been interrupted by Aiden's parents, Zain knew he would have kissed Aiden right there in broad daylight, in a public place, Aiden's bodyguards be damned. He had been this close to grabbing Aiden and taking him with him—until Aiden's words had sobered him up.

This isn't real. It'll pass. I don't need you. Stop ruining my life.

It had felt like Aiden had reached inside his chest and squeezed his heart hard. He'd felt crushed—and like he'd been transported back in time. He was suddenly eight again, a needy, pathetic boy whose affections weren't welcome. Weren't wanted.

Go away. I have no son.

Zain grimaced, pushing the memory back. He hadn't thought of it in years. He hadn't been that boy in decades. A boy desperate for his mother's love. A boy who'd grown to hate that need, who'd learned to lock it away when his mother stopped even recognizing him and looked at him with distrust and suspicion.

As an adult, he knew his mother couldn't help it. It was the dementia. But a child wouldn't understand it. A child would feel crushed by the constant rejection of his affections by his favorite person in the world. A child would learn to stop carrying his heart on his sleeve. To stop caring. To stop needing.

He wasn't that child anymore. But Aiden's rejection had brought it all back.

So he had left. If it wasn't real for Aiden, it could be not real for him as well.

Zain smiled humorlessly. They both had been full of shit. Looking back, he was pretty sure Aiden had lied. Had lied for his sake. The selfless idiot had probably thought he was protecting Zain from his father and Al Sharabi. And rationally, turning Zain away was the smart thing to do. The helpful thing. The path of least resistance.

But Zain had never been one to choose the easy way out when he wanted something.

And he did want something. More than anything he'd ever wanted in his life.

The humiliating, humbling truth was, he *needed* Aiden back—snuggled up in his lap, under him, around him, in his home. Fucking attached at the hip, so he'd never be stolen away again. He needed him, with a ferocity that frightened him. He hadn't needed anyone in years. In two decades.

But he wasn't a child anymore. His mother was dead. Aiden was alive. And Aiden wanted him. Aiden belonged to him. He knew this as well as he knew his own name. Aiden belonged to him, and Zain would get him back.

He knew it wouldn't be easy. Their situation was nearly unfixable. But Aiden needed him to fix it—Zain had seen it, had felt it when Aiden had clung to him, his face wet with tears.

Aiden *needed* him.

The thought was dizzying, intoxicating in a way that couldn't possibly be healthy or normal. But fuck it. He didn't

care if it wasn't healthy or normal. He was done hoping that these feelings would go away if he waited long enough. They weren't going away. It was impossible to remain in denial when he'd been drinking like an alcoholic ever since his return from the US.

Enough.

He was done doing the smart thing. The cowardly thing.

It was time to be the selfish asshole he was, no matter how difficult things were going to be.

And they would be difficult. It would likely take months before he could untangle his family's assets from Al Sharabi's and divorce Farah without her father creating a shitstorm of problems for his family. Zain's own father would be a major obstacle too. At least Gadiel was now safe from their wrath—Zain would be the target of it now.

There was also the problem of Aiden being a man. He would never be able to claim Aiden as his while they lived here. They could never be open about their relationship without giving Al Sharabi an excuse to arrest him and sentence him to a life in prison. That meant he needed to start moving his assets—and his business—to another country.

So much to do... so many obstacles to overcome... But for a determined man, they were just obstacles. Nothing impossible. If he could fight and claw his way up after being disowned by his father when he was seventeen, he could outmaneuver two old, stubborn men when he was thirty-three.

Zain pulled his phone out of his pocket and called his assistant. The hour was too early, but his PA was paid a small fortune for a reason.

"Tell my lawyers to come to my office in an hour."

Ignoring his assistant's spluttering, Zain hung up, his expression settling into one of grim resolve.

He would get him back.

Whatever it took.

However long it took.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Six months later

Jordan smiled, watching Damiano sleep. The transatlantic flight must have tired him out more than Damiano had let on or he wouldn't have fallen asleep after a round of sex.

Carefully, Jordan pushed his boyfriend's proprietary arm off him and got dressed. The hour was still pretty early, and he didn't feel like sleeping yet. He could catch up with his parents and siblings before going back to bed. He had missed them.

His mother was the first one he found. She was still busy baking, and Jordan watched her for a moment. She looked lovely but tired.

"You should get some rest, Mom," he said, feeling a pang of worry. She wasn't that young anymore. "Didn't you say it'd be just close family tomorrow?" His parents' lavish dinners on Christmas were a family tradition, but Jordan and Damiano had missed the main event, having spent Christmas with Damiano's family. His mother had said they would have another family dinner tomorrow now that Jordan and Damiano

were here, but Jordan had been under the impression that it would be a small affair.

“It will be,” she said with a weary smile. “Just us and Eloise’s family, no one else. Aiden will be more comfortable with fewer people around.”

Jordan frowned. “He still hasn’t gotten better?” His sister had alluded to it earlier—that Aiden still wasn’t as happy as he seemed to be, but Jordan had hoped she was wrong.

“Oh, he has!” his mother said. “He’s so much better now that he resumed going to school. But...”

“But what?” Jordan said.

She sighed, her shoulders falling.

Jordan was becoming more worried by the moment. “What is it, Mom?” he said, walking closer and taking her hand in his.

Her hazel eyes were glistening as they met his. “I just... Sometimes I wonder if we did the right thing. Keeping him away from that man.”

Jordan went still. Back when his parents had told him about the lengths they had gone to in order to keep Aiden away from his sheikh, Jordan had felt uneasy. Although he’d never been in Aiden’s situation, he knew all about falling in love in unconventional circumstances with an unsuitable man. It had taken him and Damiano a long time to come to terms with their feelings and accept that they weren’t going to disappear once they were an ocean apart. That was why Jordan hadn’t been sure that forcibly separating Aiden and his sheikh was the right thing to do. But Aiden wasn’t Jordan—he was much younger and much more vulnerable—and Jordan understood why his parents had been so overprotective after thinking for a year that their youngest son was dead.

“What makes you think so?” Jordan said.

His mother heaved a sigh again. “Dr. Richardson declared him completely recovered from the ordeal. He goes to school, he goes out with his friends, he’s even been on a

date with a nice girl. He smiles more these days, and he acts more like his old self. But..." She pursed her lips. "I know he's not happy. A mother knows."

"And you think it's because he misses his sheikh?"

"Last week we saw a man in Arab clothes in the mall, and Aiden barely spoke for the rest of the day."

"That doesn't necessarily mean anything," Jordan said. "It could be the trauma."

His mother shook her head. "Aiden keeps in touch with Janice, a girl who was kidnapped with him. She was a... a slave for more than half a year before someone helped her escape. Aiden claims Rahim was the one who saved her—"

"Really?"

"Apparently," she said, with an uncomfortable shrug. "But that's beside the point. I've seen the poor girl—how skittish of touch and traumatized she is—and I'm..." She swallowed visibly. "I feel like a terrible person for thinking it, but I'm glad my child avoided that fate. After seeing Janice, I do believe that man didn't abuse Aiden physically."

"There's emotional abuse too," Jordan said, but he *was* immensely relieved to hear that. No matter how many times Aiden had said that his sheikh hadn't sexually abused him, Jordan had had his doubts.

"There is," she said. "But... I saw them together briefly, Jordan. Before your dad and the bodyguards separated them, Rahim was holding Aiden." She pursed her lips. "At the time, it looked like a violent embrace because Aiden was crying, but looking back, I think we might have misinterpreted it. I'm pretty sure Aiden was clinging to that man and Rahim might have been kissing his face."

Jordan frowned. "You think they were in love?"

She shook her head with a sigh. "I'm not sure what to think anymore. All I know is that my son is unhappy. It's been ten months since we got him back and seven months since he last saw that man, but Aiden is still deeply unhappy, no matter how brightly he smiles."

“What do you suggest we do?”

“I don’t know, Jordan.” She met his eyes again, her expression grim. “Talk to him? Maybe he’ll open up to you. He’s always looked up to you.”

“Okay.” Kissing his mother on the cheek, Jordan went looking for his brother.

He found him outside the house, sitting on the garden swing.

Jordan sat down beside him, shivering a little and crossing his arms. “Damn, I think I got too used to the Italian climate.”

A faint smile touched Aiden’s lips. “Yeah,” he said, looking at the brightly illuminated house with a distant, unseeing gaze.

A shiver ran up Jordan’s spine that had nothing to do with the chill. There was something *off* about Aiden. Physically, he looked great, but now Jordan understood what his mother meant: he could sense Aiden’s unhappiness like a physical thing. Aiden wasn’t outright moping—he was even smiling—but that unhappiness seemed to cling to him like a second skin, his eyes dull and lacking their normal liveliness.

“I imagine it was an even bigger shock to you after the Arabian heat.”

Aiden smiled crookedly, without looking at Jordan. “What do you want, Jord? Did Mom send you to talk to the crazy guy?”

“No one thinks you’re crazy.”

Aiden laughed, the sound a little sharp. “No one? I sure do.”

Frowning, Jordan laid a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “What? What do you mean?”

Aiden stared at the house for a long time without saying anything.

When he spoke, his voice was very quiet. “Muslims don’t celebrate Christmas, you know. Shopping malls and streets are decorated festively in Dubai, but it’s more for the tourists. New Year’s is a much bigger deal for them.”

Jordan nodded, unsure where this was going.

“Last December I was moping a bit, missing you guys. I knew you were likely all here, at Mom and Dad’s house, celebrating Christmas without me.” Aiden’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Zain didn’t ask why I was moping, but when I woke up on Christmas Eve, the entire house was decked out in Christmas lights. Zain even got a huge Christmas tree, and there was a mountain of presents under it...” His smile became softer, *fonder*, his gaze faraway. “He’s over-the-top like that. And he wouldn’t even admit that he did it to cheer me up. He claimed that he always has the house decorated, and never mind that I could see how confused the staff was by all the fuss.”

Christ, Jordan thought, his stomach sinking. This was bad.

But Aiden didn’t stop talking.

“Zain’s house is huge, much bigger than this one, and it looked like something from a fairytale, all illuminated at night. So beautiful.” Aiden’s gaze was distant, as if he were seeing it instead of their parents’ house. “On Christmas evening, we dined on the patio. We could even watch the fireworks in Dubai, and I talked Zain into spending the night in the hammock there. It’s actually pretty chilly at night in December, but we had a blanket, and he held me—” His voice cracked, and Aiden stopped talking, staring blankly at the house.

Jordan didn’t know what to say.

“It’s so stupid...” Aiden whispered. “I know that life—that existence in a golden cage, with him being my whole world—I know it wasn’t healthy, but...” Aiden blinked rapidly, his eyes glistening. “I’d trade my very healthy life here for that life in a heartbeat. That makes me crazy, doesn’t it?”

Jordan looked away, his heart heavy.

He still felt like shit when he returned to his bedroom.

“*Caro?*” Damiano said, his voice hoarse from sleep, reaching for him as Jordan climbed into the bed.

Jordan looked into his beautiful gray eyes and suddenly felt so damn grateful for everything he had. He kissed Damiano hard, unable to get enough.

Damiano chuckled, pulling back a little. “Not that I mind your enthusiasm, but what brought this on?”

Laying his head on his lover’s shoulder, Jordan wrapped his arm around his middle. “I just... I feel lucky to be with the person I love,” he said, kissing Damiano’s shoulder. “It just hit me suddenly.”

Damiano knew him too well to let go of the issue that easily. His intelligent eyes studied him for a long moment before Damiano laid his hand on Jordan’s and said, “Tell me what you need me to do, *caro*.”

Jordan thought for a moment and then told him.

Damiano listened to his request without a hint of surprise.

“I wouldn’t even need to look into it,” he said with a rueful smile. “I’ve been keeping tabs on the man for months. Just in case.”

Jordan rolled his eyes with a laugh. “Of course you did. Okay, I guess your paranoid overprotectiveness can be useful. Spill.”

Damiano hummed, playing with Jordan’s fingers absentmindedly. “Rahim is a highly intelligent man. He’s a shark when it comes to business, and it’s rumored that he isn’t any different in his personal life. Not that he has much of a personal life these days. He lives separately from his wife—he recently sent her to the UK, enrolling her in Cambridge. Apparently his father-in-law wasn’t pleased about it, but in the UAE the husband’s decision is law. Rahim has also been meeting with his lawyers a lot, and from the snatches of

conversation my men overheard, they're working on a divorce. Rahim intends to financially support his soon-to-be ex-wife, so that she wouldn't need to return to her father upon the divorce, but otherwise he isn't willing to give an inch to his father-in-law." Damiano shook his head. "The man has balls of steel; I'll give him that."

Jordan frowned. "Do you think there might be a chance that he hasn't forgotten Aiden?"

Damiano shrugged, stroking Jordan's knuckles. "Who knows. As far as my men could tell, the man has been living like a monk."

That didn't necessarily mean anything, especially for a Muslim.

Jordan sighed. "Even if he gets divorced, my dad's threat to expose him as a sodomite to the UAE authorities is still very much real. The most Aiden can hope for is to be his dirty little secret again." Jordan grimaced. From his experience, he knew being a secret just made you miserable long-term. But unlike him, Aiden couldn't take his happiness into his own hands. Zain Rahim wasn't Damiano. The power imbalance between Rahim and Aiden was so vast their relationship would have been side-eyed even if there hadn't been the sex slave issue—or the issue of the UAE government not allowing them to ever be openly together.

Some relationships just weren't meant to be.

Maybe it was one of them.

Chapter Twenty-Four

They were about to sit down for dinner when the doorbell rang.

Aiden didn't pay it much mind, his gaze on his phone. Although his mother had said it would just be close family tonight, it was probably one of his numerous aunts. He could only hope it wasn't one of his parents' friends with single daughters his age.

He cringed at the thought. One awkward date trying to make small talk was more than enough. And Aiden had tried. He had. He'd done his best to like Jenny and be fun and engaging, but he had felt absolutely nothing when he looked at her. No, not nothing—he had felt discomfort, as if he were doing something wrong.

“How dare you come here? Get out.”

Aiden frowned, lifting his head. From his place on the floor, all he could see was his father's very stiff back. His dad was normally a nice, friendly guy who was never rude to people. The only person he'd ever been rude to was...

His heart beating faster and his palms suddenly clammy, Aiden got to his feet. Surely it wasn't—

It was.

Aiden's eyes locked with Zain's over his dad's shoulder, and just like that, there was nothing else in the room. There was no one else in the world. Everything else became muted, insignificant, as Aiden drank in the sight of him, feeling so damn thirsty after so many months apart. *Zain was here*. God, he looked magnificent in his stylish dark coat, his eyes so very dark, his long eyelashes glittering with snow, and his mouth—the firm curve of it so gorgeous Aiden needed to lick into it and glue their mouths together.

“Damiano, why did your men let him through?”

“They're not there to stop unarmed visitors,” Damiano said.

Aiden didn't even register the voices, unable to look away from Zain, whose gaze was fixed on him too.

He couldn't stand it—he couldn't stand seeing Zain and not touching him. There was a painful ache in his gut, his body *needing* to be closer and every cell in his body pulling him toward Zain. So Aiden went, his feet moving forward without his conscious command, as if he were pulled by a cord.

Zain's dark eyes were watching him approach, his nostrils flaring.

“Aiden, go to your room,” his dad barked out.

Aiden didn't—couldn't—even glance at him. *Zain*, his heart beat. *Zain Zain Zain*. He needed him closer, he needed to touch him, to make sure he really was there and it wasn't just a dream. He'd had so many dreams like this, dreams from which he'd woken up feeling hollowed out and lonely, and *missing* him so badly.

Someone touched his arm, trying to stop him, but Aiden wrenched it free and kept moving until he collided with Zain's chest and buried his face in his neck.

Oh god.

He *breathed in*, and he was lost, his senses going into overdrive. A whimper left his throat when strong, familiar

arms wrapped around him and squeezed him tightly. *Zain Zain Zain.*

Someone was saying something in an angry voice, but Aiden couldn't even hear it, clinging to Zain desperately, nuzzling his face against his neck. He wanted to swallow him, to consume him, and keep him inside him forever.

"Aiden!" Someone was trying to pull him away from Zain.

No!

Clinging to Zain's waist, Aiden turned his head and snarled like a feral cat, baring his teeth.

His father blanched and stepped back. "Christ..." he said, looking shaken. "Calm down, son. I'm not your enemy."

He felt like one. Anything that could take Zain away felt like an enemy.

"Shh," Zain said into his ear, stroking his back soothingly. Possessively. "I'm here. No one will take you from me again."

Aiden all but purred, leaning into his touch and burying his face in Zain's neck again. God, his scent. It was pure bliss.

"Damn..." someone said. It was either Jordan or Eloise's husband, Paul.

"We can't just—we can't just do nothing and let that man grope Aiden in front of us!"

"Let's calm down," his mother said. Her voice sounded a little strained but nowhere near as angry as her husband's. "He's not... groping him. He's holding him. I don't think forcibly tearing them apart is the right thing to do. You saw how Aiden reacted when you attempted to do it."

"But—look at them!" his father growled in frustration. "You can't tell me this kind of behavior is normal!"

"It isn't, but it's clear that Aiden won't take it well if we separate them and kick the man out of the house." She raised

her voice, sounding unnaturally nonchalant. “Dinner is ready, everyone! Let’s all go to the dining room. Aiden, take Mr. Rahim’s coat and invite him to join us. Aiden!”

Reluctantly, Aiden lifted his head and forced himself to pull back a little. He knew he couldn’t push his parents too much. His dad already looked like he was about to have a stroke.

Aiden took a step away, trying to get a grip on his emotions. He couldn’t keep himself wrapped around Zain like an octopus. His entire family was watching.

So he could only eye him longingly as Zain took off his coat and handed it to Aiden. Under it, he was wearing a dark suit and a pale-blue shirt that brought out his gorgeous skin tone. Everything about him was perfect, from his dark hair and strong hands to the faint lines at the corners of his eyes.

He was made for me.

The thought was like a slap. It felt as true as it was dumbfounding.

Their eyes locked again, and Aiden found himself physically shaking. An ache curled in his chest, a barbed, hopeless longing.

Wetting his lips, Aiden stretched out his trembling fingers to him, and after a moment, Zain took them into his own hand, squeezing.

Oh.

His stomach full of terrible butterflies, Aiden led Zain toward the dining room, following the rest of his family. His hand was tingling. He wanted to intertwine their fingers together so badly but didn’t dare while everyone was watching them.

“Sweetheart, Mr. Rahim can take the seat next to Paul,” his mother said with a strained smile.

Squeezing Zain’s hand harder, Aiden shook his head and pulled Zain into the seat next to him. He couldn’t bear having him that far away, not when he finally had him back.

After a moment, everyone took their seats, and the sounds of cutlery filled the room, breaking the awkward silence.

Aiden had to let go of Zain's hand so that they could eat, but he kept sneaking glances at him every few seconds, to reassure himself that he really was there. To his relief, Zain didn't seem to be much better: his gaze barely left Aiden, watching him eat as if it were the most interesting thing in the world.

Someone cleared their throat.

"Are we going to talk about the elephant in the room?" Eloise said with a chuckle. "Or are we all going to keep pretending that it's completely normal that Aiden is making moon eyes at the man who bought him like a thing and had him locked up for a year?"

Tearing his gaze away from Zain, Aiden glared at his sister, his face far too warm. "Shut up, El," he grumbled. Did she have to humiliate him in front of Zain?

You don't need anyone humiliating you. You already did a great job yourself, clinging to a married man the moment you saw him—in front of your entire family, no less.

Aiden's mood soured at the thought. He'd been so ridiculously happy to see Zain that he'd completely forgotten all the reasons they could never be together. What was Zain even doing here? Where was his *wife*?

"Why are you here, Mr. Rahim?" his mother said, as if reading his thoughts.

Zain's face was completely inscrutable as he looked at Aiden's parents. "I'm here to get Aiden back."

Aiden sucked a breath in, staring at him wide-eyed.

Zain didn't look at him, his gaze locked with Aiden's father's, who was nearly purple with rage.

"You—you have some nerve—"

"Darling," his mother said, laying a hand on her husband's arm. Although she didn't look as angry as he was,

there was obvious dislike in her eyes as she looked at Zain. “I was under the impression that you were married, Mr. Rahim.”

“Our divorce was finalized yesterday. Not that it matters. She was my wife in name only.”

Aiden breathed out.

“Your marital state doesn’t matter,” his father said sharply. “You’re delusional if you think we’ll let you take our son away.”

“It’s not a question of letting,” Zain said, his gaze cold. “Aiden is an adult. All that matters is what he wants. And he wants to be with me.”

Aiden spluttered. “Nice of you to ask my opinion, you asshole,” he said, but to his embarrassment, the censure in his tone didn’t quite hit the mark—it sounded far too fond.

Zain’s lips twitched, and he shifted his gaze from Aiden’s dad to Aiden, his expression significantly warmer. “I already got your answer when tried to climb me in front of your parents.”

Flushing, Aiden kicked him in the shin. “I just forgot what an arrogant dick you are. You’re much more attractive when you don’t open your mouth.”

The asshole was full-on smiling now, as if Aiden was *amusing* him. Unfortunately, his smile made him even more unfairly attractive, and Aiden could only stare at him helplessly. Longingly.

God, he’d sell his kidney to be able to crawl into his lap and kiss him.

“Okay, this is just embarrassing,” Eloise said. “I feel like a voyeur. Aiden, you *can* look away from him, right?”

His face burning with mortification, Aiden glowered at his grinning sister. The amused smile on Jordan’s face wasn’t much better. Seriously, he hated being the youngest kid sometimes. His siblings always bullied him—lovingly, affectionately, but still.

“Leave him alone,” Zain said, as if he hadn’t just been teasing Aiden too. He laid his hand on the back of Aiden’s chair. “He can look at me all he wants. He’s mine. He didn’t stop belonging to me when you took him from me.”

Aiden’s mother choked on her wine and started coughing. His dad looked like he’d swallowed a very sour lemon.

Aiden didn’t know whether to feel pleased, amused, or horrified by Zain’s words.

“That’s certainly an interesting tactic,” Damiano murmured to Jordan.

Aiden gave Zain a look. “Are you actually trying to piss them off?” he hissed, lowering his voice. “They aren’t me. They aren’t used to your charming attitude. You really aren’t endearing yourself to anyone by reminding them that you owned me.”

Zain’s hand moved from his chair to his shoulder. His knuckles brushed against Aiden’s neck, making him shiver. “I’m not going to pretend to be something I’m not. I don’t care what they think of me. They don’t have to like me. The only opinion that matters to me is yours.”

There was nothing particularly romantic about those words or the tone of his voice. But Aiden still melted into a puddle of sappy goo.

“God, you’re such a dick,” he muttered, shaking his head. “I can’t believe I love you—” He cut himself off the moment he realized what he’d said.

Shit.

Aiden looked around, hoping against hope that no one had heard him.

Of course they had.

His family was staring at him with varying degrees of pity, horror, and sorrow.

But Aiden couldn’t take the words back. He couldn’t bring himself to turn them into a joke. Truer words had never

been spoken. Truer and more damning. He loved Zain. He was utterly, hopelessly in love with him.

And now Zain knew it.

Bracing himself, Aiden looked at him.

Zain's expression was mostly blank, but his brown eyes were *searing* him.

Slowly, Zain got to his feet. His hands twitched before he shoved them into his pockets. "Come with me," he said tersely before striding out of the room.

Despite his intense mortification, Aiden did as he was told. Of course he did. His body was conditioned to obey this man, even after months apart.

Someone said something at his back, but Aiden couldn't even hear anything beyond the heartbeat thudding in his ears.

He found Zain in the hallway.

"How long will it take you to get packed?" Zain said, glancing at his watch. "If you hurry up, we can leave within the hour."

Aiden stared at him incredulously.

Then he walked over and punched him in the gut. "Seriously?"

Wincing, Zain rubbed his abs. "What?" he had the gall to say.

Aiden punched him again. "Ugh, you're so infuriating! I hate you, you unbelievable, emotionless icicle—"

Zain crushed their lips together, and Aiden's annoyance dissolved into overwhelming *relief*. Whimpering, Aiden kissed back, because he couldn't not kiss him. He missed him so much. He felt like a ravenous creature, opening his mouth wider for Zain's tongue, wanting him, needing him so much, more, deeper. Zain moved his hands to the back of his head, scraping his fingers along Aiden's scalp, angling his head bossily so he could kiss him more deeply, as if he wanted to

devour him, as if he could never have enough of him. God knew Aiden could never have enough of him.

But eventually, far too soon, they had to break apart to get some air into their lungs. They looked at each other dazedly, their breaths coming in ragged gasps.

Aiden wanted—needed—more kisses. He wanted to have this man inside him, in every possible way: his tongue, his cock, his entire body, if it were possible. And god, Zain smelled so good, Aiden wanted to roll around in his scent, like a dog in a puddle of mud.

But they needed to talk first.

“You didn’t even grovel,” Aiden said, trying to remember that he was annoyed. It was very difficult, when all he wanted was to go back to kissing Zain.

“What should I grovel for?”

Aiden laughed, shaking his head. “God, you’re unbelievable! Maybe for the fact that you bought me like a piece of meat and wanted me to be your brother’s sex pet?”

Zain just looked at him for a moment. “I have no regrets,” he said—and didn’t elaborate.

Ugh, he was so frustrating! Would it kill him to say something sweet, something along the lines of “I’m glad I bought you because I would never have met you if I didn’t”? Was it too much to ask for?

“Last time, you called me *habibi*,” Aiden said. “I looked it up. It basically means ‘my love.’”

“It’s just a term of endearment,” Zain said stiffly, averting his gaze. “You were upset. I wouldn’t take seriously anything I say when you’re upset.”

Aiden’s heart fell. Even if Zain had feelings for him, the fact that he was still so unwilling to admit them was incredibly disheartening. God. Any relationship between them was doomed. The unsaid words, the constant denial, would gradually brew resentment that would poison any relationship,

even the healthiest relationship out there—and theirs was far from it.

“Zain,” Aiden said.

There must have been something in his voice, because Zain immediately looked at him.

“You should go,” Aiden said softly, fighting the sudden sting in his eyes. “This... this will never work. I can’t—I don’t want to keep getting breadcrumbs while I make a fool of myself. I don’t want to be the dirty little secret you keep apart from your real life. I *can* do it—I know I’ll be too wrapped up in you for a while to care, but in the long term, I don’t think it’ll make either of us happy. Not that I want to force you out of the closet for my sake. With your country’s shitty laws, it’s not even a possibility.”

Zain’s face was like stone.

Aiden looked at him with helpless longing, stroking Zain’s stubbled jaw with his knuckles before dropping his hands. His throat hurt as he whispered, “It’d be better if we never see each other again.” He smiled crookedly. “I know myself. I’m not strong enough to keep saying no to you.” He had no delusions about his willpower. He’d suck Zain’s dick right here if Zain told him to.

“But you said—” Zain said, his voice rough. “You said you love me.”

“I do. More than is healthy, frankly.” Aiden gave a humorless smile. “I may or may not have been sleeping with your shirt all these months. But a relationship can’t survive on one person’s love. It should be give and take.”

“I can give you anything you want,” Zain said, his hands flexing on Aiden’s back, pulling him closer.

Aiden shook his head, trying to quash the weak, pathetic part of him that was starved for this man and yearned to give in. “I don’t care how rich you are. I want one thing—you, wholeheartedly—but you can’t give me that.” He tried to pull away, but Zain didn’t let him, his arms tightening around him. “Let go, Zain.”

“No.”

“Zain—”

“Fine,” Zain bit off, his expression grim. “I won’t take you with me back to Dubai.”

Aiden’s stomach knotted up. Although it was what he’d suggested himself, irrationally it still hurt that Zain had accepted his decision, just like that, without much of a fight.

“You’ll find us a decent place in this city,” Zain said. “Preferably a house.”

Aiden blinked at him, beyond confused. “What?”

“If you don’t come back with me to Dubai, I’ll need a house here. It’ll take me a month or two to take care of the business I can’t delegate to my employees. You’ll get the house stuff sorted out by then.” Zain sounded so matter-of-fact it was absolutely maddening.

Aiden could only laugh at that. “You can’t be serious. You can’t just—you can’t decide to—to what, *move* here for...” *For me.*

Zain’s gaze was very steady. “I can. And I will. In fact, I’ve already prepared for this eventuality.”

“Why?” Aiden said, looking at him searchingly. *Tell me you love me. Tell me I’m not the only one who feels like the world doesn’t make sense without you in it.*

Zain’s jaw worked. “I got—too used to you.” His voice was stilted. “I tried, but I couldn’t train myself out of it. You made me miserable. I—” His expression became pained. “I’m not good at this.”

Aiden couldn’t help smiling at him, his chest full of raw affection and love.

“You really aren’t,” he said, putting his hand on Zain’s chest and relishing in his unsteady heartbeat. “But I want you to try. I don’t need pretty words, Zain. I just want to know how you feel.”

Bringing his hands up, Zain cradled Aiden's face and just looked at him for a long moment.

"I feel like you're mine," he said, his thumb stroking his cheek and making Aiden lean into it like a touch-starved thing even as bitter disappointment settled in the pit of his stomach.

"Right—your possession," he said tonelessly.

"No," Zain said. "As in, you're essential for me—to feel fulfilled in life." He said it so grudgingly that it took Aiden a moment to register what he was actually saying.

When he did, he blinked, a grin tugging at his lips. "Aw, are you saying I'm essential for your happiness?"

Zain's expression was distinctly uncomfortable. "Do I really need to say it?" he said, haltingly.

Aiden's smile softened. He slid his hand up Zain's chest and neck to cradle his stubbled jaw. His breath caught in his throat when Zain leaned into his touch. Maybe he wasn't the only needy one. Maybe Zain needed him as much as Aiden needed Zain.

"No," Aiden said softly. He knew how hard it was for Zain to be open about his feelings—not only his feelings for another man, but his feelings at all. Aiden had long suspected that Zain's emotional unavailability stemmed from his mother's death and how badly it had hit his father, nearly destroying all their lives. After seeing how destructive love and grief could be, it made sense that the young boy Zain had been would learn to guard his heart. If one didn't love, one couldn't get hurt, after all.

Aiden stroked Zain's cheek with his thumb. "But it'll make me happy to know that I make you happy."

Dark eyes looked at him with almost frightening intensity. "You do," Zain said, his voice a little unsteady and rough. "Make me happy."

Aiden smiled at him, feeling a rush of unbearable love. "What else?" he murmured, threading his fingers through Zain's thick hair. He couldn't stop touching him.

“Your cat misses you.”

“My cat, huh?” Aiden said with a wry smile.

Moving his hands to Aiden’s lower back, Zain pulled him closer. “Yes,” he said, looking at the spot on Aiden’s cheek where Aiden knew his dimple was. “He misses you very much. He can’t sleep without you. It’s annoying and disruptive.”

“*He* misses me, huh? But Zainie is a girl.” Aiden laughed at his disgruntled look. “I thought you’d have gotten rid of my cat by now. You always hated it. Why didn’t you?”

“It’s yours,” Zain said.

Aiden’s throat closed up. He couldn’t help himself: he kissed him quickly, adoringly. “Tell me you love me,” he whispered, despising himself for his neediness but unable to stop.

Zain’s breath was warm against his lips, his hands warm and firm on his back. “Greedy little thing,” he said, nibbling on Aiden’s bottom lip. “Isn’t it enough that I can’t stop thinking of you?”

Aiden grinned. “More. Tell me more.”

“You’re the only person I want to touch. The only person I want to come home to.” Zain bit down on Aiden’s lip viciously, making him grunt in half-pain, half-pleasure. “Sometimes I still can’t believe what you turned me into, but”—a short, greedy kiss— “but you feel like you were made for me. Only me.”

Aiden’s body was melting, his heart was melting, he felt almost high on happiness. He was irrationally afraid to wake up and find out it was just a dream. “You feel like you were made for me, too,” he whispered as Zain kissed his neck. His eyes were stinging. “I missed you so much.”

Zain squeezed him so hard it almost hurt. “Yes,” he said, sucking a hickey into his neck. “So much, *habibi*. Say yes to me.”

“To what?” Aiden gasped out, his head spinning and his knees weak.

“To us,” Zain said. “To being mine.”

Aiden tugged at his hair, forcing Zain to lift his head from his neck. “Will you be mine, too?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Zain said, his dark eyes soft and heated. “I already am.”

Grinning helplessly, Aiden kissed him, and kissed him, and *kissed* him, blind with need, arching and squirming against him, needing more. He wanted to climb Zain’s body like a cat, and dig his way somehow deeper into him.

Someone cleared their throat. Loudly.

With great reluctance, Aiden wrenched his mouth away and turned in the circle of Zain’s arms.

His entire family was staring at them with varying degrees of dismay.

But Aiden felt so happy he couldn’t bring himself to care.

“Mom, Dad,” he said, intertwining his fingers with Zain’s. “I know you aren’t happy about this, but I love him. I hope you can accept it one day.”

His mother’s lips were pressed together. She sighed. “I’ve already accepted it, sweetheart. But does *he* love you? That’s the part that worries me.”

Aiden swallowed. For all the lovely things Zain had said, he hadn’t used the word love once.

But before he could say anything, Zain squeezed his hand and stepped in front of Aiden. “I don’t think it’s any of your business,” he said, his voice cold again. “But if you must know, I do. I wouldn’t be tolerating being questioned by his nosy parents like a child if I didn’t.”

Pressing his face between Zain’s shoulder-blades, Aiden broke into hysterical laughter. “God, you really are awful at

this,” he said through his giggles. “Worst love confession ever!”

But he couldn’t stop grinning. Zain loved him! Loved him loved him loved him!

Turning to him, Zain stared at his laughing face for a moment, his expression strange.

“What?” Aiden managed, still chuckling.

“I need to be alone with you,” Zain said, his voice rough.

Aiden swallowed, losing himself in his dark brown eyes. God, he couldn’t stand the distance between them anymore.

He darted forward and kissed Zain quickly—just a short one, to tide them over—before turning to his parents and grinning bashfully. “You can chew me out later. We’ll be in my room! Talking.” And he tugged Zain upstairs.

Eloise snorted and muttered, “Talking? Right.” But she was smiling, and so was Jordan. Aiden’s parents... they didn’t look very happy, but Aiden knew they’d come around eventually. It was going to be all right. They’d accept Zain when they saw how happy he made Aiden.

But truth be told, Aiden didn’t care if the entire world didn’t accept their relationship. As long as Zain was his—truly his—nothing else mattered.

Aiden looked back at Zain and gave him a hopelessly besotted smile, squeezing his hand.

Zain squeezed back and smiled a little, his eyes trained only on him.

As they were meant to be.

Epilogue

A few months later

Zain was back.

Zain was finally back.

Zain was finally back and inside of him, where he belonged.

Moaning, Aiden spread his legs wider, clutching at Zain's shoulders as the older man thrust into him. Christ, it felt so right—the weight of him, the pressure, the pleasure, the *man*. Aiden felt so insatiable for him he wanted to whine every time Zain pulled out. Although Zain had been back in his life for months, Aiden still irrationally felt like he could be taken away from him. He would never get enough of him. These past few weeks apart hadn't helped.

“Don't come yet,” Aiden said hoarsely, sliding his hands down Zain's muscular back and gripping his firm ass. “Don't stop.”

“I'm too close,” Zain said, burying his face in Aiden's neck. “It's been weeks.”

The desperation, the need in his voice, made Aiden's heart soar. Zain still wasn't very good at talking about his feelings, but at times like this, it was obvious he had it as bad as Aiden did.

"Zain," Aiden whispered, stroking Zain's back and shoulders, relishing the strength of his muscles as they flexed under his fingers. "Zain—Zain..."

"What?" Zain said, mouthing his neck.

Aiden smiled dazedly, hugging him close. "Nothing. I just love saying your name. I love you."

Zain groaned, his rhythm becoming uneven, harder, faster, and with a last few jerky, jagged lunges, he came inside him, letting out a deep, hoarse snarl of pleasure. Breathing hard, he slipped his hand between them to stroke Aiden's leaking cock. "Come for me, *habibi*."

That was enough to push Aiden over the edge, because he was that easy for him. That desperate. That in love.

"Don't pull out yet," he begged. He clutched Zain to him, buried his face in his neck, pressed his mouth against his skin as the pleasure wracked his body before slowly ebbing out.

Peace. Quiet. The scent. The man. Everything was perfect with the world.

At long last—far too soon—Zain rolled onto his back and pulled Aiden into his arms.

Aiden hummed, tucking his head under Zain's chin and wrapping his arm around Zain's waist. He was aware he was kind of clinging, but so was Zain, to be honest. It had taken Zain longer than expected to finalize his business arrangements in Dubai. But finally Zain was back for good, back in their home in Boston. Their home. Theirs. His and Zain's. The mere thought still made Aiden giddy. He'd loved Zain's mansion in Dubai, but this house felt special, because they'd picked it together. For them.

Fuck, Aiden hadn't known it was possible to feel so happy. His happiness was so embarrassingly obvious that even

his parents had started thawing toward Zain. *“I can’t hate him when he puts that look in your eyes,”* his mother had said last month. *“Your dad isn’t angry anymore, either.”*

His parents’ acceptance made Aiden even giddier, but after being miserable for ten long months, he still couldn’t quite believe how perfect his life was now. He was a little scared. Scared this happiness would be snatched away from him in a puff of smoke.

“Are you sure Al Sharabi isn’t going to hire someone to kill you?” Aiden said.

Zain gave a soft snort. “The old man might be pissed, but the divorce isn’t as much of a humiliation as Gadiel ditching his daughter would have been. He’ll live with it, especially considering that I gave Farah a very generous settlement.” A wrinkle appeared between his brows. “That said, I’m still a little surprised by how little trouble Al Sharabi caused. I expected it to be harder.”

“I... I might have asked Damiano to threaten Al Sharabi into leaving you alone,” Aiden said, cringing a little. It wasn’t that he was afraid that Zain would be angry. Zain’s anger was nothing a few soft smiles and hard fucks couldn’t fix. But this interference revealed how much he had been worried. “It’s not that I thought you couldn’t take care of yourself, but...” He lifted his head to look Zain in the eyes and whispered, “I’m scared shitless of losing you after finally getting you back.”

Zain stared at him for a moment. Blinked. Looked away.

“You won’t lose me,” he said, returning his gaze to Aiden. “Nothing will stop me from coming back to you.”

His eyes stinging, Aiden leaned forward and kissed him needily. “That was a very romantic thing to say,” he said, cradling Zain’s face with his hands.

“Was it?” Zain said. “It’s simply a fact.”

“Right,” Aiden said with a laugh. “God forbid someone suspects you of being romantic. You moving your entire life to another country for my sake is nothing too.”

“To be fair, not my entire life,” Zain said. “Gadiel is here too.”

Humming, Aiden laid his head back on Zain’s shoulder, squirming closer to him. “How is he, by the way?”

“Blissfully happy with his bodyguard,” Zain said dryly. “Let’s hope the man’s stamina can keep up with the brat’s. I’m not fixing his little problem again.”

“We can always buy him a dildo,” Aiden said, chuckling. “That should have been the obvious solution for you, by the way.”

“Well, I’m very glad I didn’t buy him a dildo.”

Aiden’s laughter turned into a soft smile that probably looked as besotted as he felt. “I’m very glad, too,” he said quietly, his throat suddenly tight. Jokes aside, his life could have turned out very different if Zain hadn’t attended that auction and hadn’t happened to notice him. “I’m so lucky it was you.”

“No,” Zain said, tipping Aiden’s face up to look him in the eyes. It made Aiden feel like he was the most interesting thing in the world. The most precious. “I’m the lucky one.”

Aiden blinked a few times, a lump forming in his throat. He cleared it and smiled. “Do you remember my first love confession?”

Zain’s brows drew together. “You mean in your parents’ house?”

“Nope. The *very* first one.” Aiden pouted exaggeratedly. “I can’t believe you already forgot it, sweet cheeks.”

Zain laughed. “Ah. You mean the time you pretended to be in love with me to annoy me? What about it?”

Running his fingers through Zain’s hair, Aiden looked him in the eyes and repeated softly the words he’d once said in jest, “I can’t live without you. Let’s have babies together.” When Zain just stared at him, Aiden gave a crooked smile, feeling a little self-conscious. “Not right now, of course. Down

the line, years from now. But you know what I mean.” *I want to have a family with you. I want forever.*

“Yes,” Zain said, his voice a little rough. He rolled Aiden onto his back and kissed the corner of Aiden’s mouth, pressing their cheeks together. “Anything. Whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want?” Aiden said with a grin, looping his arms around Zain’s neck. “Careful, Your Highness. You might regret it.”

Zain just looked at him for a moment, his dark eyes warm and intense.

“I love you,” he said, and kissed him.

The End

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, thank you to my readers. I'm so grateful for your support. This year hasn't been easy for me and my family, and I really appreciate your kind words and encouragement. I hope you enjoyed this book.

Thanks to my wonderful editor, Eliot Grayson, for making this book better.

And thank you to my daughter for being the bravest little girl in the world. I love you so much.

What's next?

Forbidden, Book 5 in the The Wrong Alpha series, should be released in the first half of 2024.

Just a Bit Guarded, Book 15 in the Straight Guys series, will be released later in 2024. I love the bodyguard trope, so I'm very excited about this book! Yes, I know Vlad in *Just a Bit Wicked* was a bodyguard too, but *Guarded* is going to be a very different book.

There are other books that may or may not be published in 2024, but I'm not ready to announce anything yet. I'll keep you updated!

If you'd like to be notified when my new books are published, you can subscribe to my mailing list:

<http://www.alessandrahazard.com/subscribe/>

You can always contact me at my website <http://www.alessandrahazard.com> or email me at author@alessandrahazard.com.

Yours,

Alessandra

About the Series

Currently the *Straight Guys* series includes the following books:

#0.5 - [**Straight Boy: A Short Story**](#) (Sage and Xavier)

Young, blond and handsome, Sage attracts unwanted attention in prison. When his cellmate offers him protection, Sage accepts the offer, even though he doesn't trust the guy. Little does he know how much it will change his life.

When he's released from prison, Sage finds himself needing and wanting things he shouldn't want. Sage is straight. He is. He has a girlfriend. What happened in prison stayed in prison—or so Sage tells himself.

Until he meets his former cellmate again. Xavier. The guy he hates and craves.

#1 - [**Just a Bit Twisted**](#) (Shawn and Derek)

Professor Derek Rutledge is hated and feared by all of his students. Strict, reserved and ruthless, he doesn't tolerate mistakes and has little patience for his students.

Shawn Wyatt is a twenty-year-old struggling to provide for his younger sisters after the death of their parents. On the verge of losing his scholarship, Shawn becomes desperate enough to go to Professor Rutledge.

Everyone says Rutledge doesn't have a heart. Everyone says he's a ruthless bastard. Shawn finds out that everyone is right.

He strikes a deal with Rutledge, but unexpectedly, the deal turns into something so much more.

Something all-consuming and addictive.

Something neither of them wants.

#2 - **Just a Bit Obsessed** (Alexander and Christian)

Alexander Sheldon likes order and control in his life. He isn't happy when his girlfriend invites another guy for a threesome. Alexander believes in monogamy, and he's never been good at sharing his things. It doesn't help that Christian rubs him the wrong way from the beginning.

But what starts as animosity turns into something else. Something unexpected and very wrong.

He was never supposed to touch Christian. He was never supposed to feel possessive of the guy. And he most definitely wasn't supposed to want Christian more than he wants his girlfriend.

It's a recipe for disaster.

#3 - **Just a Bit Unhealthy** (Gabriel and Jared)

When the line between "need" and "want" gets blurred...

Gabriel DuVal, a rising soccer star.

Jared Sheldon, a team physician.

To the outside world, they're just good friends. But the truth is, Gabriel isn't entirely sure what they are to each other.

Some call their relationship unhealthy. Some call it codependency. Gabriel calls it confusing. He knows Jared wants him – as more than a friend. He doesn't want Jared. He's straight, he has a girlfriend, and he loves her. But Jared

is... Jared is more. Jared is his. He needs him – his touch and his strength.

But is it enough for Jared?

#4 - **Just a Bit Wrong** (Tristan and Zach)

Zach Hardaway is one of the best physiotherapists in Europe.

Tristan DuVal is a young soccer star with a groin injury.

They despise each other from the moment they meet.

As far as Zach is concerned, Tristan is a rich, spoiled brat who is too used to getting his own way.

As far as Tristan is concerned, Zach is a bossy, presumptuous prick. Tristan hates Zach. He does. The problem is, he also wants to shove Zach against the nearest wall and climb him like a tree.

#5 - **Just a Bit Confusing** (Ryan and James)

Best friends, inseparable since childhood, one in love with the other, the other straight and in love with a woman.

Stories like this don't have a happy ending; James Grayson knows it. He puts on a smile, he laughs, he jokes, and he pretends he's fine when Ryan kisses his girlfriend in front of him—until he can't.

Except nothing is easy and letting go turns out to be much harder than one might think. Some bonds are too strong to be broken, even for a straight man. And sometimes love and desire can have different faces and layers.

A story of two men trying to function without each other and failing.

#6 - **Just a Bit Ruthless** (Roman and Luke)

Stockholm syndrome or Love?

When you want someone completely wrong for you...

Luke Whitford has always dreamed of meeting Mr. Right. A hopeless romantic at heart, he dreams of falling in love with a nice man, getting married and having a bunch of adorable babies. The problem is, Luke has the propensity for being attracted to men who are anything but nice.

Roman Demidov, a homophobic, cynical billionaire who has a grudge against Luke's father, is certainly not Mr. Right. Cold, manipulative, and ruthless, he's not a nice man and he doesn't pretend to be.

Luke is fully aware that Roman is all wrong for him. His attraction to the guy is just some sort of Stockholm syndrome; it must be. If life were a fairy tale, Roman would be the main villain, not the hero.

But even villains can fall in love. Or can they?

The story of a boy who dreamed of Prince Charming and ended up falling for the Beast.

#7 - [Just a Bit Wicked](#) (Vlad and Sebastian)

He's sure he'll never fall for a man...

When it rains, it pours. After losing his prestigious job, Vlad discovers that his girlfriend has cheated on him. Angry and hurt, he's determined to find her lover and teach him a lesson. When he finds out that her lover is bisexual, it only makes him angrier. Raised by an extremely homophobic family, Vlad is convinced he's straight and holds nothing but contempt for people who aren't.

But sometimes contempt and anger can turn into obsession, and then into something else entirely—something Vlad has always considered sick and wrong.

He's sure he'll never fall for a homophobic bully...

Sebastian is a successful English model who has always detested bullies. When a man shows up on his doorstep accusing him of sleeping with his girlfriend, Sebastian isn't interested in being a punching bag. However, provoking a

homophobic man is probably not the best idea...or the safest. But then again, Sebastian has never been good at playing it safe.

Things get a lot more complicated when Vlad has to bodyguard Sebastian. Can they stay professional?

They can't. They bicker and fight, and they hate everything about each other.

Now if only they could figure out how to keep their hands off each other.

#8 - [Just a Bit Shameless](#) (Dominic and Sam)

Two MI6 agents go undercover as a rich businessman and his sugar baby. Can their fake relationship become something real?

Sam Landon is a homeless eighteen-year-old thief desperate for a different life. When his skills attract the attention of the British Secret Intelligence Service, Sam is determined to prove himself.

His first mission: he has to steal a flash drive from a paranoid crime lord. The problem is, he has to pretend to be another agent's sugar baby.

Dominic Bommer, his "sugar daddy," is ridiculously handsome, charming, rich, and pretty much perfect. Dominic is kind, generous, and protective of him.

Except "Dominic Bommer" is nothing but a role performed by a cynical MI6 agent, who is actually straight, aloof, and manipulative.

Sam is perfectly aware that everything Dominic does is carefully calculated, every emotion faked. He knows that men actually do nothing for Dominic and he doesn't really want Sam.

But despite knowing all of this, Sam still finds himself falling hard for a man who doesn't exist.

Or does he?

#9 - [Just a Bit Gay](#) (Nick and Tyler)

Tyler Meyer is totally straight. But then the hot woman he's hooking up with sticks her finger where she shouldn't, and suddenly he's not so sure... Straight guys can like that sort of thing too, right?

Except things get confusing—and frustrating—when fingers and toys aren't quite enough.

Enter Nick Hardaway, Tyler's best friend. What's a little fun between bros, right?

#10 - [Just a Bit Dirty](#) (Ian and Miles)

A ruthless CEO of a large company.

A British student confused about his sexuality.

They have nothing in common.

The attraction between them makes absolutely no sense.

When Miles Hardaway decided to spend the summer in America to get away from his overbearing family, the last thing he expected was to end up falling for a man he should dislike—but doesn't.

Ian Caldwell is the most arrogant, bossy man Miles has ever met. He drives Miles absolutely crazy. Although Miles has been warned that Ian is playing some dirty, underhanded game, he finds himself caught between his friends and a man he shouldn't want.

Who will he choose when his heart and his mind are telling him two different things?

#11 - [Just a Bit Wrecked](#) (Logan and Andrew)

A plane crash. A homophobe and a gay man stranded together on a desert island. A love born out of hatred, need, and mutual desperation.

Andrew Reyes is handsome, rich, and very straight—he's married to a gorgeous woman. Outspoken about his distaste for gay people, he isn't shy about his opinion as he watches the gay couple he and his wife share a flight with.

Logan McCall is handsome, rich, and openly gay. He isn't impressed with the bigoted jerk across the aisle, no matter how easy on the eyes he is.

To their shock and horror, they're the only survivors when the plane crashes—stranded on a desert island with no hope of rescue, and no one but each other to depend on for survival.

As the days turn into months, can disdain, antipathy, and a craving they don't understand and can't resist turn into a connection? Or something more?

#12 - [Just a Bit Bossy](#) (Raffaele and Nate)

Boss from hell. Satan personified. A tyrant everyone fears.

Nate Parrish loathes his boss from the moment they meet.

Raffaele Ferrara is probably the most insufferable, domineering man in the world. He doesn't seem to understand that his personal assistant isn't actually his personal slave. He expects Nate to do his bidding with a single word. He expects that Nate's whole life will revolve around him. He expects other, entirely unreasonable things, even though they're both straight and there's supposed to be a line your boss should never cross. Apparently, as his personal assistant, Nate has to assist him... personally.

Except Nate knows it's just a game. His boss is straight. He knows Raffaele just wants to make him angry enough to quit. But Nate has always been too stubborn for his own good, and he's determined to be the best assistant his boss has ever had, no matter how insane—or inappropriate—Raffaele's orders may become. Before long, the two men are drawn into a twisted game neither wants to lose.

Nate knows it has to stop. He has to leave his job. It's not good for his sanity. Except his horrible boss is like a bad addiction he can't quit. The world feels boring without Raffaele's intensity, and his focus on Nate might be infuriating... but it's also something Nate's starting to realize he can't live without.

#13 - [Just a Bit Heartless](#) (Damiano and Jordan)

Jordan Gates isn't easily flustered—or easily scared.

When his boss asks him to accompany him to Italy for a family wedding, Jordan agrees. He'll get paid handsomely for his trouble.

There's a catch, though. Several catches.

1. He's there as bait: Jordan has to pose as his boss's real boyfriend, who looks a lot like Jordan.
2. Someone in his boss's mafioso family wants to murder them.
3. That someone is probably Damiano Conte, a cold, ruthless bastard who has no right to be so hot.

Everyone says Damiano is a sociopath with no capacity for real emotion. Jordan believes them. But he can't seem to stay away, fascinated with the man despite his better judgment.

When the family visit turns into a nightmare of betrayal, kidnapping, and murder, Jordan has to rely on Damiano to keep his sanity. Can he trust a heartless, manipulative sociopath? Can he stop craving him after he returns to his normal life?

Can a man who doesn't feel fall in love?

Other MM Romance series by Alessandra:

Calluvia's Royalty series

Book 1 - [**That Alien Feeling**](#)

He's the most precious human being Adam has ever seen. Too bad he isn't human.

Banished by his parents to the third planet in the Sol system, Prince Harht'ng'h'chaali of the Second Grand Clan is completely fascinated by its inhabitants. Assuming the human name "Harry," he tries to pass for a human to survive, but being human is so much harder than Harry expected. Humans are so confusing.

Adam Crawford isn't looking for love. Financially secure and good-looking, he's in a good place in his life. He doesn't mean to fall in love with the quirky guy working at the coffee shop near his office. Harry is ridiculous—and ridiculously endearing. He wears ugly shirts and flowers in his hair, and he has a kind word for everyone. Adam falls hard and fast.

Little does he know that Harry isn't what he seems and anything between them is impossible.

Star-crossed love between a human man and an alien prince from a world half a galaxy away.

Book 2: [**That Irresistible Poison**](#)

Book 3: [**Once Upon a Time**](#)

Book 4: [**Prince's Master**](#)

Book 5: [**Dearly Despised**](#)

The Wrong Alpha series

Book 1: [**Unnatural**](#)

A planet at war. Two alphas forced into a political marriage. Attraction that defies all reason and logic... Or does it?

The Kingdom of Pelugia and the Republic of Kadar have been at war for decades. Peace isn't popular, but the planet can't survive without it.

Forced to marry an enemy prince for the sake of peace, Senator Royce Cleghorn doesn't like his husband, his alpha scent, or his damned pretty blue eyes. More than anything, Royce hates what Haydn makes him become: a primitive alpha cliché who'll do anything to mark his territory, even if that territory is his alpha husband. Royce likes omegas; he isn't into alphas, no matter how pretty their eyes are. It's just a weird territorial instinct. It has to be.

Prince Haydn has always tried to be the perfect alpha his father wants him to be. He's the heir to the throne. He's a war general. He isn't supposed to bare his throat to an enemy alpha—and it isn't supposed to feel so good. Everyone knows a marriage between two alphas is a recipe for disaster. He isn't supposed to crave his husband—their marriage is just a political arrangement, nothing more.

But when disaster strikes and loyalties are tested, which bond will be the strongest: their marriage, or their allegiances?

Book 2: [Feral](#)

Book 3: [Illicit](#)

Book 4: [Expert](#)