

KNOCK KNOCK



NORDIKA NIGHT

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FROM NOTHING 3

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Knock Knock [From Nothing Book 3]

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To Maddox and Devon for being aggressively romantic dumbasses.

Fuck you, toaster setting one.

To Nate's truck for meddling.

To fancy jeans guy.

To plastic bags, mattresses, and boxsprings.

To Garron Park trailer park for raising our boys.

To Xavi's green slides.

To shitty yellow towels and tiny ass beds.

Rest in eternal suffering, Jim Sawyer.

To shitty Oaks and Patrick Harris' yellow aviators.

CONTENTS

Author's Note

1. Nate
2. Xavi
3. Nate
4. Xavi
5. Nate
6. Xavi
7. Nate
8. Xavi
9. Nate
10. Xavi
11. Nate
12. Xavi
13. Nate
14. Xavi
15. Nate
16. Xavi
17. Nate
18. Xavi
19. Nate
20. Xavi
21. Nate
22. Nate
23. Nate
24. Xavi
25. Nate
26. Xavi
27. Nate
28. Nate
29. Xavi
30. Xavi
31. Nate

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Scene](#)

[To You](#)

[Nordika Night](#)

[Also by Nordika Night](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A reminder that this is book 3 in the *From Nothing* series.

Garron Park & Lot 62 should be read first.

So much crazy shit has happened, and this is how we put the Garron Park world at peace.

Content

Nate and Xavi **are not** Maddox and Devon. So you can expect the same trailer park vibes, but a completely different romance trope. This is friends to lovers, so it differs majorly from rivals to lovers.

- friends to lovers
- inaccurate kink representation (meaning they get some wrong) do not use as a guide
- one instance of a homophobic slur
- alcoholism/addiction
- neglected kids/kids in need
- medium-ish burn, low angst, mild miscommunication

This book is written in Canadian English (a mix of American and British).

CHAPTER 1

NATE

THIS WASN'T WEIRD.

Nope. Nothing about this shitshow of a night was weird.

It wasn't weird that Xavi's nuts tickled my thigh, and it wasn't weird that his green eyes tried but failed to avert mine. It wasn't even that weird that the chick wedged between our bodies squealed like a stuck pig. To be fair, she was totally being stuck by two pigs, but she didn't need to squeal about it. Definitely wasn't weird that my foot slipped off the bed and I accidentally on purpose kneed Xavi in the ass as some sort of signal.

I mean, it sure as shit wasn't weird that we were banging the same broad while having an entirely different conversation through our hit-or-miss eye contact and the grunts and groans that left our lips.

Not weird at all.

"This is weird," Xavi said.

Oh, thank fuck.

Xavi pulled out and slid from beneath Bridget, which made the two of us do a rough-and-tumble fall to the mattress. My dick slipped out with an audible *pop* that echoed around the small room.

"What? We were just getting to the good bit. Don't leave, Xavi!" Bridget had turned from squealing to shrieking, and *sheesh*.

Xavi was half-dressed with his eyes on the prize of freedom. Short of offering him twenty bucks, there wasn't a chance in hell she'd lure him back. Pretty sure he flung the condom, and it landed on a lava lamp, too. Fire hazard for sure.

I set Bridget on the bed and extracted myself from this sweaty clusterfuck of failed fucking. My phone buzzed on the floor, lighting up the room like a beacon from a lighthouse about to save our sorry asses. I threw on some fake concern, looking at it.

"Devon? Everything okay?" I wedged it between my shoulder and ear, pulling off the condom. Devon would just have to play his part, even though he sucked at acting.

"What? Why are you acting like a dipshit? Have you seen ___"

"Shit! Seriously?" I slid my briefs up my legs—the good purple ones I'd bought at full price by accident, thinking they were boxers. Kind of loved them now, though. "Is Madd alright?" I nudged the used but empty condom under Bridget's bed and avoided looking at her. I should have been an actor.

"What? No, he's a dick. What are you talking about?" Devon shouted.

"Dev, we're coming. Just stay there, alright?"

Xavi jumped into action, picking up on the plotline I laid out for him. *His brother was hurt, we needed to get there fast, and nothing, not even two holes and a lot of lube, would be enough to keep us from protecting his fake-injured brother.* Scene set. "Is my brother alright?"

Bridget gawked around, totally pissed that her needs were not even close to being met. Poor girl. We failed another one.

"What the hell is going on, Nate?" Devon barked through the line. It was hard to keep a straight face when I pictured his expression to be scowled and rage-red. But I never broke character. "Madd's passed out on the couch like a lazy ass. I just wanted to know if you'd seen the new gloves he got me?"

I found a shoe and pulled it closer to me with my foot. “Just make sure he stays lying down. Keep him awake until we get there.”

“Good fucking lord,” Devon groaned. “You two need to stop this shit and get a life.” He hung up.

Yeah, heard that one before. Many times. “Madd’s hurt,” I told Xavi.

“Fuck.” He acted almost as well as I did, even if he didn’t have as many lines. Great supporting character for this show, and it was fun when he took the lead role, too. “Sorry, chicky. We gotta go.” He grabbed his slides and my t-shirt and ran. Guess we were sacrificing the rest of our clothes.

I gathered up whatever I could reach and looked at Bridget, still kneeling on the bed. “Sorry to fuck and run.” *No, I’m not.* “We’ll call you!” *No, we won’t.*

I booked it outta her room, through the living area with three sleeping somebodies, and out the front door. Sliding over the hood real *Dukes of Hazzard* style, my underwear bunched up and my bare ass screeched across the hood. Dammit! *Only downfall to briefs, I swear!* I howled like a coonhound, hopping in the passenger seat with an armful of random clothes.

“Thanks for driving,” I said, slamming my door twice before it latched.

“I know you hate night driving,” Xavi said. “That was fucking weird.” He tried twisting the key, but the truck said nope. “Come on, old girl. You know we love ya. Give us the win.”

Bridget was on her front lawn, headed our way in nothing but her birthday suit, with her fingers pressed over her nips like they were more virtuous than her vag.

“Give her a little gas. She’s a slut for gas!” I smacked him, hoping it felt encouraging.

“Shit!” he cursed. “Brittany’s coming.”

“Brittany?” I paused, shirt half on. “I thought her name was Bridget?”

Xavi kept trying, and Bridget or Brittany was three long strides from us. “I heard you call her Brittany,” he said. “Please don’t flood. Please don’t flood.”

I shoved an arm through my sleeve and tried to ignore the chick coming our way for the explanation we totally owed her but didn’t want to give. “Well, shit. Now I’m second-guessing myself. Are you sure it isn’t Beatrice? I thought there might be a B and an E in there somewhere.” I smacked him again when Beatrice squawked. “Hurry the fuck up, Xav, or I’m leaving you here with this hunk of junk and making a run for it.”

“How dare you talk about her like that.” He gave the dash a pat.

“She’s reaching for the door!”

The engine roared to life and backfired beautifully, waking half of Garron Terrace—the hoity-toity trailer park outside Garron. With a whoop of victory, Xavi jammed the old biddy into first and chewed gravel.

I rolled down my window and leaned out. “There’s a condom on your lava lamp!” *There. Who said I wasn’t responsible?* “Forgot how cool lava lamps are,” I told him, and he nodded.

My heart rate slowed when we passed through the gates, but the cheesy smile on Xavi’s face never left. With Garron Terrace behind us, I leaned my head back to let the breeze dry my sweaty hair.

“Come to think of it,” Xavi said, “it’s Bethany.”

“Bethany?”

“Yeah. Definitely Bethany. Because I added her to my phone as ‘Beth with an E’, and that shit tracks. Don’t smoke that.” He tossed a packet of nicotine gum on my lap when I pulled out my pack of cigs.

“Where the fuck do you conjure this shit from?” I chewed the stale gum and hated every second of it. “Well, Bethany

is...”

“Never happening again,” he filled in. “We’re fucking this all up. We had the strongest game going for a bit there, and now we’re...”

“Trying too hard?”

“Yes. That. Since when have we ever tried at anything? We’re better at the whole flow thing.” He nodded, taking a full minute to hand-crank his window down for a little humid air.

“Yeah, going with the flow is more our style. Actually, we’re better off just falling into a situation, not understanding what the situation is, and then making fun of it.”

His continuous nod said it all, but he added, “We aren’t dumb.”

Debatable. We lived a whole life with one responsibility: keep our brothers alive. That left us with no idea how to put ourselves first, no ability to plan ahead, and a promise to have fun together because nothing else in life was fun. Maybe we weren’t dumb, but we weren’t the sharpest shards of glass. Dulled down by rocks and waves that softened our edges and matted our shine. But whatever. We got by, even with all our downfalls, insecurities, and self-doubts.

As far as life bonds went, we’d gotten through a hundred percent of our shitty situations with ours, and that wasn’t something I took lightly. Ever. But now we were stuck in the same doubts. As in, someone—a whole slew of someones—made us doubt ourselves. Never, not even once, had I questioned myself as a person, and I knew Xavi hadn’t either. Yeah, we questioned our lifestyle, our upbringing, our financial situation, our luck, our tiny goals, and the methods we employed to get them, but never ourselves. Then, a while back, someone planted that seed of doubt, and it never stopped growing.

We hit the ripe old age of thirty, and suddenly, different kinds of life questions started coming our way. Turned out we had no idea how to answer them. Well... I sure as shit didn’t.

“But maybe we are dumb,” Xavi said, his smile finally falling. “Maybe that’s what we need to change. We’re getting older, being held to new standards, and let’s be real, we’re fucking failing at all of it.”

This was the part I hated. To watch someone as incredible as Xavi second-guess himself just because a bunch of people told him to start thinking differently made me borderline homicidal. And there weren’t too many things that made me a homicidal kind of guy. I wanted to yell at those fuckers, confront all those chicks, and throw it in their faces that Xavi was more than they’d ever be.

We got dumped for being immature.

We got left behind because we weren’t serious enough about life.

We got ditched because we cared more about each other and our brothers than some idealistic notion of marriage and kids.

We got told to grow up.

We got laughed at for being failures.

We got treated like a pair of jokes who didn’t know our own punchline. *Knock, knock, right?*

We got shit on and gossiped about because our brothers were together, called stupid because we defended their relationship even when everyone else called it domestic abuse.

Attempt after attempt at a three-way bond, searching for a woman who would fit our dynamic as well as we fit together, failed. It always fucking failed because the sex was hot shit, but apparently, we weren’t. We laughed at dumb stuff and didn’t get too worked up about much. You sure as shit couldn’t sit us side by side at a funeral.

And while we were best friends who got compared and blamed for the same reasons, we were totally different people who should have been seen as individuals.

Xavi took things seriously, but he didn't get that credit because I laughed too often.

Big picture wise, after my upbringing, I didn't feel like a failure, but we both got stuck in that category because we weren't 'settling down' with the love of our lives.

And it started with Kaylee. The chick we legitimately dated. It started before Maddox's jail time, cooled off a bit during, and then picked up again after. But in the end, Kaylee succeeded at one thing and one thing only: diminishing our self-worth. All because she got pissy that we were more focused on Maddox's trial than her. *Like, fuck off, woman. Who do you think you are?*

But whatever. We were better off without her anyway. Even if our attempt at finding someone new had failed every week for months, it was me and Xavi, and I felt proud to still be at his side.

"Or we don't change anything because we're confident in who we are," I said. I spit the gum out the window and sighed, annoyed at myself for pulling a cigarette from my pack. My dead lighter barely sparked, but it got the smoke down my throat, and that's all I needed.

Xavi scoffed. "Are we?"

I'd never worried much about anything like confidence. Devon was a dipshit and took me at face value, didn't give a shit about pleasing my parents while growing up, and Xavi loved me for who I was. Hookups came and went, but they were mostly looking for a good time between ten and two, so those became my effort hours. But Xavi was around my pathetic ass twenty-four-seven, and I mostly took pride in the fact that he didn't complain about it. I had a grocery list of insecurities, but I tried to hide them from most people. Xavi always knew, but I didn't feel too shit about that.

"You know what really pisses me off?" Xavi asked. "Andrea."

Oh, here we fucking go. The Andrea debate again.

The very same Andrea who saved our asses over the past few years. The one who patched up my brother and helped organize Maddox's case. The Andrea who always had our backs and our best interests at heart. She was more perceptive than we thought, and it was her who started asking thought-provoking questions after Kaylee had already made us feel like shit about ourselves.

Because we got drunk and stressed out and tried to hook up with her. *Fail!* She shot us down like we were joking. Then she laughed when she realized we were serious, but instead of sending us on our way, she sat us down and made us think! The goddamn audacity of her.

She claimed we were in the 'babies and marriage' phase of life, then said she was in the 'don't even whisper the word pregnant around me' phase. To be honest, I was in the same phase as her, but Xavi hadn't made up his mind about it.

She was right in the end. She was only forty-two, which was a bee's dick of an age gap, but she really had become our mother figure. Ain't nobody wanna mix mommies with kinkies. Right? ... *Right?* Regardless, she sat us down, told us we were being reckless, and then started the whole 'phases of life' chat that somehow turned into Xavi not being able to say yes or no to having a kid, and me locking up like a chastity belt because... I'd never goddamn thought about it before.

That was weird, right? People usually had dreams or, at the very least, thoughts about big things like that. But, other than the shop, I'd never realized I hadn't until she straight up asked me about it. Like, I figured there was no way in hell I'd ever be a dad, but that was about as far as my thought process went. I'd thought about the past and the here and now, but fuck me for not putting a ton of stock into my future. Wasn't even sure I'd survive this long. My efforts went to my brother, and since he became settled, I had no idea how to think about myself and my dreams.

"Like, why is it some crime to maybe sorta think about a distant and not at all clear future that in some small degree might possibly have a kid in it?" Xavi asked.

I loved his wishy-washy dreams. He barely knew what he wanted for dinner, let alone for life, but if a kid was potentially on the table for him, I'd help him pull up a chair.

"It's not. She shut us down because of who we are, not what we want. Jesus, Xavi. Snap out of it."

"It's like she knew something about us before we knew it. And I still don't know it. Do you?" He looked at me. "Do you know things? Does she?"

Truthful answer was, 'yeah, she noticed my dick got hard for you and I begged her not to out me, so she pushed us to chat about life things in the hopes that it'd make me confess all my sexy thoughts to you and get us to talk.'

Instead, I said, "She's just wise like that." I shrugged. "We were more into Kaylee at the time anyway, right?"

"Yeah, that whole thing was a clusterfuck." It was. For a multitude of different reasons. Timing. Priorities. Maybe even a little resentment on my part, because for the first time in my life, I was keeping a secret from Xavi.

Fucking sucked at it, too. Like any minute, it'd come flying out of my mouth to smack him in the dick because I sucked at processing shit and Xavi was the one I typically vented to. I needed to vent! Or to at least let off a little steam. Crack the pipes to release some pressure. Devon was a shit option for chatting, but he'd do if I couldn't blurt all my sketchy secrets to my sketchy bestie.

But how the hell was I supposed to tell the guy who'd been my ride or die since I met him at the dank Garron Park community grounds, surrounded by hypodermic needles and a stolen bag of candies, that he got my dick going and I perved on him more often than sometimes? The guy hated shirts, and my dick noticed. Even now, with his chest bare and his abs out, my cock gave a half-hearted throb, just a little twitch of the dick as a taunt to remind me I wanted someone I wasn't supposed to want.

The chat about sexualities was so far from my mind. Me and my dick had surpassed that about thirty hookups ago. We

were over the fact that the dudiest dude-bro got us going, and we chose to focus on the fact that it was Xavi. *Xavi!* No matter how many times Devon gave me cock-minding advice, I didn't want to listen.

“We're a shitshow, bud.” I shrugged.

“Yeah, but what else is new? I just feel like a dipshit for wanting—”

“Xavi, if you complain about wanting a kid one more time, I'll—”

“Maybe! *Maybe* wanting a kid. Like one. Huge maybe. *Massive* fucking maybe, Nate.”

I wasn't much of an eye-roller, but I strained to hold it back. Maybe was enough of a reason to keep the idea alive, and until he made up his mind, I'd support him on it. I'd hand-hold him through the whole thing. He'd be a hot dad. But when Kaylee asked him about kids, and he said his typical 'maybe,' she laughed at him and claimed he wasn't dad material. It made me so mad that I needed to leave the room before I smacked a bitch.

“What season of *Teen Wolf* are we on?” I asked instead.

“I *do not* watch that shit,” he grumped. “What'd Devon really want when he called? Madd's alright, yeah?”

“They're fine. Dicks as usual.” I slid my second shoe on as we pulled into the parking lot of the shop. “You still into this, Xav?”

“Into what?”

“This Bethany shit. The hookup thing.” I motioned between us, unsure how I wanted him to answer. If he was out, I'd lose my chance to be close to him that way. But if he was in, I'd have to suffer through everyone else being able to touch him while I couldn't.

“Yeah, why?” Xavi asked. “You want out?” His face turned stern and then he hopped out of the truck so fast I couldn't answer. His door didn't latch, so he slammed his ass against it and booked it to the shop.

“No,” I called after him, getting out.

Then he spun around, marched his shirtless self right up to me, had Maddox’s anger in his eyes, and said, “You ever leave me in this shit, I’ll kill you.” He turned around.

Sheesh. I tried not to laugh.

“You’re on episode seven! Season two!” he shouted back.

“You suck at death threats!”

He gave me the finger.

Sans pants and sumo walking, I let the night air soothe my inner thigh chafe as I followed him.

CHAPTER 2

XAVI

MY BROTHER GOT MARRIED, MY DAD GOT SOBER, AND JIM Sawyer was dead, so you'd think life would have gotten easier. Instead, we were swimming in debt from updating the shop, still playing catch-up from the time Maddox was in prison, and on top of that, life questions were coming at me all hard and nagging.

But on top of *all that*, I pulled my mom's hair back, trying not to gag at the smell of her vomiting on the front lawn.

"Get the fuck out," Maddox snarled at a bunch of Mom's drinking buddies. He held the door open for them and shoved a few out of the trailer. "Take your shit with you."

Mom heaved, and red-tinted bile splashed on the grass. The box of wine she drank came back out foamy, and I had to assume she was back on the pills. A subtle sense of dread washed through me. It wasn't anything different from the rest of our lives, but shit was finally going half-decent. I hadn't realized how comfortable I'd gotten in a life without as much dire stress until Mary called to say our dad was missing and our mom was making a scene.

"She good?" Maddox asked, all business. "Get her inside." He helped me heave her up and carry her inside. She smelled terrible and looked even worse, and sadness overcame me because it really sucked that progress wasn't linear.

"Where the hell is Dad?" I asked, holding her up while Maddox set down a few towels on her bed.

He looked at me, said nothing, and we came to the same conclusion. If Mom was back on the pills and getting drunk enough to make a scene, having all her wino buddies over like she used to, it probably meant that Dad had fallen off the wagon, too. We'd lived this dance a time or ten.

Throwing Mom on her bed, forcing her to stay on her side, and jamming pillows behind her back was the best we could do. Closing the door partway, we walked into the living room to take in the mess. Bottles, cans, and cigarette packs were everywhere, and just last week, when we'd been here for Friday night dinner, it was clean with candles burning and everything.

"What the hell happened?" Maddox asked. "They were fine last week."

I tried calling Dad, but he didn't pick up, and Mary said he wasn't in the office at the park's main building. I knew them getting back together was a bad idea. Dad had worked so hard to get clean and sober, and despite Mom measuring her wine and cutting down on the pills, she hadn't tried hard enough. She was who she was, and I hated that I spent so much of my life blaming my dad for everything. It was her. She was the downfall of their relationship and sobriety every damn time.

"I can't fucking be in here," he said, opening the front door.

I looked at the mess, the random wet spot on the couch, the filth that had built up in a single week, and turned my back on it. I couldn't handle looking at it. We'd gotten out. Made our own way. Broken free of the hold our parents had on us. But like most things in our lives, it'd all been a farce. Joke was on us for thinking we would just be taking care of ourselves from now on. No time for deep breaths in our lives.

"You go. I've got this."

"No," Maddox snapped.

"You did more than me growing up. It's my turn now."

He scoffed. "How the fuck do you figure that? You kept me alive. You think I'd be here if it wasn't for you?"

True, but Maddox did more to help out financially. I didn't have the motocross skills he had, or any real skills for that matter, so all his winnings had gone to either Dad or the trailer to keep the water hot and the lights on. Sure, I'd contributed a bit, but I fucked off a lot with Nate, too. My biggest failure in life? Not fully protecting Maddox from the responsibilities of our upbringing. I knew it wasn't possible, but I could have tried harder.

Maddox and Devon had finally gotten out of Garron Park. They broke free from Jim, our parents, and the responsibility of caring for Devon's mom. It was their time to be happy, and since I didn't have any big dreams or goals of my own, I figured it was my time to step up and give my brother the space and the freedom to be happy. It was my turn to shield him from the rest of it.

But as we sat on the front porch, I looked around the park and... missed it a bit. The community aspect. We were so isolated at the shop, and I kind of missed having people to rely on.

A random kid who looked just as dirty as we used to ran through someone's yard and yanked a blanket off the clothesline as he went by. He was ballsy enough not to even look over his shoulder to see if he'd been caught. Reminded me of Nate. Or Devon.

"Let's get out of here," Maddox said. "I don't wanna be around her."

"You go. I'll keep an eye on her."

"Xavi, come on. All she's gonna do is sleep and then get pissed at us for chasing off her friends. Not worth hanging around for." He stood.

"What if something happens to her?"

He breathed in through his nose, and on the exhale, he said, "Probably be better for all of us."

"Maddox. Jesus. She's an addict. Not a demon."

"Just because I said it doesn't mean I *want* something to happen, but I can't help *thinking* it."

To be honest, I'd had the same thought for years. Mom was a selfish person, or the alcoholism made her selfish, but either way, she didn't give a fuck how her life impacted ours. She never had. Never enough to change anything. I understood alcoholism and addiction were diseases, and I knew who she was, but Maddox was right. It was hard not to think it sometimes. Still loved her, but why were we looking after her our whole lives? No wonder I was still on the *maybe* fence about having a kid.

I stood up, ready to leave with him. She was our mom, yeah, but she wasn't our responsibility all the time. She was in bed, safe enough, and there wasn't much else we could do for her except get mad at the situation, so it was time to go. Maddox walked across the lawn and around to the driver's side of the truck. Just as we were about to get in, a taxi pulled up.

“Dad?”

Dad got out of the back seat and promised the driver he'd be right back with the money. He disappeared inside for a second, paid the guy, and then looked at us. But not as hard as we looked at him. He looked dusty and tired, but he wasn't sketchy. His pupils were normal, and he didn't have any tremors or shakes.

“She alive?” was the first thing he asked.

“In bed. Sick. Sleeping it off.” I stood beside my silent brother and waited for an explanation from Dad. He didn't owe us one, but once again, we took care of his wife while he was off... somewhere. And we made our own assumptions about where he was.

“She fucking ditched me!” he snapped, losing his temper on the lawn instead of on us. So, that was a good sign he wasn't drunk or high. “Told me to drive her to Redding because she wanted to get a burger at that place by the park, you know the one?” We both nodded. “Talked it up like some date night, then while I was out ordering, she stole the fucking car and left me there.”

No wonder he was dusty. If he had to hoof it back to Garron, it was a long stretch of dirt roads and no cell reception. No taxis would go out there either, so he probably had to wait until he got to town to borrow a phone and call for a ride back to the park.

“Took my fucking phone and wallet, too, so I couldn’t even pay for the food or a ride.”

Maddox radiated something beside me, but I figured it was aimed at our mom and not Dad. “Why the fuck are you with her?”

Dad stopped his pacing and *looked* at the two of us. That was his answer. Because we took care of her most of our lives, and now he was with her to take the burden off us. He knew he was a shitty dad and didn’t think it was too late to make up for it. I respected him for wanting to, but his sobriety was important, too. He might have loved her, but it seemed like most of that love was in the past or only focused on the sober version of her, and he stayed with her out of some obligation or duty.

“She’s going to make you relapse if you haven’t already,” Maddox said. “Don’t let her have that power over you.”

Dad clenched his teeth. “I’m stronger than that now.” He pulled out his sobriety chip. “No one will take that from me but myself.” The conviction in his voice made me believe it.

“You don’t owe her anything,” I told him.

“Maybe not, but I owe you two everything,” Dad said. “Get out of here. I’ll deal with her. I still love her.”

“Come with us,” Maddox said. “Come for a swim at our place or something.”

“I’m tired, boys.” Dad’s sigh was sad. Tired. Worn out and beaten down.

“Fine. We have a couch.” Maddox pushed Dad towards his truck. “Get in. She’s fine.”

I knew he’d never leave her for good, and I didn’t know how I felt about that, but for one day, he could come spend the

afternoon with us instead of worrying about her or getting mad at her. He'd earned that. He'd go back later and all would be fine.



MADDOX ROLLED HIS ASSHOLE EYES AT ME.

He wasn't a huge talker, but I'd been expecting a little more than that. A grunt, even. "That's it? An eye roll?" I threw my arms wide, waiting for him to talk me off the ledge and stop treating me like I was a loser.

"What do you want me to say, Xav? Want me to call you a lame piece of shit? You are. Want me to beat some sense into you? Give me ten to finish this step and I will." He tossed a rotten board at me, damn near taking out my kneecaps. "Who fucking cares, man?"

"Me! I care!"

"Because you think Nate blames you for shit going wrong with Kaylee? Or is this the hypothetical kid thing again?" He held out his hand, so I passed him the new board for the step.

No, but we'd been messing things up for a long time, and I'd started to think our groove was off or something. We had that mind-reading kind of friendship, and I'd been struggling to read him lately. It put me off that our vibe was off, and my whole life felt out of sorts because of it. We barely even made it to the orgasm stage of our hookups anymore, and that shit was on us, right?

"Because I fucked things up with Kaylee. And I bet Andrea would have taken him seriously if I wasn't there." Okay, so maybe Nate didn't blame me, but I felt guilty about it. Apparently.

Maddox glared at me. He told me to say it straight, and then he glared at me for it? My god, I needed a better emotional sounding board. "Well, fucking excuse me for not being cool with the Andrea thing. Can't even believe you guys

tried that.” He cringed. Hard. “And Kaylee was a lost cause right from the get-go.”

“What? Why?”

“You seriously think Nate liked her? Pay attention, Xavi. He was in it for *you*.”

“What?” I shouted. “He was—”

He drowned me out by nailing the new board, so I grabbed a stick and threw it for Gnat, his dog. Maddox was in a pissy mood after Dad admitted that Mom had been slipping a lot lately, but she didn’t want us to know because she still wanted us to come for Friday dinners. So, I let him hammer nails to work off that frustration and sank down on a lawn chair to huff and puff my confusion in the hope that it’d leave my body and clarify some things for me.

I should have known better than to come to Maddox for advice. He was fine at giving it before, but that was mostly when he was warning me away from Nate’s dick. Now I didn’t want to listen to that part. I wanted him to tell me the opposite, but he wasn’t taking the bait. He was throwing feelings at me, claiming things that weren’t true, and making it sound like Nate was only being a good friend to help get me laid.

Besides, Maddox didn’t know what he was talking about. He got the shit beaten out of him by his rival, beat him back, they hate fucked each other, and somehow ended up married. Our situations were so different. He had no idea what it felt like to struggle through... whatever the fuck I was struggling through.

Gnat brought the stick back, panting hard, so I threw it into the water and gave him an ice cube to lick when he returned. I’d never felt more dishevelled in my life. Didn’t even know exactly why I was all out of sorts. It had something to do with people insisting I was on some chronological clock that was ticking down time, reminding me I was a thirty-year-old fuck up with no aspirations, none of my shit together, and no goddamn idea what I wanted out of life.

It had always been me and Nate looking out for our brothers. Since they got their shit sorted, it was me and Nate, living life and finding a new balance. Now I resented the societal standard that felt like it was pressuring me to pick something other than him.

Like... how? How the actual fuck could I pick anything over him?

Maddox cracked a can of beer since Devon wasn't home and Dad was napping inside, then sank down on the chair beside me and rested his heels on Gnat's ass. I didn't know how to start a conversation because I couldn't think clearly, and he'd always been the silent type, so we sat there like idiots for a bit. I got lost in my head, which wasn't something I was familiar with. I wasn't the overthinking type. Usually, something just occurred to me, I had a random freakout about it, and that was that.

Now my freakout was in standby mode because it was all jumbled up with insecurities, confusion, and risks. What sort of life did I want to take a risk on? Was I happy with how things were, or did I have to conform to some standard progression chart?

"You know why shit didn't work with Kaylee?" Maddox asked after a bit. "We aren't even touching the Andrea thing because that was just... fuck no."

Maddox and Devon saw Andrea as the person they went to for help. We saw her that way, too. But booze and stress and fear about missing my brother had played a weird role that night, and propositioning her led to all this overthinking.

"Enlighten me. Since you're all wise and married now."

Maddox grinned, proud. "Look, you were on the inside of that relationship, and once we knew about it, we saw shit differently from the outside."

"Like?"

"Nate was so checked out of that whole thing that he barely wanted to spend time with her." Maddox shrugged. "He told Devon."

“What?” I shouted for the third time, making Gnat bark his big ol’ bark.

“The only reason that worked for so long was because you two were doing it for each other. Neither of you wanted to end things because it meant you’d have to stop hooking up together consistently. It was an easy way for you two idiots to be around each other sexually.” He looked at me. “Yeah, I remember your sliding scale gay confession.”

If I had the skin tone to blush, I would have.

“I’m just saying, if you firmly believe you’re not into Nate, go hook up with someone. By yourself.”

Ew. No. Weird now. I must’ve grimaced.

“Exactly. You want him.”

“No. No, I can’t want him! It can’t happen.”

“Why not?”

“Because our brothers are married.” There. Boom. Big reason.

“Yeah, because marriage somehow makes it incest, right? Good try.”

Fuck him for being level-headed. The main reason was because... he was straight. Wasn’t he? Wasn’t I? No. Wait. The biggest reason was because he was the only person in my life I never wanted to lose. Sex screwed things up more often than not, and I wasn’t willing to mess up anything with Nate.

“Keep going. Lay all your excuses on me.” He waved his hand as a signal for me to start prattling shit off.

Okay. “I’m straight.”

“Hetero.”

“Yeah, that.”

“Debatable. What else?”

“He’s hetero. He wanted Kaylee. Then he wanted Andrea. He wants all these chicks we find to hook up with.”

Maddox grinned like he knew something. “You know why he’s into them. Admit it. You know he’s doing it for you, right?”

“I don’t need his help to get laid!” I shouted.

“No. Not for that. *For you*. Like... to be *with you*. To be there.” Maddox looked at me. “And even if you won’t admit it, you’re doing it for the same reason. It’s why you guys keep fucking it all up lately.”

I huffed out a deep breath and broke the arm off the chair with my flailing. Gnat got up, so I threw the arm of the chair for him instead of the stick. “I fucking hate you like this. All calm and noble. What happened to you being angry all the time?”

“Hate sex and a husband to take it out on,” he deadpanned.

“So, what? I’m where you were? I’m just supposed to trip and see if my dick lands up his ass?”

Maddox laughed. “Fuck no. You aren’t me. You and Nate don’t hate each other like we did, and you actually know how to talk without fighting. So, go do that. With him. Not me.”

“I can’t! What the hell would I even say? Like, ‘hey, bud, turns out I might sorta want you but I have no idea what that means. Hope our friendship survives. You in?’ No. I can’t say that shit. There’s too much to risk.”

“Sorry ‘bout your luck, Xav. But you’re hooked on a Sawyer. Fucking sucks. But welcome to the club.” Maddox grinned at me.

Well, he got married to his Sawyer, so it didn’t suck too bad. When Gnat came back, shaking off and soaking my shirt, I threw the chair arm right at Maddox and didn’t even hang around to help him up when Gnat mauled him.

I had thoughts to lubricate and lure out of my head.



A FEW DAYS LATER, I STARED AT TWO DIFFERENT BOTTLES OF rum. One was half the price and bigger than the other, but my head already ached at the type of hangover it'd give me. The other would require me to pull three whole bills from my wallet, and my echoey bill flap didn't like the sounds of that. Which thinking juice would get the job done?

I fucking sucked at decisions.

“Xavi?”

Shit. “Heyyyyy.” *Goddammit, I'm an awkward son of a gun.* “How are you?” I hugged Andrea back when she pulled me into one of those side bro-tap things. I tripped over my slides and steadied myself on a shelf of Caribbean rums I couldn't afford.

Andrea had literally never done anything to make me feel like a loser, but she denied us, so I felt like one anyway.

She grabbed the cheap bottle of rum. “If you mix this with Coke, add a bit of water to each one. Keeps you hydrated and the hangover isn't as bad.”

I took it from her, and my wallet sighed. “Thanks.”

She smiled, but that was about all there was to it, so I nodded and stood in line. It was Friday, the second week of the month, disability cheque day, welfare cheque day, a full moon, baby bonus day, and hot as balls outside, so the line was long.

I tried not to be awkward, because yeah, Andrea stood right behind me in line, smirking at me being a fucking weirdo. “Soooo, how's things?”

“Oh, piss off with that. We're still friends.”

“So, we're just letting it go that we tried to get in your pants and you made us pull ours up instead?”

“Yes.” No room for negotiation. “What're you and Nate up to tonight?” she asked.

Hopefully, we'd be getting drunk and chatting about my predicament, but in all likelihood, I'd end up getting too drunk and passing out on the couch while I faded in and out of *Teen Wolf*. Such a fun Friday night. God, we were lame.

"The usual." *Seriously? Had I always been this pathetic?*

"Did he talk to you about everything? You guys worked it out?"

I looked at her as we shuffled forward. "Worked what out?"

"The reason things didn't work out with... *oh.*" Her shoulders dropped. "He never talked to you about it, did he?"

"What? The kid thing? Kaylee?" My mind wasn't firing on all cylinders, so I'd need her to spell it out for me.

"No. Not the kid thing. Sorry. I thought he told you." She nodded forward, so I stepped ahead.

"Told me what?"

"I'm not getting in the middle of it. I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sorry for that." Andrea gave me one of those sympathetic smiles that pissed me off because it meant I was on the outside of insider information. It made me wanna punch her in the tit because no one knew shit about Nate that I didn't! *No one!*

But I couldn't titty-punch her because she was a kind-as-hell lady who just wanted me to succeed in life. Goddamn her.

"Just talk to him, Xav."

Yeah, I planned on it. I paid for my shitty rum, headed next door for a few bottles of Coke, and went home with all my questions and insecurities and jealousy.

Time for some fucking shop talk, Nate.

CHAPTER 3

NATE

XAVI WAS MORE OF A FUN DRUNK, SO IT WAS SUSPISH WHEN HE pounded down water/Coke/rum mixes with a scowl on his face. My boy was the smiling type or the blank-faced type, not really the brooding type, so I stared at him, wondering what the hell was going on. Xavi wasn't an extrovert, but around me, he was a chatterbox who told cheesy jokes and man-giggled; it'd been a long time since I witnessed this level of moodiness.

"You better vent before you blow up, Xav," I mocked him while he made another drink. "Madd's the pissy one in your family. Sorry, role's taken."

"Fuck you, Nate."

I pressed my lips together to hold in a laugh. We weren't the 'fuck you' kind of friends, and he sucked at it almost as much as he sucked at death threats. When his loose bracelets got in the way of him pouring rum, he swore at them and sucked the alcohol from the filthy fabric.

I couldn't help it. A bark of laughter busted through my pinched lips.

"What?!" he snapped, flinging an empty bottle of Coke at me. It bounced off the hoist and clattered to the cement floor. "I'm pissed!"

"At what?" I laughed. "Pissed looks funny on you, bud."

"At you!" he shouted. He grabbed his drink off the reception desk and headed out back to the dock behind our

apartment. The lime green slides he wore with duct tape on the left one really set the scene, too.

For fuck's sake. What had I done to piss him off? I couldn't remember the last time he was mad at me. It might have been in high school when we fought over hours at the same part-time job, but other than some friction, it wasn't a real fight. There was that other time when my dad fought his dad and we both felt like shit about it, so we stopped talking for a few days. Still hung out, though. Even the war between our brothers never made us fight because they bred that feud all on their own. But this? This was something new, and I had no idea where it was coming from. Short of him finding a semi-nudie of him that I sort of saved on my phone, I couldn't come up with anything. Pretty sure he knew about the nudie, anyway.

"Where are your smokes?" he shouted from the apartment.

"You hate smoking!"

"Nathan Neegan!"

Oh. The misspelled middle name didn't come out often. I smiled at that, grabbed my pack of smokes off the reception desk, and followed him through the apartment. I swapped my pants for swim shorts on the way through, made myself a drink, and headed out back.

It was devil's taint hot out, so I found Xavi on the edge of the dock, shirtless, tanned and marred, with his feet dangling in the water and his drink to his lips. I held out the cigarettes as a peace offering, and he ripped them from my hand, angrily trying to light one. But my lighter was mostly dead, and the wind was fucking with his brood. I cupped my hands around the tip to help him out.

I laughed again.

"What?" He glared.

"I'm just... what the hell is this, Xav?"

"Take me seriously," he begged quietly. "I know I don't get mad much, but don't treat me like a joke the same way

everyone else does.”

That sobered me. I’d never want to treat him like a joke. “Okay. Sorry. Tell me what’s up. I’m listening.”

He huffed, taking a drag and hating himself for it. He wasn’t a smoker, but it must have fit his rage vibe. “I forget how to be mad at you. Give me a minute to get into character.”

“Take your time.” I took a sip and slid on my sunglasses to hide my eyes. My mom used to say all my thoughts showed through my eyes, and since I barely knew what I was thinking most of the time, I wore the sunglasses so no one else clued in before I did. “Tell me what I did to piss you off. Might help you get into the role.”

“I ran into Andrea at the store.”

“And?” I hadn’t said shit to Andrea about anything to do with Xavi lately, so what sort of thoughts did she put in his head?

“She said...” He took a long drag and coughed, handing it to me. “She said you needed to tell me something.”

Shit. My face got hot and I snugged up the sunglasses to keep my secrets locked in. When Xavi looked at me, there was betrayal in his eyes. Guilt weighed my stomach down, but how the hell was I supposed to tell him what she meant?

“What’d she mean, Nate? Since when do we have secrets?” He shook his head. “I wanted to punch her in the tit for knowing something about you that I didn’t.”

“Don’t hit her.”

“I couldn’t. She’s too nice.” He bumped his knee to mine. “What’d she mean?”

I looked at our thighs. His were thicker and more tanned. Guy had the nicest thighs, and my legs had always been my biggest physical insecurity. No matter how many lunges and squats and fuck-thrusts I did, they never bulked up. “It was probably just about the life phases thing.”

“You suck at lying. Even with shades on.”

“You suck at being ragey.”

“I know. But let me have it for a minute.”

I looked up at the blue sky. “She thought she caught something about me. That maybe I didn’t wanna hook up with her that night.”

Xavi hit me. It wasn’t a punch, but it was a firm smack right upside my head. “What the actual fuck, Nate? You let me lead that mess of a night in my drunken state and didn’t even chime in to say you didn’t want it?”

“I told you she was our mother figure! Then when she made us talk about life, I let her go for it because I thought it was what you needed. The whole kid chat.”

Xavi set down his drink and splashed into the water, disappearing for a moment alone. He did that. Ran in the Kane family. They liked to use the water as a stalling tactic to muffle the world and shut everything off.

I was almost grateful he did it because I was the one who needed to settle down and regroup. If Andrea told him I had something to tell him, it was the whole ‘me wanting him and being obvious enough about it that she caught on’ thing. Perceptive bitch. Shit, she was the furthest thing from a bitch.

I wasn’t ready to admit that to Xavi yet. Not because I didn’t trust him, but because I was afraid. Really afraid. Devon gave me all this advice about being careful to protect our friendship, and I kept telling him that our friendship was solid, but I didn’t know how deeply I believed myself about that. Yeah, our friendship was a tanker of a thing, and so far, nothing had penetrated it. But what if I blew us up from the inside by admitting something that would completely shift our dynamic? I’d handled a lot of rejection in my life, but I didn’t know if I’d survive his rejection.

When he surfaced, shaking his dark hair, I tried not to watch the water droplets drip down his chest. Since when did I find him so goddamn attractive? It just came at me all aggressive and complicated, and I hadn’t been able to sort it out since.

Xavi swam over to me, reaching for his drink. “Madd said you weren’t even that into Kaylee. Is he right?”

I pressed my foot to his chest and kicked him away, but he laughed and splashed me, so at least he was back to his happy-drunk ways. I hated feet, so I made mine disappear underwater again. “I did at the beginning, but then, I dunno, man. I just wasn’t really feeling it. Like it was all hot and awesome until she wanted... more.” More than I was willing to give her, but what I wished I could have with Xavi. *Ugh, nervous sweating.* I pushed up my sunglasses again.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you were into her! And I’m into this.” I motioned between us.

“Neegs, I love you, and you’re my best friend, but fucking spell it out for me because I’m too drunk to know what you mean.”

I laughed. “This. Us. The hookup shit we’ve got going on. I wanted to stay with you... uh, with her and you. I didn’t want to go out and have to pick up on my own again.” Terrible reason, but there it was.

Xavi looked away, buying himself time with a drink.

“What’s that for?” I asked, nodding at him. “Moody to shy in one evening? I’ve never seen these sides of you!”

He scoffed while climbing out to sit next to me. All that dripping water was mesmerizing. All. The. Dripping. Water. “I dunno. I just got a flash of something when you said that.”

“Xavi, I love you, and you’re my best friend, but stop being cryptic as fuck.” I smirked. “A flash of something?”

“Jealousy, you know?” he barked at me, adding a laugh. “Like, of you going off on your own. I’m in this with you, and it’d kill me if you left me now. That’s why I made the death threat the other night.”

I smiled because I loved that he wanted me there. “Yeah, that was funny.”

“Not funny! I’m serious.” He pouted out his lip. “Can I add pouty to my new personalities?”

Uh, hard yes. *Do not get a hard dick.* “You really wanna keep this going even though we fuck it up every time now?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I do. But it’s also on my mind that we’re getting older, you know? We can’t do this shit forever. Hence the thinking juice.” He held up his rum. “What are we even doing with our lives?”

“Living them.” I put out my smoke and dropped the butt into an empty cup. I’d never had a problem with how we lived our lives until recently. Still didn’t know if I had an issue or if I was just feeding off some outside force making me think I needed to change my lifestyle. Xavi was the outside force because he was the one thinking about it, making me consider it. “What do you want?”

“Out of life?” he asked. I nodded. “To be happy. That’s about it. Is that enough?”

“Hell yeah, it is. Fuck anyone who says otherwise. What makes you happy?”

“You.” He laughed. “The shop... mostly. Wasn’t my dream or anything, but I like it well enough, I think. Most of the time. Our brothers. Sometimes my parents. Just us and the shit we do together. Knowing you always have my back and I have yours. You know?”

Fucking loved that. “Yeah, Xav. I’m the same, minus the parents. What about a kid?”

He groaned. “I dunno. Probably not, but you never know. It’s like, I want the kid but not the mom.” He chuckled. “I don’t even fully want the kid. I just wanna be important to someone, but I can’t think of anyone I’d trust to do it with. Like, who the actual fuck could I trust more than you? I don’t even trust my own brother as much as I trust you.” He looked at me. “You know?”

“You know? You know? You know?” I mocked him for tacking that on the end of every sentence. “Well, you better

find a kid at the pound then, bud. Probably a fuck ton of angry teens who need someone important.”

“See?” He nodded. “Now that’s something I could do. I’d take in a stray kid. Fuck knows we were almost strays, so it’d be like paying it forward. Kids need homes. We have... oh, well, we don’t really have a home, but I could find a home and bring a kid there! Or at least have a door a kid could knock on.”

I believed in him.

“Let’s adopt a teen, Nate.”

“You are a teen,” I scoffed.

“Your balls sag,” he countered.

“They do not.”

“The left nut does.”

“Good to know you pay that much attention to my balls, Xav.”

He laughed. “But I could pull my shit together for an angry teen. They’d tell me I’m a piece of shit, I’d agree with them, and we’d bond over it. Match made in fucked-up heaven. Kinda like us.”

If he wanted a pissy teen, I’d help him get one. At least he had a half-assed vision of his future.

“Ugh,” he groaned, looking at me as he finished his drink. “Confessional?”

“Hit me with it.”

“I don’t think I want a kid.” He grimaced. “I think, deep down, in my non-way of thinking but sometimes knowing, I figured it’d make me sound more legit. More serious. Like I was maturing.”

I pushed him straight off the dock and jumped in after him. We sank to the bottom, and when the water bubbles slithered up my ass crack, I shivered with delight.

“You dick!” I laughed at him. “You faked a maybe-kid to sound grown up? That’s the opposite of grown up! And you lied to me about it? Fuck, you suck at being mad, Xavi. You just got all moody about me keeping something to myself when you did the same thing.”

“How is that the same thing?” He shoved my chest and I sank, drinking half the ocean.

“I faked being in a relationship with Kaylee and you faked wanting a hypothetical kid!” I coughed right in his face. “Dick!”

Xavi smiled wide, and holy shit, it was captivating. I wasn’t typically the kind of guy to use words like captivating, but I got stuck staring at the way he beamed. The sunset didn’t have shit on him.

“Can we just agree that we twin hard sometimes? No more secrets, okay?”

One secret, but maybe it didn’t matter. Hopefully, with time, I’d get over this crush thing, move on, and no longer be riddled with half-boners whenever he was around. I didn’t put much faith in anything, but I put all my faith in Xavi. No matter what happened in our lives, I had a gut feeling that we’d always be okay. Maybe I’d just caught a bit of the gay bug in the family. They said sexualities were fluid, so I had to be in my gay fluidity stage, right? Or maybe Devon was right when he said the Kane boys had super dicks, because for whatever reason lately, Xavi’s made my mouth water.

We swam to the dock and held on, floating and chatting. “You wanna know my big life goal?” he asked.

“Tell me.”

“I want a fridge with an ice machine and a water dispenser in the door, you know? That’s what I want. If I can get one of those, I’ll feel like I won the lottery.”

He wasn’t even joking. That was his big dream and I loved him for it. “Love it when you set big goals, Xav.” I grinned, already conjuring ways to help him get his fridge.

“Come on.” He pulled himself up onto the dock. “We’re going to my mom’s for a bullshit dinner. We can eat on the way.”

I watched him climb out, and my mouth got conflicted about watering. His body made it salivate, but the mention of his mom’s casseroles made me want to gag. It was damn near eight, so we were late for dinner, but he probably planned it that way. Plus, he was still mad at her from last week.

“You aren’t driving!” I warned him, even though I hated night driving.

“Then hurry up! You drive like you have a saggy left nut and no night vision.”

I couldn’t hurry up. I needed to think more about terrible dinners because I had a situation in my swim shorts I couldn’t explain away.

CHAPTER 4

XAVI

I TRIED TO BE LATE ENOUGH TO MISS DINNER, BUT MOM HAD waited. She seemed better, but in true fashion, she pretended like the whole thing had never happened. She made her shitty dinner, had us all over, and kept on deluding herself into thinking she was a good mom. She wasn't. She wasn't the worst, but I'd checked out of expecting things from her a long time ago.

Too bad all I could picture was her vomiting on the front lawn and smelling like a smoky distillery. Could barely even look at her.

I watched Nate and Maddox feed their dinner to Gnat under the table. Dad ate his with a grimace, and I tried to move mine around my plate so it looked like I ate more. I tried tapping my thigh to call Gnat over, but he was already being well fed. Devon, the crazy bastard, ate it like it was KFC. Jesus.

"It's part of being an adult, honey," Mom told Maddox. Like she had any idea. She had a tetra pack of wine with a spout hanging off the edge of the table, and her purple plastic cup with a cat on it that said 'don't stress meowt' kept going down for refills. What'd she know about being an adult? She fucked up more than all of us.

"It's goddamn criminal," Maddox scoffed, not looking at her either.

If I had to listen to him bitch about paying house insurance one more time, I'd sic Devon on him. Luckily for me, Devon

was already in the process of shutting him up. His hand disappeared under the table, and from where I sat, I caught a glimpse of him giving Maddox's dick a squeeze through his shorts. Didn't need to see it, so I shifted closer to Nate.

"How's the farm, Madd?" I grinned, interrupting his dinnertime handie.

"What? Yeah." He leaned forward, blocking his lap. "What?"

Nate grinned at me, knowing what was going on. If we hadn't meddled, they'd still be out for blood. We'd toasted—and continued to toast—many drinks to that monumental accomplishment.

"He bitches non-stop," Devon answered for him. "But says he loves it. How're your broken hearts?" he fired the question at me and Nate.

I clutched my chest in fake heartbreak, and Nate leaned in to kiss my cheek. "My poor heart."

"He watches *Teen Wolf* to cope," Nate said.

We finally had internet at the shop, and we bought one of those Firestick things at a yard sale for six bucks. By some stroke of luck, it'd still been logged into all the streaming apps of whoever previously owned it, so we'd ride that free pony until it died. Still, I didn't watch *Teen Wolf*. Even if Stiles was my favourite. Scott and Stiles were our bestie spirit animals... but I thought we might both be Stiles.

Gnat, having given up on Devon and Maddox, finally bumped his nose against my knee, so I fed him the rest of my dinner, helped Dad clean up, and then sat out front with my brother. We didn't grow up in this trailer, but I liked it for my parents. It came with Dad's new job as Park Manager, and now a really nice and respectable family of moonshine makers lived in our old place. Seemed full circle. And they competed with the crotchety old bastard, who was the resident moonshiner.

Mom was slowly reverting to the same as she'd always been, and as much as I hated to admit it, I resented her for it.

Dad had worked so hard to get sober and become a better person, and even though he chose to get back with Mom, he spent a lot of time taking care of her for our benefit. She needed to step up for once in her life. Loved her, but she didn't give a shit about the burden she was to those who cared about her. People were who they were, and that was fine, but my mom was a selfish person who tried to make up for it by feeding us shitty casseroles. Balance, I guessed.

“Boxers sticky?” I asked my brother, fiddling with a pack of gum I constantly carried around for Nate, who was trying but failing to quit smoking.

Maddox huffed. “Fuck no. I’ve learned a lot of tricks over the years. Like how not to get cum on my boxers at the table.”

“How?” I wanted to know. Never knew when that might come in handy. For a literal handie.

He ignored me. “You talk to Nate?”

“Yeah.”

“Liar.”

I groaned. “It’s harder than you think!”

The fucked-up part was that I’d never struggled to talk to Nate about anything. I once got a titanium cock ring stuck on my dick and had no trouble telling him. Even when we went to the emergency room and they confessed that their tools wouldn’t cut through titanium, so they had to call the fire department, I didn’t feel embarrassed. I mean, yeah, with the hospital staff and the whole fucking Garron Fire Department, I was mortified, but not with Nate. He kept me distracted, laughing, and in good spirits the entire time the goddamn tiny jaws of life cut a ring off my cock with about thirty nurses and doctors watching. He didn’t even call me out for not being able to get soft enough to pull it off; we blamed it on restricted blood flow and didn’t mention it any more than that. He put a bandage on the little nick they gave me and took a selfie with my dick. He smiled so wide and had his thumb up, which made my dick look big, *so thanks for that, bud*, but there were

people in the background laughing at us—maybe with us? It'd always been hard to tell.

But talking about this weird way we'd gone about dating and possibly wanting to change it? Yeah, that shit was harder than the cock ring incident of 2020.

"I guess we'll just keep going how we're going." I shrugged, pocketing the gum.

"Yeah, good luck with that," Maddox baited me, but I wasn't going to take it. We'd figure it out eventually.

Okay, fine. I was totally taking his bait. "What's that mean?"

"That you'll both be miserable about it, but by all means, keep it going." He laughed, and it sure as shit sounded condescending, but not in the same way everyone else made us feel shitty about ourselves. It was like Maddox was on our team, but knew we weren't playing the right game. "I made a bet with Devon. We give you two another month before you blow up."

"Blow up how?"

Maddox just grinned. "Go talk to him about this shit, Xav. Not me."

"Yeah, I tried that. I ended up getting buzzed on cheap rum and coming here."

"Try harder."

Fine. He was right. Hated when he was right. "Nate!" I shouted through the open front door. "Let's go! We're getting drunk and chatting!"

"Then *Teen Wolf*?" he shouted from inside.

"Hurry up before my buzz completely fades!" I shouted back, then to Maddox, I added, "That loser is obsessed with teen werewolf dramas."

Maddox smirked, but then he eyed me with a challenge. "You think that's how you wrangle a Sawyer? Watch this." He

banged on the doorframe and Devon looked at him from the table. In a gravelly tone, he said, “Flip fuck?”

Devon was out and in the truck with Gnat in under thirty seconds. Maddox gloated. “Try it with Nate. Might make the werewolf shows more fun.” He laughed, getting up and sauntering off to take Devon home. That smug fuck.

Nate walked out a minute later. “What happened? Never seen Devon move so fast.”

I stood up, an inch or so taller than him, got right in his face, and said, “Flip fuck?”

Nate swallowed.

“Wait. That wasn’t the right tone.” I cleared my throat and tried to harness that same level of gravel as my brother. “Flip fuck?”

“Hell yes. Let’s go.” He smirked, and goddamn my dick for liking that.



I HAD NO IDEA WHERE THE CHAT GOT OFF TO, BUT ONE RUM turned into a lot of rums, and then we were half naked at Kaylee’s. How did we end up here, and why did I hate it? This felt like moving backwards, and to be fucking straight with ya, I didn’t appreciate her lips on his neck.

I glared. Nate watched me over her shoulder. When my eyes shifted to the hand he had on her ass, my glare must have intensified because he dropped it to the arm of the chair and kept watching me.

Why the hell couldn’t I look away, and why was I so mad? Sex had always been a fun thing, and here I was, ruining it by being... possessive? *God, Xavi! Get your shit together.*

“Xavi,” Kaylee moaned, calling me over.

I snapped out of my mood and walked over to them. She was on his lap, her back to me, so I leaned down to kiss her

neck. *Eyes. On. Nate.* When my hand reached for her chest, Nate's fingers viced around my wrist, tangling in my many hemp bracelets, and pulled my arm away.

I glared.

He glared.

What the fuck was happening?

"God, guys," Kaylee complained. "This is so fucking typical." She climbed off his lap and scoffed at both of us. "I don't even know why I bother. You're both fucking cowards."

I was in the middle of being offended by her, once again treating us like immature assholes, when Nate did something that turned my hurt feelings into something more diabolical. He grabbed Kaylee's wrist, pulled her back onto his lap, and fisted a hand in her hair as he made out with her. When he tugged on her hair to angle her head, he opened his eyes and stared right the fuck at me.

Was it a challenge?

This game had never been about competing with each other, and now I didn't know what to do with all these feelings! Grumpy ones. Jealous ones. *Possessive* ones.

Kaylee moaned, finally getting the attention she deserved. Back in this thing, she reached for me, and her hand landed right on my cock. She rubbed me through my boxers, and I glanced down to watch her work me up, and then got even more worked up when Nate growled.

Nate. Growled.

He grabbed her hand and pulled it away from my dick, so I grabbed her body and pulled her off his lap. Kaylee was happy we were fighting over her, but I'd stopped thinking this was a race to get her off. No, this was a fight to stake a claim, but I wasn't even sure what we were claiming.

Nate stood, Kaylee's body between us, but our eyes were only on each other. Taunting me, he leaned down to kiss her shoulder, his hands wandering while his eyes stayed on mine. So I picked her up and wrapped her legs around my hips,

taunting him right back. When his mouth went for her neck again, I beat him to it and our foreheads brushed.

A goddamn fire burned in my skin, and I had no idea when my dick had gone from a semi to a hard-on. Did she do that with her hand, or did he do that with his bluntness?

A tug-of-war style fight carried on, but when it became clear we were both holding back, not making a single move to actually fuck her, she got fed up again.

Then the tension between me and Nate died as she fed into our insecurities.

“Fucking children,” Kaylee scoffed, wrapping herself in a robe. “Everything is just a game to you. Take something seriously for once!”

“Like a drunken hookup?” Nate scoffed, already grabbing his pants.

“Yes! You wanna fuck me or you wanna fuck each other?! Get out. I’m sick of you two and your bullshit. No wonder you can’t move forward in life when you’re so obsessed with each other. Grow the fuck up.”

“Yeah, we’re fucking losers, right? At least we know what loyalty is.” Nate picked up the rest of his clothes and left, completely pissed off.

“Loyalty?” Kaylee scoffed. “To each other, maybe. You treat everyone else like shit and then wonder why you’re both the butt of all jokes.”

Simmering in anger, I started getting dressed, wanting to follow him to make sure he was alright, but Kaylee grabbed my arm with an apologetic look on her face.

“Look, I’m sorry. You guys are great, but I don’t think you understand what a relationship is.”

“Thought this was a hookup? Didn’t you already break up with us?” I pulled my shirt on.

“Yeah, because you two won’t let it be anything more. You never do. You hold everyone at arm’s length because you can’t

fathom the thought of leaving each other. It's weird, and honestly, I'm getting sick of it. Everyone is getting sick of it."

It was no one else's business, and I hated that we were talked about like that.

I thought she left our asses because we weren't taking life seriously enough. I thought I disliked her because she made me feel pathetic for maybe wanting a kid. What were we even doing here? The sad part was, everything Maddox said came back to me. We were in it as an excuse to get close to each other. Kaylee didn't even matter, and that made us assholes, but assholes who were too afraid to admit the truth.

I slipped my feet into my slides. "Well, there won't be a next time. This is clearly done. But if you ever make him feel like shit about himself like that again..." Murderous rage that didn't come out too often riddled me, and I didn't hate the way it felt.

"Oh my god, Xavi. I tried dating you two for a year! It's not my fault you're stuck as teens and don't want to grow up. Get out."

"Gladly." I grabbed the hat Nate forgot and left her trailer just as Nate ran out of Old Man Hank's shed with a stolen bottle of something.

He beamed at me, the mood of the night doing a one-eighty yet again. "I got—"

Bang! "Get the fuck off my property!" *Bang!* "You shits better run!" *Bang!*

Oh, we ran. We ran like the motherfucking wind. Ain't nobody want a shotgun shell in the ass after a tiny chick already handed you yours.

It was a long walk back to the shop from Garron Park, and by the time we found ourselves swaying down a dirt road, half the bottle of moonshine was gone.

The hat Nate wore must have come from the business welcome packet we got because it had 'Garron Township' on the front. He pushed the brim up high on his forehead, his dark blond hair sticking out the front. I liked the way it looked, and

he caught me staring. But he was either too drunk to notice, or he was still stuck on what Kaylee said. He was also squinting because his night vision was shit. Pretty sure the guy needed glasses, but he'd never had his eyes checked.

“Are we jokes, Xavi?” He walked at an angle, and I tugged on his shirt to keep him out of the ditch. “I feel like the punchline to a joke I don't get.”

Guess we were ignoring that whole staring contest thing we had back there. “Probably,” I admitted. “Never really cared before.”

“You do now?”

“Well, I'm kinda getting fucking sick of hearing it so much. I'm starting to believe it.” I took a pull from the bottle. This moonshine was shit, but I didn't regret it. I already had a weird concoction of shitty alcohol in my stomach, so what was one more? “She treated us like kids. Like scum.”

“Yes!” Nate shouted. “She fucking mommed us.”

I laughed. Okay, wait. I giggled. A straight up man-giggle. I covered my mouth because I felt so ridiculous about it, and then I studied the green bottle, wondering what the fuck this brew was.

“It's like she got annoyed at herself for hooking up with us.”

“Yeah, and she's not the only one. We're... something is different, right?” I stumbled along with Nate at my side, and if that wasn't a metaphor for our life, I didn't know what was.

“Yeah,” he admitted with a blush, stealing the bottle from me. Okay, man-giggles and blushing? What the fuck was going on?

I tugged him to a stop. “What happened back there?”

“She kicked us out.”

“Before that.” I met his blue eyes, all glossy and big in the moonlight. “We're drunk enough to talk about it.”

He pulled his hat down, pushed it back up, and then sighed. “I... it fucking bugged me when you touched her.”

My stomach flapped around all obnoxiously. “Why?”

He looked at my hand, still gripping his arm and then met my eyes. “Andrea thinks I have a thing for you. That’s why she thinks I have to tell you something, Xavi. But that can’t be it, right? She’s just sensing our friendship.”

Our friendship? We’d never once been accused of having a thing for each other, and we did a lot of shit to suggest that we did. We shared a bed all the damn time, never spent much time apart, did everything together, and lived in a one-bedroom shitty apartment that used to be a staff room. Two mattresses pushed close together on the floor because we couldn’t fit a bedframe down the narrow hallway. Why were people seeing something different now? Andrea, Maddox, Devon, Kaylee, and who knew who else. Maybe even me.

“Do you?” I asked, brave because of moonshine.

“Do you think Stiles and Derek Hale will get together?”

“Stop deflecting.”

Nate stepped closer to me, our chests brushing. “I don’t fucking know, Xavi. I don’t know what’s going on in my head, and you’re the one I’d usually talk to about it, but now I can’t because we’ve got a literal lifelong friendship on the line, and I don’t want to fuck that up.”

“Right,” I agreed, even though I didn’t want to. “Our friendship.”

“Yeah.” He looked dejected, and I hated that. “It’s probably just this threesome shit, right? We should stop it. See if it goes away without the temptation there.”

Now I felt rejected. “Right,” I said again, because what the fuck else was there to say? “It’ll probably go away if we stop.”

Except his chest was against mine and I wanted him even closer, and his face was right in front of me, and I wanted to lean into it. I liked the way his hair stuck out the front of his

hat, and my hand itched to touch it. It was longer than usual, and yeah... it looked like a nice fistful.

When he exhaled, he closed his eyes and took a step back.
Fuck.

We walked in silence for a bit. The only sound came from the booze sloshing around in our stomachs and the bugs in the weeds. My mind was too lubed to think clearly because one part of me wanted to grab Nate and kiss him just to see what he'd do about it, and the other part of me figured he was right, and we shouldn't risk our friendship over a temptation.

So, falling into the stereotype everyone already put on me, I chose not to take it seriously. "I hope so," I told Nate. "Stiles and Derek would be hot together."

"Knew you watched," he mumbled.

Then a June bug came at me and I ran for my life. Maybe I outran my feelings.

CHAPTER 5

NATE

I WASN'T SIXTEEN ANYMORE, SO ALL-NIGHT BENDERS WITH cheap rum and five-finger discount moonshine didn't just disappear during sleep and completely vanish when the sun came up. It was almost noon, and neither of us had gotten our shit together.

I left the bathroom and ran into Devon in the narrow hallway. He was right in my face, shouting at me like an asshole. "We'll meet you there! Don't be late."

I groaned, covering my ears. "Stop yelling."

"You're coming, right?" he asked, grabbing his purple motocross gloves off the counter. Maddox had finally given them to him, so Devon kept them at our place so he wouldn't steal them back.

"Yeah. We'll be there. Just go away so I can be alive first." I leaned against the hall wall in my purple undies, knowing I shouldn't go back to bed because I'd never get out of it. Devon left without a goodbye, but I was pretty sure he called me old.

"Sorry," Xavi said, trying to squeeze by me in the hallway. He was all mussed up and hungover and cute about it. His abs rubbed against mine as we shifted past one another, and my tighty-purples didn't do much to contain my semi, so when his hip grazed it and I groaned, his eyes flared and he muttered another sorry. He coughed, nodded, and disappeared into the bathroom.

I put some coffee on and leaned against the counter until my head stopped spinning. So much for not telling him about

my crush. So much more for brushing my *very* legitimate crush off as some misinterpretation on Andrea's part. God, I was a fuck-up. That was my chance to come clean, and drunk me had failed present me.

But who was I to think I deserved anything more than friendship from Xavi? I mean, I counted my blessings every damn day just to call him my bestie, but I had to be real about this. I was Nathan misspelled-Neegan Sawyer, and I had fuck all to offer Xavi in the way of a life together. I was scared. Yes, my fears often came out as jokes I made fun of, or as thighs that wouldn't bulk, or even a hate for feet because I once watched Andrea do foot care for the elderly, but this time, they locked me up in lies. I wanted to tell him. I was *afraid* to tell him. I was terrified he'd laugh it off and break me.

When Xavi shut off the shower and came out in a towel, I slid a cup of coffee to him and nodded at the back deck. "Come on, Xav. We aren't this weird."

He laughed. Finally.

He left the back door open, and as soon as I sat down, a piece of paper blew from inside and stuck against my face. "The fuck is this?" I pulled it away. "Outreach?"

"Oh, yeah," Xavi said, his voice all groggy and sexy. "We have some meeting with some person at some time next week."

"So detailed." I sat on the paper to keep it from blowing away.

"Look, someone called, that showed up in the mail, and I forgot about it until it literally smacked you in the face. Something to do with community service or something."

"At the shop?"

"I don't know, Nate. I dropped the ball a bit. What time are we leaving for the track?"

I didn't overly wanna go to the track, but what else was there to do on a weekend around here that didn't require crimes, shady shit, or moonshine? I was way too hungover for

day drinking, so I'd have to go at it sober and try to have fun. I looked inside, seeing our worn couch and the TV with a shit ton of cords hanging off it, contemplating a couch day. It'd been a long time since I had one of those, but I didn't want to do it without Xavi.

"I'll shower and then we can go."

Xavi stared at the water, a resolve coming over him. "We aren't losers. You aren't a joke, Nate."

"Feels like it sometimes. You heard her last night."

Xavi turned to face me. "Stop. Stop believing that shit. Who cares if we aren't the same as everyone else, right? They're mostly all miserable in their shitty jobs and mediocre marriages. At least we're happy, you know?"

"You're one to talk," I scoffed. "You were fine with everything, and now you seem stuck on some clock you need to keep up with." Which scared me because I was worried our clocks worked in different time zones or something.

Xavi groaned, leaning his head back. "It's this age, I think. All of our friends are married and have kids and shit."

"Yeah, but half of them had kids in high school."

"Don't you feel like we should be figuring our shit out? Like, we aren't even close to married and steady." He looked at the sky.

"So?"

He sighed again. "I know. It just feels like there's all this outside pressure for the first time. People are asking me when I'm gonna settle down, and until they started, I thought I was settled. With you. Now it feels like people are judging us for it. As soon as you turn thirty, you're suddenly expected to have your shit together. My shit ain't together, Nate."

He had a safe home, some financial security if the moon cycle was right, a brother who was happy and healthy, and parents who mostly took care of themselves. He had more of his shit together than most people around here, but no one measured progress like that at this age. They put it on the

pressure to live that conventional couple's life with some kids and a home. The only way you got out of those expectations was to be a drunk, an addict, or imprisoned.

"I don't even want to get married," I told him. "Ever. Not interested."

"No?" He tilted his head to look at me, seeing the truth in my eyes. "Not at all?"

I shook my head.

"If I did, it'd be for tax benefits." He laughed. "Even though I don't understand tax benefits. Why don't we learn that shit at school? Anyway, sometimes it feels like I have to follow that path, you know?"

"I know you need to find a different way to end a sentence." I smirked at him. "Fuck what society wants."

"Wanna do life with me, Nate?"

My ribs cinched. "You carry around nicotine gum for me even though I've been trying to quit for four years. Pretty sure that's us already doing life."

"Yeah, but I sometimes encourage your smoking too, so I kind of suck at the job." He smacked my thigh. "Shower. Let's go."



I LEANED AGAINST THE FENCE AND WATCHED MADDOX AND Devon battle it out for position on their tenth lap. As much as I loved watching them, motocross always made me feel like an epic failure. I didn't have a skill like Devon had, and I'd always been a bit self-conscious of it. I had nothing to offer but protection, and I mostly failed at that, too. I failed real bad the night he showed up at the Kanes' front door and found Maddox. Hadn't even known my dad was around that night. It still haunted me.

Xavi was off somewhere throwing up, but I didn't think I could move to go check on him. The hangover was settled in deep, making me as useless as I always felt. To make matters worse, Andrea stepped up beside me. Fuck, loved her, but I knew she was about to start asking hard questions.

"Hangover?" she asked.

"You have no idea."

"Heard Old Man Hank fired a few rounds at someone last night." She nudged me.

"Wasn't me. And we didn't steal moonshine either. He's just grumpy because he's not the only moonshine maker in the park anymore."

"He is crusty about it," she agreed. "How'd the talk go with Xavi?"

I groaned. "Andrea, I love ya, but you gotta back off with that shit." I sipped my water. "You got him all worked up, and he came home pissed at me for keeping secrets from him."

"You are."

I shook my head. "Not ones I'm ready to talk to him about yet. So let it go until I am."

Andrea took a deep breath. "I know. I'm sorry. I just want you guys to be happy. You've lived your lives for your brothers, and now you finally have the time and freedom to think about yourselves. Don't waste it. Because from where I'm sitting, it seems like you both want the same thing but are too afraid to admit it."

I turned to face her, ignoring Maddox and Devon. "He's my best friend. Our brothers are married. We live together, work together and basically do everything together. Not to mention, we've never been gay before. You see how that might fuck up our lives if things don't go to plan when I tell him?" I widened my eyes at her to cement my point. "It's a lot of risks, okay?"

Andrea watched me for longer than I was comfortable with, and then she smiled. "You know, you act like you don't

give a shit about anything, and that's what makes you come off as immature."

"Hey!" I scoffed.

"But! You really think things through and take them seriously when it comes to him. It shows that you have your priorities straight."

Oh, well, that felt good. "I know. I'm mature, but everyone else is too dumb to notice."

She laughed. "You're his priority, too." She pointed down the fence line and I saw Xavi keeled over, throwing up in the bushes.

"Hey, Xav! You need me to hold your hair?" I shouted.

He heaved but waved me off and gave me a thumbs-up at the same time.

"Quite the catch, eh?" I pushed my hat up.

"Your catch. Don't miss out." She pulled me in for a side hug, and when my arms wrapped around her, everything felt back to normal. Her being our advice giver, and us being lost souls who went to her for help. No more hard feelings or awkwardness.

"Thanks, Andrea. For all of it."

After a day of drinking water and eating enough snacks to soak up my hangover, I started all over again with beer.

Devon bitched about the race, and Maddox bitched about him bitching, so the two of them went off to *deal* with it. They hadn't even finished the race because they'd crashed and burned hard in the whoops section. Hard enough that Maddox had a scraped shoulder and Devon had a split lip from taunting him about it.

Typically, I'd be all for a party like this, and it wouldn't take me much to get in the mood, but Xavi was being a fucking delight after his puke-n-rally, which meant a whole slew of chicks followed him around. He'd always been the ladies' man between the two of us, which was yet another

reason I felt unworthy of him. I didn't have his charm. I was a Sawyer and nothing more.

Sitting with my beer and my bad mood, I watched him from across the firepit. Half a year ago, I'd be receiving nods and signals to ask my opinion about our potential hookup for the night. Tonight, I was just grumpy. A jealous monster. Because what if one of those chicks surrounding him was the one who would help his clock tick forward? Worse... what if I was the one who made his clock stop ticking?

Here I sat with a confused dick and a weird twang in my heart, knowing I should just tell him how I felt, but too much of a damn coward to own up to it. How was I supposed to do life without Xavi if it crashed and burned?

It made me feel slightly better when he scanned the crowd and stopped when he found me. He grinned, which made me grin, and that felt even better. Still, did I want him securing a hookup for tonight, or did I want to go home and maybe have a hard dick on the couch with him while I watched *Teen Wolf* and he pretended not to?

"Hey. Can I sit?" someone I recognized but didn't know the name of asked. She was tall, brunette, had thick thighs and nice eyes, so I slid down the wooden bench to make room for her. "Nate, right?"

"Yeah. Hey." I fake smiled.

She didn't offer her name and I didn't ask for it, which was kind of a dick move, but it fit my bad mood vibes, so I went with it. My eyes had already shifted back to Xavi, who was still in the same spot. She asked me the typical small talk questions, and I asked all the ones she didn't, so between that awkward encounter and the end of my beer, we were out of things to chat about.

"I actually wanted to ask you something personal," she said.

I looked at her. "What's up?" I sucked at personal, but she could have at it. Especially because Xavi was paying more

attention to me and this chick than he was to the ones all over him. Wish I had my sunglasses even though it was dark.

“It’s about Xavi.”

Of course it was. Once again, I was reduced to being Nate Sawyer, son of Jim Sawyer—may his soul suffer eternally—and nobody looked twice at a Sawyer unless they were a cop, a debt collector, Old Man Hank, or their last name was Kane. I knew my place in the hierarchy. I never used to resent that because Xavi made me feel important, but now... a split was on the horizon, and it made my insecurities even more insecure about themselves.

“What about him?”

“Well, I was wondering if... wait. Do you remember me?” she asked.

I looked at her harder, trying to figure out where I recognized her from. I wobbled my head to say yeah and nah together, and she laughed.

“In grade nine, you stood watch behind Nina Brigham’s barn while—”

“You blew Xavi for the first time!” I *ah-ha’d*. “Fuck yeah. I knew you looked familiar.” I laughed. How could I forget the night my bestie got his first blowie? “Callie, right?”

“Yeah.” She smiled, tucking her hair behind her ears. “I moved away after that, but I’m back now.”

And threatening my position with Xavi. Enemy status, engaged. “And interested in Xav, I take it?”

“I hear he’s single.”

He’s mine, bitch. “Yeah.”

“How would you feel about making the re-introductions less awkward?” she asked.

Honestly, babe, I’m feeling pretty nope about it. But mature me would always be Xavi’s biggest supporter, and the last thing I wanted to do was love-block him. If she was his

person, it'd crush my soul and turn me into a Jim Sawyer, but the price would be worth it for Xavi's happiness.

“How about now?” I held out my hand for her. He'd always liked thick thighs.

Probably why I was so self-conscious of my own.

CHAPTER 6

XAVI

FUCK NATE FOR CONNING ME INTO A DINNER WITH A BLAST from my past. He'd dropped her off in front of me, chased off my company, and then abandoned me. All I'd wanted to do was go after him, but I was Xavi, and I'd never been allowed to be the asshole in the family. Maddox claimed that title without asking my opinion on it, so I'd stayed to chat with her so I didn't come across as a dick.

Somehow, that led to dinner, and now that dinner was ending, and she seemed to be expecting things, and I was not overly enthused about doing them.

It was damn near ten on a random weeknight, and Callie was waiting for an invite back to my place. No time like the present to start acting mature to prove I wasn't some irresponsible prick who didn't take anything seriously.

"I gotta work early." *That's what responsible people said, right?* "We own the shop now, and you know how it is, you know?" Shit. I really did need to find a new way to end a sentence. "But this was fun, yeah?"

"Yeah. It was nice to catch up. Maybe we can do it again sometime?"

Fuck, she was pretty. But her brown hair wasn't Nate Sawyer blond, and her dark eyes were so far off his bright blue ones, and yeah, I'd always had a thing for thick thighs, but Nate's lean, toned ones were... *Snap out of it, Xavi!*

"Sure." I gave her my number and called myself a liar. With an awkward hug and a smile, I hopped in Nate's truck

and tried to act cool. Which didn't work because the damn thing wouldn't start, and Callie stood there judging me.

"She takes a few tries," I rambled between attempts. "She's a temperamental old girl, but we love her." I put her into neutral and tamped down on the accelerator a few times.

"We?"

"Oh, it's Nate's truck. I sold mine when..." Yeah, probably not the best ending to a date to talk about my brother's time in prison. "A while back. Haven't gotten around to getting a new one yet." Couldn't afford one. We were still new-business poor. Actually, despite how busy we were, none of us understood how expensive it was to run a business. Plainly put, we had jobs, but still struggled for financial stability. Some months were better than others, but spare change wasn't a constant luxury.

"You two always were a package deal." Her smile was smaller.

Still were. "Yeah. He's..." *Everything.*

With another tiny smile, she said, "Well, thanks for tonight. It was nice seeing you." With a wave, she walked to her car and left before I even got the truck going. I knew she took something more from my lack of admission than I meant for her to take, but I wasn't mad about it. That went from 'let's do this again' to 'goodbye' real quick.

Finally, with her gone, I pulled off my shirt—because fuck shirts—and kicked off my slides to lean back and give the truck a break. While she calmed down, I did the thinking I should have been doing on the rum and moonshine night.

I liked Nate. In some new way. Maybe I had for a bit, or maybe this whole biological clock ticking down time like I was a bomb made me realize that there wasn't a chance in hell I wanted to pick someone else over him in this thing called life. It started as admiration during sex. To watch him fuck was... hot diggity damn. I creped a bit, freaked out about it to Maddox, and kept on doing it. Over time, our friendship and our hookup program blended into something that felt like a

combination of two right things that weren't in the right order, you know? Like, we had the bond and the attraction, but we forgot to have the relationship.

Would he even want that?

At first, I didn't think so. It was a sex thing and nothing more. Then Andrea said that shit about him needing to talk to me, and Maddox said that shit about him being in it for me, and maybe... maybe we both roundabout wanted the same thing but didn't know how to say it.

Well, no time like the present. I wasn't the overthinking type, and I respected Nate enough to just fess up and come clean. So, using the last one percent of my phone battery, I sat in the dead truck in the parking lot of a truck stop diner outside Garron and called him.

"What?" he answered, all brood.

"You have a thing for me?" I asked.

"What?"

"A thing. For me."

He coughed. "What?"

"You know...?" I widened my eyes as if he could see me.

"Come home, Xavi."

"I can't get the truck to start and I wanted to talk." I kicked my bare feet up on the dash and twirled the keyring around my finger. "Whatcha doing?"

"How was your date?" he asked.

"It wasn't a date. We ate shitty wraps at a truck stop and I ordered two pies because you weren't here to tell me which one is always shitty. It's the blueberry, FYI. And she paid."

He laughed. "So it was good?"

I grinned at the dashboard. "I think I scared her off by accidentally admitting I have a thing for you."

"Wha—"

"Nate?" I sat up.

Goddamn phone battery! Right when I got to the confession part.

Half an hour later, I finally had to beg a trucker to give me a boost. Twenty minutes after that, I pulled into the shop's parking lot and shut the old girl down, giving her a pat on the dash for another job well done.

I was nervous to go inside.

Hindsight was twenty-twenty and all that, so yeah, I probably should have said that stuff to his face. But whatever. It was out there now, and this was Nate we were talking about, so my nerves played no part. We could talk about anything.

Still, my stomach felt like it was in my ass when I walked inside and through the shop, and my throat had gone dry by the time I made it to the apartment. It was late, so the place was dark, but the lit tip of a cigarette glowed from outside the patio doors. The door was open, but Nate hadn't heard me come inside, so I took a quick breath to pull my gut out of my butt and swallow some saliva. When I closed the door, Nate stood.

And didn't look happy.

Shit. Every doubt and negative thought I'd ever had rushed to the forefront of my mind to remind me of what a loser I was. Of course he didn't have a fucking thing for me! What the hell had I been thinking?

Like a trailer park badass, he tossed his butt into an old coffee can and didn't even wait for it to finish hissing before he hissed at me.

"What the actual fuck, Xavi?!" He stomped towards me, and my stomach dropped right out of my ass. I'd never really seen him mad at me before, but he was a hell of a lot better at it than I was. "You just wanna ask me if I have a *thing* for you while you're out on a date?"

All the times I'd watched Devon grab my brother by the throat flitted through my mind, and I even braced for it. Nate had that Sawyer temper if he wanted to let it out. But Nate didn't give me a necklace made of fingers. He hit me with an

angry shade of blue eyes, a bare chest, hat hair, and a question I didn't know the answer to.

“How the fuck could you, Xavi? Does our friendship mean nothing to you that you're willing to risk it like this?”

I faltered backward. That punched me right in the heart. “What?” I seethed at him for even asking that. “I thought—”

“No, you didn't.” He shook his head at me. “You didn't think at all!”

He shoved my chest, so I shoved him back, unsure what the hell was even going on. How dare he think I didn't care about our friendship. That shit hurt. Bad.

“You know how long I've wanted to...” He shut his mouth and glared at me in the dim light. “Fuck you for saying that.” He turned his back on me and reached for his cigarettes.

“What's your problem?” I followed him through the patio door, unsure if we were about to turn into our brothers or handle this like we normally would. Unease, embarrassment, and guilt were already consuming me, and I didn't want to let anger in, too. Fighting wasn't our thing, but he'd never accused me of not giving a shit about our friendship before.

“You! You're my problem. You weren't supposed to say that!”

“So, what? We're just supposed to fuck the same chick forever, even though it's pretty fucking obvious we—”

“Don't.”

“—want something more. We feel shit, Nate!”

“You weren't supposed to feel anything!” he screamed at me.

I reared back, stumbling, and my slides slipped off my feet. When my back hit the glass door, I felt myself break. “Because I'm just a fucking joke, right?”

“That's not what I meant.” He tried to grab for me, but I flinched. “Xavi, wait. You can't just drop that shit on me so

casually when I've been struggling for so long, and then you ___”

“Yeah. Got it.” I ripped my wrist free from his hand. I'd read all his signals wrong. I thought we felt the same thing, but it seemed like he'd been trying to find a way to let me down gently instead. Nate wanted out of this hookup thing, not because he was done with threesomes, but because he was done with *me*. He could tell. He knew my feelings were changing, and he'd been looking for an escape to save me the embarrassment of having to shoot me down.

I didn't know if I was more upset about getting it all wrong when I'd never struggled to read him before, or if the look of disgust in his eyes hurt worse than anything. He put sunglasses on to hide it from me.

“No. You don't get it, Xavi. Fuck.” He tried to grab me again, but I flinched harder. Maybe in fear. Maybe shame.

My heart dripped down my chest and my mind exploded because life as I knew it had just ended. Who was I without him? I had to get out of the apartment, the shop, the fucking town. I needed to leave, and the only two places I could think to go were my parents' trailer or my brother's house.

I backed away from Nate, stepping into the apartment to find a different pair of sandals and the truck keys. Then my mind snagged on the fact that it was his truck, and if we were breaking apart, he probably wouldn't want me to take it.

“Where are you going?” He followed me.

To hide. To feel my pain in solitude. To cry or scream or hate myself for ruining the only good thing I'd ever had in my life by disrespecting our friendship like he'd accused me of. I had to go. I left his keys on the counter, grabbed a pair of flip-flops, and pulled the door open.

“I have a thing for you, Xavi!” he shouted at my back, making me stop. “I do. You're right, okay? I have a fucking thing.”

But my mind had already dipped deep into self-loathing and didn't want to believe it. I was all churned up with

confused feelings and broken emotions that wondered if he just said that to save our friendship. Another part of me worried he meant it, but never planned to do anything about it because he'd never see me as more than his best friend.

I couldn't face him, so I slammed the door behind me and ran.

CHAPTER 7

NATE

“HE’S GOT A BROKEN TOE,” DEVON SAID, HANDING ME A wrench and a propeller part. “Fucking idiot ran all the way to our place in flip-flops. Broke a toe, tripped into the front door, got a bloody nose from it, and then threw up so hard he made the nosebleed worse. He’s a mess, man.”

My heart broke. I did that to him. “Was he... is he okay?”

“No, man. He’s not okay. What the hell happened?”

“He didn’t tell you?”

“Wouldn’t say shit. We don’t even have a spare bed, and Gnat was on the couch. Xavi was so pathetic that he didn’t even move Gnat. He just laid down on the dog bed and pretended he wasn’t hyperventilating with tissue sticking out of his bloody nose. It was sad as fuck, which made Madd pissed, and I couldn’t sleep because he thinks loud, and...” Devon paused to sigh and calm down. “I’m worried about you two. What’s going on?”

I fucked up. That’s what happened. I spent so much time worrying about what would happen if Xavi found out I had a thing for him, and then he just called me like a cute bastard to ask me about it like it was no big deal. All the stressing and the panic... for nothing.

I flew off the handle because, like usual, I felt like the idiot everyone called me. I’d been feeling so subpar lately that when he admitted something I’d been repressing for a year, I blew up. *On Xavi!* And I never blew up on Xavi. There had been a lot of times in my life when I felt dumb, but nothing

made me feel dumber than going through a year of guilt and shame for nothing.

It scared me. Our friendship was sacred, the thing I cherished most in the world, and I'd never wanted to risk it, so I kept my mouth shut and my thoughts to myself.

My hands were unsteady as shit, so when Devon touched my shoulder and gently took the tools from me, I let him. I lit a cigarette with a blowtorch, wishing Xavi were around to give me gum instead. He hadn't come home last night, and he didn't show up for work this morning, and now I didn't know how to fucking function in a world where we didn't get along.

All my days started with Xavi. Coffee and bullshit over the counter, sometimes boners we tried but failed to hide. We worked together, lived together, did everything together, and the past eight hours without him were a sign that I was codependent on him without even realizing it. A wake-up call of emptiness I didn't want.

But it was my fault. Who the fuck was I to blow up on him for feeling the exact same way I'd been feeling? I'd never thought he'd reciprocate, and I couldn't even take the time to be happy about it because I'd messed it up so badly. I failed, just like I failed at everything.

Deep down, I knew the only future I was entitled to was the same fate as my dad. I might not have tried as hard as Devon not to become him, but when push came to shove last night, I threw Xavi on his ass like he wasn't the most important person in my life. I disrespected him for being honest. Such a Jim Sawyer move that it made me dry heave around the filter of my cigarette.

"Talk, asshole," Devon said, standing to wipe his greasy hands on his jeans. "You don't usually shut up, and this is throwing me off so hard." He opened the bay doors, letting in all the sunlight when I just wanted to hide in the dark like a sad vampire. Devon tilted his head outside, and I followed him with my smoke.

He lit one and sat on the top of a picnic table, squinting at me. I put on my sunglasses to hide my feelings.

“Your dumbass gene is genetic because I was a dumbass.”
I hated myself for it.

“Dumbass how?”

“He said he had a thing for me.”

Devon’s eyes widened and he muttered something about a bet, but then he squinted again because of the sun. “A thing? That’s good, right? Weren’t you waiting to confess that shit to him?”

Yeah, and that was the fucked-up part. He beat me to it. He said it like it was a natural thing to say, when in my reality, it was the biggest deal of my life.

“I don’t think he meant it like I mean it.” Because maybe he just meant he wanted to get sexy and fool around or something. Up until he’d said it, I half wondered if that was all I wanted, too. But the truth hit me in the chest—it was more than that. It was a gut instinct that Xavi was my person, and the turmoil I had felt by realizing it had been swept away by him being so calm about it.

“Wait.” Devon stood up. “Don’t tell me you flipped out on him, Nate! *You?* You and Xavi don’t flip out!”

I turned my back on him because I already felt like a piece of shit about it. Yeah, hair-trigger reactions, anger, and violence weren’t things I did when it came to Xavi. That wasn’t how we communicated with each other. I couldn’t even remember a time when I’d yelled at Xavi unless it was during a drunken ramble or because of excitement. Not rage. Not shame. Not guilt.

Devon walked up and grabbed my shoulder. “Fix this.”

What an asshole. After all the meddling, deep conversations about his feelings for Maddox, and the times I’d literally picked him up off the floor, that was all the advice he could give me? *Fix this?* Not even my brother took me seriously.

“Yeah. Thanks for the fucking TED talk.” I took my smoke and walked away, but Devon caught up. Didn’t even know what a TED talk was.

“That’s not... just stop. Jesus. You’re worse than I was.”

Not even close.

“I don’t know how to help you,” he admitted.

“Yeah, I figured.”

“It’s not like that. It’s like... all my life, you and Xavi were the most solid thing I knew. I don’t know how to fix you guys because you’ve never been broken before. So, let’s talk it through. How do you guys get out of a fight? Wait, have you ever been in a fight?”

No, we’d never fought like this.

We didn’t fight, and we didn’t make up. We were those two idiots who got thrown into shitty situations, and if we couldn’t laugh them off, we worked them out together. I couldn’t laugh this off. After his phone died, I’d tried to calm down, get my shit together, and look at this as good news. It was what I’d wanted, right? But as soon as he walked in the door, all my pent-up worry, shame for having hidden feelings for him, and the confusion of it all came at me hard, and I snapped at him. It was too late to come back from that, so I’d have to own it and try to explain that I’d just been feeling dumb, but I didn’t know how to start that conversation.

“You know what you two are masters at?” Devon asked, and I already knew what he was going to say. “Talking. You chatty fucks never stop, so go. Go to our place and make him talk.”

“We have work.”

“Oh?” Devon scoffed at me. “Can’t sell the pieces of a broken heart, Nate.” He grinned.

Fuck me for being so good at giving advice that it came back to haunt me.



I PICKED UP MY BALLS ON THE DRIVE OVER. THIS WAS goddamn Xavi we were talking about, and Devon was right. We were awesome at talking. I curb-stomped my nerves, swallowed my pride, and drove my ratchet-ass truck to my brother's place to find my best friend and make everything right. We were grown adults, even though we weren't the best at it, and we could handle this like we handled everything else.

I parked and got out, trying not to chicken out. Maddox's truck was gone and so was Gnat, and Xavi didn't shout back when I yelled his name, so I went back outside. I tried Xavi's phone, but it must have still been dead. On my way back to the truck, I stopped on the broken step. Dread and a choking feeling locked me up, froze me in place, and turned my head loud. I could see Xavi out there, sitting on the beach with... *her*. The same chick he went on a date with and lied about scaring off. The blowjob girl.

She didn't look very scared off! She had her hand on his arm, her head tilted back with a laugh I could hear over the waves crashing. Xavi's foot stuck out in front of him, but the rest of him looked pretty damn chill for a guy who ran out on me in a pair of flip-flops. Was I the only one making a big deal out of this? Surely Devon wasn't bullshitting me?

Had I missed my only shot? Had he remembered that he preferred thick thighs to my lean ones? Had he meant it all as a joke, and I lashed out at him because it was the farthest thing from a joke to me? Did he come to the conclusion that the biological clock he was on wouldn't benefit from me slowing it down?

I'd never run from him before. To be fair, he'd never run from me either, but that seemed to be the theme of the past twenty-four hours. So, I ran to the truck, closed the door enough that it'd keep me alive, and begged this old lady to start silently for once in her life. I turned the key, cringing as the engine groaned. Xavi hadn't noticed, so I turned it again.

"Come on, baby. Start for me so I can flee." I turned the key a third time.

Xavi turned his head at the same time the truck choked.

Fuck.

“You son of a meddling bitch,” I seethed at my vehicle. I knew it was purposefully trapping me here. In this cab full of old wrappers, Xavi’s discarded shirts, and cigarette packs, it’d always been the two of us, and the damn truck was just trying to keep the status quo. “You meddle worse than we do.”

Xavi was on his foot, hobbling his way over to me. “Nate?” he called out.

I kept trying the key, never more desperate to get away and hide behind my sunglasses. I kept pressing my foot on the accelerator to give this bitch a drink of gas in the hopes she’d do my dirty work. I was goddamn sweating, and I knew it had nothing to do with the heat and everything to do with my patheticness. Thank whatever lucky stars were sometimes on my side that Xavi was slow as fuck with a bum toe.

“Nate!” he called.

But I couldn’t listen because self-doubts ate me alive and all my insecurities fed off one another, and no matter how hard I tried to remember that Xavi was my best friend, the obnoxious voice in my head said I didn’t deserve him. That all I was capable of was holding him back, getting in his way, blocking him from that life he so desperately wanted to live.

Fuck you, fears! This is not the time!

“Nate! Wait for me!” Xavi called just as the truck decided to give me the win. She fired up on a loud roar and an even louder backfire that drowned out whatever else he said.

I put it into reverse, and as soon as I had the clearance, I jammed into first gear and took off down the gravel road. My heart beat faster than it had the night we fled Bethany’s place, but there was no smiling Xavi in the seat next to me this time. In the rearview mirror, I watched him trip to a stop, throwing his arms wide while shouting something at me.

His face wasn’t angry. It was hurt. What the fuck were we doing? I hurt him, but I was too fucking stubborn to turn around and pick him up.

No wonder pride was the deadliest of all the sins.

CHAPTER 8

XAVI

I CRASHED THROUGH THE BACK WINDOW AND GRACEFULLY collapsed onto my back. My flip-flops got caught on the windowsill, one falling to smack me in the face, one disappearing outside in the rain, and my dead phone clattered against the floor with Nate's pack of gum.

So stealth.

I'd broken into the trailer growing up to avoid my asshole dad and my drunk mom and all her wino friends, but I hadn't had to do any breaking and entering since I moved to the shop where I felt safe. Nate was my safe place, and it sucked that our foundation had been rocked by my big mouth.

Anyway, I executed the break-in pretty perfectly. Barely made a sound. Nate would be sleeping, and I'd crash on the couch and disappear into the shop before he got up. Fuck Maddox and Devon for kicking me off Gnat's bed like I wasn't worthy of sleeping on it for a second night. Even if they claimed to do it for my own good.

"Forget your key when you ran like a bitch?"

Shit. Wasn't as stealth as I thought, but I bit back a retort about him driving off like a bitch.

I tilted my head on the floor, looking at him upside down. He stood there like something I wanted to touch, but I figured the darkness rolling off him made him nothing more than shadows that my hand would swipe through. His abs were out on full display, and the purple underwear he started wearing a

few months ago showed off the shape of something I *apparently* wasn't supposed to have a thing for.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey?” He shook his head. Nate sucked at being mad just as much as I did, but he crossed his arms over his chest and made it look pretty real. He really was pissed at me. “Hey? That’s it?”

He grumbled something else under his breath, and while I was typically pretty pro at deciphering his muttered language, my head was throbbing, and my feels were hurting, and the rain was slanting in through the window to soak me in embarrassment. Nate stepped over me, feet planted on either side of my hips, to close the window before we got yet another mould problem in here. While I laid in a puddle of my fuck ups, I looked up to see a hole in the ass of his underwear. It happened the night we found a squirrel caught in a live trap and Nate hopped the fence to free it. Ah, good times.

“Yeah, hey.” I wanted to tell him I was sorry so we could go back to normal and stop whatever the hell this was, but I couldn't. Because I wasn't sorry. I meant it. I had a goddamn thing for Nate, and now that it was out there, no part of me knew how to chomp at the air to get the words back inside my mouth enough to swallow them down.

“You gonna get up or just stay on the floor?” he asked once the window was closed.

Now that it was shut, this place was a hot box of stagnant air and awkwardness. We didn't have windows on the other side of the apartment because the shop was there, and it was muggy, hot, and damp in the living room, with a nice undertone of mildew to make it oh-so homey.

Nate stepped back as I groaned my way to my feet. The tile floor was wet from the rain dripping off my body, so when I got myself into a semi-standing position, I balanced my good foot right on my slippery flip-flop. And went back down.

“Motherfucker!” Before my head hit the floor, Nate dropped to his knees, caught me, and my head hit his bare

thighs instead of the tile.

What a fucking hero. My god.

“You’re a mess, Xavi.”

Yeah, I totally was. I looked up at him, seeing sadness through the anger he tried to hold on to. Nothing felt right at the moment, but being on the floor with him after a slip and a fall, in a room that housed my confessions and sparked our fight, I just wanted to wrap my arms around him and never let him go. The old me would have done it. The new me wondered if he’d think I was hitting on him or something.

Nate cleared his throat and stood up, pulling me up with him. I balanced with a hand on the back of a chair, and Nate kicked my flip-flop away.

“You suck in flip-flops.”

It was a known fact. Nate banned me from flip-flops three years ago when the toe thong broke mid-getaway and we’d had to spend a night in the drunk tank of the Garron cop shop simply because I blew a flip-flop and got bad raspberries on my knees. Slides ever since.

“How was your second date?” he asked.

“It wasn’t a date. Are we ever gonna talk about this thing I have for you?” I looked at the floor instead of his face. My toe throbbed like a son-of-a-bitch, and my clothes stuck to my skin like a dead wet blanket.

“Do you know what it means?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then no. You went to her instead of me.”

“I didn’t fucking go to her,” I snapped at him. “Wait, are you jealous?”

“Fuck off, Xavi.”

Yeah, that was why we were in this mess. Nate stepped away from me, unsure about staying but even more unsure about leaving.

“Nate, come on. This isn’t us.” When he turned to head down the hallway, I hobbled after him. “We don’t do this shit. Can we at least talk about it?”

He spun, and the narrow hallway wasn’t big enough to contain both our bodies and the moods we were in. “I tried to talk about it when I went to find you at the beach. Guess what I found instead?” He glared, his chest against mine, but both of our backs against opposite walls. “Found you on a fucking date.”

“It wasn’t a date! Jesus.”

“What was she doing there? You didn’t call her?”

“My phone was dead! I’d have called you if it wasn’t.” I shook my head, unsure if I was mad or glad to be talking finally. “She works at the pharmacy Madd dropped me off at, so she brought me back after I spent my last twenty bucks on a bottle of Advil.” I pointed to my busted toe and then hid it, knowing Nate hated feet. “The name brand kind. Sorry.”

He sighed, and when his breath hit me, it smelled like mint. That, out of everything that had happened today, offended me the most.

“Have you been chewing gum without me? Since when do you carry your own? That’s my job.” *Fucking hell, had I been replaced?*

Nate opened his mouth to answer and then shook his head. “We should end this,” he said. “The hookup thing. It’s over for good.”

Why was that what he wanted to talk about? “Because I have a thing for you?”

“Because it’s...”

“Really? That’s all you have to say?”

“Something else you want to hear?” he asked. Chest to chest. Hip to hip. Almost dick to dick. Our hearts that usually beat to the same drum echoed on off-beats that made angry music. No melody. No flow. Just guttural, unclear lyrics that overpowered one another.

There were a million things I wanted to hear. His laugh was at the top of the list. I just wanted to go back to a place where Nate was mine, and I wasn't afraid of losing him. Best friends, more than best friends, I didn't care. I wanted our stasis back. The one where we could talk about anything and everything, no matter how hard it was.

But this version of Nate wasn't my ride or die. He was a cold, secretive bastard who wanted to warm up and vent but didn't know how to find his way to the heat. He needed to thaw, and maybe, for once, I wasn't the man for the job. Something inside me broke to know that I'd turned him into this with my admission.

“No.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

Not good.



FOR FOUR DAYS, WE LIVED IN A STATE OF AWARENESS WITHOUT comment. The only places we got caught up were at the reception desk of the shop and the small hallway in the apartment whenever we accidentally walked down it at the same time.

Life. Fucking. Sucked. And my mom was drinking more again, so it double sucked.

Nate had a few people over on the back deck. Most of them were drunk and hanging out on the dock or in the water, but I sat my moody ass right on the deck and got drunker than was probably smart. These were my friends too, and none of them knew what the hell was going on between us. To be honest, I wasn't even sure anymore.

He'd been avoiding any talking, but he'd been suggestively trying to get my attention. Whenever he got it,

usually by wearing nothing but his purple underwear, black boxers, or a towel, he didn't know what to do with it. So, by this point, I had no clue if we were fighting over my confession or something else. It couldn't even be classified as fighting because we weren't verbal or physical. It was all avoidance and weird eye contact.

"We're heading home," Devon said, sober as a goat while Maddox swayed beside him, his hands all over Devon's ass. "You two sure you can co-exist together? This whole thing is really throwing me off."

I waved it off like it was no big deal, even though it was the biggest deal ever, apart from Maddox going to jail. "We're fine." I fiddled with my necklace.

Maddox drunkenly scoffed. "Gnat's bed is up for grabs if you need it again."

My turn to drunkenly scoff. "You already kicked me out once, and now I'm standing my ground." I tried not to be jealous of the way Maddox touched Devon so freely. "Better go before he starts demanding flip fucks," I said to Devon.

Maddox laughed, but Devon groaned. "Call if you need anything, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"I gave Nate the same speech."

Nate looked just fucking peachy down on the dock with a swarm of people all around him and that laugh I'd wished to hear coming from his lips. Hated that laugh now that he wasn't giving it to me. Everyone else got the fun parts of him, and I got... silence and sketchy glares. All because I admitted to having a thing for him.

When Devon and Maddox left, I drank the rest of my beer and then grabbed another one from a cooler someone was stupid enough to leave near me. Me and free shit were peas in a pod. It wasn't a beer, though. It was a fruity cooler, and fuck it, I drank it. Then another one after that.

All the while, my eyes watched Nate. His body. His body language. His eye contact. His everything. Blue swim shorts

that matched his eyes and nothing else to hide behind but deception and lies. He said he wanted to end our hookup arrangement, and he was proving that point right in front of me. Miranda, a chick that used to run in the same circle as our brothers, was all over him.

When her hands touched his thighs, I chugged my strawberry daiquiri.

When her lips brushed his ear to whisper filthy things, I sank into my chair and felt the angry drunk my dad used to be rising to my surface.

When Nate's hand landed on her ass and his eyes flicked up to see if I noticed, I radiated something so sinister that the two people near me got up and left.

Fuck. Him.

“Xavi! How'd your brother get off in jail with a cellmate? Did they fuck?” someone shouted.

There were three things I hated. Being asked about Maddox's jail time, June bugs, and Nate's hand on Miranda's ass. It was a brutal trifecta tonight, and I was fucking done.

I might not have spent all my time trying not to be my dad like Devon did, but if I didn't get away, I'd bring the world down with me. I pushed out of the chair and grabbed hold of the door handle for balance. Barefoot and shirtless, I limped inside, bitch-slapped a June bug, and slammed the door shut behind me, closing the curtain, too.

The image of Nate and Miranda burned in my mind like a fiery stencil.

I paced around, walking on my heels, trying to calm down. What the hell was wrong with me? It was that night with Kaylee all over again, but this time, I wasn't laughing it off. We weren't running from an old man with a shotgun, drinking moonshine on a dirt road, stumbling home together. No. There was a very real possibility I'd have to endure Nate hooking up with Miranda while I tried not to die.

Fuck, the image was too much.

I locked myself in the bathroom, replaced my swim shorts with boxers, and doused my face and chest with water to chill this heat burning me up. The whole situation was weird. Even before I'd admitted to having a thing for him, we'd had a staring contest and a tug-o-war type battle at Kaylee's place that night. Then I confessed my truth—like everyone told me to—and he'd blown up on me. But now he was having the same staring contest with me, and I didn't know what it meant.

Was he proving to me that he could secure a hookup on his own?

Was he trying to rile me?

Was he calling my bluff?

I didn't know, but the lesson that hit home the hardest was that Nate had learned he was a one-man show. Together, we were a dynamic joke of a duo, but on his own, he was Nathan Neegan Sawyer, finally getting the spotlight he deserved without me.

The self-loathing I felt was too much to bear, and I couldn't fathom looking at the pathetic person in the mirror, so I ate my jealousy and left the bathroom. I needed to sleep and block out the rest of the night.

But I came chest to chest with Nate in the narrow hallway instead.

I wasn't a huge talker, but I'd never had a filter with Nate or Maddox, so when his eyes met mine, drunkenness made me blurt, "You can fuck her outside. She's not coming in here." I tried to push past him, but he blocked my exit. "Nate!" I screamed at him, choking on a mix of jealousy, rage, pettiness, and fear. "Let me go."

"No," he growled. *Growled*. His blond hair was a fucked-up mess, his eyes were blue eight balls that told shoddy truths, and his lips glistened in the wake of his tongue.

"Nate," I seethed. Begged.

"Xavi," he seethed back.

I couldn't take hearing my name in that tone, so I made everything worse. "Better go get your dick sucked before she finds someone else. Like you said, this thing is over, so by all means, go have fun."

I shoved my shoulder against his chest and pushed, but he took a side-step and forced me back against the wall. My breathing turned shallow and rapid, and I had no idea if I was too drunk for a panic attack or if I'd even know what a panic attack was if it sprung up and attacked me in a tiny hallway. Everything was all confused and amplified, and none of it was clear.

"I miss you," Nate said, deflating me and pausing my panic. "I fucking miss you."

I didn't know what to say, but those words cracked something inside me. Like all my sadness wanted to come out and weep all over the place, but my anger was still there, acting like a dam. I missed him, too. So fucking much my life had been in ruins for the past few days, but I couldn't do this right now. I couldn't be drunk while facing my biggest truth, half angry, half sad, and wholly terrified of saying the wrong thing again.

"Nate, please." I pressed my knuckles to his abs to back him up, but all it did was make his eyes drop down to look at where I touched him.

"Please, what?" he asked, voice softer.

Please fix this. Please fix us. Please be mine again. "Please let me go."

My knuckles fell from his stomach, and his shoulders drooped. With a deep breath, he nodded.

CHAPTER 9

NATE

CHILLS RADIATED FROM WHERE HIS HAND TOUCHED ME, BUT actual coldness took its place when he dropped his knuckles away.

I nodded, trying to back off and give him what he needed. His eyes met mine, and the pain in them cracked me right in half.

I think I scared her off by accidentally admitting I have a thing for you.

His admission had been my snapped tether, but the absence of our friendship was my downfall. Thing or no thing, reciprocated feelings or not, miscommunication or clear communication, I needed Xavi, and I wouldn't survive him walking out on me again. *I* wouldn't be able to walk away from *him* again.

When he swallowed and started to go by me, I let him go.

Almost. The hall intervened.

Our chests brushed, our knees jammed, and I tried hard not to step on his broken toe. "Xavi, wait." Because I owned my fuck up from before, and there wasn't a chance in hell I'd make the same mistake twice.

When he turned his face in my direction, it was so close I could smell the fruity drink on his breath. His hair tickled my temple, and I knew this was the only way to confess what I'd needed to confess for a fucking year. He shifted his weight, and I acted on nothing but instinct, clumsiness, and desperation.

And nothing was fluent about it.

He tried to get by me, and I got in his way. On purpose.

“Sorry,” I lied.

“Yeah,” he whispered, trying again to go around me.

When he bobbed and I weaved, our bodies rubbed in the confined space. When his abs touched mine, he looked down, and when our shoulders knocked, he turned to accommodate our size in such a small space. The way he turned his body left us closer, and my drunken coordination, matched with his broken toe, left us in a tangle of insecurity. Was I trying to let him go or trying to keep him?

Just tell him you have a thing for him, too. Say it.

He stumbled, his busted toe doing me favours because his chest landed against mine and gave my hands the perfect excuse to grab his hips to steady him.

“Sorry.” He was the one to say it that time, and when he looked up at me with his big green eyes all glossy and glazed from fruity drinks, he said it again. “Sorry.”

I pushed him upright. “Yeah.” My fingers slowly slid off his hips, and I didn’t miss the way he shivered from it.

“I’m gonna... go,” he said, hooking his thumb towards the bedroom. “I’ll... yeah.”

We side-stepped, needing to be on opposite sides of the hallway. “Okay.”

When we both plastered our backs to the wall and started to squeeze by one another, he looked right at me as our dicks grazed. It made me buckle forward, and I didn’t know if he buckled as well or if the hall was just that small, but our foreheads clacked, and then his lips were on mine, or mine were on his, and a thousand nerve endings frayed, everything got real fucking hot, and...

“Fuck,” Xavi whispered.

My body coiled, unsure if it was about to spring into action or stay locked in restraint. He breathed against my lips, not

moving away, but caught in the same hesitation as me. Every goddamn part of me came alive, rising to the surface through the numbness of alcohol to burn me up with the force of my desires and how hard it was to resist them. For a fucking year, I'd wanted to do this, and doing it while drunk, pissed off at each other, and caught in close proximity because this hallway was never supposed to be more than a corridor from storage to staff room wasn't how I pictured it. But with Xavi, we never planned anything. We got thrown into situations and handled them, and this time, we'd thrown *ourselves* into this one and still weren't sure how to handle it.

"Nate," he breathed, straightening slightly. He didn't back away. "This is a bad—"

"Yeah," I agreed, but my back wasn't against the wall anymore. My chest was flush against his, and when he inhaled, I felt every movement against my overheated skin, like he was sucking me in. "I know."

His forehead rolled against mine, and for a moment in time, everything became entirely unclear, but I'd never been more eager to dive into murky waters without knowing what sat under the surface. I had a fucking thing for Xavi, and denying it hadn't gotten me anywhere. He said he had a thing for me, too, and since I'd never been afraid to do anything in life as long as he was at my side, I wanted to do this. Figure it out. Stop denying it. Stop being mad at him for nothing. Fucking face it together like we faced everything.

He exhaled, his breath tickling my lips. "Nate, I—"

"Nate! Are you coming back?!" Miranda shouted through the locked patio door.

Xavi tensed as reality assaulted him, but it spurred me into action. I slid my hand to the back of his neck, held him right fucking there, and kissed him for real. My lips on his. His mouth on mine. Bodies pressed together. Dicks hard. The world paused, Xavi paused, sound stopped existing, and my heartbeat overtook everything else. I kissed him, waiting to see if he'd...

"Ah, fuck," he groaned.

He pushed into me, my shoulder blades hit the wall, and Xavi's hands slid around my lower back and pulled my hips forward while his chest pushed me back. And he fucking kissed me.

His mouth opened, and I goddamn moaned when his tongue met mine. I didn't know if it was finally getting a taste of something I'd wanted for a long time or if it was the feeling of reconnecting with Xavi after days of fighting, but it was the single most life-changing kiss, and it wasn't even that coordinated.

Xavi's teeth grazed my bottom lip, making my hips thrust against his. Our dicks rubbed together and the animalistic moan that escaped him made me feral.

"Fuck," I moaned.

Kissing him, feeling his body against mine, knowing that our desires were matched, even though we'd miscommunicated it, chased away the buzz I had and replaced it with a sobriety so pure I felt clairvoyant.

Until Miranda ruined it. "Nate! Hurry up!"

"Shit." Xavi pressed on my chest and pulled away. When he looked around, his chest heaved, his eyes blinked, and the sad state of our apartment with the chick banging on the door ruined it. "Shit," he said again, hand still on my chest.

"Don't freak out."

"I'm not freaking out," he sassed at me. "*You* don't freak out."

I laughed, and it felt damn good. "I'm not freaking out."

"Good."

"Nate!" God she was persistent. I'd used her, just like Devon told me not to use anyone. But it got a rise out of Xavi and brought us to this moment, so I couldn't really find my morals to regret it. I'd regret my actions later. Maybe.

"You gonna go... deal with her?" Xavi asked, dropping his hand from my chest. The motion brought his eyes down to his hips, and the hard-as-hell bulge in his boxers caught his

attention. I figured he might freak out about *that*, but instead, in true Xavi form, he grinned at me. “Told you I had a thing for you.”

“So does your dick.” I laughed.

He shoved me in the chest. “Fuck you. You’re no better.” He tapped his knuckles against my boner, and I straight up groaned.

This. This was how the conversation was supposed to go before I fucked it all up by getting mad at my own stupidity. “My dick has had a thing for you for... wait, maybe we shouldn’t talk about this until we’re sober. I’ve got a fucking monologue to give you that I should have given you days ago, but I got... embarrassed.”

“Nate!”

“I’m *busy!*” I shouted back. “Sorry!”

She cursed, then whined, then shrieked her friend’s name, so I figured we were good.

Xavi smirked, wrapped his arms around my neck, shamelessly pressed his hips to mine, and sighed. “I missed you.”

I hugged him back, and while there was a sexual undertone to the connection, it was all about relief. “No more fighting. We suck at it.”

“We aren’t our brothers,” he agreed. “You ruined my buzz, though.”

I pressed our stomachs together and wiggled my hips. “Did I?”

“My drunk buzz. Now I’m sober with a boner, and nothing is fun about that.” He pulled back. “And as much as I wanna make a ‘you deal with it’ joke, we should probably talk first.”

I nodded to agree. “Wanna get rid of all these people and watch *Teen Wolf* with me?”

“I don’t watch that shit,” he scoffed, trying to back up, but there was nowhere to go. “Who the fuck makes halls this

tight?”

I laughed. “Whoever added the storage rooms on as a shady addition. Plus, they’re useless because nothing worth storing fits down this hall.”

“Fire hazard, for sure,” he said, meaning two things. He smirked again, and when he shoved against my chest and finally managed to move past me, he said, “You’re on episode seven again because you fell asleep last time.”

“I knew you secretly loved teen werewolf dramas!”



WHEN THE SUN CAME UP AND I OPENED MY EYES TO FIND myself with a sore neck, a hard dick, and a lap full of chip crumbs, I groaned. Mostly because Devon and Maddox stared at me.

“What?” I croaked, feeling hungover even though Xavi had sobered me right up last night.

Xavi grumbled from the other end of the couch, his broken toe resting on the small table in front of us. “Out.”

“No. This is an intervention,” Devon said.

“You two never fight, and it’s making us fight,” Maddox barked.

Xavi looked at me, hitting me with an eye roll. “They suck at meddling.”

“I know, right? Like, did they learn nothing from us?” I shook my head at our brothers. “We got them to share a bed, and this is all they can do?”

“Fucking rookies,” Xavi said, pushing himself into a sitting position. “My toe has a heartbeat.”

“Wait, so you’re good?” Devon asked.

“Did you fuck?” Maddox bluntly blurted at the same time.

I tried to cover my hard-on, mostly just to be somewhat modest, but it was far too late for that. All my joints popped and cracked as I stood up, and I frowned at the TV. “Aww, did we miss episode nine?”

“What the fuck is going on?” Maddox asked. “You’re good?”

“And what do you mean you got us to share a bed?” Devon asked, already enraged before the sun was fully up.

Xavi laughed, corkscrewing his finger to remind me of the squiggly pube night. Gross. I could still fucking feel it in my mouth. He trimmed that shit now, and I wondered what they’d feel like against my face. Wait, what?

“You two are fucking gullible. That’s what we mean.” He put on a dramatic show of wincing in pain as he got to his feet. “I gotta piss.” He started for the hallway, but I was already there. “Uh, maybe we avoid tight spaces until...” He looked at our brothers and raised a brow. “You leaving?”

“I told you they’d be fine,” Maddox chirped at Devon. “You owe me forty bucks.”

“Fuck you, Maddox. They aren’t fine.” Devon looked at us. “Something is going on.”

I let Xavi disappear down the hallway to pee, so I just went out back and peed off the deck. That waterlogged piece of paper about community service was still wedged under the bottom of an old coffee mug, but I was far too lazy to bring it inside. If it was important, I guess we’d find out.

“Why are you still here?” I asked Maddox and Devon when I got back inside. “I thought you were over your workaholic days,” I teased Devon.

“Excuse me for worrying,” he scoffed. “But when one of you shows up at our place with broken toes and a bloody nose, and the other won’t talk about it, it’s a pretty big deal, Nate. What’s going on?”

“We just had a little... snafu. Nothing to worry about.”

“Do you even know what that word means?” Maddox asked.

“Like a situation?”

Devon groaned under his breath, so clearly, I’d gotten it wrong. “It means your normal situation is all fucked up, and if that’s your stasis, fine, but this new level of fucked up ain’t right. So spill it.” He looked at me. “Is this about what you told me?”

“How do you know more about words than me?” I asked. “I do the crossword.”

“He tried to read a war book once,” Maddox said.

“Spill, Nate!”

I ignored him and started making coffee in the old drip brew pot that came with the place. “Look, while you’re here, we need to talk about one of us actually getting a mechanic licence so we can be legit and work with insurance claims.”

“Not it,” Xavi called, walking out of the bathroom in a pair of sweat-shorts, which were just sweatpants that he’d cut into shorts, and they looked trashy and terrible, but weirdly hot. They weren’t even cut evenly.

“Devon?”

Devon scoffed, leaning against Maddox. “Hell no.”

“Come on, Dev. It’s like a few hours of class once a month and the rest is hands-on.”

That did the trick because Devon shoved Maddox from behind like he’d been the one to suggest school. Then they were gone. None of us were scholars, and I didn’t really give a shit if we actually had a certified small engine mechanic or not, but at least it got them to leave. We still needed to decide on a business name, though. We were running under a number for the time being. *Customers don’t remember numbers.*

Xavi, never one for subtleties, sauntered over in his cut-offs, braced both hands on the counter, and looked right at me. “We gonna talk about the fact that we got wedged in a tiny-ass hallway and made out?”

This was why our friendship worked. This was also why I'd fucked it up by getting mad that night. "It wasn't a make-out," I huffed, grinning. "Barely a kiss." *Best kiss of my damn life.*

"A kiss that made your dick hard," he fired back, taking the coffee I'd made for myself. "My dick's still hard."

The counter blocked my view, but I tried to look, and he noticed. I shook my head and made another coffee.

Xavi grabbed my pack of smokes, my almost dead lighter, and the pack of gum he carried around for me, and then he walked to the patio door. "Come on, Nate. No more running."

Thank fuck for that.

CHAPTER 10

XAVI

NATE GAGGED A BIT, BUT HE TRIED TO HIDE IT. HE HAD A weird mix of spearmint, coffee, and cigarettes fighting for dominance of his taste buds, and I knew they were all winning.

Coffee might have been the only thing in my mouth, but all the words I wanted to blurt about that kiss burned hotter than this brew. I tried to rein them in, keep them under lock and key, and not spew a bunch of new fantasies that had sprung to mind because we needed to talk about the logistics of the kiss. Not how hard it made me. He accused me of not caring about our friendship, and that shit hurt, so I wanted to do this right and make sure he knew he was the most important thing to me.

“Real talk?” I asked him.

Nate took a drag, coughed, chased it with a sip of coffee, and refused to spit the gum out because I’d given it to him. He nodded. “I have a thing for you.”

“What’s it mean?” I asked, ready to get to the root of this with the only person in the world I felt comfortable around. “A thing?”

Nate turned his body towards me, the lawn chair groaning. “Okay, so you know how you ran into Andrea at the store and she made you buy shitty rum?”

“Yeah.”

“And she told you I had to tell you something?”

“Yeah.”

“It was that. She caught on a long time ago. She knew I... she thought I wanted you more than I wanted Kaylee. Or even her that night we tried.” He took a breath while my mind blew, and my heart blew harder. “And she was right.”

“Nathan fucking Sawyer!” I squawked like an idiot who was way too happy to hear that confession. “You had a thing for me all the way back then?”

He laughed and sort of blushed. “It... yeah. Like... okay, let me lay it out for you in a language you speak.”

“What language?”

“*Vampire Diaries*.”

“I do not watch that shit, Nate!”

“It’s like Elena and the brothers, right? She’s got a thing for both, but she’s all wishy-washy. Well, I stopped being wishy-washy a long time ago, cut Elena out of the picture, and then there were two brothers who were best friends, and I didn’t know what to do about it because... because I didn’t want to fuck up our friendship. I think that’s why I blew up on you that night. I spent a year freaking out about you finding out, and then you just... said it like it was nothing, and I felt like the idiot everyone calls me for making a big deal out of nothing.”

Well, hated him for making me watch vampire shows, but I understood what he was saying. “A year?”

“A year.” He nodded. “Can I spit the gum out?”

“No. You lied to me for a year, so fuck you.”

He chugged some coffee and swallowed it instead. “Don’t lock up on me now, Xavi.”

“I’m thinking of a response that won’t make you hate me.” I laughed. “Because as much as I love that you freaked out about it because of our friendship, I’m also kinda pissed off that you accused me of not caring, and then thought our friendship wouldn’t survive the truth. We’re better than that, no?”

Even though I was the world's biggest hypocrite because I'd had that very same chat with Maddox and claimed our friendship was too important to risk. I'd rather not tell Nate that, though. One of us had to be forward, and I'd have no problem taking the role if he wanted to be the hesitant one. We took turns being responsible, and it'd been working for us for years, so this was no different.

"Fuck you a little bit, Xav!" He laughed. "Our friendship has never been tested this way. It's always been friendship, and now it's... friendship with more."

"Mm, keep speaking romance to me, Nate. Define more." I smiled at him.

He gawked at me like a carp. "Really? You're just fucking dandy with this?"

"I'm acting the same way I always act. Thrown into a situation, not really understanding it, and then making fun of it."

"Well, add another step on the end there, bud. Process it." He looked at me, getting a bit shy. "You said you couldn't picture doing life without me, and that shit rumbles with me."

"Resonates."

"No. Rumbles. Hard. In my gut and my chest and makes me vibrate because nothing has ever sounded more right. And all this time, I figured we'd be that person for each other, and then I freaked out a bit when you said you wanted to move forward in life and start thinking about a future and kids and all that bullshit."

"A *maybe* kid that is more of a *meh* kid who probably won't happen because I don't really want the *meh* kid. I just wanna be someone's role model because of the shit I've been through. You know?"

He grinned.

"But in my head, while I was saying all that, it was you I pictured doing it all with. And since we had the threesome thing going on, I figured we'd do it together with someone else, too. Then weird things started happening, and I'll call it

jealousy even though it was more like... wait, is there another word for it? Okay then, jealousy, but I just never thought the sexy times could be added in there with just us, you know?”

“And now they can?” Nate asked. “The sexy things?”

I leaned back in my chair, spread my legs, and let him get a good look at the crotch of my sweatshorts. “You’re my best friend, and now you make me hard. I trust you more than I trust anyone, and I have so much confidence in our bond that I don’t even think this can fuck it up. Maybe I’m dumb, but being dumb gives me the balls to want to try shit with you.”

“Are we casually talking about sex while drinking minty gum coffee?”

“My coffee ain’t minty.”

Nate laughed. “Really?” He narrowed his eyes at me, and then his lips pursed when he figured out his role. “Oh, fuck no, Xavi! No!”

I laughed. “Too late. You cast yourself in this role when you accused me of not caring about our friendship.”

He groaned and scrubbed his hands down his face. “I don’t want to have to be the responsible one for this. Switch roles with me.”

“Nope. You got mad at me, so this is your punishment. You have to think while I just get to act.” I smirked at him. “Fucking sucks being the responsible one, doesn’t it? This is payback for the time you made me be the mature one at that beach rave thing. You had the time of your life and I had to follow you around and carry your purse.”

“It was a fanny pack, and it had all my important things in it.”

It had a spare pair of underwear in case he had any mishaps, a sandy tube of ChapStick because his lips had been sunburned at the time, and a prepaid phone that was dead when we got there. Pretty sure he could have survived without all that, but he wouldn’t let me unclip that fanny pack from my waist, and to be honest, I rocked it.

“Okay, get on with the responsible questions, Nate. Think one up while I fill our coffees.” I grabbed his cup and headed inside.

I was freaking out a bit. This thing for Nate started because of a sex arrangement we had going on, and I never thought he’d be the one to capture my attention more than the girl. It brought me back to my ‘dab’ll do ya, sliding scale gay’ chat with Maddox, and I wondered if sexualities just morphed depending on current needs, vibes, and situations. Nate had been in my life since we were *little bebes*, and never, not even once, had I looked at him sexually.

Wait. Maybe once.

“Hey, Nate!” I shouted, pouring coffee into our mugs. There wasn’t enough left for two whole cups, so I gave myself more and filled his with extra hot water that he wouldn’t notice because his mouth was minty anyway. “Remember that drunk game of truth or dare we played with a bunch of fuckups in high school?”

“The one where Denis shitstain Donaldson dared me to lick your sack?” he shouted back.

“And you did it,” I laughed. “And my dick got hard from it.”

“That’s because you were sixteen and the way your jeans rubbed made your dick hard.”

True. A light breeze could have gotten me off back then. Actually did one time when we were on a boat, and I had to wear cum-slicked swim shorts for a whole hour before I could jump in the ocean and rinse them out. A fanny pack of spare underwear would have been nice that day.

I took the coffees outside, slipped on some shades now that the sun was glaring at us, and handed him his. “Did you think of a responsible question?”

“More of a statement,” he said, sipping the coffee, hiding his eyes behind his own shades. He looked at his mug, frowned, and then carried on. “We live together, work together, do everything together, and sometimes even sleep

together. If shit gets awkward, our whole lives will be awkward. Plus, our brothers are married, so shit's risky, right?"

Fair point. "So, let's make a deal. No more running. No more being awkward. No more lying because we're afraid of shit. Or afraid of ourselves, more like. We figure things out as we go, and we never let it ruin what we already have. More like a build onto what we've got type thing, you know?"

"What exactly is it we're figuring out, Xav?" He laughed. "Sexy things or emotional things?"

I grinned into my non-watered-down coffee, not having a clear answer to that, but also not being too afraid of the implications of figuring it all out. All the things.

"Just think of me as your cellmate. You're doing twenty-five-to-life with me, and since we're locked up together, we might as well fuck. Boom. Simple."

Nate choked on his shitty coffee. "What? You're just gonna drop a fuck into this conversation like you have any idea what you're talking about?"

"Maddox said he tripped and found out where his dick was supposed to go. I like to think we're more graceful than that." I shrugged.

He snorted. "No, we're not. But since I have to be the responsible one, you have first pick at sex positions when our cell doors click closed every night. Take the responsibility off me on that one."

Mmm. Fair deal. "Fine. No more wardens though, okay?"

"Wardens?"

"Yeah. People influencing us. No more Andrea telling who to say what. No more of our brothers' backward meddling. No more *life* telling us we have to be on some damn clock, you know? We've always figured out our own shit, so let's just stick with what we know."

Nate laughed. "What we know, eh? Because we know so much about this?"

I had every confidence we'd figure it out. Plus, if Maddox and Devon could figure it out, there was hope for anyone. And I wasn't even that terrified of it. Maybe I should have been.

We both sat in silence to finish the rest of our coffees. He had another smoke, and then he chewed a piece of gum. Pretty sure the gum was supposed to prevent the cigarette, but whatever; he tried. Sometimes.

The silence was the weirdest part about the morning because we weren't the silent type together. I was quiet on my own, but Nate was the only person who made me comfortable enough to open my mouth so often. The gears and cogs of my mind cranked together, getting stuck on unclear things but not really giving a shit, so they kept on grinding.

"I feel like there's more responsible shit I should be bringing up," he said after a while.

"Yeah. Something for sure." Couldn't really say what. There were a million things to figure out, but we'd get to them when they happened.

Nate snapped his fingers. "Got it! We should get sex tests."

"STI tests?" I asked; he nodded. "We do that all the time." I laughed. "Pretty sure we've had one every few months for... years." They were free at the same clinic as the nicotine gum, and I loved nothing more than taking handouts whenever they were offered. Hell, for a year there, I even chewed this disgusting gum just because it was cheaper than store-bought gum.

"Oh, right. Didn't know if there were new ones we should get." He nodded, bummed that he hadn't thought of anything responsible. "HIV?"

"Yep." I snapped my fingers at him. "That one. Let's do it."

"Oh! I have a better idea!"

I loved when he had better ideas because they were always terrible. "Hit me with it."

“We fuck with Devon and Maddox about it.” He smirked like the daredevil I knew he was.

I straight up rolled my eyes at that.

“What? Not a good idea?”

I stood up and grabbed my mug. “*Obviously*, we are fucking with Madd and Dev about it. Hate that you even had to ask.” I nudged him on my way by, and even though this felt really good, I had no idea how we were just going to turn things sexual.

We’d been doing sexy things together for a while, but crossing the line between watching to touching was... well, my dick was hard and my mind was fucked, so there was that. Maybe I should get someone to just dare him to lick my sack again? *Now there’s a meddle for my brother to participate in.*

CHAPTER 11

NATE

I'D NEVER MUCH CARED THAT WE SHARED A STORAGE ROOM AS a bedroom and only had two mattresses on the floor because the hallway wouldn't fit an actual bed frame, but it bothered me now. This place was not fit for a water-dispensing fridge, and for the first time in maybe forever, I wanted to have that place worthy of Xavi's dream.

I blinked away the sleep fog and looked over at Xavi's mattress. Asleep on his stomach, blankets kicked down to pool around his ankles, and his bad toe hanging off the end, his body was on display enough for me to perv on it for a quick sec.

He had that Kane tanned skin tone, but just below the dimples of his lower back, a perfectly straight tan line drew a boundary between where I could normally look and where I wasn't supposed to want to. Since our chat about 'things' and being cellmates, I figured I could peruse freely now. I rolled onto my side to check him out and try to understand when hard muscles, bad tats, and scars started looking better than soft curves and tits.

It might have happened that night he was a dominant animal way back when. I'd seen him get rowdy, but that was the first night I saw him blur the lines between dominantly playful and daringly challenging. It was with Kaylee, and she'd been mad at him for something I couldn't remember. Instead of him taking a scolding, he dared her to do better. She tried to dominate him, but he'd put her in place every goddamn time while making her feel like she had enough

power to keep trying. I didn't know what it was about that night, but I found myself wondering what it'd feel like to be Kaylee. To be on the receiving end of his authority. To feel the way he empowered me while taking charge. Things shifted around a bit then—my sexuality most of all—and it'd been the start of this whole *thing* I had for him.

Looking at him now, I gave him credit for having so much depth despite how simple-minded people wanted to believe he was. Xavi could be soft and funny one second and hard and brutal the next. He could be powerful and empowering, serious and lackadaisical, brilliant and dumb. It was his ability to morph his persona depending on who he was around and what the situation was that really impressed me.

I had one setting: me. Lost, unfocused, non-serious, and loyal. That was my basic setting. An anger flare-up happened from time to time, I blew up about things because I sucked at processing information and feelings, and I usually tried to find the light in everything, but at my base level, I was just a fuck up with no idea what I was doing.

Not Xavi. He got grouped into that type because of his association with me, but he was a guy who thought about things without realizing he was thinking about them. He knew how to react to an outside force and adapt to it better than I did. When Maddox was in jail, Xavi took charge and did whatever it took to get shit done. Me? I just worried about my brother and did whatever Xavi told me to do.

In most cases throughout my life, I felt like a failure who only had the odd win because Xavi pushed me over the finish line. Now I needed to buck up and get a win all on my own so I could be someone worthy of more than his friendship.

Because... *fuck*. I wanted more. I wanted him to be mine somehow.

Look at that body! Dark hair and tanned skin. Defined muscle but a lack of bulk because he ate like shit. Scars I could match to memories and the terribly done, faded blue spiderweb tattoos on his elbows because he thought they were cool when he was seventeen. They weren't cool then, and they

were less cool now, but he rocked them with pride because he paid for them with literal blood and sweat. They'd been a bet he placed at Garron Fight Night. He'd put his brand-new work boots on the line, and the guy he fought had put tattoos up for winnings. Xavi was scrawny back then, but he wanted the tattoos really badly, so he took a beating until I gave him a pep talk, and then he won the fight and beamed a bloody smile at the world.

Same guy did Devon's skull tattoo in the shed behind his mom's trailer. They were both... just so shitty.

But they were a part of him, and looking at them now, I loved that I was there for the whole memory. I looked higher, taking in the single hemp necklace he wore. It matched one of his many bracelets, and I was pretty sure he hadn't taken it off in years. It would disintegrate into nothing eventually, but he still loved it. Maybe I'd learn to make him a new one somehow. His dark hair was longer than usual, covering half his neck and sticking up in some spots while plastered to his head in others.

"I can feel you creeping on me," he said in a groggy voice. "Carry on." He cocked his knee out, giving me a better view of his ass. Black boxer-briefs hugged his cheeks and outlined his balls. "Tight, right? I've been doing squats."

Was I allowed to crawl across the floor and get up on him? "When do you do squats?"

"I did like seven squats last week," he said, turning to face me. He winced when his toe hit the mattress. "Did they work?"

"Mhm." I licked my lips. "Eight would have been better."

"No time for eight," Xavi said, grinning at me like a cute fucker. "Is this weird?"

"Does it feel weird?"

He shook his head and tucked his hand under his cheek. "My dick is hard."

"My back is sore. Are we just saying random shit?"

“I’m trying to entice you into touching it without making it weird.”

Simply by saying that, he made it weird, but I kind of loved it. I rolled onto my back and looked up at the peeling ceiling. “Well, like I said, my back is sore, so if you want me to—”

My mattress dipped when Xavi crawled on, straddling my legs. He sat right on my dick and pressed his ass against it, making me groan. “Well, I have a broken toe, but you don’t hear me bitching.” He looked down at me, smiling. “Oh no! I tripped! Wonder where my dick will end up.” He rocked on my lap and my hands went up his thighs. “Can you picture me up here like this? Riding dick?”

Didn’t take much to picture it, to be honest. My cock was restrained by my tight underwear, but it still slotted between his ass cheeks. Xavi bounced a bit, getting a feel for it. When his lips shifted from smirking to parting in awe, I tightened my fingers and dug them into his skin.

“Are we gonna skip the foreplay part and go straight to fucking? Because we’ve barely kissed, and it’s taking me a hot sec to switch from best friends to... you sitting on my dick.” I watched him, nervous but excited. We didn’t skip the awkward phase. We created it. And lived in it. This was like waking up in an episode of the *Twilight Zone*. I’d never seen the show—read the blurb, figured it’d go over my head—but I thought it was about being in strange realities, and this was definitely a strange reality. One that should have felt weird as shit, but the weird part felt right. We were familiar with being in random scenarios together, but instead of this one feeling daunting, it was taunting.

“Nah,” Xavi said, hands landing on my pecs. “Kinda wanna lick a dick first.”

“A dick?”

“*Your* dick. Or do you prefer cock? I’m still working out the gay lingo.”

I didn't care what he called it as long as he wanted it. I'd never really been wanted before. Sure, I managed a sex life just fine, but I mostly gave credit to him for that. Now I knew what it felt like to be the focus of his attention, and fuck, I was afraid to get a little too comfy there.

"How do we just turn things sexy?" I asked. "I mean, this is pretty sexy, but I feel like we're floating in the ocean, forgetting we need to either swim or tread."

"That was so philosophical."

"I know." I nodded to a calendar taped to the wall that had it quoted. "You feel good up there."

"I can tell." He ground down on my hardening cock. "But I don't know what to do about it," he admitted.

Yeah, me neither. I was a fairly forward person, but this was new territory. Wanting Xavi and actually being able to have him was the newest, but also... I knew next to nothing about gay sex. Gay anything. Gay logistics. I wasn't gonna freak out about it like Maddox did—fuck, did we laugh behind his back—but I was confident enough in *not* being confident to admit to it.

"I don't know how to be gay. Should we watch porn?" I asked.

"No. We should flounder around and fuck it all up because it'll make it funner," Xavi said, grinning.

"Right now?" I lifted my ass off the mattress at the same time Xavi ground down. I groaned because all it accomplished was squishing my dick. "Yeah, so fun to flounder."

"Assholes!" Maddox shouted, the apartment door banging open. "Shop opens in three minutes. The fuck are you doing?"

Xavi looked at me. "He has no chill. He doesn't even work here."

"Okay, so we're just gonna fuck this all up and find out?" I shifted my eyes from his swallowing throat to his hard dick. The way his thighs spread open to straddle me. The dips and ridges of his abs caught my attention more than his dick.

Mostly because they were sexy, and I couldn't remember a time when I thought abs were sexy.

“Yeah,” Xavi agreed. “Welcome to our bi-awakening, Nate. It's gonna be fun!”

“Jesus fuck,” Maddox complained, standing in the doorway. “Gotta be naked for that to work, dipshits.”

“I beg to differ,” Xavi said. “Working just fine for me already. Do I look good up here, Madd?”

Maddox cringed. “You ever ask me that again, I'll knock you out. Hurry up. Devon is late because he's stupid and had to run back home. People are waiting outside.”

“Dare Nate to lick my balls,” Xavi said to Maddox, who just turned and walked away. “Guess we'll fuck it up and find out later.” Xavi laughed, climbing off me.



“IF YOU'RE HERE TO ROB US, CAN YOU AT LEAST LET ME TAKE pictures of everything before you steal it?” I said to a random person standing at the workbench with all our tools. Xavi had gone outside to deal with a customer, and we hadn't even opened the shop doors yet, but somehow, this one got in.

The person turned around with a weird smile. Wait. Not a person. A fucking teen. And everyone knew teens weren't really people. They were demons in disguise, on their way to deciding if they wanted to be full-grown devils in adulthood.

“What?” she asked, gawking at me with big eyes and a gap between her giant front teeth.

“What're... who are you? Why are you here?” I set my PB&J—heavier on the PB—down and faced the threat fully. I even puffed my chest a bit because like fuck would I let a teenager get one over on me. I'd been dealing with Devon's juvenile ass for years, so I could handle this random one. “Are you robbing us?”

“Do I look like I’m robbing you?” she asked.

I studied her. She was definitely a teenager, but she dressed like a grandma. Was that a muumuu? Her Jesus sandals were way too big for her feet, her dirt-brown hair looked like it had birds living in it, and she was filthy. Like, so dirty that her pale skin was splotched with dark greasy spots that matched the ones on her muumuu. Why the fuck was her gap tooth so cute? It had no right to be!

“Yes, actually. You’re in my shop, staring at my tools, and I don’t trust teenagers.” I gave her a menacing glare that did nothing but widen her big smile. “So, can you Photoshop? Maybe we can add name brands to the tools you steal? Split the difference?”

She ignored me. “Hello, I’m Karen.”

Great. A teenager called Karen. Could there be any more red flags?

She thrust a piece of paper at me, and it made me uneasy to take my eyes off her long enough to read it. It was a damn resume.

“Karen Clark. Mission statement: righting the reputation of Karens everywhere.” *What the?* I glanced at her. “Ha! Good luck.”

“Thank you,” she said, beaming. “It’s tough work, but someone has to do it.”

“So, you aren’t robbing us?”

She looked around. “You aren’t really worth robbing, to be honest.”

Just as I was about to tell her to go fuck herself, or whatever the age-appropriate equivalent was, Xavi busted through the door.

“Nate!” he yipped like a Chihuahua. “Guess what? Remember that form that smacked you in the face, and I said we had some meeting with some person at some time? Well, today’s the—Hey!” He smiled widely at Karen. “Welcome!”

“Welcome?” I scoffed. “She’s robbing us.”

Xavi frowned. “On your first day?”

Karen’s eyeballs pinged between the two of us, the same dirt brown as her bird hair. Xavi smacked me, so I smacked him back, and Karen smacked the both of us.

“I’m not robbing you. Gosh, you two need to be more trusting.”

Clearly, she didn’t grow up here.

“Oh, good. You’ve met.” Some uptight business lady in a pantsuit that looked worse than Karen’s granny dress walked in the front door. “Hi, I’m Ariel. The caseworker. You must be Nate or Devon, since I met Xavi outside.” She held out her tiny, manicured hand.

I shook it, trying not to get it dirty. “Uh, Nate. What?”
Caseworker?

“Community service,” Xavi whispered. “Apparently, the guy who owned it before us signed up for this program because it gave him a government rebate, and now we’re, like, set up to guide delinquents. Karen is our first one! I feel so grown up.”

I shifted my eyes to Karen, who did not look the least bit like a delinquent despite my former accusations. She looked like she spent time in the library and cooked rice pudding on Saturday nights. Probably had a Siamese fighting fish named Bob, too. No matter how adult Xavi felt, we weren’t qualified for this.

“So, babysitting?” I asked.

“No.” Ariel laughed like I was joking. “It’s an outreach program. Karen gets work experience that counts towards her high school education credits, and you guys get to write it off as a tax deductible. It’s essentially a co-op program for youth who are reintegrating into society after being at a facility for some time. She’ll be here a few hours every day, and you guys get to show her the ropes.” Ariel looked at me. “I sent the forms. Did you not get them?”

“Yeah. They were all up in my face,” I told her. “Just forgot when it started.”

Karen giggled like a fucking loser at my lie, but I kind of liked it because I was a loser, too. “Today!”

Why was she so happy? Happiest criminal I’d ever met. “So, you come pick her up when she’s done slaving for the day?”

“There’s a bus back to Redding she can take. You’re expected back at your house by 6 PM, Karen.”

Karen breathed in through her nose, exhaled something like frustration, and slapped the smile back on her face. “I’ll be there.”

Then Ariel left. Straight up left us alone with a teen girl. Hadn’t she ever seen a goddamn movie? Sketchy, lowlife poor guys didn’t get left alone with teenage girls. My god. I stared at Karen and she stared back. Xavi looked like he wanted to hug her, but he refrained. I had no idea what to do with a girl. But we stared for so long that Devon walked in the front door with his forgotten lunch. I was about to tell him not to freak out, but he just held out a fist for Karen. She bumped it and gave him a smile.

“I’ll show ya around while these two find their balls.”

“Excellent,” she said, following him.

Guess he read the damn paper. Since when was he more responsible than me? I didn’t like it.

Xavi stared after them. “Her gap-teeth,” he said.

“Cute as fuck,” I agreed.

“Her smile.”

“Creepy as shit. Demonic, really. Who smiles that much?”

“We do,” Xavi said, laughing. “Nate,” he whispered, staring at the door Devon led her through. “I get to be a role model.”

A swell of something warm filled my chest. His wishy-washy dreams were coming true, and Karen, that little muumuu-wearing devil, was the luckiest person alive to have Xavi in her life.

“You’ll nail it, Xav.” I wrapped my arm around him. “How hard can it be? We raised our brothers.”



TURNED OUT IT WAS REALLY FUCKING HARD. BY THE TIME WE dropped Karen off at home because Xavi wanted to drive her to Redding, she missed her curfew, and we got in shit for it. Xavi tried explaining the temperamental truck, but the bitchy lady with saggy tits and a pinched face figured we were bullshitting her. Until she stood there for another twenty minutes, watching us try to get the truck started. How do you like them apples, Pinchy?

Most of the world lived by the ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ mantra, but I’d always liked to play the ‘if it works more than half the time, don’t fuck with it’ game. This old girl was close to dropping below those odds, but like fuck I had the money to get a new truck. I had a fridge to save up for. Plus, I had a pair of rollerblades in storage somewhere, so if things went to shit, I’d bust them out to get around.

“Alright!” I clapped my hands together on our way home, trying to get Xavi out of his bad mood after he realized Karen lived in a group home that was falling apart. But only for three more months until her time was up and she got to go home to her mom. “Option one, we hit the Garron Park BBQ for free hotdogs.”

“Pass. Last time they were chicken dogs and tasted like shit.” Xavi shivered in remembrance. “Beaks and brains and shit.”

“Fair. Option two, we hit up Old Man Hank for another bottle of moonshine and those beans n’ weens he’s been slow cooking in his shed all day.”

“Don’t feel like getting a shotgun shell in the ass tonight. We could mooch off my parents.”

“Nah, I can only handle your mom’s cooking once a week. Maybe once a fortnight now that she’s putting even less effort in. Option three, we could bring cheap salads to Madd and Devon’s and hope it makes them feel guilty enough to cook the rest of the meal.”

“Yeah. That one. Option three,” he said.

Sold. I pulled out my pack of cigarettes, knowing I’d need to make a run to the Reservation soon for a new carton. I mean, I should quit. I started smoking as a way to cope with the stress of keeping my brother alive around my dad, but those days were over, and he had Maddox for that now. Other than wanting to get sexy with my bestie and having no idea how to do that, I didn’t have a ton of stress in my life.

Silently, Xavi tossed a packet of half-squished nicotine gum onto my lap. If I chewed the free gum and saved up all my cigarette money, I could get Xavi his fridge in... five to seven years. Maybe. My cigs were the cheapest I could get without going to rollies, so yeah, it’d take me a good term to save up for Xavi’s big dream.

But I wanted to deliver. There was a bonfire inside me that burned with urgency, wanting me to be the one standing there, looking at expensive refrigerators with him while a salesperson said words we didn’t listen to. Something about efficiency and warranties and electric outputs that went right over our heads because Xavi’s eyes would be glowing emerald green at all the ice makers.

I chewed the gum. Xavi grinned, leaning back in the driver’s seat with one hand on top of the steering wheel. Since when did he get so sexy driving? His biceps were bigger than mine, and the corded muscles in his forearms were all embedded with veins and... yeah, manly forearms were hotter than I’d previously known. Even the worn bracelets and spiderwebs on his elbows were hot. Goddamn, what was wrong with me? Half the lines barely linked up.

“What?” he asked, parking at the back of the grocery store lot in case we needed a boost.

“You have sexy arms,” I said.

“Yeah?” he asked, turning his arms over. “I always wanted knuckle tats.”

I laughed. Knuckle tats and a fridge. His dreams were growing. “What would you get tatted on them?”

He hopped out, hip-checked the door, and grabbed a potato sack he was using as a grocery bag these days. “Xavi on the left,” he said. “Nate on the right.” He grinned.

I laughed. “What? Why me on the right?” The sliding doors opened, granting us access to the store like we were trailer park royalty.

“I’m a righty,” he said, heading down the produce aisle. “So whenever I jerk it, I’ll be doing it with your hand.”

My mouth gaped and my boner popped. “Shit, Xav. You know I can just use my real hand, right?”

“Can you?” he asked, brow lifted and grin widening. That was a dare if I’d ever heard one.

My neck flushed and I covered my dick. “Right here?” I glanced around, trying to dare him back. “Lettuce turn you on?”

“You hiding a boner in my jeans turns me on.” He grabbed a discount container of potato salad. *Best before today, perfect.*

I looked down, my boner concealed. “I won these jeans in that game of Go-Fish we played.” I grabbed a bag of coleslaw and a bottle of no-name dressing. “Stop deflecting. Are we talking handies in the produce aisle?”

“I’m talking handies. You’re teasing them. Can you put your hand where your mouth is?”

Could probably put my mouth there too, if I was being honest. I’d never salivated for a dick before, maybe because I’d refused to let myself think about it too much, but now that it was out there in the open air of the grocery store, my mouth watered.

Xavi pressed his fingers under my chin, closing my mouth. “Come on, daredevil. Time to play a game.”

CHAPTER 12

XAVI

I HAD MY ANSWER ABOUT HOW TO TURN THINGS SEXY WITHOUT making them awkward. Well, they'd probably be awkward anyway, but my idea was all about enticing him. Because if there was one thing Nate never backed down from, it was a dare.

While Maddox grumped about cooking and Devon got in his way, I listened to Maddox growl and eye-fucked Nate without hiding it. When Devon *did not* get out of his way, and Maddox growled louder, I pressed my thigh against Nate's, drawing his attention to my lap.

"Thirsty?" Nate asked, holding out his can of lemonade to me.

"So thirsty." I took it, tilting the can to my lips.

Nate's forearm landed right on my dick, using the excuse to pet Gnat on my other side. "What for? Something sweet?"

"Are you seriously trying to get me to say something salty?" I asked. Nate grinned but didn't confirm it. "Okay, something salty. Gonna give it to me?"

Nate's shifty eyes scanned the kitchen where Maddox was about to pummel Devon for fucking up the spaghetti. Potato salad, coleslaw, and spaghetti. Mmm. He leaned over even more, elbow pressing right on my dick. "I'm trying to be sexy. Is it working?"

Oh, it was working, and I was ready to do something about it. "You—"

“You two are pathetic,” Devon scoffed, ruining my vibe.

Nate coughed, leaning back. “What? Why?”

Gnat got up and sat right at Maddox’s feet while he cooked. “Because you forgot the tripping part. You’re trying to dive into each other’s dick, and that’s not how it works.”

“The fucking audacity!” Nate shouted, standing. “For all the bullshit you two put us through, you’re gonna sit there and call us pathetic? *Please*. You can shove your cock-minding advice up your own ass.” Nate grabbed my arm, and I shared a grin with Maddox as I let my best friend lead me wherever the hell he wanted to take me.

They were subtle about it, but they were meddling. Pissed Nate off enough to take us somewhere private, and I knew that’s what their plan was. About fucking time they were useful.

Outside, with the mosquitos, the sand, and the fading sun, was where he took me. He dropped my wrist outside the front door, slipped on the step Maddox was still fixing, but gracefully fell the rest of the way down.

“Look,” he said, running his hands through his hair. “I think we skipped a few steps when we had that responsible chat about sex tests and fanny packs!”

Fucking loved a good Nate freakout. “What steps?”

“The step where we figure out what the hell we’re doing and what we’re cool with, Xav!” He threw his arms out wide. “Think we skipped the whole part about teasing and taunting... and what the fuck comes after the teasing and the taunting, because now I’m standing here with a hard dick and a fucked mind, thinking about blowjobs and salty drinks, and holy mindfuck! I wanna do some shit, but my mind is dirtier than we agreed on letting it be, so what am I allowed—”

I fisted a handful of Nate’s hair, yanking his head back until his blue eyes blinked up at me. He gasped and his cheeks turned pink, but when he met my eyes, he gave me a devilish look that rivalled the demon currently controlling me.

“Oh,” he whispered, grinning just a bit. “It’s like that, yeah?”

I licked my lips. “It is.” Because I was more than willing to take charge here. I was done fucking around, feeling weird about this, letting time fly by while I wasted it not trying the things I wanted to try with him. I sat on his lap this morning, felt his hard cock against my ass, and thoughts had been stewing ever since. “You buckle under pressure, bud. I won’t let you anymore.”

“Shit, you’re hot when you’re bossy.”

“What’re you gonna do, Nate? We aren’t drunk. You aren’t taunting me with a chick on your lap. We aren’t having a staring contest with Kaylee between us. And we aren’t wedged in a tight hallway.” There it was. The dare he wouldn’t back down from.

He laughed diabolically. “You think I’m gonna fold because there’s no outside pressure?” he scoffed. He hooked his fingers into the waistband of my jeans, pulling my body against his. “Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

I let go of his hair. “Kiss me.”

Nate didn’t hesitate, but he also didn’t give in. Leaning against me, he brushed his lips over mine, fooling me into trying to kiss him before he dipped his head and grazed his lips against my jaw. My throat. My ear.

“Kiss you where, Xavi?” His hands on my waist made me shiver.

This smart bastard. I grabbed his hair again, took a moment to debate how bold I wanted to be, and then slightly chickened out. Instead of pushing him down, I pulled him up until our lips were barely touching.

“Here.”

Nate bit me. His teeth tugged on my bottom lip, his fingers dug into my sides, and his hips pressed against mine. “Here?”

I bit him back and then forced his mouth open with mine. There’d been a lot of times over the past two years that I

watched Nate completely rile up some chick with a kiss. Now I understood it. His lips parted on a moan and his tongue hit mine, a barely stifled groan adding a level of heat that the humidity couldn't touch. Because Nate didn't just kiss. He fucking taunted and teased, gave in just enough to make me want more, drove me goddamn crazy by expertly riding that line between giving and taking.

"Fuck, Nate," I groaned. "You fucking tease."

"Isn't this what you wanted?" he asked, rubbing all over me.

"More."

"Like this?" He smoothed his hand over my cock, pressing against it hard enough to make me stumble back a step. I growled at him, rocking against his hand until he grinned against my lips.

"I fucking dare you, Nate."

"Right now?"

"Right now."

He popped the button of my jeans open, darting his tongue out to lick his lips, managing to lick mine in the process. He pushed me until my back hit the side of the house, and then I moaned, long and loud, when his hand reached into my pants. For the first time, Nate touched my dick on purpose. No accidental grazes or misplaced hands. He grabbed my cock in a fist, kissed me one more time, and then pulled back enough to watch my face.

His eyes were glazed, and his lips were shiny with spit, parted in a half-smirk. "Gonna freak out?" he asked, slowly stroking me.

"Yeah," I said, grabbing the back of his neck. "Unless you go faster."

Nate picked up his pace, and between losing my mind and trying not to come, I opened his jeans and pressed my forehead against his. Nate rasped out a harsh breath when I pulled his purple underwear down, freeing his heavy cock.

“Xavi,” he warned. Or begged. Or pleaded. “Fuck.”

I wrapped my fingers around the length of him, pleased with the way he felt, velvety and hot against my palm. Looking down to watch our hands, I pulled his foreskin back and spread my thumb over the precum on his tip.

Nate trembled, squeezing my dick. He leaned against me to keep himself standing, breathing right in my face but watching our hands knock together with every stroke. It was so uncoordinated and hard to get a rhythm together that a new idea sprang up.

“Let go,” I demanded.

He whimpered, dropping my dick. As soon as he did, I spit, letting it drip down our cocks, and when Nate groaned at the sight of it, I took him into my hand, rubbing us together with spit and precum.

His head tilted back and his hips jutted forward. “Holy fuck.” He grabbed the back of my neck. “Holy fuck, Xavi.”

I could hear Maddox and Devon fighting about spaghetti, but they barely registered. To feel Nate against me, his cock next to mine, slipping and sliding together while we both leaked enough precum to prove how long we’d been craving this, took all my attention. Because it was happening. Secrets led to confessions and confessions led to a fight, but after all we’d been through, our strength of communication won out and brought us to this moment. This desperate, hot, euphoric as hell moment of sexual contact with no one else to steal the show. I got to pay full attention to Nate, revelling in his sounds and the way his body reacted to *my* touch.

“I regret it,” he said, squeezing the back of my neck. “Not telling you sooner. We could have been doing this a year ago.”

“We’re doing it now.”

He made a strangled sound, and then his lips were kissing me, and his hand joined mine on our cocks, and between the fulcrum point of our shifting relationship to the desire I’d been withholding for too long, I forgot to feel awkward and just lived in the moment.

“Ah, fuck, Nate.” I tugged on his chin with my thumb, opening his mouth so I could consume it. “Lift your shirt.”

Nate pulled it up, revealing his abs. As soon as his hand rounded the head of our cocks, I lost my composure, groaned against his mouth, and trembled in pure bliss.

“Oh, holy shit.” He moaned through his orgasm, kissing me so hard my lip bled. It was impossible not to join him, my orgasm building off his.

Cum, warm and slippery, added a new sensation that made me jerk against him, fucking his fist while he came all over his stomach. He licked spit from my lip and dropped our cocks, letting me finish us off. When he pulled up my shirt and pressed our abs together, trapping our dicks between our bodies, I choked on a breath and slid against him.

“I kind of like it,” Nate said, breathless. “The cum. The feeling of it.”

I breathed against the side of his neck as the mosquitos and sand came back into focus. Devon yelled at Maddox about overcooked pasta, and Nate’s heart beat hard against my chest.

“I regret it, too.” I nuzzled against him. “Don’t keep sexy secrets from me anymore. Because this? This is the hottest shit, and it wasn’t even awkward.”

Nate laughed. “It’ll be awkward when we have to go back in there covered in cum.”

Yeah, Maddox still hadn’t told me how to come without getting it all over my clothes. It was currently slick and slippery between our stomachs. A towel hit me in the face, and Nate grabbed it.

“Clean up, cum buddies. Dinner is ready.” Devon threw another towel at Nate. “And never make me see this again.”

“Says the guy who blew my brother in the back seat of the truck.” *And meddled to get us to this point.*

Devon flipped me off and went inside. We pulled back, and for some reason, I got weirdly... giggly. I tried to just

clean myself up in peace, but I was fighting a laugh that I didn't even understand. When I tucked my dick away and pulled my shirt down, Nate barked out an obnoxious sound.

“What the fuck, Xavi?!” He smacked me in the chest, laughing hard. “Cum buddies?”

I laughed. Hysterically hard for no real reason. Maybe relief. “Hey, besties to cum besties is an upgrade in my book.” I smiled at him, tugging on the front of his shirt. “That was hot, yeah?”

Nate's blue eyes met mine, his smile even wider than it was before. “Hot as the shop in August,” he agreed, then he looked off to the left. “Don't freak out.”

“I'm not freaking out. *You* don't freak out.” I glared at him, unsure if I should still be smiling or not.

“Not about that,” Nate said, swiping his thumb over my bottom lip. “There's a June bug on your shoulder.”

“Ah!” I screamed. I freaked out so hard I threw my shirt at his face, sacrificed him to the June bugs, and ran inside, skimming my hands all over myself to make sure none were on me or in my hair. Ain't nothing worse than a June bug.

When I calmed down, Maddox looked at me with a small smirk, and I shook my head at them both. “Never knew you two had it in you to be that subtle... or smart.”

Devon laughed and Maddox smacked his ass.

CHAPTER 13

NATE

LEAVING FRIDAY NIGHT DINNER, I STOOD ON THE FRONT LAWN of Seth and Naomi's trailer, waiting for Xavi and Maddox. Garron Park was quiet, not a whole lot going on for a Friday night, but the place felt... homey. I hated to admit it, but I almost missed it.

We grew up with these people, on these dirt paths and front lawns. Sure, a lot of bad shit happened here, and I understood why Maddox and Devon didn't want to live on Lot 62 anymore, but I always kind of enjoyed the trailer park life. It was a community. One that came together during Maddox's four-month stint in the clink, and one that helped patch us up all our lives.

Andrea lived here, Mary, the lady who took care of our mom, lived here, and I suddenly felt like a piece of shit for not visiting her since Mom got put away. Gina and her baked goods still lived here, and shit, I missed those.

"Never seen you think so hard," Devon said, lighting a cigarette and handing me the pack. "What's on your mind?"

Gum. Because Xavi wasn't standing next to me to shove it in my face. I lit a smoke and stepped out to the edge of the lawn, looking up and down the gravel and dirt path, riddled with weeds and potholes.

"Kinda miss this place," I told Devon, realizing my smoke never lit. I tried again, my lighter barely sparking.

Devon lit it for me. "The park?"

“Yeah. It’s always been home, you know?” Shit, now I sounded like Xavi. “And I live in a storage room. This seems better. Like an upgrade, even though we worked so hard to get out of here.”

“Maddox hates people in general, so our place is good for him, but yeah, I get it. Kinda miss the community.” Devon looked across the road, watching an old couple roast marshmallows on twigs on their front lawn. “You know they’ve lived here their whole lives?” he asked me. “Mom said they used to babysit us when Dad was on a bender and she was working.”

“Thanks for babysitting us!” I shouted at them, throwing out an awkward wave. They waved back, laughing at us. “We’re assholes for neglecting Mary. We should do something for her.”

“Alright. Next week. We’ll pop by and bring her something.” Devon nodded, turning to face me. “Having a gay freakout yet?”

“No,” I scoffed. “Only you do that. Even though you already knew you were gay.”

“I didn’t freak out about that.” Devon shoved me. “Just that it was him.”

I remembered it well.

“But seriously. No panic? No regrets?” he asked.

“Nah. It was pretty hot until you threw towels at us. I thought it’d be awkward or whatever because we have no idea what we’re doing, but it wasn’t. We just figured it out as we went.”

Devon smiled for real. “You two have that. That ability to figure it out together because you trust each other. We didn’t. The first time I blew Madd, it was a fifty-fifty chance that he’d either knock me out or come.”

“Yeah, but you guys like to live on that edge.”

“I’m just saying, Nate... I’m happy for ya. Can’t believe this even happened, but if I think about life and what’s

coming, it's all you and Xav, fucking around, living together, being together. It's weird, but it feels right." He nudged me with his shoulder. "Don't fuck it up."

Had to figure out how to actually have it before I could fuck it up. Kids and marriage weren't on my radar. Hell, unless Xavi actually wanted to adopt a stray, I didn't think I was fit to be a dad. Maybe Karen would scratch that itch for him. To be honest, I didn't know what my future would hold. Like I'd said, I'd never thought about it before.

But it was time to start thinking. Xavi wanted his fridge, and maybe... maybe I wanted to move back to Garron Park. Would he get a place with me?

"What's with all this thinking?" Devon mocked me. "Don't break your brain."

"Fuck you. I think sometimes."

"Yeah, about snacks and Xavi's dick."

"Priorities." I grinned, taking a drag. "Alright. Seriously, let me borrow your phone. Mine is only the kind with minutes."

"For what?"

"Porn. I need to study." I looked at him.

"Fuck no. Figure it out by trial and error like every other poor bastard." Devon wedged his smoke between his lips, squinting at me. "What're you researching?"

"How to fuck."

Devon laughed. "Same basic principle, but with prep and more lube."

"You a bottom?" I asked him. "Obvi both if you flip fuck, but...?"

"I bottom a lot, yeah."

"How'd you figure it out? Which role you wanted?" I asked, hoping the elderly neighbours weren't listening to our gay sex lesson.

“He stuck his dick in me and I liked it, then I stuck my dick in him and liked it. Was pretty sorted after that.” He looked me up and down. “You have bottom vibes.”

“Thanks!” Figured it was a compliment.

“But so does Xavi. Power bottom vibes.”

Maybe it was time we started figuring that shit out. “Xav! Let’s go talk about butt sex!” I shouted at the trailer behind us.

The neighbours looked. Whoops.

Devon scoffed and tossed his smoke. “You seriously think that’s how you make a Kane your bitch? You gotta play up the Sawyer weaknesses. Watch this.” He cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hey, Madd. Let’s go home so I can bake you those pastries you like.” Devon looked at me. “He’ll distract me with sex so he doesn’t have to pretend to like them. Best baking lesson I ever got.”

Maddox walked out the door with Gnat, grabbing Devon by the wrist and tugging him towards the truck. “You’re banned from the kitchen.” Maddox grabbed his ass. “Better off going straight to the bedroom.” He shoved Devon into the passenger seat, and when he walked around the front of the truck, Devon smirked at me.

Well played. I grinned back.

When Xavi walked out, I fumbled for a weakness. I mean, I had a fuck ton of them, but I’d never been good at coming up with anything on the spot. I improvised, shoving my hand into the pocket of his sweatshorts.

I fondled his dick a bit, watching his face as it hardened. “Looking for something?” he asked.

“This.” I pulled out the nicotine gum. “Had a craving.” A cigarette was already lit between my fingers, but whatever.

“Yeah, I fucking bet you did.” He grabbed my hand and linked our fingers. “Is hand-holding a kink?”

“Maybe.” I shrugged, popping a piece of gum.

“I think I have that one. A hand-holding kink.” He pressed me against the side of the truck, leaning in until his chest was on mine and his lips were brushing my ear. “Let’s go find out what other kinks I have.”



I LOVED *TEEN WOLF*, BUT FOR ONCE, XAVI PAID ATTENTION TO it instead of me. And I knew he was doing it deliberately. I’d take the bait.

A few months ago, Xavi mentioned that purple was his current favourite colour, so naturally, I bought full-price purple boxers that turned out to mistakenly be briefs. I figured if I matched his favourite colour to my favourite parts, he’d be enticed. About time I tested my theory.

“Hot in here.” I pulled my shorts down, kicking them across the room.

“So hot,” he agreed, not taking his eyes off the show.

I reached over to take his hand, setting it on my thigh to play into his newly discovered hand-holding kink. Xavi looked, swallowed, toughened up, and looked at the TV again. He grinned, though. Playing with his fingers one by one, imagining my name tattooed on his knuckles, I brought his hand a little higher.

“Devon says I have bottom vibes.”

Xavi’s head turned, and his eyes landed on mine. “No.”

“No?” I tilted my head.

“No. I’m the bottom.” *Teen Wolf* became nothing. Not even background noise because I couldn’t hear it over the blood rushing through my ears. “Come on, daredevil. Don’t make me fight you on this.” He hit me with intensity in his eyes and a challenge I wouldn’t have been able to back down from even if I tried.

“Oh?” I mused, moving his hand up until it pressed against my hard cock. “You think you can handle this?”

Xavi didn't back down. He grabbed my dick so hard I winced, following it with a moan. “This in my ass?” He leaned in, lips on my neck. “Fuck around and find out.”

When his tongue ran over my pulse point, I shivered so hard my teeth rattled. Hot breath tickled my skin, and Xavi's authority brought my mind online. I let him taunt the sanity out of me, living for it, but when he went for my lips, I grabbed the hair on the back of his head and pulled him back.

“Maybe it's your turn to put your mouth where your ass wants to be.” Or whatever that saying was. I pushed him down, and he smirked as he kneeled before me. My purple briefs turned darker in the front, and when Xavi ran his palms up my thighs, my dick twitched.

“Did you buy these for me?” he asked, fingers skimming the fabric.

“Yes.”

“I noticed.” He leaned forward. “I *really* fucking noticed.” His open mouth landed on my clothed cock, and fuck me, I knew he'd be a bold bastard, but I had no idea how hair-triggered it'd make me.

I groaned, gripping the back of the couch to keep myself from shooting off it. He nuzzled his face in my groin, hands and mouth being as sinful as the daredevil he called me. I knew it was my play. My turn to make a move and see how he reacted, but I was a bit fucking busy trying not to blow up all over the place.

“Knew it,” Xavi said, hooking his thumbs in the waistband.

“Knew what?” Jesus. Was that my voice? Had it always been so timid and scratchy?

“Knew you'd know just what to do to get what you wanted and then have no idea how to take it.” He tugged hard and my ass slid to the edge of the cushion. My briefs landed on the floor, and there it was. Instead of my thumbs-up and big smile

in the frame with his nicked dick at the hospital, it was his wet lips and green eyes on my very hard cock. “Don’t worry. I know how to take it.”

Holy fuck, did he ever.

Xavi’s fingers wrapped around the base, and his warm, wet tongue licked all the way to the tip. His eyes stayed on mine. I trembled.

“Fuck, Xav.” My arms strained on the back of the couch. “You look good down there.”

“I’ll look good on your dick, too.”

He wrapped his lips around the tip, bobbing his head to get a feel for it. I was trying to feel less of it because this was my first real experience with Xavi, and to be honest, I had no chill. Like none.

I was a fan of blowjobs, but I also wasn’t. Sometimes, the vibe wasn’t right, and I spent too much time cringing and shifting my hips, trying to encourage the person to stick with a pace or run their tongue over the right spot. None of that mattered with Xavi because the sight of him with my cock in his mouth, drool sliding down his chin, and his curiously daring green eyes glancing up at me every few seconds made me the bubbliest volcano on the planet. I was about to blow.

“Jesus fuck, okay. You proved your point. You can suck a dick.” I tried to yank on his hair to pull him off, wanting to keep this going longer. But Xavi growled at me.

“You know how long I’ve wanted to taste-test cum?” he spat at me, chest heaving. “Don’t stop me. Give it to me. I wanna see what all the fuss is about.” He glared.

Guess he really meant it when he said he wanted to lick a dick.

His glare, paired with that confession, sparked something inside me. Not something. Someone. The mouthy, thirteen-year-old version of me that back-talked like a bastard and had no fucks to give about the consequences because attitude was my middle name.

“Earn it,” I dared him, edgy. “You won’t get this for free, Xavi... oh, fuck.”

With gumption and tongue, Xavi sucked my dick and fucked my mind. When I hit the back of his throat, feeling his silent gag and the constriction of his muscles, my eyes fluttered shut. Xavi didn’t stop. He put his mouth where his ass wanted to be and put me in my place while doing it. He moaned around me, vibrating my nuts and jerking the base, eager for his taste of cum.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” I clenched my ass, but it did no good. “Xav...”

His hand moved up as his mouth moved down, and that was what cooked me. My eyes shot open and I watched him drink me down. My abs all tightened at once and my ass lifted off the couch, the orgasm burning through me like lava. I choked on a groan, decided not to hold it in, and let it loose as my cock filled his mouth with cum. Xavi never once backed off, licking and sucking until I took a breath and stopped him.

“Why the actual fuck are you so good at that?” I asked, my arms dropping limply to my sides. “You practice on a banana or something?”

Xavi grinned, eyes shy. He licked his lips and leaned back, ass on his heels. “You’re more plantain size.”

I tried to laugh, but I was too drained. “Well? How’d it taste?”

He leaned over me. Pulling my chin down with his thumb, he slid his tongue into my mouth and let me decide for myself. Never really wanted to taste cum, especially my own, but if he was offering it on the silver platter of his tongue, I’d take it. Salty and warm, we kissed until my cock softened, and I tugged him onto my lap to straddle me.

“I burned my mouth with coffee yesterday,” he whispered, hands linking with mine again. “So I didn’t really taste it. Guess I’ll have to try again tomorrow.”

I’d always loved Xavi, but the warmth in my chest and the way he never dropped my hands made the love feel better.

Different. Newer.

“Maybe I’ll ride your dick tomorrow,” I countered, riling him again.

“*I am* the bottom,” Xavi insisted. “I live and breathe bottom.”

I laughed against his cheek and brought our hands between our abs. “I love that you’re just owning it even though you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Story of our lives, Nate.”

I smiled at everything but nothing in particular. Sinking into the moment, hands linked, bodies connected while my dick softened and *Teen Wolf* kept playing in the background, I figured I could get used to this. Xavi was right when he said it was still the same friendship but with more. Before, we’d be on this couch, half-ass paying attention to the TV while either eating snacks or bullshitting about the show. I liked this version better. The one where we got to touch and not feel weird about it.

I dropped my eyes, taking in the sight of him on top of me. It was perfect. Until I saw my own toes and had to tuck them in tighter.

Fucking feet.

CHAPTER 14

XAVI

I HAD THE WORST CASE OF BLUE BALLS, BUT I KIND OF LIKED it. It made me edgy, and the buzz that came with that edginess was making me productive. I finished three jobs at the shop, went through all the reservations and contacted the customers, and now I was on my way to pick up a boat from another marina. Which was a sketchy job because Nate's truck was barely reliable, but it was what it was. Someday, we'd be able to afford a better truck.

"I think it likes to be sweet-talked," Karen said, running her dirty hands over the hood after closing it. "Because there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it. It's just... finicky."

I winked at her, nodding to the passenger seat to tell her to get in. "Gotta double slam it." I pointed at her door that didn't latch. "She is finicky. But I've always got on well with her."

Karen buckled in, putting on a pair of sunglasses that matched my lime green slides. "My uncle used to teach me about engines."

"Car guy, was he?" I pulled out of the parking lot.

"Car thief, yeah." Karen nodded, smiling at nothing. "He's in prison now."

"Am I allowed to ask what you got in trouble for?" I looked at her, trying to see her face through the frizzy nest of her hair. "Don't tell me it was some peaceful protest about protecting the wildlife or something. That does nothing for your street cred around here."

“See?” She slapped her thighs. “Just because my name is Karen, you think I’m all uppity about the birds and the bees.”

“Well, your hair is like a bird sanctuary, so I drew my conclusions from that, but go on. Prove me wrong.”

She rolled her eyes as we drove out of the lot. “My mom divorced my dad because he’s... well, he’s just a bad dad and husband. He’s an addict, too. I felt bad for him, so to help him get by, I’d steal things for him. I got caught a few times because I sucked at it, and the last time I got caught, I had something more valuable than I knew. Technically, it was theft over five thousand, breaking and entering, and resisting arrest because I ran. So, I spent a few months in a girls’ juvenile centre, and now I have to stay at this house for a few months.” She shrugged. “My mom visits the odd time, but she thinks it’s better I stay there instead of going home.”

Shit. “Why?”

“Because she thinks I’ll fall into old habits and help my dad again.”

God, I’d been in that situation with my mom for most of my life. Still kind of was. A lot of situations like that with my dad, too. I understood Karen a lot better now. “You’re fifteen and the kid—his kid. It’s his job to look out for you.”

Karen levelled me with a ‘yeah-right’ kind of look, and I had to laugh at that because it was so true. Shit didn’t work out that way in the lives we came from. “I know. I’ve learned that he’s not worth my freedom, though. I don’t want to go back to that place. I feel like I’ve missed so much already.”

Okay, I was about to say the most mature thing I’d ever said. I took a deep breath. Let it out. Breathed in again. Stalled. Almost lost my train of thought, and then said, “You can still check in on him and care about him without risking yourself to do it. But you gotta decide if he’d do the same for you, you know? At some point, you have to weigh the pros and cons. Is it worth your worry, or are you missing out on life by worrying about something you can’t change?”

Karen looked at her hands, nodding. “I know. You’re right. I still miss things about him, though.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Like spending time with him and my uncle, talking about cars. Like these special dinners Dad used to make for me. They weren’t really special, but they were fun because we did them together. It was just pickles and cheese and stuff like that all chopped up on a plate, but we always ate it on the floor while watching a movie. No one does that sort of thing for me anymore.”

I’d make her the best chattanooga board, or whatever it was called, my thirty bucks could buy. “Are you allowed to stay out past curfew?” I asked. “Do we have to get written permission or something?”

Karen looked at me, her smile faltering. The gap in the front of her teeth was on full display because her lips just naturally stayed open, and when her green sunglasses slid down her nose, her eyes pinned me with confusion. “Why would you request that?”

“On Friday nights, we all go to my parents’ place for dinner. It’s horrible because my mom can’t cook worth a shit and she’s a fucking mess at the moment, but you could come. Maybe if we request it in advance?” Might actually be a nice *fuck you* to my mom to show her that we had the ability to help a kid. She sure as shit barely had that ability.

“I... okay. Thank you.” She looked like she was about to cry, and I felt a bit shit about that. I’d never known what to do with a crying chick, especially a fifteen-year-old one, but then, in true Karen form, she buzzed just as much as my edging buzzed me. “I have an idea! If we get permission, maybe I can send you to the grocery store, and I can cook Friday dinner! Give your mom a break.”

“You cook?” Shit. Karen made me feel pretty pathetic about my upbringing. Maybe I kept some people alive and made sure my best friend was happy, but Karen had a worse life than I did, and she knew basic skills I failed at. I’d need to up my game.

“Yeah, some things. Do you think your mom would be okay with it?”

I barked out a laugh. “You’d be doing all of us a favour. Write down your grocery list, and I’ll get it.”



“WHAT’RE YOU DOING?” NATE ASKED, SMELLING LIKE cigarettes and minty gum as he walked in from the back deck. “Something wrong with the kitchen?” He rubbed berry-scented hand lotion all over himself to cover the smoky smell.

“Can this even be called a kitchen?!” I threw my arms wide, pissed about our non-kitchen. “It’s got a sink, a coffeepot, and a microwave.”

“And mould,” Nate added. He put his hand on the small, used-to-be-white fridge, which was now more of a shitty yellow tone. “This is no place for your dream fridge, Xav. I’ve been thinking about it.”

I looked at him. I hated wearing shirts and socks, but Nate usually wore both. Mostly socks. All the time because he had a foot fear. But tonight, he was also bare-chested, a bit shiny from either oil or sweat, and had a few mosquito bites on his hip. His blond hair poked out from the sides of his Garron Township hat, and his hip cocked out while he stood like a model against the fridge. The sweatpants he wore were a light grey, faded even lighter from time and wear, and they... they showed the perfect outline of his dick in the front. I licked my lips.

“Thinking about what?” *Like, since when did I wanna ride a dick so bad?* I wasn’t joking when I said I lived and breathed bottom vibes. In all my sexy musings, it was him railing into me, fucking me so much better than life fucked me, filling me so full I’d never be without him. I craved it. Wanted it so bad that this shitty kitchen and the yellow fridge stopped existing.

“That this place isn’t good enough for your dream fridge.”

“You remember my dream fridge?” I asked, smiling like an idiot.

“Hell yes. We’re getting it. But I want you to be able to put it somewhere better, Xav. We live in a fucking storage room...”

I reached out and grabbed his hand because I couldn’t help myself. I’d held back from touching him for so long that it felt like getting my quota was a priority. I pulled his back to my chest, our hands linked at our sides, staring at the fridge with a puddle under the bottom.

“I want the fridge. What do you want, Nate?” I asked, lips on his neck.

He shivered. “I think I want the house. And you in it.”

I brought our linked hands up his bare abs and chest, touching him and holding him and feeling equally soft and hard about it. “How the fuck are we gonna afford a house?”

“Maybe a trailer,” he suggested. “Would you ever move back?”

I spun him, pressing his back to the fridge and leaning against him. “To Garron Park?” His blue eyes met mine, full of vulnerability. “Were you afraid to ask me that?” I laughed.

“Yes. We worked so hard to get out of there, and now we live here, and I don’t hate it, but...”

“But it’s a storage room,” I agreed. “Can I kiss you?”

Nate dropped my hands and pulled on the back of my neck. “I want you to *take*, Xavi. Take and take and take everything you want from me because I’ve been dying to give it to you for a fucking year.”

His hat fell to the floor when I took what I wanted. Him. He was what I wanted. Physically, emotionally, life-y. I’d never connected with anyone as well as I connected with Nate, and a desperation to make it something more than friendship filled me with an urgency to prove to him that I was worthy of being his.

His breath panted out choppy and warm, but his tongue licked mine, instinctively making our bodies rub together. His back might have been against the fridge, but it was Nate who pulled me against him, rocking his hips to taunt exactly what I wanted. But I knew my boy. He was a great tease, a poor executioner. If I wanted him to act, I'd have to force his hand.

His lips grinned against mine, his fingers tightening on my hips. Such a tease. "I see it now," he said, cock frothing against mine. "The bottom vibes."

Fuck yes. "Told you I'm a bottom."

"Have you ever even had anything in your ass?" Nate asked, reaching around to sink his fingers into my ass cheeks.

"No, but I know I'll like it." I reached up to grab his jaw. "Ever had anything in your mouth?"

"Other than—"

I pushed on his shoulders, forcing him to slide down the front of the fridge. On his knees before me, he blushed, grinned, choked, and laughed all at once. I might have had bottom vibes, but I wasn't about to let him be the top *and* the dominant one.

"Use it for something other than rambling," I told him. "Then I'll decide if I wanna let you in my ass."

Nate settled on his knees, fingers already hooked in my waistband. "Please," he scoffed, tugging my shorts down. "You've already decided, and soon, you'll be begging."

"Are you stalling?"

My cock sprung free, and he either did it on purpose or misjudged the trajectory of my dick, because it smacked him in the face and bounced around.

"I've been edging all day," I told him. "Cock's got a whole mind of its own right now."

Nate leaned in, and when I thought he was gonna suck my dick like I dared him to, he actually rubbed his cheek and face all over it. And yeah, the edging suddenly didn't feel like a good idea because the light scratch of his scruff, the tickle of

his hair, and the smoothness of his lips sent me into overdrive, and if he didn't give me a second to breathe, I'd come in his hair.

“Shit, Nate.”

Cheek on my thigh, head turned to face my cock, he licked the base from the side. I grabbed the top of the fridge for balance. When he ran his lips along the side-length of me, not using his tongue at all, the fridge shook. And when he repeated the whole show on the other side, I fisted his hair in my hand and rubbed myself all over his face.

“Suck,” I demanded.

“Take,” Nate countered. “I told you to fucking take what you wanted, Xavi.”

Oh my god. I burned like a furnace, heating the apartment that didn't need heating. I'd never had a lot of confidence in taking what I wanted, always feeling like I didn't deserve it. But with that demand and the way he said it all commanding and breathy, I forced his head back, pulled down on his chin, and pushed my cock between his lips.

He moaned. I groaned. Bliss ensued.

I started slow, forcing his lips to widen in small increments, letting him adjust to having a cock in his mouth. But Nate, being a tease and a half, looked up at me with a challenging look, as if asking, ‘is that all you've got?’

I thrust forward, hitting the back of his throat. He choked, but his hands landed on my ass to keep me there, pulling me in even more. He started to suck me off with purpose, fearless and brazen. It took me so off guard and turned me on so hard that I almost missed the telltale sign that my orgasm was already starting to sneak up on me.

Like fuck I'd let him take all the credit, though. I pushed forward so hard that the back of his head thumped off the fridge door, and then I fucked his face. Nate gagged for it, falling off his knees to land on his ass, teeth skimming my shaft. I bent my knees and kept on going, and when he moaned

around my dick, tears already glistening in his blue eyes, I throat-fucked him harder.

“You like it,” I said.

He nodded around me, lips stretched wide.

“Jerk off.”

He rubbed himself through his sweats, too busy sucking me to properly jerk his own cock. But I was already there. Ready to combust. Pushed to my breaking point and powerful because of it.

“Can you swallow?” I pulled out just a little, giving him a choice.

He leaned his head forward and swallowed me back down. So I thrust my hips, making his head thump on every forward trajectory. My abs constricted and my breath held, and with a groan so low and so long it hurt, my cock throbbed in the back of his throat.

And I knew what raw pleasure felt like. I came unhinged.

Nate gurgled, rubbing himself harder, swallowing my cum with little choice in the matter. My balls twitched, my mind blanked, and I finally sucked in a breath. Shaking with aftershocks that felt just as good as the orgasm, I pulled out of his mouth and watched cum slip over his already wet lips. Nate rasped, looking sexier than I'd ever seen him. It brought forth my primal side, the animal part of me that loved filth and dominance.

Kneeling in front of him, I swiped my hand over his chin, gathered spit and cum, and pushed his legs together so I could straddle them.

“Xavi,” he moaned.

Knocking his hand away, I pulled his dick free and slathered the mess down his cock.

“Fuck,” he whispered, looking at his lap, my eyes, his lap again. “Fuck.”

“Next time you come, Nate,” I started, circling the flushed tip with my thumb, “it’ll be in my ass.”

“Mmmm.” He moaned, strained and powerful, and oh so damn sexy. His head hit the fridge a final time and his cock spasmed in my hand, spurting cum all over his abs and chest. His palms pressed against the floor and his back made the jars on top of the fridge rattle, but his body and the way it strained in bliss captured all my attention.

So fucking glad we had a thing for each other.

When he relaxed, sinking and slumping down the fridge, he sighed. “Okay, power bottom. Devon was right.” He scratched his hip, making the mosquito bites turn red.

“About what?” I dropped his cock and stared at the cum on my fingers, tempted to lick them clean.

“Nothing. Shit, Xavi. How’re we gonna get anything done if we have the option to be sexy all the time?”

Didn’t think we got a lot done anyway, so I wasn’t too worried about it. “Come on. Let’s recap on the deck.”

“There’re June bugs out there,” he said.

“Come on. Let’s recap on the couch.” I put his hat back on. “Because Devon and Maddox made being gay seem hard, and so far, it’s easy breezy. Are we missing something?”

Nate shrugged, too sated to care. “We can get a kink list and work off that or something.”

I washed my hands and hauled him to his feet. “A kink list, eh?” I grinned. “Hand-holding is already on mine.”

He smiled. It was a shy, bashful look that made my heart speedy, but then he had to go and ruin the romance of it.

“Hold that thought, Xav. I’ve been sitting in fridge juice this whole time. Ew! This is why I wear socks. Quick shower.”

Yeah. My dream fridge wouldn’t have that problem. Yet another reason to get it.

CHAPTER 15

NATE

STANDING ON SETH AND NAOMI'S FRONT LAWN AGAIN, THIS time because Naomi was pissed at Seth and had kicked him out, I listened to Xavi try to talk her down. I'd love to go in there and help him, but my solution would be to call her a cunt and tell her to stop ruining everyone's lives. I figured Xavi didn't need that shit. I was here for backup and moral support, and that was about it.

I squinted through the trees next door and saw some kid moving from shed to shed, stuffing things in his pockets as he went. I wasn't above thievery, but those were good people he was stealing from, so naturally, a foot chase was in my near future. I stretched my hammies and rolled my rusty ankle joints.

When the kid caught me looking, his eyes widened real big, and then he booked it.

"Shit." I sucked in a lungful of air and hoped it'd get me where I needed to go. I took off after him, and not even ten seconds later, I heard Xavi shout after me to ask what we were running from. He followed. Loved how he matched my energy, no questions asked.

This kid ran all throughout the park, but he avoided the paths and the roads. He cut through yards and alleys, squeezed his way under fences we had to go around, and weaved so many times I almost lost him.

"Hold the fuck up, Forrest Gump!" I shouted.

Luckily, my shout made him look backwards, and the little shit tripped over an old tire and faceplanted on the grass. Wheezing and cramping up in my sides, I hauled him to his feet and breathed really hard in his face.

“Let me go!” he shouted, smacking at me.

“God, you’re a pissy fire ant.” I let him go. “The fuck you running from?”

“You,” he deadpanned, glancing behind me at Xavi, who was once again keeled over, dry heaving in the bushes from exertion. “What d’you want?”

I was about to call him out for stealing like I was some peace officer, then I felt like shit about that and decided not to. Instead, I looked at him and saw... myself. Young me and Devon. Poor, dirty, wearing shitty, ripped clothing and shoes that didn’t fit, concave stomach because food was sparse, and that bulldog spark in his eyes that told me he was a fighter, just like we were. Even had our dirty blond hair and blue eyes that reflected anger and insecurities mixed up together.

He was just a trailer park kid, out on his own at dusk because he probably didn’t feel right about being wherever he lived.

“You live here?” I asked while Xavi got himself sorted.

“Yeah. What’s it to you?” the kid asked, primed to run again.

“Are you new?”

He clamped his lips shut and looked anywhere but at us. I didn’t recognize him, couldn’t place who his parents might be, and had no idea which trailer was his. And I pretty much knew everyone in the park, so he must not have lived here for long. He was probably eight, maybe ten, small for his age but street smart for it, and resourceful, by the looks of it.

“Hungry?” I asked him.

“Fuck you.”

“Yeah, fuck you, too.” I shook my head and bit back a laugh because that was totally something I would have said at

that age. Hatred for the world and nothing much to smile about. At least I had Xavi. Did this kid have anyone that made him smile? “Alright, well, get goin’ then.” I shooed him away, mostly because I wanted to see where he’d go.

He looked at the two of us all sketchy-like, and then kept on running. One shared look between me and Xavi, and we split up to follow him. The kid wound his way through the park, made it look like he was going to three different trailers, eventually figured he lost us, and then... he did. We couldn’t find him anywhere. He straight up vanished, and that shit was weird.

“Fuck, did we have that talent at that age?” Xavi asked beside me.

“Yeah. Fuck knows what happened to it since then.” I looked at him. “He’s feral.”

“Pretty sure I saw him steal a blanket off a clothesline once.”

“Yeah, he’s wild. Stray.” I stared at him, hoping he could read my mind. I widened my eyes just in case the message wasn’t clear.

Xavi tilted his head back and sighed. “We’re stalking him, aren’t we?”

“Maybe he doesn’t have an older brother like our brothers did, Xav! He looked half snapped and mostly wild, but he’s just a kid with no good home.” I knew that because I’d been there. I’d recognize that look on any kid’s face. He lived in the park, I had no doubt about that, but he didn’t feel safe going home, or he’d been told to make himself invisible. Which meant that he fended for himself and had no one to count on. “Think about it, Xav. What is the only thing we’ve ever done in life worth mentioning?”

Xavi smiled at me, nodding. “Being in our brothers’ corners.”

Xavi got to be important to Karen, and I wanted to be depended on. If I could find this kid again.

“Alright, Detective Neegs. Let’s start asking around.” Xavi linked his fingers with mine and led me through the park to start knocking on doors.

It took hours, but he wasn’t unknown to the residents of Garron Park. He was actually pretty well known, like a legend.

“Oh, he’s the Voreneau boy. Runs around all hours of the night with no supervision. Just disappears whenever someone tries to talk to him.”

“He won’t let anyone get close enough to help.”

“Police have come looking for him a time or two. Children’s Aid, too.”

“His dad’s the new guy on Lot 31. Windows are always covered.”

“Rude kid. Won’t talk to nobody, and when he does, he’s telling them to fuck off.”

“Don’t think he goes to school.”

“Little prick stole a burger right off my BBQ. Wasn’t even done cooking.”

By the time we had a few leads on this boy, I felt absolutely positive that he’d talk to me. He could be as rude as he wanted as long as I could be rude back. He didn’t need manners. He needed to know someone was in his damn corner.

I’d be his corner.

Andrea came by to give Naomi something for her hangover and perhaps the start of her withdrawal if she could stick with it, and when she closed the bedroom door and Maddox let Seth back into the trailer, we all sat around the living room.

“I don’t know about his dad, but the kid is quiet, self-reliant, and doesn’t want help. He cut his arm pretty good a few months ago, and it took four days for him to let me clean it. Had to corner him in the park at night,” Andrea said. “And he wouldn’t accept a snack or a place to stay. Wouldn’t say anything other than that he was going home. Doesn’t talk much.”

“I don’t think he goes home,” Seth chimed in. “Maybe a few nights here and there, but he leaves when his dad shows up and doesn’t go back until his dad disappears. Sometimes his dad is gone for days, and other times the guy doesn’t leave the trailer for days. He rented it about four months ago. No one in the park really knows them yet.”

“Reminds me of you and Devon when you were that age.” Andrea looked at us.

“Yeah, except we had the Kanes,” I sighed. “This kid doesn’t have anyone.” And just like that, I had some new shoddy purpose in life.

When Xavi brought up the life clock and the hard questions, all the things people expected of him and the timeline he thought he should be on, I felt kind of dumb for never having thought of it before. I spent my time living for the now, but after sorting things out with my crush becoming a reality and my best friend shifting to more of a boyfriend role, those questions came at me in a new way. They no longer felt so daunting. Like, yeah, life was rushing at me all hard and fast, but now I had my Xavi at my side, the secrets were out in the open to become dreams instead of whispered nightmares, and things felt easier. I could look at life rationally and actually picture things.

The scene was almost set. A trailer in Garron Park with Xavi, sexy things, and June bug zappers all around, a new fridge being hauled into the tiny kitchen and days of just filling glasses with ice and water because we could... but more, too. More dreams. More ideas. Like an unlocked front door that a rude, dirty kid could open anytime he needed somewhere to go. Bologna sandwiches left out on the counter for him if he didn’t want to take them from my hand. Whispered chats in bed with Xavi about the boy who reminded me of us growing up and how we could make his life just a tiny bit better.

I wasn’t fit to be a dad, but I sure as shit knew how to be a backup option. Maybe that was all I’d ever amount to. Maybe that was enough.

But when I really envisioned things, I pictured the shop, too. Karen at the front desk, being a goddamn delight to the customers who had started coming in the afternoons instead of the mornings just to deal with her instead of us. Xavi and Karen in the shop kitchen, cutting up cheese and pickles like she'd told him her dad used to do. Us having her back whenever she felt the need to check on her dad if her mom wouldn't go with her. An idea of a life was forming, and it overwhelmed me in a good way.

I didn't want to chat about it in front of anyone just in case they thought it was stupid or doubted our ability to do it, so I grabbed Xavi's wrist without a word and... just pulled him out of the trailer.

"What's up?" he asked, linking our fingers and being all over me.

I loved it. I gripped his hand tighter, walking to the truck. When we got there, I forgot to let go of his hand and followed him all the way to the driver's side door.

"Neegs," Xavi whispered, dropping my hand to cup my cheeks. "Tell me what's going on in that bright mind of yours."

Xavi was the only person who'd ever called me bright. I looked right at him, no longer afraid. "When we were growing up, who'd we go to whenever we got in trouble?"

Xavi tilted his head to think. "Not our brothers because we didn't wanna make shit worse for them. Mostly Andrea, Mary, Kathy. Even Gina when she was able to help. Any neighbour, really. The whole park unless they were buds with Jim. Why?"

"Because... we had doors to knock on, Xav."

Xavi blinked, and then a slow, sexy, beautiful smile came at me. Without saying anything, he nodded, kissed me, and wrapped his arms around me and didn't let go. He got it.

We were troubled kids with people to go to, and it felt full circle, like the perfect life goal, to become one of those doors kids could knock on. Not just kids. People. Those who helped

us were getting older, and it seemed like the perfect way to pay it forward for all they'd done for us.



WE WERE BREAKING LAWS. MOSTLY, WE LOOKED LIKE perverts. Dressed in black like real spies, Xavi's knee wobbled as he hoisted me up to peer inside one of the only uncovered windows of that kid's trailer. Luckily, it was at the back of the trailer, and from where we were, only like two other trailers could see us. Hopefully, they'd keep their mouths shut.

"Is he in there?" Xavi whisper-hissed at me. "What's that noise?"

The noise was yelling, but not angry yelling. Loud talking because the music was turned up so high the damn windows were rattling. There were bodies everywhere, dancing around, lounging, and... "Looks like an orgy, if I'm being honest, Xav." But I didn't see the kid anywhere, so that had to be a decent sign. No one even knew his damn name. Cops just called him the Voreneau boy.

Xavi leaned his back against the trailer and tried to keep me steady. He had better night vision, but his balance was utter shit, so my eyes were the lesser of two evils. I didn't exactly know what we were looking for, maybe just an insider scoop on why the kid ran around the park all night, but it felt important to get the full picture.

"If that kid is in there during an orgy, I will go full dad mode and dick kick *his* dad."

Oh, I forgot to tell him. "I don't see him in there. Hold still."

"I'm fucking trying. You're all bulk, bud."

"Thanks." I wasn't. Not even close, but I loved it when he pumped my tires. "Okay, it just looks like a rowdy party. Drugs. Booze. People. Music. It checks out." I squinted through the sheer curtains. "Oh my god," I whispered.

“What?”

“Oh my god.”

“What?!” Xavi demanded.

Two things. One, there was a saggy pair of tits right in front of the window, and I swear to Gnat that was the longest nipple hair I’d ever seen. I gagged silently, trying to look away. But two... “Xavi—”

Something crashed in the yard, and the next second, we were both in the weeds, Xavi’s bracelets tickling my skin. I fell right on top of him, ass on his chest, and instead of trying to push me away, he pulled me closer and backed us up until we were hidden in shadows against the bottom latticework of the trailer.

“That’s my dad,” Xavi whispered, chest to my back. “Right? Is that my dad?”

Yeah, Seth was stomping across the front yard and banging on the door. “Xav, your mom was in there.”

I felt him sink behind me.

CHAPTER 16

XAVI

AFTER THE CLUSTERFUCK AT THE PARK THE OTHER NIGHT, I wanted to protect someone. Naturally, that fell on Karen, but she didn't want me to go all dad on her, and Nate wasn't accepting my protective mode because he thought he needed to protect me from my own damn mom, and *ugh!* I needed to blow off some stress and not be a dick to everyone.

But a dick was exactly what I was being. Because my mom was in that trailer. Because my dad had gone there to take her home, putting himself at risk in that environment. Because, once again, someone was all up in my fucking face about shit that was none of their business.

“Seriously, Xav?” my buddy, Clark, asked. “When you gonna find someone?” He wrapped his arm around his skanky girlfriend. I wasn't just calling her skanky because I was in a bad mood. She really was. Earlier in the night, I saw her flash her tits at Clark's brother, and immediately after that, she spit her shot of tequila into Clark's cousin's mouth. That was pretty skanky.

I shrugged, swallowing a shot of rum.

“Want me to hook ya up with Trisha's sister?” Clark asked.

Fuck no. Trisha's sister was even more of a skank than Trisha. This was the shit I didn't understand. Why did all these assholes think they were better than me just because they were in a relationship? A relationship that was full of fighting,

cheating, financial problems, hostility, and a big ol' heaping of codependency?

“Nah.” I poured myself another shot, getting grumpier by the second. Grumpy about the questions, Karen being dirty with bird nest hair because I was pretty sure she was afraid to shower at her home, the boy at the park not having a safe place to go home to, and my fucking mother being there to party. At first, I was worried my dad was on his way there to get high, but we sat in those weeds and listened to him yell at someone, pull Mom out of there, and then stay silent as he carried her kicking and screaming body across the park to their trailer. What was up with her lately? If she didn't pull it together, I'd make sure my dad was always supported. Especially in his sobriety.

“You gotta ditch Nate, man. He's holding you back.”

I turned into Maddox for a second. My first instinct was to knock Clark out and call his girlfriend a bitch.

“That guy's gonna end up dead like his dad,” Clark laughed.

The bottle of rum was made of plastic, but I still wanted to bash it over his head. No one talked shit about Nate without me doing something about it, so when Clark opened his mouth again, laughing like he was some fucking comedian, my fist balled.

“Or beat half to death like his brother.”

I dropped the rum and wound up for a punch, but Maddox came out of nowhere and did it first, stealing my thunder. Clark's nose busted and spurted blood, and he fell right out of his chair to the muddy ground.

“Hold my beer,” Trisha the skank said, standing up.

“Fuck you, bitch.” At least I got to do that part. When Clark sat up, cupping his face, my knuckles ended up hitting his eye socket and he went back down. “Talk shit about Nate or Devon again! Try it!” I hadn't seethed this badly in forever. I wanted him to open his mouth so I could completely unleash on him. I had a lot of frustrations to take out. Maddox stood to

my side, radiating something as sinister as I was. I had a few triggers: someone shit-talking Nate, someone shit-talking my brother, and someone asking me when I was gonna get my shit-talking self figured out.

Clark stayed down, but Trisha didn't shut her mouth. "Fucking Kane brothers," she scoffed. "Think you're hot shit even though you're both stuck with Sawyers. You bring this town down with your filth."

I *wanted* to hit a girl. Considered it. Felt Maddox put his hand on my wrist to keep it steady. Thought about Karen instead. If I got myself arrested for hitting a skanky meth head, I wouldn't be able to run to the grocery store for the list she gave me.

"Your tit is literally hanging out the side of your tank top, Trisha. Not sure you got a whole lot of ground to stand on." I glared at her, honestly just glad I never turned out like them. I was a mess, but at least I wasn't a meth headed mess with no standards. I glared at both of them, daring them to talk badly about Nate one more time.

Maddox tugged on my wrist, tilting his head to tell me to walk away. So I walked down the beach with him, still gripping the plastic bottle of rum.

"Why the fuck everybody gotta be all up in my business about Nate and relationships?" I vented. "What makes them better than us?"

"The delusions in their heads," Maddox said, shaking out his fist. "Cool off, Xav. Don't let people like that get to you. Not even Mom."

He was one to talk, but I appreciated it anyway.

"So, how'd it go?" He changed the topic.

"What?"

"The blowie. Devon said Nate's been going on about it."

My anger dissolved, and a bubbly sense of energy took over instead. Wow, my switch flipped fast. *Way to change the*

subject, Madd. He hated sex chats, so I wasn't going to waste the chance to spew my thoughts.

“Going on about it, how? In a good way? Like, a ‘Xavi knows how to control a blowie’ type way? Or you mean he’s talking about the night I sucked him off? Seriously, Madd. I don’t know what you were going on about way back when with the dick tripping chat. This shit is easier than you two made it look. I can be gay in my sleep. Am gay in most of my dreams these days.”

He shook his head and stole the rum from me. “Well, we aren’t all fucking go with the flow types, Xavi.”

I was proud of that. A lot of people saw it as a weakness or a sign of immaturity, but being able to adapt to situations without letting them overwhelm me was my superpower. Despite how heated I just got about Trisha and Clark, I handled most things pretty well, in my opinion.

“Okay, so I’m totally a bottom, right?”

Maddox stopped. “What? You’ve fucked?”

“Not yet, I just know.”

“How?” He laughed. “How could you possibly know that?”

“It’s just something I know. Can’t explain it.” Like my ass clenched in anticipation whenever I thought about it. I shrugged and kept walking, hoping we’d run into Nate and Devon somewhere along the way because I had no idea where they went. “But like, how do I do it?”

“Bend over and take it.”

“No. Absolutely not. I’ll take it however I want to take it, so butt out of that part. Pun totally intended.” I ducked and weaved, thinking there was a June bug out to get me. Just a moth. “I’m asking about the preparation part. You know, the lubing and the stretching.” I looked at my brother. “You know?”

Maddox grimaced. “Oh, I know. Don’t make me tell you.”

“Maddox, you demanded flip fucks in great detail and got sucked off in the back seat of—”

“Ugh.” He waved his hands around, embarrassed. Poor guy. “Do not remind me. Just... fingers and a lot of lube, okay? Fingers first. Tongues, even. Then comes the begging. Since you’re apparently a bottom, you’ll be the one begging. You’ll know when you feel ready. Are we done?”

“And don’t even get me started on the box spring/mattress confession.”

“I hate you,” he said.

Okay, lubed fingers and begging. Didn’t seem so hard. Wait, tongues? Where? *Where did the tongues go?* I couldn’t wait to find out. There’d be no tripping because I knew exactly where I wanted Nate’s dick to end up, so all I had to worry about was the prep, the vibe, and sticking the landing.

“Where’s the prostate?”

“Oh my fucking god.”



“I NEED TO WEED WHACK SOMETHING!”

Nate seethed, angry at the world because Patrick Harris called to warn us that my mom went to him for a loan. Nate threatened him into keeping us in the loop, and now he was all agitated about it. I loved him for it because she was my mom and my problem, but it was like he was holding onto my anger for me. I felt numb. Detached from it at the moment. She’d failed so many times that it almost felt like a familiar coming home party or some shit.

“Weed whacker!” he shouted. Demanded.

Uh oh. When Nate was really mad or worked up, nothing would calm him down like the instant satisfaction of either weed whacking or power washing. I ran into the shop, knocked over a bunch of brooms and shovels we never used,

and yanked out the old weed eater. Still had some gas in it, so I rushed out to hand it to Nate before he blew up.

His lighter had finally died, and without a cigarette, he was a blond monster in work boots and cutoff jean shorts that were, admittedly, too short, as much as I hated to say it. Because damn, he had nice thighs despite how insecure he was about them. I fiddled with my bracelets and eye-fucked his legs and biceps every time he pulled on the weed whacker. Shit, was he really mine? More than my best friend? Like I earned him somehow for real?

On the sixth yank of the ripcord, the engine fired up, and Nate got to work whacking at weeds around the shop. My first instinct was to get him a new lighter, but maybe that made me a terrible quit-smoking-buddy, so I sat on the picnic table instead. He went around the other side, disappearing from view, so I watched Karen be a delight.

“Thank you for your business and have a wonderful rest of your day.” Karen beamed at the customer, handing him his invoice. “Please rate us on Google.”

The fuck does that mean?

The customer, who was weirded out about Karen’s politeness, or maybe her muumuu, or maybe her hair, gave her a weird look that didn’t deter her, taking his invoice and the key to his boat. It was docked behind the shop, so at least we didn’t need to tow it anywhere.

“Hey, sunshine child,” I shouted at her. “Come take a break before we get written up for child labour.”

Karen did not take a break. She answered two more phone calls before coming out to sit with my lazy ass in the sun, tugging up the length of her weird dress thing. “What a beautiful day,” she said.

“You seen your mom lately?” I asked, mainly because I hoped her mom was better than mine. Mine tried with certain things, like the dinners, but we’d never been her priority, and I hoped that Karen was a priority to someone.

“Not lately, no. It’s okay, though. I’m... it’s okay.” She smiled at me and honestly looked happy despite that.

“Why you so happy all the time if your life is shit?”

“Happiness is a choice. Being miserable doesn’t get me anywhere. Happy or angry, my situation is the same, so I might as well try to smile sometimes.”

Fuck, I love her.

Because honestly, I understood that. Nate and I had made a pact way back in the day. An agreement to have fun together because the majority of our lives were such bullshit that it was like sinking in quicksand. Karen had even deeper quicksand and still managed to smile. Fucking warrior.

“You’re a gem, Karen.” I nudged her. “Why you so dirty all the time?”

She blushed. “I just... am.”

There was more there, and despite the warning signals in my head telling me not to push it, I did anyway. “But why? No showers at the girls’ home?”

“Yeah, there are. But the staff aren’t the nicest people, and I just... I dunno. I feel uncomfortable there, so I shower every few days and try to hurry.” She shrugged. “My body is...”

“Is what? Awesome? Because you look pretty awesome to me.”

Her gap teeth met my eyes, the sun glinting off them. Despite her tangled hair, her teeth were in top-shelf shape, and I think they were the whitest teeth I’d ever seen. “I’m kind of a loser, if you haven’t noticed.” She snorted.

“Being cool is overrated. All these expectations to meet and people to impress.”

“How would you know?”

“Oh! Burn!” I ruffled her hair, but my fingers got caught up in there, and it took some maneuvering to free them. “We aren’t losers. We just have our own vibe.”

Karen laughed and I had no idea why, so I joined her. “When I get outta there and get to buy my own stuff again, I’m gonna wear so many colours.”

“What’s your favourite?”

“Lime green.”

“Twinsies! Mine too. And purple.”

When Karen laughed again, it was one of those ridiculous ones that made everyone around her laugh, so I couldn’t even help it that time. I looked at the sky and just let myself laugh with her.

“What’s so funny?” Nate asked, shutting off his machine. “Is my ass out?”

“I don’t know how you don’t have butt cleavage in those,” Karen said, smiling at him.

“Or your saggy left nut isn’t out,” I added.

“You like it.” He winked at me and kept on working.

“I planted that last week,” Karen said of the garden Nate was ripping to shreds. “I had hoped it’d look pretty, but I guess serving as his stress ball works, too.”

“He got fired from the golf course because he couldn’t tell the difference between a flower and a weed. Don’t take it personally.”

“Is... is he your boyfriend?” she asked. “I mean, I get a vibe, but didn’t want to be rude.”

“He’s my best friend... with more.”

“Benefits?”

“Yeah, benefits, but more than that, too. He wears purple underwear for me.” I looked at her. “That means he likes me, right?”

“I’ve never had someone like me, so I wouldn’t know, but it seems like a good sign. Plus, he watches you all the time. I see it. He gets those heart eyes.”

I was pretty sure I got them, too. Even when I looked at Karen. I'd never really had anyone to look up to in life, but the way Karen went about her situation and didn't let it change her was heroic to me. She was a strong fifteen-year-old who felt like a loser, was obviously self-conscious of her body, and had little to hope for while carrying a lot of worry around, and she managed to smile. The best part was that I didn't think it was fake.

My heroics weren't heroic enough to help her home life, but maybe there was one thing I could do for her showering situation. An idea formed, and I knew Nate would be on board.

"Alright, you better get me that grocery list, sunshine. I got approval for Friday!"

"What?!" She jumped up. "You did?"

"Yep! You still wanna come to Garron Park for dinner?"

Karen did a dance on top of the picnic table. It was so horrible that I joined in to make it even more horrible, and when Nate came over and twerked in his tiny shorts, he made it even worse. It was awesome.

"We can strategize your mission statement," I shouted at Karen over the happy music inside our heads. "About how you're going to right the reputations of Karens everywhere."

Behind her green shades, I swear her eyes got wet. But her smile was goddamn radiant.

Fucking loved the Karen Movement and it hadn't even started yet.

CHAPTER 17

NATE

XAVI WAS DUCT-TAPING HIS LEFT SLIDE AGAIN, BENT OVER with his ass pointed right at me like he thought he was subtle. He wasn't. I wound up and slapped it, making him yelp.

Followed it with a tense moan, though.

"Bet you can't turn my ass cheek red with one more slap," he dared me.

I shook my head at him.

"What?! Spanking is on the kink list."

Devon had found a kink list on the internet and reluctantly printed it out for us, and Xavi was going through them all. There weren't any definitions, so we were going in blind, but he carried it around in his pocket like it was the bible to being gay.

"Spanking in the middle of the hardware store you're stealing duct tape from is a surefire way to get caught." I glanced down the aisle.

"I'm just stealing a little. I'll put the roll back." He did just that. "There. These sandals will last me another three years now." He grabbed the cart handle and started pushing, leaning over, ass out. He *really* wanted to bottom. "Should we get plywood or something?"

"No. There's scrap wood behind the store. We'll steal pallets. The weather-treated ones. We just need the shower curtain."

When Xavi stopped in front of the shower curtain section, I pressed up behind him and the cart. We already had a hose, a bar for the curtain, and a shower head in the cart. My wallet started bitching at me, but if we could steal the wood, it'd have to relax.

“Mm,” Xavi mused, pressing his ass back. “Is that a pool noodle, or are you just happy to see me?”

“Awe, thanks for comparing the size of my dick to a pool noodle.” I laughed, reaching over him to grab a white plastic shower curtain.

Xavi spun his back to the cart, face right in mine. “Are we hiding?”

“From what?”

“From people. You know?”

I had no reservations about my shift in sexuality, but that deep-seated insecurity that reminded me I wasn't good enough to be a boyfriend wanted me to say yes. To hide. To keep our bubble intact so that no one would tell Xavi he could do better than me. But the look in his green eyes and the complete lack of shits to give about it on Xavi's face had me shaking my head instead.

“Not hiding.”

“Good.” He weaved his fingers with mine. “If you won't spank me again so I can decide if it's one of my kinks, I'll fall back to my favourite one.” He raised our hands. “Fuck, I could come from this.”

I hid my face from him and let him fondle me as we walked through the store. I related to my brother more than I thought I would. Devon never thought he was worthy of Maddox, and from the outside, I used to think he was stupid for that because Maddox was so obviously in love with him. But I understood it now. What did I actually have to bring to the table to be worthy of a relationship with Xavi? My complete disregard for a direction in life wasn't worth shit, and my floundering personality was fun for a friendship, but

what did he want from me? What could I give that I didn't already give him?

Was there a traits list, similar to the kink list in his pocket, that would be a bible about how to be in a relationship? I didn't know, but when Xavi kept playing with my fingers, leaning against me, being all up in my space with no shame about it, I thought maybe it didn't matter.

Connection was everything, and we had that in spades.



“HONESTLY, I THINK THIS IS BETTER THAN OUR REAL shower,” I said, admiring our handiwork.

We'd stolen a ton of pallets, managed to make three walls out of them to create a stall, hung the shower head and even connected it to a black hose that ran across the roof to heat the water with the sun, and hung the curtain on the open side. Our outdoor shower was complete.

“Do you think she'll like it?” Xavi asked. “I mean, I'm super impressed, but will it insult her?”

Karen was dirty. All the time. Smelled a bit ripe, too. She said that by the time the other girls got through their two-minute showers, there was no hot water left for her. But we figured that was a lie. Karen didn't give a shit about hot water, especially with how hot it had been outside lately. She was scared to shower there, and we didn't know if that was because of her own insecurities or if she felt unsafe being naked. Xavi tried to pry but didn't get a clear answer from her.

“Either way, we like it.” I laughed. “I think she'll like it.”

“And we can take it apart and bring it with us when we move,” Xavi said.

I looked at him, something tightening in my chest. It was a different kind of tightening to the plastic coating we just added

to the wooden pallets. It wasn't a constriction, but rather a cozy wrap right around my heart or some craziness like that.

“Are we moving?”

Xavi grinned, leaned his bare chest against mine, and licked my lips. “You fucking know we are, Nate. You want out of the storage room and back into Garron Park so you can protect that kid, and wherever you go, I go.”

Spreading my hands over his lower back and letting them cop-a-feel all the way up to his shoulders, I kept my lips against his, not kissing, but not *not* kissing. “I'm not the best person to follow.”

“Bullshit,” he whispered, hands on my hips. “Even when you lead me astray, we always have a good time.”

“That's because we're together.”

“Exactly,” he said, matter of fact. “Which is the only sign I need to know you're my person. I'll fucking follow you anywhere, Nathan Neegan.”

That cozy wrap around my heart got too warm with that confession, so I reached up, threading my fingers into his hair. Just when he thought I was going to kiss him, I tugged his head back. “You still all bottomy?”

“Fuck yes.”

“Then let's cross that line.” I pressed my lips to his and then tried to force him inside.

Xavi might have claimed he'd follow me anywhere, but not today. He grinned at me, a sinister, sexy thing that perked up my dick and made my throat dry. “Yes. Let's.” He wrapped his arms around me from behind and steered me inside.

Confidence was something that came naturally to me when around my best friend, but nerves swept through me anyway. The apartment was quiet compared to outside, the rush of my blood drowning out the sound of anything else. Until Xavi spoke.

“You're nervous,” he accused, his voice huskier than usual.

Damn right I was nervous. “Excited-nervous,” I said, looking him straight in the eye. “Don’t laugh this off, Xavi. We’re about to fuck.”

He grinned, eyelashes fanning across his cheeks as he looked down. His hand trailed down my stomach, fingers catching on my waistband before he rubbed me through my shorts. “Why haven’t you been smoking?” he asked randomly.

I swallowed desire and squinted at him in confusion. “My lighter died.”

“Did it?” he mused, hand rubbing, lashes still fanning, bare chest starting to heave.

No, not completely. It still sparked when it needed to. Fifty percent reliable, just like my truck. “Yeah.”

Xavi grabbed the hem of my shirt, pulling it over my head. My hands lifted, and when they dropped, they touched him. Explored the way his abs dipped, and his ribs stuck out with every breath and subtle movement.

“You know what I think?” he asked, fingers on my jaw, thumb swiping my bottom lip. I panted like a junkie, desperate for a hit of him. “You haven’t gone to buy more. You’re weed whacking to cope. Your lighter isn’t dead.” His thumb released my lip, trailing down my chin and the column of my throat.

“So?” I asked, back hitting the patio door when my balance faltered.

“So,” Xavi started, slowly easing down my shorts, “I think you quit.” He dropped to his knees, hands rubbing all the fuck over my briefs. “And since you wear these sexy as fuck purple underwear for me, I’m starting to think you quit smoking for me, too.”

I totally did. I didn’t want to call myself a quitter yet, because there was still a chance I’d slip up, but I’d avoided smoking for a bit now, and it was for his fridge. To save money. To be able to help him afford something he dreamed about.

“So what if I did?” I watched him. He was still my playful Xavi, but there was a dangerous, almost dark edge to him that

set my pulse to pounding.

“Well, I think that deserves a reward. Don’t you?” He finally looked up at me, and when his eyes blazed with something daring, I had a momentary lapse in confidence. I didn’t deserve anything, let alone a reward, but Xavi wanted to give it to me anyway, and maybe he made me feel comfortable enough to accept it.

“What kind of reward?” My hands twitched at my sides, desperate to grab hold of him but unsure how or where.

He bit his goddamn lip, and my goddamn lip dripped drool. *Sheesh!* I licked it up and barely had time to swallow before he pulled my underwear down and pressed my cock to my stomach. His tongue, warm and wet, licked a path from my taint to my tip, making my legs shake. Then the cocky bastard sucked my nuts into his mouth like they were Jell-O shots.

“Goddammit, Xavi. *How?*” I finally grabbed something. His head. For balance. “How are you so good at this?”

“I’m not,” he purred, all seductive and sexy. “You just want it so bad that it feels good.” He licked me again, running his tongue around the flushed tip of my dick. “You know what I want so bad?”

Okay, fuck it. I knew exactly what he wanted, and to be honest, I wanted it just as badly. “Yeah.” I barked at him, pulling him to his feet and then shoving him until the back of his knees hit the couch and he fell onto it, grinning at me. Yeah, I played right into his hand, but he dealt it so well. “You know what else was on that kink list you carry about?”

“What?” he asked, excited and needy.

He was only wearing boxers since he had just showered in the new outdoor shower, so I pulled them off, enjoyed the audible slap of his cock against his stomach, and then sank to my knees between his. I pushed his legs back, tugged his ass right to the edge of the couch, and dug my fingers into his thighs.

“Rimming.”

“What’s rimming? Fuck, Nate. *What’s rimming?*” he asked urgently.

“Ass licking.” And I was eager as all get-out to try it.

Xavi gasped, moaned, and groaned all together when my tongue swept his hole. No teasing. No taunting. No build-up. I licked all around the tight entrance my cock couldn’t wait to get in, pushing his thighs back as far as they’d go. And holy shit, I had never chased an endorphin rush so hard.

“That’s where the tongues go,” he whispered.

Xavi trembled because of me.

He moaned because of me.

He begged for more because of me.

He pushed his ass against my face, fucking desperate for more *because of me*.

“Oh, holy fuckfuck,” he groaned. “Yes. It’s a winner. I’m not even self-conscious. This is my kink.”

“Uh-uh,” I denied, shoving my tongue inside him and burying my face against his skin. Pulling up for a breath, I said, “You got hand-holding. This one is mine.”

“Take it. It’s yours. As long as you do this to me... fuck, it’s gonna make me come before we’ve even... Na-te.” He choked on my name, pressing his head against the back of the couch. His thighs tried to squeeze together and his hand wrapped around his cock. “Don’t make me come yet. I want you in me. Please. Please get your dick in my ass.” His eyes shot open, and he seemed to have a lightbulb moment. “The *begging*. I’m doing it. It means I’m ready.”

I scoffed, pulling away to give him a chance to calm down. Whatever advice someone had given him about prep, he figured he was prepped. He wasn’t. Because Devon was better at talking details than Maddox was these days, and I learned all about how to prep an ass for the taking.

I intended to take it.

“Dirty words wanna come out,” he warned.

I grabbed the lube he'd strategically placed on the coffee table three days ago as a hint. "Say them."

"Spit. On me. Then tongue fuck it inside me."

My cock pulsed precum. I pushed his legs apart, spit right on his tight hole, and dove in with my face. His groan of pleasure was fucking musical, but the way he moved around, wiggling like he was about to combust, really did me in. I pinched the tip of my dick, staving off my orgasm.

"Fuck yeah," he whispered at the ceiling. "I'm a slave to this. Do it again."

"Demanding slave." I did it again, spreading spit all over him, watching it drip down his crack. "Ready for fingers?" I lubed up.

His throat hitched with a swallow, and he looked at me. Temporarily lost for words, he just breathed and nodded, biting that damn lip again. Unsure if there was a protocol but way too worked up to overthink it, I slowly slid one finger inside him, watching his face slacken as I did.

"Still a bottom?" I asked, making sure.

"Yes. A million yesses." He bit down on his lip.

I pumped my finger, watching it disappear inside him. When I added a second, he bit down harder. "If you keep biting your lip like that, I'm going to bite it for you."

"Ah, do it."

Lifting upright on my knees, I tugged his lip free and dragged my teeth across it. My two fingers curled inside him while he moaned straight into my mouth. He dropped his cock and grabbed my nape, forcing my mouth against his.

"I'm begging," he rasped.

I kissed him harder, pumping my two middle fingers. "You aren't ready."

"Nate," he moaned, trying to goad me.

Stretching him until his thighs clamped around my torso, I felt a rush of power that brought on cockiness. "Say it."

He groaned.

“Come on, Xavi. Beg harder for what you really want.”

He moaned.

“Xavi,” I warned.

With his hand tightening on the back of my neck and his ass riding my fingers, he broke the kiss, looked me straight in the eye, and demanded, “Fuck me. Make me a bottom.”

CHAPTER 18

XAVI

MADDOX SAID I'D BEG FOR IT, BUT I HAD NO IDEA I'D BE delusional with need and goddamn whining for it.

“Fuck me,” I repeated, grabbing the back of Nate’s neck. “Please, hurry up and fuck me before I lose all my dignity.” Somewhere between him putting his tongue in my ass and his fingers doing magical things, he bit my lip and turned me into a starved man. I’d been hungry before, but nothing compared to this level of feral appetite. I got caught somewhere between a needy brat trying to get laid and a wild beast, ready to take what I wanted.

“What dignity?” Nate asked, his cock brushing my hole.

Yeah, I had none of that. Which was why I couldn’t wait for him to be calm and gentle, easing his way inside me. I grabbed his hips, pulling so hard that his lubed cock sank inside me in one hard push. It hurt like a motherfucker but sated my hunger in a way that made me feel drunk on fulfilled cravings.

“Shit, Xavi,” Nate grabbed the back of the couch for balance. “Are you okay, you pushy bitch?”

My eyes fluttered and my ass spasmed, adjusting at a faster pace than it was ready for. When Nate tried to pull back, I held him there and growled. “Don’t. Fucking. Move.” I stared at his chest, wanting to sink my teeth into his pecs.

“I can’t decide if you’re sexy or crazy right now. The mind fuck of it is hot, though.” He reached down, tilting my chin until I looked up at him. “Are you okay? Answer me.”

I *felt* crazy. Crazy with lust and sexy because of it. With his cock buried inside me and a concoction of pure want and desire surging through my veins, I'd never felt sexier. I felt pain and satisfaction morph together into a cocktail of something I'd chase forever. I felt a connection snap into place, like it'd been waiting all our lives to finally settle there. I felt a closeness to Nate that made me want to cry with relief.

Because... *this*. This was what had been missing from every hookup we had over the past few years. Nothing ever felt right because this part had been denied. I never even knew how badly my body craved it, but now that I had it, I knew it was the only thing I'd ever want. We worried about turning things sexy between us, and even though I'd basically forced him to fuck me at my pace, and he was currently staring at me, wondering if he'd hurt me, nothing had ever felt easier.

Nate was my person. And I was his. The sex wasn't the scary part like we'd thought. The acceptance of the shift in relationship would be—the mingling of friendship and romance. I wasn't afraid of it anymore.

“I'm so good, Nate.” I sighed in painful bliss. “Are you?”

“Are you hurt?”

“No.” *A little.*

Nate pulled back a bit, giving small, gentle thrusts of his hips. It didn't alleviate the weird pressure feeling, but it had me biting my lip again. “Never better,” he said.

Instead of grabbing him, I reached behind my head, dipped my hands beneath his, and linked our fingers against the back of the couch. Nate squeezed hard, starting to fuck into me nice and slow.

My dirty mouth vanished, and my obsessive need chilled. When I looked at the way his abs flexed with every thrust, a calmness set in that proved to me I was right where I was supposed to be. I drummed my fingers along the tops of his hands, making sure we were properly linked, tight and unforgiving. Nate looked, drawn by the motion, and when he lowered his gaze to my eyes, something changed within him.

He thrust harder, making me groan. He fucked me even harder, making me moan. As my body sagged down on the couch, my ass seeking the fill of his cock, I became conflicted about what to do with my hands. Hold his or jerk myself off?

Nate let go, and I huffed in annoyance. “Come here.” He pulled out and helped me down to the floor.

“I wanna ride you,” I blurted.

He smirked. “Next time. I can tell you’re being all sentimental and needy right now.” He shoved the table out of the way and settled between my legs. “I’ll hold your hands, Xavi.” He linked our hands on either side of my head, pinning them to the floor, and moaned when he entered me again. My own moan almost drowned it out, but fuck, I loved the sound of him turned on. “And this way, you don’t have to jerk off.” He bent over me, fucking me while his abs rubbed against my sensitive cock, adding the perfect friction.

“Shit,” I gasped, loving that.

“Learned it from Devon.”

“Don’t say Devon.”

He laughed, but then his mouth was on mine and our breaths were mingling. If I thought I was delusional before, the drag of his cock inside me and the rub of his body against mine turned me borderline unhinged. Every motion created a sensation, and every thrust taught a lesson. My hips tilted to find that angle that felt perfect, and when a jarring bolt of pleasure made me gasp against his jaw, he grinned.

“He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named bet me I couldn’t find it the first time.” He rocked, hitting that same spot that almost had me coming between our bodies. “Found it.”

Oh, fuck. *Did he ever!* I started to sweat with the pressure of trying to hold out a little longer. “He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named’s husband bet that I wouldn’t come the first time.”

“Please come,” Nate begged. “Because my ass hurts from trying not to. Fucking come, Xavi.” He pushed into me, tightening our hands and rocking our bodies on the floor.

While the pain was still there, it was such a background feeling that I focused solely on the building orgasm. When I bit my lip, Nate bit it free, and that was it for my restraint.

“Ah, fuck yeah,” I moaned, heels jammed into his thighs, ass rising off the floor to take what I wanted from him. Cum slicked between our bodies, my eyes closed without permission, and my fingers slackened in his hold. “Nate.”

His forehead hit mine, and he blurted something rushed about coming inside me, but it was far too late for that. Nate’s body trembled on top of mine, his forehead slipping until he was moaning right in my ear. But his moans weren’t fluid. They were choppy, barked out between staccato breaths, forced and unbalanced.

“Oh, fuck, Xavi. Oh, fuck.”

I needed to feel him. I let go of his hands, wrapped my arms around his back, and held onto him as I actually got to experience him coming during sex for the first time. I’d seen it from across the room, felt it through a second body like she was a conduit, but this trumped all feelings.

“So fucking hot, Nate.” He kept still, but the cum between our bodies provided a smooth glide. My legs lowered, stretching out, hitting his heels, and... “Did you keep your socks on?”

He collapsed on top of me, partially laughing but mostly wheezing through his smoker’s lungs. “Look, you broke your toe, and I’ve had enough of feet for a while. Yes, I kept them on.” He balanced himself on his elbows. “We fucked.”

I smiled, unable to help it. “We fucked,” I confirmed. “Don’t freak out.”

“I’m not freaking out. *You* don’t freak out.” He smiled. “Recap?”

I grabbed his jaw. “Our twenty-five-to-life just became my new favourite thing, Nate. I am *so* gay.”

He laughed. “You’re not gay. Bi, maybe.”

I shook my head, in complete denial. “Nah. Totally gay now. For you. I just made the switch.”

“That’s allowed?”

“Who says it isn’t?” I raised a brow, reaching down to press on his ass cheek.

He rocked into me a bit, shaking all over. “Fuck, fine. Totally gay.” He looked at me. “For you, too.”

Knew it.

“We’ve got awesome chemistry,” I started my recap. “Paired with our bond and the fact that we’ve both wanted it for so long, I think we’re in for the best fuck years of our lives.”

“Agreed,” he said, starting to catch his breath. He pulled out and left me empty, falling to his back on the floor next to me. “But if you wanna get all bossy, maybe don’t do it the first time we fuck and you have no idea what you’re in for. Your ass is gonna be so sore. Please make a big dick comment.”

“So sore,” I agreed. “From your monster cock.”

“Ugh, now I’m comparing my dick to a monstrous one. Like tentacles and shit.”

“Tentacles are on the kink list.” I turned my head to face him. “So, rimming? You claimed that one?”

“Claimed. Stole. Bought. It’s mine. You can’t take it.”

I linked our sweaty hands together. “This is mine. Can’t wait to find my next one.” So glad he picked rimming because... yeah, he could shove his tongue in my ass all day every day. I’d need to start showering multiple times a day just to entice him to do it. Travel pack of wet wipes might help. Maybe a bulk pack for how often I wanted it.

“We’ve got a lot of list left to go through,” he said, but he put a hand on my chest when I tried to sit up. “What’re you doing?” He pushed me back down.

“Uh, sitting up? Water?”

“I need to get into position. Wait.” He climbed to his knees, crawled to my feet, and spread my legs. “Okay, go.”

I tilted my head at him.

“I just came inside you, Xavi. If you think I’m not gonna watch it drip out your ass when you sit up, you’re fucking crazy.”

“Oh, right. Good call! Give me the recap as I go, okay?” I asked; he nodded.

But Nate didn’t need to give me the recap. As I got myself into a sitting position, which was harder than I thought it’d be because my abs were already on fire, I felt the warm liquid push out of my ass. His eyes glazed, and the drool coming out of his mouth gave the recap his words didn’t. Fuck, he was a sexy blond bastard.

“Hey, bestie.” I smiled at him, shy but owning it.

Nate licked his lips with the same sort of shyness in his eyes. “Guess you’re more like my baby now,” he said.

I swooned so fucking hard I pulled him right back down and didn’t let him go for hours.

My baby.

CHAPTER 19

NATE

“COME ON, DEV! I’M DYING TO TALK TO SOMEONE ABOUT IT!” I followed him around his front yard while he gathered up a propane tank for the BBQ later at Seth and Naomi’s place. I was finally looking forward to a Friday dinner. Xavi was out getting all the groceries with Karen, who was supposed to be working at the shop, but we were skipping. The big shower reveal came next, and then we’d meet everyone at Xavi’s parents’ place.

“Ah!” He waved me off. “I gave you sex tips. I don’t want the full story. Fuck off.”

He got it anyway. “Well, you never warned me I’d turn into a fucking monster when my cum dripped—”

His hand viced around my throat, and his angry eyes met my happy ones. “No.”

“Please,” I croaked.

“Hard no.” He shoved me away. “Grab that.” He pointed to a bag Maddox had picked up at the store for Xavi.

I grabbed it. “God, when’d you turn into such a prude?”

“When the topic started including your parts in his parts. I liked it better when I was telling you to mind your cock.”

“Oh, I minded my cock, alright.”

“Go do something useful,” he grumped at me.

I smiled, twirling the bag around my wrist. Karen’s green surprise went flying, so I skipped over to pick it up from the

lawn. “Can’t. My bestie slash boyfriend has my truck, and you’re my ride home.”

“Oh, you’re boyfriends now?” Devon looked at me, slugging the propane tank into the back of their truck. “When’d that happen?”

“Probably when we were twelve. We’re only just catching onto it now.” I tossed the bag through the open window. “So, rimming is defin—”

He shoved me so hard I stumbled over the rotten wood from their deck and landed on my ass bone. “You’re fucking lucky my ass ain’t the one being pounded, Devon!” I rolled around, seething through my pain. “You ungrateful dick!” I stared at the cloudy sky, knowing rain was on the way. Hopefully it held off until after dinner so Karen could enjoy herself.

Shit, she’d enjoy it in the rain just as much. Probably make us all do a rain dance or some shit, and I loved to dance! Kinda loved that teenager, even if she was a dash devilish and a sprinkle angelic. She’d gotten under my skin, and now I wanted to show her a good night because... because her dad used to make her special suppers, and no one did that for her anymore! Even though she was cooking.

“I’m not ungrateful. Trust me. You saved my sorry ass too many times to count.” He held out a hand, so I took it and let him haul my broken butt up. “But you’re all comfortable with everything, and it’s pissing me off.”

“Why?”

“Because I struggled so hard!” he shouted.

“That was your own fault. And I’m pretty sure it’s half the reason you two are together, so get over it. We don’t all struggle to dip our sticks in—”

“Don’t.”

“—our Kane boy.”

“You’re fucked, Nate.” Devon sighed, handing me the hat that had knocked off my head when I fell. “It makes me

jealous, alright?”

“Of what? You literally have everything you’ve ever wanted.”

“Of... the time I wasted. You’ve had Xavi forever. Sure, shit is changing, and you’re fucking now. Weird. But you’ve always had him. I spent most of my life hating Maddox for no reason other than Dad told me to, and then I wanted to. I could have had him sooner.”

There was actual sadness in his eyes, but I knew he was wrong. Their relationship worked because of their feud. It *was* their story. “It was you being half dead on his doorstep that started everything. And nothing would have started if you two were already friends and you showed up bloody. You couldn’t have had him sooner because you two needed that tense history to finally snap.” I grabbed his shoulder. “So enjoy the fuck out of how it finally worked out, and let me tell my sex stories.”

He glared at me. Nostrils flared. Lips pressed together. “One sex story. *One*. And if you try to tell me more than one, I’ll tie you to Gnat’s leash and wrap it around a tree.”

I beamed, fist-pumping the air and doing a celebratory high kick. “Well, I only have one so far. Let me start at the *very* beginning.”

He groaned.



“IT’S BADASS, RIGHT?” XAVI ASKED, LIPS PARTED IN A massive smile. “Right?”

Karen, dressed in a one-piece bathing suit that sorta drooped way below her ass cheeks, ran from the shower we’d made, did a cannonball off the dock, laughed a bunch, and ran back to the shower.

“It’s so badass!” She turned the water on and let out the happiest sounding sigh. “You know how long it’s been since I was able to stand in a shower for more than thirty seconds?”

No, but tears pricked the back of my eyes at that admission and the joy on her face. Xavi turned his back on her, biting his fist to staunch the emotions. Then he ran and cannonballed into the water like Karen had, using it to buy himself a moment of muffled silence.

“Well, take all the time you want. We even got this!” I held out a little shower bag full of soaps, conditioners, and shampoos. Most of it was donated, half-empty bottles from Andrea’s friends, but whatever.

“Thanks, Nate,” she said, taking it. “I’m really... this is the best day I’ve had in forever.” She gave me a wet hug, and whatever fatherly instincts I swore I didn’t have rose up and made me desperate to jump in the ocean, too. “And thank that crybaby for me.”

“Thank him yourself. Just let him pretend he isn’t crying first.” I winked. “Take your time.” I closed the curtain, put a towel and a brush there for her, and headed down the dock to make sure Xavi wasn’t drowning in anything but his own tears.

He clung to the dock, hiding in the water. “Did she see me?”

“No,” I lied. “Just thought you were hot and needed a swim.”

“Oh, good.” He pulled himself out, sitting next to me. “She smiled, Nate. Full gap teeth and no worries.”

“I know. You did good, Xav.” I nudged him with my shoulder, proud as shit.

He snaked his arm under mine and held my hand on my thigh like it was no big deal. It brought attention to my thighs, but for once, I didn’t feel too shit about them.

“Having second thoughts about your *meh* kid? Turning into a *maybe* kid again?” I asked.

“I never realized I was so soft,” he said instead. “Like, here I am, thinking I’m this hardened lowlife, used to fucked-up shit and capable of dealing with it. Able to laugh it off, you know?”

I nodded.

“But I’m not. I got used to *our* life. Our definition of shitty. Our way of being poor and neglected. Karen’s is totally different, and if I was in her shoes, I doubt I could handle it. Juvie and a girls’ home? God. I’d get beaten to death or just... die from depression.”

“You could. We adapt to what we’re in. That’s how she survives.”

“Yeah, but she also bitch-slaps the bad parts away from tainting her. I think we tried to do that, but instead of winning at it, we pretended to be happy when we sometimes weren’t.” Xavi looked at me, dark hair dripping and eyes on mine. “You’re not wearing sunglasses.”

“I’m not hiding.”

He leaned in and pecked my lips. Then licked me. “You told me to take. So I’m taking.” He hooked a leg up on the dock. “Okay, so no. No *meh* kids, no *maybe* kids, no kids, period.”

“What? Why? I thought having Karen around would make up your mind.”

“It did. That’s what I mean by being soft. I’m at my emotional limit with her. I wanna help her be happy and make sure she gets out of there with her smile still on her face, but after that, I’ll need like a decade long nap because this shit is draining. I don’t wanna be someone’s full-time life-protector. I want Karen to be ours, always in our life, but more like our younger sister. Not our kid. I forgot how hard it is to worry about someone all the time. Madd and Dev have been good for so long that I got used to being lazy about it.”

“You aren’t lazy.” I laughed. “You deserved the break.”

“So did you,” Xavi said. “But!”

“Uh oh. A but.” I smirked at him.

“Yes, a but. A different butt later.” His smile was as cheesy as his joke. He tried to wink, too, but it was more of a blink that got water in his eyes. “You know what we’re awesome at?”

“Chatting?”

“Yes, and?”

“Bonding?”

“Yes. What else?”

“Fucking. Doing life together. Having each other’s backs. Talking shit through. Making plans. Meddling.” I looked to see if any of those were what he wanted to hear.

“Yes, but what el—just ask me what. Just say, ‘what are we good at, Xav?’ and I’ll answer it.” He cleared his throat, resetting the scene. “But! You know what we’re awesome at?”

“What are we awesome at, Xav?”

“Being older brothers. I might not know how to go Daddy for Karen, but I can sure as fuck be an older brother. We both can. You know?”

Fucking loved that. “Damn right we can. Maybe the boys will give us a reference.”

“They fucking better. Swear to all that is holy, they’d be dead without us.” He wobbled his head a bit. “Sometimes they almost died *because* of us, but whatever. That shit all buffs out in the end.” He looked right at me, green eyes bright. “And we can be that for the kid at the park. That’s who we are, Nate. That’s what we’re good at.”

He had a point. One I’d already considered. We weren’t parents at heart or big goal-type people, but we had a love for each other that was growing and a determination to be protective in the only way we knew how. Which was the same way everyone else in Garron Park was protective of us. I didn’t want that boy to look at me like I was some adult trying to fix him. He didn’t need fixing; he needed safety. I wanted him to knock on our door and know he’d never be turned

away, because when I was his age, that was all I needed. That was what helped me survive.

“Thanks for getting it, Xav. Thanks for not calling me dumb for wanting it.”

He scoffed. “You aren’t dumb. For a minute there, we let everyone tell us we were, but they don’t get it. No one gets us like we do, and that’s what makes us happy.” He leaned in to kiss my neck, and my whole body broke out in goosebumps. “Hand-holding and neck kissing. Mmm.”

Do not get a hard dick while Karen is nearby.

“Someone help!” Karen shouted, laughter following. “I’m stuck.”

We both looked up the dock, finding her in my t-shirt and Xavi’s cut-off sweatshorts, a hairbrush sticking out the side of her head.

“The bird sanctuary claims its first victim.” I laughed, tugging Xavi to his feet.

“Bet you a hundo bucks that’s not the first victim.” He cracked his knuckles. “I got this.”

But Xavi did not have it. I didn’t have it. Karen didn’t have it. When we went to Garron Park with the brush half broken, not even Naomi or Seth had it. Devon shook his head at her and told her to give up while she was ahead, and then Maddox grabbed the clippers.

“It’s time,” he told her, turning them on to buzz around the yard ominously. “Karen, this is a rescue mission for all things lost in that hair.”

“Excuse me,” Xavi scoffed, taking them from Maddox. “I am the designated buzz-cutter in this family. Karen, you trust me more, right?”

Karen looked at Maddox, who subtly warned her to say yes, and then she smiled. “Fine. But only if I get to do yours, too.”

No. The fucking horror. *The dread.* The hatred that filled me for this loveable girl. Did I growl?

“Not mine. You can do Nate’s,” Xavi said, laughing at my expression. “He likes grabbing my hair while he f—”

“She’s fifteen!” Maddox barked.

“—orces me to watch teenage supernatural shows,” Xavi finished, honestly looking innocent. *Was he really going to say that?*

“I’m a fifteen-year-old who’s been to juvie and lives in a group home. Not a nun with an abstinence pledge.” Karen grabbed the clippers from Maddox. “Alright. Do your worst,” she dared Xavi. “And hurry up about it because I have to check the food.”

“Are you sure?” I blocked Xavi from starting to hack at her hair. “Like, one hundred percent? Can’t come back from this, sunshine girl.”

Karen sat on a lawn chair, looking fearless. “I like teenage supernatural shows, too,” she said, tugging the abandoned brush from her hair. “I’ll look like *Eleven*, and I can’t think of anything more badass than her.”

“Ohmigod! Watch that one with me,” I begged her. “Xavi says no.”

“And you call yourself dominant,” Devon scoffed at me.

I glared at him.

“Xavi’s a piece of shit,” Karen teased.

Xavi’s eyes met mine, bright with happiness. He’d said he’d take in a teen, they’d call him a piece of shit, he’d agree with them, and they’d bond over it. I laughed, loving that he considered this a win.

“I really am,” he agreed with Karen.

Xavi took great pride in his work. When Karen’s hair was buzzed to an even half-inch, he surprised her with option two. Neon green hair dye. Her eyes lit up like his sandals, and soon enough, my buzz cut was forgotten. Maddox and Xavi slathered pharmacy-brand dye all over Karen’s head while she laughed the whole time. Seth tried to keep her forehead clean, and Naomi watched with a fond smile and a tetra pack of

wine. I rinsed her off with the garden hose, and by the time she was glowing green, she needed to get going on dinner. Maddox went to help her while he growled at everyone else to stay the fuck out of their way. Especially Devon and Naomi.

From behind, Xavi's hands wrapped around my neck and slid down my chest. "You want yours cut, daredevil?" He kissed my cheek and nuzzled his face into the side of my neck. "You wear purple underwear for me. You gonna wear my favourite colour in your hair, too?"

I wasn't as badass as Karen and probably couldn't pull off green hair. I turned my face, lips brushing his cheek. "What do you do for me?"

"I told you, I'm getting your name on my knuckles," he reminded me. "Permanently."

I tugged him until he plopped ungracefully onto my lap. "Sounds like a talk you can't walk."

"Want me to go right now? Bet Keith is smoking a joint in his mom's shed." He raised a brow, showing me he'd do it.

"You need someone better than him. Knuckles are hard to tat as is, and he'll fuck it up."

"I can't afford better than Keith," he said, rubbing all over me, hands on my chest, in my hair, on my abs. "Fuck, I love touching you."

I blushed from feelings, glancing around to see if anyone was watching. Before I could tell, Xavi grabbed my chin and made me look at him.

"Let me cut your hair. I like the feel of it short." He leaned in, teeth nipping at my earlobe. "It'll feel so fucking good between my legs."

"So cute," Naomi squeaked.

"You two are sickening," Devon groaned.

I ignored him. Sold on the haircut. "Cut it. But no green. Not yet."

Xavi grinned. "Mmm, my baby."

CHAPTER 20

XAVI

I FORGOT HOW HOT NATE LOOKED WITH ARMY HAIR. BUZZED fairly short to show off his cheekbones and bright blue eyes, I couldn't stop staring at him. Or touching him. Running my palm over the soft prickle of his hair. I had the sudden urge to sit on his face and feel it between my thighs, but I swallowed that desire, saving it for a more appropriate time.

Because that ratty boy was staring at us from two lots over without knowing we could see him. Nate was trying to be subtle about it, but I could tell he was itching to get up and offer the kid a plate. The fear of scaring him off kept him seated, though.

Karen's meal was... *ohmigod*. The best thing I'd eaten in at least four years, other than Nate's dick. It was a simple BBQ'd meal with a meat I couldn't name and some real live vegetables that hadn't come from a can, a frozen bag, or Maddox's farm, and everything was spiced just right. And, of course, Karen was proud about it.

"Xavi," she whispered across the outdoor table. "I figured out how I'm gonna change the narrative for Karens."

The fuck was a narrative? "How?"

"By helping Nate." She made a plate, grabbed Nate's hand, and went around the side of the trailer to lure Nate's mystery boy out for a bite to eat. My eyes watered again. *So much watering today!* I watched them walk together, Nate holding onto Karen like he was the one who was afraid.

"Any lots available here?" I asked my dad.

Maddox and Devon both stared at me. “What?” Maddox asked. “You wanna move back?”

“Yeah, we miss it here. Better than a storage room, you know?”

Dad sighed. “There isn’t anything right now, but I can keep my ear open.”

“Lot 62,” Devon blurted. “It’s still abandoned because no one will move in there. They think it has bad juju.”

“You wanna put that bad juju on us?” I scowled.

“If anyone can replace bad vibes with good ones and make that place awesome again, it’s you two,” Devon said. “Yeah, I just said that. Fuck off about it.”

It was oddly sentimental for Devon, but it made me think. Lot 62 was one of the best lots in the park, and it really was going to waste. But it housed a lot of bad memories from a pretty dire time, and I wasn’t sure if we were even strong enough to change the energy of that place.

“We’ll drive Karen home,” Maddox said. “You two go over there and check it out.”

Even though they sucked at meddling, maybe they were supportive in different ways. Because that sounded an awful lot like they were on board with us moving into a trailer together... as in, *together*.

“Oh, honey. That’d be wonderful if you moved back,” Mom said, but I looked at Dad instead. He gave me a tight smile that said, ‘Even if you move back, she’s still my responsibility.’ I appreciated it, but it’d also make me feel a lot better to be around for my dad.

Karen laughed, drawing our attention just as the kid grabbed the plate and ran. Nate shouted something at him, and the kid threw up the middle finger on his way through the neighbour’s backyard. I’d never seen a bigger smile on Nate’s face.

I fist-bumped Karen when she came back. “World’s best dinner and righting the wrongs of Karens everywhere. Quite

the night for you, sunshine.”

“Hey,” Mom said. “I make some good ones.”

No one else nodded except Devon, but Karen gave me a hug that changed me to my very core. I thought I could be important to her, but instead, she became just as important to me.



LOT 62 WAS PRIVATE, OVERGROWN AND LONELY. RIGHT THERE was where Maddox had gotten arrested and my heart had shattered with worry, wanting to save my brother but having no idea how to do that. Over there, at the side of the lot and to the back, was where Jim’s lackeys buried contraband. The trail to the forest, which had led to more contraband, was barely visible through the weeds that had grown to cover the entrance.

“Devon broke down right there,” Nate said, pointing to the front door. “Madd called me to say he had left for the night, and I remember running here, thinking Devon would be fucking dead or something. Prick never could handle emotions.” He fiddled with his pockets, so I handed him the nicotine gum. “Picked him up off the floor right inside the front door. He was all broken and scared.”

This place really did have bad vibes.

But...

“We made fun of Maddox about the flip-fucking right there.” I laughed, pointing at the deck. “And remember the day they moved in here? They were so damn happy, but they pretended to be annoyed about it, and then we moved half their shit while they disappeared to *handle* their tension.”

“Came back a lot calmer,” Nate agreed. “Devon went all Betty-homemaker here when Madd got out of the hospital. That was funny because he fucked it up so bad.”

“And Madd loved to hate it.” I smiled fondly at the memory.

“It was their fresh start,” Nate said. “This was their big... thing. They were proud of this place.”

“Didn’t end so fresh, though.” I looked at Nate, taking the gum to shove inside my pocket again. “Could you live here?”

Nate turned his back on Lot 62, hands slapping on the sides of my face and his smile right in front of me. “I could live anywhere with you.”

“That was so swoony. Keep going.” I circled my arms around his lower back.

“We grew up here and made it a fun place. We live in a storage room and have great memories there. We swapped beds and sleepovers at two completely different trailers growing up. We were homeless together. Even when you weren’t really homeless, you came to be homeless with me.” His fingers played with my hair. “And now we’re sexy besties with even more to live for. I’d live in a van with you, Xav.”

Fuck, I loved him. And our kind of love wasn’t really changing, but deepening. Becoming something more while still sitting firmly on the same foundation. Maybe I’d always been in love with Nate Sawyer and had no idea what it was, so I slapped a best friend label on it and called it a day. But maybe it took our friendship to get us to this level, and I’d forever be grateful for that.

“But where would my fridge go in a van?”

Nate laughed at the same time he tried to kiss me. It resulted in our smiling mouths pressing together without actually doing anything more than smiling.

“I’ve never doubted you, Xavi. Never. Not even once. If we really are on some clock because of our age, I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather be running down time with.”

I let my hands drift down to his ass, just feeling. “So, you’re mine?” I pressed on his ass, making his cock rub against mine. “Since we’re doing twenty-five-to-life together anyway, right? Say you’re mine, Nate.”

“Your what?” he asked, taunting me. He ran his lips over my jaw, nipping and licking to rile me into... something. Wasn't sure what yet, but I was up for the game.

“My best friend,” I said, biting his bottom lip and dragging it through my teeth.

“Best friends don't do this.” He ground his dick against mine, making me hard instantly.

“Like fuck they don't,” I rasped.

Nate teased me, not letting me fully kiss him, but taunting me with his proximity. “So, just your best friend?”

My fingers dug into his ass, squeezing a nice handful. “My partner.”

He reached behind him, linking his fingers with mine as they groped at his ass. “In crime?” He brought our hands around to the front, trailing them down his chest and stomach.

“Yeah.” I breathed. “And in life.” My fingers twitched when he teased the waistband of his pants. Our foreheads rubbed together, breath mingling, the smell of minty gum making me desperate to taste his tongue.

“Mmm, life partners, yeah?” He wet his lips, licking mine. “What do life partners do together?”

Everything. “This.” I slid our joined hands down his pants, rubbing him through his underwear. “So, are you mine?” I teased the hand job, not fully giving it and not submitting to him trying to make me.

“Your life partner,” he whispered. “Sure.”

I squeezed his dick, making him groan. “My boyfriend?”

He groaned harder. Grabbing the back of my neck, he tried to kiss me, but I pulled away. “Xavi,” he complained.

“Are you mine, Nate? My boyfriend?” I dipped below the hem of his underwear.

He wanted to say yes, but Nate had always been a bit insecure. He never thought he was good enough for anyone, but he'd always been more than good enough for me. Nate

was the best person I knew, and I'd spent most of my life reminding him of that, so it'd be no burden at all to continue to do so. I took pride in the job, and with new tools to use, I'd remind him every chance I got how fucking amazing he was.

"Be mine, Nate. My baby. My daredevil." My fingertips tickled the length of his cock. "Say yes."

Whispered, his voice mingling with the sound of the swaying weeds and the rustling leaves, Nate's lips moved against mine and said, "Yes." He spit the gum to the side.

When he kissed me hard, I stroked my hand down his cock. He groaned against my lips, body writhing. Precum seeped from his tip, and I swept my palm over it before his purple underwear could absorb it. Using it as lube, I pumped him in my fist.

"All mine," I warned him, jerking him off and feeling a rush of power over how hard his body trembled against mine. "No more threesomes, Nate. I'll lose my shit."

"Mmm," he moaned, fingers tightening around my nape. "Just you. Fuck. I've wanted..."

I pulled my hand out of his pants and spit on my palm. Slathering it down his hard shaft, Nate shook from restraint. "You've wanted what?"

"You," he confessed. "For so fucking long. I felt sick about it." He gasped when I ran my thumb over the slit. "When we'd hookup with... whoever, I always cut her out. I'd pretend it was just you and me."

With my lips under his jaw, I sucked a mark into his skin, feeling the wave of possession that came with branding him. "And what did we do in your pretend world?"

"I tried not to think about it," he rasped. "Tried to keep it to just touching."

"But?" I squeezed the base of his cock.

"But I pictured it. Fantasized about it. Told myself I didn't, but I did."

I wrapped my fingers around the side of his neck and pushed him back. When he looked at me with lusty eyes and a little embarrassment, I tilted his chin up, reminding him to own it.

“I fantasized about fucking you,” he said. “A lot.”

I pulled my hand out of his pants and stepped back. I bit my lip, knowing it'd draw all his attention. I figured it out months ago, before our confession, and I'd started doing it more often because I liked the way it felt when he looked at me like that.

“What're you doing?”

“You don't have to fantasize anymore,” I told him. Then I walked away. Walked to the trailer on Lot 62. The window in the door slid up easily, so I reached through and unlocked it. But Nate didn't follow me inside. He liked to hesitate about things, which made me grin.

Walking through the corpse of our brothers' old lives, I rifled through the cabinets in the bathroom that still had some of their stuff. A half-full bottle of lube had a layer of dust on it, but it'd work just fine. I did a quick freshen up, and when I pulled the door open, Nate was right there, ready to walk inside.

“Still stalling?” I asked, pushing him back outside.

“I wasn't...”

“Gonna fuck me or not?” I set the lube on the railing of the deck, undoing my shorts and letting them fall to my ankles. “Come on, daredevil. Live up to your name.”

Nate got that nickname when we were thirteen and he was the only one dumb enough to jump off the top of the bridge into rocky waters. Became a bit of an adrenaline junkie after that, and the nickname stuck. I was the only one who used it after the first few weeks, but I liked to goad him with it whenever he hesitated to make a decision. Thirteen-year-old Nate never hesitated. Never. Was a mouthy little shit, too.

Determination flared in his eyes, and he took an authoritative step towards me. But I grabbed him by the throat

and held him at bay. “You’ve got work to do first.” I forced him to his knees, dropped my boxers, kicked my slides off, and turned around. Leaning over the railing, I shamelessly put my ass right in his face.

Daredevil Nate didn’t hesitate. He grabbed my hips, pulled me back, and buried his face between my cheeks. And it felt so fucking good that my cock fucked through the railing slats, and I barely even registered the June bug that whizzed by my head.

“More,” I demanded. “Come on, Nate. Eat ass like you know what you’re—ah, fuck *yes!*” His tongue speared my hole, and his hands spread my ass cheeks open. His nose buried against my skin, panting harsh breaths, and his chin nuzzled my balls. Fuck, his new hair felt amazing against my skin.

I buckled forward, gripping the railing for support. He moaned, vibrating my taint, and when he pulled back and spread me open even more, I had a full-on body tremor when he spit.

“Fuck,” I groaned.

“Yeah,” he snapped at me, either pissy or impatient. “Not so bossy now, eh, Xav?”

“Get back to—”

He shut me up with his tongue in my ass, and when his saliva dripped down to coat my balls, I was close to delusion. When his fingers pumped into me, his tongue soothed the pain. The begging came even sooner than it did before, but I was conflicted. I could come just from his mouth, but I craved the fullness of him inside me. So many options, not enough time.

“Ah, fuck me. Hurry up.” I tried to twist around to control him, but Nate stopped me. Standing, he pressed on my back, making me lean over the railing. The sound of him lubing his dick made me leak, and when the head of his cock nudged against me, I pushed my hips back, trying to force him inside.

“You think you’re in control?” he asked, teasingly bumping his cockhead against my rim. “You denied me this feeling last time. You rushed it, and now I’m going to draw it out and enjoy every fucking inch of it.”

The stretch as his cockhead pushed into me was overwhelming enough to have my legs buckling. Nate never let me fall. With his hands on my hips, he held me where he wanted me, squeezing and caressing in tandem. With each gentle thrust, my jaw slackened, but with every hitched breath he released, my body temperature rose.

Nate was right. I had robbed him of this when I got greedy and impatient, and to listen to him enjoy it was almost hotter than the feel of him inside me. My natural instinct was to take over, but no part of me wanted to miss this slow ride and the way he was a fucking slave to it. Inch by inch, hitched breath to sigh, and groans that turned into moans made this the sexiest fuck of my life, simply because he was so into it.

“Fuck, you’re—”

“If you say tight, I will flip this fuck around and show you a different kind of flip fucking,” I warned him. “Don’t treat me like a chick.”

“What, guys can’t be tight?” he scoffed, thrusting a bit harder to punish me. “I was gonna say shaking. You’re shaking, Xav.”

I was. Trembling, more like. With restraint and anticipation, equal parts wanting to turn this sex rough and loving the gentleness of it. Yeah, the stretch hurt, but it wasn’t overwhelming, and to be honest, it excited me to mix in pain. I liked the extra sensation to focus on, and I think Nate knew it.

“Because... yeah, it feels really fucking good.” I turned my head to look at him. “How have I not known I love getting fucked in the ass before?”

Nate didn’t say anything, but he moaned when his thighs hit my ass. There was a pause as he took a moment to appreciate that. My dick twitched and my ass clenched around the length of him, getting familiar with how it felt to have him

inside me. Gripping the railing, I rocked a little, and Nate didn't stop me. His hands tightened on my hips, but he didn't move otherwise, letting me steer this show.

I pulled forward and rocked back, fucking the length of him slowly. When I swivelled my hips, Nate's breath choked him.

"You got your socks on, baby?"

"Y-yeah."

"Time to pull 'em up. I'm gonna fuck you so good."

He swallowed.

Pushing out my ass to force him back a step, I bent over a little more and really got my hips going. While Nate stayed still, I fucked his cock like it was the best ride I'd ever been on. And fuck, it empowered me. My fingers curled around the railing and the night vanished into the background as I fine-tuned my attention to fucking his dick and drawing the loudest gasps out of him.

Nate's hands left my hips, trailing up my torso and taking my shirt with them. When he tugged on it, I straightened my back and leaned against his chest. My arms lifted, and the barrier between us vanished.

"Fuck my cock, Xav. Show me what feels good." He gave a small thrust, arms holding me upright.

I'd never really been born to perform, but I meant what I said to Maddox. I wasn't going to bend over and take it. With Nate buried deep in my ass, it was my time to shine. Because, unlike everyone else who saw me as a goofy idiot, Nate saw me as sexy. And wow, did that feel good.

Getting up on my tiptoes, I leaned forward, dragging his cock right out to the tip. Before it left me completely, I lowered to my soles and pressed back, gyrating my hips as I went.

"Uh," he groaned. "Yeah. Shit."

"You suck at dirty talk," I said, slamming back a few times.

Nate grabbed the back of my neck as a hand-hold. “I’ll work on it.” He pulled me upright and pressed his mouth to the side of my neck. His hands pressed on the front of my hips, pulling me back until my ass hit his thighs and we both moaned into the night air. “When I fucked you in my fantasies, it was like this,” Nate whispered, letting me control the pace.

“Like what?”

“You taking charge,” he said as I found a rhythm that had my dick rutting against the slats of the railing. I put my hands there to make it less abrasive. “I wanted you to take my cock, Xav. I wanted to feel you just like this. But I had no idea how hot it’d be to let you lead. Fuck, take me anywhere, Xavi.”

I pushed him back and turned to face him, kicking his jeans away with my shorts. “I’m feeling like a bit of an animal right now, Nate.” I pulled his shirt off and tugged him down the steps. “I wanna ride you right here.” Forcing him to his back on the dewy grass, I straddled his hips and planted my hands on his pecs.

When I sank down, impaling myself on his cock, the true power came forth. Not from me taking it, but because of us combined. It was a weird time to be having epiphanies, but with him beneath me, I realized something. That Nate had always been my foundation. It didn’t matter how hard things got, how much we succeeded, or how epically we failed, Nate was my anchor. And not in that drag me down sort of way, but rather like he kept me from floating away from myself. How many times had he comforted me when no one else would? How many times had he had my back when I had no one else to rely on? I grounded myself with Nate, and now I needed to learn how to do the same for him.

“Where’d you go?” he asked, hands on my hips.

I didn’t know how to express what I felt. I rode his cock, gathering strength from the way he lifted me up, and blurted, “My clock slowed down. That one that was ticking, telling me to change everything and make big decisions. It’s... I feel settled now.”

“I thought you felt like an animal?” he teased.

Oh. Right. I grinned.

I grabbed his hands from my hips, pinned them to the grass beside his head, and looked him straight in those big blue eyes. “This is gonna be some real werewolf shit.” I slammed my ass back, and Nate lifted his at the same time. The reverberation of our bodies slapping together rippled through the night, making Nate plant his feet on the grass to match me thrust for thrust.

“I knew you watched,” he groaned, clenching his fingers in mine.

“Only the sexy scenes. You know what they do a lot of?”

“What?”

I bent down and bit him. Right between his shoulder and neck, growling against his skin like they did in the shows. Was that vampires or werewolves? Fuck, it didn’t matter because it felt really damn good to do.

“Ah, fuck yeah. Do that again.” He fucked me from the bottom, but I wasn’t having any of that. “Xavi,” he moaned.

“I’m the alpha,” I growled again, sucking and biting until Nate started continuously moaning beneath me. “You’re my beta.”

“This roleplay is weird,” he rasped, not sounding too weirded out by it at all. “It’s on the kink list.”

“I’m marking you. Making sure every person in the world knows you’re mine, Nathan Neegan. You belong to your alpha.”

He coughed out a laugh that didn’t last long because I sucked another mark into his neck and rode him like any good alpha would ride their beta. Our temperature rose as the night air cooled, the slapping sounds echoing off the trees to mingle with the distant crash of the waves. Our breathing got louder and more shallow in depth, and when Nate freed a hand to slide into my hair, I let him kiss me through his orgasm.

He shook beneath me, filling me with cum and consuming my mouth. I jerked myself off, riding him slow and deep until my forehead fell against his and I came all over his abs.

“Ah, fuck that looks hot.” Nate pushed me up so he could watch me come. “I wanna lick it.”

I didn’t have the strength, the flexibility, or the balance to move my jelly legs up to shove my dick in his mouth, so I half-ass tried and ended up stumbling to the side, making his cock pop out.

“Shit, I need Pilates,” I groaned, still pumping my fist to wring myself dry. The weakness tremors were already setting in, and if he saw my legs shake, he’d never let me live it down.

Nate shoved me onto my back and stayed on his. Reaching for my cock, he took over the gentle caress until we both fell still and the rain started to spit.

“This is not sanitary,” he rasped. “When you first shoved me down here, I thought it was all nice grass. Had my sex goggles on.”

I looked at the lawn. Yeah, partly sand, mostly dirt, a fuck ton of weeds, and oh... gross, fucking kids must’ve been chucking cigarette butts here. No one took care of this lot anymore, and I kind of hated to see it in this state.

“Ow, motherfucker!” Nate shrieked. “Oh no!”

“What?”

“Xavi, don’t move!”

“Is it a Juner?” I yelled, starting to panic. “Tell me it’s not a June bug! *Nate, is it a Juner?!* It’s gonna bite me on the dick!” I flailed around, trying to see in the dark. “Ow!”

“I told you not to move,” he bitched. “Thistles.”

Oh no. Those prickly shits were everywhere. I was going to be picking tiny little thorns out of my ass for a month.

CHAPTER 21

NATE

“YOU’RE SURE?” I ASKED DEVON, STARING AT THE LAWN XAVI had fucked me on Friday night. “It’s not going to weird you guys out if we move here?” Because it was the only trailer currently available in Garron Park. Plus, it *was* the best lot, and I didn’t want to give it up now that my sights were set on it. I suddenly had big visions and didn’t want to let them go like I let everything else go.

“Yeah. Xavi already annoyed the fuck out of Madd about it. We’re both cool with it.” Devon looked at the trailer and exhaled slowly. “This place deserves you guys. It needs you.”

I took that as a compliment. Because, despite most of our lives being the punchline to a joke, it felt nice to be seen as someone who could bring something good to a place that had been riddled with darkness. It meant more coming from my brother because, other than Xavi, his opinion was one of the only ones that carried any weight with me.

“Okay, let’s talk fridges,” I said, turning to Devon. “Water dispensers and ice makers and shit. Where do I get one for cheap?”

“How cheap?”

“Ninety bucks, preferably.”

Devon scoffed. “In your dreams. What do you need a fridge for? There’s one in there.”

Yeah, but it wasn’t gonna fill a glass with ice *and* water *from the door* and make Xavi’s eyes light up. “Remember when you were an asshole and wanted to provide for Madd?”

He groaned, hating on himself for a quick sec. “Yeah. Don’t do that. One hundred percent would not recommend.”

“Well, I might have the dumbass gene, but not nearly as bad as you.” He shoved me. “I want to get Xavi a fridge. Or at least help him get one. He has dreams, Devon.”

“A fridge is a dream?”

“Yes! Stop being a dick. How do I get a fridge?”

The shop wasn’t steady enough to give us a level of financial security that allowed for anything more than a business credit card we used to buy parts. Most of the money we made went back into the shop, and just a little in our pockets. So, buying a fridge would have to be strategic, especially because rent was about to become an additional expense we didn’t really need but would figure out.

“There’s that scratch and dent place in Redding,” Devon said. “Never been there, but I think Harris has something to do with it.”

I cringed. “Patrick Harris? That yellow aviator-wearing motherfucker?”

Devon nodded. “Yeah. I think he uses it to launder money or some shit. Has a deal with the owner. You have a smoke?”

Had one in my pocket. Hadn’t smoked in days. Craved one every now and then, but not smelling like an ashtray while Xavi kissed me was a good motivator. Oh god, the way he kissed me. On my way out of the shop earlier, Xavi had grabbed the back of my t-shirt, spun me around, and kissed me with his whole body. Lips on mine, chests together, legs pressed up tight, and his hands everywhere. The guy didn’t peck. He made every kiss a living thing that flushed my cheeks and filled my dick with blood. Really got the adrenaline pumping, and I found myself more motivated and more productive because of it. Xavi had always been good for me; he was just good in even more ways now.

I handed my weathered pack to Devon and watched him take seven attempts at shaking the almost dead lighter to a spark. “You quit?”

“I hope so.”

Devon grinned around the filter. “This is real, isn’t it? You’re all in love and shit.”

If I had asked Devon that during the beginning of their relationship, he would have punched me, called me a dick, and then yelled at me about how love was a farce, but he didn’t know how to stop it. Not me. I owned that shit.

“Yep. Like that stupid kind of love that makes you think weird things and smile all the time. Even when I think I’m not good enough to be anything more than his best friend, I remember that it’s Xavi, and that dumbass loves me anyway. He calls me baby.”

Devon laughed, walking across the yard and up the front steps of the porch. “It’s not weird? The shift from friends to boyfriends?”

I had nothing to compare it to since I’d never been in love before. I had no idea if the kind of love I felt was the same kind of love Devon felt for Maddox, but I didn’t think it mattered. I loved Xavi in the same way I had always loved him, but it had deepened, became more intimate, and felt romantic where it never had before.

It was a love that brought hope because it tethered itself to our bond and cast out like a goddamn fishing net, catching feels and dreams and reeling them in for the both of us instead of us as individuals. Our lives were connected before. We were living the same life on the same trajectory, but instead of walking side by side, we were now piggybacking each other. Our paths had merged and stopped at the same ending because we were *one* in a way that we hadn’t been previously.

“I think everything we do is a bit weird. Even our friendship was weird, so my progress report on weirdness is a bit skewed.” I followed him to the porch. “But it doesn’t feel weird. It feels right. Because I don’t have to pretend to be anyone other than who I am with him, and isn’t that what love is supposed to be all about?”

Devon looked at me, standing in the doorway with his cigarette. He rolled his eyes because I just described love better than he ever could. “So, you’re just like friends with benefits?” He grinned, trying to rile me.

“The best benefits. Wanna hear about the night we fucked on this lawn and got—”

“No. You’re cut off from sex stories.” He tossed the butt and walked inside. “Proud of you for just fucking going for it, though. Took ya a year, but whatever. Sawyers are opportunists, but we’re dumb, too.”

“You’re dumb. I’m just slow.” I looked around. “Hesitant, I mean. Fuck, is that yours?” I walked into the living room that no longer had a couch, picking up a hose nozzle that had no business being there.

“Yeah. Was. Attaches to a power washer.” He tried to grab it from me. “I’ve been looking for that.”

I yanked it away. “Mine. I am going to power wash the fuck out of this trailer.” Nothing was more satisfying than power washing and weed whacking. “You have any string?”

“String?” Devon asked, walking into the kitchen.

“Karen is going to teach me how to braid string to make Xavi a new bracelet.”

“So pathetically romantic.”

“Thanks. What happened here?” I nodded at the counter where a toaster sat in pieces.

“Toast is hard.”

“Neegs!” Xavi shouted, honking the horn of my truck. “Hop in! We’re going to sign the lease. Madd said yes!” He even yee-haw’d.

Devon laughed. “I say yes, too. Go, asshole. Be all happy and shit.”

“See ya! And pick up that cigarette butt!” I took my nozzle and booked it down the front steps, doing a much better *Dukes*

of *Hazzard* slide than I did that night at Bethany's. Things were lookin' up!



I PICKED ANOTHER THISTLE THORN FROM MY BUTT CHEEK AND rinsed it down the sink. Jesus, they were still there even after a few days. Xavi used table salt and scrubbed his whole body like it was a spa treatment, and apparently, it'd worked.

I wiped the foggy mirror and stood stark naked before it. Now that we had signed the lease for Lot 62, I noticed all the things I had failed to see about this shop apartment before. When we first moved in here, it'd been a dream. We made it. Got out of the park. Owned a business and got to live on the ocean with a dock right outside our back door. Not many people got that... but Lot 62 had that. Maybe not right on the ocean, but with a path to it that only took a few minutes to walk.

The mirror was cracked, the sink was rust-stained, the ceiling tiles were basically falling in, and the corners of the bathroom were black and mouldy. A red ring of some form of mould lined the toilet bowl and the tub, and...

I looked at myself again. Maybe I didn't fit in a place like this anymore. I checked myself out, matched my reflection to my surroundings, and had a weird thought. Like maybe I deserved better than this place. Maybe I was worth more than a storage room with a mildew problem.

That was a first for me. New hair, new attitude, maybe. I liked the way it felt.

I thought I might take pride in a new trailer, wash the red rings away more often and keep the corners clean. Here, I just gave it a quick clean and didn't care enough about it because... because apparently I'd been unhappy here for longer than I thought.

“Nate!” Xavi shouted from the couch. “Would you say we crossed off roleplay or not? I can act better if you wanna try again, but you’ve always been the better actor.”

His alpha vampire/werewolf roleplay was both cheesy and hot together, and I smiled at the memory of it. How did he manage to make sex sexy and cringey? True talent, and totally worth the thorns in my ass.

“Check it off!” I yelled, slipping into a plain pair of white boxers. All my purple briefs were dirty, and you could only wear that shit so many times in a row before it became questionable. Three days tops if I didn’t sweat a lot. Only one day with sweat. Did a lot of laundry those weeks. Fresh shower, fresh hair, fresh boxers. I felt good. “What’s next?”

“Cock warming!” he shouted.

The fuck was cock warming? I didn’t want to be the idiot who asked, so I’d let him lead that particular kink. I brushed my teeth, ran my hand over my hair, and threw some socks on.

Xavi was shirtless and barefoot, like usual. His broken toe wasn’t even red anymore, and he could mostly bend it now. I’d banned him from flippies for another few years. The guy had Bambi legs in the damn things, so it was safer for everyone if he kept duct-taping the slides.

His dark hair was wet from a swim, and his green eyes were downcast, reading the list like the answer to cock warming would jump out at him. I grinned, knowing he didn’t know what it was either. Was there time to call Devon and ask?

“Get over here,” Xavi said.

Shit. No time.

“Are you still ranking rimming in your top spot?” he asked, a pen held over the page.

I sank down next to him, the springs of the couch digging into my back. “Yeah. Definitely. It’s number one for sure, and biting is a close second.” I rubbed the tender spot on my neck fondly.

Xavi smiled at that, eyes shifting to my neck. “Mm. You look hot with my teeth bruised into your neck.” He snapped his teeth at me, scribbling a star next to rimming and biting. “Okay, hand-holding, touching, and cuddling in general are totally my thing. I’m grouping them all into one, and they sit at the top. I also really enjoy the rimming and wanna try it on you next.”

Oh. Full body hot flash. *Yes.* I cleared my throat. “Anything on there you don’t wanna try?” I nodded at the list.

He scanned it. “This. I don’t overly wanna be restrained. I like touching too much. I’d tie you up, but I need my hands free. Thoughts?”

Fucking loved it when he touched me, *so no thanks.* “I like the feel of your fingers in mine too much to be tied up. Let’s skip that one.”

He crossed it out and circled cock warming, tapping the pen to it. “Okay, this one.”

I grinned, waiting for him to explain. When he didn’t, I gave him a nudge. “How do we do it?”

“It’s easy,” he said, setting the list down. “Cock warming. Warming up the cock before fucking. BRB.” He got up, and I laughed under my breath. Maybe he was right, or maybe he wasn’t, but he was gonna be confident about it either way.

When the microwave turned on, I squinted at him. “What’re you doing?”

“Just getting the supplies.” He leaned against the counter, watching the microwave spin and click down time. “Boxers off, Nate.” He opened it one second before it beeped because we both liked edging the microwave. “Wait. Let me do that part.”

I just sat and waited for him to lead this shitshow. When he came back with a washcloth, bouncing it between each hand because it was too hot, he kneeled in front of me.

“What’s that for?”

“It’s like a hot little blanket for your dick,” he said. “We’ll wrap it around it like a cozy little cock sock. It’s gonna be cute.”

I blanched. “No fucking way. That’s so hot you can’t even hold on to it. You aren’t wrapping my dick in a hot blanket.”

Xavi rolled his eyes at me. “Fine. We’ll wait for it to cool a bit. In the meantime…” He hooked his fingers in my waistband and smiled at me. “I’ll keep your dick warm.”

He tugged, making my dick slap my stomach. His hands were on me in a heartbeat, and he looked up at me with innocent yet dirty eyes.

“Spit.”

So hot.

I leaned forward and spit on my dick. When Xavi spread it down my shaft, I was rock hard immediately. Freedom to be touched by Xavi after craving it for so long was still blowing my mind. He really was mine. Besties to hookup buddies to… two guys doing twenty-five-to-life together in the same cell. Couldn’t have asked for anything more.

“You’re already warm,” he said, fist corkscrewing down my shaft and over the head. “Maybe it feels different when your dick is warmed up. Like, more sensitive or something.” He looked at the washcloth. “It’s ready.” He picked it up and blew on it. “Ready?”

What, was he just gonna wrap my dick up like a burrito?
“Sure.”

Artfully, Xavi sat at my side and wrapped the warm cloth around my cock. Pretty sure this wasn’t what cock warming was, but he seemed like he knew what he was doing.

“Gotta tuck it in,” he said, tongue poking out the side of his mouth as he concentrated. “And maybe leave some breathing room for the tip?” He folded in the edge and smiled at my warming dick. “It’s so adorable.”

“Do not call my dick adorable,” I snapped at him, trying to look. It wasn’t cute. It was a dick wrapped in a washcloth.

Reminded me of when I was in the shower with a boner and used it to hang my face cloth while I rinsed off.

“Maybe they make proper cock warming sleeves or something,” he mused, tucking my dick in tight like it was going to bed. “Snug as a bug in a rug.”

“Oh my god! This is the least sexy thing we’ve done!” I tried to rip the cloth off, but he stopped me. “Come on, Xav. It doesn’t even feel good because I’m dying of second-hand embarrassment. Or is it firsthand? I don’t know, but this feels ridiculous!”

“It’s not ridiculous. This is a common kink.”

“Are we even doing it right?”

“It’s pretty self-explanatory, don’t you think?” He looked at me, and I hated that I doubted him because he was so damn pleased with himself. “I should have prepped while we warmed your dick. I’ll just suck it.”

Fuck. He gave it another minute, and then he took the warm towel away. When the cool air hit my overheated dick, I thought maybe he *did* do it right. And when his lips wrapped around me, his tongue sliding down to my base, I died of firsthand embarrassment all over again when I came in under a minute.

Okay, shit. Cock warming was a win.

Even after I came and he swallowed, he just... kept my dick in his mouth like he was comfortable to be down there. Seemed weird. But I loved it.

CHAPTER 22

NATE

I WAS SOAKING WET, BUT OH, THE SATISFACTION I GOT FROM looking at the clean, almost white outside of our new trailer. I'd power washed every inch of it and then some, and I already felt like a prideful new homeowner—renter. There would be no red rings in the tub or toilet bowl and no mossy build-up on the siding outside. This place was my new pride and joy.

I finally had a home and my cellmate to live in it with me, and wow, that was a punch to the feelings because... how had I achieved this? A job, a trailer, a nice yard, the park, and Xavi. I'd never really known what it was like to have dreams come true because I hadn't really had any, but here I was, staring at a place we were going to make a home, feeling tickled and warm and hopeful about it.

I was Nathan misspelled-Neegan Sawyer, and I finally felt like a somebody.

I pulled the trigger one final time, washed a June bug carcass off the top corner before Xavi saw it, and blew on my tool, pretending to holster it. *Yep. That'll do.* Already loved it here.

Xavi walked out the front door with my hat on backwards, one slide on his foot and the other in his hand as he fixed the tape. "Okay, so we live here now," he said like he was surprised. "And we've fucked on the porch and the lawn, so when we christening the inside?"

Shirtless. One slide. A backwards hat. Tan lines on his hips. Purple swim shorts. Abs and a V. A gummy worm

hanging out the corner of his mouth.

Holy shit, did *all that* really wanna fuck me? I swallowed desire while more pooled in my mouth. “How ‘bout now.” I dropped the hose and turned off the power washer. When I straightened, Xavi was right in my face.

“How ‘bout every fucking day for the rest of life?” He smirked, kissing me. I sank into myself, puddled in lust and love and disbelief that shit had worked out this way. I wasn’t the kind of guy who got the win very often, but if I were granted one, this would be the one I picked. Him. “But right now, I’m going to buy lube because we were irresponsible last time.” He nodded to the bottle we’d used the last time we were here. It had the cap open, and the lubricant leaked all over the deck. Oh, I’d love to power wash that away.

I was about to beg him to stay and use spit as lube, but before I could, Xavi took the hat off, placed it backwards on my head, tilted my chin up until our eyes met, and licked his lips. Straight up died and went to heaven. Or hell. Wherever the fuck he reigned, I went there as his willing servant. *That* look. *Those* eyes. His playful dominance. It all teased me, taunting what was to come. I hadn’t seen Xavi get possessive yet, but I knew he would, and he’d be goddamn top-tier at it.

“And when I get back,” he started with a raspy, serious tone, “I want you naked with your ass on display so I can tongue fuck it.”

“Jesus, Xav.” Melted.

“I own your pleasure now, daredevil. And I know just what I want to do to your body.” When his lips pressed to mine, they teased enough to have me leaning forward for more. Xavi dragged my lip between his teeth, hummed dominantly, and stepped back. “Naked, Nate. I won’t be happy if you aren’t.” He backed down the steps, and I was still standing there staring after him when the truck left the lot and disappeared from view.

Okay, so he was way better at being demanding than he was at uttering death threats. *Sheesh.*

It'd take him at least an hour to get to town, buy lube, and get back, so I had plenty of time to shower. My dick was semi-hard, but I didn't touch it. I wanted him to touch it, because now that he'd declared it, I wanted it. My pleasure belonged to him, and I knew he'd deliver.

I packed up the power washer, rolled up the hose, and went to the side of the trailer to put it all away. And watched a blue-eyed glare hit me with hostility and a bit of panic.

I made sure I didn't get too excited.

"Snooping?" I asked the kid, hanging the hose and acting like I didn't give a fuck that he was there.

He looked like he wanted to run, but something made him hesitate. His jeans were dirtier than mine had ever been, his face smudged with grime that clung to his sweat, and his shirt a bit ripped. Probably from hopping over a fence or tripping over more tires.

"What's it to you?" he barked at me like he was pretending to be a pitbull but was really just a yippy yorkie.

"Can you grab that?" I nodded at the loose ring of the hose that had fallen off while I put the power washer next to the trailer. Perfect place to set up our outdoor shower. Karen could come by anytime and use it.

He hesitated again, unsure about getting close to me, but he did it. He hung the hose and then stepped back like I was going to grab him.

"We just moved here." I talked to him without looking at him. "Grew up here, but now we're back." I walked to the front, hoping he'd follow.

Took him a few minutes, but he did. I sat on the front step and he lingered on the lawn like a loser. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you come back?"

So you can knock on our door. "Like it here. The people are good. Helped us out a lot growing up. My dad was an asshole, so everyone else in the park helped us get by." I held

out a cold can of pop from the cooler. When he didn't take it, I set it on the railing and let him decide. "I'm Nate."

He fucked with his shirt and stared at me. His anger and hesitation spoke to me, but his struggle to trust spoke the loudest. The night Karen had cooked, he wouldn't take the plate from me, even called me a dick, but he took it from Karen, so there was that.

He took a few steps closer, thinking I wouldn't notice, eyeing the can like he wanted it.

"You got a name or something?"

He glared, the force of it having no more impact than thunder. All boom, no bite. "Evan." He took the can of pop and then rushed back a few steps.

"You always this sketchy, Evan?"

"You always a fag?" he bit back. "I saw you kiss that guy."

I couldn't be mad at him. He was a kid, raised by a man who taught him to judge and hate. He was a byproduct of his upbringing, the same way we all were. He hadn't found his leg to stand on yet. He'd get his footing eventually, make his own observations and forge his beliefs, and he'd be better off for it.

"Nah. It's pretty new." I shrugged. "Careful who you call a fag, though. You'll get your ass whooped for that around here."

He looked at his feet. Worn slip-ons, black-and-white checkered. "Dad says fags are pussies anyway, so I can take them."

"Your dad's an asshole." I barked out a laugh. "Seriously? What has he ever done to make you believe that his word is right?"

His eyes met mine, blue on blue, and for the first time, he looked almost hopeful. Like no one had ever called his dad an asshole except for him, and maybe *that* was the foundation our new relationship was about to get started on.

"Tell you what," I said, throwing a mini bag of chips at him from the bag Devon had dropped off earlier. "You wanna

see how tough gay guys are, you stop by the fights tonight.”

“You’re gonna fight?” he asked like he thought that was pathetic.

“Nah. My brother and his husband. Then you can decide if *fags* are pussies. If you change your mind, you have to stop using that word. Deal?”

He didn’t say yes or no, but he looked at me again, almost nodded, grabbed the chips and drink, and then ran. I knew I’d see him later. I called Devon.

“What?” he answered. “I just left. Don’t make me come back.”

“Tonight,” I told him. “Need you to fight Madd so I can prove a point to a kid.”

Devon groaned. “We don’t do that shit anymore, Nate.”

They did it like two months ago, so fuck them. They were due to let off some steam. “You’re fighting Madd.”

His sigh almost sounded relieved. “What point?”

“He thinks *fags* are *pussies*. His dad taught him that.” I took a sip and let that stew.

Devon churned. I felt his energy even through the phone. “Oh, fuck that. Make sure he’s there.” He hung up on me, probably to goad Maddox into a fight.

I smiled, and then I headed inside to wash up and put my naked ass on display for Xavi.

CHAPTER 23

NATE

BREATHING DEEPLY, I REMAINED ON MY STOMACH WHEN THE front door opened. Completely naked and shaking from restraint, my chest heaved with anticipation and exhilaration. There was a moment of panic when I thought it could be someone other than Xavi, but when I heard him kick off his slides and clear his throat, I relaxed and got an adrenaline rush simultaneously.

My fingers dug into the new blanket, and my cock rutted against the mattress. A shaky exhale stuttered past my lips when the bedroom door creaked open. I didn't look, but I felt his eyes on me. Burning my skin and scorching my insecurities. It made my hips grind.

Typically, I'd feel stupid for doing this. But right now, with a little fear and a fuck ton of eager desire, I felt powerful. Even though I trembled. Even though the hair on my arms and nape stood erect. Even though I couldn't catch a full breath through the buzz humming through me like a live current. I'd never felt stronger.

Xavi let out a low hum of approval, the sound skittering across my skin and down to my balls. "Ass up, daredevil," he demanded, a gravel to his voice that superseded the one Maddox had. "Let me see what's mine."

I'd never been in this position. On my stomach, naked, submissive to a man who knew exactly what he wanted to do with me. Lifting onto my elbows, I moved back into a yoga pose. Chest, forehead, and forearms on the bed, knees under my ribs, ass pointed right at Xavi.

“Mmm,” he hummed again, and not a second later, I yelped when his palm cracked against my bare ass cheek. “Fuck yes.”

Oh, fuck yes, indeed. I gasped, groaning at the same time. My nerve endings all lit up like a fucking power plant, and the warmth that spread through my ass cheek started a fire that threatened to turn wild.

“You liked that, didn’t you?” Xavi asked, his voice moving around to the end of the bed. “Should I give you a matching one on the other side?”

I moaned.

“Admit it. With words. Admit that you liked it.” He rubbed my ass and I instinctively wiggled, trying to entice him into spanking me again. He pinched instead, and when I yelped, he tugged on my balls. “Nate,” he warned.

“Fuck, I liked it.” Why was it so hot when he got bossy and mean? “Do it again.”

Xavi spanked my left cheek, the force of it hard, but the impact of it shocking enough to make my body tense before it slackened entirely. I drooled on the bedspread, closing my eyes as if I could see the bloom of heat spreading out behind my eyelids. Panting, unsure of who I was or if this was exactly who I was, I begged for another one.

“Again.”

When Xavi’s hand hit me again, it wasn’t on either side. It was right in the middle, stinging my balls and making my hole clench tight. My body jolted, but Xavi grabbed my hips to keep me still.

“You have no fucking idea how perfect you look right now, Nate,” he rasped, squeezing my hips. “These tan lines.” He traced them from hip to hip, tickling my lower back as his finger moved across the line where my shorts sat. “This fucking body.” He leaned over me, chest on my back and hands fondling me everywhere at once. “The way you taste.” His tongue ran a straight line from the base of my spine to my

nape, and fuck me, I shivered and my cock pulsed beads of precum onto the bed.

“Xavi,” I moaned, needing something more but loving that he wasn’t giving it to me. Desperation was insanely arousing, and I understood what he was doing.

The kink list.

Spanking, edging, dominance. Xavi was morphing them all into one epic experience that had already blown my mind, and all I’d done was pose here for him to fuck with. He could fuck with me forever because Xavi had always been the leader, and I’d never hesitated to follow him anywhere.

“Hmm,” he hummed, the sound of his Velcro swim shorts being undone echoed around the small bedroom. “But I haven’t tasted enough of you yet.” He tugged on my hips to bring me to the end of the bed and then spread my ass apart. “My turn to drive you fucking crazy.”

His tongue lapped at my hole with no pause.

“Oh, fuck.” I grabbed the blanket and forgot to breathe.

When Xavi licked with no shame, I clenched my thigh muscles in an attempt to keep my cool. But I couldn’t keep cool when I was burning alive from the way he played my body like he knew every hotspot. He spread me open, feasted on me like I was dessert, and knelt down to suck my balls into his mouth.

“Holy fuck, Xav. I’m gonna lose my mind soon.” I pressed back against his face, wanting his tongue on my ass again.

“You can last longer than that,” he teased, smacking my ass and then my balls, making me delusional with the mix of pained pleasure. His teeth grazed my hip, but the pad of his thumb pressing against my hole distracted me.

“Oh,” I gasped, but it made Xavi stop. “I want it. Fuck, I want it.”

He pressed a little harder but didn’t breach the surface. “How bad?”

I'd considered bottoming at the beginning, but ever since Xavi basically stole the role, I'd been more than happy with mine. But now that his fingers teased my entrance, my dick leaked a steady stream onto the bed, and my mind was lucid but lost in this reality he'd created. I'd never craved anything more.

“So. Fucking. Bad.” I leaned back, trying to force his thumb inside me.

I hadn't even looked at him yet, and the urge to see the blaze in his eyes overwhelmed me. When I turned my head, Xavi's hand landed on the back of it, pressing my face to the mattress.

“I'm the bad guy right now, Nate,” he growled at me. “And I'm not going to give you what you want until you ask me better than that.” He pressed so hard on the back of my head I could barely breathe. It added a head rush to this already euphoric high he trapped me in. I used my last bit of air to moan, and the hum of approval it earned me from Xavi was worth the suffocation.

He let go. “On your knees.”

I sucked in a breath and didn't give a single fuck that drool dripped down my chin as I knelt. When I saw Xavi for the first time since he got home, my heart thundered. He radiated power and exuded dark energy. Not ominous dark, but wild dark. The kind that meant he was going to fuck with me and enjoy every diabolical second of it. My dick ached, jumping with need. Xavi noticed.

I had no idea what I looked like on my knees for him, but I knew there'd be something crazed in my eyes and a flush to my skin that couldn't be written off as embarrassment. Because I wasn't embarrassed. I was empowered and sexy, wanting and wanted, aroused and in love with a man who never treated me like I was damaged or broken. I wasn't a knock-knock joke to him. I was whole under his demonic attention, and it was such an insane realization that it made me grin like a devil.

“There you are,” Xavi said, amused and impressed. “My daredevil.” He walked toward me, grabbing my chin. “How far are you going to let me push you?”

I swallowed spit and looked him right in the eye, unafraid and completely alive. “Find out.”

I’d never been more excited to be pushed.

Fucking fall with me, Xavi.

He laughed, but it wasn’t his happy-go-lucky one. The sound of it chattered my teeth and made me pant. But breathing was his domain after he forced my face down and buried his cock between my lips until my eyes watered and I choked on the fullness of him in my throat. Every muscle strained as he took what he wanted and pushed me far enough that I was on the brink of either passing out or coming.

When he pulled back to give me air, I thought he’d let me suck in one breath and start all over again, but he didn’t. He claimed his own turn. He pushed me so hard I fell onto my back, and Xavi never wavered in his confidence as he spread my legs open, pushed my knees towards my shoulders, and dove face-first into my ass.

I groaned in pleasure. “Ah, fuck.” My hands fisted in his hair, pulling him in until he was the one suffocating. “More.”

His tongue breached my hole, and his hair tickled my nuts. My eyes fluttered, staring at the ceiling because I didn’t have the coordination to lift enough to watch him. But I felt everything. *Everything*. Every lick and suck and caress of his tongue against my sensitive skin. And when it got to be too much, threatening orgasm, Xavi read my body like an expert and backed off. Denying me the satisfaction of coming.

He licked his lips and glared at me with a mix of heady lust and menacing dominance. “You want me to fuck you, daredevil?” he asked, all power. Kneeling between my legs, he pulled my ass right against his dick, taunting the motion and making me crazy. “You want my cock inside you?” He bent forward, hands linking with mine as he pinned them beside my head and rocked against me. “Or you want to bury your thick

cock inside me? Answer me.” He bit my lip and kissed me hard.

Both. Holy shit, both. I didn’t even want the prep. “Just fuck me.” I tried to free my hands to grab his ass and force him to. “Xavi, holy fuck. Fuck me!” I screamed at him, angry and desperate, but elated about it. This mental state wasn’t one I’d been in before, but I revelled in the urgent blend of it.

“So impatient,” he teased. He put my wrists together and pinned them down with one hand. “Love the sound of you desperate.” He pushed two fingers inside my mouth, and I slobbered all the fuck over them. When they were dripping, he pressed them to my hole and spread my spit around.

“Xavi,” I begged.

When he slid one finger inside me, he also bent down and licked my nipple.

“Oh, shit.”

I lost myself to sensations that mixed together and switched from perfection to overwhelming and back again. My head pressed into the mattress, my body rocked with his, and my chest pressed against his face, wanting more of his tongue wherever he’d put it. His lick was a gift, and I got greedy for it. By the time he had three fingers in my ass, I’d forgotten to feel pain because he made the pleasure overwhelm it.

“Now,” I growled at him, never more impatient than I felt at the moment. “Fuck me. Now.”

“Ask nicely.”

“Xavier.”

“Mmm. Again.”

I ripped my hands free, yanked on his hair, and kissed him so hard my lips rang out in pain. “Fuck me, Xavier.”

He moaned against my mouth before leaning over to grab the lube. I watched him slather his cock and my ass, our eyes connected, our breaths mingled, and our bodies in identical states of pure need.

“I got something else in town,” he said, reaching into the bag to pull out a small object. “I like something inside me, Nate. Will you put it in?”

I’d never loved a small object as much as I loved that plug. Xavi slid it into my mouth, and I tongue fucked it like it was my mission. Sitting up, my forehead at his chin level, I licked his neck, sucking my own mark against his skin while I pressed the toy inside him. Xavi moaned, his throat vibrating my tongue. When it was firmly in place and Xavi’s eyes glazed, he grinned at me and pulled my hands away.

Pushing me to my back and gripping my hips, he said, “Now I’m gonna fuck you, baby.”

Baby.

He stayed upright, but his hips pressed forward, the breach of him jarring enough to hitch my breath. His mouth gaped, eyes still on mine, and I understood why he tugged me forward the first time we fucked.

The sounds that filled the room when he buried himself inside me were unhinged and unabashed. Xavi’s cock stretched me wide and burned brilliantly. I reached for him at the same time he bent forward, and then we were fucking and making out, and sloppy because there were too many places to touch and so many motions to coordinate. It felt like nothing I’d ever experienced, and the mess of it included hot breaths, drool-slicked lips, and the sound of his thighs hitting my ass so hard it was like he was spanking me all over again. I pressed on the plug in his ass.

“Holy fuck you feel good, Nate,” he tried to growl, but it was barely coherent because his mouth was pressed to my neck. “Squeeze your ass.”

I clenched hard, and Xavi’s eyes rolled back. “Holy fuckfuck,” he groaned. “I wanna come in your ass.” He fucked into me hard, deep. “Then I want you to come in mine.”

Oh, god. “I’m not gonna last that long.” Because my orgasm was already building, and Xavi didn’t have enough

self-control to slow himself down. When he grabbed my cock, jerking it off at the same time he bit my nipple, I went insane.

“My. Fucking... *god*. Xavi!” I yelled his name like a curse, my ass squeezing the hell out of his cock and mine unleashing my orgasm, fucking into his fist and riding his dick at the same time.

“I’m gonna come. Fuck, I can’t... Nate, holy fu—”

I blanked. Soared. Dipped. Reached a peak and cliff-dived over the ledge with no fear of what the fall would entail. And Xavi soared with me. He thickened, hardened inside me, throbbing deep and steady. His lips met mine, moaning his pleasure straight into my mouth, and I wanted to consume it all so badly that I grabbed his face to keep him there even though I couldn’t breathe.

My ears muffled with pressure and my abs ached from tensing, and when Xavi breathed a breath into my lungs, I shook with blissful aftershocks.

His chest fell against mine, so I wrapped my arms around him and tried to remember how to breathe on my own. When the room came back into focus, Xavi’s body weighed me down, and my body broke out in a sweat. For however long it took for us to slow our heart rates, we said nothing, but my mind replayed everything while living in the glow of that sheer perfection.

Holy fuck. Xavi could fuck. And my ass liked it. All of me liked it. I’d definitely take this role more often if he wanted, but more so, a complete desire to fuck him as well as he just fucked me washed through my mind and settled itself at the top of my to-do list.

“We didn’t quite get there,” he said quietly, “but flip fucking is definitely going on the kink list to try.”

“Definitely,” I agreed. No wonder Maddox wanted it so badly. “Xavi?”

He pushed himself onto his elbows, face right in front of mine, eyes connected.

“I wanna do more than just *do life* together.” My feelings caught up with the endorphins and made me sentimental and brave about it. “I wanna *live* life together. I want that kid to knock on our door. I want to go places with you. I wanna sleep in the same bed and learn what it means to wake up together to face the day with you. Not just with you, but like... with us. With this new thing we are.”

I didn't know what I was trying to say, but the way I felt for him just changed again. It was the sex, but it was also the complete trust and understanding that came from doing something so new and not being the least bit afraid of it. It told me we could face everything together, and I wanted to do just that. Face life and fucking win at it. Even if our goals were just to hear a '*knock*' on the door, I wanted to conquer it with him and be proud of it together.

“What are we, Nate?” he asked, fingers skimming over my short hair. He smiled, waiting for me to name it.

“We're...”

“Everything.” He kissed me. “We're everything, Nate. Everything that was missing and everything we've been looking for. We found it.”

Oh my god. Yeah. *That*. Exactly that.

CHAPTER 24

XAVI

AFTER ROUND TWO, BECAUSE THAT PLUG—WHICH WAS WAY more expensive than I thought it would be, but I'd already committed and sold my soul for it—tempted the two of us into more fucking around, I waited for Nate to get ready. Yeah, the plug was a win. Toys got checked and circled on the list, and even though we couldn't afford another one, that one would get *a lot* of use.

“You ready to go, bes-by?” Nate asked, fumbling over his words and blushing about it.

I smirked at him. “Did you just jumble bestie and baby?” Fuck, I loved him. Guy sucked at nicknames, but it filled my chest with comfort to watch him try. To know he was secure enough to attempt a pet name, even though he fucked it up, was progress. He was the one to initiate the ‘baby’ name after our first fuck, but he'd bit his tongue ever since. It meant things were coming around. Our bond really was morphing into a relationship instead of only a friendship.

“Yes.” He glared at me, embarrassed and mad because of it. “Don't make a thing of it.”

“Oh, I'm gonna make a thing of it.” I laughed, pulling him to stand between my legs. With my ass on the back of the new-but-old couch Gina had donated to us, I pushed the brim of his hat up and met those beautiful blue eyes. “I'm ready, besby. Are you? Big night for making deals with angry kids.”

“What if he doesn't show up?” Nate asked, playing with my hair.

“He will. Because you called his dad an asshole, and he finally has someone to relate to.” And I loved that he wanted to become that kid’s backup plan. If the night went well, I knew Nate would be listening for the ‘*knock knock*’ on the door every day and night until that kid felt safe enough to come to us. Nate would make it happen because he was fucking awesome at being a protector.

“And if he doesn’t, Madd and Dev will kick my ass for making them kick each other’s asses.”

I snorted. “You think they don’t love that you gave them an excuse to fight? Please. They’ve been itching for this. Probably be good for them, as usual.” God, I was still riled from that fuck earlier. I enjoyed taking charge, and I craved a role reversal to take charge from the bottom next. “We did it, Neegs. We got here.”

Nate looked around the trailer. It didn’t have a ton of furniture yet, and our deep clean wasn’t finished, but fuck it. This place was ours. We had a space of our own that didn’t contain a narrow hallway or a storage room. Sure, it was a double-wide trailer, but our standards were met because it was an actual home of our own. Our fresh start as a couple. Privacy, a yard, a path to the beach, a bedroom of our own with actual bed frames.

“Missing a few things,” he said, smiling. “We’re getting that fridge.”

“We can’t afford it.” I laughed, even though it sucked. *One day! One day I’ll get my water dispensing fridge.*

“I have an idea for that,” Nate said, bending to press his lips to mine. “I’ll tell you tomorrow. Tonight, let’s prove to a homophobic kid that he’s not actually homophobic.” With a quick peck that I chased, Nate spun, determined to teach a filthy boy a lesson. Maybe he’d enjoy the outdoor shower, too? I smacked his ass and whooped, ready to take on the challenge.



IT'D BEEN A MINUTE SINCE I'D LAST ATTENDED GARRON PARK Fight Night, but god, I missed this shit. Everyone was drunk or happy, or a combination of both. Tension was low because people were blowing off steam, and the general vibe of the night was trashy and fun. My kind of vibe.

Devon and Maddox were in swim shorts, already amped up to beat the shit out of each other, and Nate was shit-talking both of them to rile them further. While he did that, I scanned the crowd for a set of beady, judgy little eyes that thought gays were pansies. I huffed at that. Since I was a gay now, I took offence, and a part of me wanted to give my brother a better pep talk so he knew not to let us down.

I was president of this new gay club. *A dab just won't do anymore.*

Over the heads and through the swaying bodies, I caught sight of a tiny blondie hiding behind an old truck. Nate was busy, so I took it upon myself to walk over to him. I leaned against the side of the truck and didn't look at him. He hid, but he didn't run, so that was a start.

"See those two?" I nodded at Devon and Maddox. "They're up next. Both gay." Technically, I thought Maddox was bi, but for the sake of this lesson, they could both be gay. They were gay for each other, so it wasn't a lie.

Someone pumped music from a crackling speaker, but I still heard him. He asked me how I knew they were gay, but I pretended not to hear him. He stepped closer, revealing himself. "How do you know?"

"How do you not?" I scoffed.

"They don't look gay."

"Because gays have a look?" I finally turned my head in his direction. He had a hoodie on, the hood over his head, and his hands were shoved in the front pocket. He had to be under

ten, but what the fuck did I know? My Jesus, he looked like Nate as a kid. “I look gay?” I asked him.

The little fucker swept his eyes from my toes to my messy hair and back down again. “Yes.”

“Thanks.” I smirked at him. “Come on. They’re up next. You gonna hang back here in the nosebleeds or actually watch this thing?” I walked away without waiting for him. I felt his eyes on me, so the move was his.

Maddox and Devon had agreed to tape their knuckles for the sake of a little protection. Neither of them were happy about it, feeling like pushovers in love, but that’s exactly what they were. Devon was in the middle of telling Maddox to wear a mouthguard because he liked his teeth, and my brother gave him a smack upside the head for that. I pulled Maddox away.

“The fuck you being all soft for? We’ve got a kid to impress.”

“Devon likes my fucking teeth,” Maddox scoffed. “Apparently.”

Kane boys did have good chomps, that was for sure. “Look, if you don’t impress this kid enough to make him knock on our door, I will kill you myself. I don’t know what else to get Nate for our one-month anniver—”

“One-month anni... are you joking? No one gets shit for that. I still hated Devon after one month. Chill, Xavi.”

I would not chill, and I didn’t give a shit that no one celebrated months. Nate had been mine my whole life, but now he was mine in a different way, and I wasn’t about to let the milestones go by unnoticed. That timeline I felt pressured to live on got a whole new meaning when Nate became my baby, and now I wanted to commemorate the whole damn thing. In physical form. I was gonna sketch a damn timeline with our milestones marked like some people measured their kids’ height on the doorframe. Each notch, a new and awesome thing.

“Is your head in this?” I asked Maddox. “Surely he’s done some shit to piss you off lately.”

“Oh, he has.” Maddox grinned, looking at Devon while Nate taped his knuckles. “But this fight is more about a bet.”

“What bet?”

“That’s between us.” Maddox looked at me, and even though he wouldn’t tell me what the bet was, I knew it was something important. Something big. Something the two of them maybe wanted but didn’t know how to talk about, so they’d put it up as a bet in order to get the conversation going.

I smacked his cheeks before palming them just as the horn honked to signal them into the makeshift ring. “Don’t sully the family name, and we still don’t have dental coverage, so wear the mouthguard.”

“Fuck that,” he scoffed, bouncing on his heels. “He can try to knock out all the teeth he wants.” Maddox laughed, shoving me away. “But he won’t because my smile is sexy.”

“Like fuck it is.” I laughed as he bounced away, wrapping an arm around Devon’s neck to put him in a headlock. The two of them laughed, but as soon as they entered the sandy ring, the smiles fell off their faces, and it was all business.

“Ah, I’ve missed this tension,” I said to no one. But Nate was there suddenly, and he didn’t stop me from linking our hands together.

“Kinda glad our tension is different,” he said, leaning on me. “Did you see Evan?”

I tilted my head to where Evan was creeping through the crowd and climbing onto the top of a truck to get a better view. “He’s mouthy. Reminds me of you.”

Nate grinned. “I know, right? I feel like I was more badass than him, though.”

He wasn’t, but I nodded anyway. “Wish Karen was here.” I wasn’t sure how she felt about violence, but I knew she’d appreciate the vibe of the night. Maybe when she got out of the group home, she could come over and chill with us some days. Was that creepy? Maybe, but I didn’t care. I was Karen’s protégé, and I’d learn all the lessons from her I could manage

to retain. Smiling and being happy despite some dire circumstances being one of them. God, she was a badass.

Somebody switched the song to *I Hate Everything About You* by *Three Days Grace*, and our brothers must have felt the vibe because they both crouched into a fighting stance, skipped the bumped knuckles to begin the fight, and just fucking went for it.

While they beat the shit out of each other and the crowd roared for spilled blood, Evan watched it all with a bit of a shocked look on his contemptuous little face. Yeah, gays weren't pansies, and he was having an epiphany about it. Good on him. I grinned and pulled Nate in front of me. Wrapping my arms around his neck and resting my chin on his shoulder, I watched the fight and asked, "So, toys? A win?"

"Fuck," he groaned. "I can't believe you spent thirty-five bucks we don't have on that, but I've never been more proud of you for being financially stupid."

I smiled. "Guess what?"

"What?" He let me join our fingers together, trailing them all over his abs and chest. "Wait. No." He stopped my hands. "Xavi, if you tell me that plug is still in, I will miss the rest of this fight and forget to teach a kid a lesson."

I kissed his neck. "Okay, I won't tell you that."

His ass pressed back and he huffed out an annoyed but aroused sound, tightening his hands in mine. In the ring, Devon punched Maddox right in the chomps, and the diabolical laugh that left my brother sent chills down my spine. What a crazy bastard. He spit blood and didn't let Devon get another hit in.

"Look," I whispered, lips on Nate's pulse point. "Think he's learning that lesson."

Evan sat on top of the truck, completely enraptured by the fight. I didn't know if it was the lesson that gays were tough or the lesson that maybe there were a few people around who were tougher than his dad, but whatever it was, his life was changing. Nate wasn't a scrapper if he didn't need to be, but

we could both hold our own, and if Evan needed someone to be his mad dog, he now had a few options. Us and our brothers. It really did feel full circle, like we went from being jokes to being supporters.

The toy sat snugly in my ass, and I figured edging was one of my kinks. Yeah, I already got off a few times before we came here, but the tease of it made me horny as heck. A perfect taunt that hit the right places but didn't have the same impact as Nate's thick cock. My filthy mind liked the idea of already being open and prepped for him to take me whenever the hell he wanted to. Just needed him to buck up and do it.

Devon collapsed to his back, and Maddox stood over his body, dripping blood on his face. Devon wanted to get up, I could tell he still had some fight in him, but for whatever reason, he pretended to be knocked down. Done. No one else would notice, but we did. Maddox did.

"Get up," Maddox snarled at him.

Devon pretended to try. "Can't."

"Devon, you fucking dumbass."

Devon grinned a bloody grin, and when Maddox realized he was giving up on purpose, his face softened and something changed in him. Whatever bet they made, Devon just gave Maddox the win on purpose.

"We are meddling the fuck out of that situation, right?" Nate asked. "I'm a filthy gossip and need to know what is going on."

"Hell yes."

Maddox hauled Devon to his feet, and when they glared at each other with all the tension of two competing suns, the park went still. Quiet. That moment after lightning but before thunder, waiting for the boom.

Then Maddox grabbed the back of Devon's neck and crushed their bloody mouths together. The crowd roared, and it was one more lesson for Evan to learn. That the gays were supported.

Nate grinned at Evan, giving him the finger. And for the first time, Evan grinned back and threw up both his middles at us. Bonding. Finally.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Isn’t this some sort of incest?”

Nate and I spun, coming face to face with Clark and his skanky bitch Trisha. “The fuck did you say?” I growled.

Clark laughed, high and invincible. His scummy friends surrounded him, laughing at us like everyone always laughed at us. I didn’t know about Nate, but it was a trigger for me. To be treated like a joke just because I wasn’t the same as everyone else really got to me. To see the judgement in Clark’s eyes and the snicker coming from Trisha’s bubble-gum pink lips set my knuckles to twitching.

“Another Sawyer and Kane couple? Fuck off with that shit. I told you, Xav. Drop his ass and find someone real. He can’t be that good of a fuck.”

Remember when I said I couldn’t handle anyone shit-talking my brother, shit-talking Nate, or telling me to get my shit-talking self together? Well, my triggers were triggered, and it was Garron Park Fight Night. That roleplay about being Nate’s alpha went from a sexy experience to a life lesson, and Clark was about to learn it.

“He’s a fucking Sawyer!” Clark laughed.

I looked right at Nate. “My Sawyer.”

We pushed off the sandy ground at the same time, my fist knocking out the rest of Clark’s remaining teeth and Nate’s knee slamming into his gut. Chaos erupted, and a full-on park brawl broke out just outside the ring.

Maddox and Devon were there in an instant, the rest of our buddies jumping in to blow off their steam, and it was Garron Park against the meth heads.

I howled. Fucking needed this! “Stay up there!” I shouted to Evan, who was now standing on top of the truck.

When someone came at me, I let my alpha personality come out. I punched, kicked, threw, and growled at anyone who came near me. Blood sprayed my forehead when my fist landed against someone's nose, and when I looked over to see Nate pummel the fuck out of Clark's brother, my dick liked the sight of it. Never fought with a plug in my ass, but goddamn. Yeah. Liked it. Was that a kink? Plug fighting?

Maddox and Devon went feral, still having energy after their fight. Nate looked half insane, on his way to full insanity, which promised me the best night of my life. When Clark's brother collapsed at his feet, he looked over at me with bloody knuckles and a diabolical smile.

"Think I love ya, Xav!" he shouted.

I paused mid-hit. I held Trisha's cousin by the scruff of his shirt, and my jaw dropped open at Nate's confession. I'd told him I loved him a million times in my life, and he'd said it back. This was different. This was a love confession that surpassed anything we'd ever felt before. My chest constricted with emotion, happy and bashful and so fucking in love I didn't even know how it happened.

Holy shit balls. I loved Nate. Like, I was *in* love with Nate.

I smiled at him while the guy in my grip flailed around. "For reals?"

"For reals!" he shouted, laughing. "I love Xavier Colton Kane!"

I threw my fist into Trisha's cousin's face, let him drop, and stalked through the fights to get to Nate. Grabbing him by his nape and putting our faces an inch apart, I stared into his eyes to make sure he was sure. This was a notch I'd be carving into the doorframe, and when I did, I wanted to remember every single detail about him, the vibe, and the look in his eyes.

"I've loved ya forever, bud." Nate smiled at me, completely ignoring the fights. "But I love you more now, baby."

Ohmigod. *Oh. My. Gawd!* I wanted to cry. Or laugh. Or fuck. Or just smile at him forever and not feel weird about it. That timeline stopped, giving the moment the respect it deserved. Nate loved me as his baby, and holy hell, the feeling struck me dumb. I got it. Knew what it felt like. Finally figured out what it meant to be in love. It wasn't some love at first sight thing. It was a lifelong bond that lived through dips and highs and remained strong despite everything. It was an understanding and a mingling of dreams. It was the soul-deep need to make him mine, protect him, support him, and make him happy for the rest of his life. It was the knowledge that he was my person, and I was his, and the journey that got us here was worth everything.

I placed my palms on his cheeks, my eyes watered, and Nate smiled at me. "I love you, besby. In all the ways. Best friend to baby."

Nate kept on fucking smiling while his eyes got glassy and his hands didn't know what to do. "This is happening," he whispered.

"Fuck yeah it is." I beamed.

Then I kissed the man who had always been my ride or die. Best friends to friends with benefits to boyfriends. All. Fucking. Mine.

"Outdoor shower sex," he said. "I don't trust meth head blood." Yeah, we were both a bit red, and he had a point. We completely bailed on Fight Night, and I dragged my man across the park.

CHAPTER 25

NATE

SHEESH. STRING WAS HARDER THAN I THOUGHT. I HAD AN inch length of a perfect kind of fancy knot, then a few fuck-ups, then another good inch of perfection, and then things went to shit after that.

“I suck at this!” I dropped the bracelet that was safety-pinned to the desk to help me keep it pulled taut. “Xavi will never wear this!”

Karen rolled her pretty eyes at me. “Yes he will. Because you made it.”

“I’m starting over again.” I grabbed more string. Purple and lime green. “I can’t do that fancy one. I’ll just do the braid thing.”

“You give up too easily,” Karen said, snatching the new string from me. “You’ll chase a boy around the park even though he tells you to fuck off, but you can’t have some patience for a bracelet?”

I narrowed my eyes at her. Her green hair had given her an attitude adjustment, and maybe the shower had helped with her confidence. Her big teeth and front gap were still the same, and I hoped she never fixed it. No braces for Karen, please.

I kept going with the fancy knots. Fucked them up every few loops. “When are you gonna come see our new place?” I asked her.

“Whenever you invite me.”

“You don’t need an invitation, sunshine. You’re family.”

Karen laughed to cover her emotions, but they came out anyway. “I am?”

“Fuckin’ right.”

“I’ve never really had a good family,” she said, expertly making a bracelet. “My dad was... and my mom is okay, but I don’t think she knows what to do with me. I like her, but... she’s not really the mom type.”

“You and Xav have that in common.”

“Do you have a mom?” she asked.

“Yep. She’s mentally unstable and in a criminal mental health facility for killing my dad.”

Karen gasped. “I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, no. She protected us. Killed him to save us. Was so badass.” I smirked at her. “I feel a bit shit because we don’t visit her as much as we should. The staff told us to limit our visits a bit because it confuses Mom and puts her into a bit of a downward spiral. She doesn’t really know who we are all the time.” I shrugged and then cursed at the string. “So we make our own family. Us and our brothers, Xavi’s dad is a good shit now that he’s sober, and you. Like it or not, chickie, you’re one of us now.”

“I like it. I like it a lot.” She said it in the voice of *Jim Carrey* from *Dumb and Dumber*, and holy shit. If that didn’t just solidify my love for her, nothing would.

And because it was Karen, and she didn’t give a shit about pesky things like looking weird, I tipped my head back and laughed my ass off. Then I said the line twenty times while she repeated it and we acted like idiots just for the fun of it. Ah, my mood improved immediately.

“Guess what?” I kept working on bracelets instead of actual work.

“What?”

“Xavi said he loves me.”

Her mouth gaped and she smacked me with happiness.
“Knew it!”

“I said it first!”

“Knew it again!”

“Now I have to figure out how to get him his dream fridge. He wants one with a water dispenser and ice maker, and those shits are expensive.” But I had an idea, and it had to do with Patrick Harris.

“We could sell lemonade or do a boat wash or something. Raise some money,” Karen suggested.

“See? This is why you’re family, Kare-bear. You give a fuck about Xavi’s dreams.”

She smiled. “He gives a fuck about mine, too. He made me pickles and cheese.”

Oh, I knew that. He’d been nervous about it, thinking it was a thing only her dad could do. But he cut precision pickles and bought four kinds of cheese and six kinds of crackers, and he was putting us in debt with toys and snacks, but I didn’t care. Karen was worth it. And so was that plug. After everything had been mostly moved out of the apartment at the back, Xavi made his snack board and then he and Karen ate it on the back dock while Karen turned him into a Swiftie. He talked about it in bed that night until two in the morning while singing “*Shake it off.*” I hoped that phase didn’t last, but it was fun to listen to him butcher it.

The front door of the shop opened, and Xavi walked in without a shirt or any shoes. “Karen, I need you to sweet-talk the truck if we’re going to get you home on time. The stubborn old girl is trying to keep you here.”

Karen laughed, helping me hide my bracelet making materials. “I’ll give her a good talking to.” She headed out front, and Xavi went with her.

Okay, so my skills in jewellery making weren’t awesome, but I was excited to finish it and give it to Xavi for our one month.



OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, LIFE GOT AWESOME. I LOVED living at the park again, and since we'd sort of bonded with Evan, he started seeking our attention more. He wouldn't knock on the door, but he did whatever he could to draw us outside.

The first time he tried, he stole my power washer and I foot-chased him through the whole park until he tripped on the cord and almost broke the damn thing, let alone his nose. Then he threw stones at the trailer to make us come outside, and I could tell he was hungry, so even though I was full on PB&Js, I acted like I was just about to make one for myself just to get him to eat one. Four sandwiches in one night was a bit much, but he ate it, so there was that.

He'd follow us around and pretend to randomly run into us. He hung around the park building where Seth worked, hoping to catch Xavi on his way for a visit. He even came to us one night when he saw Naomi heading for his dad's trailer. God, she was pissing me off. She did great for a few days and then slipped. Same cycle over and over again, but Seth was on it. Protecting Maddox and Xavi from it.

But as I walked out of the trailer, ready to pick Xavi up from his parents' place on our way to Redding, I saw Evan lurking around the yard. When I threw him the middle finger, he didn't throw one back.

That was the first clue that something was off.

I pulled my shirt on and approached him, but he wouldn't look at me. "What's up?" I kept it casual because he spooked when anything got serious. Kid was terrified of his dad, and he did whatever he could to stay out of his way and avoid Children's Aid because they usually failed to take him away, and all it bought him was a smack from his father.

He kept his hood up and didn't say anything. I wanted to grab him, but he looked pretty sketchy, so instead, I nudged

his shoulder and nodded at the truck.

“Your dad home?”

“Sleeping,” he mumbled.

“Then come on. He won’t notice if you’re gone for a bit.”

Evan followed me to the truck, and when he climbed in, I saw a split lip and a bruised cheek that hinted at a black eye. Rage came at me, but I knew he wouldn’t respond to that, so I clenched my teeth and tried to start the truck. He wouldn’t talk about his dad, but the general vibe of the situation was something along the lines of ‘he tells me to fuck off for a bit, so I do, and if I get in his way, he smacks me.’ I had a feeling his dad liked to party, didn’t want the kid around, whether that was to shield Evan from it or just to keep him out of his way, and didn’t really give a shit where Evan went as long as he wasn’t home and didn’t draw attention from the cops or CAS. Hadn’t met the guy, but figured he was pretty shit at parenting. That didn’t mean he was a terrible person, but now that I saw a busted lip and actual bruises on Evan, my thoughts were rearranging themselves into angry, judgy ones.

“What a piece of shit,” Evan grumped when the truck wouldn’t start.

I gasped, covering my truck’s ears. The vents. “How dare you talk about her like that. At least do it behind her back like we do.”

Evan smirked. Then scowled because he was trying to be moody.

The truck had a trick to get her going if I was lucky, so I hopped out and left the door open. “Can you turn the key when I tell you to?”

Evan slid over wordlessly. He was so easy to manipulate. I opened the hood, pretended to do something, and waited a few seconds for the ticking to stop. When it did, I knew if I waited too long, it wouldn’t go. So I shouted for Evan to start it and stuck my hands near the window washer fluid to look like I knew what I was doing.

“Now?”

“Now!”

Come on, baby. Give me the win and make him feel important. When Evan turned the key, she fired right the fuck up like the faithful old biddy she was, and for the first time, I saw Evan smile for real. I peeked at him from under the hood, noticing that he had some nice teeth and was actually pretty cute when he smiled.

By the time I slammed the hood, the smile was gone and his split lip had cracked from the effort. I threw a paper towel at him, the same one I’d used to wrap my PB&J in the other day, and made him scoot over.

“Can I drive?” he had the balls to ask.

“You know how to drive a stick? We aren’t rich enough to afford an automatic.” I slammed my door.

“No, but I can learn.”

She was the only truck I had, and half the time, I barely knew how to drive her. “You can steer.”

I worked the clutch and the shifter while he steered us out of the lot terribly. He reached over me, on the edge of the seat, damn near standing to see out the windshield. We backed into a light pole, then a recycling bin, but when we hit the sign that said LOT 62, Evan clammed up and went over to his own side.

I laughed. “That shit’ll buff out.”

“You aren’t mad?” he asked, looking at his lap and his dirty nails.

“Ha!” I barked again. “When I stole my dad’s truck for the first time, I hit the park manager’s brand-new car and got my ass whooped for it for a month. You barely hit a sign, so you’re good.” I motioned to the wheel to ask if he wanted another go, but he shook his head.

“Your dad hit you?” he asked when we were halfway to the Kane trailer.

“Hell yeah. All the time. My brother, too. Till we got old enough to defend ourselves.” I didn’t look at him. “Yours?”

“Yeah.” He snugged up his hood, and I realized it was his version of my sunglasses. “But says crying is for girls, so I’m not allowed to.”

What a douche. “You ever met Andrea?”

I knew he had. “Yeah.”

“She’s the toughest chick I know. Tell her only girls can cry, and she’ll prove you wrong. She’s made many men sob. Plus, we all cry. Who the fuck cares, right? If he smacks ya around for it, just hide it from him.” Terrible advice, but it wasn’t worth telling him to fight his dad on it because he’d lose. He was eight.

“You cry?”

“Shit yeah. For all sorts of reasons. Happy ones. Sad ones. Painful ones.” I pulled out front at the Kanés’ and honked the horn.

“I cry,” he whispered. “Mostly because I’m scared.”

Oh, holy heartbeat. I swallowed the surge of pride in him for admitting that. “We all get scared. Means you give a duck.”

“Duck?”

“Fuck. But can I swear around you?” *Bit late to be asking.* At least I remembered eventually.

“I swear around you.”

“Touché. Being scared of something means you have something to give a shit about, you know? Like, if you did everything without fear, it’d mean you didn’t have anything to lose. Shows you value yourself.”

His black eye squinted at me, but he no longer tried to hide it. “You’re weird.”

I’d take it.

Xavi tried to execute a hood slide, fell off the front, jumped up to stick the landing like a gymnast, and barely even balked at Evan being in the truck. He climbed in, made Evan slide to the middle, and started rambling.

“Did you fucking see that landing?”

“You can swear around him.”

“Did you fucking see that landing?”

“Nailed it, bud.” Was it weird to still call him bud now that he was my baby? Kinda. I liked baby, even though I jumbled it up sometimes. “We’re going to Redding. Wanna come?” I asked Evan.

“Fine.”

What a little dick.

“You know how to throw a punch?” Xavi asked him.

So, for the rest of the drive to Redding, Evan punched Xavi a million times while getting pointers about force and thumb placement. Nothing was mentioned about his beat-up face, and I fell in love with Xavi a little more. Even when he complained about how sore his arm was.



PATRICK MOTHERFUCKING HARRIS.

Devon said he ran money through this scratch-and-dent furniture place, but I hadn’t been expecting to actually see him. He stood in the back office, polishing those yellow aviators on his tracksuit sweater, chatting with the owner in hushed tones.

Xavi didn’t care. His eyes were lit up like the northern lights at all the dented fridges with water dispensers. Evan stood beside him, unsure what we were so excited about. He figured a fridge was a fridge, meant to keep shit cold and nothing more. But Xavi wanted ice! He wanted to press his cup to that dispenser and get all giddy about his cold drink of water and the cubes for his rum mixes.

And I was going to deliver.

I snatched the price tag off the fridge and marched up to Harris. The owner of the store disappeared inside his office, probably knowing what kind of customer Harris usually brought by.

“Mr. Sawyer,” he greeted me with a fake gangster smile. “Pleasure.”

I held up the sign that said \$999 and raised my brow at him. “You can do better.”

“I don’t own this establishment. Sorry.” He put on his aviators and tried to walk past me. Like hell I was letting a scum lord interfere with Xavi’s dream. Harris sighed, looking at me through the lenses. “I can get him to knock a hundred off. That’s it.”

I grabbed a permanent marker off the desk, scratched out the price, and wrote the amount I could almost afford. \$300. “I’ll take it for this.”

Harris laughed. Right in my face. Just like everyone else used to laugh in my face, behind my back, and to my side. It rattled the old version of me that had always felt like a joke, bringing forth my anger.

“Something funny, Harris?”

“The fact that you think you hold any clout with me to get that discount. What have you ever done to deserve this favour?” He brushed past me, still laughing.

Well, I didn’t want a favour anymore. I wanted a bargain. So, walking up to Xavi and Evan, I knelt down to open the freezer door to make sure it was in top-notch shape.

“You see those yellow sunglasses he’s rubbing on his shirt?” I asked Evan.

“Yeah.”

“Oh god,” Xavi gasped, freaking out. “You wouldn’t!”

“Think you can pinch them?” I asked the kid. “And don’t go all moral on me. I’ve seen you steal a bunch of shit from the park.”

Evan looked at me like I was beneath him. With a glare that turned into a Devon-level eye roll, he grinned and started to stalk around the outskirts of the store.

Xavi stood at my side, biting his damn nails. “This is risky, Neegs. Harris has a gun on him.”

“I’ve never seen him shoot it.”

“You think Evan would still do it if he knew... *oh my god!*” Xavi jumped up in the air.

Right as Harris leaned over a counter to chat with a saleswoman, Evan *yoinked* the sunglasses straight out of his hand and made a run for it.

“Hey! You little fucker! Give those back!” Harris screamed, but Evan was already out the front door and not looking back.

Xavi took off to block Harris’ path, and as soon as I got there, I looked Harris straight in the eye and laughed in *his* fucking face. “You hand deliver that fridge to our trailer—Lot 62, you remember the one?—for the money I wrote down, and you’ll get your precious aviators back. Deal?”

Harris reached for his gun, but I pressed my chest to his. “Don’t,” he warned me.

“It’s just a fridge. How much are those sunglasses worth to you?” I patted his cheek. “Delivered tomorrow would be great.”

Before he could grab me or unholster his maybe real, hopefully fake gun, I bolted out the front door and hoped Evan and Xavi had managed to get the truck running. But she wasn’t running, and Xavi was yipping like a coyote, barking orders at Evan, who was trying to push the truck into a rolling start.

“Switch!” Xavi shouted.

Evan hopped into the driver’s seat, and me and Xavi rolled our old hunk of loveable metal down the slope, shouting at Evan to turn the key every few seconds. When she finally fired

up, Xavi whooped with the biggest smile of his life on his face.

“I’m getting my fridge, bitches!”

Then the truck clanked, and the gears groaned as Evan tried to give himself a driving lesson.

“Oops. Fuck. Forgot eight-year-olds can’t drive,” I laughed. “We’re getting your fridge!”

“I’m ten!” Evan yelled, but he was laughing, high on crime and lunacy.

Maybe we weren’t the best influences, but maybe we were. Who decided that sort of thing? I’d say the smile on Evan’s face did.

CHAPTER 26

XAVI

THE BRACELET NATE HAD MADE ME SNAGGED IN MY MOM'S hair, twisting with the one Karen gave me. I valued the stringy gifts more than I valued her tangles, so I yanked it free and felt numb to her yelp. Getting her on the couch with a bucket and a cool cloth, I blew out a breath over the sound of her sobbing.

“I’m sorry, hun. I’m so sorry. I’m gonna be better. I’m done now. Totally done. I’m so sorry.”

I knew she was sorry, but it wasn't enough to make her better. I didn't want her to get better for me. I wanted her to respect her life enough to give it a shot. I mean, if she was happy being a drunk mess who failed everyone all the time, fine. But she wasn't happy. She was guilt-stricken, ashamed, and embarrassed. Who wanted to live like that?

Alcoholism is a disease. Addiction is a disease. Give her credit for trying as much as she does.

I couldn't listen to her anymore, so I slammed the door of the trailer behind me and just... fell. Straight to my knees because the weight of *her* world felt like it rested on *my* very unstable shoulders. I hardly had my own shit together, and to be honest, I cared more about putting the rest of my energy into Maddox, Dad, and Nate than I did her. I knew that was an asshole thing to think, but I couldn't help it. Why did we constantly have to help someone who didn't give a damn about helping herself?

My knees hit the grass and my head hung. Not sure if I was going to cry or just take a few minutes to breathe, I stared

at my knobby knees and tried not to put all my weight on my bad-but-better toe. Life was good for me. Life was *mine* for once. It wasn't about Maddox and Devon. It wasn't about Jim Sawyer. It wasn't about my dad being a mess or Nate being insecure, or us having to put everyone else ahead of ourselves. It was our fresh start. The next chapter in our love story, and... and I didn't want to be kneeling on my mom's front lawn because I couldn't listen to her sobbing apologies anymore.

I fisted my hands on my thighs and stared at my knuckles instead. The knuckles I was going to get our names tattooed on just because I wanted to. A reminder that we were the most important. Nate and Xavi.

A small hand with dirty fingernails landed on my knee. Patting me. Being weird.

Holy fuck it was comforting. A strangled sound that was probably a cry but came out half-choked left me, and I leaned forward to rest my head on the top of his.

"My mom was like that too," he said. "She left now."

"I'm sorry," I told him, meaning it. At least my mom hadn't left. Probably hadn't had the motivation to.

"I'm sorry, too," Evan said.

He kept his clammy hand on my knee until I got the energy to lift my head, and then he hauled me to my feet and forgot to catch me when I tripped over my slide.

"Go home, Xav," Dad said, coming up the path. "Mary called. I got your mother," he said, smiling at me and giving Evan a nod. "You get to live your life now."

For the first time in a long time, I gave my dad a hug, and then followed Evan through his winding paths. He didn't talk much, and neither did I, but it felt good to have him there. When we got close to Lot 62, he stopped and looked at me.

"Good news," he said.

"Yeah? Didn't think you believed in good news." I smirked at him.

“Not mine. Your good news.” He nodded to the truck driving down to our lot. “Delivery that might kill you, but you’ll probably get a fridge out of it.”

“Oh. My. God!” I jumped, grabbing his shoulders. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted this?!”

“It’s a lame-ass fridge.” He shrugged.

“Not any lame-ass fridge. *My* lame-ass fridge! Come on!” I took off. “Wait. Maybe you should hang back in case Harris is murdering.”

“You don’t want me there?” he asked, looking dejected.

Ah, fuck it. He could hide behind me until we knew Harris wasn’t gonna kill us. “Damn right I do. You’re the thief who accomplished this! Let’s go!” I dragged him along.

When we got to the yard, Harris buttoned his suit jacket that was a few sizes too big and glared at Nate on the front porch.

“Mr. Sawyer,” he greeted him. “I believe we had a... deal.”

Nate was sexy when he was negotiating with shady criminals. All for my fridge. So hot. Evan gagged beside me while I eye-fucked him.

“So gross.”

“Yeah, whatever. Wait until you find your person.” I shoved him behind me and dragged him along. “That for me, Harris?!”

His goons unloaded the thing, adding another dent or two. Nate stood to protect the kid with me, but Harris just breathed through his nose. He had one of those names that was a little bit feared but mostly respected. Sure, he wore tracksuits and giant jackets, donned those yellow aviators, and looked like a lowlife with a touch of authority, but at his base, he seemed like a businessman just making do with the hand he’d been dealt. He turned it into something that worked for him, and I respected him the tiniest bit for giving me the heads up about Mom going to him.

“Where are my glasses?” he asked.

Nate had them in his hand, but he didn’t pass them over. “I looked at them. They’re cheap. Not even some ritzy brand. Why are they so important to you?”

Harris looked at the two of us and tried to get a peek at Evan. Vulnerability flashed in his eyes, but he breathed it out like fire. “If you must know, they belonged to my, uh,” he choked, “son. Who passed away. Cancer. Didn’t get good enough care. So, please—”

“Say no more,” Nate cut in, handing Harris his unharmed shades. God, we were assholes. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Harris fondly placed them into a sunglasses case before tucking them into his pocket. “I admire your negotiation skills, but after this, I really do hope we part ways to never meet again.” He nodded. “But you,” he said to Evan. “You ever need work as a pickpocket, you come to—”

“Nope.” Nate covered Evan’s ears. “You wanna scare his dad, go for it, but leave him outta it.”

“Who is your dad?”

Evan didn’t answer, but he looked like he wanted to. “Brad Voreneau,” I said. “Feel free to rough him up a bit, too.”

“He do that to ya?” Harris asked, nodding at Evan’s lip and eye. Evan nodded in Nate’s hold, but that was it. Harris gave him a small smile. “Pleasure. The cash?”

Nate slapped some bills on his palm.

“You’re short. About a hundred bucks.”

“Oops.”

Breathing more fire, Harris waited in the truck until my new fridge was installed and they took the old one to sell to make up the difference.

“Happy ‘dreams come true’ day, Xav,” Nate said to me, smiling with Evan between us.

“Ew.” He shoved away and went to admire my fridge from the doorway.

“Nate.” I tugged on his shirt and brought him against my chest. I grabbed his hand and twined our fingers. “Thank you. For making all my dreams come true. This.” I looked at the new trailer we lived in. “These.” I held up my wrist with my new bracelets. “The fridge. And most of all, you.” I pressed my lips to his and simply breathed him in. “I love you, daredevil.”

He kissed me back and hugged me tight. “You’re my dream too, Xav.” He tugged on my hand. “Come on. Let’s go fill water glasses until the ice maker is done!”

“Fuck yes! I wanna video it for Karen!”



MY LOVE LANGUAGE MIGHT HAVE BEEN HAND-HOLDING, AND Nate’s might have been smoking cessation, but our kink list adventure was all over the place.

We’d crossed off restraints and bondage, weren’t too sure on the water sports just yet, and hadn’t had the desire to try the blindfold because we were both the staring, intense eye contact type.

“Hand-holding, cuddling, rimming, roleplay, and edging, yeah?” he asked, starring them with a pink pen.

“Cock warming?” I asked.

Nate blushed. “Yeah, fuck, fine. I liked the cock blanket.” He starred it. “And toys are a definite win, even though that’s the only one we can afford. What’s next?”

I pointed to ‘nipple play’ and then ‘ice play’ on the list. “Since we have an ice maker now.” I waggled my brows.

“Hot dicks and cold nips. Okay.” He tapped the pen. “Let’s go for it. But I’m chilling your nips since you got to heat my dick.”

“Fair.” I ripped my shirt off and sprung from the couch. “But I get to get the ice!”

Loved getting ice. Sometimes I filled a glass with it just because. Like, how fucking cool was I to have this fridge? Now I wanted one of those orchids you put an ice cube in every few days... because I had some goddamn ice cubes! I smiled to myself, loving Nate for helping to fulfill my dreams.

Oh, she hummed, and the light lit up when I got the ice. *So cool*. Bringing it back to the couch, I sat down beside Nate and loved that his dick was already fully on board with this idea. He couldn't hide that boner behind my cut-off sweatshorts. But he didn't jump into action like I thought he would. He hesitated, with the list still on his boner-laden lap.

"What's up?" I asked, setting the cup on the coffee table so my hands were cold and free. I gripped his chin and made him look at me. "We don't have to try anything you aren't—"

"Take," he cut in, licking his lips. "I want you to take what you want."

I blazed from the inside out. My skin heated, ready to melt ice cubes. "You telling me you're submissive, daredevil?" I tapped BDSM on the list. "This what you want?"

The breath shook out of him. "No. Not submissive, I don't think. But I want... I want to *not* feel insecure."

I tossed the fucking list and straddled his lap. My fingers wrapped around his head and both my thumbs pushed up on his chin. "Tell me what you feel insecure about so I can prove to you how much I love everything about you."

Nate looked at me, eyes scared but bold. "When you... when you fucked me, you just did everything, and I didn't have time to get in my head about it. I loved it because you took charge and just told me what to do. How to take it. So all I had to do was feel awesome."

Okay, so not submissive, but enjoyed commands. That was definitely something I could work with. And if I knew Nate, once he got comfortable taking demands, he'd start making a few of his own. It wasn't far off how he acted in life. He let me lead, did what I suggested, and then got brave enough and comfortable enough with the situation to join the leadership

role. Nate needed to be led in order to take charge, and fuck me, I loved that about him. All I'd have to do was get the ball rolling.

So, with a smirk and a quick kiss, I pulled on the back of his neck and forced his mouth to my chest. "Lick," I demanded.

Nate's tongue licked my nipple, his warm breath panting against my chest. When his hips bucked up and his hands squeezed my thighs, I forced him to the other side. My head tilted back because, yeah, I liked the nipple stuff, and the way his short hair felt in my hands was a sensory accessory that gave me a high. Reaching behind me, I fingered an ice cube from the glass and ran it down the back of his neck.

"Shit," he gasped. He shivered when I ran it down his spine, shaking beneath me. I let it melt against his hot skin before grabbing another.

"Open," I demanded. But Nate had cold-sensitive teeth, so I didn't know if he would. Fortunately, he was on fire, so he opened willingly and took the cube into his mouth. I smirked at him before pushing him back to my chest.

When the warmth of his lips was replaced with the chill of the ice, my nipple hardened, and I groaned. I held him there, forcing him to tease me while I rocked on his lap, taunting him.

"Think you can fit ice and my dick in your mouth, daredevil?" I rasped. He trembled. "Because I'm going to fuck your throat until it melts."

The remainder of the ice fell from his wet lips and dribbled down his chin. Nate looked at me, mouth already open for another cube. I put it on his tongue and stood, rubbing my dick through my boxers. Nate moved his ass to the edge of the cushion and reached for me, but I smacked his hands away and pressed his face to my cock. A power built inside me as he moaned against me. Nate made me powerful because he *gave* me power, and I wanted to make him powerful because I helped his confidence. I wanted him to rise up with sureness, knowing that I craved every goddamn part of him.

I hooked a thumb on his bottom teeth, forced his jaw open, and took my cock out. Bending to lick his drool-slicked lips, I whispered, “I won’t let you breathe until that ice melts.” I forced my way inside his mouth, and Nate grabbed my ass for balance.

I showed no mercy. He wanted me to take? I’d take.

I fucked his mouth like I’d fucked his ass, hard and unrelenting. The constriction of his gag around the tip of my cock sent a jolt of pleasure down to my toes. Nate choked and spluttered, eyes watering, mouth leaking water and saliva, tongue swirling whenever he got enough control to taunt me back. Fucking beautiful.

“You should see yourself right now,” I purred down at him, not pausing the thrust of my hips. “Crying, gagging, whimpering, basically fucking drooling for more. So fucking sexy, Nate.” I pulled his head in, burying his face in my groin until he tensed and choked so hard his body spasmed. Letting him pull back enough for a quick inhale through his nose, I stopped moving my hips and made him do it all on his own. And he fucking did. He sucked my cock until the ice melted, and when he pulled off, strings of saliva stretched between us, and he had a whole new fire in his eyes.

I grinned at him, but he growled at me. Then he forced me to my knees in front of him, hopped off the couch, and bent me over it. An ice cube landed on my spine, and Nate’s cool tongue spread over my hole.

“Ah, fuck.”

“Yeah, fuck,” he snapped at me, lube and fingers joining the party. “You almost fucking killed me.”

Licking, fingering, melting, ice and heat combined, *he* almost killed *me*. “What’re you gonna do about it, daredevil?” I taunted while losing my mind.

“I’m gonna fuck you,” he said, matter of fact. He pushed my chest to the couch and kept on licking and finger-fucking my ass. His underwear landed on the cushion next to me.

To rile him, even though I wanted to moan and melt under his dominance, I snorted instead. Scoffed. “Are you? Because it feels like you’re stalling.”

He ripped his hand free, leaned back, smacked my ass, and lubed his dick. But I wasn’t about to have any of that. I was still in the mood to take. So I flipped over, sat on the very edge of the couch, and grabbed him until he was lined up with my hole.

“Not if I fuck you first.” I pulled him in.

Between me trying to control him and him trying to be dominant, he pounded inside me in one brutal thrust that buckled him forward and made my eyes roll back. Pleasure, pain, lust, and dominance swirled through me, and Nate groaned against my chest.

“You gonna fuck me, or do I have to do all the work?” I ground my hips and grabbed his ass.

“Goddammit, Xavi,” he growled, fingers dug into my skin.

“Harder!”

He went harder. His blue eyes met mine, and I knew that mouthy daredevil Nate had come out to play. His hips snapped, fucking into me while I matched every thrust with a force of my own. It wasn’t a fight for dominance; it was a charge led by the two of us, heading towards the same goal.

“You wanna talk about stalling?” he said, about to get real mouthy. “Knuckles are still bare, Xav.”

I laughed, crazed. Happy and horny. “Not for long.” I grabbed the back of his neck and brought his mouth down to mine. Biting his lip hard, I kept him there. “Can you picture this hand with your name on it, jerking my dick when you’re not around?” I wrapped my hand around myself and let him up to watch.

Nate growled. “I’ll always be around. You wanna jerk off, you’ll do it in front of me.”

Oh god. I pumped faster, and he fucked harder. “You think?”

“It’s my hand. I get to control what it does.”

“What’s it get to do right now?” I circled the tip, and my head fell back when Nate fucked into me hard and brutal.

“Squeeze,” he rasped. When he looked at me, I knew he was about to change the dynamic. “Hold off. Because when you come, it’ll be inside me.”

Goosebumps. A wave of bliss and power washed over me. I coughed out a moan and dropped my cock. “Oh, yeah?” I sat up and forced him up with me. “We finally gonna flip fuck?”

I didn’t let him answer. I hauled him to his feet and mourned the loss of him filling me. But if I had my way, he’d be inside me again soon. I linked his hands behind his back, led him over to the kitchen, and pushed his chest right against my shiny new fridge.

“Stay,” I warned him. “I’m grabbing the lube.”

“No,” he rasped, making me stay. “I don’t need it.”

“Nate.”

“Check.”

My fingers slipped between his cheeks, and when I rubbed them against his tight ass, I growled in pleasure. “You filthy fucking tease.” I wiggled the plug. My plug. My cock throbbed to know it’d been inside him all this time. I added a finger inside with it, lube dripping out to coat my knuckles.

“Xavi,” he begged.

“Oh, daredevil,” I purred, kissing his neck. “You never have to beg me for anything.” I worked the plug free and fucked him with my fingers. “Just tell me what you want.”

He groaned, stuttered over a few words, and finally blurted, “The wall. Fuck me against the wall.”

My pleasure. I pushed him against the wall, decided I needed to look at him, and spun him until his back was to it. Hooking his leg up over my hip, I used my right hand to guide my dick. “Well? Permission to use this hand?”

“Permission,” he rasped, then moaned when I pushed inside him. “Grant-ed,” he finished. “Don’t make me come. Don’t make me come, Xav.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanna fuck you again. I wanna switch back and forth until we can’t take it anymore.”

I smirked in his face. “I love it when we twin hard.” Because... *fuck yes*. My thoughts exactly.

I pumped my hips and fucked him against the wall, trying to slow my pace so I didn’t come too early. Nate’s hands were all over me, holding on for balance, but mostly just touching. I’d never connected to someone during sex like this before. Yeah, it’d been hot, but not this hot. Not a mind fuck, a heart fuck, and an anal fuck all at the same time. Nate gave everything, took everything, created everything, and I should have known. Expected it. Because we’d always been on the same wavelength, and there was no reason our sex life should have been any different.

“Xavi, switch with—”

Knock knock.

Our eyes snapped together, and we held our breath. Could it be Evan? Had he finally come to our door? Thank fuck the curtains were closed. Sweat tickled my temple as we waited, wondering what to do.

“Nate!” Devon shouted. “You home?”

We both sagged. Maybe in relief. Maybe in disappointment that it wasn’t the kid. Nate took the distraction to push me down to the floor. On my side, he hooked my calf over his shoulder and pushed inside me.

“Nate!”

“Trust me, Devon. You do not want to come in here right now!” he yelled.

Devon groaned. “Hurry up.”

“Don’t you dare hurry up,” I seethed at Nate.

He grinned. “Try to hold me back.”

CHAPTER 27

NATE

MY BROTHER HAD LONG GIVEN UP AND GONE SOMEWHERE else. Thankfully, because we'd ended up on the kitchen floor again, and Xavi's eyes were all fucked up. One was closed, and the other was fluttering as he held his breath and filled me full of cum.

My teeth chattered in restraint, and my hand squeezed my cock to stave off my orgasm. To feel him come inside me was pushing me past a limit I'd teetered on for an hour.

"Don't," Xavi warned. "Want your cum inside me."

Well, it wasn't going to wait. I lifted onto my knees, backed up, threw his legs over my thighs, and thrust into him twice before my orgasm hit like a bullet. A rapid-fire machine gun that made me tremble and jerk and look like a fool.

"Ahhhhh, fuck yeah."

It was too much. But not enough. I grabbed for Xavi, bringing him into a sitting position because coming while not kissing him felt like torture. He let me moan against his lips, kissing me as hard as he held me. His ass clamped tight around my cock, and my *ah-ha* moment finally happened. Xavi decided he'd made the switch, and now I for sure had, too.

"I'm gay."

"Finally," he panted. "Welcome to the club."

"Thanks."

"I'm president. Wanna be VP?"

“Yes please.” I tangled my fingers in his hair and calmed down enough to pull back. “I really do love you, Xavi.”

“I know,” he said, smiling. “It’s the best life sentence I could have ever gotten.”

I laughed, but Xavi whispered his love against my lips before helping me to my feet. Fingers entwined, we had a short shower, got frustrated in the cramped space, and ended up taking turns.

I sat on the toilet while he rinsed off, then he did the same.

“We gotta get the outdoor shower here,” he said, passing me an olive-green towel with frayed edges. “Let’s get Karen to help.”

I nodded. “She’d like that. Then we can show her the new place.”

“We gotta make sure we lock the door during fucks, Nate,” Xavi said. “We gotta be responsible for the kids.”

“We are kids.”

“I know. But we’re good actors,” he said. “Well, you are. I’m more of a supporting character.” A packet of nicotine gum fell out of his shorts pocket, and we both stared at it. I hadn’t even thought about the gum in a few days. Or cigarettes, for that matter. Xavi looked from it to me. “I love you.”

I blushed because that meant he was proud of me. “Come on. Don’t make a thing of it or it’ll put pressure on it. Let’s go find out what Devon wanted.”

The text he’d sent said to meet him at the Kane trailer, so I shot him one to say we were on our way. I was still on board with the meddling plan because we didn’t know what they’d bet at fight night.

Hands swinging between us, leisurely walking through the park, I felt at peace. I still loved the shop. It’d been a dream for me and my brother, and the pride we’d felt at achieving it had been surreal. Still was. But it felt even better now to go there for work instead of living there. We’d figure out what to do with the apartment at the back eventually, but for now, it

just felt good to stand in there and remember how things started. Xavi and I had shared the tiny room, and Devon slept on the couch until he worked up the nerve to ask Maddox to live with him. We'd been happy then, but we were happier now.

Without even talking about it, we took the long way over to Seth and Naomi's so we could swing by Evan's place to see what the status was there. The TV flickered and his old man's car was gone. He was safe for the night, and that put me more at ease.

"So, the kid thing?" I asked Xavi. "What're your thoughts on it now?"

He squeezed my hand and leaned against me, swaying down the street at a tilt. "Well, now I have your feelings to consider, too. You want a kid?"

I didn't want to say no and crush his dreams, but I didn't want to say yes and not mean it.

"You know what I think?" he asked. "I think we're exactly where we're supposed to be. Parental figures to the park kids. Like part of a community of part-time parents who watch out for the kids who live like we did."

I smiled into the darkness. "Yes," I whispered, because that was exactly it. That was exactly what I wanted. "That'd be enough for you?"

"More than enough. You, my fridge, our new home, and a door to be knocked on. It's... well, plus the awesome sex, it's everything. You're everything."

I'd never been everything to anyone. Would I fall for my best friend a little more every day for the rest of our lives? "So glad we're doing life together, Xavi. Prison sentence or not, I'd have picked you."

Our gooey moment turned into a kiss, but that only lasted a second. Maddox's truck turned the corner, his headlights blinding us, and we both shrieked like wimps when they almost hit us.

"Hey!" Xavi yelled. "I blew a sandal!"

“Get in, fuckers. Payback’s a bitch!” Devon cackled.

Oh no. Payback for what?



XAVI STUMBLED, TRIPPING OVER HIS SLIDE AND USING MY shoulder for balance. I swept him up and did a spin, and then we laughed about it because it was funny. And life required laughter.

“The fuck kind of payback is this?” Xavi asked our brothers.

We were at Garron Terrace. That hoity-toity park we’d fled the night of the Brittany incident. But the streetlamps were all lit up and string lights decorated the streets and pathways, and there were tables of junk everywhere.

“You dragged me to a farmers’ market, so I’m dragging you to a night market.” Maddox nudged Xavi. “We’re here for something, and you’re gonna help us get it.”

“Like you found your wedding rings?” Xavi scoffed at Maddox, but he looked at me. “These two can’t meddle worth a shit, you know? I love yard sales. Night ones just make it more fun.” He smiled.

“I know, right? Hardly payback. Like, look at all this cool shit!”

“It’s hard to piss you two off when the only thing you hate are feet and June bugs,” Devon said, sounding pissy.

“And extra old cheddar cheese,” Xavi added.

“What do you two need from here anyway? You bust another toaster, Dev?”

Devon punched me. “Since you think we suck at meddling, we figured we’d flip the script. We’re here to get you something.” But before he could say more, Maddox wrapped his arm around Devon’s throat and squeezed hard.

“We’ll go look for it. Be back.” They dragged each other away, seeming to know where they were going.

Well, guess that left us free to do some shoppin’!

“Nate, I have six bucks in my pocket. Pick anything within bartering distance of six bucks.”

I grabbed his hand, felt the perfect energy from the twinkle lights, and walked with him through all the yards and tables.

The rent was higher here and the lots went for more, and they might have had a swimming pool and a tennis court, but we had a fucking community at our trailer park. This was Garron’s version of the ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ type thing, and no thanks. I’d take our outdoor shower and weedy lawn over the aesthetic of this place. But it still felt good to walk around, hand in hand, looking at shit we couldn’t afford, but dreaming about it anyway. We had a trailer to decorate and make our own, and surely, for six dollars, we’d be able to find something.

“Hey, I recognize that lava lamp.” I pointed to it on the table. “Shit. And the trailer.”

“And the Brittany,” Xavi whispered to me. “Hey, Brittany!”

“It’s Bethany,” she said, looking at our joined hands.

“Oh, yeah. We’re a lil bit gay now,” Xavi said, holding up our hands.

“A whole lot gay. Sorry. Maybe explains why we fucked shit up so bad that night,” I added.

“Thought your brother got hurt.” Bethany raised a brow before waving us off. “No matter. I met someone now.”

A guy who looked like a wrestler stepped up behind her. He had a baby face though, and awww. I wanted to squish his cheeks!

“How much for the lava lamp?” I asked. “And why the hell would you get rid of it?”

“Caused a bit of a smoke show that night you two... well, yeah. Four dollars?” Bethany asked.

Oh my fuck! I’d never had a lava lamp. My buddy used to have one when we were younger, and I swear I looked at that thing for hours while high one time.

“For my besby, anything.” Xavi handed over a fiver and told Bethany to keep the change for her troubles that night. Handing me my new lamp, Xavi’s teeth lit up green and blue from the string lights. “Happy new house!”

“Should I give it to Karen?” I asked, feeling kind of possessive of it. “She’d love a lava lamp for when she moves back to her mom’s house.”

“Look, I said we need to be *responsible* for the kids, not giving gifts all the time. We’ll get her something else. We already got her the coolest shower.” Xavi wrapped his arms around my shoulders from behind. “Where do you think our dipshit brothers got off to?”

“And what the actual fuck would they be getting for us?”

As soon as I finished saying it, Devon skidded around a corner and Maddox punched someone right in the face. They came at us hard and fast. “Fucking run!” Devon screamed.

Oh, we ran. No idea why. Everyone was running.

“The fuck is going on?” Xavi asked as we booked it back to the truck, dust skipping up behind us. “Who are we running from?”

“Not from. To!” Maddox laughed. “There’s a race. Found out about it at Fight Night.”

“A race for what?” I opened the door and Xavi threw me and my lamp into the back seat of Maddox’s truck. “To where? The hell?”

“To your gift. Fucking step on it, Madd. I’m not losing this.” Devon punched him. “Hurry up!”

Maddox flew through Garron Terrace, his truck way more reliable than mine. He almost hit three chicks and a family of foster kids, but the race was on, and everyone got out of the

way. A busted up Jeep tried to cut us off, and a monster truck almost did, but Maddox kept us in the lead.

“I feel so alive and I don’t even know what’s going on!” Xavi whooped. He stuck his head out the window and whooped louder. “I’m gay!” he screamed.

“Nobody cares!” someone screamed back.

“Fucking loser,” Devon scoffed.

The path ended, and the three vehicles in the lead turned down a narrow gravel road that travelled along the beach. I couldn’t figure out where we were going because the only thing up ahead was a pier and a few boat slips. And that was exactly where Maddox headed. Before the truck was even parked, Devon hopped out and ran faster than he moved that night Maddox had asked for a flip fuck. Squinting and twenty steps behind, I saw a man sitting on the pier.

“Move!” Someone barrelled into me, and Xavi stuck out his foot to trip the guy. He went down hard, and we kept on going.

The pier was short and the boat slips were built off it, and when Maddox and Devon got to the guy in the chair first, they handed him something and started a verbal argument with the three other guys who had raced us here. Like usual, we gawked around without a fucking clue what was going on.

“We were first,” Devon panted. “We won. It’s ours. Right?”

“Like fuck, Sawyer! You cut us off.”

“You tripped me!”

Ah, this sounded like Maddox and Devon used to sound, except they were on the same team for once.

“It’s yours.” The man handed Maddox a key to something.

“Fuck yes! Fuck all you bitches!” Devon gloated.

“Enjoy it,” the older man said, smiling and walking away with everyone else.

“Enjoy what?” I asked. “What is that?”

Maddox and Devon were still breathing hard, but they both looked at us. “Since you think we suck at meddling, but really we don’t, you two just suck at being meddled, we got you something else.” Maddox held up the key. “We were gonna trap you at the gravel pits but figured you’d love that too much, so... here.” He tossed Xavi the key. He fumbled it, almost lost it over the pier, and finally got it in a good grip. “We just won you a boat.” He pointed to the only boat docked at the slip. It was a pathetic-looking thing, but holy shit.

I swear to Satan my eyes actually watered. A boat, a lava lamp, a trailer, and a Xavi all in one lifetime? I gaped at it, thinking someone was going to jump out and say it was all a joke. No way!

“Why? Why would he give his boat away? Is it stolen?” I asked.

“He’s moving and can’t take it, and doesn’t have time to sell it, so...”

“It’s...” Xavi started.

“Yeah, a bit of a piece of shit and a real fuel hog, but it’s ___”

“So perfect!” Xavi shouted at the same time I yelled, “Awesome!”

“Ahhh! You got your boat, baby!” Xavi hugged me, jumping up and down.

“Baby? Jesus,” Maddox gagged. “Stop being idiots for two seconds.” He kicked me in the thigh, so Devon kicked him back. “It’s weird as fuck that you two are all in love and shit, but... we couldn’t picture it going any other way. So, yeah, we suck at feelings and shit, but... we’re all...”

“Proud,” Devon filled in. “We’re proud of you. Happy, or some shit. Just... yeah. There’s a boat, so go be happy in it.”

Well, that called for hugs. They bitched about them.

“See that light?” Maddox pointed down the coastline. “That’s Garron Park. Aim there. Don’t get lost.”

“You’ll get my lava lamp home safe?” I asked.

Devon rolled his eyes and Maddox pushed him away.

“Thank you!” we shouted after them.

Guess we were going for a boat ride. I was already imagining all our day trips out on the water to just park—because fuel was not cheap—and chat and sit in the sun and swim whenever we wanted to. Karen could come. And Evan.

“I don’t know how all my dreams are coming true,” I said as we climbed into the boat. “But I’m afraid to change anything in case it stops. Maybe I shouldn’t go to sleep tonight. This has been the best day of my life.”

Xavi tugged on the front of my shirt and brought our chests together. “As long as you stay mine, I don’t care what else happens. Just me and you, besby. That’s all the dream I need from now on.” He kissed me.

He kissed me. On a boat. Under the moon. Fuck, I was such a lucky son of a bitch.

Speaking of moms, I should go see her.

“I love you, Xav.”

“Love you too, Neegs.” He grinned. “You’ll never guess what I’ve got planned for our two months.”

I probably never would guess, but that’s what I loved about him. He was always exciting.

CHAPTER 28

NATE

XAVI WAS BEING AN EVASIVE BASTARD TODAY. HE'D LEFT work early, rushing out the door before I could ask him what was up. Probably because he sucked at keeping secrets, and he'd needed to leave before he accidentally blurted the truth. Took my truck, too.

"You think he likes working here?" Devon asked me, closing out the old computer at the end of the day.

"I think it's a job. Wasn't his dream." I shrugged. "Says he doesn't have a work dream." I looked at my brother. "Why?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Never seen him work late. He fucks around a lot. Leaves whenever he can and is always the one who volunteers to do the deliveries. Seems like he wants to get out of here a lot is all."

"Are you shit-talking my baby?"

Devon laughed. Then groaned. "Fucking pet names. You sound like Madd. And no, I'm not shit-talking him. I hated my jobs before I got here, too. He should talk to Maddox about it."

"About working for Garron Construction? Or Pete's farm?"

Devon waved me off. "What're we naming this place?"

"Big cocks 'n docks."

"No."

"Dicks and dinghies?"

“No dicks in the name, asshole. Jesus, you turn gay and it’s all cock talk.”

I leaned against the counter and really thought about it. The shop was our dream. When we were teens, we’d think about life and what we wanted it to look like, and the shop became a fantasy. Hardly believed it was a reality now. Especially when it was just the dream of two poor Sawyer brothers.

“How about Sawyer Brothers? Take the name back from Dad.” I looked at Devon. “Unless you wanna call it Kanes’ bitches... ‘n boats.”

“Hard no. I’m no one’s bitch. Not even his. Won’t Xav want his name on there?”

I barked a laugh. “Xavi already calls himself an honorary Sawyer. He’d be flattered.”

Devon grinned. “Yet another reason he needs to go talk to Madd. You two need some separation. You can’t work together, live together, do everything together, and not lose your shit. Tension or no tension, every couple needs a degree or two of separation.”

Yeah, maybe. Why was Devon so mature lately? Throwing me right off.

“What’s Madd got to do with this?”

“Remember that bet we made at fight night? The one you’ve been meddling your way into? Tragically.”

“Yes.”

“Well... I dunno. Something is going on. I agreed to wait so we could tell you guys together, but... Maddox might have something Xavi would like more. Madd doesn’t think he loves it here. Stays for you and Karen.” He shoved a paper file against my chest. I put it away. “Don’t ask. We’ll tell you later. It’s a good thing, so don’t worry about it.” He looked at me. “Kinda like Sawyer Brothers. Nice *fuck you* to Dad, and kinda makes me feel like Karen, changing the Sawyer name.”

We both pointed middle fingers at the floor, hoping they reached all the way to Hell. “Sawyer Brothers.” I liked it. Fit. A pair of Sawyers had made it, and it might have been a bit cocky to put our name on the sign, but fuck it. Tons of businesses did that. We *were* cocky. “Alright, deal. Sawyer is a bad omen, so we better change that luck. If this shop goes under as soon as we get a sign, I’m pointing all the blame at you.”

“Whatever,” Devon snorted. “Karen! Wanna grab burgers on the way home?”

Karen poked her head out from behind the hoist. She wasn’t actually supposed to be working on boats, but it turned out she had a knack for the electrical panels. “Wait, can you film something for me?”

“Sure. Where’s your phone?” I walked over to her.

“I don’t have one.”

I turned around and grabbed mine off the desk. “Ready?” Hope the battery lasted.

Karen cleared her throat, ran her hand over her fading green buzz cut, and sat on the edge of the hoist. “Ready.”

Devon turned a light on to spotlight her and stood next to me as I pressed the button. “Rolling.”

For the first time since I’d met her, she wasn’t smiling wide. She looked happy and confident, but like she wasn’t joking around.

“Hi, Dad,” she started, and my heart cinched up tight. “I just wanted to tell you that I love you, and that I’m okay. I spent a few months in juvie, and now I’m living in a youth home for another month. I’m telling you this because, although it was my mistake, I’m in this situation because you let me fend for you. I’ll always love you, and you’ll always be my dad, but *my* life is important, too. So when I get out of the home and move back with Mom, I’m going to change some things.”

She looked at us, and I pressed my lips together to keep the sob at bay. Devon groaned, choking his back down his throat.

“Karens are self-entitled and well off. But I’m neither of those things. I’m poor, have made a bad name for myself, and have struggled a lot this past year. So, I’m changing the narrative. I’m going to be selfish, but I’m going to do it for self-preservation reasons. I come first from now on. No one else is going to watch my back, not you or Mom, so I’m going to watch my own. And now I have an awesome family of four idiots to watch it, too. And when I come visit you, you’ll get to meet them all. Xavi, Nate, Devon, and Maddox have agreed to come with me whenever I want to see you so that I can put myself first and do better. I think you’ll love them as much as I do.” She smiled. “So, I can’t wait to see you, Dad. But this time, I’ll have my new family with me, too. Talk soon! Love you!”

She wiped a tear from her eye, and I busted up, unable to hold back the sob any longer.

“Kare-bear! Get over here!” I wrapped her up in a hug and hated that Xavi missed this. “Fucking love the Karen Movement! We love ya too, sunshine child.”

“I know!” she said confidently, hugging me back. “Xavi gave me the idea for the video and how to put myself first. Did it turn out okay?”

I pulled my phone up and... “Oh, shit. I forgot to press record.”

“Dumbass.” Devon shoved me.

“Oop! Here it is. Phew!” I replayed it. Halfway through, Devon gave Karen a hug.

“Here’s my dad’s number. I’m hoping you can send it to him for me,” Karen said. “And yes, I’d love a burger.” She beamed and grabbed her sweater on the way out like she hadn’t just filmed a life-changing speech.

“I will never understand how she can smile so much.” Devon looked at me. “She really is family.”

“You’re damn right she is.” I sent the video to her dad. And Xavi. And Maddox. And my friend Keith because I was proud. Then Andrea. Then Naomi so she could see how

parents affected kids. Then Seth. Then Mary. Fuck it, I sent it to Gina, too. And maybe by accident, I sent it to Bethany/Brittany just because she was near the top of my list. “I want a burger, too.” Fuck it. I sent it to Kaylee as a ‘look, bitch, we can be a family and we’re awesome fake-dads’ slap to her face. Fuck her for laughing in Xavi’s face for mentioning a kid.

The three of us stood by Devon’s truck, staring at the sign that still named the place as O’Malley’s.

Sawyer Brothers. Yes.

We were all changing the legacy of the name. It felt right. In a few years, when people heard the name Sawyer, they’d think of our shop instead of our maniac dad, Maddox’s jail time, our mom’s loving act of murder, and the cuts and bruises all over Devon.



THE JUNE BUGS LIKED TO HANG AROUND AS LONG AS THEY could. It wasn’t even June anymore, but I swore they stayed just to fuck with Xavi. I hip-checked the truck door and walked up the front steps, drawn to the bug zapper glowing vibrant blue next to the door. No idea why he put it there when all it did was attract the things right where we needed to walk, but whatever. It gave him peace of mind.

“Xav,” I called, opening the door. “You still feel like an honorary Sawyer? Because we might name the—”

He ran to the door, slamming it shut and putting his back against it. “One got in. A three-pound Juner. It was so big it wouldn’t fit in the bug zapper and decided to come inside. I’ve been hunting it for an hour. Manly hunting. No crying.”

Sure.

“There.” He nodded to a Tupperware container on the kitchen counter. “Juner jail.” The hard-shelled bug knocked off the inside walls of its cell.

“You didn’t kill it?”

“And suffer through the crunch? Hard no. Plus, I’m a lover, not a killer.”

“Let it free outside?”

He shook his head. “I thought... what if it flies back at me, you know? Figured you might want to do that part.”

“Why are you wearing long sleeves?” I asked, suspicious because the guy barely wore shirts. Barely wore pants, if I was being honest.

“Armour,” he said. “In case it got all up on me. They have barbed little devil legs, Neegs.” He nudged me towards the container. “Please get rid of it. The sound of it in there is going to haunt my dreams for a month.”

I took the container outside while Xavi watched from the front window, face pressed to the glass. I let the thing go and shared a private little smile with myself. I’d never felt like the man of the house before, but now I was the June bug letter-freer, and wow, it felt good to be needed.

“My daredevil,” Xavi swooned when I came back in with the empty container. “Thank you.”

Never felt cooler.

“Okay, wait. I lied about the long sleeves.” He grabbed my shoulders and stood me right in front of him. “I did something.”

Ah, the reason he was being evasive. “What’d you do?”

“Turn around,” he said. “Wait. I’ll turn around.” He spun, turning his back to me. Pulling his shirt off and tossing it onto the couch, he said, “Remember they’re new and will look better later.”

Xavi spun, fists stretched out between us, knuckles pointed right at me. He had a huge smile on his face but a little trepidation in his eyes. *What?! He actually did it?*

“Happy two months, baby.”

On his left knuckles, his name sat proudly in black ink. On his right hand, “Hate?”

“Nate.” He looked at it. “N-A-T-E.”

“Keith do those? N looks a little like an H, Xav.”

“What?” he scoffed, studying his knuckles. “It clearly says Nate.”

It did, even if the N was a bit wonky, but it was fun to mess with him. “You said it was my hand, and every time you jerked off, it’d be like I was doing it.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Exactly.”

“Now you’ll be hate beating your meat, Xav. That clearly says hate.”

“What? No. Neegs,” he whined, staring at his knuckles.

“I love you, Xavi.” I laughed, tugging him forward to press my lips to his. “I can’t believe you actually did it. Me and you, right there on your knuckles.”

“And my heart,” he said, grinning like a cheesy fucker. “It hurt like a bitch, and then I cried like a bitch when you sent Karen’s video. That girl. My god, that girl.”

“So proud,” I whispered, kissing him. “And I love the tats.”

“It’s always been me and you, Nate. Always. And I think it always will.”

“I *know* it always will.”

CHAPTER 29

XAVI

MY KNUCKLES WERE ITCHY, BUT NOT NEAR AS ITCHY AS THE conversation I was having. Maddox made it worse because it was supposed to be a heartfelt chat, but he sat there all stoic and broody, not even blinking.

“Go on, Naomi,” Andrea said, patting Mom’s shoulder in encouragement. Dad sat at the kitchen table, not a part of the conversation but around for moral support.

Mom cleared her throat. “Well, when Nate sent that video of... Karen.” She sobbed, emotional because of Karen or booze or a lack of booze. Who knew? “It just really struck a chord with me. About how I’m affecting my children. I don’t want to lose you for good one day.”

“We’re adults,” Maddox blurted. “You never got your chords struck when we were kids, the same as Karen?”

Mom wept, and I kneed my brother in the thigh. I understood where he was coming from, felt the same way, but I’d never deny my mom the chance to try. Again.

Maddox glared at me before sinking back against the couch, ready to listen, but not promising any sort of reaction one way or another. I didn’t want to be here, listening to our mom come to the realization that she was shitty. I wanted to be out on Nate’s boat, drinking piña coladas and soaking up the sun with my besby daredevil. But Nate was with Evan. Because Patrick Harris had someone beat up his dad, and Evan, for once, felt like he had some control over his life.

“You are adults,” Mom said. “And I’m supposed to be an adult. I’m going to get some help.”

“Help?” I asked.

“I’m going to help,” Andrea said. “Help her get sober and help her cope with why she drinks.”

Maddox and I looked at each other, and for the first time, maybe we felt like shit for judging our mom. Did she have trauma? Obviously she did, including the times my dad left and treated her horribly. When I looked at him, I realized that was partly why he came back and stayed back. He was making up for his own mistakes. Not solely protecting us from her, but helping to heal her, showing her she could trust him, and proving to her he was better now. Better for her and better for their marriage.

I didn’t really know much about the things our mom went through, but she used wine and pills to numb something, so I became proud of her for wanting to give the sober thing another go. Maybe the right way, this time.

“Are you even qualified for that?” I asked Andrea.

“No, not in any legal sense. But I’ve been a sober companion for others before, and it’s better than nothing.” Andrea as the park psychologist? Yeah, that fit. She was the best woman for the job.

“I’m proud of how the two of you have turned out,” Mom said. “Despite everything I put you through.”

“We,” Dad added.

“We. And now you’re adults, helping such a lovely girl like Karen, and... I’m just... it’s time for me to keep you in my life. It’s time for me to put you first. After her video...” Mom sighed. “I’m sorry. I know I’ve said it a million times before, but I’m going to work hard to prove to you that I mean it this time.”

Skeptical, but I hugged her anyway. I didn’t trust my mom, but I trusted Andrea. If anyone could be in her corner and help her from a place of goodness, it was her. With Dad at her back.

Maddox didn't say anything, but he let Mom kiss his cheek before he walked out to wait for me. I didn't have much to say to her. I wanted to hope, but I kept it realistic.

The only thing I could say was, "Stay away from Evan's dad. Don't let me catch you there again."

"I promise," she said. "I promise. No more."

Not knowing if it was an empty promise or not, I gave my dad a nod and went outside to find my brother.

"Come on," he said, already in his truck. "Gotta talk to you about something."

"Ominous." I squinted at him, climbing into the passenger seat.

"At least I didn't get the word hate tattooed on my fist."

"It says NATE!"



WE DIDN'T TALK ABOUT MOM ON THE DRIVE. THERE WASN'T really anything to say about it other than to ask if she meant it, so we left it at that and moved on. Then I got distracted by baby cows when we got to Pete's farm, and my mood drastically improved. Nate and Devon were already here, waiting for us to show up for some chat.

"What're we doing here?" I asked while a calf sucked on my fingers, getting them all drooly. Nate sat on the barn floor with a chicken on his lap, petting it like it was a teacup pup.

Then our brothers stood before us, side by side, united in some front that stressed them out.

"Oh my god. Are you getting second married?" I guessed. "More dead trees?"

"No," Devon barked.

"Vow renewal is very popular these days," Nate added. Gnat flopped his head on his lap with the chicken.

“No more vows,” Maddox said. “Ever.”

“Gonna be daddies or something?”

“Fuck no.” Maddox glared.

“Oh! Did you—”

“No,” Devon cut in. “Just tell them, Madd. Or they’ll keep guessing stupid shit.”

Totally would. I wondered if cow drool was bad for healing tats. At least it was the Xavi hand.

“We’ve... there’s an option to...” Maddox scowled.

“Ohhhh,” Nate marvelled. “A nervous Maddox. Welcome back.”

“Back?” he scoffed. “Fuck you. Look, we’ve been given an opportunity that we never saw coming and definitely don’t deserve, and... we want to talk to you about it.”

They looked serious. And stressed. And maybe a little overwhelmed, so I pulled my fingers from the calf’s mouth, sat down next to Nate, and gave them my full attention. “We’re listening.”

“Pete is old,” Maddox started. “Doesn’t have any kids.”

“Rude.”

“Christ, boy,” Pete said, walking into the barn in dirty jeans and a flannel shirt. “Useless with words, this one.” He nodded at Maddox.

“Always has been,” I agreed, getting up to shake Pete’s hand. Nate did the same.

“Heard you don’t love your job,” Pete said to me. I wasn’t sure if it was a question or not, but I swallowed in nervousness.

“I don’t... it’s... yeah, I like it.”

“Liar.” Nate laughed at me, gripping my hand. I linked our fingers. “It’s okay, Xav. I know it wasn’t your dream.”

“But I like working with you,” I told him. I didn’t hate the shop. It was a job, same as every other job I’d had. It was fine.

I never bitched about it, so how did they know?

“As this one said, I’m getting old,” Pete told me. “Need more help around here.”

I took the chicken from Nate’s lap and hugged it. My comfort chicken. “You’re offering me a job?” On a farm? Working with my brother? Why did that sound so perfect?

“You two are all the fuck over each other. All the time,” Devon cut in, pointing a finger between me and Nate. “You need some separation or you’re going to kill each other.”

I disagreed about the killing, but the rest...

“A job,” Pete cut in. “With the potential for more.”

“More?” I liked to think of myself as a pretty perceptive guy when it came to some things, but whatever they were trying to tell me wasn’t penetrating my thick skull. I hugged the chicken tighter, petting its head while it pecked at my t-shirt.

“I’m gonna die someday,” Pete said. “Want to leave this place to someone who cares about it. Someone who won’t rip it down and turn it into a winery or some lame petting zoo for city slickers.”

I looked at Maddox, waiting for him to fill in the gaps. Because... *no*. No fucking way. I hadn’t done shit in my life to earn a farm. Barely even knew anything about farms and how they ran, but... *no!* “You’re immortal,” I told Pete. “You won’t die.”

He barked out a gruff-sounding laugh. “Yeah, immortal. Wanna live on through this place. Which is why I want to leave it to someone who knows what it means to me.” He squeezed Maddox’s shoulder, and the two of them stood there looking awkward but comfortable in it. “Want a job here to decide if you and your brother can handle it when I’m eventually gone?”

Yes. “Don’t you want to sell it and live out your final years in luxury?”

“This is luxury,” he said. “I ain’t dying anytime soon if I have anything to say about it.”

“Accept the job, Xav,” Maddox said to me. “We can figure out the rest later.”

The rest. Meaning a contract in place, put into Pete’s final will and testament, stating that the farm belonged to us after his death. I was a trailer park boy with a shitty upbringing, money struggles, and a lack of hopes and dreams. But I was also a mentor to Karen, a guy with a fancy fridge, a door to knock on, and a lucky enough bastard to have found love with my best friend. Karma wasn’t often on my side, so I was skeptical of that bitch fooling me, but did I deserve all these things?

Everything had been coming up us lately. The trailer, the kids, the fridge and the boat, Nate’s lava lamp, the level of love I felt for him, and my mom wanting to do better. Shoes dropped all the time, and I realized I spent most of my life waiting for the other one to drop. Was I allowed to be happy and hopeful for something I hadn’t yet earned?

“Maddox should be the one,” I started.

Maddox stopped me. “Yeah, because I’ve put in time here. But so will you. These two have their shop. Come on, Xav. Let us have a farm.”

“You’re just okay with this?”

“No. Pete told me months ago, and I refused to believe it. Devon and I fought about it because he wanted me to take it, and I told him I wasn’t worth it. We laid it out as a bet at Fight Night, and when this dipshit lost on purpose, it meant... he was telling me...”

“That he can own something with you because I own something with my brother.” Devon grabbed Maddox’s wrist.

“Accept it, baby,” Nate whispered in my ear.

I stood up abruptly. “I accept the job!” I shouted at everyone, choking up. “The rest can come later if you think I earn it!” I ran outta there, needing to go feel my feelings by that shitty dead oak. I wasn’t used to luck. I never had more

dreams than an ice fridge, and I felt like a thief for stealing someone else's. But now that it was out there, I wanted this with my brother so badly that I was already afraid to lose it.

Me and Maddox, working the farm life together.

Nate and Devon, running their dream shop.

Going home to Nate on Lot 62 every night.

Friday night dinners at Mom's with all of us. As a family.

I had no idea the perfect life was so close until this very moment.

"Leave the chicken!" Pete shouted after me.

"I need it!"

CHAPTER 30

XAVI

“Noooooooooooo!” NATE CRIED, SINKING TO HIS KNEES IN front of the TV. “Why?!”

The horror. Whoever owned that Firestick before us finally clued into someone else using their streaming apps, and my poor baby was cut off from *Teen Wolf* without ever having finished it.

While he cried, I walked into the kitchen to make him a drink. Ice tumbled into the cup, clanking off the glass under the light of the dispenser. *Ah, so cool!* I mixed him up a rum and Coke, sank to my knees with him, and rubbed his back.

“Drink up, Neegs. We’ll find a way to finish it.” I switched on his lava lamp, hoping it’d calm him down.

Nate tangled his fingers in my bracelets and took a sip. “We’ll never find out if Derek and Stiles get together.”

Pretty sure they didn’t because it wasn’t about them, but whatever. I pulled him back to lean against my chest, the blank TV right in front of us. “What do you think about this one?” I pointed to the next item on the kink list.

Nate looked. “Don’t even know what that is. Are you sure it’s supposed to be on the gay list? How do guys get bred?”

Yeah, no idea what a breeding kink was. Was hoping he’d know, but apparently not. I’d have no problem with him coming inside me and trying, though. “Okay, this one?” I pointed to primal play.

Nate ignored me. He turned around, crossed his legs, and smiled at me. “How about we add one to the list.”

I crossed my legs to mirror him. “What one?”

He took the list and the pen, covered the page, and then held it out for me.

makin luv.

I smiled at him. “Come on, Nate. You already know that’s my kink. I love the sentimental shit.”

“You also love the rough and dominant shit,” he said. “I think you’re this weird combination of aggressively swoony and soft and simple. Like... hand-holding can get you off.” He grinned. “Love that about you.” He took another drink before handing me the glass.

I sipped the rum. “What else do you love about me? Build my confidence, Nate.” *Make me believe I’m worthy of you and a farm and all these dreams coming true.*

“I love that you got our names tattooed on your knuckles,” he started, crawling to straddle my lap.

“Even if the N looks sorta like an H?”

“Even more because of that.” He smirked, kissing my neck and playing with my hair. “I love that you tried to be a mentor to Karen, but she became one to you instead.”

“That smiling little badass really knows what’s up in life,” I agreed. Couldn’t wait to see her tomorrow and tell her about the farm. *She’ll be pumped for me!*

“I love that you moved back to Garron Park with me because I wanna be Andrea 2.0.” His hands slid down my chest.

“You better start taking lessons from her. She’s top-notch and has a lot to teach.” I finished the drink and set it down.

“Yeah, but it’s you who gives me the confidence to actually do it.”

“Nah. That’s all you.”

Nate laughed, unsure if he agreed with that. “Look at us, Xav. Can you even believe this shit?”

Sometimes it all felt like a fever dream. “What’d we ever do to deserve all this?”

He shook his head. “Like, look how fucking fortunate we are. We have our own place, together! We have a boat and a lava lamp. We have bracelets and tattoos and a whole new version of love that I never thought could happen.”

I squeezed his thighs, loving everything about the moment. “We have Karen and Evan, happy brothers, the potential for two businesses, and a fridge with a water dispenser.”

Mind-fucked. For two guys who went with the flow, stumbled through making fun of the situations we got thrown into, and laughed off more than we took seriously, life gave us a whole slew of massive wins. I almost felt guilty. Guilty for being someone who never really dreamed, but only realized he had dreams when they happened. It felt backwards. Most people worked their whole lives to achieve their goals, and a part of me felt like I cheated the system. Didn’t work hard enough. Didn’t put in the right amount of effort to actually have everything I had.

It’s like life gave us so many lemons that the lemonade just made itself when they fermented.

Sure, we weren’t millionaires, and Pete told me that owning a farm made you asset rich, but cash poor, so it wasn’t like we were going to become wealthy because of it, but it was a job I’d love. Plus, we had fuck all cash already anyway. And I’d get to do it with Maddox.

Everything good overwhelmed me, and my eyes got watery. I always thought I was this loser who’d been down on his luck and the butt of all jokes, but when I really thought back on my life, it wasn’t so bad. I had Nate all along. I had Maddox. I had a community in Garron Park and people looking out for me. Maybe my luck didn’t change as of late. Maybe I’d always been lucky but was only just realizing it for the first time.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” Nate asked, thumb swiping a tear away. “Most of the world would look at us like we’re poor idiots. But we’re happy like this, aren’t we? We’re... life is fucking good, Xav.”

“Because of you,” I told Nate. “Even when we were kids. Idiots running around. We got through everything together. I think we were always meant to be here. Like... what kind of friends actually do the whole threesome thing together?” I laughed. “It was fate, pushing us to this point.”

Against my lips, he said, “So glad we’re the kind to be pushed by fate and flounder through it all.”

When Nate kissed me, it didn’t end. Hours could have gone by. Days, even. Because it was easy to get lost in him—in us. In the bond we’d always shared and continued to deepen. I wondered if soulmates always turned out this way. We found them when we needed them, even if it wasn’t romantic, and morphed the bond into whatever worked in the best interest of both of us.

When the sun was down and my back was sweaty against the bed, Nate pushed inside me, eyes connected and mouths open. I loved him. More than anything in the world. Words weren’t always my strong suit, but the movement of my body and the eye contact we shared said so much more than simple words ever could. Because Nate loved me too.

We were done feeling weird about it, thinking we were unworthy of it, and being afraid of it because it was risky. It wasn’t risky anymore. It was fate. Him and me and the love we shared.

Love was our luck. And once we stopped denying it, that’s when all our dreams started coming true.



IT’D BEEN A WEIRD DAY. A WEIRD DAY FOR MOMS.

My mom had sat the four of us down and showed us the journal Andrea had been making her write. It stated all the things she was coping with, and it hurt me so badly that I stopped being mad at her. Mom had trauma, and it sucked to know that I never paid attention to that part. She was doing better, but it hurt to process. Maddox and I agreed to support her every step of the way.

Then the facility where Nate and Devon's mom lived called to say she was having a very rare lucid day. We'd booked it over there, and as we walked in, she burst into tears about how all her prayers were finally coming true. How she always envisioned a future with the four of us together. I didn't know if she understood that Nate was mine in a way he never had been before, but she looked happy with whatever she saw between us. She said it was always meant to be us, Sawyers and Kanes. Then she made a joke about killing Jim with a cackle that I'd never forget and a smile so wide I saw her heart through her throat, and then her lucidity wore off. When we left, we were all feeling pretty sentimental.

Then Karen called. Said that her mom had come to visit her at the girls' home. She had brought colour palettes and magazines and had spent two hours with Karen, picking out furnishings for her new room when she got out of the home. Karen said it was the most motherly thing she'd ever done, and even though she was happy about it, she was afraid to be too hopeful. So, I'd gone to pick her up from the home, had to sign my name on a permission slip like I was a real adult, and we fled. We got two milkshakes and ended up here.

At the farm.

"I *cannot* even *believe* you get to work here!" she shouted, her fingers getting sucked into a calf's mouth and her other hand petting two dogs, a donkey, and a kid. Of the goat variety. "This is epic! I sort of wanted to be a veterinarian!"

"You can play fake doctor here all you want," I told her. "Until you become a real one."

She *haha'd*, but didn't confirm or deny if that was a real dream or not. "I'm gonna miss you at the shop, but you better

invite me here all the time.”

“Obvi,” I scoffed. “You know we’re gonna be besties even after you’re done your co-op thing at the shop, right?”

“Obvi,” she mocked me, but it came out a bit lispy between her gap teeth. “Thanks for just being awesome, Xav. And for helping with my Karen Movement.”

“You did that all on your own.” I wrapped my arm around her shoulder. “Always be on board with your Karen movement.”

She hooked her arm around my lower back, laughed, and said, “Show me the dead oak!”

So, I did. I walked her down Maddox and Devon’s memory lane, and by the time I took her home that night, she was full of gummy worms, smiles, and promises that I’d go with her to see her dad. Was a great day. Pete even let her name a goat. She named it *Rammstein*, like the band, and I learned a whole new level of respect for her.

CHAPTER 31

NATE

“IT’S NOT POISON,” I TOLD EVAN, WHO STARED AT THE container of treats like they were going to kill him. “She does this for everyone.”

“Why me?” he asked.

Gina had dropped off a batch of pastries with strict instructions that they were for Evan. I’d had to physically restrain Xavi from eating them until I could find the kid.

“Because. She does nice shit like that. Not everyone here is an asshole.” I squinted at him. “Except you. You’re an asshole.”

“My dad is an asshole,” he corrected.

So proud of him for being brave enough to say it.

“And you’re an asshole,” he added. “But in a different kind of way. I just don’t... Why are people helping me? I don’t need help.”

What a stubborn little prick. “Look around, kid.”

“Don’t call me kid.”

“This place is poor, but guess what? Poor people are the most selfless. You can knock on any one of these doors and get help. Except Old Man Hank. Don’t go there unless you want a shotgun fired at you. But anyone else? We take care of our own. You’re park family now. It’s a thing. Get used to it.”

“It makes me weak. I should be able to take care of myself.”

“You’re eight.”

“I’m ten.”

I thought he was a liar, but what did I know? “You aren’t supposed to know everything at your age. You need help. We all need help. If it weren’t for these people, I’d have probably died when I was eight.”

“I’m ten.”

“So you’re already older than I would have been!” I stole a tart from his box and chomped into it. It hurt like a bitch because my teeth were sensitive, but I ate it to make a point. I needed a dentist so bad. And an eye doctor for my night vision. “You know you can come to us anytime, right?”

He picked up a flaky pastry and nibbled. “Maybe.”

It’d take some time for him to trust everyone in the park, but I wasn’t deterred. I was a stubborn old mule, and as long as he knew he had options for protection and help, that was good enough for me.

Harris had done more than rough up his dad. He’d threatened him. Apparently, Evan’s dad went to Harris for loans every now and then, and Harris had said he’d be completely cut off if he ever so much as heard a whisper that he was abusing the kid again. It gave me a whole new respect for Harris, who had lost his own son, and I never knew about it. That shady, yellow-aviator-wearing gangster was a good man under all his tracksuits.

“I gotta go. Dad’s home and he’ll wanna know where I am,” Evan said, standing. “Can you hold on to these? If my dad sees them...”

I took the container from him, hating that I had to watch him go home to that man. “I’ll guard them from Xavi.”

Evan didn’t say anything, but he backed away with a smirk on his face, leaving our yard. Then he threw his middle fingers up at me, I did the same, and everything felt good.



WE SHOULD HAVE PICKED SOMETHING EASIER. HAD NO IDEA what sauté meant, couldn't find the $\frac{1}{4}$ measuring cup, and wasn't even sure if we had olive oil.

"This'll work," Xavi said, putting a glob of margarine into the frying pan. "It's oily. Same thing, right?"

"I think we need to turn the burner on for it to melt," I reminded him.

"Right." He turned it on, and then we both stared at the recipe to see what heat level it needed to be. "Devon wasn't far off with the toaster thing."

"We can do better than Devon." *Medium heat. There we go.* "Don't ever tell him we struggled with this so bad."

This was a far cry from our usual cooking experiences. Hot dogs, burgers, anything microwavable, soup from a can, or anything from a can really, and pasta. If we wanted to eat a vegetable, we boiled it or ate it raw. This was... *cooking*. A real meal. Because Xavi's mom wasn't feeling good during her sobriety. She was getting used to the mental aspects of coping, and feeling pretty drained about it. She'd gone back to work yesterday, though, so tonight, we were cooking Friday dinner. Karen picked the recipe, but she couldn't come because her mom was visiting again. *So nice for her!*

As we fucked up the meal and worked together in the kitchen, I breathed deeply. This life, and all it entailed, was everything.

"Do I look sexy like this?" Xavi asked, tattooed knuckles with my name on them wrapped around the handle of a wooden spoon. "All domesticated and shit?" No shirt. No socks. Cut off sweatshorts. Messy dark hair. "Is my 'husband look' a hot one?"

Oh, it was definitely making my dick hard, but... "Husband?"

Xavi smirked. “I’m gonna make you fake marry me outside one day, baby. Then I’ll bully you into getting our names on your knuckles, and when all that’s said and done, and you’ve fucked me hard to seal the deal, I’ll call you my husband and fight anyone who claims it isn’t real.”

Holy shit, I loved him. “But why a fake marriage?”

“Real to us, just not by law. You said you never wanted to get married, and I kind of like the idea of it only being real to us.”

I tugged on the front of his shorts. “You fake asking me to marry you?”

“Mhm,” he hummed against my jaw. “Are you saying fake yes?”

“Fake yes,” I whispered. “Are you gonna make our fake engagement swoony?”

“So fake swoony,” he agreed. “I’ll even fake court you before I fake ask.”

“This isn’t you fake asking?”

“This is me teasing my fake question.” Xavi tilted my chin while the margarine started to bubble in the frying pan. “You know what’s not fake?”

“What?”

“Everything we have. Everything we are. Our love. And I’ll prove that to you forever. Nothing fake about it. Because I for reals love ya with all I’ve got, Nathan Neegan. So glad you perved on me for a year.”

From feeling like jokes to... this, there was nothing fake about it. “I’ll perv on you forever because that’s my love language.”

“And smoking cessation,” Xavi added.

“Don’t make a thing of it.”

“Shut me up,” he dared. He glanced at the time on the stove, turned the burner down, and sank to his knees. “Better

stir in those vegetables, daredevil. Can you multitask? Cooking and sucking.”

I dumped the bowl of cut up veggies into the hot buttery pan, and then Xavi’s lips were wrapped around my cock, and I might have forgotten to stir them a bit. When I forgot a lot, he spun me around, put the spoon in my hand, and bent me over the stove. When his tongue hit my ass and his fingers pressed inside me, I just turned the burner right off.

“Ah, fuck me. Right now. We have like twenty minutes.” I reached back, pulling his shorts down to pool with mine. “Xavi.”

“I got you,” he promised. Conjuring lube from the kitchen drawer, he slid his slick cock up and down my ass crack, teasing me.

“No time for teasing.” I tried to push back enough to make him fuck me.

“Always time for teasing. This is my fake courting. Want this sex all your life, fake husband?”

“I want this sex right now. For real. And all my life. Give it to me.”

Xavi pushed inside, going slow enough to make my eyes close with the satisfaction of being filled. He buried himself deep and pressed his forehead to the back of my neck, breathing against my skin.

“I still have bottom vibes,” he whispered. “But fuck. I like top vibes, too.”

“Versatile vibes,” I said, gripping the oven door handle. “That’s the word. I learned it in my gay bible studies.”

“Keep studying, Nate,” Xavi rasped, starting to rock enough to make me rock back. “I fucking love learning with you.”

My fingers tightened around the handle, and Xavi slammed into me hard and abruptly. My forehead clacked off the stove fan and my cock nudged the handle. The heat from the burner made my face hot, but the temperature between us

caused a full body flush. But when Xavi reached around and wrapped his fingers around my throat, tilting my head back, I burned alive.

“Primal play,” he growled at me. “Let’s check it off the list.”

“How?” I asked, hips bucking backwards to fuck his dick.

His teeth sank into my earlobe, and his one-word answer made me shiver. “Run.”

I ass-checked him and ran. I’d been chased by cops, Old Man Hank, debt collectors, my dad, and meth heads, but none of them sent a thrill through my naked body like being chased by Xavi Kane did.

I swung around the counter, heading for the bedroom. My feet gripped the carpet until I got to the hallway and my socks slipped on the hard floor.

Xavi caught my wrist, pulling me back. I spun out of his hold and made it to the bedroom with a sinister laugh on my lips. Adrenaline chased pleasure through my bloodstream to hear him behind me.

“You’re trapped, baby,” Xavi said, entirely the hunter. “Where’re you gonna go now?”

I didn’t care because I felt crazed. Who knew I’d get such a high from being chased through my own house? At the end of the bed, I turned to face him, letting him see the fire in my eyes. I didn’t know if I should count myself lucky or unlucky to see the fire in his staring back at me. We’d once watched a show about being naked and afraid, and we’d had a long debate about how being naked made things more terrifying. But right now, I felt the opposite of terrified.

I was alive. Brimming with anticipation and dripping with adrenaline. I wanted him to catch me because I wanted what I’d get when he did, but I wanted the fight, too. The challenge. The game.

He stepped forward and I stepped back, dancing with the bed between us. When he cocked his head to the side with a

sexy grin on his lips, I breathed harder, lungs clear of smoke and tar.

“Such a helpless little bunny caught in my trap.” Xavi stalked closer. My back hit the wall. “Gonna fight for your life or let me devour you?” He licked his lips.

Was this roleplay, too? I didn’t care. Short of trying to wedge myself through the small window, I had nowhere to go. So, I’d fight for my life.

I smirked at him. “Find out.”

Oh, he found out. He lunged over the bed, grabbing my wrist and yanking me onto it. He flipped me onto my back, but I wasn’t a helpless little bunny. I was a fucking jackrabbit, and I kicked and squirmed until I worked my way free. With my eyes on the door, I crawled away from him.

“Uh-uh.” Xavi cackled, grabbing my ankle and tugging me back.

I collapsed onto my stomach, Xavi on top of me. There was still a little fight left in me, so I got myself to my knees and kept on moving.

Until he latched onto my hips, pulled them back hard, and buried himself inside of me.

“Ah, fuck,” I moaned, the fight leaving me.

“Mine,” he growled. “All fucking mine, Nate.” He fucked into me so hard that my hands landed on the bed and I just... took it. Battled through it. Gave up control of my body because he knew exactly what to do with it. He’d caught me, and I’d never been stuck in a more pleasurable trap.

“Hands,” he demanded.

Letting myself fall forward, I reached behind me to give him my hands. He linked our fingers, pressed them to my lower back, and used them as a handhold to fuck me harder.

“Oh god,” I moaned. “Shit, Xavi... this is... I’m gonna come like this.”

“Good. We only have three more minutes.” He bottomed out inside me and held himself there. “Can you come without touching yourself?”

I nodded, pretty sure I could. My face pressed into the mattress. My breathing became shallow. Xavi started thrusting, and when he found that angle that made sparks blow up behind my closed eyes, I bit into the comforter and tightened my hands in his.

“*Breed me.*”

“Oh, holy fuckfuck.” Xavi roared. His hips stuttered, his fingers tightened, and his moans turned guttural and unhinged.

I lost my mind. To him. My dick twitched, pulsing with spurts as my orgasm hit hard. The feeling of him filling me, *breeding* me, made me delusional enough to moan out his name repeatedly, not even caring that our family could show up at any moment.

“Fuck, I love you, Nate,” he rasped, shaking. “I love you.” He freed my hands and fell on top of me.

I mumbled my affection into the blanket, just trying to catch my breath. “Primal play,” I said after a bit. “It’s a win.”

“Major win,” he agreed. “And fuck me, Nate. You figured out what breeding is. It’s going to the top of my list, right below hand-holding.” He fell to my side, and I turned to look at him. Smiling, he kissed my cheek. “You okay?”

“I’m so good right now I don’t even know what year it is.” I smiled at him. “I think we fucked up dinner.”

“We can redeem it.” He ran his palm over my hair. “Everything is so good with you. You’ve always made life more enjoyable for me, but this is next-level. I really do love ya, fake husband.”

“I really do love ya too, real boyfriend.” I leaned in to kiss him. “But your fake courtship isn’t done yet. More fake swooning, please.”

He smacked my ass. “I’m gonna smother you in swoony shit. Ain’t gonna be nothing fake about it. Come on. Those

pricks will be here any second.”

When I stood, my legs wobbled, and we laughed about it, because shit, it was funny.



DESPITE HOW TIRED WE WERE AFTER THE DAY OF FUCKING, pretending we knew what we were doing while we cooked, hosting dinner, and putting up with Maddox and Devon being losers, neither of us could sleep.

“Do you think that looks like a dick?” Xavi asked, pointing to a shadow on the wall made from one of the blobs in my lava lamp.

I studied it. “Yeah. A dick with like two mini dicks coming out the side of it. But that one looks like the gap in Karen’s teeth.” I pointed to another shadow.

“Oh my god, it does!” He held my hand between our bodies. “Why aren’t you sleeping?”

“I dunno.”

“Wanna watch something on the couch and have a slumber party out there?”

I pouted about *Teen Wolf*, but nodded to agree. Hauling all our blankets and pillows into the living room, I turned off the lights, left the one above the stove on—because it was a cardinal rule to leave it on from the moment you moved in until you died—and went to close the curtains.

Stopped dead in my tracks.

“Xavi!” I whisper-hissed. “He’s out there. Evan. Evan is out there.” I crouched below the window so he wouldn’t see me.

Xavi army crawled over to the window, peeking outside. “Holy fuck. Evan’s out there! He’s out there!”

“Shh!”

“You shh!”

“Don’t freak out!” he told me.

“I’m not freaking out. *You* don’t freak out!”

He smacked me. I smacked him. We hid like losers beneath the window. Breath held. Hearts hammering. Fingers clasped.

“Nate?” Evan called. “Xavi?”

Xavi looked at me, the clock on our lives about to start ticking to a new time zone, the one that marked our switch from being the punchline to a joke to being who we really wanted to be.

“Twenty-five-to-life, Nate,” he whispered, hand in mine. “It starts now.”

And then...

Knock knock.

EPILOGUE

XAVI

1 MONTH LATER

THE BOAT ROCKED PEACEFULLY, MAKING ALL THE HOURS AFTER work worth the time and effort of fixing her up. This was her maiden voyage since she got a makeover, and I already loved it. Knew we'd spend days out here, just living because we could! We had the time, security, and peace to do that shit now.

"I told you," Maddox scoffed at Devon. "I told you not to make that bet. Devon, you dumb fuck."

I grinned at the sky, an actual piña colada in my hand, my head on Nate's wet thigh he was no longer insecure about. Nate bet Devon that he couldn't swim all the way to the bottom and back up on one lungful of air. They pitted their smoker's lungs against one another, and since Nate quit and Devon didn't, Nate's lungs were giving him the win.

"Fuck you, Maddox. I didn't see you try." Devon glared.

"Now we have to listen to their shit because you can't hold your breath. Jesus, you can suffocate on a dick, but lose your shit in the ocean?" Maddox hit Devon.

"Speaking of dicks," Nate said, amped enough to have me sitting up. "The bet was that if I won, you had to listen to our sex stories. Which one you wanna start with, Xav? We've got a whole kink list to get through."

Maddox groaned. Devon kept his scowling mouth shut.

“Oh, the failed attempt at water sports?”

“What? You pissed on each other?” Maddox jumped up. “Fuck no. Skip that one.”

It was a failure anyway. We just... peed together in the outdoor shower. Wasn't really sexy, but it was like a locker room experience we never got in high school because we weren't athletes. So, it was fun anyway.

“Oh! How about the sensory one where you thought my silky nutsack was that satin pillowcase we own?” I laughed. “That one was fun.”

“You do have nice nuts when you get rid of the squiggly pubes,” Nate agreed. “Almost felt as good as the warm cock blanket.”

“Uh... warm cock what?” Devon asked.

“Cock warming,” Nate confirmed. “That one is definitely at the top.”

Devon and Maddox looked at each other, confusion on their faces. *Ha!* They didn't know what it was either. No time like the present for me to shine in my role as president of the gay club.

“It's when you heat up a little blanket and wrap your dick in it.” I smiled, slurping my piña colada and snuggling up my shades to my eyes. What a gorgeous day! My body hurt like a son of a gun after a few weeks of farm labour, but I could feel new muscles growing. “Like a nice little cock sock.”

“Uh, no it isn't,” Devon said.

“Uh, yeah it is.” Nate looked at me. “Right? We did it. We'd know.”

“Well, you did it wrong. Jesus, you're embarrassing.” Maddox sat back down.

“Cock warming. Warming of the cock. Pretty on the nose, Madd.” I shook my head at my brother.

“I can't believe we are having this conversation,” Devon mumbled. “Tell them what it is. Don't make me say it.”

“No,” Maddox barked.

“See? We’re right.” Nate smiled.

“Cock warming!” Maddox growled. “Keeping the cock warm... inside the body. Mouth or ass. Not actually fucking, just keeping it in there.” He threw his arms wide. “Jesus fuck.”

“No way.”

“That’d be called cock docking.”

Devon grabbed Maddox by the throat and warned, “Do not make me explain what docking is.”

They glared at each other, and then Maddox pushed Devon off the boat and jumped in after him, getting away from our stories and whatever docking was.

I watched them swim away. There was nothing else out here, so they’d have to stay sort of close. Couldn’t escape our stories forever.

“Did we do it wrong?” Nate asked in a hushed tone.

I looked at my baby. His hair was growing in again, and he had the best tan lines from his sunglasses. “No. Right?”

He shrugged. I shrugged.

“Wanna try their way?” I asked.

“Come sit on my lap,” he dared.

It took some maneuvering and a lot of spit, but I sat on Nate’s cock and felt my cheeks heat up. When he was fully inside me, he held my hips, kissed my shoulders, and... “Now what?”

“Fuck if I know. We just sit here?”

“I guess.”

We twiddled our thumbs, watching the clouds move across the sky. Every now and then, he’d point at one that looked like the blobs of the lava lamp, and I’d shift my weight to get a new angle.

“This is boring! I wanna either fuck or get off. I like our cock warming better.” I looked behind me.

“Yeah, ditto,” he said, hands sliding down my thighs. “But imagine how hot this would be right after sex. Your ass full of my cum, and my cock acting like a plug to keep it all inside. I could be on board with that.”

Oh. Shit. Yeah. “Yes. That one. Cock plugging.”

“Mhm,” he hummed. “We’re adding that to the list. And docking, whatever that is.”

Maddox had left his phone on the bench seat, so I hopped off Nate’s lap, grabbed it, and handed it to him. “Google it while I get handsy with ya.” I wrapped my hand around his cock, double-checked that Maddox and Devon were far enough away and not drowning, and started to jerk him off.

“What’s it say?” I asked, spreading precum down his shaft and loving that his hips bucked on their own.

“Hang on. I’m getting a lesson on how to dock a boat.”

“Wrong docking.”

“I know, but still handy.”

“Nate.”

“Okay. Hang... oh fuck, yeah. That feels good.” He thrust into my grip and typed at the same time.

We’d been messing around with some edging, so Nate hadn’t gotten off in... almost two days. He wasn’t gonna last. I ran my palm over the tip, making him shake.

“Docking. A strictly cock-to-cock act,” he started, cheeks reddening by the second. “Where at least one man needs to have foreskin. Inserting the tip of the penis into the other’s foreskin, or they put their foreskins over each other’s dicks.” Nate looked at me. “Never knew a foreskin could be so fun.”

“Add it to the list!”

“Xavi, shit. I’m...”

Yeah, my brother once bragged about learning how to not get cum on his boxers at the dinner table. Well, I might not have figured out his trick yet, but I knew exactly how to keep

cum off Nate's swim shorts. I bent forward, wrapped my lips around him, and drank it all down.

Because I fucking loved Nathan misspelled-Neegan Sawyer, and tasting his cum was third on my kink scale.

When Nate managed to drag in a real breath, he ran his fingers through my hair and grinned. "You aren't coming until tonight. Inside me. Then we can try their cock warming version while we sleep."

Deal. I poured us each a new piña colada from the cooler, sat down next to him, and held up my cup.

"From nothing to something, Neegs. We actually made it."

THE END! FOR REALS.

BONUS SCENE

XAVI

Months Later

Nate shrieked. “I can’t do it! I literally cannot hit the button! Don’t make me!” His panicked eyes met mine, tears welling amidst all the blue. “Xavi. Don’t make me.”

I laughed, setting his phone down and pulling him in for a comfort-hug. My poor baby. “Then don’t do it. I’d never make you.”

“It’s just...” He paused, skimming his fingers over the steering wheel, lovingly caressing the dashboard, giving the gear shifter a handshake, and patting the worn seats to bring up a cloud of dust. “I can’t sell her. She’s been here for it all.”

She really had. Nate’s truck was there when we had picked our brothers up from the cabin where we stranded them. It was there when Devon needed an escape in the middle of the night to deal with his depression. It was right there in the small back seat where Maddox demanded flip fucks and Devon shut him up with his mouth.

But more importantly, Nate’s truck had become our first home. We spent more time in this cab than we did our trailers. Even when I had my own vehicle, we took his because she was a stubborn old bitch, and we liked the way she meddled. To be honest, it was probably where we learned it. The truck had taught us so much, kept us together, and gotten us into situations we would have missed out on had she not broken down.

It was us in here. Us, wrappers, cigarette and nicotine gum packs, discarded shirts, random sandals, and a whole slew of hats we could never find when we were looking for them. Even the rearview mirror wore my old hemp bracelets as a necklace. Some of our best chats happened on these seats with these windows rolled down.

“Then don’t sell her.” I pulled back to look at him.

“But... her odds have gone down. She’s less than fifty percent reliable.” He ran his hand along the window ledge as an apology for saying that.

“Yeah, but she’s earned it. She’s like a parent, you know? She raised us, made us who we are, and now it’s our turn to take care of her in her old age. Don’t put her in a nursing home, baby.”

Nate groaned, choking on the grief of losing his truck, even though it hadn’t happened yet. Probably wouldn’t happen. Actually, it one hundred percent wouldn’t happen. He was keeping the truck. I could see the finite decision in his expression.

“I would never! That’s why I put the stipulation in the ad!”

Yeah, the ad was ridiculous. It said:

Truck for sale. No city dicks. No buyers for parts. No truck murderers. Patrick Harris: fuck off. Only twelve minutes left on my prepay, so hit me up at Sawyer Brothers Shop or my insta @ besbyneegs

He hadn’t even posted it yet. Couldn’t hit the button. And his Instagram was new. It only had pictures of us, some of our brothers, a few shop photos, and then about a hundred of his truck. Maddox unfollowed him.

“I feel like it hates me,” he whispered. “Like it knew I was gonna sell it.”

“It knew you weren’t. I love that she’s a *she* and an *it*.” I grinned. “You know what we should do instead of selling it?”

“Fix it?”

“No,” I scoffed. I loved her, but she wasn’t worth that money pit.

“Wash her?”

“Well, maybe.”

“Get her new tires?”

“No. You know what, just ask me what we should do. I’ll reset the scene.” I cleared my throat. “You know what we should do instead of selling it?”

“What should we do instead of selling it, Xavi?”

“Fuck in it.”

Nate blushed a bit, which already made my dick hard. When he looked around, he took in the small back seat, the bench seat in the front, and the mess on the floor. We’d fucked bent over the hood, up against the side door, and on the tailgate, but we hadn’t gotten sexy inside.

“Well, now you just compared her to a parent, and I’m not that into voyeurism with my parent watching.” He looked at me, but his sweatshorts were already tenting.

“I’ll cover her eyes.” I put an old t-shirt over the rearview mirror. “Come on, daredevil. Don’t you think this truck has earned some sexy times that don’t belong to our brothers?” I pulled on his wrist until he slid down the bench seat to sit in the middle. Straddling his lap, I ran my fingers through his lengthening hair poking out the back of his hat. “How have we not fucked in here?”

Nate’s hands slid up the side of my thighs, squeezing my hips when he got there. He rocked me, making our dicks grind together, and when he looked up at me, the brim of his hat hit my nose.

“We’re usually too busy trying to get her to start.” His smirk turned deviant. “But she doesn’t have to start right now.”

“No,” I agreed, leaning down until our lips touched. “She just needs to sit here until we make her rock.”

Nate kissed me. Sharp breaths puffed against my mouth, and his tongue met mine with a familiarity that would always feel sexy. His hat fell off and his hips bucked upward, then he whispered, “There’s another kink I want to try.”

“Right now?”

“No. Just in general. Later.” He pulled my shirt off, and my head and arms smacked against the ceiling. “But the internet says I need your permission first.”

I lowered my arms and ripped his Hawaiian-style shirt open. I thought the buttons would fly like they did in movies, but they were that clip together kind. Still popped open audibly, so it was sexy enough. “You have it. My permission. For anything.” I looked at him. “Permission for what?” I watched my tattooed knuckles skim down his chest. Yeah, pecs were so much hotter than tits. My god.

“Don’t make fun of me,” he whispered.

“For the kink?” I kissed his neck and sucked a mark there, labelling him as mine.

“No. Because I can’t pronounce it,” he rasped against my ear, fingers in my hair. “Som... somno... ugh!”

“Sumo wrestling? I mean, I’m into it, but we gotta find fat suits.”

“No, you dick. Not that.” He pinched my nipple and smacked my shoulder at the same time. “Somno-filo.”

“Pastry? Not sure Gina would be up for baking that.”

“Xavi!” he barked at me, tugging on my hair to crane my neck back. “I wanna fuck you while you’re sleeping!” His eyes glared into mine, not even a hint of embarrassment within them.

My body tingled all over because, fuck yeah, that sounded hot. But... “Oh, so I’ll miss it?”

We played a bit of Tetris when he pushed me off his lap and leaned me against the passenger door, my ass on the seat. Our knees clacked off the dashboard and the window crank

dug into my back. Nate prowled above me, ripping my shorts off.

“No, I’ll just *little spoon* you and start fucking you when you’re asleep,” he said, dipping his head to lick the tip of my leaking cock. “But I’ll make it so good that not even your dreams will keep you there. You’ll be awake in no time.”

I pulled his hat from under my ass, tossing it into the back. “Fuck. I’m in. I wish I could sleep right now. Drug me.”

He shook his head on my dick. “No drugging.” He licked, jacking me with his fist. “But when you’re asleep, dead to the world, totally vulnerable and naked in bed, it’ll be my turn to be the alpha and take you how I want you.”

His shoulder hit the steering wheel, and the horn that hadn’t worked in forever honked.

“Don’t judge me!” he yelled at the truck.

I gripped his chin and forced him to look at me. “Yes. Permission. Fuck me while I’m sleeping and turn me into your omega bitch.”

His eyes pulsed like a true werewolf, but he held back his complaints about me turning this into roleplay. “Deal. We’re doing that.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He nodded. “But right now, we’re gonna recreate another scene.”

“Which one?”

Nate leaned over me and blew his breath against the window, fogging it. “*Titanic.*”

Like a goddamn ship captain, Nate steered us out to sea. He flipped me over, ate my ass so good I almost covered the seats in cum, and then lubed me in spit and pushed into me so hard my head bonked off the window.

“Ah, holy fuckfuck.” I grabbed whatever I could, which happened to be the door handle. I almost fell out when he drove into me, opening the door at the same time, but Nate

wrapped an arm around my chest and pulled me back in. I slammed the door and pushed my ass back to meet every thrust.

Nate still teased and then hesitated when the teasing got him where he wanted to go, but my daredevil never hesitated when it came to sex anymore. He'd told me to take what I wanted from him, and in the process, he started taking what he wanted from me. And he was goddamn hot about it.

His palm slammed down on the door lock to keep us inside, and then his hand landed on mine. I joined our fingers while Nate pressed our hands against the door and fucked me deep. His breath fanned the back of my neck and mine fogged the window, turning his movie remake real.

“Where’s that filthy mouth of yours?” he rasped.

It was tongue-tied. Because my balls were tingling and my body was sweating, and every hard thrust built the storm inside me until I was on the precipice of exploding.

All my life, I'd promised myself and my brother that I'd never become an addict like my parents, but Nate turned me into a junkie. A fiend for his dick as much as a fanatic jonesing for our connection. Every time I got a hit, whether in the form of sex, hand-holding, or simply talking together, I needed more. Nate was my drug of choice, and I'd been doing him for most of my life. I had a new method to consume him now, and fuck me, the high was out of this world.

“More,” I said, bodies slapping. “Just more. Fucking give it to me.”

Nate breathed hard, fucking into me while his fingers dug into mine. “You know what this truck needs?”

“What?” My eyes fluttered, but when they opened, I noticed the windows really were fogging up. The temperature in here wasn't legal to leave dogs in.

“To be unsellable.” He bent over my body. “Cover it in cum, Xavi. Make it so we can never wash it out.”

Not wanting to come on the passenger seat where children sat, I turned my body forward, slapped a hand to the window,

and dragged it all the way down the wet glass while my cock covered the floor mats.

“Jesus fuck, Nate,” I moaned through my orgasm. “Keep going.”

He pounded into me three more times before stilling, buried deep. He trembled behind me, his voice hitched on a broken breath. “Fuck, I love you,” he wheezed. “Lo-ve. You.”

It was about that time my legs failed me. My thighs were too shaky, and when they gave up, refusing to hold me upright any longer, I fell forward and Nate collapsed on top of me.

“Shit. Sorry.” He tried to push himself up, but he couldn’t. “I’m a weak bitch right now.”

I chuckled, trying to breathe against the fabric of the seat. We got ourselves situated, sort of mushed up together in a half-lying down position on the bench seat.

“Truck sex is a win,” he started, panting. “But it’s too hot in here and I don’t think I can breathe.”

I nodded, trying to reach for the window crank. “Agreed. Every fucking window is fogged.” I wiped a spot clean on the passenger window right as someone knocked on it and made us both jump. “Ah!”

Maddox and Devon stood there with disgusted faces. Maddox just shook his head and walked away, but Devon grinned. “This truck is going to hell,” he said before leaving.

“What’re they doing here?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but that just gave me an idea.” He tilted his head to look at me. “Since my truck is going to hell, and I’m probably going there for something too, will you just bury me in it? Like, I don’t need a coffin or anything. Just get an excavator, put me in the truck in my purple undies, and bury us together.”

I grabbed his hands and joined our fingers together. Xavi on the left. Nate/Hate on the right. “If we’re taking her for a joyride to hell, Neegs, I’ll be driving. So, we can all be buried together.”

Nate smiled and kissed my tattooed knuckles.

TO YOU

MY READERS

For taking a chance on my grungy boys and loving them despite their faults. For being loud about your love. For taking a chance on a new author like me. For being kind, compassionate, and supportive. The From Nothing series wouldn't be here without you.

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NORDIKA NIGHT

Canadian.

Author of gritty MM romance.

Banter. Bullshit. Boys.



ALSO BY NORDIKA NIGHT

Little Demon in the Details

Tropes:

- Bratty boy and the man who understands him.
 - cum kink
 - size difference
 - found family
- the rise to power of a guy who has been beaten down his whole life.

Alter Arlo

- dark, dystopian, psychological, twisty
 - focuses on 2 couples (both MM)
- dark themes, emotional, harsh world